

CINÉMA VÉRITÉ

By MICHAEL CALLAHAN • Photos by TOD SEELIE

# MORE FLOP THAN BLOCKBUSTER

Mired in budget overruns, clumsy politics, and curatorial missteps, the Academy Museum has lost its plot.

**A**s I stroll through the entrance of the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, I'm instantly enchanted. Here is Dorothy's Kansas house, the striped stockings of the dead Wicked Witch of the East protruding from beneath it, plopped in the middle of Munchkinland. I wind my way onto the yellow brick road, enveloped in the magic of Oz, which has been re-created to the last Technicolor detail. I may not be off to see the Wizard, but I am surely off, I feel, to discover the world of wonder that is the movies.

Well, that's how it was supposed to be, anyway. It didn't turn out that way. Like much of what could have made the museum clever, glittering, and special, the concept for the lobby was eventually dropped. When you enter the finished Academy Museum today, the space comes off as chilly and industrial, as if you've stepped into an

old airplane hangar that's been remodeled into the lobby of a Ramada.

Like the trailer for a horror film, it all foreshadows the archaic and soulless experience to follow. Plagued by huge cost overruns, a deeply flawed design, overtly political curation, and sticky charges of anti-Semitism, the museum now seems laughably earnest, lacking in a cohesive narrative, and, perhaps most damning, dull.

How did an institution dedicated to celebrating one of the nation's most enduring and bold contributions to the world end up such a mess?

## BUILDING TROUBLE

The idea for a film museum in Los Angeles goes back to the trade's founding days, but it didn't gain momentum until 2006, when the



Long awaited—and much debated—the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures opened in a former department store next door to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Wilshire Boulevard.

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the group that presents the Oscars and produces the annual ceremony, forked over \$50 million for a 3.5-acre site next to its Pickford Center for Motion Picture Study, on Vine Street in Hollywood. The project's budget was \$200 million. Five years later, the academy abandoned the site in favor of renovating a building it had owned since 1994: the old May Company department store, next to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art at the bustling corner of Wilshire and Fairfax. David Geffen ponied up \$25 million; other big names also opened their checkbooks.

The first mistake (of many) that the academy made in building the museum was its selection of an architect. It chose two: Italy's Renzo Piano and L.A.'s Zoltan Pali. Piano was an odd choice, having completed the underwhelming Resnick Pavilion at LACMA, which would now be a neighbor. While his firm was an architectural powerhouse in Europe—Piano and Richard Rogers's Centre Pompidou cultural complex in Paris, now under renovation, is regarded as a masterpiece—its L.A. work was largely deemed the weakest in its considerable portfolio. Pali—whose firm actually *knew* Los Angeles—was forced out of the project in 2014 when the two firms couldn't agree on a joint vision. In the meantime, the building's cost had ballooned to a staggering \$482 million by the time the museum opened in the fall of 2021.

Entering the museum today, you encounter an endless bank of escalators that deposit you onto wide, blank corridors where huge opaque glass doors lead you into the exhibits. With virtually no signage, things quickly morph into a guessing game of what's behind what door, a museum version of *Let's Make a Deal*. Once inside, it's hard to figure out where you are: Costumes? Sound? Around this bend, animation?

"The architectural plans reflected an organization that had never really been in the business of building a public-facing museum and had certainly never been an architectural client or patron," says Christopher

Hawthorne, a former architecture critic for the *Los Angeles Times* who is now a lecturer at Yale and a contributor to *Alta Journal* (see page 54).

Luigi Priano, the Renzo Piano architect who oversaw the museum project, loves talking about the much-touted "sphere," which from the street looks like a cross between a gargantuan terrarium and the giant golf ball at Epcot in Walt Disney World. The sphere houses the 999-seat David Geffen Theater, but the theater is separated from the rest of the museum, so the only reason to enter is if you have a ticket to see a film screening there. Priano says he's heard the criticisms that the museum is too vertical, that there's too much walking through empty spaces and endless corridors. That there's no sex appeal. "The beauty of building a museum, a new institution, is that it grows," he says. "It grows to the project, and then it keeps growing, and then people come and they feed the soul of the institution. So I think there's time."

The message to Angelenos—essentially, "*Our half-a-billion-dollar project will eventually sort itself out*"—isn't exactly reassuring. But former academy board member Bill Mechanic, who stepped down in 2018 via a blistering resignation letter that charged, "We have failed to solve the problems of the Museum, which is ridiculously over its budget and way past its original opening date," says the big issue was obvious from the start: People who basically exist to run an awards show knew nothing about how to build or operate a massive cultural institution.

"If you're not in the business of building museums," he says today, "why the hell do you think you should build a museum?"

## MESSAGE OVER MEDIUM

If the physical layout confused visitors, the museum's curatorial vision left them divided. Creating a reliquary exploring the sparkly, innovative, uniquely American—and messy, complicated, at times dark—history of motion pictures was never going to be easy. In the end, a choice had to be made: lean into the upbeat and celebratory, frothing the bewitching fizz of the movies' ballyhoo, or present an academic, wide-ranging examination of "cinema."

"I think there might have been a fear from some people in the community that the museum might lean toward an 'Oscars museum,' focused more on the glamour of movies rather than a full-spectrum film museum," says Kerry Brougher, who served as the museum's founding director from 2014 to 2019.

They needn't have fretted—in the end, the cinephiles easily won out over the philistines. "Our museum is always going to tell honest, truthful stories as it relates to film history," says Amy Homma, who was the museum's director of audience engagement before taking over the reins in 2024—its third director in four years. "We also celebrate film history, and we want to be a place where, at the same time, you can learn about the history of film and its impact on audiences. You can feel moments of pure entertainment, pure affection, and nostalgia for the films you love and the films that you like to watch, and that your perspective as a film appreciator or a moviegoer is valued and validated here."

That might have been the takeaway had the museum's original vision, cen-



The museum was designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano; when it opened in 2021, the construction bill had reached \$482 million. The 999-seat David Geffen Theater is housed in this sphere that sprouts out of the museum's backside.



A full-scale model of the shark from the 1975 film *Jaws*—at 25 feet long, it's the largest item in the collection—hangs above a series of escalators that connect the museum's four floors.

tered on a largely uncritical history of its signature product under the title "Where Dreams Are Made: A Journey Inside the Movies," been realized. But fueled in part by the #OscarsSoWhite controversy in 2015 and then George Floyd's murder in 2020, the museum pivoted hard. Its new prelaunch mission, coated in progressive politics, promised to "challenge dominant narratives around cinema." The museum formed a 24-member Inclusion Advisory Committee, reflecting the academy board's commitment "to presenting underrepresented voices and clarifying film history," in Brougher's words. Proposed permanent exhibits on silent film and the Hollywood studio system, along with the Oz lobby, were scrapped; then-president Bill Kramer created 17 task forces to broaden the museum's content lens and hired two women of color for high-profile roles: Jacqueline Stewart, a Chicago film scholar, as the chief artistic and pro-

gramming officer, and Jenny He, an independent curator, as exhibitions curator. Stewart would go on to serve as the museum's president from 2022 to 2024. "We know we're raising issues that might be polarizing," she told the *New York Times*. "Some people may want to enjoy beloved films and characters and not necessarily think about minstrelsy or the ways films can reinforce problematic narratives about body image and what constitutes romance."

"The pendulum in Hollywood," adds a weary Mechanic, "never swings to the middle."

It certainly didn't here. When the museum opened in the fall of 2021, it contained a major exhibit dedicated to the editor Thelma Schoonmaker and almost an entire floor celebrating animator Hayao Miyazaki. Today, there is virtually nothing about directors Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, George Cukor, Martin Scorsese, or Mike Nichols anywhere in the place. If you're looking for a meaningful representation of classic actors—Bette Davis, John Wayne, Charlie Chaplin, Grace Kelly, Humphrey Bogart, and Gary Cooper come to mind—or for any titan of 20th-century film, for that matter, keep looking. While the museum boasts 52 million objects stored in four storage facilities, its exhibits offer only passing mentions of any films or movie stars found on the American Film Institute's top 100 lists.

Museum officers can get a bit prickly about charges that the curation is too "woke," choosing to frame the discussion as one of big tent versus little tent. Academy board member Patricia Bellinger talks about the need to cast a wider net around the moviemaking experience. I ask her if that doesn't risk the museum coming off as too boutique. "That is a risk," she admits. "But I think it's a challenge that the museum has met incredibly well. It's throwing back the curtain and giving a peek at how it all really unfolds."

Homma is unapologetic about the curation. "Something I think about every single day," she says, "is the equity and the balance that we're presenting amongst all of our spaces."

Alas, that balance initially didn't include any mention of the visionary Jewish moguls who birthed the industry. That several of them were morally problematic, a dark reflection of their era, was well-known. When the museum opened and these founders were conspicuously missing, many Jewish philanthropists, furious at the omission, withheld donations. Museum leadership, caught flat-footed, quickly promised a correction.

Mounting an exhibit exploring the role of the Jewish founders "was always the long-term plan," insists Kramer, who was the museum's president from 2019 to 2022 and now serves as the president of the academy. He acknowledges that some patrons were disappointed—and vocal about it. "We listened. We know that we really need to pay attention to how a lot of our colleagues and stakeholders were feeling about this."

Only in this case, the cure turned out to be worse than the malady. The permanent exhibit *Hollywoodland: Jewish Founders and the Making of a Movie Capital*, which eventually bowed in May 2024 and examined the roles of tycoons such as Louis B. Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, and Harry Cohn in creating the film industry, included descriptions such as "predator," "womanizer," "tyrant," and "oppressive." A letter signed by more than 300 show business heavy hitters charged that the exhibit "is the only section of the museum that vilifies those it purports to celebrate" and blasted "the despicable double standard...blaming only the Jews for that problematic past." It was also noted that the exhibit itself was tiny, dimly lit, and tucked away on the museum's top floor, making it feel like "a Jewish ghetto," in the words of producer Lawrence Bender. After seeing it, Israeli American filmmaker Alma Har'el resigned from the museum's



A recent show at the museum celebrated production designer Sarah Greenwood and set decorator Katie Spencer, the team behind *Barbie*, among other films.



The suit that transformed actor Doug Jones into an amphibian man in the Oscar-winning *The Shape of Water* is featured in the exhibition *Inventing Worlds and Characters: Encounters*. Below: Visitors walk through the museum's lobby.



Inclusion Advisory Committee.

The museum edited the exhibit, but the damage was done. “It’s outrageous,” one noted cultural critic told me. “All of those people should have been fired.”

The museum “is not a Hall of Shame,” Kramer insists. “This is about celebration and inviting everybody in. But we do want to be honest about moments in our history that we probably should take a look at with a more critical lens. That’s what a museum does.”

## WINNER'S CIRCLE

I am excited to accept my Oscar.

After passing through exhibits exploring climate change, labor relations, #MeToo and gender equity, and Black Lives Matter, and others devoted to social justice visual artist Lourdes Portillo, filmmaker Agnès Varda, animator Suzan Pitt, and film composer Hildur Guðnadóttir, I reach *The Oscars Experience*, where for an additional fee of \$10 one can feel what it’s like to win an Academy Award. I step into an anteroom, where I type in my name and the category. (Wanting to telegraph humility, I choose Best Supporting Actor.) On cue, I walk into a virtual reality space, where the applauding Dolby Theatre crowd rises to its feet as I receive my statuette.

Well, sort of. I’m not actually handed my Oscar—I have to pick it up off a table. And I don’t get to make a 30-second speech. After a few uncomfortable seconds, I exit stage right. I’m later emailed a video of my awkward encounter with fame that I don’t even bother to open.

Such second-rateness is reflected in brutal Tripadvisor reviews and wan attendance. For the fiscal year 2021–22, after the museum had been open for only nine months, it reported a total revenue of \$108 million and a profit of more than \$2 million, fueled largely by donations and initial visitor curiosity. In fiscal year 2022–23, the museum’s first full year of operation, revenue plunged by 26 percent to \$79.2 million, with a posted loss of almost \$15 million. Museum-earned revenue—money from ticket sales, sponsorships, and events—went from \$18 million in 2023 to \$15 million in 2024, a clear sign that fewer people were coming or returning.

Other museums offer shining examples of how to focus on a single topic. The Wright Brothers National Museum, in Dayton, Ohio, tells a riveting story of the birth of aviation; the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, in Cincinnati, inspires with its stories of those who fought against slavery. At the Museum of the American Revolution, opened in Philadelphia in 2017, visitors eventually file into an auditorium where, after appropriate buildup, they suddenly come face-to-face with George Washington’s original tent at Valley Forge. People weep.

Last year, I visited the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, in Cooperstown, New York, a marvel of clear, linear storytelling; interactive exhibits; and plentiful entry points for even the most casual observer of America’s (at times fraught) pastime. “We have to make sure that there is something for everyone,” says Jon Rawitch, the museum’s director, “because not everybody is going to be a baseball fan when they get here.”

Mass appeal. Who’d a thunk it?

How to fix the Academy Museum? Imagine the curtain of the Geffen Theater rising to reveal an Oscar’s Greatest Icons gallery of animatronic mannequins, an attraction akin to the Hall of Presidents at Disney World. Or a huge gallery similar to the hall of First Ladies’ gowns at the Smithsonian, but with the greatest ensembles in Oscar history lined up. I ask Homma why there can’t be an intern in a tux or a gown to hand me my Oscar, and why I can’t make a brief speech. Just those two small things could be the difference, I argue, between a video clip that’s splashed all over TikTok and one that remains, like mine, unloved inside your phone.

“I love that you’re sharing your opinion and your experience!” she says brightly. “Please fill out a visitor survey.” ■

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