

A light touch

## **Disney Hall is aglow now at night. That's not as simple as it sounds.**

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It's twilight on an early winter night downtown, and in front of Walt Disney Concert Hall, a few Angelenos stroll by on their way to dinner. A scattering of visitors, seeing the building for the first time, stop to take in its undulating curves. An out-of-town architect raves about the striking use of disparate materials. Two young tourists from Thailand photograph each other.

Ask about Frank O. Gehry's hall, which has evolved from a long-delayed white elephant to an architectural landmark, and these Grand Avenue pedestrians may hail the graceful surfaces or complain about the way the building's interior and exterior don't seem to speak to each other.

But what most of them need pointed out to them is that the only reason they can see the hall tonight, to praise or bury it, is that a new lighting system, a year in the making, was switched on at the beginning of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's current season. That system has been making the building visible to nighttime commuters only since the end of daylight saving time in late October.

In short, people continue to argue about Disney Hall's daring architecture more than two years after its appearance, but the building's lighting already seems to most like common sense. Which perfectly fits the ambitions of James Schipper and Mark Flaisher — lighting designer and project manager, respectively, of the plan commissioned by the Music Center.

"What they basically asked us to do," Flaisher says, "was to illuminate the building for presence, so you could see it at night — and really no more than that."

Despite what might sound like a simple assignment, the idiosyncratic nature of Gehry's building, clad in more than 6,000 stainless steel panels, made the execution a challenge for the two men, both of whom work for Culver City-based Kinetic Lighting, which lights such events as movie premieres, fashion shows and corporate parties. (The firm previously did "theatrical lighting" for the hall's opening and its galas, which required a vastly more colorful, extroverted effect than the permanent scheme.)

"If it was simply a blank white-box building, it would have been much more straightforward," adds Schipper, who says the project required something akin to artistry.

"What I enjoy about it," he says, "is that when you walk down Grand Avenue, just as the architecture doesn't look the same from any one location, neither does the lighting. The highlights and shadows and different surfaces really come into play."

The pair's goal when choosing angles, intensities and color "temperatures" — light that seems white covers an enormous spectrum, from the very warmest to the very coolest — was to respect the building and its subtlety.

"We found that what everyone liked most was a color temperature that resembled moonlight," Flaisher says. Technically, that means lights set at about 4,000 degrees Kelvin — the standard measure of color temperature — or somewhere between a relatively warm indoor incandescent bulb (about 3,000 Kelvin) and relatively cool high noon (roughly 5,500 Kelvin).

Similarly, the electricity was kept relatively low, at 400 watts for each light. "If we went any higher, it would have lost some of the architectural detail," Flaisher says. "It would have looked like you were going to a stadium or something."

Limmy Park, an Angeleno showing off the building to some friends from upstate New York, is among those who approve. "They're not too strong," she says. "If they were too strong, the shape would be too strong too. It's very smooth."

That doesn't mean a mellow white light is always mellow or always white. In the early stages of the testing process, Flaisher and Schipper took a single light and projected it onto several different parts of the building, which is highly reflective of the ambient light in the area.

"There was this odd red glow coming from one of the panels," Schipper recalls. "We couldn't for the life of us figure out where it was coming from — until all of a sudden it changed into a green glow. It turned out to be a street light a few blocks away."

A few adjustments, and the lighting went back to being white.

As with any such project, restrictions were imposed from the beginning. No lights could be affixed to the hall itself or set on its grounds. What are called dark-sky government regulations, designed to keep the stars above visible, had to be observed. Neighbors who complained when the sunlight refracted off the hall's exterior virtually microwaved their condos and offices could not be hit with excessive glare.

The solution was to perch lights on five existing lampposts across Grand Avenue from the hall and to put fixtures on the roof of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion to shine across 1st Street. This combination of floodlights and spotlights, Flaisher says, was about balancing aesthetics with function.

For most observers, the balance seems to have worked; some even speculate that the greater illumination on the surrounding sidewalks could be good for downtown's on-again, off-again street life. Times music critic Mark Swed has gone on record as a detractor (he wrote in a concert review of "banal lighting that diminishes the steel's sensuality"), and Gehry, who mused in an interview many years ago that metal buildings are tricky to light, has not returned Times calls for comment.

There is one person, though, who spends a lot of time at Disney Hall and doesn't buy the talk about understatement and balance.

"I think if they lighted the whole building, it would be much nicer," says Sean Eskandar, a Disney Hall parking valet. He points to the way, as the building rises, the light fades, leaving the top of the uppermost metal panels dark.

"It's silver — it would shine."