

# Wallis Annenberg Center: New Beverly Hills Theater Nods to Its Past Life as a Post Office

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Old and new converge at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts

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In a year of sweeping post office closures and service cutbacks, one local branch is being celebrated with a much-anticipated transformation. The

historic mail center in Beverly Hills, after a 10-year conversion, is finally re-opening as the grand Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.

In architect Zoltan Palti's design, the movement and imagery of mail service -- stacks of paper, flying envelopes, square stamps -- are reflected in abstract details. The layered, underlit walls of the corridor that lead to the 150 seat Lovelace Studio Theater refer to layers of square stamps, while the theater itself occupies the former mail sorting room. The former clerk windows are put to new use as box office windows, and the old loading docks are now repurposed as marley-floored classrooms.

Rather than gutting the old post office to incorporate a state of the art theater, Pali decided to work within the constraints of the historical building, leaving it mostly intact and simply re-imagining its available space. He therefore built an additional building in the back -- the 500-seat Bram Goldsmith Theater, with its walnut interior inspired by the movement of performers. Wood screens wrap the space in arching bowed trusses, slatted to both conceal and reveal modular acoustic systems, and to interplay with the theater's lighting capabilities -- highlighting, once again, the layers of space and the inner workings not of postal work this time, but theater.

The lobby of the theater flows into a sunken garden walled off from South Santa Monica Boulevard. Terraced landscaping leads toward the upper Jamie Tisch Sculpture Garden, from which you'll get a grand view of the skyline of Century City, and, more immediately, the shopping district of Beverly Hills. As you stand in the garden, you might notice the juxtaposition of the new architecture against the old, and once again, you'll observe postal imagery in the new: the copper-colored cement plates that adorn the exterior of the Bram Goldsmith Theater mimic the pattern of envelopes of various thicknesses moving through sorting machinery, and mirror the original terra cotta roof tiles of the adjacent post office.

In perhaps the most impressive design detail of the center, old and new merge via a public walkway that leads from City Hall to the east, between the old post office and the new theater building, into the sculpture garden, and out to Canon Drive. Patrons and non-ticket holders alike can wander this path. Just as the government mail service of this 1933 public work-era building was available for all, the architectural experience of the Wallis Annenberg Center, despite its 90210 zip code, is designed to be accessible by all.

*The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts (nicknamed the Wallis) officially opened its doors to the public last week with a series of galas. Programming begins Nov. 8 with the Martha Graham Dance Company. The performance calendar includes dance, world theater, film, and opera. In 2014, the Annenberg Foundation will begin a year-round program of professional theater classes for kids age 8 to 18.*