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Welcome Back, 'Ed Ruscha Monument'

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Artist Kent Twitchell installed his 30-foot-tall tribute to artist Ed Ruscha on the side of the American Hotel at 303 S. Hewitt St.

photo by Gary Leonard

DTLA - Is it an overstatement to say that the return of the "Ed Ruscha Monument" mural feels like the return of a friend you haven't seen for a decade? Many would scoff, and would point out, correctly, that it's just a piece (albeit a large piece) of inanimate two-dimensional art. It sits on a wall of the American Hotel in the Arts District. It doesn't move or talk.

Still, the "Ed Ruscha Monument" does speak to and about the evolution of Downtown Los Angeles, and its presence connects the community's past with the present. It also represents a victory for its creator, artist Kent Twitchell, and for greater Downtown.

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Los Angeles Downtown News last month wrote about the comeback of the work. And what a comeback it is. In 1987, the muralist painted a commanding portrait of California artist Ed Ruscha on the side of a building at 1031 S. Hill St. It stood regally in a sleepy section of Downtown, adding vibrancy to a building and a block that was otherwise boring.

Then, one day in 2006, it was suddenly whitewashed. No advance notice was given and no permission was sought. Destroying a permitted mural without informing its creator is against the law in California, and Twitchell sued. Two years later the case was settled, with the artist receiving \$1.1 million.

That would prove to be only one step in a long and difficult process to bring back the work. The original stood 70 feet tall, and while there are many bland or blank walls in Downtown, that doesn't mean a lot of property owners are willing to turn one over for the sake of public art. Finally, in 2015, Mark Verge, the owner of the American Hotel, gave Twitchell permission to create a 30-foot replacement on the side of the building at 303 S. Hewitt St.

Even then it would be nearly two years until work would begin, as Twitchell both lost his Downtown studio (he now operates out of Long Beach) and wanted to prepare a design based on new sketches of Ruscha. Additionally, Twitchell is an in-demand artist with a lot on his plate.

The new “Ed Ruscha Monument” is nearly complete, with only some shadows still to be painted (credit the organization the Los Angeles Downtown Arts District Space for raising money last month to help pay for the last bits of work). It is colorful, with Ruscha in a bright red shirt, and contemplative, the artist’s fingers interlaced as he stares forward. It is a stately addition to a community seeing rapid growth.

It is also familiar, and for those who have spent time in the community, it does indeed feel like the return of a friend. A two-dimensional mural may be inanimate, but the “Ed Ruscha Monument” helps humanize Downtown.

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