

# Soaring costs stalled Los Angeles hall

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LOS ANGELES—The similarities between the Millennium Park project under construction in Chicago and Walt Disney Concert Hall, being built in Los Angeles, are striking.

In both projects, the crowning glory is an undulating design by celebrated architect Frank Gehry. Both the park and the concert hall were put on a “fast-track” construction schedule—meaning that construction got under way before designs were completed—to meet rigid deadlines.

In addition, the two civic projects rely on parking fees from underground garages and private donations to help pay their costs. And, in both instances, the projects have been plagued by spiraling cost overruns.

But while Chicago’s Mayor Richard Daley reached into the public coffers to keep Millennium Park inching forward, construction of the Disney hall was halted for nearly four years as Los Angeles County waited for private donors to make up the shortfall.

Now the Disney project, which one of its key backers, power broker Eli Broad, once described as “dead and ready to be buried,” is rising again, as evidenced by the mass of metal splaying every which way into the downtown Los Angeles skyline.

The complex will occupy a full city block with a cluster of curved, stainless steel-clad buildings and include a state-of-the-art concert hall as the winter home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, two outdoor amphitheaters, extensive public gardens, restaurants and bars.

It aspires to be the Carnegie Hall of the West and the architectural signature of this eccentric city.

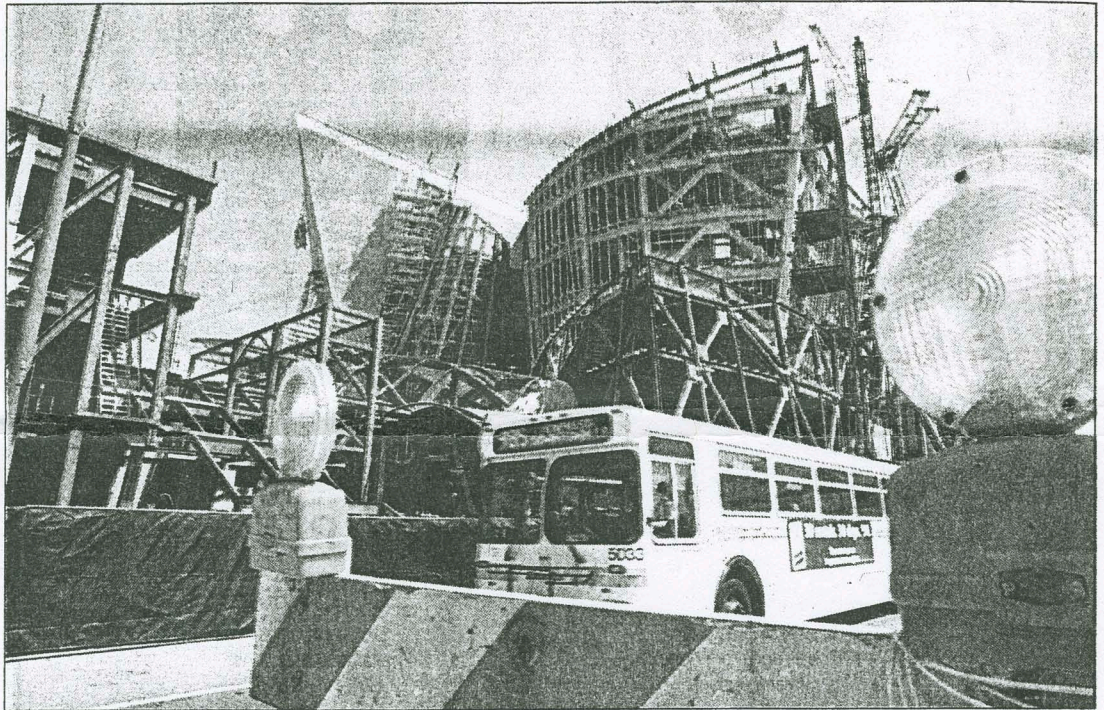


Photo for the Tribune by Stephanie Diani

Construction on the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles resumed in 1999 after being halted for almost four years because cost projections had nearly doubled.

If the complex opens as scheduled in October 2003, the gala Philharmonic affair will be the culmination of an odyssey that will have taken more than 16 years from start to finish.

It will cost \$275 million, 2½ times the original budget estimate, and will have overcome the potential loss of Gehry, who at one point threatened to walk away from the project if he were not allowed to finalize its drawings.

The project took off in May 1987, when Lillian Disney, Walt Disney’s widow, donated \$50 million to build the concert hall bearing her husband’s name on Los Angeles County land. Faced with a deadline from the Disney family requiring that construction begin within five years of the gift, the county began to

build an underground parking garage in 1992. Plans called for the county to pay off the parking garage’s bond issue with parking fees, rather than use its perpetually strapped general fund. But the county couldn’t keep that promise.

In 1995, with cost projections more than double the original estimates, Los Angeles County shut down all work on the project and gave backers a four-year grace period in which to raise the money needed to complete construction. Construction began again in 1999.

In explaining the skyrocketing costs that nearly sank the project, Fred Nicholas, former president of the Walt Disney Concert Hall committee, said the hall’s fast-track approach meant they couldn’t get an accu-

rate fix on the cost because the design was so incomplete.

Harry Hufford, who was the chief executive officer of the project when construction stopped, said the critical issue was the translation of Gehry’s designs into detailed drawings the subcontractors could use to estimate their costs.

Gehry has said he has been unfairly blamed for the Disney hall’s budget problems. In a recent interview, he said the project was poorly planned, plowing forward with little regard to costs.

“It’s conventional illiteracy to blame the architect for all cost overruns,” Gehry said. “We were told to build the best concert hall in the world. We begged for a budget but they didn’t give us a budget.”

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