

Frank Gehry 1989 Laureate Essay

On Awarding the Prize

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For Frank Gehry, like most architects, the art of building is a serious and searching business. He pursues his muse with love and frustration, with a sense of discovery in each undertaking, and an exceptional set of skills. At a time when retro reigns, he follows the modernist route of an original vision that postmodern traditionalists have tried so hard to give a bad name. He takes chances; he works close to the edge; he pushes boundaries beyond previous limits. There are times when he misses the mark, and times when the breakthrough achieved alters everyone else's vision as well. And he believes, as most architects do, that it is always the next project that will realize his aims and ideals his own.

For those that work this way—exploring levels of philosophy and practice that renew both the spirit and meaning of an ancient art—there is a quiet, but genuine joy that is the architect's secret elixir. Delight breaks through constantly; there are no gloomy Gehry buildings. One cannot think of anything he has done that doesn't make one smile. There are the fish, as pure sculpture or useful objects, ornamental or occupied, luminous or glistening, a piscine preoccupation that has led to lamps, anthropomorphic restaurants and skyscraper towers. There is the furniture of corrugated cardboard, a welcome old shoebox presence, ingratiatingly paper-pompous and comfortably user-friendly. There is wit, but no fashionable in-jokes or one-liners; these are light and lively designs and buildings that lift the spirit with revelations of how the seemingly ordinary can become extraordinary by acts of imagination that turn the known into new configurations that engage the mind and eye, that explore unexpected definitions of use and style. For Frank Gehry, these explorations characteristically take place at the point where architecture and sculpture meet in anxious and uneasy confrontation; this is the difficult, dangerous and uncharted area that he has made his own. That he has reconciled art and utility in a handsome, workable and intensely personal synthesis of form and function is his singular achievement. Gehry's work takes architecture a significant step farther as an evolving, challenging and creative art.

But there is more to Gehry's work than an adventurous spirit and original imagery. He combines building elements on a site in a way that is not only intriguingly sculptural but also innovatively contextual, whether it is the small gem of a law school at Loyola University in Los Angeles, an ambitious American cultural center in Paris, or a commercial complex that suddenly sparks a humdrum block. What may look like arbitrary, and to some, off-putting, abstract geometry outside reveals itself inside as a series of unusual and inviting relationships achieved through a thoughtful analysis of the program in terms of a multidimensional concept of sensuously orchestrated space.

If there are many facets to Gehry's work, there are also several Gehrys. There is the media Gehry as defined and promoted by the press: the casual, laid-back Californian whose work is touted as fashionably "pop" or "punk," who uses funny materials-chain link, exposed pipe, corrugated aluminum, utility-grade construction board—in a funky, easy, West Coast way. The image is part of the media-chic of Venice and the seductive charms of Santa Monica, the places he has made his habitat; this is nouveau California at the cutting-edge of style. It is the fashion to admire his offbeat spirit but to wonder how well the work will travel.

And then there is the real Frank Gehry, who is all and none of this: an admirer of the quirky, the accidental and the absurd, tuned in to the transient nature of much contemporary culture, while he is deeply involved, personally and professionally, with the world of serious art and artists. There is a closet elitist, if elitism is equated with a fierce admiration for the great works of art, architecture and urbanism. Above all, he is an obsessive perfectionist engaged in a ceaseless and demanding investigation of ways to unite expressive form and utilitarian function. He practices architecture in the most timeless and sophisticated sense, but with a very special spin.

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The spin is that Gehry's work goes to the heart of the art of our time, carrying the conceptual and technological achievements of modernism (as real and instructive as its much better-publicized failures) to the spectacularly enriched vision that characterizes the 1990s. He builds on the liberated "box" that Frank Lloyd Wright broke open forever, and the liberates spaces that Le Corbusier raised to luminous heights. ("Ronchamps humbles us all," he says.) Gehry continues and personalizes the 20th century tradition. This is a kind of architecture ultimately made possible and logical only by modern technologies and lifestyles. He pushes the modern miracle of radically redefined structure and space into sudden bursts of "pure" form—a surprising exterior stair, a sky-lit room that offers as much abstract art as illumination in its crowning construction.

In every case, the building is painstakingly programmed, and the program is the generator, or at least, the co-generator, of the solution. Sometimes the parts are broken down into the "single room" elements that Gehry favors for their plastic possibilities. But the choices are never arbitrary; he does not seek novelty or superficial effect. He does not make sculpture and stuff it with after-the-fact uses. Nor does he sheathe his unconventional forms and spaces in trompe l'oeil masonry to suggest a weight and solidity of construction that are not there. They are wrapped in skins of metal, plywood, composition board or glass for flexibility and appropriateness of scale, for transparency, opacity or reflection, for changes of color, climate and light. As an alchemist of sorts, constantly changing dross into something less than gold but much more than common aluminum, Gehry professes to be unsure of what is ugly and what is beautiful. It is irrelevant; he uses the everyday and ever-present stuff of the expedient and low-cost construction of our immediate environment for surprising aesthetic revelations and unexpected elegance. The cultural references of these materials are as strong as the structural and aesthetic rationale.

One of Gehry's benign, mock-monumental cardboard furniture lines is called Easy Edges; even the name has a comfortable, laid-back sound. But his is not easy art; the more relaxed it seems, the more rigorous the creative effort that underlies it. Add wit, as Gehry does, and the deception is greater still; art mocks earnestness as life mocks art. But art and life are inseparable, whether the relationship is one of imitation, as earlier centuries believed, or observations on a world outrageously out of control, as is so often the case today. Architecture does more than comment; buildings define and accommodate attitudes, customs and style. This has made the art of architecture an unending series of sublime surprises. Whether it is the revolutionary vision of the Renaissance or the Baroque, the dramatic disruptions of classical convention of Schinkel and Soane, or the twentieth century's intoxicated pursuit of the future, nothing goes back to the way it was before. In every case, architecture has been vitalized and opened up, with new directions charted that had not previously existed and that affect everything that follows. Today there are those who understand history so little that they would cut off all avenues of discovery in favor of reworked revivals. They beg the issues of art and life and shortchange the one art that serves both.

And so debate will continue about Frank Gehry's work. It is hard to imagine a "finished" Gehry look, except among his imitators, who are legion, or an oeuvre that will not continue to evolve. There has been much that was tentative or unresolved in his earlier projects, as he set the most difficult problems of the union of art and architecture as his highest task. Today his ever-larger and increasingly international commissions are marked by an impressive, hard-won clarity and order. He has achieved a documented success, and is being "mainstreamed," as the saying goes, into the establishment. Will Gehry's serious irreverence and non-formulaic art survive the institutional embrace? Poetry, that closely-guarded secret of all great architecture, rarely scans well in the corporate boardroom. But this architect is very much in control. He is a cool romantic, a rational expressionist, a mature adventurer. He will continue to work at the less-than-easy edges, turning the practical into the lyrical, and architecture into art.

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