

## The heavens open up to L.A. again

After five years and \$93 million, the renovated Griffith Observatory is ready to take its visitors to the stars -- and far beyond.

By Christopher Reynolds, Times Staff Writer  
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THE pristine lawn spreads before you like a quad that's misplaced its college. The six smart guys of the Astronomers Monument glower stonily in your general direction. Beyond them waits the triple-domed Griffith Observatory, our freshly squeegeed window to the universe, or, as observatory director Edwin C. Krupp likes to say, "the hood ornament of Los Angeles."

Starting at noon Friday, after a nearly five-year closure and \$93 million in historic preservation and mostly underground expansion, the public is welcome again to this 1935 building, and so many visitors are expected that the city has set up a temporary timed-reservation and shuttle-bus system from the Los Angeles Zoo and Hollywood & Highland parking areas.

But before you step inside those arty bronze-and-glass double doors to commune with the cosmos, glance to your right. In the foreground, you'll see a bust of James Dean, reminding us that much of "Rebel Without a Cause" was filmed here half a century ago. Beyond Dean's bronze spit curl, there's the familiar hillside typography of the Hollywood sign. And then, if the sun has already set, you'll see the lights of the city, twinkling geometrically as they dwindle into the southern distance.

Their glow is pollution, telescopically speaking, but for those visitors not counting down the days to the next transit of Mercury, it does look nice.

And that's the thing about Griffith Observatory. Unlike its brethren in places like New York and Chicago, this is an astronomical landmark that's also a Hollywood landmark, a hilltop perch that offers as many simple rewards to those who look down as it does complex rewards to those who look up.

With that in mind, here's a quick guide that's aimed not only at the upward-looking stargazers who hunger for astronomical details, but also the downward-looking grid-scanners who just want to score a view table at the new cafe.

### The main floor

Front and center, beneath the '30s murals by Hugo Ballin, the 240-pound brass ball of Griffith's Foucault pendulum swings along its familiar path, steadily knocking down wooden pegs as the hours pass. This is proof that the Earth is turning, although that's not always the easiest connection to make with perplexed children.

Here's what to tell them: "It's the Coriolis effect. Google it when we get home." Then walk away before anybody can ask you about sidereal days.

Along the halls, associate architect and preservation expert Brenda Levin has reclaimed previously blocked-off space to open up several alcoves for new displays designed by C&G Partners of New York. You could call them educational displays — they cover subjects such as tides, seasons and eclipses — but that makes them sound less colorful and striking than they are.

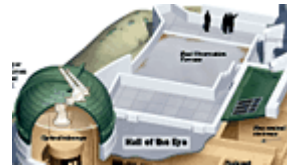
Along the Hall of the Sky — to the right of the pendulum — one display



Ready for its close-up  
(Wally Skalij / LAT)



Griffith Observatory Deputy Director Mark Pine gives a tour of the renovated facility.



A landmark returns

shows the sun creeping across a deep blue sky while cactus shadows lengthen on the desert floor. In another, the moon waxes and wanes.

Nearby these new exhibits stand two old favorites, updated and relocated: the light-bouncing camera obscura that allows visitors to see the landscape outside, projected on a sort of tabletop; and the lightning-imitating Tesla coil, which only looks like a forgotten prop from "Lost in Space." The coil has been in the building since 1937. It has nothing to do with astronomy, as director Krupp admits, but he feared a lynching if he removed it.

When Paul Knappenberger, president of the Adler Planetarium in Chicago, got an advance peek at these halls a few weeks ago, he found the place "spectacular."

In particular, Knappenberger said, he was struck by the displays in the area to the left of the pendulum known as the Hall of the Eye.

With its review of naked-eye astronomy, the invention of the telescope and the development of more sophisticated devices since then, he said, it's basically "a study of how we as humans have extended our own senses to explore the universe. I've seen a lot of exhibits, and I don't remember seeing that done that way anywhere else."

He also liked the live video feeds from the observatory's two rooftop telescopes, which give wheelchair-users a chance to see images they otherwise wouldn't be able to reach.

### **The planetarium**

The main-floor displays are mere sideshow attractions, however, compared with the central domed theater now known as the Samuel Oschin Planetarium. The old planetarium, its walls lined with leaky plaster, relied on a 1964 Zeiss projector to entertain audiences in more than 600 rickety seats with wooden headrests. Now the same space, sheathed with perforated aluminum, holds just 300 thickly padded seats and a new star projector, again from Zeiss, that by itself carried a price tag of more than \$3 million.

With prices of \$7 for adults and \$3 for children, the planetarium offers hourly screenings of "Centered in the Universe," a half-hour presentation that promises to be full of gee-whiz imagery and astronomical basics. But this show is also a sore subject among some astronomy enthusiasts who have haunted the building for years.

Though the observatory will continue to rely on live narrators for the show, as it has for decades, Krupp and company have been recruiting actors, paying less and leaving less time for audience questions.

Meanwhile, the independently produced Laserium light-and-sound shows, which ran from 1973 until the building closed for renovations, have moved on to other venues.

### **Downstairs**

Most of the observatory's other new features lie below the main level, where principal architect Stephen Johnson of Pfeiffer Partners Inc. added nearly 40,000 square feet of space. (The old observatory amounted to about 27,000.)

There's the Edge of Space, where a luminous moon model and meteorite displays are found. There's the 200-seat Leonard Nimoy Event Horizon theater. And there's the Gunther Depths of Space, where one wall includes a

text-and-imagery rundown on this solar system, along with scales set into the floor, so that you can sample local gravity and discover that you're overweight on Jupiter. (Don't worry. Everybody is.)

The highlight of the room needs little introduction: One wall is covered by a 20-by-152-foot photomural of space. At 2.46 gigapixels, it's the largest image of its kind anywhere — and probably among the heaviest, since the designer had the image burned into heavy but highly durable porcelain enamel.

Experts say about a million galaxies are visible in the picture. And yet, if you sit on the bench next to the bronze Albert Einstein, you'll notice he's holding his index finger up about a foot in front of his eyes. That's all it takes to block the tiny slice of sky that includes those million galaxies.

## **Outside**

Now you're done indoors, but that doesn't mean you're done. One of the observatory's great charms is that you can walk all over it, and look closely at the Moderne contours bestowed by original architects John C. Austin and Frederick M. Ashley.

Like the murals inside and the Astronomers Monument out front, they make the building's '30s vintage clear. (In fact, the building was part of a national planetarium craze; despite the Great Depression, Chicago, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles all put up planetariums between 1930 and 1939.)

A new lighting scheme emphasizes those contours. In revamping the building, the designers added upward-tilting lights "to wash the face of the building," in the phrase of associate architect Levin. That gives the observatory a new stateliness, but, like the glow of the city below, it's not necessarily beloved by those who have come to squint at Virgo.

"There was a lot of discussion" on the subject, Levin said, and the result was compromise: On those nights when observatory staffers think a little less light pollution could make a difference in one of their observations, they can dim those exterior lights. In any event, the building's stairs and terraces can make for great, and remarkably child-friendly, exploration.

You can pace terraces to the east and west of the building, and at each end, stairs curl up around the building to the rooftop, where the free telescopes await. But you need not queue up for the telescopes.

You can investigate the Gottlieb Transit Corridor — a 10-foot-wide passageway on the building's western edge — where a meridian line and light-reflecting display illustrate the connections between the clock, the calendar and the sun's movements in our sky.

Or you can forget about the sky and settle for the Earth. Rising beyond that perfect lawn and the Astronomers Monument, the Hollywood Hills to the north are an entirely worthy view, as are the mountains to the east, not to mention the glint of the Pacific to the west. During the Santa Ana winds of mid-October, you could even pick out the Getty Center on its Brentwood hilltop.

## **Food and more**

The designers certainly had that westward view in mind when they positioned the observatory's new eatery, the Café at the End of the Universe.

Run by Wolfgang Puck's catering team, the cafe includes seating for 54 indoors and 84 outdoors on a cantilevered, westward-looking balcony.

Though the place will feature soups, salads, sandwiches, sweets and one hot entree per day, nothing will cost more than \$10. If it weren't for the \$8 per head that most people will pay to get there on a shuttle, that balcony would be a contender for the best cheap-date view in the city.

It's also a good place to admire your purchases from the expanded gift shop, and maybe even spend a moment considering the earthly history that made this place possible.

Griffith J. Griffith, born in Wales in about 1850, made his fortune on Mexican silver mines and California real estate. In 1896 he gave the city the 3,015 hilly acres that form the heart of Griffith Park. That didn't mean, however, that people liked him.

He drank a lot, quarreled often and called himself "Colonel," though it's unclear if he ever earned that rank in any organization. And in 1903, while drunk, he shot his wife in the face, which led to a divorce and a brief term in San Quentin. It was after this hitch in prison, and an inspiring peek through a telescope on Mt. Wilson, that he set aside the money that eventually built the observatory and the Greek Theater below it. He died in 1919, not only before construction began, but also before the modern planetarium had been created.

So, you could say it's fitting that the renewed observatory is getting lit most nights. But you could also do worse than remember, on your way out, the exhilaration that gripped Griffith after his own first look through a good telescope.

If all mankind could look through such a telescope, he told a contemporary, "it would change the world!"