



Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts set for grand opening

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The new performing art center, which includes the old Beverly Hills Post office, was designed by architect Zoltan Pali, above. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times / October 17, 2013)

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By Deborah Vankin
October 17, 2013 5:30 p.m.

The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts will officially open its doors Thursday evening with a black-tie gala co-hosted by Robert Redford, [Brad Pitt](#) and Jamie Tisch, as well as its namesake, who gave \$25 million to build what is nicknamed “The Wallis.”

On Thursday morning staffers rushed through the \$70 million, 2.5-acre site at the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Canon Drive, getting the two buildings -- the renovated, expanded 1934 Beverly Hills Post Office and the new 500-seat Bram Goldsmith Theater -- ready for the evening.

Maintenance crews freshened the gleaming entrance promenade with white paint and pruned the outdoor sculpture garden as others rushed by with blooming floral arrangements. Alternately, the piercing sound of violin strings or full orchestral music swelled in the background, then faded entirely, as rehearsals and sound testing went on inside the theater spaces.

SPF architect Zoltan Pali, who designed the space, stayed calm in eye of the pre-party storm as he led a small private tour.

Though Pali is known for restoring and transforming historic buildings, a primary challenge of the Wallis, he said, was creating a unified, fluid space out of two distinct buildings, with two different styles of architecture -- "how to make that sympatico," he said.

He said he wanted to pay homage to the old aesthetic but not get trapped in it, and while he wanted to allow the newer building to be just that -- modern -- he still wanted to blend the two spaces organically.

"We were building a new theater next to a historic structure that's not only revered, but a national monument," he said in an interview. "The proper way to add or put something on this particular site would be to build something completely different and new. In my mind, you have to build for today, and with today's technology and ideas; you also have to make sure that you actually distinguish the new from the old -- radically. But you also want to create a dialogue."

Pali designed high-end, Swiss cement panels -- tinted to look like copper and which match the terra cotta of the older building -- that cover the exterior of the new building. He also worked with architectural details in the grand hall of the original Post Office -- now called the Paula Kent Meehan Historic Building -- stitching the old and new aesthetics together. Donor plaques hang over what once were P.O. boxes and the arches housing ticket booths for Wallis events were once kiosks where customers bought stamps.

The first public performance at the Wallis will feature the Martha Graham Dance Company on Nov. 8 and 9.

The outdoor sculpture garden is still in progress and somewhat sparse, with just two pieces on display - one by Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi and the other by French artist Emmanuel Fillion. Executive Director Lou Moore said "a big piece is coming in next week, but I can't say by whom yet."

Moore, while relaxing in the old Post Master's office -- which will ultimately be used as a private dining room and lounge -- said she has big plans for the Wallis, not just in programming but how it fits into the city.

"I really want it to be the town square," she said. "I really want it to be where everyone wants to come to walk the grand hall, sit out on the terrace and have coffee, see a show, their children attend classes, something's going on at all times and it's full of life and creativity. That's my dream."