

Something to build on

Camarillo man spent five years overseeing construction of Frank Gehry's Los Angeles landmark, the Walt Disney Concert Hall; now, he's running his own business

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Sean Leonard listened attentively as a headhunter on the phone described the position she was trying to fill, but he was dubious about being interviewed for the job.

His caller wouldn't identify her client, but Leonard, then a project manager with one of Southern California's biggest construction companies, quickly figured it out.

A high-profile downtown Los Angeles project that had been repeatedly started and stopped could only be the Music Center's much-delayed Walt Disney Concert Hall. Trouble with financing and political infighting caused the project to languish for most of 10 years. It made Leonard and others doubt it would ever be built. Leonard told the headhunter he preferred building structures with economical right angles and straight lines as opposed to the hall's soaring, sculptured curves.

"I didn't even like the design. I didn't," he said. "All I knew about it was what I read in the papers, and initially ... someone with one of the newspapers described it as looking like several shoe boxes that were left out in the rain. I think I was influenced by those kinds of reviews."

Despite his misgivings, Leonard agreed to an interview after that call in 1998. After doing about 30 days of independent research and talking with several members of the Music Center's

board, the Camarillo resident, who today heads his own construction-management firm that is overseeing Camarillo's \$27 million library, did a 180.

He was convinced the Walt Disney Concert Hall was a viable project that would be built. More importantly, he could see the beauty in its design and realized he had nearly passed up the opportunity of his life.

For the next five years, Leonard was senior vice president of project management for Walt Disney Concert Hall Inc., a nonprofit corporation formed to finance and build the gleaming structure that has become an internationally acclaimed landmark since its 2003 opening.

Covered in stainless steel that reflects the sun in some places with enough intensity to produce heat, the complex encompasses 360,000 square feet on top of 1 million square feet of parking in a six-level underground garage.

Renowned architect

Designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry, the Walt Disney Concert Hall stands on 3.6 acres at First Street and Grand Avenue. It is the Music Center's fourth venue and home to the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and Los Angeles Master Chorale.

Planning for construction began in 1987 with a \$50 million donation from Walt Disney's widow, Lillian, who died six years before the complex was completed. In all, the project cost nearly \$355 million, all of it donated.

Gehry, architect of numerous critically acclaimed projects like the titanium-shrouded Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, won the Disney Hall design competition in the early 1990s.

Critics have called his concept an architectural masterpiece — an imposing, seemingly sculpted building whose many skylights and wide windows make maximum use of natural light while offering unparalleled access. And because acoustical consultants determined the materials, shapes and thickness of its ceilings and inside walls, audiences hear the sound of music almost perfectly.

With a lot of help, Leonard's job was seeing that all work got done correctly, on time and on budget.

He headed a six-member team that oversaw the complex development process, including analyzing every aspect of the design, negotiating prices, determining the validity of construction bids, setting up schedules and approving completed work.

The parking structure had been built by Los Angeles County in the early 1990s, but Leonard's team spent 18 months planning, negotiating and coordinating before above-ground construction began. With some 600 workers for about 150 contractors, sub-contractors and vendors on site, construction took more than three years. A friend who worked closely with him said Leonard was the right man for a very complex job.

"The man has a full understanding of all the business aspects of construction plus a strong understanding of physical, three-dimensional construction. It's a very rare combination," said Arnold "Ry" Pressman of Sherman Oaks, who was the hall's senior vice president for construction management.

"Basically, PMs that are out there now are just business people who have some technical issues and that's about all. They wait for their architects and their contractors to explain things to them."

Unconventional design

With a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and a master's degree in business administration, Leonard has been managing construction projects since the early 1980s.

The Disney job was his most expensive, but it was not the biggest. That title belongs to the Wilshire Courtyard, a six-story Miracle Mile complex covering a city block with 2 million square feet split evenly between office space and parking.

Still, the Disney project had unusual challenges, many presented by Gehry's unconventional design.

"This building has a lot of curve shapes, and there are some, I'll call them lumps, that were on the city's property," he said. "There might be an exterior wall ... that's intruding over the property line."

Essentially, he had to get city bureaucrats to approve easements allowing parts of a building on county property to extend into air space over city-owned land. A legal description of air space with enough information for a surveyor to locate it precisely was required.

To do that, Leonard and members of Gehry's staff used aerospace-industry software that could spin three-dimensional images of any part of the building for viewing from any angle. Because construction people are used to working with two-dimensional drawings, city officials and some contractors initially had trouble understanding the information, Leonard said.

"In this building, we had more information than the contractors were probably used to, but it was all in a computer program," he said. "We could show them a 3-D coordinate of any piece of the building to eight decimal places. ... We could give them precise answers, say, this area encroaches at an elevation of 17.635421 feet."

But while the hall's architecture was acclaimed from the outset, Leonard, Gehry and others running the project worried about the acoustics. The project had hired a master Japanese acoustician and a well-regarded San Francisco associate to advise designers. Often they would suggest the shape and density of inside surfaces or adding, say, 6 inches of concrete or plaster to one surface to improve the sound.

The trouble was, they would not know if the ideas worked until the inside — including installation of 2,265 seats — was complete. The tension was palpable, Leonard said, when the acoustics were tested on a summer afternoon just three months before the hall opened.

Martin Chalifour, the Philharmonic's concert master and first violinist, played for the master acoustician, Gehry and Esa-Pekka Salonen, the Philharmonic's conductor-music director. Everyone else was told to leave.

"They went in there before it was finished, but the seats were in place, the surfaces were in place, and it was their first indication," Leonard said.

"They just did this very quietly, just the three of them in there. They were four rows back. The report is that Frank and Esa-Pekka Salonen actually held hands and were teary-eyed it sounded so great."

The acoustics are so good, Leonard boasted, that audience members can pick one musician and discern the sound of that instrument from the rest of the orchestra. They also easily balance the music of the hall's \$2.7 million pipe organ, a huge instrument with 6,134 pipes ranging from pencil to telephone-pole size. Made by a German company, it was installed over three months amid the construction.

Logistical issues

There were myriad logistical issues. As the project neared completion, Leonard fielded increasing requests to film on site. A few were granted, but many, including one from producers of a TV commercial who wanted to suspend a car above the construction, were turned down.

Some problems, like the much-publicized heat generated by the building's polished stainless steel exterior, were not anticipated. It raised the ire of nearby condominium residents.

"Glare? What glare?" Leonard asked with a laugh. "Because of the geometry, you have concave surfaces and convex surfaces. There are some hot spots as you walk down the street where you feel some heat ... We tried different things ... persuading the condominium owners to put a film over their glass, but that didn't do the trick."

They also considered covering larger areas of the building, but instead ordered workers to apply a sandpaper-like angel-hair brush finish by hand to some sections. That quieted the controversy, but pedestrians across the street still occasionally report feeling heat.

Though the concert auditorium is the complex's focus, there are two additional components: The 17,000-square-foot Los Angeles Philharmonic Center, housing office space, board and conference rooms and a reception center for the orchestra; and the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater, featuring a 226-seat theater and an art gallery. It was named for Walt Disney's brother and business partner, Roy, and his wife and is an extension of CalArts in Santa Clarita, a multidisciplinary arts school founded by the Disney brothers.

Leonard's Disney Hall contract expired at the end of 2003, two months after its opening. He launched his own comprehensive project-management business, S.L. Leonard & Associates, out of his Camarillo home early last year.

The Disney project's high profile attracted numerous clients. Among the projects he is coordinating are a \$10 million expansion at the University of Judaism in Bel Air and a 44-unit affordable housing complex in Santa Monica. Leonard's company also recently

completed work on the City of Hope's six-story, \$100 million replacement medical center in Duarte.

A Camarillo resident since 1989, Leonard was hired last year as project manager for the city's 65,000-square-foot library under construction at 4101 Las Posas Road. The building will be four times larger than the city's current library and is scheduled to be completed next summer.

Instead of asking companies to bid on building the entire project, Leonard won city approval to divide construction up into about 20 packages that contractors vied for separately. Called multiprime delivery, he said it is a more efficient cost-control system that often avoids delays.

"When you're bidding it to just general contractors and you come in over budget, you have two options: You vote to build it, find the money and fund the difference; or you cancel the whole project and rebid it and you lose many months," Leonard said. "With a multiprime delivery, you're splitting the packages. If one or two are out of sync, we could rebid those and keep the rest of the bids and keep moving."

His system has locked-in costs for concrete, steel, wood and other construction materials for which prices are rising, he said. So far, the library project is 1.7 percent over budget, well within the city's 10 percent contingency. Some other publicly financed projects are running 25 percent over budget because of materials price increases, Leonard said.

He is sure the Walt Disney Concert Hall will be the trophy piece of his career. Engineers often fail to see all of what an architect envisions, but Leonard said he realized what Gehry really saw as the project took shape.

"It's a spectacular building," he said. "It's got stainless steel. It's got curved surfaces. It's not like anything else down there. And the inside of it is also spectacular. A lot of people don't even get to see that."