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## Hollywood Luggage Shop Won't Have to Pack Its Bags

**Owner wins his fight against the plan to raze his luggage store, so a massive development at Hollywood and Vine will be built around the 1928 landmark.**

By Bob Pool  
Times Staff Writer

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Hollywood's luggage king refused to pack his bags and go when Los Angeles officials tried to seize his 60-year-old family business to make room for a high-end hotel development.

Shopkeeper Robert Blue fought back by blasting the city's use of eminent domain with a mocking billboard atop his Bernard Luggage store on Vine Street just south of Hollywood Boulevard.

Then he filed a lawsuit alleging a violation of his right to due process, and in the process became a symbol of what some residents considered Hollywood redevelopment run amok.

And on Wednesday the luggage man bagged a victory.

The city and Community Redevelopment Agency leaders announced that Blue's business will stay — and the largest commercial development in Hollywood history will literally be built around the historic 1928 building containing his valises, suitcases, trunks and travel accessories.

The planned \$500-million Hollywood and Vine project will include a glitzy, 300-room luxury W Hotel and 150 condominiums, 375 modern apartment units and 61,500 square feet of upscale retail space.

Tucked into it will be the Bernard Luggage building, set back from the street an additional 12 feet and restored to its original, vaguely Spanish Colonial Revival glory.

Architects changed the plans for the sprawling development to notch in the building, which will be bordered on two sides by the new construction.

Blue, 46, will retain permanent ownership and use of the one-story, 5,475-square-foot structure, originally called the Herman Building.

The structure cannot compete with Hollywood's more glamorous architectural landmarks like the El Capitan Theatre, Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel and Capitol Records building.

But fans see it a symbol of Hollywood's golden era. It was designed by architect Carl Jules Weyl, who also drew the plans for the now-destroyed Hollywood Brown Derby restaurant next door. Weyl went on to win an Academy Award for art direction on the 1938 Errol Flynn-Olivia de Havilland classic "The Adventures of Robin Hood."

"This is a proud day for Los Angeles!" Blue shouted over the noise of a 12-story crane parked a few steps away on Vine Street. It was hoisting building materials onto the roof of a former Broadway department store building that is being converted into posh condominium units in another city-sanctioned redevelopment project.

The fate of the luggage store had become an issue of much debate in Hollywood, which is in the midst of a major revitalization and building boom. Hollywood and Sunset boulevards, both symbols of decay in the early 1990s, have seen a string of new retail and housing projects rise in the last few years as the neighborhood has become a hip destination again.

But some merchants and community activists have expressed concern that rebirth has come at the expense of Hollywood's past, including several movie houses and TV studios. Preservationists have battled to save the Florentine Gardens, the Hollywood Palladium and CBS Columbia Square.

Blue credited Hollywood-area City Councilman Eric Garcetti for setting up negotiations with developers and the city's redevelopment agency that led to Wednesday's breakthrough. But he still got in a dig at eminent domain.

Such government land seizure should be reserved for public projects, not commercial developments like the one that will rise around his tiny shop, he suggested. "You can't always count on a good City Council president" being there to help the small property owner, Blue said.

Before Wednesday's storefront sidewalk ceremony, Blue painted over the sign protesting eminent domain that he placed in March on the antique, iron-framed billboard on the roof of his shop.

It resembled a movie poster and read: "Reverse Robin Hood Pictures Presents, 'Murder on Vine Street: Eminent Domain Kills Small Businesses.'" It listed Garcetti, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the redevelopment agency and developers as its "stars."

"This Story Tells It All: Greed, Corruption and Gridlock," the billboard's tagline said.

"I took it down as a gesture of goodwill," Blue said.

The peaceful resolution of the dispute will allow work to begin on the Hollywood and Vine project. Jeff Cohen, senior vice president for acquisitions and development for one of the project's principals, Dallas-based Gatehouse Capital, said ground will be broken for it by year's end.

"I'm very appreciative of the outcome and humbled by the experience," Cohen said of the property dispute.

Redevelopment agency head Cecilia Estolano was equally relieved.

Preservation of the luggage shop building "allows us to maintain the best" of old Hollywood while bringing in the new, she said. "Those who stuck it out in Hollywood's worst days will get to benefit from Hollywood's best days."

Garcetti thanked Blue for taking his stand. "You made me grow as an elected official and as a person," he said.

"Bob was standing up for his business. He will be able to keep his business here. They will build around him," Garcetti said.

Blue's supporters showed up with cameras to capture what they called a "historic moment for Hollywood." Some said they hope the agreement sets a precedent for Los Angeles redevelopment.

"I'm glad they did it, however they did it," said Robert Nudelman, director of preservation issues for Hollywood Heritage.

Community activist Chris Shabel, who has long criticized the disappearance of historic buildings from Hollywood, grinned as Victoria Valentine presented a wrapped bottle of champagne to mark the preservation's success. "We'll take it," Garcetti said as Valentine puzzled over whom to hand it to.

Other property owners and business operators in the project zone will have to move, however, including billboard figure and sometime actress Angelyne. Her small office is located in the development site.

Hair salon operator Vam Nguyen, who has rented space in Blue's building since 1996, said she hopes to move back into her shop after the reconstruction is complete.

And Blue — who has also retained ownership of the old billboard on his roof — said he could have space for Angelyne too.

"I might put her picture right up there," he said, pointing upward.

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*bob.pool@latimes.com*

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