

Madame Tussauds Comes to Town

by James Bartlett
photos by Anthony Nelson

Everyone who comes to Hollywood and strolls along the Walk of Fame or compares their hands and feet with the prints outside the Grauman's Chinese Theatre secretly wishes that they'll see their favorite celebrity.

In late summer, over 100 of the most famous stars in the world arrived on Hollywood Boulevard at the new Madame Tussauds Hollywood. There are no velvet ropes, barriers or bodyguards here though – you can get as many pictures as you like and get up close and personal with Brad Pitt, Zac Efron, John Wayne, Jennifer Lopez and many, many more.

Designed by local architects Michael Rotondi and John Ash, the \$50 million building was the first Madame Tussauds ever to be built from the ground up. An angular, ultra-modern design, its faceted planes sheathed in zinc panels actually change its transparency depending on what time of day it is.

It has certainly made an impact on the crowded Boulevard, and Rotondi spoke about the challenge of building

next to the legendary Grauman's Chinese Theatre: "We initially wondered whether it was possible to even make a neutral building on such an iconic site that already has such great presence, (so) what we did was to simply think of it as a space, and we needed to enhance that space."

Using geometric drawing – a process akin to lasers showing the path of a bullet – they drew lines from every view, building and angle, looking to make the building a center. As a result people are almost subconsciously guided towards Madame Tussauds. "The best way to leverage the space is to make people stay, and here the sidewalk becomes the plaza, which then becomes the courtyard – like a piazza in Italy. It's not just a public space metaphorically, it's something that works as a public space – and hopefully sets an example for future development in Hollywood."

Adrian Jones, General Manager of Madame Tussauds Hollywood echoed Rotondi's thoughts:

"We're excited about being involved in the regeneration of Hollywood as a major tourist destination that Los Angeles can be proud of. (We wanted to) establish the building on the Hollywood landscape, not only from an architectural view but as a 'landmark' on a trip or vacation, establishing and reinforcing the 'brand' credentials of Madame Tussauds Hollywood and what it can offer to tourists and locals alike."

These ideas become clear in the tomato red-colored courtyard. It's the perfect place to begin your unique journey, and guests step onto the red carpet to be met by President Obama (one of the most popular figures in the exhibition) and comedienne and celebrity interviewer Joan Rivers.

Over the course of three storeys you pass through 18 themed zones filled with all the amazingly realistic stars that you love – and love to hate. It's the next best thing to hanging out with your favorite stars, so put on one of the wigs, hats or feather boas to get in the mood, take some pictures, and back home it will look like you were a star for the day.

Wannabe American Idols can sing karaoke for a fierce-looking Simon Cowell (and have him tell you how bad you were!) or you can go within biting distance of Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and have him whisper in your ear about his favorite "meal" (the only time you wish some of the figures were behind bars!).

continues next page



The fun and razzle-dazzle begins even before you step inside the lobby.



The unveiling of the new Michael Jackson exhibit had adoring fans captivated like it was the King of Pop himself.