

Cultural Daily

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Revisiting Old Town Pasadena

R. Daniel Foster · Friday, December 6th, 2024

More than a decade had passed since I explored Old Town Pasadena. I was initially lured by a visit to the Norton Simon Museum's new exhibit, [Plugged-In: Art and Electric Light](#) with installations by Andy Warhol, Dan Flavin and Allen Ruppersberg, and others. However, I decided to stay for a few nights to indulge in a truly immersive Old Town experience.

After checking in to the newly remodeled [Courtyard by Marriott](#), a few blocks north of Colorado Boulevard, I took a short orientation walk. The architecture of late 19th and early 20th century buildings line every block: Beaux-Arts, Art Deco, Mission Revival, and Italianate. Each building tells a story.



The lobby of Courtyard by Marriott in Old Town Pasadena. Photo courtesy of Courtyard by Marriott.

By contrast, the Marriot is a mere 25 years old, but a recent \$12.8 million renovation of the 314-room property nicely pairs with traditional Pasadena styles. The renovation was completed in February 2024.

“We asked ourselves, how can we take Pasadena and synthesize that into a hotel, drawing on the craftsman influence?” says Craig Ballard, Managing Partner of Dauntless Capital Partners, which bought the hotel in late 2021. The property blends Art Deco, modernist touches, and the venerable Pasadena style.

A Modernist Lobby Worthy of Calder and Twombly

I had prepared myself for the usual cookie-cutter Marriott Courtyard experience. But designer Rodrigo Vargas of [RVD Associates](#), who mastered the renovation, transcended the standard boxy Courtyard look. Vargas’ portfolio includes five-star luxury hotels and resorts, including Orange County’s Waldorf Astoria Monarch Beach, and Sam Lords Castle in Barbados.

Upon entering, the Marriott front desk lobby hits you like a modernist art installation. Abstract art covers the upper walls—a maze of black scribbles, no doubt inspired by artist Cy Twombly who created calligraphic works drawing on graffiti traditions. Black and white lights are suspended from the ceiling like mobiles, a nod to Alexander Calder’s kinetic mobile sculptures.



The modernist lobby in Pasadena’s Courtyard by Marriott. Photo courtesy of Courtyard by Marriott.

The lobby’s initial abstract introduction is softened by the lobby’s warm earth tones: tan, beige, mustard, and moss. A fireplace adds warmth to the open space (although it’s electric and merely an illusion). That space opens to a bar and cafe. But more on Marriott later.

The Marriott’s modernist lobby was matched with more art a 15-minute walk away. The Norton Simon Museum’s galleries are rich in Van Goghs (although one is on loan to the National Gallery in Britain, part of its *Poets & Lovers* Van Gogh exhibition), Raphaels, Rubens, and Rembrandts, to cite the Old Master collection. After viewing the museum’s current exhibit, *Plugged-In: Art and*

Electric Light. I did another walking tour.

Pasadena's Venerable Architecture

[Castle Green](#) is less than a ten-minute walk from the Marriott. The late 19th century Moorish Colonial and Spanish-style building rises seven stories next to the city's Central Park. A former luxury resort catering largely to easterners, Frederick Roehrig who lavished the building with pillars, arches, verandahs, balconies, and domes designed the romantic edifice. The hotel was converted into residential apartments in 1924. The Pasadena treasure is a nationally registered historic monument.



The towers of Old Town Pasadena's Castle Green. Photo: R. Daniel Foster.

Walking a block east, I discovered a building that has since been incorporated into the Castle Green complex: the [Wooster Building](#) on the corner of Fair Oaks Avenue and Green Street. The 1887 building was built as the home of [Throop University](#), which later became Caltech. The upper stories and roof have been altered, but much of the look from street level remains intact.



Old Town Pasadena's Wooster Building. Photo: R. Daniel Foster.

Nearby, on Colorado Boulevard, I happened on the [Dodsworth Building](#) constructed in 1902. Designed by Joseph Blick, the building's upper scrollwork and inset medallions are striking. When Colorado was widened around 1930, Walter Folland redesigned it, [according to one account](#). He also altered the Bear Building nearby—its ornate arches and carved heads soaring above modern shops.

I had lunch at the [Nostalgic Cafe](#), 27 E. Holly Street, just around the corner from the Marriott. The eatery's overstuffed look was a great match for a slow meal. The space is packed with antiques and curiosities. There's a "Memory Lane" corner where you can look through old photographs and letters. All told, it's a great place just to sit and muse.



Old Town Pasadena's Nostalgic Cafe. Photo: R. Daniel Foster.



The cozy Nostalgic Cafe interior. Photo: R. Daniel Foster.

A Full Bistro and Bar Back at the Hotel

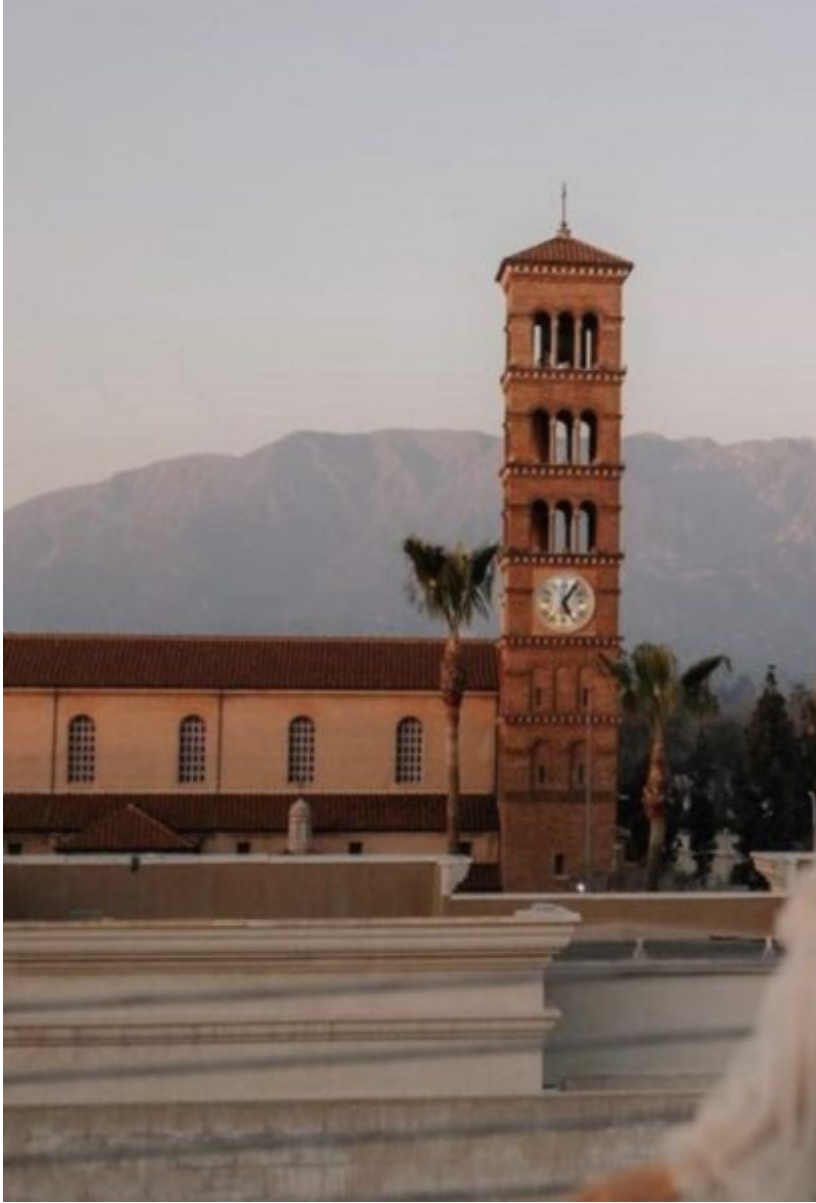
My meals at the Marriott were not steeped in such vintage surroundings but were good. The property's bar and cafe stand out from other Marriott Courtyard properties, which merely host a grab-and-go Starbucks station, and maybe a few muffins. The Pasadena property has a full bistro and bar serving craft cocktails and dinner. The menu isn't extensive, but the basics were well-presented and delicious. There's also a breakfast buffet, another deviation from the Marriott Courtyard brand.

The hotel attracts a business clientele during the week, partly drawing from nearby Jet Propulsion Laboratory, East West Bank, Tetra Tech, and other tech companies. Weekends bring leisure travelers, many are younger. Situated at the gateway to Old Town, the property is well-placed near the vibrant street scene and nightlife. It's also within walking distance of the Pasadena Convention Center.



The Courtyard by Marriott indeed has a courtyard—with a fire pit, pool, sitting areas, and a Jacuzzi. Photo: R. Daniel Foster.

The U-shaped Marriott has a modest gym, about 6,000 square feet of meeting space, and an outdoor courtyard with sitting areas. The courtyard includes a fire pit, pool, and Jacuzzi. I recommend rooms around the first-level pool, which opens into the courtyard. If you stay on an upper north-facing floor, however, you'll get a terrific view of one of the oldest churches in Los Angeles County: [St. Andrew's Catholic Church](#). Its striking Romanesque Revival campanile bell tower, built in 1927, was modeled after the Basilica of St. Sabina in Rome.



St. Andrew's Catholic Church can be seen from north-facing Marriott rooms. Photo courtesy of Courtyard by Marriott.

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