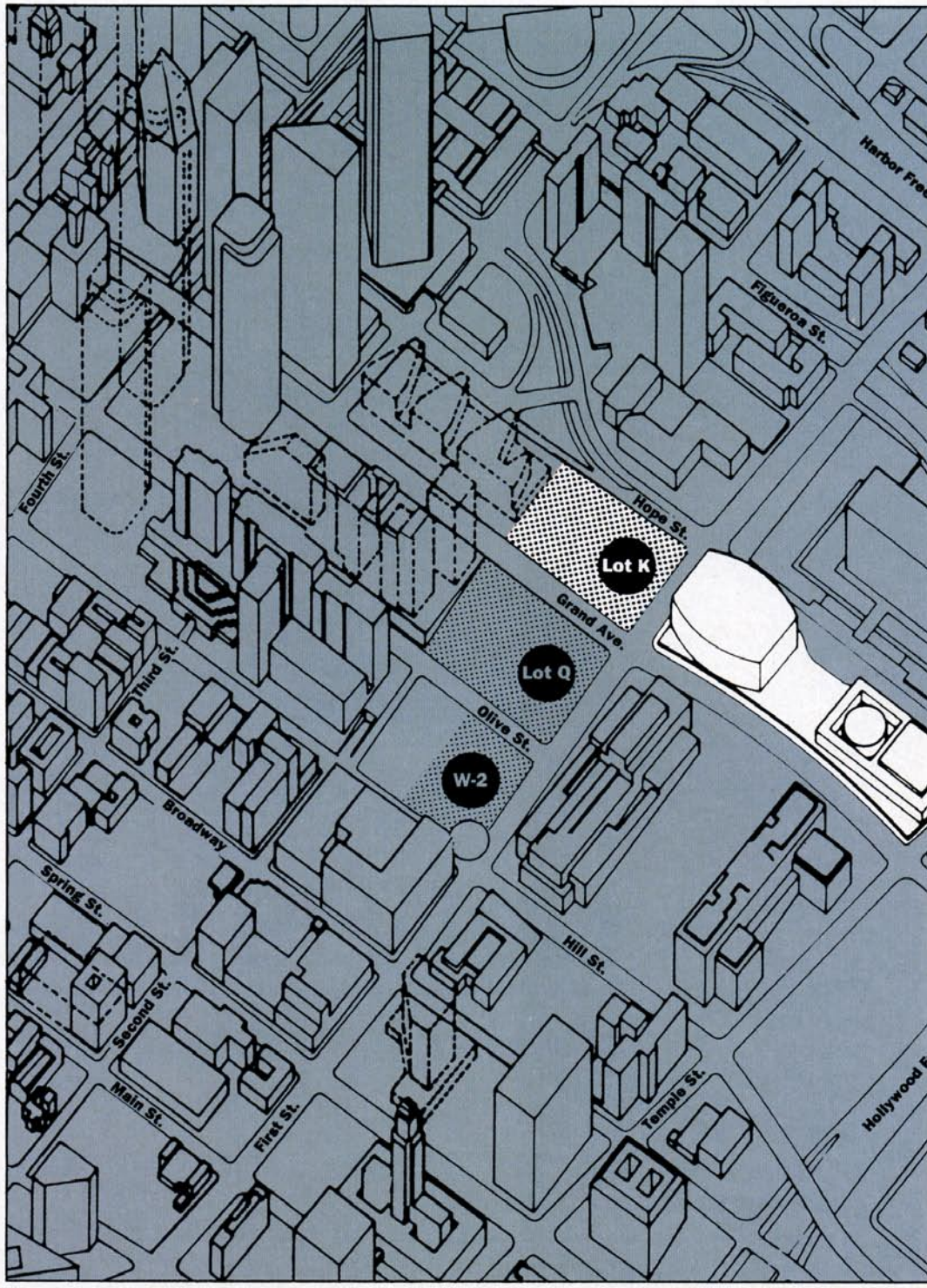
Walt's Way

Building Something Wonderful for the Los Angeles Philharmonic

As of 1985, there were some 22,000 private grant-making foundations in the United States generating a cool $4 billion in grants each year. Although their goals are as diverse as the interests of the people who created them, a donation from any one of those intrepid institutions can change forever the course of a particular field of endeavor or alter remarkably a familiar cityscape.

The gift of $50 million in May, 1987 from Lillian B. Disney and the Lillian B. Disney Foundation to the Music Center of Los Angeles County for construction of a 2,500-seat concert hall as a permanent home for the Los Angeles Philharmonic in honor of Mrs. Disney's late husband, Walt, was just such a momentously transforming event for the city of Los Angeles. As far as anyone knows, it is the largest donation of its kind in the history of the performing arts, and in the year and a half since it was announced an impressive organization has been set up to determine not only what the Walt Disney Concert Hall will look like, but also what its impact will be on both the urban environment and the cultural life of America's fastest growing population center.

The vast scope of that impact is due in large part to the intended location of the new hall: Los Angeles County's Lot K, directly south across First Street from the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The potential value of the project — and the reason the decision makers have ap-



Garrett White is associate editor of L.A. Style *and editor of* Frank, *a literary journal published in Paris.*

by Garrett White

(Opposite) *County Lot K, site of the new Walt Disney Concert Hall, is across First Street from the Music Center. Lots W-2 and Q will be developed in the future. Drawing courtesy Barton Myers Associates Architects/Planners.*

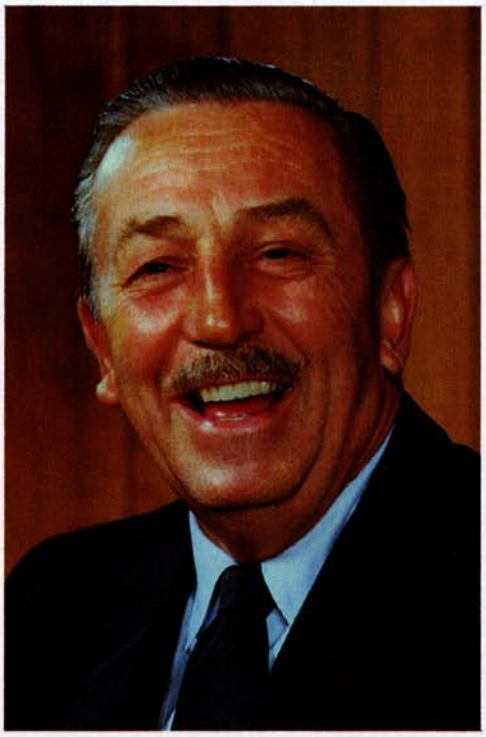
(Below) *Walt Disney's legacy made possible "the largest gift of its kind in the history of the performing arts." Photo courtesy The Walt Disney Company.*

proached their responsibility with a seriousness bordering on reverence — goes beyond creating a new home for the Philharmonic. The building of Disney Hall provides an opportunity to solve one of L.A.'s most famous deficiencies: the lack of a viable downtown.

In Los Angeles no less than in New York, influence is ultimately wielded by lawyers. But considering the importance of the Disney Hall project, there seems to be none of the power playing that might be expected. The overwhelming power play, the gift itself, has already been made. In fact, a talk with anyone from the four major constituencies involved — the Disney family, the Music Center, the Philharmonic and Los Angeles County — reveals a willingness to collaborate and a level of respect for the process that has to be unique in the ego-ridden worlds of philanthropy and high culture.

Ron Gother, a partner at Gibson Dunn and Crutcher, has a deep personal interest in the future of the Walt Disney Concert Hall. He recently moved his office from the 47th floor of the Wells Fargo Center to a suite on the north side of the 50th floor so that he could have a bird's eye view of the Music Center and Lot K where construction will begin next year.

An open, amiable man now in his 50s, Gother became the lawyer for Walt Disney and his private family company, Retlaw (Walter spelled backwards), in 1964. He planned Walt's estate and, after the pioneering filmmaker's death in 1966, remained a close friend and advisor to the Disney family. As Gother relates it, the story of the Disney gift to the Music Center actually goes back to 1953, when Walt licensed the public company, Walt Disney Productions, to use his name in return for a five percent royalty. Although royalties were waived for Disneyland, the agreement extended to all amusement parks that might be built in the future.



With the phenomenal success of Walt Disney World in Florida, the income generated annually from that five percent was in the millions. Predictably, the public company desired some other arrangement. Gother explains: "Walt Disney Productions' management approached the family through me, saying 'We're going into Disneyland Tokyo, Disneyland Europe — would you be interested in terminating the agreement in return for some monetary compensation?'"

That dialogue went on for a number of years. For the most part, when confronted with the question, the Disneys would say no. "The family always felt this was not their money," Gother continues. "It was Walt's money, the legal rights to the name Walt Disney. They said, 'If we could do something whereby we establish a great foundation in Walt's memory, we might be interested.'"

Finally, in 1982, the family did sell the rights for $47 million in Walt Disney Productions stock, stock that has nearly quadrupled in value since 1984. It then remained to determine a use for the fledgling foundation's considerable assets. Gother knew that the Music Center had long been planning to expand, and during a social visit he asked Mrs. Disney if a gift to the Music Center might be appropriate. Walt had been involved in the complex's conception and had also helped raise money for its construction. Mrs. Disney asked Gother to look into it.

It was at that point that Gother contacted F. Daniel Frost, chairman of the Music Center Board of Governors, and a fellow partner at Gibson Dunn and Crutcher (Frost also happens to be Dorothy Chandler's son-in-law). Discussions followed between Lillian, daughters Diane Disney Miller and Sharon Disney Lund, and Frost, and one day Mrs. Disney said, "Let's go."

Once the decision was made, the terms of the gift had to be set. Naturally, the Disney family wanted to be sure the money would be put to the best possible use. For the Disneys, it isn't only Walt's involvement with the early days of the Music Center that makes the gift so fitting; it's the very nature of the project. Says Diane Disney Miller, "At the end of his life, my father was fascinated with the

Continued on page 32

concept of cities. EPCOT Center was intended to be the city of tomorrow. It was to be a prototype of how a perfectly planned city of the future could work.

"I feel that he would have wanted to do this. During his lifetime, he didn't know wealth like we, his family, share now, and he wasn't interested in wealth for its own sake. Something wonderful had to be done with it."

The most important of several stipulations that came with the gift was the requirement that the new concert hall be located on Lot K. Promised to the Music Center in 1968 as a site for future expansion, Lot K had been the subject of controversy prior to the granting of the Disney gift. The debate stemmed from the fact that Los Angeles County had come to view the parcel as a source of badly needed revenue. The County also owns the two contiguous lots — known as Q and W2 — east of Lot K along First Street. These three properties are the last remaining to be developed under the Bunker Hill Urban Renewal Project of 1959. Commercial development of the First Street properties could bring the County millions of dollars in revenue every year.

When the Disney gift was first announced, the County and the Music Center were given 30 days to accept or reject it. It is difficult to imagine that such a staggering amount might actually have been refused, but there were several weighty considerations, particularly for the County. The gift came with a stipulation that the County construct and maintain an underground parking facility at Lot K, serving — as at the nearby Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) — as the foundation for the new building.

But there were even more important considerations. The parking structure — estimated to cost around $40 million — must be funded, without cost to the taxpayer, by revenue bonds sold against future parking fees. And Lillian Disney reserved the right to decide not only what shape the Walt Disney Concert Hall would take, but also demanded veto power over the future use of Lots Q and W2.

That the County accepted the gift on Lillian Disney's terms shows extraordinary foresight. Filling all three parcels of land with office buildings might bring in more revenue, but it has already become clear to all those involved that another row of disconnected high-rises would not solve the greater problem of integrating the urban center.

Addressing the question of lost revenue, County Supervisor Edmund Edelman says, "You can obviously look at it that way. I don't. I look at it as an investment and as an opportunity to enrich the community with a concert hall that will provide great enrichment to the people of the County. It's going to make a significant architectural statement and try to make that area an inviting area where you don't just come to a concert and leave."

If the planners succeed, the development of the Walt Disney Concert Hall and adjacent properties could, in the long run, make the entire district more profitable — and more habitable.

While it is true that the money was given with several strings attached, the generosity of the Disney family — that is to say, Lillian and daughters Diane and Sharon — extends to the planning process in a rather unusual way. "Anything is possible," says Diane Disney Miller. "I can't predict anything." The Disneys may have complete control, but their exercise of that control demands a new definition in the history of donor involvement in the arts. The mandate from Lillian Disney is simple: Build, as her husband Walt might have done were he alive to do it, the finest concert hall in the world.

By the time ground is broken in 1989, the Disney's original gift, with accrued interest, will be worth something in the neighborhood of $65 million. How, exactly, do you take that kind of cash and translate it into a world-class concert hall?

The complexity of such an undertaking requires a complex network of decision makers, and it was Music Center Board Chairman Dan Frost who took the first steps toward establishing the necessary organization. He put together the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee, composed of representatives from each constituency. The committee includes Frost and Joanne Kozberg from the Music Center; Lillian B. Disney, Diane Disney Miller and Ronald E. Gother; Charles I. Schneider from The Music Center Operating Co.; Ernest Fleischmann, Michael J. Connell and Sydney Weiss from

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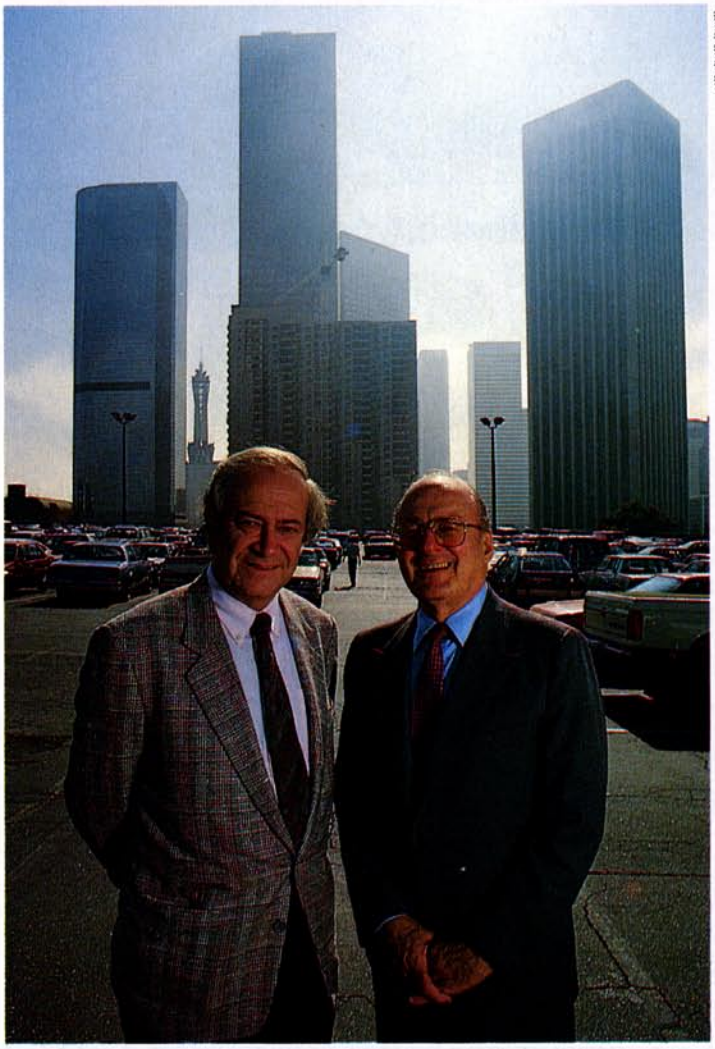

GEORGE RUSE

Philharmonic Executive Director Ernest Fleischman (left) *and Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee Chairman Frederick M. Nicholas take stock of the Lot K car park that will soon give way to Disney Hall.*

WALT'S WAY *continued from page 32*

the Los Angeles Philharmonic; and ex officio members André Previn and Supervisor Edmund Edelman.

To head the committee, Frost chose Frederick M. Nicholas, by all accounts a chairman capable of doing the impossible. For years a prominent real estate lawyer in Los Angeles, Nicholas was the MOCA trustee who took control of the building committee during a crisis that nearly resulted in the firing of architect Arata Isosaki. It was Nicholas's expertise as an organizer and diplomat that saw the building through to its successful completion (on time and under budget), having seen to it, meanwhile, that Isosaki was given the artistic freedom the project required.

CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Diane Disney Miller discussed making the gift to the Music Center with her mother, Lillian, and sister, Sharon Disney Lund.

Nicholas had the idea to set up a series of subcommittees — panels of experts — to investigate every aspect of the planned concert hall. There are finance, site, budget and public relations committees, but the crucial panel at this point is the Architectural Subcommittee. This team has the awesome task of choosing an architect who, it is hoped, will create a masterpiece for the city of Los Angeles. The committee's members are Robert Harris, dean of USC's School of Architecture; Earl A. Powell, III, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; John Walsh, Jr., director of the Getty Museum; and Richard Weinstein, dean of the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning at UCLA; with Itzhak Perlman and Pierre Boulez consulting.

Nicholas chose MOCA Director Richard Koshalek to lead the Architectural Subcommittee. The qualifications Koshalek brings to the project — in addition to his trial by fire at MOCA — include a B.A. in architecture from the University of Minnesota, and work on the design team for Martin Friedman's Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Sitting in his MOCA office, the weight of the responsibility Koshalek feels for the task at hand registers in his voice: "I can't think of a project in a downtown urban area in any city in the country as important as this one for Los Angeles. It's going to be the most important cultural project to be done in this city in a long, long time — and I include MOCA and the future Getty Center in that picture, mainly because of the Disney Hall's importance to the core of the city."

Koshalek felt that in light of the significance of the concert hall as a public project and because of the number of people involved in making decisions regarding it, a competition would be the best solution to the problem of choosing an architect. The Architectural Subcommittee began by drawing up a list of about 100 architects from around the world and reviewing their work; that field was then narrowed to 36, who were then asked to submit material to the Disney Hall Committee.

CRAIG SCHWARTZ

F. Dan Frost, chairman of the Music Center Board of Governors, put together the organization necessary to plan the new hall.

"The test we made of these architects," says Nicholas, "is what we call the 'ripeness' test — are these architects at

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The Los Angeles Philharmonic is expected to take up permanent residence in Disney Concert Hall in late 1992.

that certain phase of their career where they can produce a great work?"

After spending weeks reviewing the material, the Disney Hall Committee chose six semifinalists. Last March, the field was further narrowed to four of the world's preeminent architects: Hans Hollein of Vienna; Gottfried Boehm of Cologne, West Germany; James Stirling of London; and Frank O. Gehry of Los Angeles.

The selection process has been extremely democratic, due in part to the extraordinary circumstances of the gift and also owing to the eagerness of the Disney family to learn along with everyone else. Architects are frequently given large commissions by a small group of people (six in the case of MOCA), with heavy — and not always welcome — input from the primary benefactor. "I am very wary," says Diane Disney, "of anything being said like 'the Disney family insisted on this, or insisted on that.' We're not doing that. It has got to be as fair as it can possibly be."

The range of participants involved in the selection process is intended to be so broad as to balance special interests, and all of the committee members are volunteers.

Now that the finalists have been chosen, the process has entered the "Design Commission" phase. Working with the committee is a wide range of acoustical, architectural and program consultants, all of whom have helped to produce a written document (a boxed set of three spiral-bound volumes beautifully designed by Deborah Sussman — yet another example of Fred Nicholas's attention to detail) to be used by the architects in developing their submissions. Each step has also been painstakingly recorded for publication (including videotaping of architect interviews for private viewing by Mrs. Disney), creating a valuable archive for the Music Center and future building committees.

The four architects are now being paid $75,000 each, plus expenses, to come up with a design. Preceded by several weeks of questions and reviews, the final submissions are due on November 11. If one of the architects has a question, he must send it to Program Consultant Don Stastny, who then forwards a copy of the inquiry, along with the response, to each of the three other architects. None of the committee members are permitted to talk to any of the architects outside of designated review sessions.

On December 16 the committee will announce its decision, and an exhibition of the finalists' work will follow. What the planners are after is not just to see what one architect can do, or has done in the past, but what four very different sensibilities produce.

The comprehensiveness of Fred Nich-

olas's approach has earned him the praise of his coworkers. Part of that approach has involved educating the committee. "In order to have a good architectural solution, you have to have a good client," Nicholas believes. "So, it has been my aim to educate our client — our client being the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee. In order to do that, we made trips to the concert halls of the world."

Organized by Los Angeles Philharmonic Executive Director Ernest Fleischmann, the group heard concerts in many of the great (and some of the lesser) halls in Europe and Japan, including the Musikvereinssaal in Vienna, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Berlin Philharmonie and the Suntory Hall in Tokyo. "We chose Japan," says Fleischmann, "because Japan is the country where I think architects and acousticians have been on the whole successful in creating spaces for music in recent times. In Europe, the most successful concert halls are the large and small Philharmonie in Berlin. The small one has 1,100 seats, the large one about 2,300 seats. This is a place where there is wonderful contact between performer and audience, where the acoustics are really splendid in that they are rich and warm but have great clarity as well."

For Fleischmann, one of the most important issues, and something the entire committee learned from the trip, is the need to create in the new Los Angeles hall "public spaces where an audience will really feel welcome, where it will not feel overawed but will still feel they are entering a special place." His concern is for the total environment, both in terms of ample accommodations for the musicians and in terms of ancillary activities for the audience: good restaurants, book and record shops, and perhaps a place to display works of art. "What I hope we will get is not a monument to the artistic vision of an architect," says Fleischman, "but a structure whose outside will reflect what's going on inside. That's why Berlin is so effective. I hope that we will really generate an active, vital kind of arts and urban activity."

A special effort has been made on the part of the planners to include the musicians in every phase of the decision making process. Says Richard Koshalek,

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"There's a general feeling that if we produce a work of architecture that the musicians who are going to perform there respect, they'll do even better."

Two Philharmonic musicians — Barry Gold and Byron Peebles — accompanied the group on its tour of concert halls. Another player, Philharmonic concertmaster Sidney Weiss, was chosen by the orchestra to represent them on the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee. "It is to the committee's credit," says Weiss, "that it has made every effort to get input from the orchestra and from every source that will be affected by working in the new hall. Not only the orchestra, but also input from the stagehands as far as loading dock facilities, stage facilities and so forth."

Weiss, along with other members of the orchestra and Ernest Fleischmann, is especially pleased to know that the new hall will be reserved exclusively for use by the Philharmonic as intended by Mrs. Disney. "The Los Angeles Philharmonic is a very great orchestra," Weiss says, "certainly one of the greatest orchestras in America and in the world. And it is very important for a first-class orchestra to have a hall of their own that they can rehearse and perform in regularly."

Disney Hall committee member and Vice Chairman of the Music Center Board of Governors Joanne Kozberg confirms that the multi-purpose Dorothy Chandler Pavilion is overburdened, currently housing 420 performances a year and still unable to accommodate all groups seeking to appear at the Music Center. "When companies would tour through the world," says Kozberg, "we really couldn't accommodate them. We were beginning to lose a number of major touring companies who couldn't get into the Music Center for months."

Says Music Center Operating Company Chairman and Disney Hall committee member Charles Schneider, "The Pavilion must currently house symphonic presentations, chamber music presentations, ballet, dance, musical theatre, occasionally legitimate theatre and opera. The demands are such that we simply don't have the time to bring all of these disciplines in as often as we'd like. The new single-purpose symphony hall will

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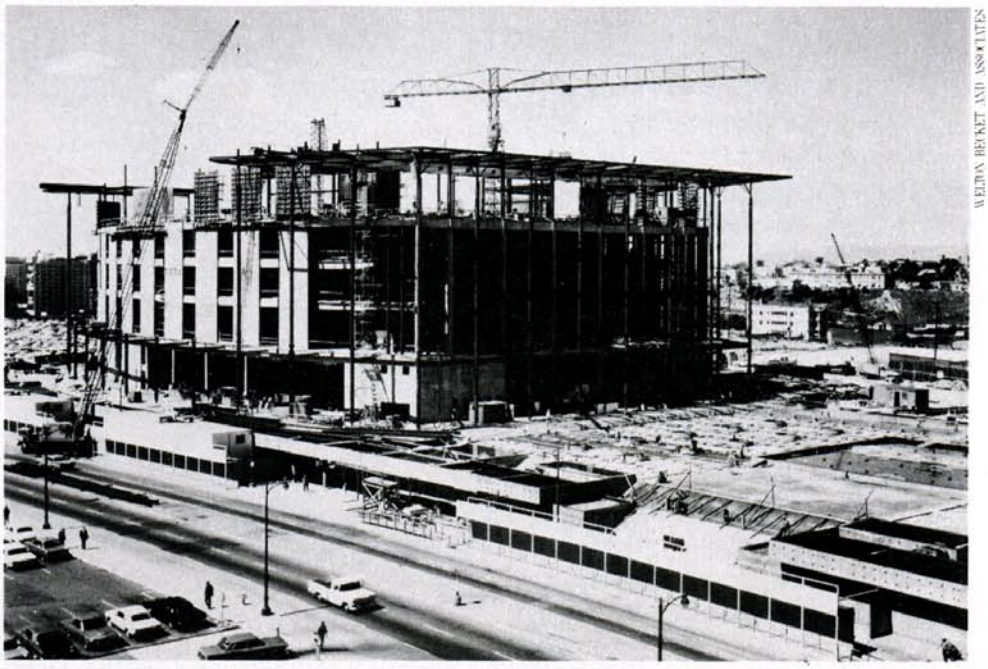
The Disney Hall planners are looking for a work of genius, and that is exactly what they'll need to make the project work. Just building a successful concert hall is an imposing challenge in itself. If there was anything like a consensus among those who traveled to concert halls around the world, it was that with the major exception of the Berlin Philharmonie (built in 1962), contemporary concert halls are largely unsuccessful. "Acoustics is a very inexact science," Ernest Fleischmann observes. "It's more an art, almost like black magic." Sidney Weiss agrees: "There's a great element of luck about acoustics. It is, in the last analysis, really a mystery. If it weren't, they wouldn't be building so many bad halls all over the world. It's an art, and all art has an element of mystery about it." The Disney Hall Committee is presently searching for an acoustician in the same way it has gone about finding an architect.

In addition to the difficulties of building a world-class concert hall, the architect of Disney Hall faces the challenge of integrating his new building with the existing Music Center complex. How will Lot K be tied into the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and the plaza behind it? And how will the whole of the expanded Music Center relate to the surrounding district? It is hoped that Disney Hall will somehow unify the area comprising the Music Center, MOCA, California Plaza, Wells Fargo Center, the public library, the condo and apartment complexes in Bunker Hill and even the development of Lots Q and W2 that will later take place.

Next month, we will see how each of the four extraordinary architects who are finalists in the Walt Disney Concert Hall design competition have dealt with these problems, and discover which one will be given the prestigious job of solving them in concrete terms. In the meantime, the Disneys, the Music Center, the Philharmonic, Los Angeles County and Fred Nicholas have every reason to be optimistic.

In his book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, the late architecture critic Reyner Banham mused, "It would be nice if Pershing Square was still full of old men playing chess (or whatever it was) and if the Angel's Flight funicular still climbed between those narrow streets of picturesquely crumbling rooming-houses, but it could only happen nowadays under some such auspices as produced . . . Disneyland."

We may very well get our Bunker Hill back, and under just those auspices that years ago created Southern California's first Magic Kingdom. □



WELTON BECKET AND ASSOCIATES

For long-time Music Center supporters, the building of Disney Hall may recall this scene of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion under construction in 1963.