



Photos by PERRY C. RIDDLE / Los Angeles Times

The Babylon Court of Hollywood & Highland features columns topped with white elephants. It is meant to evoke the set of the classic film "Intolerance."

Grand Illusion

Hollywood & Highland scales down the glitz of a bygone era into a formulaically designed mall and theater complex.

Architecture Review

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF
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They don't do kitsch like they used to. That's the sad truth behind the latest TrizecHahn development, a massive new mall and theater complex that opens today in the heart of old Hollywood.

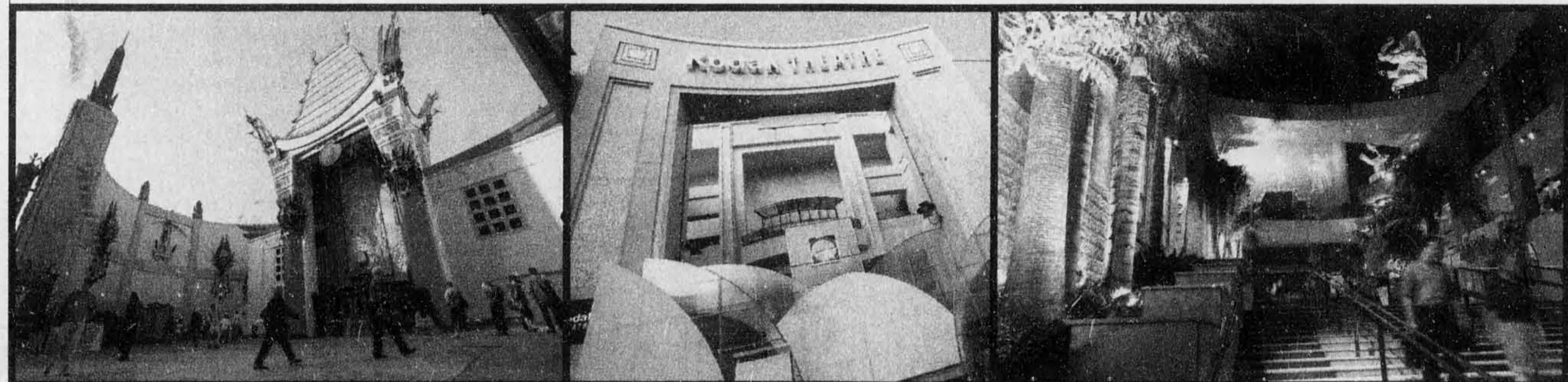
Built on a budget of \$615 million, the 640,000-square-foot Hollywood & Highland development includes all of the elements we have come to expect in a conventional urban mall—a six-screen multiplex; brand-name stores, such as Banana Republic, the Gap, Victoria's Secret and

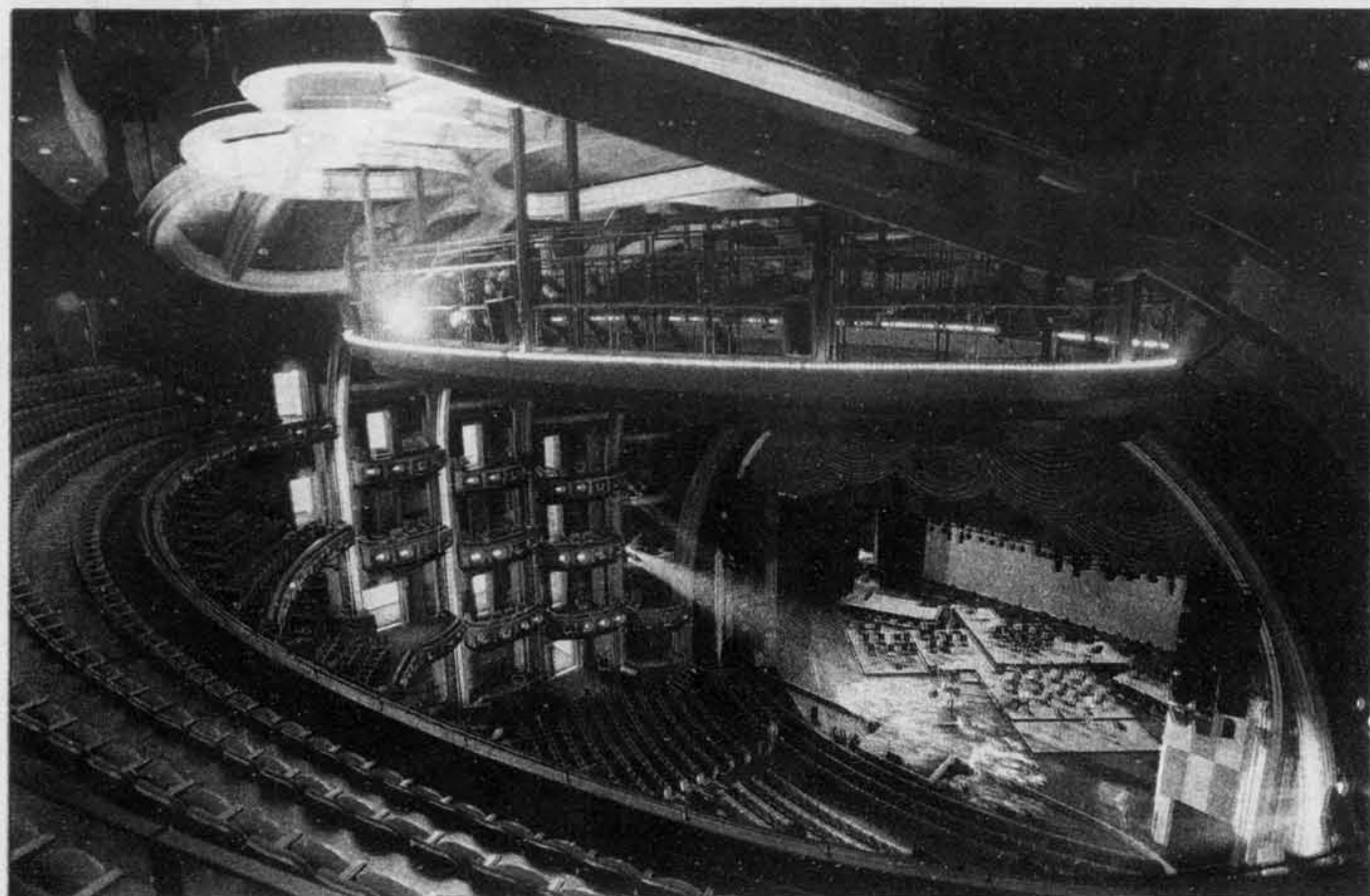
Tommy Hilfiger; and a mix of high- and low-end chain restaurants.

What makes the project unique is its desire to tap into Hollywood lore. Designed by Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects, the development is organized around a central courtyard that is a mock-up of the stage set designed for D.W. Griffith's 1916 epic film on bigotry, "Intolerance." Tucked deep inside the development, the 3,500-seat Kodak Theatre, designed by the Rockwell Group, will be the future home of the Academy Awards. The theater will be the first venue since 1960 to bring Hollywood's showcase event back to a still-dilapidated strip.

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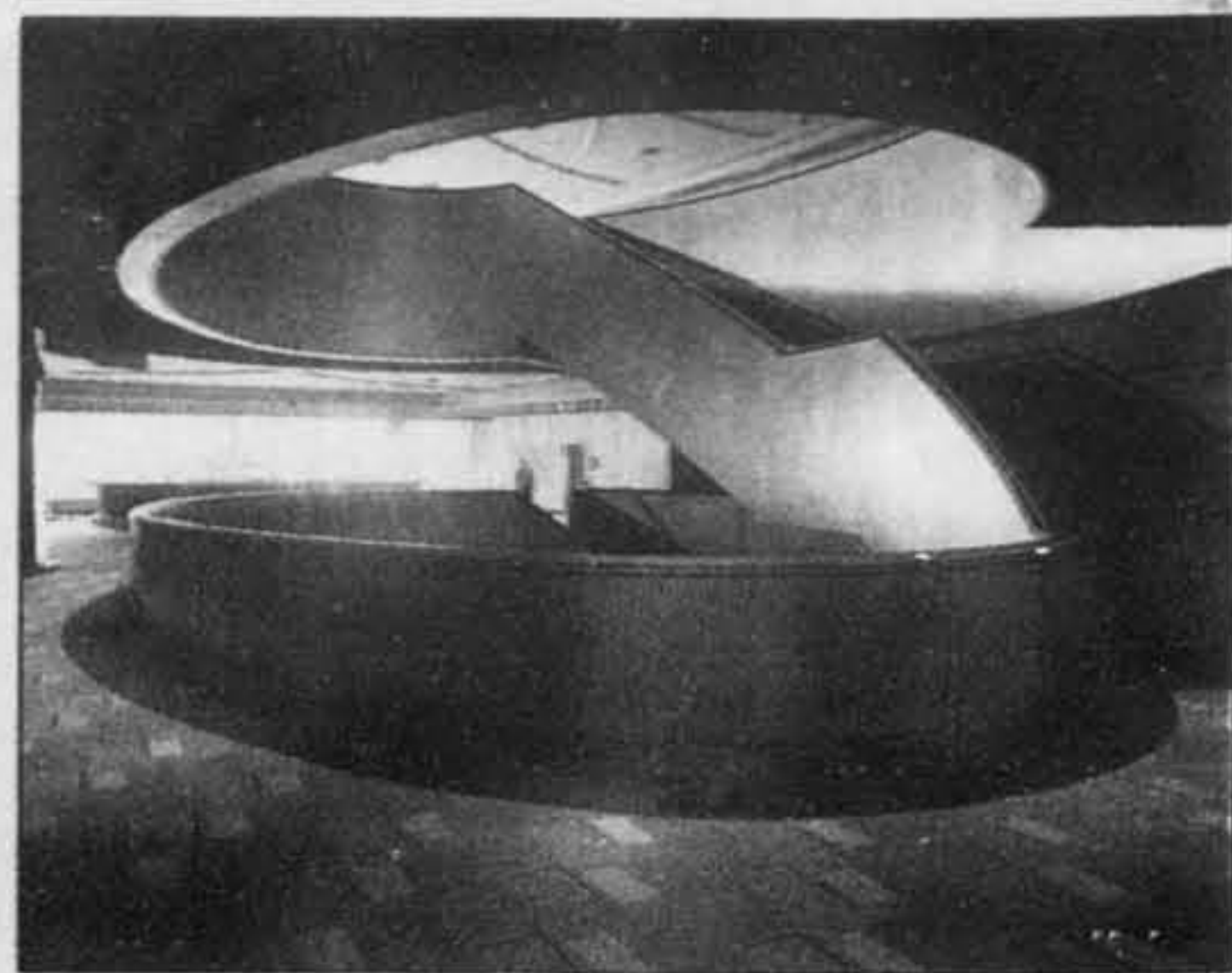
The masterfully kitschy Grauman's Chinese Theatre next door, left; the 3,500-seat Kodak Theatre, future home to the Oscar ceremony; and the grand stair that connects Hollywood Boulevard to Babylon Court.





PERRY C. RIDDLE / Los Angeles Times

The Rockwell Group's Kodak Theatre will be home to the Academy Awards. It's the first venue since 1960 to bring the event back to Hollywood.



LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times

The staircase that links the multi-level lobby of the Kodak Theatre.

Complex: Lacking in True Hollywood Glitz

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But the veneer of glitz is relatively thin, and the result is another gigantic urban eyesore—better than most, but ultimately lacking in either creative energy or social complexity. Its dull, formulaic design clearly springs from the minds of corporate bureaucrats, not the grandiose eccentrics of Hollywood's past.

It could have been worse. The complex has been promoted as a critical component in the redevelopment of the boulevard, which city officials are trying to transform from a seedy strip of T-shirt shops and vacant buildings into a world-class tourist destination. To that end, the TrizecHahn development strives to connect to the surrounding context. Rather than focus all of the activity inside, for example, the architects have placed entries to several major retailers along the boulevard. A grand stair connects the boulevard to a circular plaza—dubbed the Babylon Court—that is intended to function as a vibrant public room.

That effort to engage the surrounding cityscape extends to the ethos of Hollywood as well. A 19-story tower anchors the corner of the project at Highland, echoing the gothic lines of the 1927 Security Pacific National Bank building across the avenue. Escalators connect the complex's upper-level cinemas to the courtyard of Grauman's Chinese Theatre next door. And the main axis through the Babylon Court lines up with the flamboyant marquee of Disney's El Capitan Theater to the south and the Hollywood sign to the north, establishing a strong visual link between the complex and two major Hollywood icons.

Such connections have value. But the project's nod to contextualism cannot save it from two fundamental problems. In terms of grandiose artifice, the development does not measure up to such old Hollywood palaces as Grauman's, the El Capitan and the recently renovated Pantages and Egyptian theaters. And as architecture, its desire to draw on the mystique of old Hollywood only trivializes the past, rather than adding a significant new layer to it.

The problems begin at the street. The main facade is broken down into a composition of interlocking forms, each clad in a different material—plaster, rough Jerusalem limestone and green and blue tile. Billboards and video screens decorate most of the boxes, a nod to the boulevard's neon. But they do little to disguise the project's clunky scale.

That lack of extravagance continues inside the Babylon Court. The original "Intolerance" set, built on a quarter-mile lot at the corner of Hollywood and Hillhurst, was an early example of Hollywood's self-promotional flair. In the TrizecHahn version, that vision is reduced to three large sculptures set against a backdrop of yellow plaster. Its centerpiece is a faux Babylonian portal, seven-eighths the original scale, that frames the courtyard's back entry. Two squat columns, their forms bulging grotesquely at the center, stand to one side of the court, topped by twin sculptures of elephants propped up on their hind legs.

The overall effect is too sub-

dued, as if the developer were unwilling to invest in the appropriate veneer of artifice and glamour. What's missing is the feeling of enchantment that can be found in many of the theaters and stage sets of the 1920s—structures that were meant to envelop visitors in a complete, if superficial, fantasy.

The Kodak Theatre should be understood as part of this larger corporate ethos. Embedded deep inside the development, it is the project's most authentic link to Hollywood and a crude example of current shopping mall design strategies. The theater's formal entry, located on the boulevard, is marked by an enormous portal, with the Kodak logo emblazoned above. Just inside the portal is a small court, much like Grauman's next door, surrounded by two tiers of balconies.

The balconies are decorated with faux opera boxes, as if to remind us that public life, too, is a form of spectacle, much like the events being staged inside. But at 3,900 square feet, the Kodak's courtyard is less than half the size of Grauman's. As such, it is a largely empty gesture—a nostalgic image that is essentially divorced from its intended function.

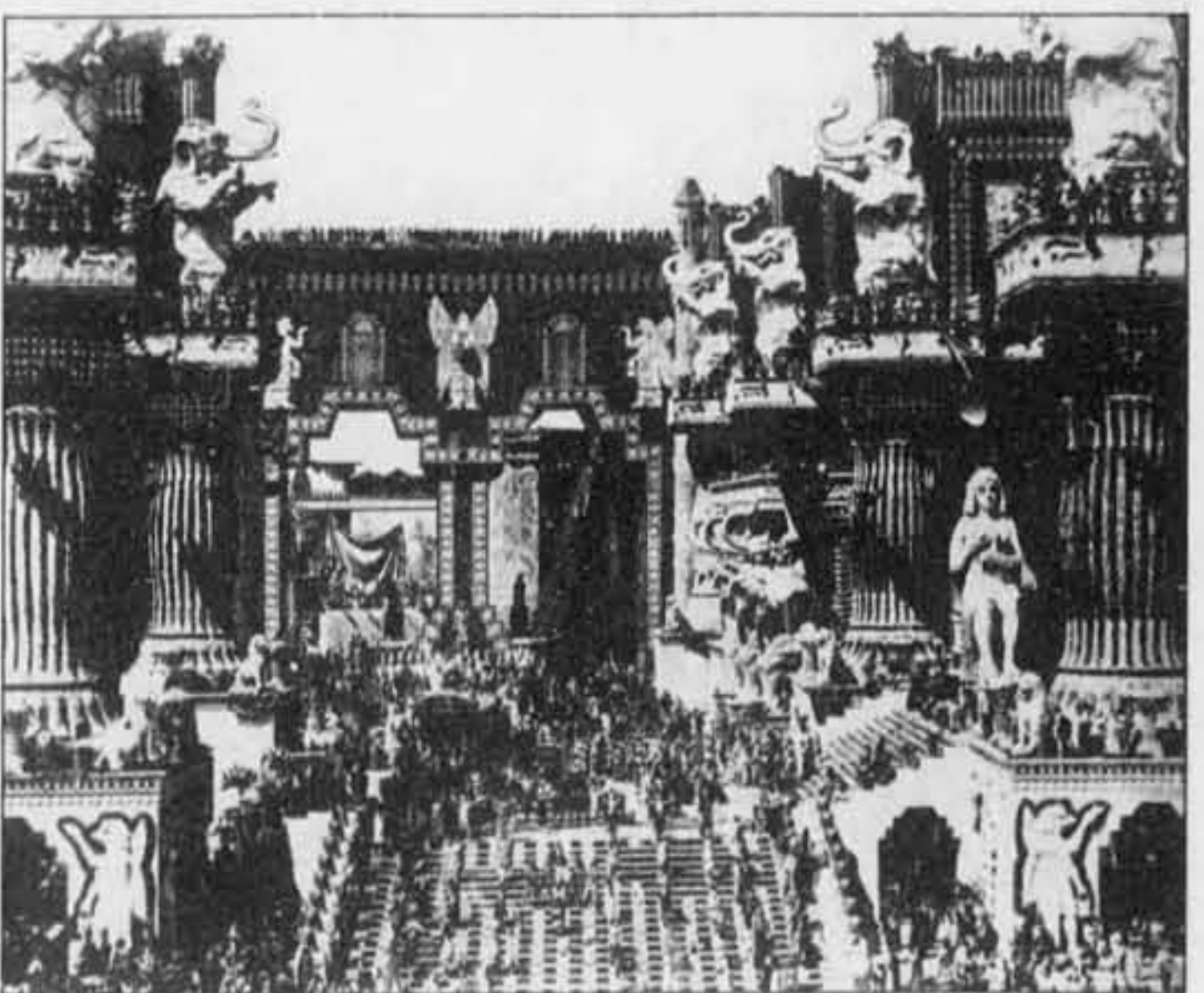
That kind of deception continues inside, where visitors encounter a shopping arcade before reaching the theater lobby. The two-story arcade is cluttered with walkways and bridges, connecting the various shops. Their windows are framed in bronze. Above, balconies have simple, wrought-iron rails. A sweeping grand staircase anchors the end of the space. One of the project's most elegant details, the staircase, which narrows as it rises, evokes the graceful lines of a ballroom gown.

But this, too, is an illusion. Once you reach the top of the staircase, you enter another circulation chamber: a four-story, open-air rotunda that connects back to the Babylon Court on one side and a bus drop-off on the other. The effect is to make the theater feel like an appendage to shopping. For those who have the stamina to reach the lobby, the experience is surprisingly low-key. A four-story space, dominated by a large oval stair, its curved walls give it a certain intimacy. The stair's heavy banisters, made of cherrywood, have a simple elegance that would get Martha Stewart's stamp of approval.

And despite its 3,500 seats, the theater hall itself feels relatively compact. This is largely due to its height. Three balconies are stacked on top of one another, which brings the audience somewhat closer to the stage. Real opera boxes line the hall on either side.

In fact, this too is a stage set, designed primarily for a television audience. The room is decorated with eight gray columns that rise up on either side and tie together on top in an enormous bow. David Rockwell, the theater's principal designer, calls this the tiara, a crown that will float above Hollywood's royalty during the filming of the Academy Awards ceremony. There is no ceiling above the tiara—just the theater's dark black shell—because it will not be visible on TV. The fiberglass columns, which are hollowed out to conceal

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File Photo

The original set of Belshazzar's palace in D.W. Griffith's "Intolerance."

Complex: A Dull Take on Glitz

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electronic cables, look flimsy. In short, the theater lacks the gaudy grandeur of its predecessors.

Ironically, it is as an urban strategy that the entire Hollywood & Highland development is most disturbing. Its aim is to create the aura of a bustling city district in place of the real thing. Such strategies are a response to the theories of thinkers like Jane Jacobs and Robert Venturi in the early 1960s. Jacobs decried the large-scale developments that were then infecting urban centers as a destructive force, breaking down a city's spirit of community. Venturi, meanwhile, saw the visual noise of places like the Las Vegas Strip as a model of American vernacular architecture.

Neither Jacobs nor Venturi, however, could have foreseen how their ideas would be co-opted by commercial developers. In the past decade, as the scale of such projects has continued to grow, developers have struggled to find new ways to increase their profit margins. As such, they have added elements of a real city—its public spaces and neon glitz—to make their malls more attractive to shoppers. The TrizecHahn development is typical of such projects. A collage of Hollywood clichés, even its Kodak Theatre has a marketing mission: to suck more pedestrians off the boulevard and into the mall.

And that is something no amount of glitz can cover up. The TrizecHahn development is less about escapism than about brand-name tie-ins. In the end, the sheer scale of the investment may do wonders for the revitalization of the boulevard, but the project has a hollowness that makes one long for the straightforward formulas of an earlier time. Far from spellbinding, the experience is exhausting. What TrizecHahn needed was a dose of Jacobs' feel for urban life, and Sid Grauman's knack for the spectacle.