

On the Work of Frank Gehry

Born to Be Wild

Los Angeles Vice might be a good name for Frank Gehry's brand of architecture. His work flouts so many conventions that at first sight it looks like sheer materialised malefaction. Using all the discipline's autonomous resources, Gehry tries to shake established architecture out of its slumber and offer it an invigorating cold shower, ultimately to its own good. First catharsis, and then... everything is allowed.

Frank Gehry was once likened to his fellow Californian Clint Eastwood as the notorious *Dirty Harry*, the cop who spurns all the stultifying legal niceties and meets crime head on with his Magnum 44.★ The powers that be at first want to strip him of his badge, but in the end they are visibly pleased with the lone combatant who takes the law into his own hands. At last, the city can breathe easy...

Perhaps the analogy looks a bit far fetched: Eastwood's neo-reactionary Harry seldom yields as much as a grudging smile, whereas Frank Gehry's playful avant-garde is closer to a Dionysian guffaw. But there is also an overriding similarity. In both cases, the nomadic wilfulness and provocative methods are widely enjoyed. And in both cases, too, this is really because whether intentionally or not, their wayward behaviour perpetuates a conventional morality.

The American Way

The media and the market have welcomed Gehry's work with open arms. His presence in the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art (1988), his invitation from Skidmore, Owings and Merrill to design offices and from Disney to design a concert hall, his commission for the American Centre in Paris, and his selection with Peter Eisenman as the official American representative at the 1991

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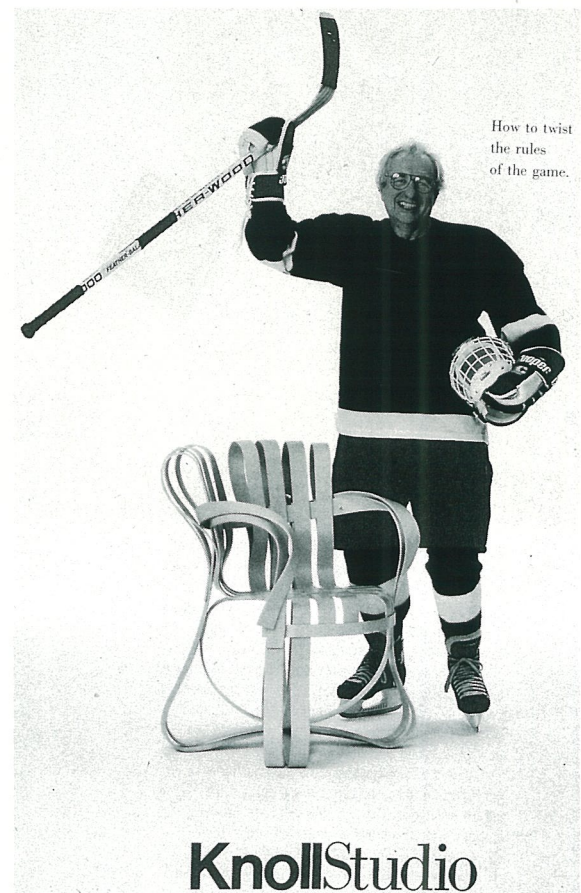
Gehry House, Santa Monica, 1978

My perception has always been to deal with the world the way it is and to deal with it optimistically. I don't try to change it because I know I can't.

Frank O. Gehry

I was very annoyed with Post-Modernism. In the early beginnings I felt that we were just starting to find a way to deal with the present so why did we have to go backwards? I got very angry and I said: 'Well, if we're gonna go backwards, we can go to fish which are 500 million years before man'. And I drew many pictures in my sketchbook of fish and pretty soon I started to become interested in the fish itself. Inevitably you start becoming interested in what you are drawing.

Frank O. Gehry



How to twist the rules of the game.

KnollStudio

Venice Biennial, all go to prove that Frank Gehry the architectural delinquent has made it to Parnassus.

So Gehry is not a real troublemaker, after all. Manoeuvring around the framework of personal expression with the legitimacy of artistic freedom to back him up, he bears no rancour against a world that is supposedly fragmented and without ideological *leitmotiv*. Gehry says yes to life. 'I think pluralism is wonderful. That is the American way. Individual expression. It hasn't hurt us in painting and sculpture. It hasn't hurt us in literature. And it won't hurt us in architecture (...) My perception has always been to deal with the world the way it is and to deal with it optimistically. I don't try to change it because I know I can't.'★

Gehry makes use of his autonomy primarily to help halt the decline of 'human' architecture. This places him in the much-followed tradition of Romanticism, which is forever attempting to unmask the darker side of the rationalist civilisation-offensive. But there is a further meaning to be read into his work, one that is specifically linked to recent social developments and is more their product than a form of resistance against them. Gehry's fragmentary architecture is a reflection of late capitalism, in that it releases the objects from their contextual obligations in a way that is reminiscent of the world-wide proliferation of identical Cultural Centres, McDonalds and Novotels.

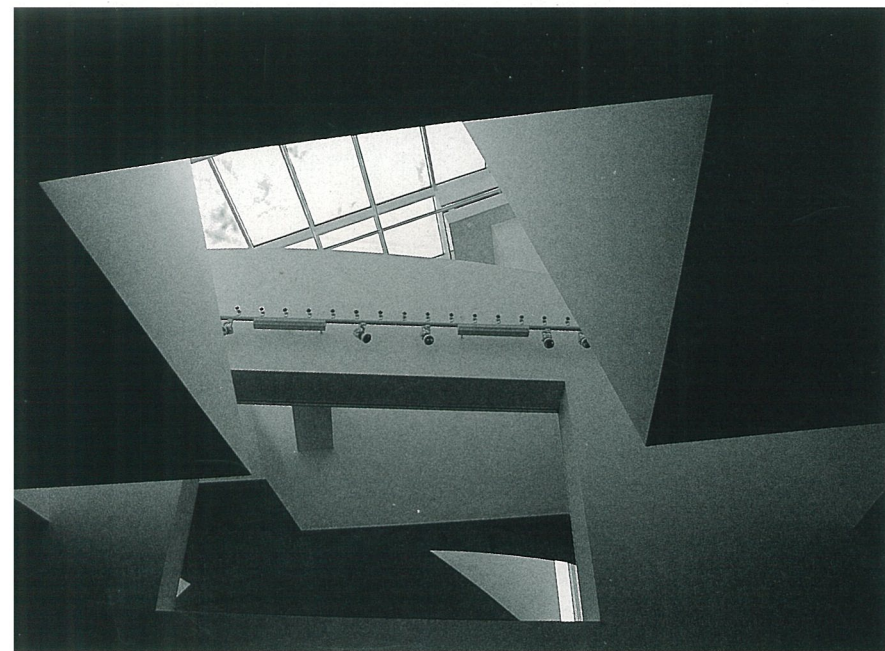
★ Frank Gehry, quoted in Cohn, David, 'I Sing the Light Electric', *El Croquis* 45 (1990), p. 124.

Perspective illusion and perspective contradiction are used throughout Gehry's house, and many of his other projects, to prevent the formation of an intellectual picture that might destroy the continual immediacy of perceptual shock. (...) Such illusions and contradictions force one to continually question the nature of what one sees, to alter the definition of reality, in the end, from the memory of a thing to the perception of that thing (...).

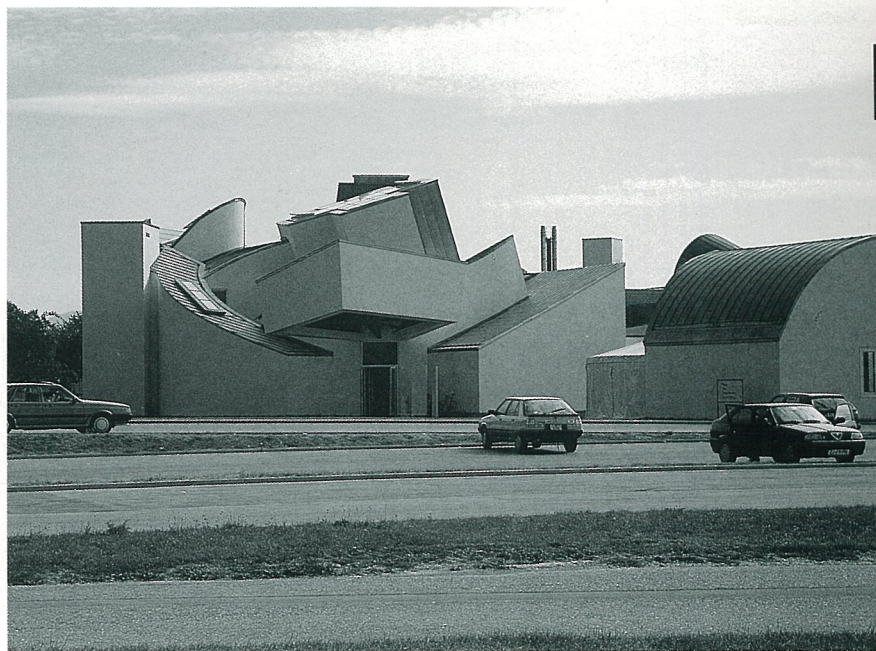
Gavin Macrae-Gibson

I had a funny notion that you could make architecture that you could bump into before you realised it was architecture.

Frank O. Gehry



Vitra Design Museum, Basel, 1989



A Different Kind of Objecthood

Frank Gehry's work is noted for its experimental quality and for its intuitive, seemingly temporary *mise-en-scène* of form and space. The result is what appears to be an arbitrary clutch of spaces that evade every syntactic convention. 'I wanted the building not to look like buildings. ★ I wanted to give them a different kind of objecthood.' In his own house in Santa Monica (1978), based on an existing dwelling in a characteristic local style, this effect is

★ Filler, Martin, *Eccentric Space*: Frank Gehry. In *Art in America*, June 1980, p.114.

created partly by the use of found materials. Through their raw incongruity, these elements set in train a process by which the existing structure is questioned and qualified. More recent work, such as the Vitra Museum (Weil am Rhein, 1989) and the Schnabel House (Brentwood, 1989), demonstrates a much more abstract approach which concentrates on the manipulation of discrete volumes. These buildings no longer look as though they are in a permanent state of simultaneous construction and disintegration, but take the form of discrete, gleaming objects, geometrical volumes and archetypal forms, clustered in what appears to be a state of confrontation.

Something that has formed a consistent thread through his work so far is the distinction between interior and exterior. The exterior is industrial and hard. From the outside, we see an explosion of forms, volumes and materials that scores a direct hit. Its Expressionist tectonics can scarcely represent a programme or a function. Attack is the best defence against over-pedantic interpretations. Only a voyeuristic gaze is tolerated. The order-seeking eye is forcefully denied, and this strongly stimulates the viewer's inquisitive search for secondary visual and spatial cues.

The interior, on the other hand, is more yielding. It is often reminiscent of the homey world of the do-it-yourself enthusiast. You are taken up in a centreless *hyperspace*, with a multiplicity of shifting horizons, perspective lines with countless intersections

and disappearing points. This space is continuous, offering a non-hierarchical succession of explicit banalities. There is no focus, no totalitarian composition. The emptiness and the absence of normative messages give this architecture the character of a soft envelopment that is not so much to be grasped by mental decoding as by sensory experience.

Adhocism as Opportunism

Gehry's preference for the everyday, the temporary and provisional does not stand in isolation, but relates to a more comprehensive view of culture. An important source of inspiration is the typical American vernacular, an apparently all-out democratic architecture that spurns every trace of Classicism and leans towards an ad hoc attitude of healthy opportunism. In the North American idiom of do-it-yourself, unfinished materials such as metal, plywood, glass, corrugated aluminium are knocked together to form a structure of adjoining wrapped, cubed or framed volumes. It is a pseudo-poverty technique that evinces a collective creativity. Thus, to Gehry, it is not the pop culture of Scott Brown's and Venturi's Las Vegas that characterises America, but the 'architecture without architects' – the formal vocabulary of the common man who relies on his own resourcefulness. As Sinatra sang, 'I did it my way'. 'Venturi', observes Gehry, 'is into storytelling. (...) I'm really interested in this hands-on thing, and not in telling stories.' The result is a highly plastic kind of architecture. The realities of everyday experience are placed first, with the result that the traditional space is annulled, surcharged, volatilised, sublimated and transformed until the spectator can no longer be sure where he is. Gehry's work often looks ad hoc and it stimulates ad hoc usage – with the proviso that it is the architect who orchestrates the ad-hocism for the user. Of course, by the use stage, it is not the intention that there should be new ad hoc inter-

The decontextualisation of objects of everyday use, their estrangement through alterations in scale, and the rejection of closed languages in favour of mechanisms that generate meaning through semantic distortion: these are some of the operative methods shared by Oldenburg, Cage or Gehry with the Surrealists. The intention of this line of thought, originating in the same seed as Modernism, is finally directed at the *elimination of culture*, understanding by culture all the moral, aesthetic or religious values that limit the freedom of judgement and action of the individual: a new naturalism takes the place of cultural determinations as the regulator of contemporary civilisation.

Alejandro Zaera Polo

Meanwhile, the single family dwelling may also be less characteristic of the projects of the Post-Modern: the grandeur of the palace or the villa is clearly increasingly inappropriate to an age which began with the 'death of the subject' in the first place. Nor is the nuclear family any specifically Post-Modern interest or concern. Here too, then, if we win, we may actually have lost; and the more original Gehry's buildings turns out to be, the less generalisable its features may be for Post-Modernism in general.

Fredric Jameson

What I like doing best is breaking down the project into as many separate parts as possible. So instead of a house being one thing, it's ten things. It allows the client more involvement, because you can say, 'well, I've got ten images now, that are going to compose your house. Those images can relate to all kinds of symbolic things, ideas if you've liked, bits and pieces of your life that you would like to recall (...)'. I think in terms of involving the client.

Frank O. Gehry

What is different about my house from the Schröder and other Rietveld houses, is that his houses demanded a kind of order (...). My house, on the contrary, is very comfortable. You can drop your coat and jacket. It is like an old shoe. So I am not such a purist.

Frank O. Gehry

ventions, since that would mar the integrity of the artist and his work. In practically all Gehry's projects, the programme components have an identity of their own; together, they form a close-knit community, a 'village of forms'. The construction as such is unrecognisable. If we note the technical structure and the symbolism in Gehry's work, it becomes clear that he is particularly interested in the cultural connotations of the materials and volumes. We encounter, at this point, subtler strategies than simply an iconography of populist debunking. They involve no less than the reinstatement of the myth of the everyday, an inversion of the process of civilisation of recent centuries and a firm rejection of the philosophical underpinning of that process.

Mythology

'The characteristic distinctive trait of mythic thought, like a *bricolage* over the practical plane, is that it builds structures not directly based on other structures, but rather using the residues and debris of phenomena; in English, odds and ends', wrote Levi-Strauss. And what architecture does this suggest more strongly than that of Frank Gehry? Gehry's *bricolage* is an attempt to undermine the representative value of architecture. His buildings are mythic inventions, or perhaps anti-myths of middle-class domestic culture. By appropriating and abstracting the com-
 ★ Quoted in Foster, Hal, *Recordings*, Seattle 1985, p.168.

mon-or-garden banality of the typical American family house, he defines a strategy of resistance. Ironically, he does it in the language of his 'opponent'. 'Myth is speech stolen and restored, not put exactly in its place', ★ as Roland Barthes said. He realised here that when a sign is transposed from the myth to the countermyth, it can function only as a signifier of criticism. From that point of view, Gehry's early designs are surely exemplary of a subtle form of semiotic resistance. The dilemma, however, is that the mass media have managed to neutralise this



Main Street Building, Venice, California, 1989

antimyth's provocative character with devastating effectiveness. This kind of resistance has become so popular that its critical potential has sunk to zero: the process of mythical appropriation ('stolen speech') decontextualises the original sign and reduces it to an isolated, neutralised gesture that simply crops up somewhere. Appropriation can have its brief critical validity, but it soon decays into a simple undermining of the collective repertoire for expression. The media have done to Gehry what Gehry did to the vernacular: they have appropriated his antimyth to the point of familiarity. This work ultimately plays into the hands of the original butt of criticism, middle-class banality. The new myth serves only as a surrogate for a lively, open debate and as a subtle alibi for the marketing of the image. Gehry may divide, but the client still rules. Recognising the mythical character of our daily surroundings, Gehry hopes, will enable us to experience them in a creative, spontaneous and anti-authoritarian way. His aim is not a defensive architecture of resistance, but an assertive architecture that punctures the armour of convention in search of a direct, sensory relation towards objects and people. But the fragmentary character of this architecture has lost its ambivalence: the only difference is that of form. What remains is a style, the style of the other. The myth makes way for the fetish.

Laughter as Strategy

Gehry seems to cock a snook at the established order in general, and the conventional choice of materials and typologies in particular. This, however, does not alter the fact that his architectural parody, while laughing in the face of the establishment, is meant in earnest. But the question is, what is the critical impact of such a burst of laughter on social reality? To answer this question, it is not enough just to examine Gehry's own development. The social significance of laughter has itself undergone important



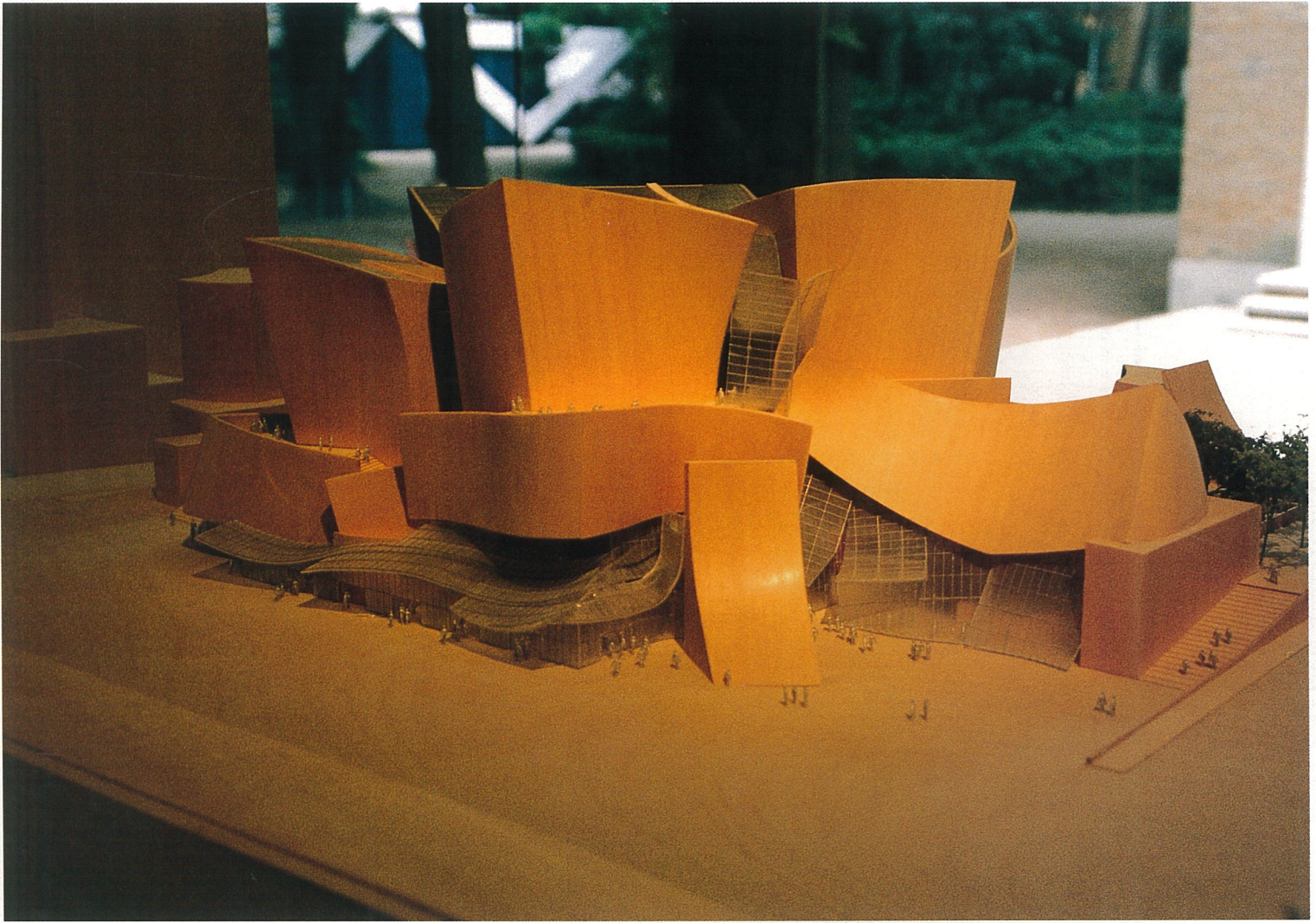
Pieter Breughel the Elder, *Battle between Carnival and Lent*, 1559

When I look at my work I always see it as related to the social structure. The whole idea of using cheap materials, although it was circumstantial because the buildings I was getting were low budget, was like pulling rabbits out of the hat in order to make something I thought was important. What energises me, what I am looking for when I do a building, I find in inexpensive materials, in not being precious, not being pretentious.

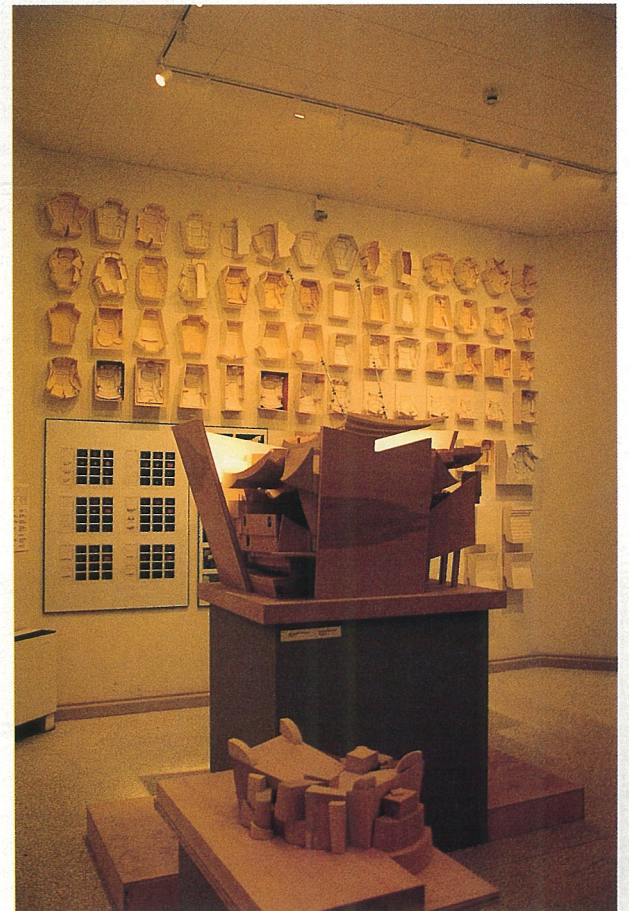
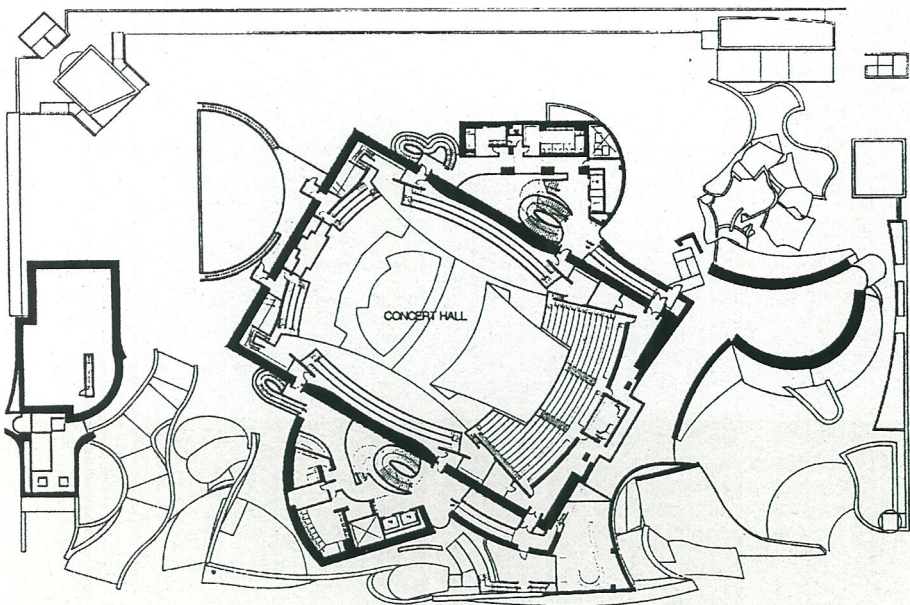
Frank O. Gehry

Such materials clearly 'connote', they annul the projected synthesis of matter and form of the great Modern buildings and they also inscribe what are clearly economic or infrastructural themes in this work, reminding us of the cost of housing and building, by extension of the speculation in land values: that constitutive seam between the economic organisation of society and the aesthetic production of its (spatial) art, which architecture must live more dramatically than any other fine arts (save perhaps film), but whose scars it bears more visibly even than film itself, which must necessarily repress and conceal its economic determinations.

Fredric Jameson



Walt Disney Concert Hall of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, 1995



Walt Disney Concert Hall, Venice Biennale presentation with preliminary studies, 1991

changes in the course of history. In medieval Europe, the serious world and the mirth-racked Land of Cockayne were seen as two complementary, coexistent realities. The feast of Carnival and fast of Lent belonged together, and neither was superior to the other. With the growth of a middle-class, however, the symbiotic balance between laughter and gravity had to make way for a dialectic in which laughter was increasingly marginalised. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Fool stood cap in hand before the Miser. The cultural domain of laughter had declined from parity to subordination and finally to a mere attribute of leisure, a spectator's privilege. Laughter no longer played a role in the ontogenesis of the world, nor was it a significant dimension of life. Seriousness was sacrosanct and laughter profane.

In the course of the nineteenth century, people rediscovered laughter (along with Carnival) but only as an anthropological phenomenon. It never reattained its liberating potency. Laughter, in social respects, had become a museum piece. Successive avant-garde movements, notable Dada, have attempted to resuscitate its subversive power, but the debasement of laughter to one of the minor phenomena of life has never been reversed.

This history of continual decline seems to repeat itself in Gehry's oeuvre. His early work, located amid the radical counter-culture of the sixties, ventured into as yet uncoded, unnormalised areas of architecture. But the territory, once conquered, had to be defended. The public, originally participants in the anarchistic process, became spectators entertained by a procession of droll forms – across the world, courtesy of the architectural press. It speaks for itself that laughter fades in the face of such massive technical reproduction. Finally all that remains is a faint grin and all Gehry provides is an aesthetic outlet valve for the powerful. Transgression? Forget it. In the , for instance, the anthropological functions – bed and three-piece suite (the sleeping and sitting areas) – remain unaffected as such, while they seem strange because of the anomalous space that surrounds them. We may be momentarily surprised at the imbalance within the context. But as long as this joke leaves the ideological identity of the function unimpaired, it is just a pretence at turning things on their head and actually underlines the status quo. It is laughter as repressive tolerance.

An excellent illustration of this process of degeneration from defiant laughter to the feeble resistance of the *bon mot* is to be found in the way Gehry handles the urban context when called upon to do so. In his California Aerospace Museum (1984) in Los Angeles, the transition to city space at the rear of the building is so abrupt that it is practically a clash between Carnival and Lent. And, as we know, Lent always comes out on top. The avant-gardist pose is absorbed by the unruffled social discipline.

From Undermining to Affirmation

Some of Gehry's works, in which the archetypal traditional house is interrogated in all kinds of ways, both as to function and to symbolism, generate experiences that reach further than what Fredric Jameson calls 'existential messiness' and 'psychic fragmentation'.[★] Admittedly these projects go along with the idea of a decentralised subject, but they also

[★] Jameson, Fredric. *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London 1991, p.117.

actively challenge the powers of judgement of the user and spectator. They stimulate us to take a definite standpoint in relation to the dubious order. Here Gehry generates something more than a promenade for the aesthetic tourist. It is rather a kind of rambling around in which the deliberate oddness deliberately undermines the premises of the programme. In Gehry's recent work, unfortunately, the aesthetic scenario is becoming increasingly dominant. The programme is now left for what it is and the function is unquestioned. What remains are frivolous follies whose autonomous identity is only skin deep. They offer no trace of an undermining effect, let alone a provocation to redefine the actual function. On top of that, the projects on behalf of clients with well-filled purses display a use of materials that is far removed from the original impoverishment technique. Polished prestige takes the place of the former temporary shack. And it is becoming increasingly easy to perceive the interior as an orthogonal, functional box. (Perhaps we will be spared this disappointment in the impending Walt Disney Concert Hall, since in this case the design grows from the programme: the context, the concert hall, the music and the audience.)

In Gehry's quest for heterogeneous images, the homogenising forces of the transnational economy have escaped the attention of his anarchistic 'savage thought'. This has placed him in a position that has all the hallmarks of schizophrenia. After all, he originally professed to a critical strategy that was meant to unmask the totalitarian tendencies within culture. But the fragmented image to which Gehry now resorts has come to serve as an excuse for the underlying homogenising processes. The interests behind those processes no longer need the traditional, recognisable image. They can easily transmute the rebellion of form into merchandise while remaining comfortably invisible themselves. *Go ahead, punk*, says Frank 'Dirty Harry' Gehry, and he sends his built rebellion out into the world. *Go ahead, punk*, the world echoes back with a guffaw. He who laughs last...

According to Adolf Loos, the architect ought to concentrate on the mood a building invokes. This mood has to be refined and precisely adapted to the function. Gehry's work, too, conveys a mood – not that of the institution being built, but of the institution of 'contemporary architecture'. In contrast to Loos, the mood no longer relates to the specific character of the function, but only to external processes that clearly overshadow spatial and functional particularity. It presents affirmatively the ostensible visual heterogeneity of the Post-Modern age. In this connection, the work might have been expected to achieve something more than, to quote Jameson, 'posing its own internal content as problem or dilemma (...) even representing itself as a problem in the first place (...)'.[★] Gehry's rebellion has created space. But that space is a territory of easily digested aesthetics. It's a bit like the tale of the hippie who became a stock market operator. Born to be wild – a box office success, particularly as a remake.

[★] Jameson, Fredric. *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London 1991, p.127.

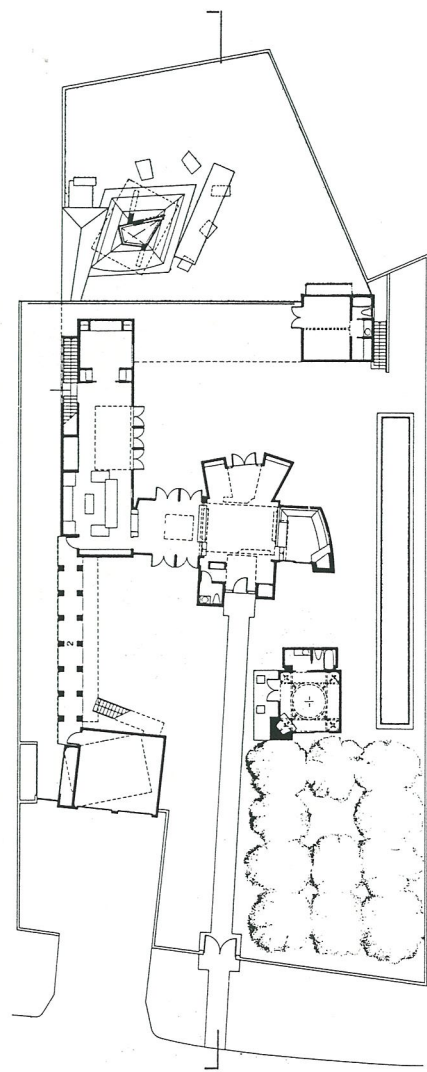
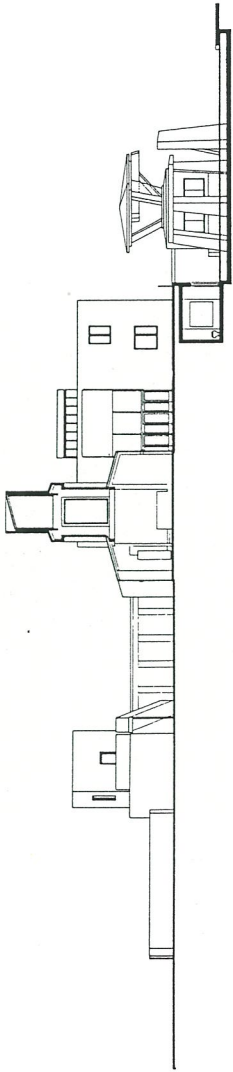
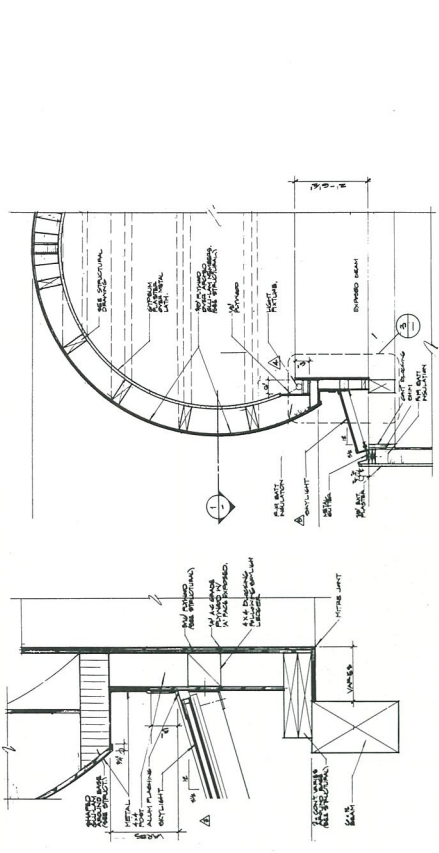
Certainly Gehry's work is perfectly expressive of the economic model in which it is inscribed, where chance has finally been integrated in the productive process, as a mechanism able to continuously modify the internal structure of the system. The lack of a final model makes the integration of chance necessary as a factor of controlled disequilibrium, permitting the continuous modification of the system, a consequence of the very essence of capitalist development. Post-Keynesian economic theory, based on models of disequilibrium developed dynamically within systems of decision making, is comparable only to the interpretative models of thermodynamic processes, based on unstable, dis-symmetrical systems, or to the most

recent developments in the theory of evolution, which compare processes of biological evolution to aleatoric mechanisms. California has become the paradigm of these processes that are characteristic of contemporaneity; it has the most exuberant and uncertain territory, together with the most prosperous and accelerated economy: a perfect materialisation of Deleuze and Guattari's proposition that the world of nature and that of capitalist production follow parallel paths.

Alejandro Zaera Polo

I'm always fascinated by theoretical positions because I'm like a voyeur: I love to try them on for size, like a suit, see what it feels like. My work is dumb, ordinary, typical architecture.

Frank O. Gehry



A number of years ago I was asked to design a tract house. I thought that one room buildings were so much more interesting because they eliminated all the baggage of function and all the things that one can hide behind. When you do one room there is nothing, just a roof and a space. Some of the best buildings in history are one-room buildings. I decided to make a house that would have separate pavilions. This is in California so you could go outside. It is a courtyard house and each piece would have a different character. I started to play with the site. To begin with I decided that what had to happen was that the grounds (only a 30.5 metre wide by 76.25 metre long) had to look open. So the living room became a pavilion in the middle. Because of a slight slope of the site at the back I cut the site and put a retaining wall and made a lower level with a garden for the master bedroom. The master bedroom and all of the dressing rooms and bathrooms together form a retaining wall that connects to

an additional terrace on the higher level. So there is a private garden at the back and one in the front, and then a private bedroom garden. In this way I sculpturally engaged the site. I wanted to make it look like a complete village. From each room you can look to other parts of your own house. In other words, you can create your own setting. The living room pavilion could be more open because it was set way back and there is a lot of privacy in the garden. When you walk into the bedroom, it almost feels like a boat sitting on a lake. It is very peaceful inside, and this Stonehenge, or whatever you will call it, creates a foreground, gives depth, creates a relationship with the landscape, creates privacy and gives the feeling that there is more happening, that there is more space. Inside the living room, it is very light and airy. The palm tree happened to be there by accident; it is not a John Baldessari painting. I claimed it. *Frank Gehry*



Your money talks :

Barbara Kruger, 'Your money talks', 1984

