

L.A. concert hall part of revitalization

**By Gail Schiller
ASSOCIATED PRESS**

LOS ANGELES - With a dramatic, curved steel exterior that looks more like sculpture than architecture, and acoustics it is hoped will be among the best in the world, the Walt Disney Concert Hall is being counted on to provide much more than a new home for the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

When the \$274-million, Frank Gehry-designed building opens this fall, local government officials and business leaders are banking on it becoming an immediate icon.

They see it as an edifice that can set apart the downtown skyline, revitalize an aging urban area and at the same time move Los Angeles toward becoming a cultural hub that is the rival of New York or any other city.

"It's going to be a great boost to classical music, to the Philharmonic, to Los Angeles, to downtown and to the region," said Zev Yaroslavsky, who has been involved in the project since his election to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 1994.

The Board of Supervisors donated the 3.6-acre downtown site on which the concert hall sits, but it was a joint effort by business and government that brought the project to fruition.

Billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad and his family, for example, donated \$10 million. Broad, who is co-chairman of the Grand Avenue Committee that is spearheading a downtown redevelopment effort, sees the hall as being the centerpiece of a revitalization that will bring restaurants, shops, offices, residences and perhaps even a smaller version of New York City's Central Park to the area.

"We will wind up with a small Central Park or Boston Commons" where people from all over the city could come together to celebrate New Year's Eve, the Fourth of July and other holidays, Broad said.

The open area would result from restoring and expanding a 16-acre park that would run from City Hall to the adjacent Los Angeles County Music Center.

The hall, meanwhile, is expected to become the city's signature building, pulling in tourists who simply want a look at the latest work by Gehry, arguably the most acclaimed architect of his time.

"It's just spectacular," said Mayor James Hahn. "It's a one-of-a-kind building, and I think people just love the excitement of it. I think it will be a real landmark for our city."

Not that the odd-looking building by Gehry, who takes a modern artist's approach to architecture, is everyone's cup of tea.

"It's controversial. A lot of people aren't going to like it ... but architecturally, I think it's a masterpiece both outside and inside," said Yaroslavsky.

Gehry designed the wavy, steel exterior of the 293,000-square-foot concert hall to look like a ship with its

sail at full mast, saying he wanted to create the feeling of traveling along a ceremonial barge to music.

The centerpiece of the concert hall, a 2,265-seat auditorium with natural lighting in which the audience surrounds the orchestra, was designed to look and feel like the hull of a ship. The auditorium's curved wood ceiling is also meant to evoke the feeling of billowing sails.

In contrast to the harsh steel exterior, the auditorium and many of the smaller performance areas in the four-story concert hall are filled with the warmth of wood on floors, walls and ceilings, an important element, experts say, in achieving high-quality acoustics.

Indeed, Gehry has said that no matter how impressive the building's appearance, he will not have succeeded if the sound isn't the best it can be when resident maestro Esa-Pekka Salonen steps to the podium to lead the Philharmonic.

"It is my dream that when Esa-Pekka raises his baton to conduct the first notes on opening night, the building will be his instrument, that he will be at the same time conducting the inside and outside of the building itself in a wonderful symphony," Gehry said recently.

In designing the hall and planning for the installation of a stunning 10,000-pipe organ in its main auditorium, Gehry collaborated with world renowned acoustic experts Yasuhisa Toyota and Minoru Nagata. The organ debut is scheduled one year after the hall's opening in October.

The Philharmonic is planning to present more than 150 concerts a year at the Disney Hall beginning with the 2003-2004 season.

At the Disney Hall, much more than music will be on display.

Many areas reflect a second theme of gardens, in deference to Walt Disney's widow, Lillian, who initiated the project in 1987 with a \$50 million donation in honor of her late husband's love of symphonic music. She died in 1997 at 98.

The Disney family's contribution, including accumulated interest, eventually swelled to \$100 million, and the Walt Disney Co. gave \$25 million more. The state of California donated \$15 million to the project, and numerous other corporate donors made seven-figure contributions.

The carpet throughout the hall, also designed by Gehry, is called "Lillian" and depicts a garden in full bloom. The same pattern is found on all the seats in the main auditorium. The donor's room is designed as an inverted tulip, and wood pillars throughout the main lobby area are sculpted to depict large tree trunks.

A 38,000-square-foot rooftop garden, billed as an urban park, contains trees from different neighborhoods of Los Angeles. A porcelain fountain in the shape of a rose -- Lillian Disney's favorite flower -- is its centerpiece.

Government officials and business leaders are counting on it all to help resurrect an area of downtown that for decades has rolled up its sidewalks after dark and on weekends. The area is beginning to show signs of life, however.

The imposing Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, home to the Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese, was completed just blocks away last year. About a mile away is the downtown Staples Center, which opened in 1999 and whose tenants include basketball's Los Angeles Lakers and Clippers and hockey's Los Angeles Kings.

All of those structures, and others, are seen as key to bringing people into the area.

About 41,000 people live downtown, and that number is expected to rise to 60,000 by 2004, according to developer James Thomas, chief executive of Thomas Properties Group. He said 9,000 residential units are either under construction or in the planning stages.

Contra Costa Times and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.bayarea.com>