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SCIENTOLOGY:

## Château Scientology: Inside the Celebrity Centre

The New Yorker, USA  
Jan. 14, 2008  
Dana Goodyear  
[www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)

**Franklin Avenue, skimming past the mouths of Hollywood’s eastern canyons, at the disappearing far-north edge of city maps, forms a halfhearted high street for the apartment dwellers clustered on its banks.**

[...]

Across from the Villa Carlotta is the avenue’s defining anomaly: a monumental turreted castle, also designed by Harvey, on a three-acre site, with formal gardens, a bubbling stream, a tennis court, and a pair of rubber trees that are more than a hundred years old. Seven stories tall, the castle is an overgrown folly the color of farm cream, with swaying long-necked palms that seem to graze its roofs. “You want to circle the block and look at it,” **Richardson Robertson III**, a local architect, says. “It’s unusual in the modern-box world we live in to see so many nooks and crannies and little windows and interesting roof lines.” Built as the Château Élysée, a long-term residential hotel for movie stars, it is considered by preservationists to be one of the city’s grandest Norman-revival buildings. (The Château Marmont is smaller and sits on considerably less land.) Since 1973, the Château Élysée has been owned by the [Church of Scientology](#), which calls it [Celebrity Centre](#).



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### Celebrities and Scientology

♦“The Church of Scientology uses celebrity spokesmen to endorse L. Ron Hubbard’s teachings and give Scientology greater acceptability in mainstream America. As far back as 1955, Hubbard recognized the value of famous people to his fledgling, off-beat church when he inaugurated ‘Project Celebrity.’ According to Hubbard, Scientologists should target prominent individuals as their “quarry” and bring them back like trophies for Scientology.

Scientology, the religion that grew out of [L. Ron Hubbard](#)’s popular self-help manual “[Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health](#),” incorporates aspects of Eastern philosophy, management theory, and science fiction—a genre in which Hubbard was prolific. The first Scientology church was established in downtown Los Angeles, in 1954. Although the Church’s spiritual headquarters are in Clearwater, Florida, and it has facilities around the world, Scientology is most deeply associated with Los Angeles and its entertainment industry. The dozens of local buildings owned by the Church, many of them historically significant and now prominently marked with posters advertising “Dianetics” or with the eight-pointed cross that serves as one of Scientology’s symbols, have entered the landscape of iconic L.A. architecture as a visually



[...] Celebrities are considered so important to the movement's expansion that the church created a special office to guide their careers and ensure their 'correct utilization' for Scientology. The church has a special branch that ministers to prominent individuals, providing them with first-class treatment. Its headquarters, called Celebrity Centre International, is housed in a magnificent old turreted mansion on Franklin Avenue, overlooking the Hollywood Freeway.

[- The Selling of a Church: The Courting of Celebrities](#)

♦ [The Scandal of Scientology: Children and Celebrities](#)

♦ [Travolta, Cruise and other celebrities con fans and media](#)

♦ [Scientology celebrities FAQ](#)

▶ [Research resources on Scientology](#)

symbols, have entered the landscape of iconic L.A. architecture as a visually stimulating mash of old Hollywood and seventies-style art direction and signage. At Celebrity Centre, where a large yellow sign affixed to a south-facing roof overlooking the 101 Freeway announces the building and its owner, this juxtaposition is especially acute. Diane Kanner, an architectural historian who specializes in twentieth-century Los Angeles, calls the building Château Scientology.

From the outset, the conversion of celebrities was important to Scientology. An internal newsletter produced by the Hubbard Communications Office, probably in the mid-fifties, asserts, "There are many to whom America and the world listens. On the backs of these are carried most of the enthusiasms on which the society runs." It goes on, "It is obvious what would happen to America if we helped its leaders to help others. Project Celebrity is part of that program. It is obvious what would happen to Scientology if prime communicators benefitting from it would mention it now and then." The piece concludes with a list of the day's stars—Orson Welles, Howard Hughes, Walt Disney, and Greta Garbo among them—referring to them as "game" and "quarry" for Scientologists to "hunt." Though Scientology is not known to have

had success with this early group, the movement now counts Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Kirstie Alley, and many other celebrities as members.

Celebrity Centre is used for Scientology courses and for "auditing," a mainstay of the religion, in which a person undergoes a guided talk-therapy session, usually while holding a device known as an E-Meter, which is supposed to measure one's spiritual state. The goal is to eliminate "mental image pictures" associated with traumatic events; when a person is "Clear"—freed of all such associations—he can advance to the mystical and esoteric levels of Scientology. The path to becoming an "Operating Thetan," or pure spiritual being ("thetan" being Hubbard's word for the soul), is laid out in a table called "The Bridge to Total Freedom: Scientology Classification Gradation and Awareness Chart of Levels and Certificates." Scientology is a technological religion and claims to have developed "exact, precise methods to increase man's spiritual awareness and capability." Completion of the Bridge takes years, and each stage requires a cash investment. An initial twelve-and-a-half-hour auditing session costs between six and seven hundred dollars, Greg LaClaire, a vice-president of Celebrity Centre, says. (Aspiring Scientologists can mitigate the expense by choosing to be audited by a fellow initiate rather than by a staff member.) In the Holiday 2007 Dianetics and Scientology catalogue, a deluxe Planetary Dissemination Edition [E-Meter](#)—billed as a "tool for Golden Age of Tech certainty," to assist in "faster progress up The Bridge"—was offered, in "Diamond Blue," for five thousand five hundred dollars.

On Celebrity Centre's upper floors, there are thirty-nine hotel rooms to accommodate visiting Scientologists. An undated leaflet advertising "a safe environment for Celebrities and Scientologists" contains a plug from Travolta: "Good rest, good food, good service but most of all I felt very safe in this space"; Celebrity, a magazine produced by Celebrity Centre, which features a Scientology celebrity on the cover of every issue, urges readers to stay at the hotel for five to six weeks "to complete your Basics books & lectures courses faster!" In the basement, there's a drug detox facility. The castle also fosters a feeling of community. "Hollywood's not a very easy industry to bust into," Hilary Royce, a former dancer who went to Sarah Lawrence and is now the director of community affairs for the Church of Scientology,

former dancer who went to Sarah Lawrence and is now the director of community affairs for the Church of Scientology International, told me. “Any artist at Celebrity Centre would tell you it’s a safe place to study scripts, to network. It’s really a hub.”

### Consumer Alert: Scientology Quackery

- ♦ [Medical claims within Scientology’s secret teachings](#)

- ♦ [Scientology verses Medicine](#)

- ♦ [The healing claims of Scientology](#)

- ♦ **“Scientology is evil; its techniques are evil; its practice is a serious threat to the community, medically, morally, and socially; and its adherents are sadly deluded and often mentally ill...**

**(Scientology is) the world’s largest organization of unqualified persons engaged in the practice of dangerous techniques which masquerade as mental therapy.”**

- Justice Anderson, Supreme Court of Victoria, Australia, quoted at [What judges have to say about Scientology](#)

- ▶ [Research resources on Scientology](#)

The promise of connectedness attracts many Hollywood hopefuls. Celebrity Centre offers a range of Success in the Industry Seminars—Breaking Into Commercials, How to Get Cast in the Pilot Season, Hollywood Acting Class—which it promotes with flyers posted at auditions around town. A former actor I spoke with told me that when he first got to Hollywood, a decade ago, he went to Celebrity Centre for what “seemed like a legitimate industry workshop,” only to find that “it was more or less an opportunity for them to solicit people.”

“I stood in the foyer and watched this massive indoctrination presentation, where Marissa Ribisi, Juliette Lewis, and a casting director came out talking about how great it is to be in Scientology,” he said. “This celebrity panel was confirming that the people in the audience could in fact realize their dreams if they took courses and got ‘Clear.’ Then I was followed by auditors, who tried to get me to go into another room and get audited. It was a pervasive, invasive type of sales pitch. I started to get really pissed, and then they started to say that my stress was causing discomfort in my life.”

“Those seminars are absolutely, utterly, entirely an introduction to Scientology,” Greg LaClaire told me. “They are an introductory service of the Church.” But he said that he found the actor’s account otherwise suspect. “There’s so much interest in Scientology. We really, really, really don’t have any inclination or the time to talk to someone who’s not interested.”

A longside glowing testimonials from people—celebrities and not—who credit Scientology for personal transformation, there are stories of savings spent, lives derailed, critics harassed.

[...]

The Church of Scientology bought the Château Élysée for a million dollars from a group affiliated with the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, which had been using it since the nineteen-fifties as a retirement home. The building was run-down, with rebar poking through its shell, and, as studios moved to the valley and stars moved to Bel Air and the beach, the neighborhood, too, was becoming increasingly desolate. The Church used volunteers and staff for the restoration. [Stephen Kent](#), a sociologist at the University of Alberta who specializes in alternative religions and has interviewed many former Scientologists, told me that “much of the labor that renovated the Celebrity Centre was performed by people on the R.P.F., or [Rehabilitation Project Force](#), who often worked dangerously long hours for almost no pay.”

[...]

In the seventies and eighties, the Church, despite its fortifying real-estate acquisitions, found itself besieged. Dissatisfied former members alleged financial and psychological abuse; some asked for their money back. Journalists



wrote exposés. Lawsuits abounded. Fighting to regain the church's tax-free status (which was revoked in the late sixties and eventually reinstated), [Scientologists infiltrated government offices, stole documents, and bugged an I.R.S. meeting](#). In the investigation, Celebrity Centre and the Cedars of Lebanon complex were searched by the F.B.I., and L. Ron Hubbard's wife was sentenced to four years in prison for her role in the conspiracy. But for the Church of Scientology, a new religion with limitless ambition and a sharp awareness of the importance of image, rehabilitating elegant old buildings serves both as a powerful means of repairing its reputation and as a tangible metaphor for that work.

[\[...read the full story in The New Yorker...\]](#)