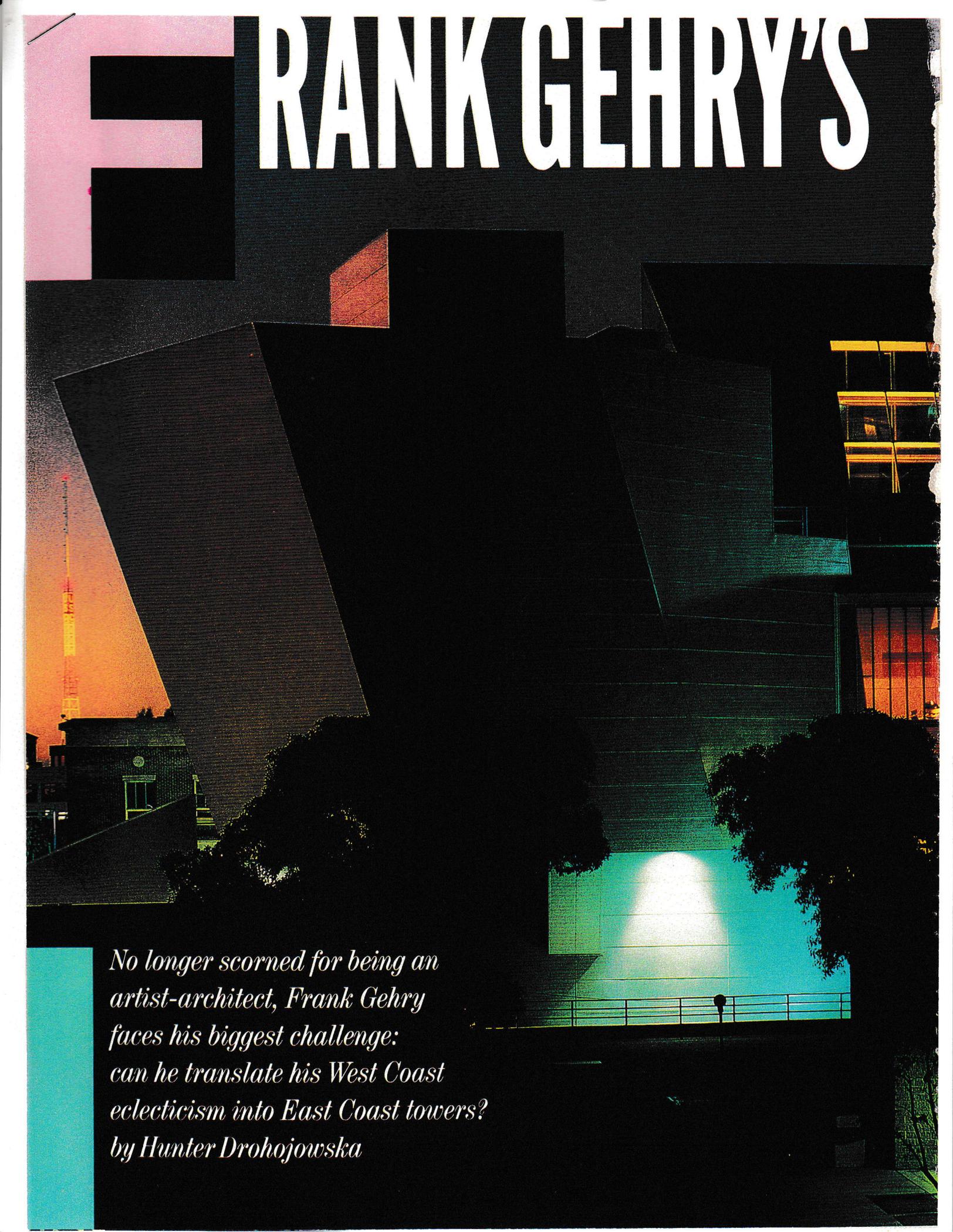


F RANK GEHRY'S



*No longer scorned for being an artist-architect, Frank Gehry faces his biggest challenge: can he translate his West Coast eclecticism into East Coast towers?
by Hunter Drohojowska*

GRAND ALLUSIONS



*California Aerospace
Museum, 1982–84, Los
Angeles, California.*



Frank Gehry, at 59, has finally come into his own. "I try to rid myself of the burden of culture and look for new ways to approach the work," explains the artist-architect.

because you get programmed about the budget, the building department, the site, all these constraints that I consider crutches." As Kurt Forster, director of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, has observed, "Gehry's knowledge of performance arts and his even deeper affinity with the transitory, with the improvisation of life, galvanize his architectural imagination and goad him into 'impossible' constructs."

Today being accepted is no longer a problem. Gehry has moved his offices to posher Santa Monica. Gone are his straggly mustache and rumpled clothes. And while he has not yet got what he most wants, a major museum commission, he has renovated two warehouses that are used as museums and is a finalist in the competition to design the new building for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Cesar Pelli has invited him to design a 15-floor apartment building for the Boston Fan Pier project, and he has designed one of two high rises,

BONNIE SCHIFFMAN

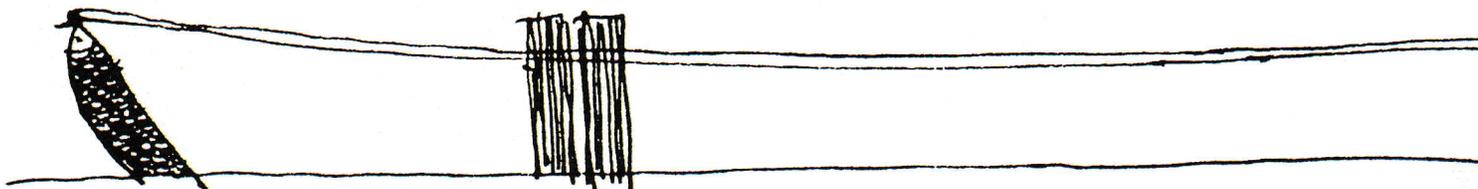
Being accepted isn't everything," said Frank Gehry three years ago. With a distracted air, he'd guide visitors around the disarray of his warehouse office in Venice Beach, California, pointing out models of his mostly residential projects. Yet when he'd come to more ambitious ones—museum renovations, university buildings—you could sense his pride at being connected with an Establishment. Back then, he'd wear casual, baggy clothing and graying hair curled over his collar.

In fact, for 20 years Gehry thrived on this outsider posture. He felt more closely allied with artists than with the button-down world of architecture, earning himself the appellation artist-architect. "In art, you are confronting that thing with no function other than to become something," Gehry, now 59, explains. "In architecture, you don't get very close to that

the other by David Childs of Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill, for New York's Madison Square Garden site being developed by Olympia & York.

Gehry now seems positioned at center stage: last summer in New York Leo Castelli Gallery was exhibiting his cardboard furniture at the same time the Whitney Museum of American Art was featuring his retrospective and he was making headlines for his entries in MoMA's controversial "Deconstructivist Architecture" exhibition.

The retrospective, which began in 1986 at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, was designed by Gehry himself. From the transparencies, drawings, and models to architectural constructions, it revealed not only how Gehry works but how his designs interact with the viewer, or user. It showed how his fragmented forms and humble materials—chain-link fencing, plywood, sheet metal—which had inspired so much



animosity could, ironically, propel him into the spotlight. Once labeled “cheapskate,” his architecture is now called “deconstructivist”—though Gehry protests, “I’m not a decon.”

Five years ago Philip Johnson complained, “Frank has a pathetic faith in chain link that I don’t share. I keep insulting him every other day about it.” But Johnson also recognized a background in sympathy with his own—that Gehry is, at heart, a late modernist. In MoMA’s *Deconstructivist Architecture* catalogue, he thanks the “artists whose visions have moved me more even than any purely architectural drawings: Frank Stella, Michael Heizer, Ken Price, and Frank Gehry.” Johnson has even added a chain-link pavilion to his New Canaan, Connecticut, estate.

Gehry’s concern with process and impermanence—not relying on set plans, working hands-on, allowing a structure to evolve—can be considered a natural response to his L.A. environment and to the artists he has befriended there, among them Ed Moses, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, and Robert Irwin. Architect Barton Myers supports this view: “Frank’s work, like early Venturi stuff, is a caricature of the impermanence and kitsch that exist here.”

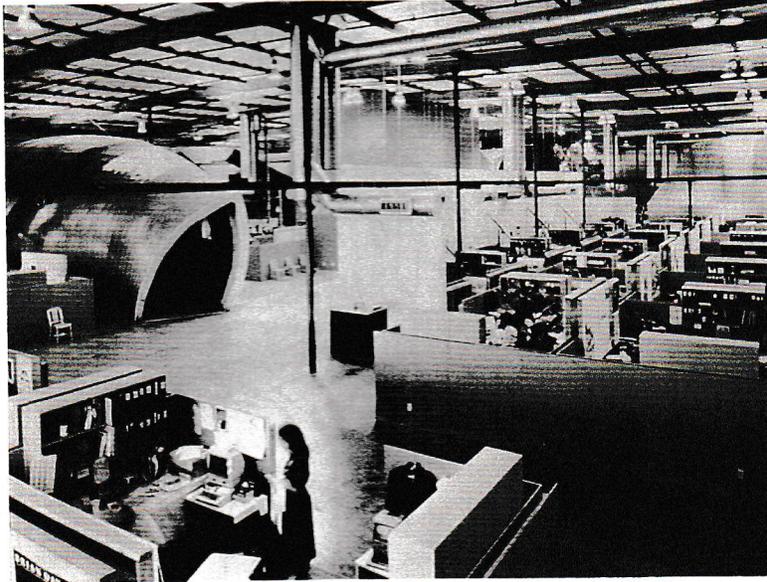
In 1972 painter Ron Davis commissioned Gehry to design his Malibu studio and residence. Modeled after a Gehry-designed hay barn, it features an improbably tilted trapezoidal corrugated-metal roof. The building conflates the worlds of perception and conception, and it echoes Davis’s own two-dimensional paintings, which illusionistically replicate three-dimensional shapes. As Rosemarie Haag Bletter describes it in the catalogue published by the Walker Art Institute and Rizzoli, *The Architecture of Frank Gehry*, “It is as if a Renaissance architect had tried to use perspective in the execution, not just the rendering, of a building.”

Throughout the ’70s, Gehry carried on a schizophrenic existence, designing unexceptional shopping malls and buildings for corporate clients while occasionally experimenting with more daring ideas, such as the oceanside mall (1973–80) he designed for the Rouse Company, where veils of blue and white chain link over the parking structure spell out “Santa Monica Place.” The graphics float in such a way that, as one

approaches, the whole mall seems to dematerialize. But “by the end of this project,” Gehry says, “I realized the limits of my interest in trying to please the marketplace.”

In 1978 Gehry got the chance to please himself when he renovated “a dumb little house with charm.” His second wife, Panamanian-born Berta Isabel Aguilera, had found the modest Santa Monica bungalow in a neighborhood well suited to raising their two sons, Samuel, now 8, and Alejandro, 12. The house was so sweet and suburban, he decided to dress it in

guerrilla fatigues. In essence, he deconstructed the elements that made up the house and arranged them schematically around the core of the conventional home. He wrapped the bungalow on two sides with corrugated steel and added a chain-link structure over the front door. In the kitchen, a cubic skylight of glass and unfinished two-by-fours is mounted corner upward above an asphalt floor. Other floors are of raw wood, while many of the walls are made of plywood and lath or



Temporary offices of the Chiat/Day advertising agency in Venice, California, 1988. The aluminum-covered fish structure is a conference room.

COURTESY FRANK O. GEHRY & ASSOCIATES

stripped to their original framework.

The transformed bungalow infuriated neighbors. “I can’t stand the hypocrisy of a situation where every house on the street has a camper or a truck or a boat parked in front,” Gehry says, “but when a guy comes along and puts up some chain link, they raise holy hell.” So he painted the cinder-block wall outside the house aqua to blend with the blue and green of the neighbors’ pickup trucks.

Haag Bletter describes the building, which earned Gehry a national A.I.A. award, as “a palimpsest of the house’s history in which the viewer can read the old house quite literally through the forms of the new one.” The house also turned out to be a palimpsest of Gehry’s life. His younger sister, Doreen Nelson, sees the house as autobiographical: it reminds her of the Orthodox synagogue in Toronto where their maternal grandfather, Samuel Caplan, was president of the congregation.

Caplan and his wife, Leah, emigrated from Lodz, Poland, in 1908 with their four-year-old daughter, Thelma. They settled in Toronto, where Thelma studied music—a love she passed on to her son—and married Irving Goldberg, who had emigrated to Toronto from Brooklyn, New York. As a child, Gehry was very close to the Caplans. He spoke with them in Yiddish and worked in their hardware store until he was 17. He remembers building imaginary cities with his grandmother from wood scraps on the floor. He also remembers her buying a live carp every Thursday, which she’d keep in the bathtub until Friday when it would be turned into gefilte fish—he mentions this as a source for the fish motif in his work. (He also points out that he’s a Pisces, born February 28, 1929.)

Sketch for *Collaboration*, 1981, a bridge connecting the World Trade Center and the Chrysler Building conceived by Gehry and Richard Serra.



Irving Goldberg was involved in a variety of businesses in Toronto. He once even won an award for window dressing at the Canadian National Exposition. Then he began selling pinball and slot machines. As the business prospered, the family moved to Timmons, Ontario. There, as Thomas Hines points out in *The Architecture of Frank Gehry*, Gehry first experienced anti-Semitism—people would derogatorily call him Fish.

When, in the mid-'40s, slot machines were declared illegal in Canada, the family moved back to Toronto, where Irving started another business, but success eluded him and his health began to fail. So in 1947 the family moved to L.A. Irving worked as a truck driver, then in a liquor store, while Leah took a job in a department store. The teenage Frank attended night courses at L.A. City College, and got a job delivering and installing breakfast nooks. While on this job, he met Anita Snyder, whom he married in 1952 and who became the mother of his daughters Brina and Leslie. While she worked as a legal secretary, Gehry finished college at the University of Southern California.

He began in the art department but switched to the U.S.C. School of Architecture, where he met architects Raphael Soriano, Arnold Schreier, and Gregory Ain. He became friends with Gregory Walsh, who has worked with him since 1962, when Frank O. Gehry & Associates was formed.

Gehry began working for Victor Gruen Associates while in school and after his graduation, in 1954. It was during this period that Gehry and Anita decided to change their last name from Goldberg, leaving his father understandably hurt. It is only in recent years that Gehry has come to appreciate the importance of his Jewishness in his life and art. This is reflected in his house and in his preoccupation with the fish image, which he first began to exorcise in a

1981 proposal with Richard Serra for a bridge to span Manhattan; it features a Gehry-designed fish pylon in the Hudson River and a canted pylon by Serra in the East River.

In 1955 Gehry was drafted into the army, and was put to work at Fort Benning, Georgia, designing the enlisted men's dayrooms, as well as furniture, using corrugated metal, plywood, and shingles.

Then in 1956 he entered the Harvard Graduate School of Design to study urban planning, but he quickly abandoned the program, remaining at Harvard as a special student. There, teacher Joseph Hudnut introduced him to the European modernists and to the traditional architecture of America and Europe. He returned to L.A. from 1957 to 1961, when he decided to go to Paris for a year to work for André

Rémondet and immerse himself in the history of architecture and its relationship to painting and sculpture. Upon returning to L.A. he set up Frank O. Gehry & Associates. By 1966 the Gehry marriage had fallen apart.

Ten years later Gehry married Aguilera. Trained as an anthropologist, she now works in Gehry's firm as "the treasurer, the moneybags," she says. While their Santa Monica house reflected his past, it also galvanized his future. As Gehry so candidly remarks of his corporate supporters, "After seeing my house, the Rouse Company guys just fled the pasture. . . . In a way they were right. It was a difficult time financially but gratifying personally."

Coincidentally, as Gehry pressed toward his most controversial work, the stays of modernist architecture gave way to postmodernism. By the late '70s buildings by such architects as Michael Graves, Robert Venturi, and Charles Moore were being commissioned by corporations, and Gehry found himself included in the postmodernist boom—though his work had little in common with that movement's historical and narrative concerns. Architects everywhere began allying themselves with the fine arts, and Gehry was suddenly perceived as ahead of his time.

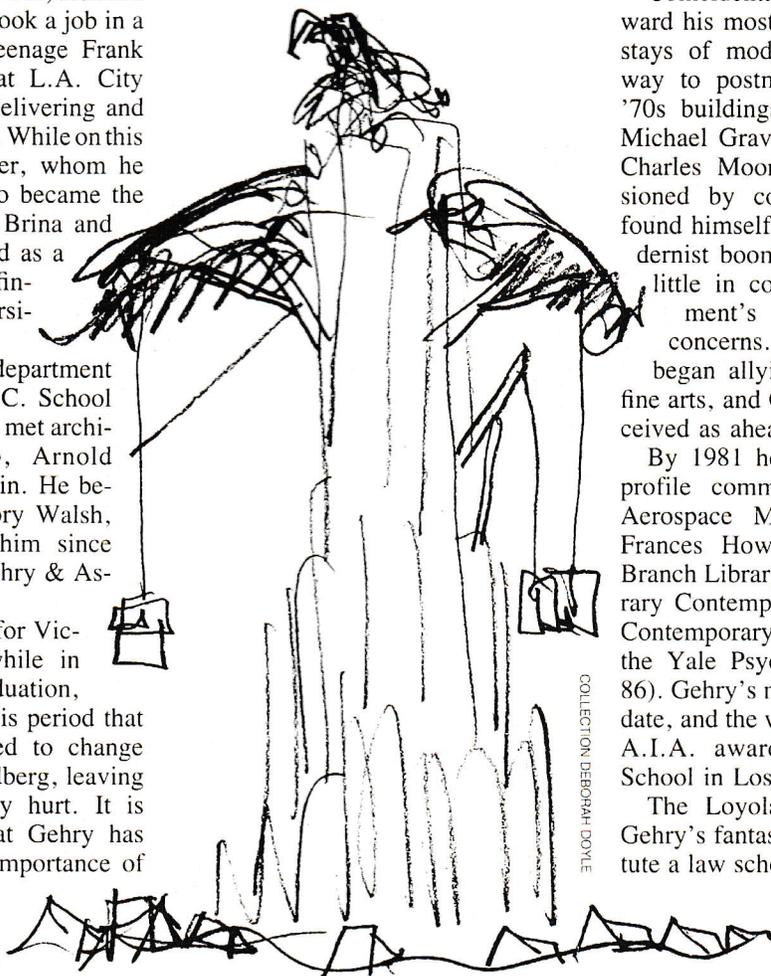
By 1981 he began attracting high-profile commissions: the California Aerospace Museum (1982–84); the Frances Howard Goldwyn Regional Branch Library (1983–86); the Temporary Contemporary of the Museum of Contemporary Art, L.A. (1983); and the Yale Psychiatric Institute (1985–86). Gehry's most successful project to date, and the winner of a 1986 national A.I.A. award, is the Loyola Law School in Los Angeles (1981–84).

The Loyola campus grew out of Gehry's fantasy of what should constitute a law school: "a fleeting image of a pileup of buildings, like an Acropolis, with stairs leading up to it." The amber stucco administration- and-classroom building is impaled by a

zigzag staircase through the center and topped with a greenhouse-like entrance gallery. Other structures have clearly metaphoric references: academic-redbrick buildings are fronted by freestanding columns alluding to a courthouse; a circular redwood chapel has an elongated bell tower, evoking a confessional. The school balked at Gehry's suggestion of fallen columns, inspired by the Roman Forum, but agreed to a courtyard sculpture: a teetering chain-link ladder by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.

While the Loyola success was attracting a new type of clientele, Gehry continued his more flagrantly artistic pursuits, designing fish lamps and a new line of cardboard

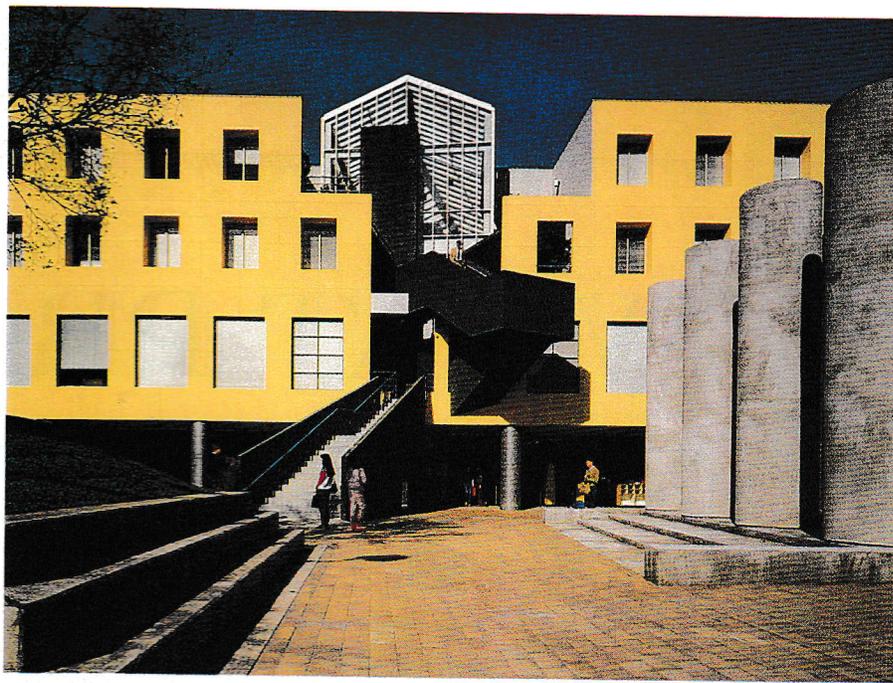
Hunter Drohojowska, chair, Dept. of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Otis/Parsons, is writing a biography of Georgia O'Keeffe.



Late Entries: Chicago Tribune Tower Competition, 1980. Gehry's submission is an Oldenburgian tower topped by a computerized news-dispensing eagle.

COLLECTION DEBORAH DOYLE

furniture; collaborating on a performance piece, *Il Corso del Coltello* (1984), with Oldenburg and van Bruggen and critic Germano Celant in Venice; and working with dancer/choreographer Lucinda Childs on *Available Light* (1983). "I want to be the big-shot architect, but I also want the fun and exploration I have; those goals are not consistent," Gehry once complained. Nonetheless, Gehry increasingly seems able to embrace both aims. For example, construction is beginning on the new offices of the Chiat/Day advertising agency in Santa Monica, the entrance of which will be a giant pair of binoculars designed by Oldenburg and van Bruggen. His Fishdance restaurant in Kobe, Japan, is a chain-link Japanese carp standing on its tail beside a coiled snake.



MICHAEL MORAN

Loyola Law School, 1981-84. The school, in a tough neighborhood close to where Gehry lived when he arrived in L.A., in 1947, was the kind of project he'd always wanted.

Ironically, in spite of his success, some fear he has opened a Pandora's Box and even inspired a movement of clones. Vincent Scully, Sterling Professor of Art History at Yale University, cautions: "Frank is the kind of formally innovative architect who makes other architects feel they are as free as painters or sculptors. . . . But architecture has to do with the types that create cities, and a certain freely formal invention presents urbanistic problems. Painting, sculpture, architecture, it's all fine arts. The difference is that it has led to urban chaos in late modernist buildings. Students like Frank's work because it seems to release them from the kinds of architectural responsibilities we've been talking about in the last generation, issues of context and type."

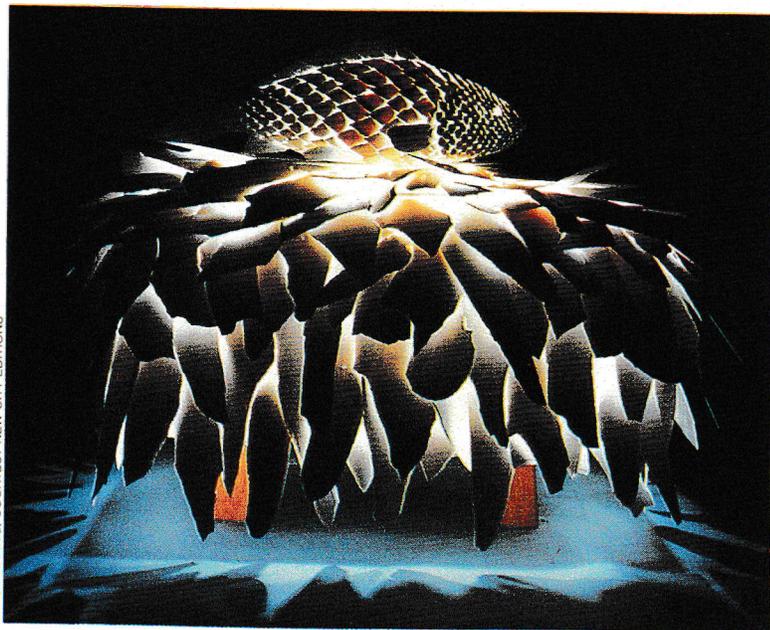
Architecture critic Leon Whiteson summarizes Gehry's dilemma: "He's uncomfortable as an insider, then he moans about being an outsider. The test of his mettle is how he handles the high rises. His usual method is to break a building into its component parts and reassemble them, but a skyscraper doesn't lend itself to that sort of deconstruction."

The projects scheduled for New York and Boston signify a shift both in geography and context. And there are projects elsewhere, including a high rise in Cleveland—in collaboration with Oldenburg, van Bruggen, Donald Judd, and possibly Serra and Carl Andre—for the Progressive Company headquarters. But will Gehry's southern California vocabulary translate into areas so identified with their architectural history?

"On the large-scale projects like Boston, I think he's going to have a hard time," says Barton Myers. "From what I've seen of the Boston building [the Fan Pier project], it looks like California." Nevertheless, Gehry's restoration of a seven-story building with an added eighth story on Boston's Newbury Street seems to have successfully integrated the traditional elements of Back Bay past with his own approach. Architecture critic Joseph Giovannini, who has seen models for the Madison Square Garden project, describes the building as featuring "the shape of a partial fish. It is not a fish in movement but a stylization, like an Oldenburgian sculptural form but not so explicit."

Giovannini points out: "New York is subject to the same sort of cacophony you find in L.A. You can say that [Gehry] has absorbed the L.A. context within his buildings, that they are a synopsis of that environment and of the larger American condition of which New York and East Coast cities are also part. The only problem for him is in staying an architect as opposed to becoming an artist. There's a blur to it, but Frank makes the distinction all the time. You don't occupy a work of art."

Low White Fish Lamp, 1984, Colorcore, wire, wood, incandescent lights, 38 by 38 inches. Instead of transforming a cheap material, Gehry converted a highly finished product into a raw one, shattering it into scales.



LARRY HARRIS. COURTESY NEW CITY EDITIONS

For the time being, Gehry can savor his success. As Giovannini says, "He already counts. He's had an impact on our vision, made us see things that already existed differently. He's one of the most original architects working today."