

# A Concert Hall for Fantasyland



**Recession and riots underline the futility of the Disney project as a catalyst of urban renewal.**

**By SAM HALL KAPLAN**

Ground was being broken recently for the Walt Disney Concert Hall, which—based on a heralded design process and resulting fanciful plans—is being acclaimed as a bold attempt to create an idiosyncratic architectural icon.

In this respect, the concept is not unlike the spirit that spurred the construction of the Sydney Opera House, which opened 20 years ago to mark the emergence of that Australian city. In Los Angeles, the hope is that the Disney Hall might help revive a fractured and bruised downtown, and in time bring honor and glory to the city.

Indeed, the projects also share a similar stylistic fondness for curves: the opera house designed by architect Jorn Utzon as a clipper ship in full bellowing sail gracing a stunning waterfront and the Disney Hall fashioned by Frank Gehry as a sculptured exotic flower set among the hard edges of the Modernist and civic indulgences of Bunker Hill.

But beyond the celebratory sculpture/design of the Disney Hall is the question of how appropriate is the timing and tenor of the \$223 million project. That figure includes \$115 million for the 2,380-seat hall, planned to be funded entirely by gifts from the Disney family, and \$108 million for a complementary 2,500-car underground garage, paid for by the county through a

convoluted public bond issue.

And those are only estimates. No one really knows what the final bill will be, or how much in scarce public subsidies and private funds will be needed to maintain and operate such a cultural conceit. For the much more ambitious Sydney project, which included a concert hall,

theater and recording studios as well as an opera house, the price tag rose during construction from \$7 million to \$102 million. It was eventually paid for in large part by a national lottery hawked by school children.

To be sure, the Disney project seemed almost unreasonable when it was announced five years ago, with a price tag of \$50 million for concert hall and chamber music halls. The need for parking was noted, but not detailed or estimated. No matter.

Those were magnanimous times. Los Angeles was on a rising tide of commercial construction, expanding public budgets and generous corporate and private donations. Cultural pretensions and indulgences such as the Disney Hall were affordable.

That, without question, is not the case today. The nagging recession, a floundering real estate market and disastrous public deficits, rubbed raw by the riots of last spring, have the city reeling. Resources of every type and manner are needed.

But if our sad history of what passes for city planning and urban renewal has taught us anything, these resources should not be focused downtown and certainly not in such a grand gesture as the Disney Hall and at such a staggering cost—no matter who is paying the bills.

Yes, the Disney Hall construction will

create jobs: approximately 780, according to a Music Center press release. But those jobs and many more could more easily be generated by diverting the money into an ambitious community cultural center program, in new and recycled buildings, preferably as prideful anchors in riot-savaged shopping centers. There is where music and hope are needed. Of course, those who were to be inspired by the Disney Hall would be invited.

If Los Angeles is to be revived, the effort is not going to start downtown, and certainly not in the form of a fanciful concert hall. Rather, it will begin in our scattered neighborhoods in need. The centrist trickle-down theory doesn't work, in urban design and renewal or in economics.

There is little argument that if built, the Disney Hall will become an architectural landmark, to lend pride, if not cultural notoriety, to the city. This has been used to rationalize all sorts of projects, from the great cathedrals of medieval Europe to the Sydney Opera House. When such landmarks are viewed today, there is little thought of what perversion of priorities there might have been at the time of construction; whether the cost of, say, a cathedral should have been diverted instead to needed housing.

But we do not live in the future. We live in the present, and beyond temporal design theories, there seems something perverse about spending so much money on a singular concert hall when our streets echo with a dirge.

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# In the Spirit of Our Times



**The Disney family's gifts represent an investment in the future of Los Angeles.**

**By FREDERICK M. NICHOLAS**

The Walt Disney Concert Hall and its surrounding public spaces as conceived by Frank Gehry brilliantly reflect the bold and imaginative spirit that characterizes the City of Los Angeles as it approaches the 21st Century. Disney Hall's location at the heart of downtown is highly appropriate if not critical, for it is at the hub of this sprawling and fragmented metropolis that its many diverse communities can potentially come together. It is provocative, yet welcoming and profoundly accessible, with outdoor terraces, gardens and pocket parks laced throughout the site. As has been so aptly observed, one won't need a ticket to enjoy them.

Twenty-eight years ago, the Music Center opened with an ambitious mission: to bring the best in performing arts to all Southern Californians. In its three distinct buildings—the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, the Mark Taper Forum and the Ahmanson Theatre—millions have witnessed the most creative talents of our time, and many were introduced for the first time to the magic of artistic expression. But just as our city has dramatically changed over the last three decades, so should our cultural facilities continually evolve.

Thus in 1987, when Lillian B. Disney

bestowed her extraordinary gift of \$50 million to build a concert hall in celebration of her late husband, the timing could not have been more fortuitous. The Los Angeles Philharmonic shares space at the Chandler Pavilion with the Los Angeles Opera, the Master Chorale and various touring companies, meaning none has adequate rehearsal and performance time. As one of the world's most highly acclaimed symphony orchestras, the philharmonic deserves its own fully dedicated home, acoustically tailored for symphonic performance.

Despite the addition of a new building to the Music Center complex, the greater efficiency and flexibility in programming is actually expected to reduce the respective operating costs for both the Chandler and Disney halls. More important, new opportunities will become available for music, theater and dance groups from throughout the community, as well as renowned international artists, to perform. Disney Hall will thereby enhance the Music Center's capacity to express and celebrate our community's rich cultural heritage.

Mrs. Disney's enabling gift has been generously augmented by an additional \$17.5 million from the Walt Disney family. With interest, these funds now total approximately \$93.5 million. The Music Center has committed to raising the balance of \$17.5 million, bringing the total private sector contribution to \$111 million. The County of Los Angeles will finance \$81.5 million for the garage construction and roadwork with a bond issue. All money from the 2,500-car

garage will go directly to benefit the county budget. In addition, nearly 1,000 new construction jobs will be created and future employment will result from the operation of the new hall.

Although Mrs. Disney presented her gift to the Music Center several years before the distressing upheavals in Los Angeles last spring, the Disney family and I believe this project can play a vital role in the rebuilding process. Walt Disney Concert Hall represents a stroke of faith and confidence in the City's future and in the ability of the arts to heal and strengthen community spirit.

Disney Hall represents an essential and timely investment in the civic, economic and cultural life of the city. Walt Disney's indisputable populist ethos permeates this project much as it does the theme parks and multifaceted entertainment empire that bear his name. As his daughter, Diane Disney Miller, expressed last week at the groundbreaking: "Our father came here from the Midwest full of curiosity and big dreams. He was a humble man, but not a timid one. He made his dreams come true because he believed in them and because he fought for them."

Los Angeles, too, must fight for its dreams—for the vision of a culturally diverse population freely drawing inspiration and vitality from those public institutions that have come to define our civilization. Our city deserves the most imaginative and embracing environments that can be created to nurture mind, body and soul. The Walt Disney Concert Hall will surely be such a place.

*Frederick M. Nicholas is chairman of the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee.*