

Rodeo Drive enjoys renaissance after recession



Los Angeles Times MCT photo by RICARDO DEARATANHA -- Shoppers gather in front of Hermes on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, which is undergoing a renaissance.

By Booth Moore

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LOS ANGELES — Sitting at the intersection of Hollywood and high fashion, it's no wonder Rodeo Drive is one of the most fabled shopping streets in the world.

It's been immortalized in movies, books, song lyrics and on reality TV.

The thoroughfare played a supporting role in the 1990 film "Pretty Woman," when

Julia Roberts went on a Cinderella-like shopping spree. Eddie Murphy flirted with a blond in a Mercedes on the same street in 1984's "Beverly Hills Cop."

"Beverly Hills has gone from an exclusive enclave to a world icon," says J.F. Lawton, who wrote the screenplay for "Pretty Woman." "The film business has become more international, and that has contributed to the glamorous image of Rodeo Drive as a place where the rich and famous shop."

"The stories of Steve McQueen and Grace Kelly going to Giorgio Beverly Hills in the '60s and '70s or Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart having dinner at Romanoff's in the '50s — Rodeo Drive is the epitome of glamour," says designer Tory Burch, who is slated to open a \$7 million Rodeo Drive flagship in November.

Today the street is in the midst of a renaissance that could very well ensure its supporting role in pop culture for years to come.

For the first time since the recession, there are almost no vacancies among the roughly 100 storefronts along the three-block retail row.

On a recent afternoon, the crowds were thick, albeit with cameras outnumbering shopping bags and flip-flops outnumbering stilettos. Cadillac Escalades with blacked-out windows jockeyed for parking spots, as open-air Starline Tours vans with the tops cut off hugged the curbs.

The opening of a new Hermes flagship after an eight-month, \$20 million renovation is just the latest in a flurry of development.

From British shoe designer Charlotte Olympia's first L.A. store, which opened in June at the top of Rodeo, to the new \$5 million Celine boutique due south that's stocking \$3,000 trapeze bags, the luxury business appears to be booming.

"We went through this period after the financial crisis when everything stopped, and a lot of the luxury brands put the brakes on development," says Chuck Dembo, a real estate broker at Dembo Realty who handles a lot of luxury retail properties in the L.A. area. "Now they have started to invest in new infrastructure, because luxury stores always have to update their look and keep it fresh. Their image is everything."

It's hard to say who was first. In October, Dior reopened its 5,000-square-foot store with a design concept borrowed from the brand's worldwide flagship in Paris on Avenue Montaigne. In November, Van Cleef & Arpels reopened its historic boutique by treating guests to a garden party and world premiere dance choreography by Benjamin Millepied. And this spring, Prada ditched its Rem Koolhaas-designed retail-as-cultural-epicenter concept in favor of a new, more inviting store.

Recent newcomers to the street include Patek Philippe, Pomellato, Stefano Ricci, Moncler, Vacheron Constantin, Barbara Bui and Frey Wille. Coming soon will be Vera Wang and Burberry. Meanwhile, Louis Vuitton and Saint Laurent are both embarking on multimillion-dollar renovations of their stores.

“With the Internet and social media and how important celebrity is to brands, being here is a must,” says Jay Luchs, executive vice president of real estate agency Newmark Grubb Knight Frank, who has handled many properties on Rodeo Drive. “Celebrities are luxury customers too.

And brands want them to have easy access. Because the minute someone famous wears something here, it goes around the world. By being on Rodeo Drive, they’re getting celebrities, locals and tourists.”

Rodeo Drive is also being bolstered by (and helping to bolster) development on surrounding streets. Beverly Drive has become a hot spot for contemporary brands. All Saints, Theory, Alice & Olivia, Intermix and Scoop recently opened there, and Maje, Sandro and IRO are coming soon. With the Wallis Annenberg Center for Performing Arts set to open in Beverly Hills in October, there are plenty of attractions to lure shoppers into making a day of it here.

“Brands came to the realization that instead of trying to be different, they should go to a location where everyone is going to find them,” says Luchs. “Beverly Hills is back because it’s a place you’re going to get eyeballs.”