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The \$578 Million School

Oct 1, 2010 12:00 AM, By Mike Kennedy

The 20-year effort to build a school complex in Los Angeles comes with a hefty price tag.

The 24-acre site south of Wilshire Boulevard in the Koreatown section of Los Angeles signifies different things to different people.

To those with fond memories of the golden era of Hollywood glamour, the site is where starlets were discovered, some of the first Academy Award ceremonies were held, and where the Rat Pack hung out. To those steeped in the lore of politics and history, the site marks the tragic setting where a man who might have become president of the United States was felled by an assassin's bullets.

To those responsible for educating the hundreds of thousands of Los Angeles students, the site represents the overcoming of more than 20 years of obstacles to acquire one of the few viable sites for a school in a dense urban area and bring critically needed classrooms to the neighborhood. To the families of the 4,000 or so students now attending classes there, the site represents the addition of an asset to a community that had for years seen their children bused out of the neighborhood for school.

To taxpayers near and far battered by the economy and distrustful of public officials' ability to spend money wisely, the site is a "Taj Mahal," an overpriced and extravagant education showplace that symbolizes unchecked and wasteful government spending.

All those memories and emotions—and lots of money—are tied up in the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools. Where the famous Ambassador Hotel and Coconut Grove nightclub once stood, where U.S. Sen. Robert Kennedy was fatally shot in 1968, where developer Donald Trump once envisioned erecting the world's tallest building, the 24 acres are now home to an education complex that was delivered with a gasp-inducing bill of \$578 million.

The cost has brought unwanted national attention to the project, labeled in the media as the most expensive school in the nation. Those involved acknowledge the steep price of the campus and point to a number of factors that caused costs to escalate: the cost of the acreage, legal fights to gain control of the land, challenges from preservationists seeking to save the original buildings, environmental mitigation steps, and seeking bids for the project in an unfavorable market. But they also emphasize the overriding purpose behind the project and the result.

"The area desperately needed a school," says Harry Drake, senior project manager and principal with Gonzalez Goodale Architects. "It's our hope that people look at it as a well-designed, well-maintained campus dedicated to education."

The campus has two main facilities: A 92,000-square-foot elementary building on the south end of the site opened in 2009. The six-story high school structure, designed to approximate the size and shape of the Ambassador and Coconut Grove, has more than 400,000 square feet and opened in September 2010.

Faded memories

Let's go back more than 20 years. The once-elegant Ambassador Hotel still was open, but had fallen on hard times in the 1980s, when the Los Angeles Unified School District began expressing interest in acquiring the property. Gaining control of a tract in a densely populated area of the city would enable the district to construct a badly needed school without having to resort to property condemnations and displacing neighborhood residents.

The Ambassador closed for good in 1989, but by then other suitors were vying

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with the school system for the site, which developers saw as a prime candidate for commercial construction. The most prominent of those was Donald Trump, who became managing partner of a group that bought the hotel site in the late 1980s. Trump envisioned an ambitious development that at one point included a 125-story building.

The school system pursued legal avenues, including condemnation and foreclosure, to acquire the property. As years passed, the site became less attractive commercially because of a downturn in demand for commercial space and the negative effect that riots in 1992 had on the neighborhood. Trump eventually dropped out of the development group, but the school district's legal fight for the site continued.

By the time the district prevailed in court and won control over the 24 acres, it was 2001, the school system had laid out \$105 million for the property, and still no school had been built.

Preserving the past

Gaining undisputed ownership of the tract did not end the school system's days in court. Preservationists, in the form of the group Los Angeles Conservancy, mounted a legal challenge to force the district to save the Ambassador and the adjoining Coconut Grove nightclub.

Built in 1921, the Ambassador reigned for decades as one of the city's most prestigious hotels. U.S. presidents routinely stayed there, and in the 1930s and 1940s, it played host to the Academy Awards six times. The Coconut Grove was a regular performing venue for some of Hollywood's biggest stars: Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, Sammy Davis, Jr.

The Ambassador gained greater notoriety in the early hours of June 5, 1968, shortly after Bobby Kennedy won the California Democratic presidential primary and delivered his victory speech in the hotel ballroom. Walking through the hotel kitchen after the speech, Kennedy was mortally wounded by three gunshots.

The Conservancy tried to persuade the school system not to tear down the structures. It argued in a lawsuit that the district could reuse the hotel building as part of the new campus, or build the campus elsewhere on the site and convert the main building to housing or another use that would benefit the neighborhood.

The district asserted that saving the hotel building and modernizing it to meet safety and educational standards for use as a school would be too costly. For instance, Drake says, seismic standards for concrete call for it to have a strength of 3,000 pounds per square inch (psi), and much of the concrete in the Ambassador had a strength of only 800 psi, and already was deteriorating.

The preservationists conceded defeat with regard to the Ambassador. In settling that lawsuit in 2004, they chose not to challenge demolition of the hotel, but got the district to agree to preserve the Coconut Grove and the hotel's coffee shop.

After a more detailed examination of those areas, school officials concluded that saving those structures wasn't feasible, and the Conservancy went back to court in 2007 to hold the district to its agreement. The group subsequently opted to drop the legal fight, citing "the increasing realization that true preservation of the site's remaining resources had become impossible due to what had already been lost. The Coconut Grove and coffee shop had been stripped of their historic fabric.... The damage had been done."

In return for settling both of the lawsuits, the Conservancy says, the district agreed to provide \$8.9 million to a preservation fund that will help repair and restore historically meaningful school facilities in the district.

1 | 2 | 3 | Next

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By Mike Kennedy

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