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Historic Los Angeles hotel site is reborn as an expansive new K-12 school campus

BY SHEILA CAIN

The \$578-million Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools campus in Los Angeles is built on the site of the former Ambassador Hotel.

FOR MANY, THE SITE OF THE LOS Angeles Unified School District's new Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools campus will be remembered for the building that used to be there.

The Ambassador Hotel, opened in 1921, hosted world-famous musical performers, several Academy Awards galas and, most notably, an ill-fated Democratic fete in 1968 that ended with the assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

Even though the hotel was demolished over several years in the mid-2000s to make

way for the new 4,000-student campus, the site continues to gain attention. The September opening of the \$578-million school, which serves K-12 students, has followed years of legal wrangling over the site and significant remediation work to cap a methane-gas field. It also has survived an ongoing buzz over the elaborate amenities and level of architectural and artistic detail that should go into a taxpayer-funded public school.

For many members of the project team tasked with designing and building the

most expensive public school in U.S. history, the site likely will be remembered as host to one of the most challenging and memorable projects of their careers.

Built on a site just shy of 24 acres, the Mid-Wilshire District's RFK Community Schools campus includes a two-story elementary school building; a 500,000-sq-ft, six-story structure for middle and high school students, a 320-car parking garage, a central plant, soccer field, several outdoor practice fields, an outdoor swimming pool and an art-filled memorial park. A



RFK COMMUNITY SCHOOLS CAMPUS

Originally designed as a large comprehensive K-12 school, the Los Angeles Unified School District's Local District 4 determined, in 2008—after design documents were long complete and construction was well under way—that the new Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools campus would be home to six pilot schools serving student populations from kindergarten through grade 12.

Because the campus already was created to house small learning communities within the overall school, design adjustments were minor.

Pilot schools are innovative small schools that have charter-like autonomy over their budget, curriculum, assessment, governance, schedule and staffing but are part of the public school system.

The pilot schools on the RFK campus are:

- UCLA Community School (K-12)
- New Open World (NOW) Academy (K-12)
- Los Angeles High School of the Arts (9-12)
- School for the Visual Arts and Humanities (9-12)
- Ambassador School of Global Leadership (6-12)
- Ambassador School of Global Education (K-5)

The schools have adopted as their theme social justice, as determined by the Robert F. Kennedy Commission, a group formed in 2005 by the LAUSD school board and superintendent. The commission's major recommendation sought a theme that would permeate the curriculum, extending from kindergarten through high school, and reflect Kennedy's commitment throughout his public life.

Activities are expected to include a foundation to help fund activities related to social justice as well as a speakers program and a fellows program that will bring emerging and established leaders to the school.

The RFK Community School is home to six pilot schools in two buildings. The elementary school's playground/courtyard is pictured.

ribbon-cutting was held at the school on Nov. 13 and attended by members of the Kennedy family, dignitaries and community leaders.

The two classroom buildings are home to six pilot schools that follow the theme of social justice (see sidebar). Campus perks include fine-art murals, an auditorium with an orchestra pit, a food court and atria.

Several significant portions of the historic Ambassador Hotel were saved during demolition and incorporated into the new construction, such as the east wall and

west entry of the hotel's famed Coconut Grove nightclub, where stars such as Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby once performed.

Others parts of the structure were memorialized by re-creating architectural details, preserving views or positioning new construction on the original footprints of historically significant venues.

Remembering History

Incorporating original pieces of the hotel into new construction wasn't easy. Beach

sand was used in the concrete walls of the original hotel, leaving the project team with few options to save the historic Coconut Grove nightclub space and still bring its walls up to current seismic codes.

Crews were able to save and incorporate into the new auditorium the old nightclub's west canopy as well as its east wall—a stronger wall that had been added during a 1935 upgrade. Original columns and arches uncovered during demolition helped architects work into the final product some of the space's original designs

HISTORICAL SITE

The east wall of the former hotel's famed Coconut Grove nightclub was preserved, becoming part of the new high school's auditorium. Crews shored and suspended the wall, then cut it away from the existing structure to incorporate it into the new construction.



The new auditorium (left) and entry (right) include features similar to those in the site's original Coconut Grove nightclub.



Designers created a building appropriate for educational use while still evoking memories of the former hotel and nightclub.

AMBASSADOR OF HISTORY

Before the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools project began making headlines, the historic hotel that formerly occupied the site often found itself in the news.

Known as a place where national and international leaders came to stay, star entertainers performed and Academy Awards ceremonies were held, the Ambassador Hotel is probably most remembered as the site where Senator Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Kennedy had just finished making a victory statement after capturing the California Democratic presidential primary shortly after midnight on June 5, 1968, when he was shot along with five other people by Sirhan Bishara Sirhan in the pantry area of the hotel's main kitchen. Kennedy died at the hospital one day later. The others survived their wounds.

The 500-room hotel opened at 3400 Wilshire Blvd. in Los Angeles's mid-Wilshire District in 1921. Designed by Pasadena architect Myron Hunt, the hotel was frequented by the entertainment industry's most revered personalities.

The famed Coconut Grove nightclub hosted the biggest names in show business, including Frank Sinatra, Barbara Streisand, Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, Liza Minnelli, Martin and Lewis, The Supremes, Merv Griffin, Evelyn Knight and Richard Pryor.

Six Academy Awards ceremonies were held at the hotel between 1930 and 1943, and it hosted as many as seven U.S. presidents as well as heads of state from around the world.

The hotel closed on Jan. 3, 1989, and slowly fell into disrepair. It was rented out for commercial shoots and feature films in recent years.

Soon after the hotel closed, the Los Angeles Unified School District began efforts to purchase the property. District officials wrangled for 10 years with real estate developer Donald Trump, who wanted to build the world's tallest hotel on the site. The district then faced legal battles with preservationists, who wanted to save the hotel from the wrecking ball.

In the end, the hotel was demolished, but crews saved parts of the historic Coconut Grove nightclub, bar stools, countertops and doorframes from the former nightclub's coffee shop, and portions of the original Ambassador Hotel sign.

The Kennedy Inspiration Park, dedicated to the life and work of Senator Kennedy, runs parallel to Wilshire Boulevard and includes a stainless-steel wall with a series of etched quotations about social justice from the senator and other leaders.



and colors.

The Pasadena office of general contractor Hensel Phelps Construction Co., a member of multiple AGC chapters, pulled together the expertise of the owner, historical designer, architect, structural engineer and subcontractors to develop a plan to first shore and suspend the east wall, then cut it away from the old building.

Once the wall was shored, the team could underpin the existing footings with the new code-compliant seismic footings. The wall was reconnected to the new structure after the auditorium was built, says Stephen Kimball, Hensel Phelps' project manager.

The project team also salvaged some of the marble column covers, doorframes, stainless-steel counters and bar stools used in the historic Paul Williams-designed coffee shop that sat adjacent to the nightclub. The salvaged materials were worked into a re-creation of the cafe, now used by the school as a faculty lounge.

The high school building's new library was designed within the same footprint as the hotel's original Embassy Ballroom, the site of Kennedy's final speech before he was killed. The new space features the same arched ceilings as the original venue and includes a section for archives donated by the Kennedy family.

Behind the auditorium is the high school building, with a height ranging from four to six stories. Designers were directed to preserve the appearance of the Ambassador Hotel, but instead of replicating the original building, they took artistic license and created a building appropriate for educational use while still saluting the former structure.

"It resembles [the hotel] but with more contemporary architecture," says Harry Drake, principal and senior project manager with Pasadena, Calif., design firm Gonzalez Goodale Architects.

The high school building mimics the height, shape and sloped roof of the original hotel, with the addition of a floor-to-ceiling glass curtain wall, Drake adds.

"This provides good north light into the classrooms," and people walking along Wilshire Boulevard can see the classrooms in action, he says.

A 1970s remodel of the hotel included the addition of a neon sign at the hotel's entry. When the sign was removed during demolition, crews found the original concrete pylon underneath.

The pylon — put in place in the 1930s — was seismically retrofitted, along with the

fountain at its base that had been filled with concrete. A new water feature was created to resemble the original.

These features are now part of the 19,000-sq-ft Kennedy Inspiration Park fronting Wilshire Boulevard (see sidebar).

Higher Education

The site's existing 30-ft slope provided designers with a natural solution to keeping apart the elementary school from the middle/high school building while still creating a unified campus in design and function.

The elementary school building is positioned at the lowest point on the site, while the middle/high school building is built at the highest point. Between them is an outdoor, terraced amphitheater that provides a natural progression between the two campus sections.

"The thought process was that students in the lower grades would be looking up to the [middle/high school] building and saying, 'Some day I'm going to be one of the big kids on campus,'" Drake says. "And our hope is that the kids in the upper grades will look down at where they started and become mentors to their brothers, sisters and cousins in the lower grades."

Designers also used materials and paint



The new library was reconstructed in the same location as the hotel ballroom, including replicating its original ceiling.

color to differentiate the two buildings. Both have plaster, zinc panels and perforated metal on their exteriors, but while the elementary building features primary colors, the middle/high school building is clad in more subtle shades of green, gray and white.

The elementary school was completed

and open to students a full year before the rest of the campus was finished.

A Long Road

The road leading to this fall's opening of the RFK Community Schools has been a rocky one for the district, which had been eyeing the property since the 1980s but

KENNEDY INSPIRATION PARK

The Kennedy Inspiration Park, master-planned by Pasadena, Calif.-based Gonzalez Goodale Architects, occupies a 19,000-sq-ft section of the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools campus fronting Wilshire Boulevard.

The park slopes downward from the busy street, preserving views of

the school buildings from the street and terminating in a stainless-steel wall designed by artists May Sun and Richard Wyatt.

The rectangular sheet is etched with an image of Robert F. Kennedy and displays an array of inspiring quotes from Kennedy and other champions of social justice. The idea is to create a

space that encourages contemplation of Kennedy's legacy of social justice.

Two "audio benches" based on the design of benches in the original hotel garden feature taped speeches and memories of the Ambassador Hotel.

The park also provides spaces for eating lunch, playing chess and quiet contemplation.

Artwork at the park, along with the art incorporated into the school buildings and the surrounding campus, was designed and installed in response to the project's environmental impact report. This project's EIR required the school district to incorporate public art to reflect the history and culture of the original hotel.



PHOTOS BY © HELIOPHOTO

PROJECT TEAM

Owner: Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles
General Contractor: Hensel Phelps Construction Co., Pasadena, Calif.
Architect: Gonzalez Goodale Architects, Pasadena
Historical Architect: Tetra Design, Los Angeles
Structural Engineer: Englekirk & Sabol Consulting Structural Engineers, Los Angeles
Mechanical, Electrical and Civil Engineer: TMAD/Taylor & Gaines, Pasadena
Landscape Architect: AHBE, Culver City, Calif.
Lighting Designer: Horton Lees Brogden Lighting Design, Culver City, Calif.



The two main buildings are separated by a 30-ft difference in grade, eased by incorporating a terraced outdoor amphitheater.

faced a lengthy and expensive legal battle with real estate magnate Donald Trump, who had entertained the idea of building the world's tallest building on the site. It also faced resistance from municipal leaders and the L.A. business community, which was strongly opposed to the use of the site as a school.

A lawsuit filed by the Los Angeles Conservancy, which wanted to preserve the entire Coconut Grove nightclub, was dropped only after the district agreed to pay \$4 million to fund historic school conservation.

The challenges and costs continued to grow with the discovery of a methane-gas field on the site during demolition. The

mitigation added \$8 million to the budget and includes a rubberized membrane over a sand underlayment 3 to 4 ft below the surface, says Stephen Sharr, LAUSD's regional director for new construction, central region.

Crews finished final construction on the RFK Community Schools in just 30 months—in time for the start of the 2010-11 school year—a tight time frame that was aided by the use of building information modeling.

The school's design was actually completed with the traditional bid set of drawings, but once Hensel Phelps was awarded the job, the team decided to redraw the entire project in BIM. The decision was "invaluable to ensuring the success of the project on schedule," Kimball says. "The process revealed more than 17,000 clashes between trades that were resolved before installation of work began."

Furthermore, the project team's staunch commitment to partnering and problem-solving is also credited with keeping the fast-moving job on track.

"There was no finger-pointing at all and no 'volleyball' tossing of issues back and forth," Sharr says. ■

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