



ARCHITECTURE'S WILDER SHORES: A TRIBUTE TO FRANK GEHRY

By Joseph Giovannini

FRANK GEHRY BECAME LUMINOUS AT 50. In 1978, he transformed that sweet, but ordinary two-story Dutch colonial bungalow in Santa Monica into a house that launched magazine covers around the world. He stripped parts down to the wood frame and rebuilt and expanded it with corrugated metal, chain-link, and asphalt. But unlike many actors, painters, and architects who become famous for a standout film, a signature style of painting, or a single remarkable building, Frank has incandesced ever since he built that defining work.

Over 40 years, one invention succeeded another: the glinting Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis; the Dancing House in Prague; the storm-tossed Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles; the chaotic Stata Center at MIT; the turbulent Guggenheim in Bilbao; the eruptive Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University; and that billowing schooner sailing through the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, the Fondation Louis Vuitton. Each was a building that would have launched a career, but for Frank, his steady stream of stunning masterworks sustained the wattage. His retrospective on the ramps of the Guggenheim in 2001 charged the rotunda with an energy that emanated from the work itself. And Frank easily stood up to Frank Lloyd Wright.

In 1979, just as I was starting my career as an architecture critic at the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, Frank and I first met. At a reception not long after the completion of the house, he said in his deadpan way, “I hear you don’t like my house.”

“Well, I don’t really know,” I responded, caught off guard. “I haven’t seen it.”

He invited me by, but when I saw it, I still didn’t know. It was too new. It didn’t fit any of the boxes I had learned about in architecture school at Harvard. It didn’t wear beauty on its sleeve, so it didn’t immediately seduce my eye. I had to write about it to understand that it offered a different sort of beauty, and it really took me years to come to grips with its layers of ideas. I came back to it in many articles, and my opinions and feelings shifted and changed before I made peace with it. Modernism’s simplicity had given way to a new complexity, and the complexity was elusive. Its provocation made me think. I finally settled on the conclusion that Frank had built a Rauschenberg.

Instead of working with simple geometric shapes and noble materials, Frank had taken a wall piece composed of raw materials found on the streets and back alleys of Los Angeles, and projected them into space as an environmental installation outside the art gallery. I had been walking through an expanded collage. It was really a mind tease more than a sweet for the eye. *I did* like it.

Philip Pirolo

Since architecture immemorial, architects have drawn from architectural history, but Frank also streamed contemporary art into his thinking. His architectural subconscious simmered over the years as he learned from artists to identify and develop a promising idea to its most provocative and complete expression. If *Swan Lake*

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as a ballet is built on the movement of fluttering wings, and Beethoven developed four beats into the Fifth Symphony, Frank took ordinary cardboard and turned it into one of the century's most inventive furniture collections. In his practice, Frank shifted the paradigm from architecture's theology of precedence to architecture practiced with the creative individuality of the artist. Of course, the building should function; Frank was practicing as an architect, not as an artist. Well trained and diligent, he knew how to do the plumbing and keep the rain out. But his buildings were like a canvas; they made the eye and body move. Most of all, they made you wonder. And they were humanist, embracing you through gesture, warm materials, and livable scale. Their irregularities triggered exceptional moments that made the buildings idiosyncratic.

In his paradigm shift, he bumped up architecture to another level of expectation: architecture, or at least his architecture, had to succeed as art. He established a new, different, and more difficult standard.

In my many visits to Frank's office over the decades, I never knew what to expect, what designs I would find, where his imagination would lead. But I also discovered that Frank wasn't sure either. Even today, when he starts a project, he doesn't know what it's going to be, how it will turn out—nor does he want to know as he sinks into an idea. He approaches design by mining, taking an idea to other levels, ruminating, uncovering in a long process of enquiry and research alternatives that spring from each other. Never does he design by thunderclap. He works at it.

For me, the discoveries are disarming especially because they aren't anticipated by precedent, and so I encounter them unprepared. On my studio visits, often I still don't react as he unveils a project. He never explains himself, and I'm on my own dealing with the unexpected. The projects don't even conform to Frank's own precedents. He moved on from Rauschenbergs to Morandis, and then to what I consider architectural Pollocks that keep the eye roaming the surfaces. And in the 1990s, he spliced the computer into the process, which enabled him to deepen explorations into the devilishly difficult compound curves that were already on the table, the new objects of his

curiosity. The results were surprising, probably even to Frank, as he broke in this powerful beast and ratcheted his buildings up to Dionysian geometric freedoms beyond Euclid. He built unfurling metal ribbons that snapped the air.

Often the new projects escaped me, and I would go back to my writing and think them over. The designs grew on me; I matured into them. Frank's research expanded architecture's potential, and for me, his studio was a continuing-education class.

I had lots of company in Los Angeles among people who didn't get Frank at first. A confidant of the Westside avant-garde, for years he belonged mostly to the artists who had inspired him. But beyond LA's avant-garde, Frank was a prophet without honor in his home city, until finally, with growing success outside town and increasingly abroad, Los Angeles woke up to its own 1989 Pritzker Prize winner.

But it took decades, and in what has proved a gradually accelerating curve of acclamation, Frank's acceptance now has reached a steep pitch. In 2019, 40 years after the house, downtown Los Angeles is on the threshold of a cluster of major Gehry buildings. First there's the sublime Walt Disney Concert Hall, its sails tossed by gusty winds. On the other side of Grand Avenue, Frank has designed a large mixed-use project, with shops, a hotel, and apartments caught in the three-dimensional throes of one of his furious sketches. The high-rise, multi-building complex with a tiered village at its base appears jolted in a quake of motion. Now the Colburn School has commissioned him to design its Center for Performance and Learning, and again unsure of what the building will be, he is searching for the design through his churning design process of trial, error, and correction.

We are now celebrating Frank on his 90th birthday, but in a reversal, it is Frank who is giving Los Angeles the present: the rare urban gift of a pride of buildings that will soon be forming an unusual architectural neighborhood, each building different from the other, but each animating Grand Avenue and adjacent blocks with the same turbulent energy that teemed on the ramps of the Guggenheim back in 2001.

No need to go to Disneyland for fantasy when Frank — as in his house — has again transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary and taken us to architecture's wilder shores.

Joseph Giovannini is a Yale- and Harvard-trained architect and critic who splits his time between New York and Los Angeles. He has written for *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*.