

Empathy as perception in downtown Los Angeles and the Walt Disney Concert Hall as an act of architecture

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The present article suggests that empathy is not the sole preserve of human beings, and that a city or buildings can also relate with empathy to people and the environment. The Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by the architect Frank O. Gehry in downtown Los Angeles, is taken as primary embodiment of such empathy. The article is divided into three sections, framed by a brief introduction and conclusion. The first section deals with the historical context of Los Angeles, with special focus on the downtown area, and the way in which the multicultural population has given the city a heterogeneous culture, reflected in its architecture. In the middle section, dealing with how the city relates with empathy to its inhabitants, parallels are drawn with Pretoria and its downtown quarter, providing suggestions for introducing new life, meaning and activities to the Pretoria inner city as a strategy for counteracting xenophobia, and improving relationships and engendering respect among divergent cultures. The third section explores the Walt Disney Concert Hall as an act of architecture and work of art, where the macro and micro design have led to an intelligent strategy of hybridization and inclusiveness. Gehry has in his ingenious design of the theatre complex managed to draw many differences together, allowing various cultures and art forms to meet, thus giving empathy a new meaning.

Key words: Los Angeles, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Gehry, empathy, architecture, acoustics, organ, Pretoria, xenophobia.

Empatie as gewaarwording in die middestad van Los Angeles en die Walt Disney-Konsertgebou as 'n uitdrukking van argitektuur

Die artikel voer aan dat empatie nie slegs 'n emosie of ingesteldheid is wat aan menslike wesens toegeskryf kan word nie, maar dat 'n stad of geboue ook empatie kan uitoefen op mense en die omgewing. Die Walt Disney Konsertgebou ontwerp deur die argitek Frank O. Gehry in die middestad van Los Angeles kan beskou word as 'n verteenwoordigende voorbeeld van so 'n tipe empatie. Hierdie artikel is in drie afdelings verdeel, omraam deur 'n kort inleiding en 'n afsluiting. Die eerste afdeling behandel Los Angeles in historiese verband met as spesiale fokuspunt die middestadgedeelte, asook hoe die multikulturele bevolkingsamestelling aan die stad 'n heterogene kulturele lewe verskaf het, wat ook verbeeld word in sy argitektuur. In die middelgedeelte word aangetoon hoe die stad empatie uitoefen op sy inwoners. Parallele word uitgewys met Pretoria en sy middestad en voorstelle word aan die hand gedoen met betrekking tot die invoering van nuwe lewe, betekenis en aktiwiteite in die binnestad as 'n wyse om xenofobie te bekamp, asook om verhoudings en respek tussen uiteenlopende kulturele bevolkingsamestellings te bevorder. Die derde afdeling behandel die Walt Disney Konsertgebou as 'n argitekturele uitdrukking en as 'n kunswerk, waar die makro- en mikro-ontwerp gelei het tot 'n intelligente strategie van hibridisering en insluitendheid. Gehry het in sy vernuftige ontwerp van die teaterkompleks daarin geslaag om baie van die inherente verskille saam te vat. Daardeur het hy toegelaat dat verskillende kultuurlewe en kunsvorme 'n aanknopingspunt kon vind om sodoende op 'n alternatiewe wyse aan empatie betekenis te verskaf.

Sleutelwoorde: Los Angeles, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Gehry, empatie, argitektuur, akoestiek, orrel, Pretoria, xenofobie.

Empathy is usually viewed as a human attribute. However, it is not inconceivable that the central business district of a city could relate with empathy to the population working and living there, and that a building could relate with empathy to the environment in which it is situated. The architectural qualities and features of a construction are always seen in the context of the area in which it has been erected. Objects do become drawn into an empathetic relationship with receptive human beings in their vicinity, and under those circumstances do not remain lifeless and cold. A completed building often distances itself from its creator, and embarks on a creative existence of its own. This is ideally what should happen, and a development of this nature is largely dependent on the talent and geniality of the architect.

In downtown Los Angeles the Walt Disney Concert Hall is perched on the edge of the ridge on Bunker Hill, with the central business district, and its skyscrapers, stretching to the side. It is part building, part concert hall and part free-form sculpture, comprising an office wing, built from white limestone, several outdoor gardens, two open-air amphitheatres, and two buildings clad in a brushed or polished stainless steel skin, much of which is curved and

composed of convex and concave undulating surfaces.¹ The concert hall is one of the architectural masterpieces of Frank O. Gehry, and is in many ways similar to his design of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. The design of the Los Angeles theatre complex predates that of the Guggenheim Museum, but construction took place only after completion of the Bilbao project. Marked changes to and influences on the original design of the theatre complex are noticeable, clearly arising from knowledge and insights gained during the museum project.



Figure 1
Elevation of the Walt Disney Concert Hall with part of the skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles in the background. (Courtesy of Liao Yusheng)



Figure 2
Part of Walt Disney Concert Hall with the Music Center and its columns across the street. (Courtesy of Liao Yusheng)

During the course of this article the reader will gain historical information about the origins of Los Angeles and its development into a city and metropolis. The downtown area is the original business district, and still forms the central focus point of the city. Attention will be paid to how, with proper planning and architectural ingenuity, empathy was brought back to downtown Los Angeles. The diversity or cultural pluralism of the population has a profound influence on particular characteristics of a city. Parallels will be drawn with a city in South Africa with similar demographic features. The Walt Disney Concert Hall as a design of architectural legitimacy by Frank O. Gehry will be discussed in light of its empathetic relationship with the population and the environment. This will be used as a matrix for suggestions for reinvigorating the State Theatre complex in Pretoria as a means of introducing new life and meaning to the inner city of the capital. Particular attention will be paid to the role and purpose of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, and how its inner and outer architectural design acts as a pivotal link in the cultural corridor along Grand Avenue, between the older Music Center on the opposite corner and the Museum of Contemporary Art farther down across the street.² The project will be considered as an act of architecture that not only serves its purpose, but transcends it as a true work of art.



Figure 3
Frontal view of the main entrance. (Courtesy of Liao Yusheng)

Historical origins of Los Angeles

Many hundreds of years B.C.E. the coastal region of what is now California was occupied by the Tongva (or Gabrieleno) and Chumash Native American tribes, who lived as hunter-

gatherers.³ Their first introduction to Spanish, and thus western European, influence occurred on 2 August 1769 when Gaspar de Portola, along with Franciscan missionary Juan Crespi, reached the site of present-day Los Angeles. Through the founding of missions as part of the conquest of the New World, a marked European presence on the south-western coast of the North American continent was established. Within the boundaries of Los Angeles, two missions were founded: the Mission San Gabriel Arcangel, and the Mission San Fernando, which exists to this day. However, since the eighteenth century, in pursuit of a better life and in search of their possible new selves, many people from divergent social backgrounds and cultures have come to California and to Los Angeles in particular. Named after *Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Ángeles de Porciúncula*, the city has, since its inception as a *pueblo*, or settlement, in 1781, been home to a diversity of communities. In accordance with the 1769 recommendation of Juan Crespi, the site selected in 1777 by Governor Felipe de Neve for the first buildings was at the point at which the valley narrows, before the Los Angeles River loses itself in the plains to the south on the way to the sea. The easiest route for expansion of the original settlement was roughly north and south along the river, and expansion did indeed follow that trajectory. Nonetheless, the customary United States style of urban planning and expansion, block by block in all directions, eventually linked the grid of streets with the adjoining hill-lands.⁴ The city soon spread out to the hills to the east and west, and by the 1880s construction was already taking place on the tops of these hills.

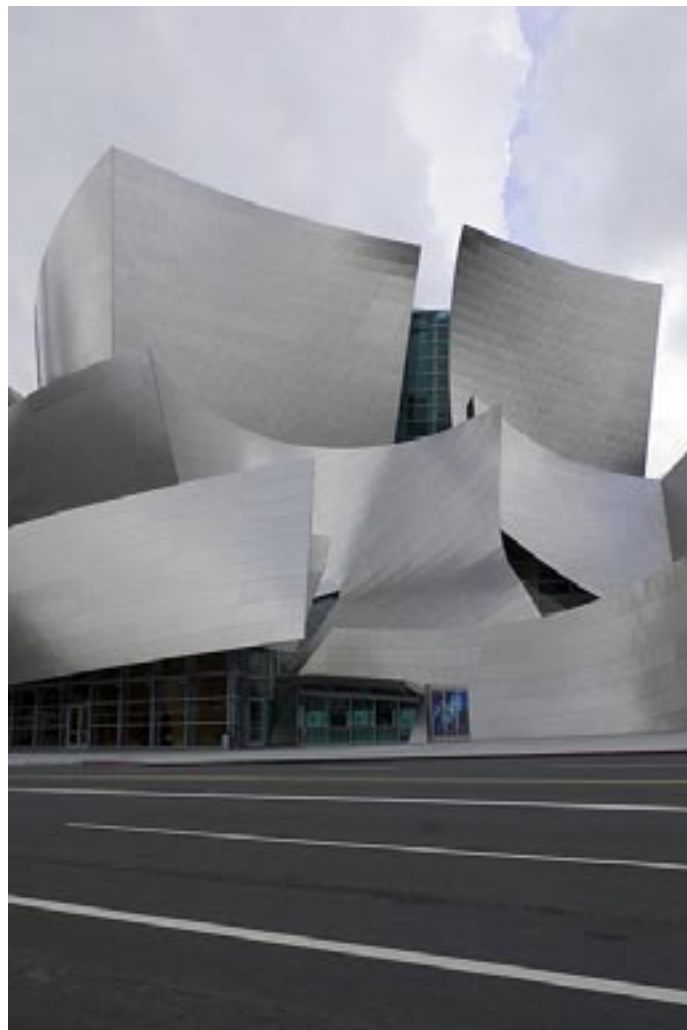


Figure 4
Frontal view including part of Grand Avenue linking
The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) further down the street
(Courtesy of Liao Yusheng)

At Bunker Hill the original high-density development of the hillside was part of a primarily pedestrian concept, but represented only a small segment within a city whose conception of itself was neither figuratively nor physically pedestrian.⁵ Whatever glass and steel monuments may have been built downtown, the essence of Los Angeles, its true identifying characteristic, is mobility.⁶ The United States is synonymous with the automobile, and in many ways this is also true of the bigger South African cities. In Los Angeles people think of space in terms of time, time in terms of routes, and of their vehicles as natural extensions of themselves.⁷ From the mid-1920s onwards, the motor car age tended to confirm the going pattern. At present an intricate but very efficient network of highways criss-crosses this giant Angel City with its population of almost four million, making all parts of it equally accessible.

2005 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY DATA

HOUSEHOLD RELATIONSHIP

	Number	Number	Number
Population	3,731,437		

GENDER FOR HOUSEHOLDS

	Number	Number	Number
Male	1,866,012	17,497,507	141,274,964
Female	1,865,425	17,781,261	147,103,173

AGE FOR HOUSEHOLDS

	Number	Number	Number
17 or younger	1,000,092	9,655,142	73,131,688
18–24	378,361	3,324,585	26,295,690
25–44	1,190,705	10,395,118	82,023,068
45–64	816,292	8,202,819	72,167,164
65+	345,987	3,701,104	34,760,527
Average age (years)	34.02	34.81	36.40

RACE AND ETHNICITY FOR HOUSEHOLDS

	Number	Number	Number
White alone	1,831,467	21,491,336	215,333,394
Black or African American alone	368,711	2,163,530	34,962,569
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	15,082	253,774	2,357,544
Asian alone	415,652	4,365,548	12,471,815
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	9,732	124,511	397,030
Some other race alone	1,002,868	5,784,073	17,298,601
Two or more races	87,925	1,095,996	5,557,184
Hispanic or Latino	1,824,373	12,523,379	41,870,703

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; ePodunk

Table 1

Estimate summary conducted in 2005 of the population per household of Los Angeles, California and the United States of America

The heterogeneous culture of Los Angeles, deriving from the multiple populations from which it originated, is reflected in the city's architecture. The author Charles Jencks has suggested the label hetero-architecture, and instead of referring to a city with these demographics as a metropolis, has offered his own term, heteropolis.⁸ (With South African cities that have developed and grown along similar lines after 1994 in mind, an even more streamlined and more relevant term in the African context would perhaps be hetropolis.) The latest population overview of 2005 shows that the 1214,885 square kilometre radius of the city of Los Angeles is occupied by whites, Hispanics and Latinos in almost equal numbers, these groups numbering more than 1,8 million each.⁹ At the turn of this century statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau show

that black or African American, and Asian persons have a percentage representation of 11,2 and 10,0% respectively, while American Indian and Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders each represent 0,8 and 0,2% of the total. 40,9 % of the population were foreign born persons, and 57,8% of the population above the age of 5 did not speak English at home.¹⁰ See table 1 for an estimate summary conducted in 2005 of the population by household of Los Angeles, California and the United States of America. These statistics show the huge influence that massive immigration from many parts of the world can have on the character and culture of a city, which eventually develops into a global megalopolis, or, if the term is preferred, heteropolis.

Ultimately culture is what makes life worth living; historically, culture refers to the particular values, customs, ideas and religious practices of a multicultural society. Too often the debate on multiculturalism has foundered because one side of the dialogue has been promoted at the expense of the other, and efforts to achieve political correctness have degenerated into caricature. Under these circumstances of complex cultures living and working together, the saving grace could be an agenda where hetero-architecture or the unifying force of the universal language of music can contribute to transcending or even contesting divisions of taste, thus overcoming institutional and linguistic barriers that can fracture contemporary culture.¹¹

Empathy and the city

I have for years had an abiding love for both Manhattan in New York and downtown Los Angeles. South African novelist J.M. Coetzee, winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize for literature, asks how one can fall in love with objects, such as a house or, in my case, a city consisting of many houses, when these cannot love you back. Are we using language more loosely, or has the definition of real love become lighter, less serious, adapting to the times?¹² Human-built cities do have a soul of their own, whether this takes the form of a pleasing visual experience and exciting atmosphere, or the opposite. This is associated with the empathy with which a city relates to its inhabitants and the love or lack of love it returns to humans.

During these relatively early times in the development of the new South Africa, many South African cities are experiencing identity crises. The downtown areas under the previous dispensation were based on models of Western cities, but are now evolving in the direction of African-style cities, with their specific features and problems, as a result of which businesses and offices are moving away to the suburbs. A reasonably balanced economy, a number of government offices, and some banks, museums and concert halls do not in themselves make a mature, whole inner city. Only a change in consciousness and political will towards radical inclusiveness will achieve that goal. Multiculturalism and the politics of difference ought to be reflected in the cultural scene, but also in the landscaping of a city, which is often left to the insight, foresight and discretion of town planners and architects.

In Pretoria, the capital of South Africa, many of the government offices, embassies, financial institutions and businesses have moved out to the suburbs, leaving the original downtown financial and administrative hub, with its high-rise buildings, vacant for other purposes. As in Los Angeles, during the long summer months the suburbs of Pretoria become green and leafy, the vegetation creating a living network running everywhere, connecting the individual urban centres, but also to some extent including the sub-economic housing schemes on the fringes of the city. In the middle-class or wealthy residential areas, in keeping with pre-apartheid values, there are few signs of a hetero-architecture indicative of possible adaptations to inclusive ethnic pluralism. Instead, designers have embraced non-African styles, as evidenced by the recent

proliferation of ‘Tuscan villas’. Little empathy can be derived from or devoted to these creations so out of context and so misplaced in their African environment.

In downtown Pretoria the previously exceptionally active State Theatre complex (always something of a rabbit warren) has been left largely abandoned, and is now only occasionally used for performances by visiting companies. Thus far the opportunity to create a lively cultural centre for the changed and varying public passing by daily has not been embraced. A few changes would make all the difference. The austere entrance area could, by means of a few hetero-architectural changes, be made more welcoming, hospitable and inviting to visitors. Following the example of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, a cultural corridor running along Church Street, which has wisely been closed to traffic and is being used as a pedestrian zone, could be used as a crucial link to the historical buildings of Sammy Marks Square farther down across the street. At present these buildings and open spaces beg to be used for more informal cultural activities, including art, music and theatre, and would be well suited to these purposes, giving more legitimacy and possible empathy to the historical Pretoria downtown quarter. However, the question of architectural and cultural legitimacy is different from political legitimacy, because it has a different time-scale and a greater emphasis on such non-democratic values as creativity and beauty.¹³ Obviously a single building or building complex cannot unite a heterogeneous culture, on its own bringing about ‘trans-nationalism’. It would be overly optimistic to expect art or architecture to make up for political, economic or social inadequacy, but it might nevertheless make sense to ask a public building to symbolize a credible public realm, to set a relevant direction or trend acting as its meaning.¹⁴



Figure 5

The organ façade in the concert hall designed by Frank O. Gehry in collaboration with the organ builders Manuel Rosales of Los Angeles and Glatter-Götz Orgelbau of Owingen, Germany. (Courtesy of Manuel Rosales)

Walt Disney Concert Hall as an act of architecture

An architect designs not only the exterior of a building, but also the interior, which, in the case of a concert hall, becomes exceptionally important, as acoustic and aesthetic qualities are vital

to the process of creating a successful and functional end product. Frank O. Gehry has come to be known as one of the initiators and leaders of the deconstructivist architectural movement. His work featured prominently in the 1988 Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art, together with that of other participants in this movement such as Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, and Coop-Himmelblau. The divergence in the work of the members of this group far exceeds its similarity, making their ability to disturb thinking about form perhaps the single most unifying factor among them, resulting in a novel view of architecture.¹⁵

Born in Toronto, Canada in 1929, Frank O. Gehry changed his last name from Goldberg, and has become an Angeleno, or inhabitant of Los Angeles. He could be considered a member of the L.A. School of Architects, although because of the individualism of its members this could perhaps more accurately be described as a non-School. All of its members see themselves as outsiders, on the margins, challenging the establishment with an informal and demanding hetero-architecture. This becomes understandable when one discovers that these architects, who make Los Angeles unique, are precisely the ones that the establishment refuses to hire for important commissions.¹⁶ This paradox pertained until 1988, when Gehry won the limited competition for the downtown Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Crowning Bunker Hill in downtown Los Angeles, the Walt Disney Concert Hall is an act of architecture, and can be described as a masterpiece bearing comparison with other multivalent buildings such as Le Corbusier's church in Ronchamp and John Utzon's Sydney Opera House. The central business district had previously been a no more than cluster of skyscrapers, with many of the office buildings designed by minor architects to fit in with the duller tastes of the corporate establishment, and hardly distinguishable from the downtown areas of other modern cities. This one architectural masterpiece has managed to bring about a magical transformation. As already mentioned, a single public building is not sufficient to bring together a heterogeneous culture and plural society, but as a work of hetero-architecture the concert hall has ingeniously been abstract enough not to prioritise any subculture. As the most visible focus point, the complex has managed to give meaning and relevance to downtown Los Angeles by means of an architecture that is friendly at heart, outgoing, open, accepting, as well as able to absorb other voices into a discourse, turning the ubiquitous deconstruction-reconstruction into an enjoyable language. Play and growth, suggestive of the many divergent metaphors of music, are reflected in the external open-architecture. (See photographs 1 to 5.) The Music Center across the street, embodying a more restrained experience of culture in the discipline of a temple, forms a stark contrast to, but also cleverly complements the Gehry creation.¹⁷ Within walking distance, farther down across Grand Avenue the cultural link is extended to Arata Isozaki's Museum of Contemporary Art, another very different architectural masterpiece. Life has been brought back to this environment through the additional introduction of hotels, good restaurants, apartments, and above all the creation of a secure milieu, which is still one of the biggest problems in downtown Pretoria.

In addition to engaging in a relationship of empathy with their environment, buildings equally have the capacity to exert a negative influence. On a macro scale this would be measured in terms of the resources that they use, but on a more reduced scale they could have a substantial impact on the micro climate of their immediate surroundings.

The undulating stainless steel skin of the Walt Disney Concert Hall is a case in point. This scintillating feature, which brings beauty and sparkle to the building, excites the viewer, but at the same time presents some difficulties. On hot, sunny days significant overheating and uncomfortable visual glare have been measured in surrounding buildings and on sidewalks, the latter with the potential to interfere with traffic safety. As the highly reflective polished stainless

steel surfaces were the primary cause of the thermal glare, solutions were sought to reduce the problem. Vibrational sanding followed by orbital sanding were found to be the best solution to solve the problem, without disturbing the aesthetic qualities of the feature unduly.¹⁸

In order to achieve successful results with regard to the interior (surely the most important element of any music theatre complex) the architect has to tread with exceptional care. The architect usually collaborates closely with an acoustician, and in the case of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Gehry worked closely with the Japanese firm Nagata Acoustics. The results of their co-operation were very successful, culminating in one of the most pleasing and satisfying acoustic experiences I have ever had in a concert hall anywhere in the world. Another major challenge for the architect was to accommodate 2350 concert goers in the auditorium, around a central orchestra in the front, allowing the listeners and spectators an unrestricted view and unique acoustic experience.

In Germany, the architect Hans Scharoun used ship imagery for the interior of the Berlin Philharmonic Hall, regarded as the expressionist concert hall of the 1960s, with ‘vineyards of people’ against slopes as a solution to the problem of distributing the audience. Gehry made use of the same principle in the Los Angeles design, but his nautical metaphor or internal ‘Noah’s Ark’ is much tighter and tauter. At the four corners the space billows out; backlighting, combined with the outward tilt of the walls, invites the wandering eye to explore the back and the ceiling, and draws it upwards and outwards. This suggestion of going beyond what can be seen is crucial to the design as a whole.¹⁹ Acoustically this principle, together with the downward curving ceiling of mechanically movable billowing wooden panels, has achieved miraculous results. Except for the upholstery of the seats, wood has been used for the majority of the inner construction and covering, since it remains the ideal acoustic material for this purpose, as it most closely approaches the reverberation and reflective sound-board qualities of some musical instruments. As with many other Gehry designs, this interior represents a very simple and sensible solution to a seemingly complex, fragmented geometry.²⁰

Frank Gehry has managed to put another unique personal stamp on the interior design of the main concert hall by designing the organ facade in collaboration with the Los Angeles-based organ builder, Manuel Rosales. The entire organ was completed as a joint project between Rosales and Glatter-Götz Orgelbau of Owingen, Germany.²¹ The facade, representing only 2% of the entire organ, has become a spectacular and striking feature, located as a centrepiece and focus point behind the orchestra podium. The pipes used for the exterior of the instrument create the impression of pickup sticks standing or having fallen in all directions, while the longest pipes of the 32 foot register made of reddish Douglas fir, have been curved inward. In total the organ case weighs 40 tons, having been mounted on an earthquake-proof skeletal steel frame. Its console has 5 keyboards, including the pedals, and serves the 6134 pipes. Even the facade of the Rieger organ in the Great Hall of the University of South Africa in Pretoria, which was progressive for its time, appears conservative by comparison. Although the design of the Walt Disney Concert Hall organ is out of the ordinary, all has been done in the best of taste, and splendidly blends in with the design of the interior and of the venue as a whole.

Conclusion

The concept of what a heterocultural city entails has over the past few decades undergone a metamorphosis relating to fundamental issues of our time, such as the formation of an ethnic identity and self-determination by its inhabiting communities. One of the pivotal clues to the successful and optimal functioning of a city, ideally radiating from the central downtown area, is the empathy with which it relates to the population within its boundaries. Sensitivity to ethnic

differences can evolve from xenophobic conflict into an opportunity for aesthetic, creative transformation. The ingenious reality and wonder of creativity, as the Walt Disney Concert Hall and so many other inventive, heterogeneous artefacts show, lies in making conflict lead not to destruction and loss of human life, but rather to an entirely changed situation that none of the conflicting parties could have imagined.²² An interweaving of world-views should take place, resulting in true peaceful negotiation among cultures in search of a politics of recognition.²³ This is especially true of Africa, where millions of people are on the move, fleeing persecution, seeking better opportunities, or escaping starvation. These nomads often arrive in a foreign country and environment, only to find themselves embroiled in fresh ethnic strife. In order to solve these problems, new sets of values and relationships need to be developed, and divergent cultures must then learn to adapt to and respect one another. Maturity in outlook is proved when these often conflicting differences begin to be reflected in cultural happenings, or even in more concrete forms, as can be noticed in the hetero-architecture of Los Angeles.

Through a remarkable and ingenious visionary act of architecture, Gehry has managed to draw many of these differences together in a building and venue where various cultures and art forms meet, and where empathy gains new meaning. The design and realization of the Walt Disney Concert Hall as a macro and micro structure has become an intelligent strategy of hybridization, a policy of radical inclusiveness, overcoming the prevalent tendency to regard matters only in terms of stark opposites. Creations such as this also manage to contest the image of a central monoculture based on old and often dated symbols of dominance such as classical columns, modern high-tech, overly ordered symmetries and centralized power structures.²⁴ Public space can thus be defined or redefined in a way that allows different people to enter into a fluid social situation where they feel safe, comfortable and at ease.

Notes

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