

THE STATE

Disney Hall: A Grand Public Building for a City Sadly Lacking

By Michael Webb

'Great buildings symbolize a people's deeds and aspirations,' declared the mayor of Toronto a century ago as he inaugurated the city hall. Every metropolis has at least one unique structure that embodies its civic pride. The Golden Gate Bridge, the Eiffel Tower, the Sydney Opera House are all useful, joyous and highly profitable. They serve as markers, universally recognized. What is the signature of Los Angeles? The Hollywood sign—a rebuilt fragment of an old real-estate promotion.

If Los Angeles wants to be known for something besides flickering images, riots, earthquakes and sensational trials, it needs a more substantial symbol. Walt Disney Concert Hall, an arresting work of art by one of the world's most honored architects, fills the bill. Frank Gehry has often demonstrated his skill in creating lively public spaces on shoestring budgets. Disney Hall is more ambitious. It offers a sense of place and purpose, to lift our spirits and beguile our ears.

Southern California boasts an unrivaled stock of adventurous private houses; here, for a change, is something we can all share. A visit to one of the few public treasures—the Bradbury Building, say, or Arata Isozaki's Museum of Contemporary Art—demonstrates the power of architecture to enrich our lives. But such inspiration is rare in Los Angeles, which said, "no thanks" to the idea of Mies van der Rohe designing the L.A. County Museum of Art. Yet, as Winston Churchill said, "We shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us."

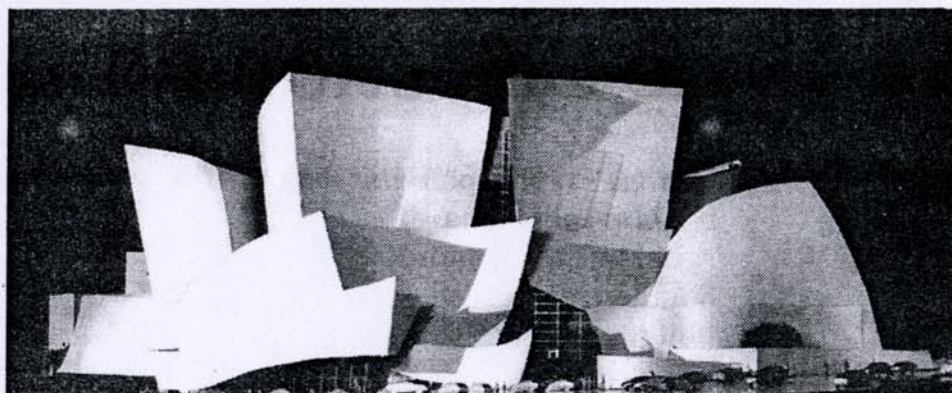
Much of Downtown is composed of

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dumb, unfriendly boxes. Disney Hall would create a sense of expectancy. The dynamic, undulating planes that wrap the interior spaces draw back to invite you in from the street. Working closely with the musicians, Gehry shaped the concert hall to achieve the warmest possible sound and bring players and audiences together. From stage to performance lobby to garden amphitheater, the building makes a universal art more accessible, and links the Music Center with MOCA to establish a cultural center for Southern California.

Of course, the design has stirred controversy—originality is always shocking. Leading Parisians fought plans for the Eiffel Tower, calling it "monstrous and useless" and "a disgraceful skeleton." The Sydney Opera House was denounced as an expensive folly. There was fierce opposition to Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington; today, it is a beloved symbol of sorrow and reconciliation. We can assume that some Athenians objected to building the Parthenon, 25 centuries ago. The colors! The expense! What's wrong with the temples we have? Disney Hall belongs in their company as a forward-looking expression of timeless values.

Anticipation of this prize, plus gratitude to the Disney family for gifts totaling \$93 million, should have prompted the mayor and citizenry to dance in the streets. Instead, chaos reigned. The program was repeatedly changed. Five years of political ineptitude and bureaucratic foot-dragging delayed construction and helped raise the projected cost by \$90 million. The county has almost completed the parking garage, but refuses to authorize the hall's construction until 95% of its funding is assured. Before the dream turns into a nightmare of recrimination, it's important to step back, see what is at stake and consider how the crisis could be resolved.



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Above all, this is a test of vision and will. Without those qualities, Los Angeles might still be a dusty outpost. It took vision to conceive a metropolis in the desert, to bring in the water to sustain it, and build a major port from scratch. We may criticize the ruthlessness and greed of our founding fathers but, without them, we would be living somewhere else. Aerospace, the entertainment industry and the building of the Music Center all required leaps of faith. Today, we are stumbling and making excuses.

One test of a great city is its ability to bounce back from disaster and reach beyond the mundane. New York was pronounced bankrupt and ungovernable in the late '70s—the South Bronx was likened to Beirut, and the middle classes were fleeing. Now, despite its problems, New York has recovered its self-esteem and restored its reputation. Newark, the epitome of urban decay, is rejuvenating its downtown with a \$150-million performing-arts center, backed, in word and bonds, by the mayor and the governor of New Jersey. Chicago raised more than \$100 million to renovate its Orchestra Hall; San Franciscans found \$84 million to build and endow their new Museum of Modern Art, despite the recession. But

the L.A. Music Center has raised just \$2 million in extra funding for Disney Hall.

It should be easier to raise big bucks here than in other American cities. This is the world capital of entertainment—now ahead of aerospace as California's most profitable industry. The market value of the Walt Disney Co. has increased from \$1.8 billion to \$28 billion in the past decade. Other L.A.-based companies and individuals command vast fortunes.

What's lacking, however, is a tradition of philanthropy. Andrew Carnegie, the Rockefellers and the Mellons used their wealth to enrich the public realm. Social pressure keeps that tradition alive in older, more cohesive communities. Los Angeles has more socioeconomic fault lines than fissures in the earth. There is little sense of the common good, and a recent report ranked the city 48 out of 50 U.S. communities in per-capita giving.

Our new tycoons seem more interested in commissioning fancy estates than in giving something back to the public. Self-interest alone should spur their generosity. It may be fashionable to extol stupidity in the name of entertainment, but you need smart people to create it. Disney understood that when he endowed the avant-garde California Institute of

the Arts. Creative people want to live in places that offer food for the spirit as well as a good paycheck.

There is a lack of political leadership to build public support and encourage private giving. It would help if the governor, mayor and county supervisors were to speak out for projects, like Disney Hall, that could enhance the quality of life.

Are they afraid their opponents will smear them with the dreaded "e-word"? Is it elitist to create an ideal showcase for one of the world's great orchestras? Ask the L.A. Philharmonic musicians who volunteer for Inner City Arts workshops if the classics are of interest only to affluent white Westsiders? Ask Itzhak Perlman, who recently played for 400 enthralled kids—few of whom had heard such music before. Survey the million people who attend philharmonic concerts every year in Los Angeles and abroad, and you will discover the real elitists are those who would restrict the arts to people as prosperous as themselves.

Finally, for the hard-nosed, Disney Hall is a solid investment. Its construction would free up the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion for more opera, jazz, folk and popular music. Together, these halls would generate employment and yield revenue from tourism and concert-goers far exceeding the cost of building.

Billions have been invested in Downtown and its transportation network. Billions more have been proposed. But there is now little reason to go to the center except to work. By establishing a yardstick of excellence, in music-making and architecture, Disney Hall could energize Downtown and strengthen its role as common ground in a fragmented city.

The alternative is unappealing. If we spurn this gift and settle for a parking garage, derisive laughter will echo across America and around the world. □