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FALL PREVIEW / THE ARTS

## A rocky road, step by step

*Disney Hall is here, but it wasn't easy. Here's the tale of a dream that began with high hopes and almost ended as a hole in the ground.*

September 14, 2003 | Mike Boehm | Times Staff Writer

On May 13, 1987, publicity-shy Lillian Disney announced through representatives that she was bestowing \$50 million so a philharmonic concert hall could rise in downtown Los Angeles, honoring her late husband. She specified that it should be "one of the finest in the world."

Walt Disney Concert Hall, due to open Oct. 23 and already celebrated in some quarters as a masterpiece, promises to be just that. It arrives 10 years later and, at \$274 million, 2 1/2 times costlier than first anticipated. The path to its creation has been as angled, undulating and full of precipitous swoops and dips as the structure itself.

Lillian Disney's unsolicited gift landed on a Los Angeles that generally thought it was doing all right for itself. It was still morning in America in the go-go '80s. Southern California, with its dynamic aerospace industry, was a leading arsenal of Ronald Reagan's campaign to defense-spend the Evil Empire into oblivion.

By 1995, a universally understood shorthand of disaster had come to define L.A. in the popular imagination. Rodney King. Florence and Normandie. Northridge earthquake. O.J. And, for cultural doings, Disney Hall. The project was a bust, a ship that had run aground before it was even launched. The sail-like vision that architect Frank Gehry had conceived existed only in models; years had passed, millions had been spent, and there was nothing to show for it but the underground parking garage upon which the great hall was supposed to sit.

"It was like, 'What else can go wrong here?'" Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky recalls. "You thought this was a biblical seven years of disaster, all overlaid with a recession. But Disney Hall was not an act of God. This one was in our control. The civic leadership got together and said, 'Enough is enough.'"

As Disney Hall went from dream to blueprint to fiasco to gleaming presence, friendships soured, its chief benefactress and one of her two daughters died, a star architect's reputation was tarnished, then restored, and an uneasy, elite alliance forged to salvage the sunken project was tested in boardroom brinkmanship that threatened to scuttle it all over again.

Here's how it unfolded, in the words of some of those involved in taking the concert hall from the gift-wrapped, assemble-it-yourself surprise it seemed at first to the hard-won reality it became.

Part 1: 1987-94

### Starting and stalling

The Los Angeles Philharmonic wants a better-sounding venue than the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, its home since 1964. Arts leaders and government officials quarrel over where to build this addition to the Music Center of Los Angeles County. Lillian Disney's offer cuts through all knots, including fears that the new hall would cost too much to run and that the old one would be left an underused relic. The Disney gift, plus its investment earnings, is expected to cover most of the construction cost. The family creates a nonprofit corporation -- Walt Disney Concert Hall I -- to build the dream.

Ernest Fleischmann (executive director, Los Angeles Philharmonic, 1969-99): "The glow, the richness, the direct impact that a symphony orchestra can have in a good hall, was not there."

David Howard (bass clarinetist, Los Angeles Philharmonic, since 1981): "We'd have to leave town on tour to feel we were really being heard well."

Diane Disney Miller (daughter of Walt and Lillian Disney): "We wanted [Lillian] to do something with the money that would give her pleasure during her lifetime. We had no preconceived design in mind. I think that's the best way to give a gift like this. It won't be a carbon copy of anything else."

Frank O. Gehry, an idiosyncratic, Santa Monica-based architect known for using everyday urban materials, wins an international competition over several more laureled designers, including Pritzker Prize winners Gottfried Bohm, Hans Hollein and James Stirling. His selection proves controversial, and, try as he might, he never does get Lillian Disney to embrace fully his plan for the hall. But she likes him and is willing to trust his talent.

Gehry: "Yeah, I was an underdog. I was told I was an underdog by representatives of the Disney family. They didn't understand my work. They thought it was all chain link and plywood."

Ron Gother (attorney for Lillian Disney): "I went around to see what Gehry had built in the city of Los Angeles, and I didn't like any of it.

But what he came up with in the competition was the best rendering and model and explanation of any of the architects, and he deserved to win. But I had my fingers crossed."

Frederick M. Nicholas (arts leader and chairman of Walt Disney Concert Hall I, 1987-94): "There were phone calls, letters, saying they didn't want Frank Gehry. He was a dreamer, his stuff looked like a garbage can unloaded, he was a prima donna. But when Diane Disney decided she would go along with him, that was really it."

Gother: "Frank came out to [Lillian Disney's] house occasionally after he won and showed her his ideas. He would bring a white rose in a bowl of water and say, 'I'm creating a flower here.' Sometimes he would say it was a sailboat. They became good friends."

Gehry: "I knew she liked white roses, and I tried to explain it in her terms. But her aesthetic was more in line with brick and thatched roofs and things like that, very sweet, pretty images. She asked me for some of that. You couldn't do it. It would have been a caricature. I left on vacation, very distraught because I thought the project was going to come to an end. And the phone rang in the hotel room and it was her. 'I've been talking to my daughters and they really like what you're doing. I don't understand it, so I've put them in charge of it. I know you were worried. Everything's going to be fine.' I can tell you it certainly brought tears to my eyes."

Los Angeles County, as landowner, and the Disney Concert Hall board, as developer, must hammer out a lease and agree on construction issues -- including a requirement that all the funding be in place before work starts. The process drags on and the project goes nowhere. Finally, three weeks before the Dec. 31, 1992, deadline Lillian Disney had set, work begins on the county-financed underground parking garage that will double as Disney Hall's foundation.

Ed Edelman (Los Angeles County supervisor, 1974-94): "At times the county [negotiators] may have been a little too stringent. But there was a doubt on the county's part from the get-go whether the money would be there to do the whole thing. We didn't want to get stuck with a hole in the ground, a garage with nothing on top."

## Part 2: 1994-96

### Fiasco and rescue

A calculated risk -- speeding ahead with work on the garage/foundation before firm bids are in for the entire building -- blows up in the Disney Hall overseers' faces. Blueprints don't clearly capture Gehry's novel, unorthodox design, and wary contractors jack up estimates, shattering the project's budget of \$110 million. Work stops indefinitely as officials try to establish a firm construction price. Gehry and his design come under fire; he faults the firm of his former friend, Daniel Dworsky, which had been engaged to do the working drawings builders use. With no life in the project, Sally Reed, the county's chief administrative officer, proposes aborting it and building something else to generate the cash needed to pay back the \$116 million the county borrowed to build the garage.

James A. Thomas (Music Center chairman, 1992-93). "People were pushing to start on a fast track. The main driver was, 'Let's see if we can get this done in time for [Lillian Disney] to enjoy it.' "

Gehry: "We had the wrong executive architect doing the working drawings. I helped pick him, I'm partly responsible. It brought us to a stop. I thought it was finished forever."

Daniel Dworsky: "Knowledgeable people were supportive of us. They were saying it's a very complex and unusual design, and they can understand the difficulties in trying to achieve this within a limited budget and a limited schedule. It was unfortunate that Frank came out with his criticism, but he was the center of the storm, having designed the building, and he was just trying to lessen the blame on himself."

Gehry: "We took the heat for a long time. I was ready to move out of town at one point. I didn't like going out at night and having people confront me."

Richard Weinstein (UCLA architecture professor and friend of Gehry): "He was in despair many times. Phone calls at 10:30 at night, at 7 a.m.: 'I'm going to quit this, I can't do this, it's ruining my health.' You'd listen to him, you'd try and joke, you'd tell him that people believed in his talent and toughness to last it out."

Miller: "Sally Reed turned to me and said, 'I'm so sorry, you won't be able to build this hall for your father.' And I really wasn't prepared for that. Suddenly it was very dismal."

Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan rolls up his sleeves to save Disney Hall and recruits his friend Eli Broad, a billionaire arts patron, home builder and financier, as point man for a nearly \$175-million fund-raising campaign; joining them is Andrea Van de Kamp, newly installed chairwoman of the Music Center's board.

William Ouchi (former mayoral chief of staff to Riordan): "The mayor's political advisors told him not to touch it with a 10-foot pole, because there's a stink of death about it."

Riordan: "It's the type of thing I love to take on. I get involved if there's a vacuum. What I always do is get somebody else to do the hard work, and that was Eli Broad."

Broad: "One more time, Los Angeles was going to look like a place where we can't get anything done, we're flaky, and we have failed. I believed we had to rally around something, and here was something to rally around. By then this project had a terrible reputation. It was

viewed as a black hole, dead, ready to be buried."

Gehry: "Dick Riordan and I would play hockey together, and we were skating around the rink one day and he said, 'I'm going to ask Eli to chair this thing.' I had worked on Broad's house and we had a falling out about it, so I said, 'Oh, God, please don't do that to me. We're not going to get along.'"

The new team reels in big donations. Gehry's reputation soars as his Guggenheim Bilbao museum in Spain, a variation on his earlier Disney Hall design, opens to great acclaim, having met its budget and construction timetable.

Van de Kamp: "You have to believe in something if you're going to raise money for it, so when I got the Music Center job I flew over to see the Bilbao museum. It was half-built. If I thought it was terrible, I could come back and say, 'We've got to return the money, this project isn't going to happen.' But it was absolutely an epiphany for me. I thought it was just drop-dead beautiful."

Richard Koshalek (chairman of the Disney Hall architectural search committee): "What they saw in Bilbao was that Disney Hall was buildable."

Part 3: 1997-98

New crisis; Enter the Mouse

Broad, backed by Riordan, thinks Disney Hall can be built more quickly and inexpensively if another architect does the working drawings that will guide builders. Gehry insists only his firm can handle those complexities and threatens to resign.

Gehry: "It was emotional for a few weeks there. Riordan called me up, very angry, one day: 'What are you trying to do?' "

Riordan: "I was saying, 'You and Eli Broad each have the power to destroy this project, and you'd better get together and make it work.' Frank told somebody else that I sounded like the Godfather."

Van de Kamp: "There was a meeting in Eli's office, and Ron Miller and Diane Disney Miller came in and said in no uncertain terms that it was going to be Frank. When your family has given \$50 million, then another \$25 million, there's not a lot of room for debate."

Weinstein: "Many people thought Diane could be manipulated and bossed around, and when it came to the showdown, she said, 'My father taught me that the creative people were the most important, and the creative person in this project is Frank Gehry.' "

Van de Kamp lands \$25 million from Walt Disney Co. and its highest-ranking family member, Roy E. Disney. Matching funds pour in from other donors, ensuring that the hall can be built and clearing the way for Disney Hall's second groundbreaking on Dec. 8, 1999 -- two years after Lillian Disney's death at age 98.

Van de Kamp: "A lot of people in Los Angeles were saying, 'You're asking our company to give, and the company whose name it bears hasn't given anything.' It was a pivotal donation. Once that came through, the rest was finishing up.' "

Part 4: Fresh hopes

Disney Hall is scheduled to open with invitation-only preview concerts for kids and community groups starting Oct. 16, then a gala first night, Oct. 23. It has engendered hopes that it will be more than a glorious marriage of architecture and acoustics, more than a downtown landmark, and perhaps even more than an icon for all L.A. If a concert hall were wondrous enough, could it help a famously fragmented city connect, cohere and better know itself?

Fleischmann: "It's a remarkable combination of grandeur and intimacy that I have not experienced in any other concert hall in the world."

Howard: "We played in Edinburgh a couple of weeks ago -- it's a very good hall, a world-class hall -- and for the first time I was thinking, 'Geez, I like the way I sound better on Disney Hall's stage.' It's so nice, it almost feels self-indulgent.' "

Miller: "There is so much of [my mother] in it, and she would sense this immediately. When she sees the trees, the flowers ... definitely she would be thrilled, and see it was done for her."

Nicholas: "The reason this hall is so great is that Frank Gehry had time to tinker with it, playing with the design and making it better. If they had built the hall I worked on [from 1987 to 1994] it would have been a great hall. But this one is greater because of all the time and effort and the love that was put into it at the end. Also at the beginning."

Broad: "It's a great building, and a great success story against the odds. Disney Hall shows that it's the beginning of a new century, and we're a city of today and the future, and not how we were perceived a decade ago."

Riordan: "It's hard now for people to call us La-La Land."

Gehry: "Could you do any kind of project like this without that kind of pain? Probably not."

Times staff writer Diane Haithman contributed to this report.

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### Evolution of a design

It's a \$274-million project that took 10 years longer and is 2 1/2 times costlier than first anticipated. Thus it is hardly surprising that the vision for the Walt Disney Concert Hall also changed over the years.

(see photo captions)