

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

Griffith Observatory

Los Angeles, California

Pfeiffer Partners Architects Inc.

Pfeiffer Partners and Levin & Associates Architects' restoration and expansion of L.A.'s beloved landmark lures stars back to Hollywood.

By Russell Fortmeyer

Like Los Angeles, the Griffith Observatory, a 1935 Art Deco masterpiece conceived by Russell Porter and designed by the firm Austin and Ashley, exists in several domains, illusory and real. Whether glimpsed in the movies—1955's "Rebel Without a Cause" or 1984's "The Terminator"—or as a twilight destination in the Hollywood Hills, the Griffith's iconic three-domed structure, what longtime observatory director Edwin Krupp calls the "hood ornament of Los Angeles," also provides that rare Los Angeles accident: true public space.



Photo © Tim Griffith

Angelenos have come to take for granted the drop-dead views of the L.A. basin from the Griffith's formal, Beaux-Arts plan's rear terraces and colonnade, as well as the informative, accessible displays of astronomy's wonders inside. They didn't foresee that their fondness for the building would wear it out to the point where it would need to close for five years while comprehensive restoration could occur.

Pfeiffer Partners and Levin & Associates respected these convictions when the two L.A. architectural firms collaborated on the preservation and expansion of the observatory during a 10-year, \$93 million project. It helped considerably that the two firms' principals—

Pfeiffer's Steven Johnson, AIA, and Brenda Levin, FAIA—had worked together on some of the most high-profile historic preservation projects in Los Angeles, including the 1993 preservation and expansion of Bertram Goodhue's 1926 central library (at the time, Pfeiffer was part of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer).

Johnson and Levin approached the project as a study of dualities—the existing and the new, the iconic and the contemporary, the sky and the ground. Walking up to the building, you would never know the architects had taken the existing 27,000-square-foot building's cramped galleries and doubled them in size with nearly 40,000 square feet of new underground space.

Due to the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, the original architects eschewed the vogue for a Spanish Revival tile dome, embracing concrete in order, Levin says, to "use materials volumetrically in a clean, modern building," resulting in a "fortresslike" building that needed no structural upgrades. The high craftsmanship of the original observatory was owed to cheap, Depression-era labor, says Johnson, and it shows in the restored exterior details, heavy bronze window grates, and the marble floor and travertine walls of the rotunda.

Formal name of project: Griffith Observatory

Location:

Los Angeles, California
2800 East Observatory Road
Los Angeles, CA 90027

Gross square footage: 27,300 sq.ft. existing: 39,600