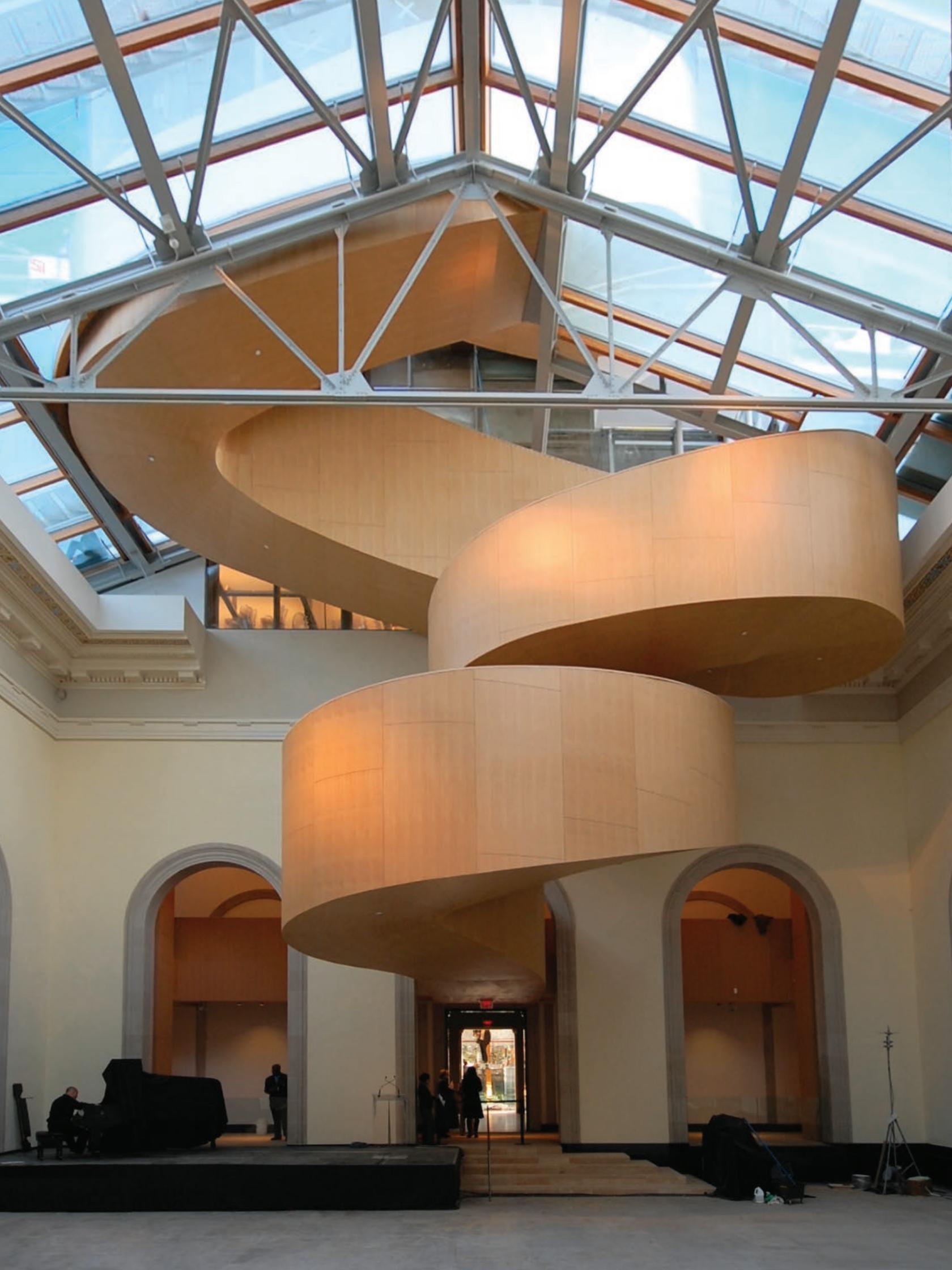


# The Voice of London

A proposed Frank Gehry-designed concert hall in Wimbledon, south-west London, offers an opportunity to leave a cultural legacy for the 21st century.

by Ben Morton Wright

For Bernard Arnault, chairman and CEO of LVMH Group, Frank Gehry's astonishing sail-like, glass structure for the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris is 'a dream come true', as he writes in his preface to a book on the story of the building. "Because he is one of the great architects of our time," Arnault says, "I knew that Frank Gehry would rise to this challenge and create a project that was emblematic of the architecture of the 21st century." The rest is history. Now one of the great iconic cultural buildings in the world, it attracts huge visitor numbers.





Clockwise From Top: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao © Sydney Pollack. Walt Disney Concert Hall, Process Model © Gehry Partners. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao © Gehry Partners. Frank Gehry designing the King Street Project 2014 © Gehry Partners. The Walt Disney Concert Hall © Gehry Partners



Opening soon will be another Gehry building, the Luma Tower in Van Gogh's city of Arles. It is the 'dream' of art collector and founder of the Luma Foundation Maja Hoffmann, who funded the building completely herself. For her, the thrill is about creativity. She is quoted in the Financial Times as saying: "I'm so much more interested in seeing work take shape than acquiring something already made. I didn't want to do just a museum. I took the liberty of using my money to do something I really believe in."

The Luma Tower will join the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles; the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain; the Weisman Art Museum, Minnesota; and the Dr Chau Chak Business School in Sydney, Australia. All were designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning Los Angeles-based architect: all were made possible by large-scale philanthropic gifts; all have become famous iconic works of architecture; and all are known by the name of the major philanthropic donor, or the business they represent.

Now, as Gehry turns 90 years of age, a new project is on the table and seeking a philanthropic backer. What could be the architect's 'swansong', Gehry has drawn up designs for a concert hall for London, in Wimbledon.

The vision is for a state-of-the-art, acoustically superb 1,250-seat main concert hall, and 350-seat second space to serve music of all genres, to welcome the world's great performing artists to be heard at their best. Gehry has already committed to the project, having produced outline plans and models for the Wimbledon Hall. "Concert-hall projects are the most exciting for me... I love the people, I love the challenge of it... I love music more almost than life itself. Having someone come to me with a concert-hall project, my eyes light up. I'm in!" he enthuses.

The construction cost has been put at around £65 million. A site has been found: the Hartfield Road car park in Wimbledon town centre, next to another shopping complex that a property company is hoping to redevelop.

Gehry says the location of Wimbledon is very important. "Because it's not in the centre of London there is an opportunity to be less precious, it has an opportunity to be more focussed on making music and make the relationship with people and the community, and making it a place that people even from further away will want to come to."

"If you make a place for music that people want to go to, the proper room, that they feel ... they will come from everywhere. There ain't many of those places," he adds. "We had no idea when we did [The Guggenheim Museum] Bilbao that it would bring in billions of euros to the community."

Anthony Wilkinson, a former LA-based film-maker who is driving the Wimbledon project, is in discussions with a developer. His vision is for the project to be integral to the area. "The building should hum throughout the day. I want it to be in the centre of the community."

Wilkinson has recruited dancer Darcey Bussell, who lives locally, and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen to be patrons of the project.

"To have a Frank Gehry-designed concert hall in Wimbledon would be a total transformation of London concert life. It would have a global effect. With these buildings the influence goes beyond the art form," says Salonen.

Wimbledon has been short of a major performance venue since the 1,500-seat town hall was sacrificed for a shopping mall more than 30 years ago. The local council promised to replace it, but it never materialised.

Wimbledon is known not only for the excellence of its tennis championships, but also as a thriving cultural suburb, with an International Music Festival attracting the finest artists from around the globe; a Bookfest; and a children's theatre.

Two of the major London orchestras are keen to have a performing residency at the Wimbledon Hall. As David Whelton, former CEO of the Philharmonia Orchestra, says: "London... badly needs a good-size hall with good acoustics. It has five major orchestras and 40 professional chamber orchestras but nowhere an audience can experience great music as it should be heard." ◇