

# ENTERTAINMENT & THE ARTS

## ‘Living room of L.A.’



Fred Nicholas, head of the Walt Disney Concert Hall committee, has been credited with keeping the \$220 million project on track.

### *Disney Hall comes one step closer to reality*

Stories by Suzan Bibisi  
Daily News Staff Writer

**F**ive years after Walt Disney's widow, Lillian, gave the Los Angeles County Music Center \$50 million to build a concert hall in the name of her husband, ground will be broken today on the facility, which has been nicknamed by supporters as "the living room of Los Angeles."

However, true to the bureaucratic red tape that has caused numerous delays in starting construction, today's event is only ceremonial. There still are several permits and documents that need to be signed before any shovel tears into the 3.6-acre parking lot on Grand Avenue and First Street where the Walt Disney Concert Hall is expected to stand in 1996.

As of today, the backers of Disney Hall have 14 more days to secure all the necessary permits, contracts and leases to begin construction of \$110 million hall and \$110 million parking garage. If they don't break ground by the end of the month, they not only lose the \$50 million Lillian Disney donated in 1987, they also lose \$17.5 million from Disney's daughters. With interest, the family's contribution is now up to \$92.5 million.

Ground will be broken this month for the hall's 2,500-car underground garage, which is expected to take two years to construct. The hall itself should take four years, said Fred Nicholas, a real estate lawyer tapped by the Disney family to head a 10-member com-

mittee to push the project through.

"I told them I would be interested in the job, provided Mrs. Disney was committed to a world-class project, something that you couldn't get out of an ordinary architect," said Nicholas, who spearheaded the building of the downtown Museum of Contemporary Art.

"She said she wanted a great hall, a great sound and a garden on the grounds of the hall. That was in May of 1987. And when we're finished, this will be the most famous hall in the world, an architectural masterpiece. It's going to be the best thing L.A. has seen. It's going to start the rebuilding of the city."

Construction of the project, starting with the garage, which will be financed by bonds expected to be paid off with parking revenues, at the end of this month, should create 780 jobs in Los Angeles, Nicholas said.

Councilwoman Rita Walters also has recommended that many of those jobs be awarded to residents living near the downtown site, including unemployed workers in South Central Los Angeles.

"I see this as a real bridge to communities south of the Santa Monica Freeway," said Walters, whose district covers the Music Center.

"I'm excited about the design because it has an air of informality. The doors are at street level. There are windows for people to look into the hall. There are no

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### *Architect Gehry calls his design 'frozen motion'*

**I**f you could walk into the wood-and-paper model of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, you'd swear you were in the belly of a whale.

Looking up, the ceiling, arranged in strips of wood that resemble large brown rib bones, curves outward. The wood, which will probably be Douglas fir, lends a warmth to the rather stark, curvilinear interior design, which has gone through 42 basic changes and thousands of fine-tunings.

Architect Frank Gehry, who won a year-long, worldwide competition to design the structure and its parking garage, describes the design as "frozen motion."

"When you walk into the hall, you'll be

walking onto a platform that's free-standing in this room with a wooden interior," said Gehry, whose Frank O. Gehry and Associates is based in Santa Monica. "It's very intimate for a hall of this scale."

Audiences also will be able to surround the orchestra, which will be on an elevated platform. There will be a few rows of seats behind the orchestra where patrons will see the conductor's face.

The farthest seat will be 103 feet from the conductor, compared to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion where the last seat is about 350 feet from the podium. A \$1.5 million organ will be placed behind the orchestra.

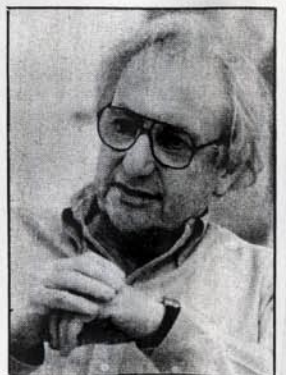
"You'll get a very powerful feeling that the

orchestra is in your midst, playing with you. The idea is based on other halls," such as the Berlin Philharmonic, Gehry said.

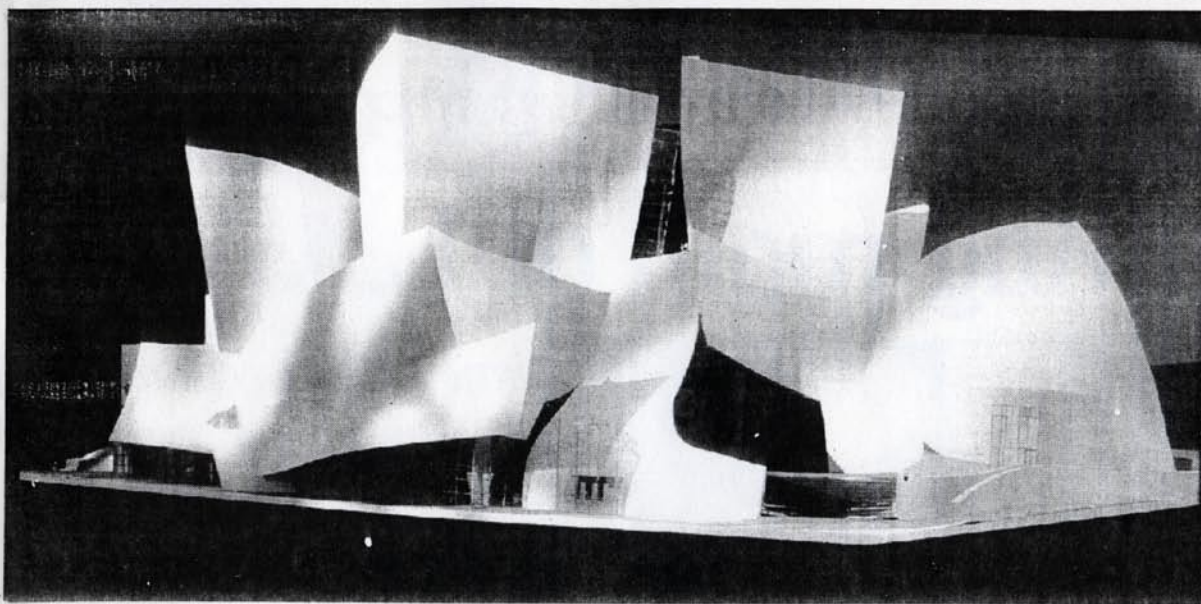
Street-level glass doors are designed to recess into the structure, giving the building an open feeling.

It's the exterior, with its curvy stone sails, however, that has raised a few eyebrows.

"It's a very complicated image to present," said Gehry, who designed the California Aerospace Museum, temporary quarters for the Museum of Contemporary Art and the renovation of the Hollywood Bowl's sound system. "There are comments that it looks like broken crockery. Some people don't understand it yet."



**Frank Gehry**  
Disney Hall architect



Courtesy of Joshua M. White

Model details the Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by Frank Gehry. Construction is due to begin by the end of December.

## Concert hall briefing

- **What:** Walt Disney Concert Hall.
- **Where:** To be built at First Street and Grand Avenue, downtown Los Angeles, across the street from the back of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.
- **When:** Construction should start within two weeks and finish in 1996.
- **Cost of the project:** About \$220 million, including \$110 million for the 2,380-seat hall and another \$110 million for the 2,500-car underground garage. In 1987, Lillian Disney contributed \$50 million for the hall to be built in her husband's name; her daughters, Sharon Lund and Diane Miller, together have contributed \$17.5 million. The interest accrued brings the total Disney gift to \$92.5 million. Los Angeles County Music Center Operating Co. must raise the balance of \$17.5 million for the hall. The county has donated a 3.6-acre parcel worth about \$40 million, and the county will pay for the maintenance and operation of the building and the grounds.
- **Behind the scenes:** Project spearheaded by volunteer Fred Nicholas, a real estate lawyer chosen by the Disney family.

## Disney

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sheer granite walls. It's inviting. It says, 'Come on in and see what's around this curve.' The Dorothy Chandler is a magnificent edifice but always seems formal. I feel like I have to wear my white gloves and pillbox hat."

The main Disney Hall concert hall will have 2,380 seats, compared to the Dorothy Chandler's 3,201 seats. The L.A. Philharmonic currently stages 33 concert programs a year at Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Once the Disney Hall is

constructed, the Philharmonic will add more performances of programs and present chamber orchestras and New Music concerts there.

All parties involved — the Los Angeles Philharmonic (which will assume the concert hall as its new home), the Music Center Operating Co., the county, the city and members of the Disney Concert Hall Committee led by Nicholas — say they will pull off this project.

Richard Volpert, a real estate lawyer hired by the county to protect the county's interests in the project, said "I think it will take them the rest of this week and

of next week (to get the paperwork approved). They will clearly make it by the year's end." The county has donated the land, estimated at about \$40 million.

At the request of Lillian Disney, the county also has agreed to pay for the hall's maintenance and operation, which will cost several million dollars annually, Volpert said. However, the first task at hand is to hang on to the \$50 million gift, Volpert said.

Also at the request of Lillian Disney and with the urging of Walters, the new hall will provide greater opportunity for the Music Center to expand its existing program of taking classical music to

underserved communities and bringing more people to the Music Center.

The new hall should free up opportunities for greater access to all of the Music Center's facilities at 135 N. Grand Ave.: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Theatre, Nicholas said.

Not only does the project mean a lot to Lillian Disney, who wants to ensure that her husband's legacy extends beyond animation and theme parks and into symphonic music, it means a new home for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which has shared the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion with the Los Angeles Opera, the Glendale Sym-

phony Orchestra and visiting ballet troupes.

The Philharmonic will have a permanent rehearsal space, an essential component to a world-class orchestra, said former conductor Zubin Mehta.

"All the great orchestras in the world have their own rehearsal space," Mehta said.

Philharmonic managing director Ernest Fleischmann said the hall will make the 74-year-old orchestra more visible.

"At long last, the Philharmonic will not only be able to get a real identity vis-a-vis the community, but it will be able to develop its own musical identity. We will have a lot more flexibility in planning a repertoire, and that makes a lot more sense."

With the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion freed up, the Los Angeles Opera also will have room to program for a longer, uninterrupted season, said general director Peter Hemmings.

"In Europe, any major city has an opera house devoted to only opera and ballet," Hemmings said.

Aside from the size of Disney's gift, which is considered by the Music Center to be the largest cash donation in the history of art philanthropy in the country, the hall has grabbed headlines for Frank Gehry's whimsical design and the committee's attention to perfecting the hall's acoustics.

All eyes from the classical and architectural communities are on Los Angeles, which is building a new concert hall when orchestras are simply struggling to just get programs on stage, Volpert said.

"It's been a long haul, and it's been more difficult and more complex than anybody contemplated at the outset," Volpert said.

"I don't think anybody analyzed or understood what it would take to build a huge underground garage and to finance it and an avant-garde hall with perfect acoustics. But two or three weeks from now, I'll feel a lot better."

## Victorian homes once graced hill

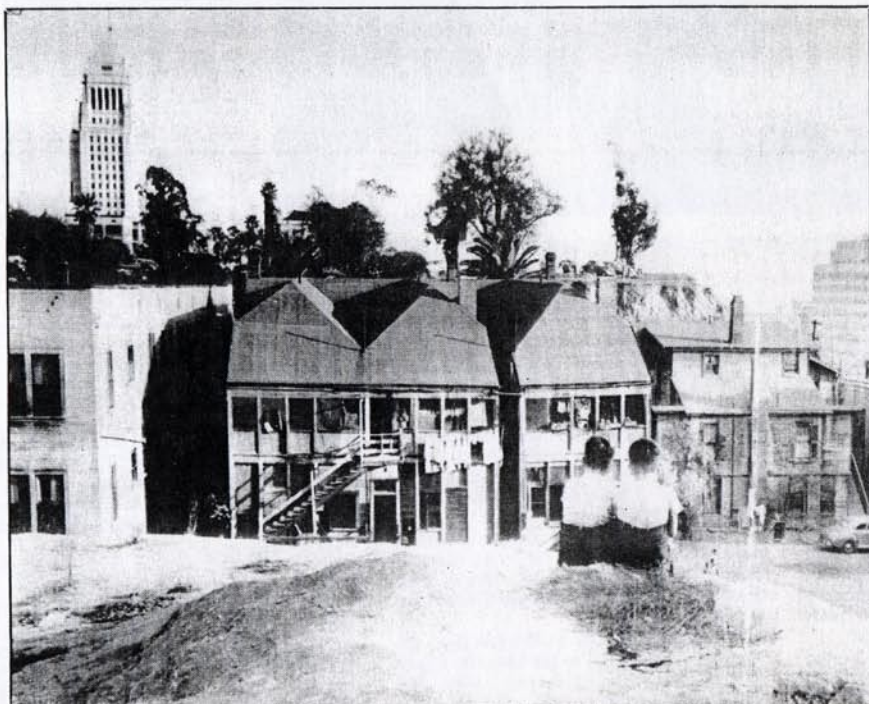
The site where the Walt Disney Concert Hall is to be built was at one time considered a location for a music or dance academy, but plans fell through and they put up a parking lot.

At the turn of the century, however, Bunker Hill was dotted with Victorian houses, said county Supervisor Ed Edelman, whose district used to include the Music Center.

"People used to walk to work," Edelman said.

The 1950s brought apartments to Bunker Hill. Now, the site at First Street and Grand Avenue will be a concert hall and underground garage. It will be an extension of the Music Center, which was proposed in 1951 and actually founded in 1959 by Dorothy Chandler. She formed a committee to raise \$20 million of the total \$34.5 million complex on seven acres of county-owned land bounded by Grand, Hope, First and Temple.

The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion opened in 1964, and the Mark Taper Forum and (Howard) Ahmanson Theatre in 1967.



Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Music Center Archives

The view from Bunker Hill in the 1950s revealed apartments and City Hall in the background.