

Critique High Note Gehry's Crown for Bunker Hill Is a Fitting Tribute for Disney

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Few buildings in the history of Los Angeles are more important to the life of the city than the proposed Walt Disney Concert Hall on Bunker Hill.

Disney Hall is important for several reasons. It will crown Bunker Hill and will be a pivotal link in the "cultural corridor" along Grand Avenue, between the Music Center and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The site, bounded by Grand Avenue and Hope, 1st and 2nd streets, lies on a crucial corner where the cultural corridor intersects the city's civic core that runs along 1st Street down to City Hall.

Most of all, Disney Hall will affirm Los Angeles' coming of age as the West Coast's major cultural center.

For such a vital public building we need an architectural masterpiece, and architect Frank Gehry's design is exactly that.

Gehry's Disney Hall is that rare event—an act of architecture that not only serves its purpose but transcends it as a true work of art.

Resembling a galleon in full sail, the Disney Hall complex is a cluster of superbly orchestrated eccentric shapes. Undulating walls in a variety of curves, clad in off-white limestone, seem to be blown along in a stiff breeze.

The feeling that the architecture generates is one of serene excitement. The majestic presence of the 2,350-seat concert hall, surrounded by its ancillary facilities and set in a garden, truly crowns the top of Bunker Hill.

Yet this powerful building does not overwhelm the Music Center's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion across 1st Street.

Both of the massive structures have roughly the same roof level. More subtly, the flowing curves of Disney Hall pay homage to the rounded colonnade of the Pavilion, though the two concert halls' architectural styles could not be more different.

Disney Hall is funded by a \$50-million gift by Lillian B. Disney as a memorial to her late husband, Walt. Frank Gehry was chosen as its architect in an international competition held in December, 1988.

Enthusiastic informal approval of the finished design has come from all the major parties involved, including County Supervisor Ed Edelman, in whose district the Music Center is located, and the Music Center's Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee.

Mrs. Disney is "delighted" with the design, said Concert Hall Committee Chairman Fred Nicholas.

The model will be formally presented to the Music Center Board and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors the first week in October. At that time the model will return from display at the 1991 Venice Biennale, where it was first unveiled.

"We showed the finished design first in Venice because the model was only just completed in time and it was a wonderful and prestigious opportunity," Nicholas said. "In Venice, Disney Hall represents U.S. architecture to the world."

In the 33 months since Gehry won the competition, he has been developing the design in collaboration with the staff of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Tokyo-based acoustician Minoru Nagata.

The main concert hall is the crux of all their concerns, and the final result is nothing short of superb.

Continuing the nautical metaphor expressed on Disney Hall's exterior, the concert hall resembles a giant rectangular wooden boat Gehry once dubbed "Noah's Ark."

Outwardly sloping paneled walls enclose banks of seating that seem to float above an off-center performance platform. A ceiling of curved and billowing sail-like segments creates a vast canopy suspended over the 120-foot-by-200-foot area of the hall.

The ceiling segments will be constructed of irregular white plaster to break up sound reflections that might blur the purity of the acoustics. Skylights at each of the corners let in shafts of natural light—an unusual feature in a major concert hall.

The quality of the sound is, of course, the heart of the matter in a concert hall.

In the original competition, the four architects invited to participate were asked to include a drum-shaped hall. This configuration, which many experts question, was mandated by the French acoustician Daniel Commins, who advised in the development of the design competition.

Gehry's original scheme featured a flower-shaped concert hall described as a "metaphysical garden." Tiers of interlocking balconies were clustered about a central stage. Externally, the bulk of the building was broken down into horizontal, limestone-covered segments.

After Gehry won the competition, Commins was replaced by Nagata, an acoustician with bigger projects to his credit. At Nagata's dictates, the main concert hall was radically reconfigured.

Nagata proposed the hall's present rectangular shape, with its tilted walls and downwardly curved ceiling. This so-called "shoe box" configuration is similar to the scheme Nagata followed in shaping Tokyo's 1987 Suntory Hall. Its acoustical efficiency has been proven in many of the world's best traditional concert halls.

In the following year Gehry experimented with about 60 different solutions based on Nagata's strategy.

"Every acoustician has his own pet theory, and some have several," Gehry said. "In the design of a concert hall, the acoustician lays down the rules and the designer then struggles to make architecture of his instructions."

In this endeavor, he has succeeded brilliantly. Although the concert hall is large, it remains cheerful. Compared to the dark and solemn 3,200-seat Chandler Pavilion, Disney Hall seems filled with light and air.

The concert stage area has five sets of mechanically adjustable platforms that can be raised and lowered to provide different performance layouts, from a full orchestra to a chamber music quartet. The gallery that accommodates a choir behind the stage can also be lifted and dropped, as required.

The backstage areas connect directly with the stage itself, allowing performers easy access to their dressing rooms and lounges.

The audience seating banks are accessible at five levels, reached by stairs and elevators. No concert-goer will be more than 110 feet from the musicians.

Each bank of seats is close to an outdoor terrace where people can take the air at intermissions or while waiting for the concert to begin. The terraces are linked by a sequence of stairs to the gardens that surround the complex.

These external terraces and stairs are a vital feature of the architecture. Curving and sculptural, they lightheartedly elaborate the motif of the giant limestone "sails" that enclose the complex.

The hall's outer walls have a triple thickness for sound insulation. The inner skin is the wood paneling. This skin connects with the skeleton of the main steel structure, which is topped by deep roof trusses spanning the hall's column-free space. The outer skin is a lighter metal framework supporting the limestone cladding.

Apart from the main concert hall, the Disney complex includes:

-A "pre-concert" area off the main lobby that can seat an audience of 500 for the Philharmonic's popular free concert program.

-A rehearsal hall in the rear of the site with a 300-seat capacity that can also be used for chamber music concerts or lectures.

-A Founders' Room set in the main garden.

-A small museum on Grand Avenue intended to house Philharmonic and Disney memorabilia, together with a restaurant, gift shop and a bookstore.

In addition, there are the usual back-of-house facilities for performers and Philharmonic staff, such as dressing rooms and offices. The musicians will also enjoy the privacy of their own enclosed garden.

The concert complex sits atop a five-level, 2,500-car underground parking garage entered from Hope and 2nd streets. The garage gives direct access, via escalators and elevators, into the hall's main lobby at ground level.

Public accessibility is a keynote of Gehry's concept. At street level, people may enter the gardens and stroll the terraces without having to buy a concert ticket. From one high terrace they can even look into the body of the main concert space through windows set above the top row of seats.

"Insofar as a concert hall can be populist, I want the design to avoid an air of cultural intimidation," Gehry said.

"The architecture should invite people in off the street. It should prick the curiosity even of those Angelenos who might normally never attend a performance."

The only way in which the new design is less satisfactory than Gehry's competition entry is in the elimination of the splendid glass-enclosed garden conservatory that served as Disney Hall's main lobby.

The conservatory was a key concept in Gehry's original design. It greatly appealed to the Music Center board and captured the heart of Lillian Disney.

Described by Gehry as "a living room for the city," open to a wide range of popular cultural activities from ethnic festivals to lunchtime concerts, the lushly planted conservatory-foyer was central to the architect's stated desire to "create a kind of public architecture that is easy to walk into off the street and in tune with the relaxed sensibility of Los Angeles."

Gehry's competition-winning concept was lauded for such urban design qualities, particularly for the way its foyer-conservatory opened up to Grand Avenue. This openness, added to the forcefulness of Gehry's architecture, created a pivotal presence.

The power of its architecture is vital, since Disney Hall will be surrounded by a forest of towers, including a proposed 65-story office block and a 36-story condominium high-rise immediately across Grand Avenue.

Although the forcefulness of Disney Hall's presence is enhanced in Gehry's final design, the conservatory-foyer has now shrunk into the glass-sided "pre-concert" area beside the main lobby.

The conservatory shrank for two reasons. First, in changing from a drum shape to a rectangle, the concert hall took up more room on the site. Second, the high-rise, 400-room Ritz Carlton Hotel that, for a year or so, was added to the original design, pushed the placement of the hall complex farther toward 1st Street, squeezing the conservatory's space.

(The hotel was added to raise extra funds for the project, but was eliminated when the operator refused to agree to pay its service workers union scale wages, as mandated by a new policy instituted by the Community Redevelopment Agency.)

The budget for Disney Hall is \$85 million, most of it covered by the sum pledged by Disney, plus interest and additions. Added to this is the need for \$35 million for "soft" costs such as concert seating, the massive organ and so forth. The \$81.5-million cost of the underground parking garage will be raised by the county in a separate bond issue.

Excavation for the parking garage is scheduled to begin in spring, 1992. In spring, 1994, when the garage is ready, the hall complex will begin construction, and should be completed by early 1996.

Disney Hall will crown more than Bunker Hill. The brilliant design also caps Gehry's career as an internationally acclaimed avant-garde architect who has finally been embraced by the mainstream cultural establishment in his home town.

"I don't think I could have brought it off a few years ago," the architect admitted. "My mind had to ripen first."

Several of Gehry's recent commissions demonstrate this ripening. The highly sculptured Vitra International Furniture Museum in Weil am Rhein, West Germany, and the American Center in Paris are complex works of art that only an architect sure of his mastery could accomplish.

In the past, Gehry seemed more at ease with an architecture that reflected the ad hoc and visually splintered character of Los Angeles' street scene. In his earlier work, such as the Loyola Law School campus on Olympic Boulevard, Gehry was concerned with breaking a building into its separate and distinctive parts.

These buildings look like a collection of children's play blocks assembled by a giant hand. Their fragmented emotional message was one of a threatened chaos only just held together by an act of will.

Now Gehry favors cohesion over fragmentation. As he grows older he seems to believe that the center can hold, that the energies that glue things together may, after all, be strong enough to counter the forces of disintegration.

"After years of breaking things apart, I'm trying to put Humpty Dumpty together again," Gehry said. "A sign of maturity? Maybe . . .?"

In Disney Hall, Gehry has given us a truly Angeleno masterpiece.

The building is highly sophisticated yet easily understood, delightful without being coy, commodious and open in its appeal.

It could be the best act of public architecture ever achieved in Los Angeles.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: COLOR, Like a majestic galleon in full sail, the 2,350-seat Walt Disney Concert Hall crowns Bunker Hill with a design that includes garage for 2,500 cars, restaurant, gift shop, gardens and terraces for strolling. The concept symbolizes Los Angeles coming of age as the West Coast's major cultural center. / BRIAN S. YOO