

THE FACILITATOR

by

NANCY WINTERS

He is a man with the sensitivity of an artist and a vision of what a community should be. Working behind the scenes, Frederick M. Nicholas, at 72, has been one of the little-known architects of California culture, quietly becoming the mover and shaker of the arts community.

Nicholas is an attorney specializing in real estate law and President of the Hapsmith Company, shopping center developers with successful centers and other commercial projects California-wide. He often can be found poring over plans for the permanent new home of a non-profit organization while his steady influence can be felt throughout the public interest community. He holds or has held fiduciary positions with the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation, Pitzer College, the American Federation of the Arts, the American Arts Alliance, the Music Center of Los Angeles County, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and the California Economic Development Commission. "He loves the diversity of life," says Ira Yellin, an attorney/real estate developer and a protege, as cited in a Los Angeles Daily Journal article in 1990. Nicholas is also Chairman of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Downtown Los Angeles and for the Music Center, where he is chairing the Walt Disney Concert Hall - the new home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra - for which the groundbreaking ceremonies

are taking place on December 10. In addition to all of this, Nicholas has played prominent roles in the development of new buildings for the Los Angeles Dance Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and he founded Public Counsel in 1970. Today, Public Counsel is the largest pro bono law firm in the United States, originally supported solely by the Beverly Hills Bar Association, now also by the Los Angeles County Bar Association. State Bar President Alan I. Rothenberg said of Nicholas in 1990, upon honoring Nicholas with the firm's first ever Founder's Award, "If the rest of us in this room could in our lifetimes accomplish a mere fraction...and give back to our community a mere fraction of what he has accomplished...this would be the best community on the face of the earth."

Nicholas's road to success has been long and not without its rocky places. He says his wife, Joan, and his three children are crucial to the balance of his life. He has an unassuming attitude and doesn't take himself too seriously; when I met with him, his tie had been loosened and his shirt-collar button unhooked. "I try to divorce my ego from my function. I have achieved things, particularly in the public sector, because I have not tried to push myself or my own ego. I've tried to enhance the process and not compete with people". He also insists that "If someone works 30 or 40 years and doesn't have his integrity, he has nothing."

Fred Nicholas was born in New York in 1920 and moved with his family to Los Angeles when he was 13. He attended the USC School of Journalism and, at 20, was the first person from his class to be drafted. He went into the Army and World War II

before his senior year. He returned after 5 years to USC to finish and graduated at 26 in 1947. While working for the Los Angeles Daily Times and Mirror, he was given the opportunity to go to Honolulu and work for the United Press (before it was United Press International). Part of Nicholas's work as a labor correspondent was to cover the labor strife and he spent much of his time following Harry Bridges, the Chief of the Longshoreman's Union, over the islands. His fascinating two years at the United Press ended when, at 29, he enrolled at the University of Chicago School of Law. When he heard that, since he had fought in World War II and was subject to recall in the Korean War, he could take the Bar Exam while still in law school, he transferred to USC School of Law and had passed the Bar when he graduated at 32. If he could have it to do again? He would have stayed at the University of Chicago, where he was excited and stimulated intellectually and wanted to graduate with his U of C class, and simply taken the Bar after graduation. At the time, he felt as though he had to make up the five years he had missed by being in the Army.

"He is one of those people who achieved his success not by clawing and kicking his way, but with dedication, hard work, and unparalleled integrity," says Judy Hanauer, a Beverly Hills real estate broker who is a longtime friend and business associate of Nicholas's. "His taste rivals that of any art collector worldwide." Does Nicholas agree with her statement? In his own words, "Yes".

Earlier this year, Nicholas's Los Angeles residence appeared in a film about John Lautner and his works, shown at the Museum

of Contemporary Art. Lautner is an architect who is so coveted and esoteric that his pattern is to design only one house every 4 to 5 years. Nicholas's particular Lautner is a piece of art in and of itself. It is by coincidence alone, however, that the film was shown at the Downtown Los Angeles museum of which Nicholas is Chairman.

"Without [Nicholas], there might have been no building at all [to house the MOCA collection], said Richard Koshalek, museum director for MOCA. "And," Koshalek continued, "based on his past contributions and what is promised for the future, Fred's legacy will be one of quality". Perhaps Nicholas has become known for his negotiating skills because of the battles he fought and eventually won as overseer of the MOCA building project. In 1981, Nicholas was not yet involved with the museum but he knew Max Palevsky, then head of the architectural committee to develop MOCA. Japanese architect Arata Isozaki had recently been hired and the conflicts had begun. There were, first of all, cultural differences between Isozaki and the Americans involved with the museum regarding "the American way of architecture, which is more open to overt confrontation than Japanese architectural practice". Palevsky has been cited as being forceful, abrasive and knowledgeable about architecture, knowing and saying what he likes and wants with conviction. Palevsky and the committee also clashed with Isozaki about timeliness, budget, and the size and shape of the architect's early schemes. Palevsky, who knew Fred Nicholas as a lawyer, an art collector and a specialist in real estate development, asked Nicholas to join the committee and help

expedite the design. Nicholas joined hesitatingly, afraid of conflict with Palevsky: "I might see things in there that he might not agree with. He said that wasn't a problem". Once immersed, Nicholas saw quite a lot of conflict, resulting in Palevsky's quitting the committee. Nicholas ended up working the arrangements out with Isozaki, discovering along the way the biggest problem thus far: Palevsky had not given Isozaki the right to design; he had told Isozaki what he had wanted without allowing the architect the freedom to express his creativity and develop his work. Nicholas first gave Isozaki creative license, then provided the non-English-speaking designer with a staff and consultants to make Isozaki's first job in the United States easier. The Los Angeles Times quoted Isozaki as saying about Nicholas: "I think he is a very good coordinator. I find he is a very nice person [and] I find him good to work with". The responsibility was tremendous. If Nicholas succeeded, Los Angeles would have a museum of contemporary art second to few. Should he fail, Los Angeles would have, at best, a nice museum. As Nicholas took on a more and more active role in the museum's development, he became crucial to the museum's potential - and now proven - success. It was during MOCA's development that Nicholas anointed himself "The Facilitator". "I was able to get [Isozaki] to work and get the board to relax and give him some freedom. I have negotiated things throughout my business life and I do have skill in [negotiating], so that's why we were able to get MOCA put together successfully."

When he is not looking at the blueprints that lean against the wall of his beautiful corner office (with leather couches,

polished wood tables, an overflowing bookshelf along one entire wall, and, naturally, primitive and modern art). Nicholas is a fund-raiser and staunch supporter of the Democratic Party. He supported Leo McCarthy in McCarthy's race for Senator - a race that was lost to Barbara Boxer. McCarthy has now notified friends in the Clinton camp that he would like a top job in the Commerce, Interior or Labor Department. Does Nicholas think President-Elect Clinton will appoint him? "I don't know how well-connected McCarthy is with the Clinton camp," says Nicholas honestly. McCarthy is, however, close to Mickey Kantor, one of Clinton's campaign managers who is also involved with Clinton's transition team. "Leo McCarthy is a very able, competent guy," muses Nicholas. "I'd like to see him in Washington because I supported him for Senator and he didn't make it," he adds with a laugh.

Nicholas's most recent project is the new wing of the Music Center of Los Angeles, the Walt Disney Concert Hall, future 2,350-seat home to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. As Chairman of the Concert Hall Committee, Nicholas lead an odyssey among the great halls of Europe and Japan in order to envision the "greatest hall in the world" for Los Angeles County.

It was 1987 when Walt Disney's widow, Lillian, gave a gift of \$50 million to the Music Center. At that time, a lawyer named Dan Frost was Chairman of the Music Center and his partner was Ron Gother, Mrs. Disney's attorney. They wanted someone who would organize and shepherd the process of designing and building a hall and they went to Fred Nicholas. "They asked me if I would

consider heading the project and I said I would be interested provided I knew from Mrs. Disney what it was she wanted and whether or not she was committed to a world-class architect and world-class design". Nicholas met with Mrs. Disney and asked her specifics, including whether she had pre-chosen an architect and whether she had specific designs in which she was interested. "She said no", continues Nicholas. "Her only requirements were great acoustics and gardens." Nicholas then, with Mrs. Disney's go-ahead, organized a world-wide competition in search of the ideal architect. He formed a committee of ten, including himself, made up of members of the Disney family, members of the Philharmonic, and members of the Music Center and its Operations Committee. Nine of the ten knew nothing about architecture.

"I knew I had to educate them," said Nicholas without a trace of ego or conceit, "and we started a series of trips." The committee and their spouses toured all of the major concert halls - nineteen in all - in Europe and heard concerts in London, Nottingham, Wales, Berlin, the Hague, Cardiff, Paris, Cologne and Frankfurt. Later they repeated the process - sitting in different seats and changing seats with each other often during each performance, touring the backstage and orchestras in each hall, meeting with directors, architects and musicians, and searching for the best acoustical design - in Japan. They filled out questionnaires in each city and when they returned, they discovered that the two halls they enjoyed the most were the Berlin Philharmonic and the Concertgeboun in Amsterdam. When those two were voted down to only one - the Berlin Philharmonic emerged triumphant - the international competition began and an

acoustician from Paris was hired. It was suggested by Nicholas to the Parisian that the acoustics of the Disney Concert Hall should be along the lines of Berlin. Of eighty submissions, the committee interviewed fifty architects, a number which was then narrowed to twenty, then to four. The competition was finally awarded to Frank Gehry, of Frank Gehry and Associates, Inc. in Venice, California, by a unanimous vote by the committee for his design based upon the Berlin Hall. "It was far and away the best of the designs. But I must say," Nicholas smiles in retrospect, "that if we had had just a competition without getting the people involved with knowing something about music and architecture, they would never have picked Frank Gehry. So I think the competition was helped by having the tours and seeing the different architecture". Nicholas has been interested in architecture for as long as he can remember and his dealing with MOCA and Arata Isozaki was an extremely positive experience for him. Because of the rapport that Nicholas felt with Isozaki, the Disney committee hired Namura Nagata, a Japanese acoustician; the partnership between Gehry and Nagata has been beyond successful. On Thursday, December 10, the Music Center is breaking ground for the Walt Disney Concert Hall, complete with a mini-concert performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. "I can truthfully say," declared Nicholas, "that in regard to the Disney project, if I hadn't been there, on top of it for the last five years, it would never have come about. I believe that. I was like a maestro conducting an orchestra."

"It's important to give something back to the community." I

asked Fred to describe himself in three words and he jokingly began, "Old, bald...." He then grew serious, thought for a minute and said truthfully, "Motivated, dedicated, artistic".

In his second-floor office in a discreet Beverly Hills building, Fred Nicholas continues to encompass those qualities, continues to give something back to the community, and continues to change and enhance the face and the culture of Los Angeles.