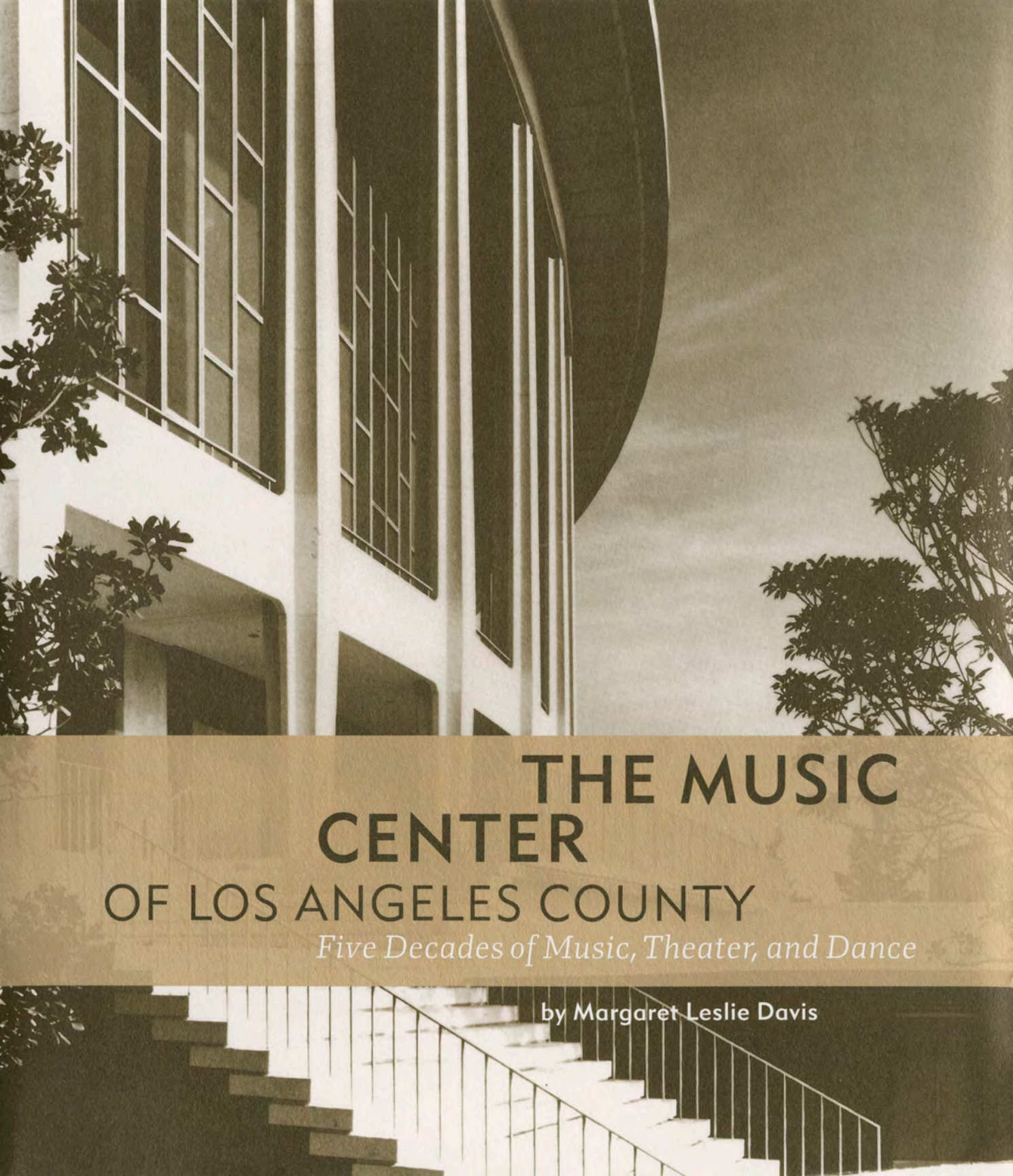

THE MUSIC CENTER OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Five Decades of Music, Theater, and Dance

by Margaret Leslie Davis

required that construction of the hall begin by December 31, 1992, or the gift would be rescinded. The gift allowed for the possibility of other buildings on the site that would add revenue, such as a luxury hotel or high-rise office building, as long as that building was compatible with the new hall from an architectural and aesthetic perspective. Finally, the underground parking garage for the new hall had to be paid for by the County, along with the maintenance of the building.

Throughout the long process, however, the Disneys took an unusual approach that might be described as hands-on-at-arm's-length. They not only retained final approval of important elements but also had the right to designate an agent or committee to oversee every aspect of the creation of the new hall. Yet later in the process, Diane Disney Miller said, "I am very wary of anything being said like 'the Disney family insisted on this or insisted on that.'"[7] The Music Center's Frost assembled the overseeing committee, which was named the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee, a nonprofit corporation separate from the Music Center, charged with the design and construction of the concert hall. Frost's wife, Camilla, a patron of the arts and Dorothy Chandler's daughter, suggested the committee's chair, Frederick M. Nicholas.

Nicknamed "the facilitator," Nicholas was chairman of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and had successfully maneuvered the museum through a design war of epic proportions between an important donor and Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. Nicholas, who managed to complete the ambitious construction project on budget, had also ensured that Isozaki be given the artistic freedom that he required. "Camilla knew about that and said, 'We just need to have Fred,'" Frost recalled. Gother and Frost met with Nicholas and offered him the job.[8]

The enormous weight of the task was readily apparent to Nicholas, then sixty-seven. He doubted that he could devote enough time to both the Disney job and MOCA, as well as his private business activities. His wife, however, insisted that he take on the task because of its historic significance. Nicholas decided to discuss his responsibilities privately with Lillian Disney. "When they offered me this job I said I would only be interested if I could talk to Mrs. Disney," recalled Nicholas. He met with her for two hours at her home in Holmby Hills.

Nicholas asked, "Are you committed to any architect or any type of design?"

Her response was straightforward. "No, I want a world-class institution. You can do anything you want to do as long as the sound is the best in the world."

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Excited by her response, Nicholas went on to ask what she envisioned for the site. She replied, "I want a beautiful hall with good acoustics and a flower garden."[9]

On December 27, 1987, the ten-member Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee was formally established, chaired by Nicholas. It included Lillian Disney, her attorney Ronald Gother, Diane Disney Miller (who was also a member of the Music Center board of governors), Fleischmann, three additional representatives from the Philharmonic and the Music Center, and two ex-officio members, the Philharmonic music director and Supervisor Edelman. The Committee planned to select both the architect and the acoustician by early summer 1988.

In addition, several subcommittees were created. The architectural subcommittee was responsible for the project's single most important decision, selecting the architect. Nicholas was fully aware that in order for the architectural subcommittee to do its job, the group had to be free of political entanglements, so he avoided naming representatives from the Music Center, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, or the City and County of Los Angeles. Instead, recalled Nicholas, he looked to people who reflected the "culture and excitement and creativity" of Los Angeles,[10] and he chose Richard S. Weinstein, dean of the UCLA architecture school; Robert S. Harris, dean of the USC architecture school; Richard Koshalek, director of MOCA; Earl A. "Rusty" Powell III, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); and John Walsh, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. All had been involved in large-scale construction projects and had worked closely with premier international architects. Nicholas also appointed several music consultants: conductors André Previn, Simon Rattle, Pierre Boulez, and Zubin Mehta, along with master violinists Isaac Stern and Itzhak Perlman.

Nicholas made every effort to insulate the subcommittee members from outside pressure. Their charge was only to recommend an architect, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee would make the final decision. Nicholas felt this organizational structure would free subcommittee members to "act on the basis of their consciences," since their choice was not definitive. Although Mrs. Disney had the right to veto the selection and choose an architect herself, she had no desire to do so, and authorized the committee to make the choice.

There was, not surprisingly, disagreement as to the best architectural style for the Disney building. Not everyone felt that the design should be innovative. One trustee of the Music Center said to Nicholas, "I'll tell you

what to do. Get the drawings for the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion out of the drawing cabinet, hire the same architect, upgrade the mechanical, lighting and sound systems, and build the same damn building across the street."[11] It was, of course, impossible to hire the same architect since Welton Becket had died in 1969.

The architectural subcommittee began the search in August 1988 by drawing up a list of one hundred candidates from around the world and reviewing their work. From this list, they selected thirty-six who were asked to submit materials. "The test we made of these architects," said Nicholas, "is what we call the 'ripeness' test—are these architects at that certain phase of their career where they can produce a great work?"[12]

The subcommittee held numerous meetings to which the Music Center leadership was invited. The thirty-six architects who were chosen then showcased their qualifications and proposals at Lillian Disney's home in Holmby Hills. After considerable debate and consideration, on March 17, 1988, Nicholas and the subcommittee chair Koshalek announced the four finalists: Hans Hollein of Vienna, James Stirling of London, Gottfried Böhm of Cologne, and Frank Gehry of Los Angeles. Each of the semifinalists had been recognized with the most esteemed award in the field of architecture, the Pritzker Prize, within the previous seven years—except Gehry, who was viewed by some as a dark horse.

As soon as the final four were announced, members of the subcommittee began to hear vociferous complaints about the possible selection of Gehry from people associated with the project. While all of the finalists were considered modernists, Gehry's work was viewed as the most extreme. He used unconventional materials—corrugated steel, chain-link fencing, and unpainted plywood—and forms that exposed the process of construction. His idiosyncratic, personal style that evoked the disunity and energy of vernacular Los Angeles clearly scared the elites of downtown. For instance, back in 1974, billionaire Norton Simon had invited Gehry to a dinner party. Simon helped fund the remodeling of the Hollywood Bowl, a project Gehry had completed with Fleischmann. One of the guests asked Gehry what projects he had recently completed, and the architect named a private home that he had designed, not far from Simon's. The guest's eyes widened, and he expressed his disdain with a burst of profanity.[13]

Though Gehry's work elicited highly disparate responses and he had yet to win acclaim equal to that of the other three finalists, he was increasingly recognized internationally for the distinctiveness and innovation of his architecture. MOCA was offering a major retrospective of his work just

"The test we made of these architects is what we call the 'ripeness' test—are these architects at that certain phase of their career where they can produce a great work?"

as the subcommittee was making its decision. In addition to his work on the Hollywood Bowl, he had designed two other music halls, the Merriwether Post Pavilion in Columbia, Maryland, and a concert pavilion near San Francisco. Moreover, his work resonated with the most exciting artistic currents in Los Angeles at the time. Born in Canada, he had lived in Los Angeles for forty years and absorbed its ethos into his architectural style.

Nicholas made every effort to inform and educate every participant in the process—subcommittee members as well as artists. Working with numerous acoustical, architectural, and music consultants, the subcommittee prepared a boxed set of three spiral-bound books to guide the architects in developing their designs. The architects were required to design a drum-shaped hall, as recommended by an acoustician who advised the committee.[14] Fleischmann organized trips for subcommittee members to concert halls around the world, from Vienna and Berlin to Tokyo. An unexpected consensus they reached following these trips, according to Fleischmann, was that the new hall should be a public space "where an audience will really feel welcome, where it will not feel overawed but will still feel they are entering a special place."[15]

In July the subcommittee held a final briefing for the competition finalists, followed by a reception at Lillian Disney's home. Reflecting her love of gardens and flowers, Koshalek recalled, "There were flowers everywhere at the house, including an explosion of blooms along of the border of the lawn where the party was held."[16]

In early November, as the deadline for final presentations approached, one member of the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee became increasingly worried that Gehry might be chosen. He insisted that the subcommittee be allowed only to offer comments on the designs, not a final recommendation, and that they not be allowed to speak to the media. Subcommittee members were incensed at these restrictions, and John Walsh drafted a letter of collective resignation, effective immediately, if the subcommittee were prevented from making a decision. Their willingness to make a public issue of the matter proved sufficient to defuse the crisis.

The architects made their final presentations on November 7. Each submitted a narrative, eight panels of drawings, and a model for consideration. The subcommittee subsequently met several times to discuss the presentations. Their decision was announced on December 5. Lillian Disney wore her lucky red dress. Four of the five subcommittee members nominated Frank Gehry for the project. He proposed a conservatory surrounded by terraces that made the hall inviting to passersby. The hall

model itself was formed of layers in something like a spiral, flanked on one side by a glass-enclosed atrium. Inside, the audience would surround the orchestra, and the sound would resonate equally in every direction.

The group felt that Gehry's presentation stood out from the others because he had so clearly absorbed the ideas of the Music Center and the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee. Moreover, unlike the other designs, Gehry's showed an understanding of Los Angeles and of the cultural ideal the Music Center represented. Nicholas, who had worked closely with Gehry during the time-consuming and stressful renovations at MOCA, saw great potential in the architect. In addition, Ernest Fleischmann had become close friends with Gehry during two renovations of the Hollywood Bowl.

Once each of the subcommittee members had made his recommendation, an intense and passionate debate followed. The one subcommittee member who had not chosen Gehry eventually agreed to make the vote unanimous. Gehry, however, was hardly home free. The subcommittee had to convince the rest of the members of the Walt Disney Concert Hall committee, some of whom detested Gehry and his work. "There were people on the committee who said they would never in a million years vote for Frank Gehry to do any kind of design in this town, based on his previous work,"[17] Nicholas said. "There were many people who thought we were all crazy." Not least of all, they also had to convince Lillian Disney.

Both committees met privately with Gother and members of the Disney family to win their approval. The Disney family criticized "his design, his work attitude, his everything," Nicholas conceded. "It took a huge selling job to get the Disney family to finally say okay."[18]

Ultimately, Gehry's supporters prevailed. His design was approved for construction, and Gehry won the biggest commission of his career to date. On December 12, 1988, Nicholas and the members of the Walt Disney Concert Hall committee made the official announcement. "It was like a dream when I was told that I'd won," Gehry recalled. "I just couldn't believe it. My mother was still alive so she knew about it, and that was nice because she was the one that always sort of brought me to music."[19]

Less than five months later, in a vindication of the committee's selection, Gehry was awarded the Pritzker Prize. Jay A. Pritzker, president of the Hyatt Foundation, which sponsors it, announced the jury's choice: "The great body of work of architect Frank Gehry, which includes residences, museums, libraries, schools, shops, concert halls, restaurants, and even a hay barn, demonstrates a range of styles that defies classification, but certainly warrants recognition." The selection panel for the prize said:

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The selection of Frank Gehry (left) as the architect of the Walt Disney Concert Hall in 1988 made national headlines. With Gehry are Diane Disney Miller, Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee Chair Frederick M. Nicholas, and Ernest Fleischmann, with the model of Gehry's project-winning design, later greatly modified. Photo: Craig Schwartz

"Refreshingly original and totally American, proceeding as it does from his populist Southern California perspective, Gehry's work is a highly refined, sophisticated and adventurous aesthetic that emphasizes the art of architecture." Gehry's champion, Fred Nicholas, said, the Pritzker Prize was the "symbolic ratification" of his first choice.[20] "He was young enough and he was exciting enough that we put our hope and faith in him," Nicholas said at the time. And as for the architect, the Disney commission "totally changed Gehry's career," Nicholas noted.[21]

The Disney Hall project also became a factor in recruiting conductors for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which had seen turbulence in its leadership in the last five years. Giulini's residence in Los Angeles ended with sorrow. In 1982, his wife was stricken with a brain aneurysm, and she was left physically impaired and emotionally devastated. Giulini felt he had to do everything he could for her in their home in Milan. He often had to cancel work with the Philharmonic and, finally, realized such a life was no longer possible. In July 1983 he announced that he would step down when his contract ended in September 1984.

Fleischmann created a guessing game as he decided on the next music director, discussing candidates with some of the musicians as well as Giulini. He eschewed the common practice of appointing a search committee, which he declared to be "a fraud and a sham" that typically makes selections that are "not essentially musical ones."[22] The orchestra, he said, "needed someone with an international reputation... a superb musician...

of the seats. Therefore, the first thing Fleischmann wanted his friend Gehry to do was not to design but to listen, to fully understand the relationship between a building and the music played within it. He personally facilitated Gehry's introduction to great conductors when they came to Los Angeles: Simon Rattle, Pierre Boulez, Kurt Sanderling, and Zubin Mehta, among others. From conversations with them, Gehry said, he gleaned many of the principles that drove the hall's eventual design.

Frederick Nicholas, in addition, insisted that Gehry and the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee members visit the world's great concert halls, to learn all that they could about how to construct the very best one—a key expectation of the Disney gift. "In order to have a good architectural solution," reasoned Nicholas, "you have to have an educated client."[3] With members of the committee, Gehry traveled to halls in Europe and Japan, and elsewhere in the United States. They were particularly excited by Berlin's Philharmonie: the sound was full and rich, and its "vineyard" design put the orchestra in the middle of the audience, as Gehry had envisioned. Its bowl-shaped floor embraced the audience, as if they were sitting in the palm of a gentle giant.

When the group returned home, there was clear unanimity as to the favored two halls: the Philharmonie and Amsterdam's Concertgebouw. The halls were similar in size, both with around 2,500 seats. Built after World War II, both were modified vineyard designs, with seating above and also behind the orchestra. The group liked both the acoustics and the intimacy of these halls, where the seats farthest from the orchestra were only eighty feet away. They knew, however, that copying the Berlin Philharmonie was not the solution, even if Gehry agreed to such a plan. The biggest problem, Nicholas said, was that modern building standards demanded the use of steel and concrete rather than wood frames, though halls could be finished in either stucco or wood.

Every detail of the hall's construction could have a profound impact on its sound. As architecture critic Joseph Giovanni pointed out, "Creating a hall that will allow audiences to hear a Paganini pizzicato in the last row is not an exact science. Acoustics has been called a black art and likened to the Bermuda Triangle."[4] Sound quality in a concert hall is not fully predictable, in part because orchestral music is not a series of pure notes isolated in space, but rather layers of sound coming from the orchestra and then combining with reverberations produced by the walls and ceiling—indeed, by every surface in the hall. The shape of the auditorium is also a critical acoustic factor.

the Chandler Pavilion, modeled on a Greek temple, Disney Hall would have, in Gehry's words, an "open body language."[6]

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Meanwhile, as plans for the great new concert venue inched forward, the Philharmonic continued delivering acclaimed performances, and symphony lovers awaited the official arrival of music director–designate Esa-Pekka Salonen. The young maestro saw the decision to build the new hall as an "indication of the city's deep commitment" to the Los Angeles Philharmonic through a "bold and brave undertaking."[7] Although Salonen would not fully take charge of the orchestra until the 1992–93 season, he brought the Philharmonic to the Salzburg Music Festival in the summer of 1992. It was a triumphant engagement, for which the orchestra earned a level of international praise unusual for an American orchestra.

The moment Salonen was named the Philharmonic's music director–designate, Gehry called to congratulate him and immediately pulled him into the process of developing the concert hall. During the ensuing months and then years, Salonen became another key source of musical knowledge for Gehry. The architect peppered Salonen with questions about how he accommodated the orchestra to a particular space and what the musicians heard when they performed on stage.

As the architectural vision of the new hall came into focus, legal issues among the Disney family, the Music Center, and the County proved to be the first real threat to the project's future. A bevy of lawyers would be required to sort them out.

Although Lillian Disney's letter of May 12, 1987 (along with subsequent correspondence between her lawyers and the County) had established the general terms of the arrangement, some legal ambiguities remained. "Letters are one thing," Disney lawyer Ron Gother said. "The other thing is for lawyers to agree on the wording of terms in the documents to reach agreements. Lawyers can have a field day with these things." In fact, they had a field day for five years. Gother and Nicholas met with County lawyers virtually every week from 1987 to 1992. "We spent every Monday morning for five years negotiating various parts of the deal at the County," Nicholas recalled.[8]

The County's caution was not unreasonable, given the size and complexity of the project. As an institution accountable to the public, the County had to safeguard its expenditures if—as might well be expected—any problems arose during construction, or after. To begin with, the

County had to offer a $110 million bond issue to fund the construction of the garage, which would eventually provide revenue to the County. A primary concern was that the project could be halted midway due to inadequate fund-raising, so the County stipulated that no construction could begin until 85 percent of the funding was raised.

"The County was willing to make available three and a half acres of the most prime space in downtown and to finance a garage to serve as the foundation to support the concert hall," said Richard Volpert, who started representing the County in 1989 as a partner in the Los Angeles office of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flome. "The County was very concerned there would be cost overruns...We did not want [the Music Center] to seek additional public funds."[9]

Another requirement of the agreement involved Lillian Disney's request that the building be maintained at the highest quality once it was completed, which was projected to cost between $5 million and $10 million a year. Over the course of the sixty-year lease, a difference of $5 million annually would amount to an enormous sum, so the lawyers for the County stipulated that the required maintenance be precisely specified. Such details resulted in extensive negotiation over, for example, the building materials to be used in the hall.

Because Lot K was located in a Community Redevelopment Agency renewal area, the City as well as the County had to approve building plans. Then in 1990, a suit was filed claiming that Los Angeles failed to consider how the concert hall would affect traffic in the downtown area, as well as other environmental issues. The complaint was rejected in 1991, but the watchdog group that initiated the action appealed. Only after the appeal was denied could a three-way agreement between the City, the County, and the Music Center be worked out.

The most difficult obstacle of all, as it turned out, was the County's desire to add another revenue source to the project, something that the Disney gift permitted as long as the addition harmonized with the other buildings in the complex. "We came up with the concept...of a hotel in there and eventually we also became very excited [about] it," Nicholas said. Now three years into his work, Gehry had already been through a number of redesigns, but adding a four-star, 350-room hotel to be operated by Ritz-Carlton added several new layers of complexity. In the end, the hotel plans came to nothing. In part due to City opposition, the whole idea was thrown out because the Community Redevelopment Agency would not approve the hotel's labor policies. "That was a nightmare, a big waste of effort," Nicholas said.[10]

Richard Koshalek, then director of the Museum of Contemporary Art and a member of the architectural subcommittee, posed a provocative question that would become more important as time went on—just who was Gehry's client? Was it the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the hall's resident company, or Los Angeles County, or the Music Center Operating Company (which held the master lease), or the board of governors of the Performing Arts Council? Was it the Disney family or the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee? Each of these entities came to the project with somewhat different points of view and different goals, making the process for reaching decisions cumbersome and impossibly drawn out. Throughout the long years building the hall, the hydra-like client would pull the project first one way and then another.

Gehry said in retrospect that the endless delays and legal entanglements provided him the unexpected luxury of improving and perfecting his vision for the hall, though he did not fully realize it at the time. The delays allowed him time to invent new ways to take his evolving design concepts from a model constructed of paper to an actual building, and over the years his concept radically changed. "Frank's original scheme is kind of shocking when you look at it now," noted *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, who pointed out that the early design was surprisingly traditional. The initial hard-edged shell with a glass-covered outdoor atrium "had none of the kind of elegance and lightness that [the design] has now." Ouroussoff went on to suggest that in "some sense, it is the project where you can most clearly see the evolution of his language."[11]

Among the significant additions to Gehry's original design were curved walls and other rounded forms that grew out of the acoustical features demanded by Nagata and his protégé, Yasuhisa Toyota. "The interior curves were a response to acoustic requirements, and that evolved and created the sail-like quality of the ceiling and the walls," Gehry said. "I then wanted to express those characteristics on the outside so the building became whole."[12]

At first, questions were posed as to whether the radical shapes could be translated into physical forms. But in 1991 Gehry's partner, Jim Glymph, introduced a startling new piece of software to the office. The Computer-Aided Three-Dimensional Interactive Application (CATIA) could, among other things, translate a three-dimensional object into precise drawings from which builders could work. As a result, Gehry was no longer constrained by straight lines and rigid forms. "This computer," Gehry pointed out, "represents shapes—and I love to say this—to eight decimal

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A 1991 sketch of Frank Gehry's vision of the Walt Disney Concert Hall as it had evolved from the model he submitted for competition. Photo: Frank Gehry

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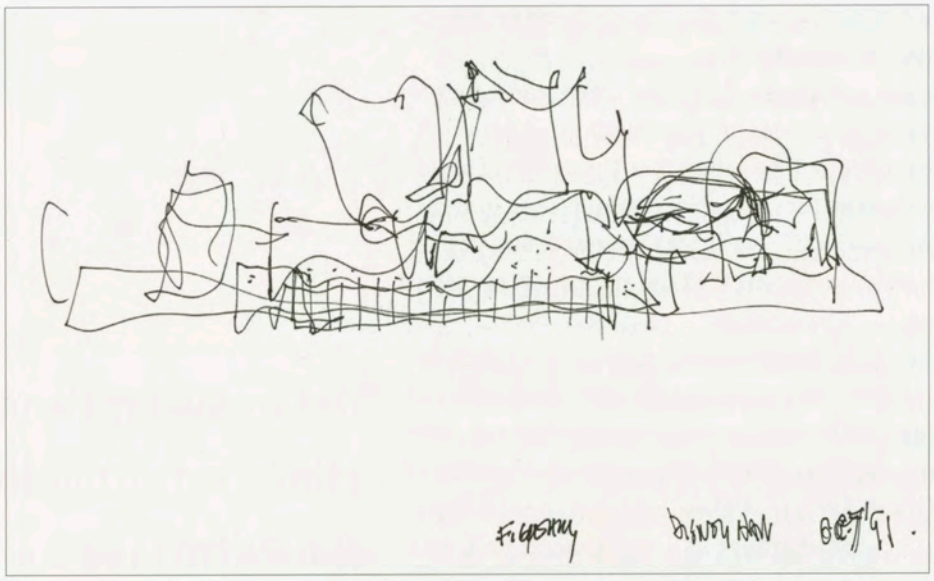
Gehry's final model of Disney Hall. Photo: Frank Gehry



points of accuracy, and you can build from it directly, so it gets architects closer to the craft. That, for me, is exciting."[13]

Originally used to design fighter jets, CATIA allowed a designer to draw curving forms in a way that was not only intelligible but also cost-effective for the builder. Gehry applied the software to the design of buildings, trading hard-edged geometries for sensual forms rarely seen in architecture. CATIA was so new, however, that it was untested, and debate persisted as to whether it could be applied to stone and concrete rather than the supple metals of jets.

When the County canceled the hotel planned for the site and a chamber concert hall was dropped from the project as too costly, Gehry moved the main hall toward the center of the block, giving it more breathing room and repositioning it toward the Chandler Pavilion and the Museum of Contemporary Art down Grand Avenue. A glass-enclosed conservatory, originally planned to connect the chamber hall and concert hall, was replaced by an outdoor park with sweeping staircases—suggesting Rome's Spanish Steps, but multiplied—which satisfied Lillian Disney's request for a garden. The hall's curved exterior edges offered no single formal entrance, but rather left multiple openings that allowed people to come and go freely, weaving together the inside and outside environments.[14]

Fred Nicholas watched as the design changed, and he respected both the architect's genius and his process, despite the uncertainty. "Gehry invented himself when he found the CATIA system of computer architecture," said Nicholas. "He was able to do his flowery works, works that soared, works that had no boundaries. The works were totally sculptural. I think this is what made Frank important."[15]

Gehry's primary goal was to honor Lillian Disney's wish to build a concert hall with world-class acoustics. Admirers of the proposed architectural plan described the new hall's design as lyrical and highly musical in its appearance, which, Gehry said, was intentional. "My fantasy," Gehry told architecture critic Joseph Giovanni, "is that when Esa-Pekka Salonen is conducting the orchestra on the podium, he is really conducting the whole building."[16]

In September 1991, Gehry's "wild and undulating design" (distinctly different from his competition-winning model) for Walt Disney Concert Hall was revealed to the public. Architectural professionals were impressed and admiring but, for many, the shards of wall that fronted the building were an unpleasant shock. "People just hated it," remembered *Los Angeles Times* reporter Diane Haithman.[17] When photographs of Gehry's

"You are talking about a time...when that kind of aesthetic, and the energy and the dynamism and even the sense of almost violence of a building being torn apart, seemed very threatening. At that time it was a radical aesthetic vision."

In November 1992, wealthy lawyer Richard Riordan was elected the city's thirty-ninth mayor, the first Republican to win the office in three decades. Yet, surprisingly, Riordan had no intention of throwing in the towel on the Walt Disney Concert Hall. For him, the proposed hall was not merely an acoustically superior new home for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, but also the potential linchpin for a revitalization of downtown that could foster an active new hub for the city.

In the past, Los Angeles had repeatedly sought direction from its civic and business leaders in moments of crisis. Community activists and power brokers had faithfully collaborated to steer the city's path. Now, a new team of leaders from both private and public sectors gathered, a group that would play a critical role in the hall's future. This group, however, had not yet coalesced, and the concert hall faced its first do-or-die moment without the benefit of their stewardship as the troubled year of 1992 came to a close.

By late fall, the County was ready to award the construction contract for the parking garage and wanted to know whether building of the new concert hall would begin as soon as the parking garage was finished. But because the working drawings were not complete, the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee could not commit to a contract, much less a schedule for construction. Facing the County's 85 percent rule, Fred Nicholas hurriedly asked several construction companies to give their best estimates. They were all within the range of $100 million to $110 million.[30]

The outlook was dire. A meeting was called including Nicholas, F. Daniel Frost of the Music Center, finance subcommittee chair Ronald Arnault of ARCO, and James Thomas, acting Music Center board chair. "In essence they said that with a project as complex as this it was foolish to go forward without full working drawings and price guarantees from contractors," Gother said. Frost, Arnault, and Thomas felt it would be necessary to ask Lillian Disney to extend her deadline for breaking ground until a firm estimate was available. She was then nearly ninety-four years old.

When the idea was broached, Gother recalled, everyone waited to hear what the Disney sisters would say. "Sharon spoke first after the silence and said she wanted to go forward," Gother said. "Then Diane said, 'I do too.'" According to one witness, Music Center officials at the meeting were taken aback and "stunned into silence." The groundwork for this surprising conclusion had actually been laid at a lunch before the meeting, at which Gother and Nicholas had urged the Disneys to agree to going ahead without construction drawings. The decision to start construction may have been a bold move, but Gother argued that it was "hardly irresponsible."[31]

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Esa-Pekka Salonen, shown here in 1994, became the Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1992. Photo: Kira Gluschkoff

The Disney family agreed to contribute another $17.5 million to the project, which would bring their total, with interest, to $93.5 million and would satisfy the County's demand for 85 percent of the total, now projected to be $111 million. The Music Center committed to raising the $17.5 million necessary to fund the balance of the project.

Amid all this turmoil, the man who had agreed to lead the Los Angeles Philharmonic three years earlier—on the assurance that he would conduct the orchestra in an acoustically brilliant concert hall—arrived. For Salonen's first concert in the fall, Fleischmann pulled out all the stops. The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion was dressed in an enormous banner bearing the conductor's name. As audience members arrived, they were handed flowers. Bouquets lined the stage apron. The orchestra entered after the audience was seated, wearing white tie and tails.

Fortunately, Salonen was not distracted by the razzmatazz so antithetical to his usual manner. (He had already turned down an opportunity to be

named one of *People* magazine's fifty sexiest people on the planet.) That first night, the orchestra performed Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony—the same work Salonen had conducted when he substituted for an ailing Michael Tilson Thomas in London in 1983, the concert that had so impressed Fleischmann. In his review of Salonen's opening concert in Los Angeles, Martin Bernheimer was enthusiastic:

> Salonen conducts this symphony as if he had written it. He understands the episodic structure, and he savors the conflicting tensions. He knows how to gauge the thunderous climaxes, how to integrate the introspective bliss with the zonking violence. It may, or may not, be coincidental that he, like Mahler, happens to be a composer, and that he is now about the age that Mahler was when the Third was conceived.
>
> The Philharmonic played with rare cohesion and passion, with suavity (silken strings) and vigor (soaring brass) that would disarm even the nastiest Austrian critic. This, obviously, was a night for inspiration.[32]

It was an inspiring beginning, a sign of hope for everyone involved with Disney Hall.

Lillian Disney's deadline was met with a symbolic groundbreaking ceremony for the parking garage on December 10, 1992. A few hundred guests watched Nicholas and Diane Disney Miller, among others, pose for photographers in the morning sunshine. Miller said, "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 fought for them."[33]

At the time, the final lease agreements were still forthcoming and were not officially signed until December 23. Attorneys Amy Forbes and Richard Volpert diligently hammered out the legal responsibilities of all the entities involved. Under the terms of the contract, the County leased the land for the hall and garage to the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee (now WDCH I—"I" was added as the arrangement became more complex). WDCH I subleased the land to the County, which agreed to its maintenance role. The County subleased the land back to a new entity known as Walt Disney Concert Hall II, Inc., tasked with operating the concert hall, which, in turn, agreed to enter into separate subleases with the Music Center and the Philharmonic for the completion of other operations. Ground was broken and the master lease signed, but the gleaming monument to Walt Disney's creative genius and the new cultural center for downtown Los Angeles would require ten more years of bold leadership and more than $200 million in additional funds to realize its destiny.

"Salonen conducts this symphony as if he had written it. He understands the episodic structure, and he savors the conflicting tensions. He knows how to gauge the thunderous climaxes, how to integrate the introspective bliss with the zonking violence. It may, or may not, be coincidental that he, like Mahler, happens to be a composer, and that he is now about the age that Mahler was when the Third was conceived."

At the same time that the prospective new member of the Music Center family was facing a prolonged gestation, the established members were maturing past Dorothy Chandler's founding structures and relationships. The disruption caused by the shortfall during Wachtell's tenure at the Music Center added fuel to a fire that had been heating up since the early 1980s, when Dorothy Chandler first began to absent herself from regular oversight of the cultural center. As early as 1984, Chandler failed to appear at a twentieth anniversary celebration at which she herself was to be honored. The board of the Music Center had decided to make a $1 million contribution in her name and then exceeded that goal, but Chandler remained at home, sending her thanks through Daniel Frost.

The economic problems of the Center Theatre Group as well as the Music Center fund-raising helped to initiate a process in which everyone reexamined their books. In 1991, the Music Center quietly decided to allow the resident companies to raise money individually as another way of making up the shortfall. In addition to the economic shocks in the Southern California economy, that decision would have a continuing effect on Music Center fund-raising.

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In 1992, CTG President Lawrence Ramer asked Stephen Hinchliffe, who had worked at the consulting firm McKinsey & Company, to join the board as chairman of the budget committee. "There would be only one person on the committee and that would be me," Hinchliffe recalled. "My job was to figure out how they could reduce their costs."[34]

What was immediately apparent was that the CTG had parallel staffs: one for the Ahmanson and one for the Taper. Especially now that Gordon Davidson was in charge of both theaters, the duplication was largely unnecessary. Hinchliffe applied himself to the delicate business of deciding whose job should be eliminated or absorbed. Over the course of three years, the two staffs were carefully merged, and the operation became profitable again.

At the same time, the nation's economy was stumbling, hobbled by the savings and loan crisis of the early 1990s that resulted in the closing of more than seven hundred thrift institutions. Los Angeles lost offices of some major corporations because of acquisitions and mergers. Money tightened everywhere. Subsequently, the County reduced its share of the costs of maintaining the complex, and rents for the resident companies increased. Fund-raising, not surprisingly, became increasingly difficult,

and the resident companies protested more loudly that the Music Center, Inc., was not providing adequate support. The Unified Fund agreed to allow donations to individual resident companies, but that, inevitably, decreased the amount the Unified Fund could raise.

Hinchliffe became president of the CTG and then chairman in 1995. He was also on the board of the MCOC and, during the remodeling of the Ahmanson, met regularly with an MCOC subcommittee in charge of the work. He considered the merger of the Ahmanson and the Taper one of the two signal accomplishments of his tenure, nearly a decade; the second was the board's increased involvement with the management of the company. More beneficial fallout of the belt-tightening came when the MCOC began to examine how the County charged for the services it provided—the maintenance, the ushers, and other crucial functions. It turned out that the County was adding a 40 percent charge for overhead. The MCOC insisted on taking over all of these functions and providing them in-house, thus saving a substantial sum. A forerunner of later battles, the transition proved difficult. Some long-term County employees even destroyed operating manuals. Nonetheless, during the early 1990s, the MCOC steadily gained full operational control of the Music Center.

In 1995, the Music Center Unified Fund met its reduced goal of $10.6 million. Its staff of fund-raisers had been cut almost in half since 1992, and the fund-raising efforts of the resident companies were increasingly cutting into its income. In reporting the accomplishment of the goal, Unified Fund campaign chair Sheldon Ausman pointed out, "Beginning in 1992, some contributions that would have ordinarily been given through the Unified Fund went directly to the resident companies. The new policy vastly increased the resident companies' capacity for independently raising funds, resulting in additional gifts totaling more than $13.5 million."[35] In only a few years, fund-raising by the resident companies had outpaced the centralized efforts and had taken overall donations far beyond the Unified Fund's best year, even in the midst of an economic downturn.

Fund-raising also improved because of changes in the board's requirements. "For years," Hinchliffe recalls, "if you were a board member of the Center Theatre Group no one made any significant financial demands, because the Music Center was providing the money. It became apparent to me that we were not going to be able to continue that practice." Similarly, he noticed, none of the board members of the MCOC were required to give anything to the overall support of the Music Center and a number did not.

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Groundbreaking for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in 1992. Shown are Supervisor Deane Dana, Councilwoman Rita Walters, Sharon Disney Lund, Ernest Fleischmann, Frederick Nicholas (former chairman, Walt Disney Concert Hall), James A. Thomas (chairman, Music Center Board of Governors), Frank Gehry, Supervisor Edmund D. Edelman, Diane Disney Miller. Photo: Gary Leonard

The requirement to donate changed the attitude of board members in a crucial respect. "When you take a group of volunteers and tell them that you want them to contribute financially, they tend to say, 'Well, okay, but if that is the case I want to have some say about what we are doing.'"[36] Over the course of the 1990s, the resident companies gained independence and confidence in their ability to manage themselves, just when TMC, Inc. found itself buffeted by internal misfortunes and external economic stresses. The resident companies were coming to believe that they were not well served by the divided structure between the MCOC and TMC, Inc. And a crisis with Disney Hall would soon burden the complex as never before.

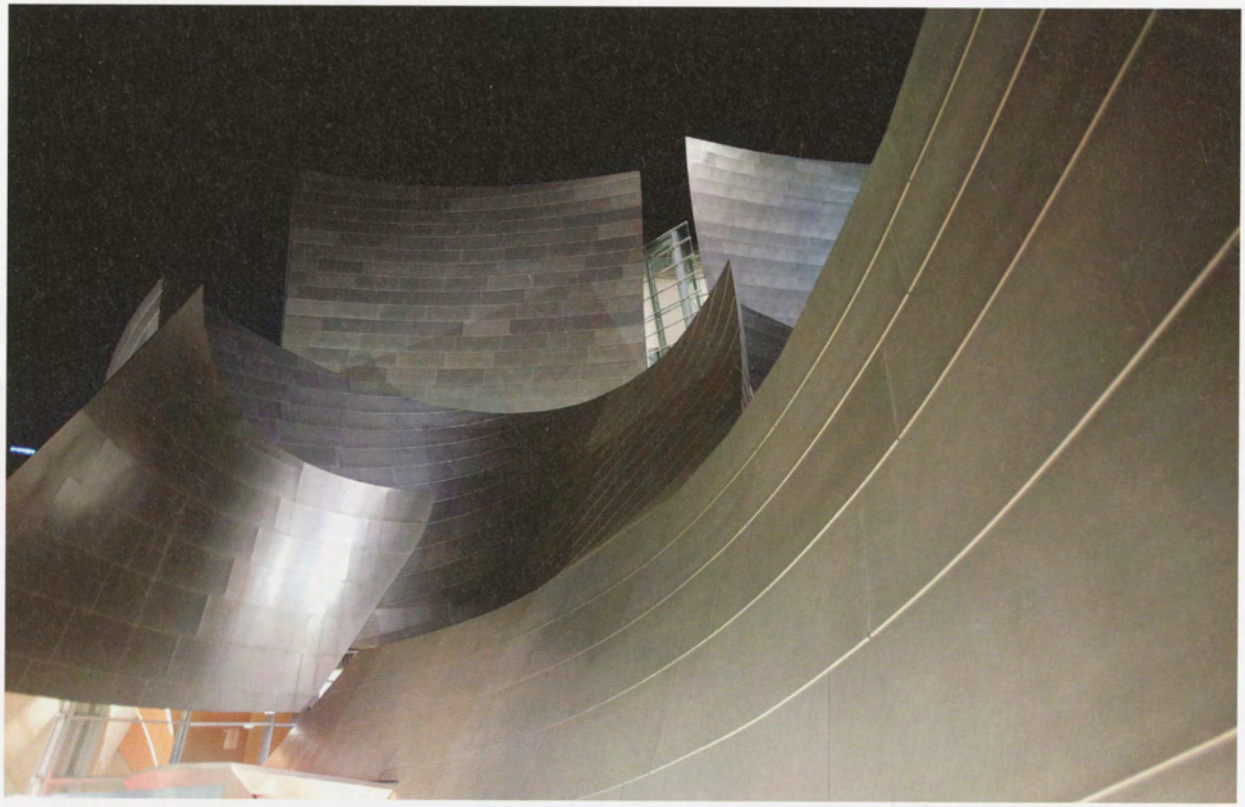

Photo: Danielle Klebanow

CHAPTER 8 THE DISNEY GIFT AT RISK

Seven years after Lillian Disney's initial gift, Fred Nicholas, the concert hall's champion and building committee chair, was forced to perform the excruciating task of informing the County Supervisors that cost estimates to complete Disney Hall had increased by $50 million, bringing the total near $180 million. In the spring of 1994, working drawings for construction had become available and subcontractors submitted their bids. The estimates shocked Music Center officials and committee members. Some insiders feared that if unexpected issues surfaced, the price could climb as high as $200 million. "That was what caused the Paul Revere alarm to go off," longtime Music Center board member Stuart Ketchum recalled. "I remember because I was on the phone for two and a half hours [while on vacation] in a bathing suit in Hawaii."[1]

The sobering news unleashed a wave of criticism and finger pointing, much of it directed at the embattled building chairman. By this time, construction of the 2,500-space underground garage financed through County-issued bonds was nearing completion, but without the concert hall the garage's income would fall painfully short of what the County had been expecting. Though Nicholas and other Disney Hall supporters expressed confidence that the additional money could be raised, no one was entirely sure how that would be done, and the Supervisors called for a detailed explanation from the committee. At the same time, the committee halted all work toward building the hall, originally slated to begin in 1995, and no one could predict a start date with any certainty.

County officials cautioned the WDCH I committee that the County was in no position to cover any increased costs. One of the hall's most passionate boosters, Supervisor Edelman, said, "We can't offer any more help," but he also expressed confidence that private sources would

come through. "This is a setback," he acknowledged. "But I think it can be overcome."[2]

Many were skeptical. The region had been badly hit by the recession, and the County's vocal lawyer for the project, Richard S. Volpert, argued that the cost of the hall's complex design was prohibitive. Cautioning civic leaders about the severe risks of forging ahead without signed construction contracts, he said with more than a tinge of sarcasm, "If you throw enough money at it, you can build an atom bomb, fly to the moon, [or] build the Disney Concert Hall."[3]

In statements to the press, Lillian Disney affirmed her continuing support, but she did not come forward with any pledges for additional funding. Diane Disney Miller acknowledged that her mother had "found it very difficult to understand and accept" the lengthy delays in the construction.[4] Lillian Disney's advanced age was also a factor: family members feared she would not live to see the hall.

Ron Gother, the Disney family attorney, insisted that the present problems, however formidable, could be overcome, but County officials wanted a firm estimate of costs along with pledges for 85 percent of the required funds before construction continued. Despite the bitter friction, Gother attempted to assuage the parties. "The building will be built; it's just a question of when," he said.[5]

According to the committee's report to the Supervisors, the largest increases in construction costs were in the steel framing (up $8.6 million), in the wood and millwork (up $7 million), and in the drywall and plaster (up $4.9 million). "The drywall designed for this hall has curves and movement that don't have any comparison to anything else that's been built in this city," Nicholas said in defense of the revised budget. "The people who were bidding the drywall had never seen anything like [Gehry's design], hadn't had any experience with it. So they put a lot of contingencies in it and they bid it very, very high."[6] The purchasing and installation of the exterior limestone, a thorny issue that continued to plague the project, was now bid at $22 million and climbing. Music Center officials confirmed the new estimates and attributed the increase to inflation, rising material costs, and a shortage of qualified contractors following the widespread devastation caused by the Northridge earthquake of January 17, 1994.[7]

Much blame for the delays was directed at Frank Gehry. His design was considered complicated, messy, unbuildable.[8] Questions were raised about the working drawings drafted by the executive architects, Dworsky Associates. Subcontractors complained that they were unable to understand

them. "Nothing is straight, nothing is square, everything is cut to fit," noted one observer.[9] Nicholas insisted that despite the complexity of Gehry's design, it was "absolutely buildable," and that the money could be raised to complete "one of the nation's most important cultural and architectural undertakings."[10]

Although WDCH I committee officials and the Music Center board sought detailed contracting estimates to minimize risk, some board members cautioned that significant additional costs were inevitable. Ketchum, a prominent real estate developer, and other board members—including Arnault and James A. Thomas of the developer Maguire Thomas Partners—had been vehemently opposed to fast-tracking the project, and now that the bids were coming in much higher than expected, they began to scrutinize the process. "The project needed more management, more control," Ketchum recalled. "There was about $50 million in this project that had been spent on plans that ended up just being junked."[11]

As the project came to a screeching halt, Gehry was so upset that he locked all of the concert hall's models inside a room at his office and refused to look at them. He described this period as excruciating, and acknowledged that, at the time, he felt as if he were a pariah in the city of Los Angeles. "I stopped going out for a while," he said. "This is a high-stakes game in a way. You are in the public eye. If you fail, there is a finger pointed at you for life. It is like the scarlet letter."[12]

On top of that, fund-raising efforts had come to a standstill. Even now, the WDCH I Committee had guarantees of only $2 million toward the nearly $100 million shortfall. Nicholas had operated under the assumption that money from the Disney family would finance virtually the entire hall, with Music Center fund-raising serving as a supplement or backup. But now, with the hall practically on its deathbed, the project became almost entirely a fund-raising effort. For its part, the Music Center leadership was so disenchanted that the board was quietly negotiating an agreement with WDCH I to relieve the board of its fund-raising responsibility. At the same time, according to Harry Hufford, the committee was seriously considering an independent fund-raising effort.[13]

Worst of all, the legal safeguards that Volpert had been so careful to build into the contract to protect the County would soon take effect. The entire project was perilously close to collapse. The gargantuan cost prompted Los Angeles power broker Eli Broad to describe the concert hall project as "dead and ready to be buried."[14] Fleischmann was flabbergasted by the prospect that the hall would not be built. "I couldn't believe that

having gone this far, the people of Los Angeles would want to endure the shame, the scorn, the contempt of the rest of the world if this hall wasn't going to be built."[15]

Gother weighed the options carefully on behalf of the Disney family. If the project were in fact canceled, the County would collect $10 million in liquidation damages and use those funds to finish the underground garage. Other costs of abandoning the project, including contract penalties, would come from the balance of the Disney funds.[16] What was left of the Disney money would immediately revert to a charitable trust fund. The Philharmonic would stay in its current home at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Increasingly alarmed about the project he had helped to midwife, Gother shared those concerns with Hufford, his former colleague at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher. "There's a problem with the hall," Gother began. Hufford had recently left the law firm to pursue a career in investment at Bear Stearns, but his door was always open to Gother, and he listened with concern about the escalating Disney Hall crisis. Gother mentioned the fast-rising estimates and the Music Center's fund-raising campaign. He asked Hufford at least to drop in at a few meetings of an ad hoc committee the Music Center had formed to figure out what to do. Hufford reluctantly agreed to do so.

Following an initial review, Hufford recommended that the Music Center disclose the actual state of things in a letter to the Board of Supervisors and the mayor. In August 1994, Robert Egleston, then chairman of TMC, Inc., and the vice chairman, Kent Kresa, officially informed the Supervisors that the revised estimate far exceeded the current $130 million project budget, that the campaign to raise additional support from anyone other than the Disneys had essentially gone nowhere, and that work on the project was being suspended pending a complete reevaluation by Hines Interests, a real estate development firm hired to assess the state of the project. It was expected that the evaluation would take eighteen to twenty-four months.

All work came to a halt while the parties awaited the report's findings. In January 1995, the WDCH I committee asked Hufford to serve as CEO, to turn the project around. Though he was not a fund-raiser, he brought an array of skills and a deep stock of experience. And, unlike most others, he was willing. "The reason I'm in this is I thought it would take somebody who could work with local government, who could work with the media, who handles finance, who is credible, who is willing to work and is stubborn. That's me," Hufford said.[17]

"I couldn't believe that having gone this far, the people of Los Angeles would want to endure the shame, the scorn, the contempt of the rest of the world if this hall wasn't going to be built."

Soon Hufford's task became even more difficult. Not long after he took the job, the County's no-nonsense chief administrative officer, Sally Reed, announced her intention to declare the project in default and to collect the $10 million in liquidation damages if the construction of Disney Hall did not start as soon as the garage was completed. There was still no plan for producing final working drawings for construction. The Music Center and the WDCH I committee were metaphorically drawing up divorce papers, and the Disney family, the Music Center leadership, and County officials all felt they had been let down and were blaming each other.

This was the project's darkest hour. It was time to make a break from the recent past, a past largely represented by Fred Nicholas. "I know that Diane Disney Miller was being advised by many others that if we were going to get a new team in there it should not include Fred," Gother conceded. It fell to Gother to break the news to his friend, who was not entirely oblivious to the situation. "I went to see him one afternoon," Gother recalled. "He knew what I was coming there to say, so he beat me to saying it." Gother compared Nicholas's departure to that of a baseball manager. "It wasn't Fred's job to get the hits or do the pitching," said Gother. "But when the team fails, the manager has to go." Nicholas also resigned from his roles on the boards of the Music Center and the Philharmonic, thinking it was best to separate himself completely from the project. Nicholas had poured his heart and soul into the project for eight years, pro bono, and the task had taken its toll. Pointing to his forehead, Nicholas said that when he started working with the Music Center, he'd had a full head of hair.

Nicholas knew he would inevitably be blamed for all the problems that had arisen—legal hurdles, inaccurate estimates, and inadequate funding—whether he'd had any control over those difficulties or not. "Fred was the fall guy," Gother said, despite Nicholas's enormous efforts to keep the project moving for so long. "Fred should be getting a gold medal for all the time and effort he put in free of charge," Gother added.[18] Nicholas's last task was to brief his replacement, Harry Hufford, and they soon had a constructive meeting. Hufford liked Nicholas and appreciated the difficulty of his task as a volunteer. But Hufford was hired as a full-time professional, and the skills needed at this juncture were not the ones required when Nicholas came on board.

In March 1995, Houston-based Hines issued its report, reaching three basic conclusions: the project was buildable, working drawings needed to be completed, and a new, detailed project budget needed to be developed based on the best estimates available. Hines's own estimate was nearly