

DISNEYWHIRLED

Despite controversy, Gehry's Disney Concert Hall marks its 10th anniversary as a stainless-steel glimpse into the Frank O. regime

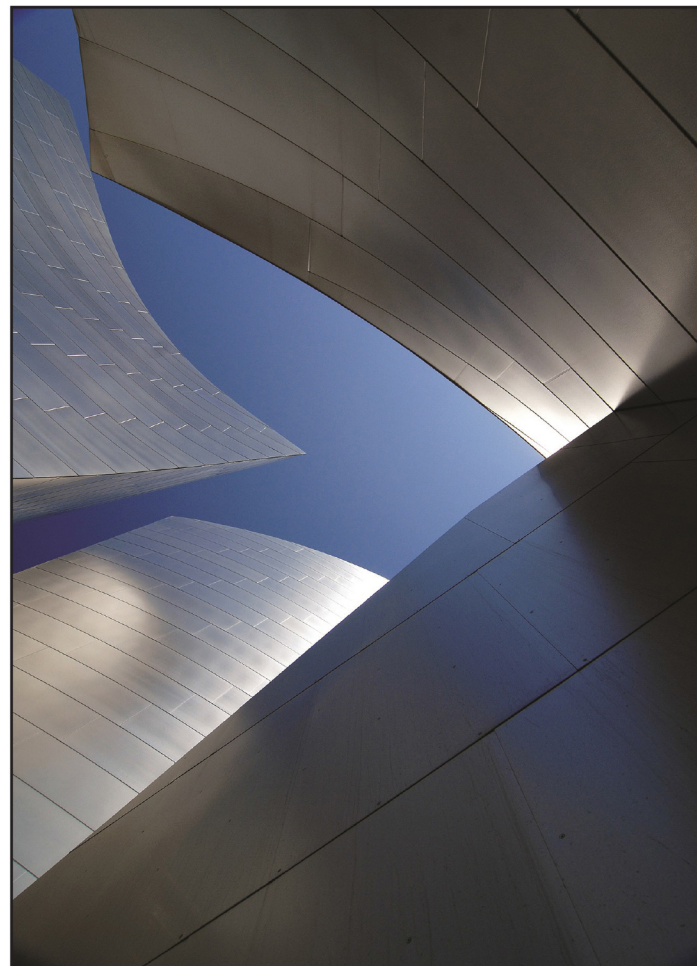


Story and Photos by James Gaffney

The first time I stood across the street to better admire the Disney Concert Hall in downtown L.A., I thought, “Um, not bad for a guy that started out in the 1940s driving a delivery truck while studying at Los Angeles City College. The swirling, stainless-steel creation of the world’s most important (and certainly most famous) modern-day architect, Frank O. Gehry, rises from the street as a singular vision of postmodernism that seems to defy not only the imagination but gravity itself. Everywhere the eye looks, riveted panels of quilted metal walls crest like ocean waves, undulating without ever moving. Upon closer inspection, as one walks the passageways that wend inside the exterior shell, the imagination is drawn to the sculptural vignettes of towering walls, leaning like sharply articulated tree trunks and twisting like sails in the wind, all dancing overhead beneath the sky. The color of the metal can actually seem to change — from pewter to bluish to matte gray — depending on the quality and intensity of ambient sunlight. All of which can leave the impression of being dwarfed and enveloped by a turbulent, stainless-steel

forest from a whimsical, seemingly LSD-drenched future known only to the designer.

Gehry, of course, would go on to distinguish himself as a budding designer at the USC School of Architecture and, later, the Harvard School of Design. But little could have prepared the world for the sheer revolutionary style that has made the Pritzker Prize-winning architect such a household name. Consider: When juxtaposed against its immediately surrounding neighbors — a dreary collection of high-rise office buildings that have kept



downtown L.A. hostage to modernist architecture for most of the 20th century — the Disney Concert Hall, opened in 2003, is a welcomed visual orgasm of deliciously spine-tingling contours and shapes. And, yet, Gehry’s \$274 million, 394,000-square-foot gewgaw, home to the Los Angeles Philharmonic, blends into the cityscape as though it were born at the intersection of South Grand Avenue and Hope Street. It also bares noting that the acoustics inside this shimmering, floating metal flower of exquisite flow, have been ranked as among the finest in any performance hall anywhere. (FYI: the concert hall’s Gehry-designed wooden pipe organ — 6,125 pipes in all, ranging from a few inches to 32 feet tall — is the largest in the world.)

Cynics might argue the Disney Concert Hall doesn’t really break any new ground Gehry-wise. Granted, anyone who has visited what are some of his

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best-known creations, including the “Fred and Ginger” building in Prague (named for the fact the structure looks like two people dancing), the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, or the Experience Music Project in Seattle, has indeed witnessed Gehry’s wildly curvilinear, idiosyncratic aesthetic and unorthodox vision. Others, perhaps, would suggest the Disney Concert Hall is merely the fitting next-step evolution for a genius hell-bent on designing controlled chaos in a passive and unimaginative world accustomed to one-size-fits-all architecture. Either way, the concert hall is not without its flaws. The sun’s reflection in the mirror-like panels used for the Founders Room and Children’s Amphitheater, for instance, jacked nearby street surface temperatures to 140 degrees while causing cooling bills for residents in adjacent condos to skyrocket. (Complaints finally forced Gehry to dull the offending panels by lightly sanding them.)

Like most artforms, each new genre of architecture at its best is rooted in rebellion against the old regime. For contemporary leaders of postmodernism like Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind, their revolt was against the formal, starched-shirt approach they witnessed in the school of modernist architecture that preceded them. But, as might be predicted, there has in recent years surfaced a new rebellion of sorts — specifically against its poster child, Frank Gehry. And it has not been kind. But, according to the London-based UK tabloid *The Guardian*, when someone began selling T-shirts emblazoned with the phrase, “Fuck Frank Gehry,” the 82-year-old architect actually bought a few.

Say what you will but the Santa Monica, Calif.-based *starchitect* has spent a good part of his career creating buildings that dance — in the wind, with the trees, against the sky, and, most importantly, against all odds and criticisms. And he has done so with a surprising degree of humility. Years ago when I interviewed Gehry in Biloxi, Miss., for the unveiling of his design for the city’s new Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art, dedicated to George Ohr, the “mad hatter” of Mississippi Gulf Coast pottery, which Gehry adored for his sculptural expressionism, I asked the world renowned designer what is was like to be, well, *him*. Gehry peered over his glasses and smiled. “I just work,” he said.

