

A conversation with Frank O. Gehry

Autor(en): **Hebel, Dirk / Lee, Mark**

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involving with students provide a critical distance from professional relationships, or taking the stage with the Jacques Herzog, Frank Stella, Jörg Schlaich, represents an expansion of territories within his interdisciplinary attitude towards architecture. In the following interview, Frank Gehry, arriving as a monument of calm interjected by lapses of jet-lag, discusses his views concerning architectural pedagogy, the questionable prerequisite of theory, his collaborations, and his work; inconspicuously serving notice that he is signed on for the whole ride through that difficult journey historically demanded by the practice and critical establishment alike, of every master architect.

A Conversation with Frank O. Gehry

Dirk Hebel
Mark Lee

ON ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

You have had a long professional career as an architect, but alongside practice you have also been concurrently teaching at many institutions – from USC, UCLA to Rice, from Yale, Harvard, and now to ETH. Most people know a lot about Frank Gehry the architect, but not as much about Frank Gehry the teacher. What are your thoughts about architecture education and the various tendencies in different architectural programs?

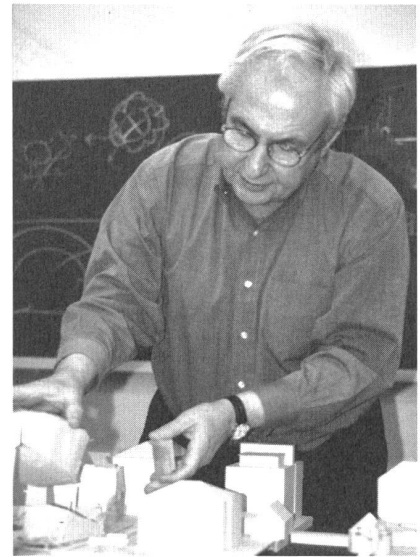
I think it points to the individual, what I said before is that training has to take into account that everybody is different. Different levels of intelligence, different levels of experience, economic background, family. Everybody cannot be the same architect. The tendencies in the schools are to try and make the Richard Meier, the Michael Graves, the Peter Eisenman. And everybody cannot be that, everybody has to find his own way. And I think teaching has to deal with this issue. When I approached this class at ETH, we have twenty-four people of very different character; and you see the breaking points, of who they are, and you can dismiss twenty-four people if you only think in terms of Meier, Graves and Eisenman, then twenty-four people are out. And when you treat them like that in the attitude as a professor, they are lost. They are done, they get into



a painful experience. I think it's more interesting to play with it. That is why I am in the course, it is like a performance, an artist sort of comes in, he throws you a pitch and you have to sense a way to bring it out.

Certain critics believe that students should deal with the problematics that the critic deals with, and the students tend to succumb to this hegemony of such teachers who have strong formalistic preferences.

I do not know if they are still doing this now, but there is a value in this too for students, it is like trying on different suits. I did it myself – I tried on Frank Lloyd Wright, I tried on Louis Kahn, Alvar Aalto and so on. I remember going to Peter Eisenman's class once, and on the way to the studio, he told me that the great thing about his class is that nobody is doing little Peter, everybody is doing his own thing. And I went to see it, and it was all Peter. He did not see it because it was not quite exactly him. And I had that problem too, I remember one of the juries in Ale a student came up with a project that just looked like my work; I did not see it but Richard Serra was on the jury and he started yelling at her – that she did not understand my work enough to do that ... Basically there are different levels of fear and somebody always gets scared. Mostly what happens in the studio now is that a student have a great first idea, and then I give a critique on the basis of what is there, so I can say it loud and clear that idea is great, then I start looking at the rooftop for example, the critique of the particulars, then they go back and they are scared, and they do not hold on to the basic principle that they started with, I always tell students, just write down what you believe in on this project and hold it beside you, then you can go back every time and check back, do not get derailed, in order to stay focused. Teaching is a performance game: understand every individual and try to make the experience work, so there is growth, so they learn something god damned, if somebody comes in and shows the project that he always would have done anyway that person would not have learned anything in my studio. It is not just to change, but to experience something else.



You seem to have a humanistic approach towards the possibilities of teaching. Being a practitioner, how do you see your role as a teacher in relationship to your practice?

Teaching is gratifying because it is a people experience, it is different from professional relationships, and I treat it like a project: you have a beginning and an end and you create something in that period, it is like a hockey game for me. How do you get from here to there and come out scoring. When you get older you get cynical with the world, you start to realize that you cannot change the world. Except Rem Koolhaas, he will never realize; but I had a Rem period in my life, where I wanted change the world.

Being around students there is an optimism, because they have not given up yet. I had a good time at Yale, it was more open because the art school is there and there was a dialogue between the departments. The act of drawing a line between art and architecture between the disciplines is fraudulent, for it does not exist. But there was not enough strong faculty members at the architecture department then to nurture that environment. And I could not give as much time as I would have liked, and that was the reason why I stopped teaching after that.

In regards to ETH and teaching in Switzerland, has it been as you have expected when you came for a lecture last year?

I did not know what to expect. I came here to give the lecture. There was so much interest here in this new simplicity, so I got angry with it. That is why I ended up teaching here, because I ended up in a discussion with Vittorio Lampugnani. I am a hermit, I do not understand the predominant style at the ETH. When you go through the studios here, you see a lot of, lets not use the word 'fascist' but kind of a rigid, monolithic design mentality. And I know that there are architects who are poetic with that style, like Giorgio Grassi for example, he can handle that in a very poetic way, I am just worried that they present it as the only way. There are certain etiquette, certain language in architecture that are acceptable, and if

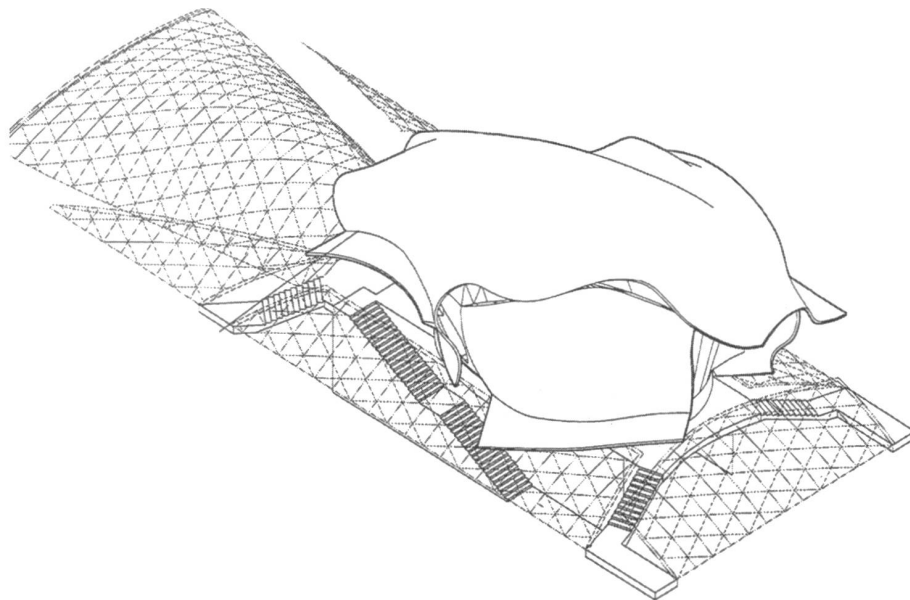


Abb.: Berlin, Pariser Platz 3, Axonometrie Auditorium

you transgress them, you are outside of the etiquette, and therefore you are the bad guy. Kenneth Frampton thinks that I am a total fraud, that I have ruined Prague with the Nationale-Nederlanden office building. I do not see how people could have such sureness about this required ethic; it certainly does not apply to a democratic philosophy that there is only one way to live.

ON THE DEMAND OF A THEORY

After you saw Marc Angélil's first year program at ETH, you made a remark that all these students would end up writing their own architectural theory.

Eventually, most of the students do become architects, and they start giving lectures, they start to write and so you look around at Marc's first year program, and you say: there would be at least ten new theories coming out from here for sure. Like the way the students are doing this publication; before you know it, you will end up having a theory, you will be writing a paper and teaching us what architecture is all about, why it should be done this way, so that was what I was referring to.

You occupy a central position within architectural discussions. But unlike your peers, you have consistently refused any theoretical commitment but instead adopted a certain intellectual acuity between an unapologetic professionalism along with vigorous experimentation. Do you feel that the academic environment often demands you to bridge this gap by taking stands in particular positions?

A couple of years ago Steven Holl got really upset with me, I got this letter from Steven and he was attacking me that I had to explain myself that I was not telling what I was thinking, what was my theory, where do I stand and how do I feel about what's going on and all this stuff. And I wrote him back saying that he is ethnocentric and thinking only of one way of living life. And I said it scares me that he is teaching students

because there may be a student in your class who's a Frank Gehry and does not think the way he does, and he is going to cut off his knees before he has a chance to survive, because he cannot sit down and explain what he does through a philosophical construct in words, but he might be able to do it visually, might even be able to do it with music. There maybe seventeen thousand ways you could express themselves, although it is not the way he thinks. I have heard Steven Holl gives talks, I have heard him talk about his Stretto House in Dallas as coming from a specific piece of music from Béla Bartók (Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste). So OK, he thinks he got it from Bartók. I've listened to that piece of music, I know this piece of music, I do not see his house there. but I do not care, for if this is his personal construct, that is fine, but it's not necessarily the only way. Artists do that too, Mario Merz with the Fibonacci series, but he really uses it, and make something out of it instead of a using it as a justification.

Speaking of categorization, Rafael Moneo said one cannot talk about your work without talking about Los Angeles.

See, my colleagues all try to put me in a box. People do that , they try to marginalize, I do that too myself. I think the globalization thing is bigger than all of us, whether we like it or not, we are all part of it. The global box would be a good box for everybody to be in. I do not fight labels because I do not care, I think all these labels are ways to marginalize you. By doing so, you don't have to deal with the people, if Moneo puts me into a L.A. box in his mind, than he does not have to worry with me in Europe, so he can say: Europe is mine, Gehry is the L.A. guy. I do not think that he consciously does that, I also know that I do that to other Architects, but sometimes I find that out later. Like with Daniel Libeskind. I thought he is a theoretician, so he is in his spot and I do not have to worry about him, now he is doing some incredible work, he is nipping at my heels, I have to pay attention to that guy! I do not think it is hostile or anything like that, it is just normal.

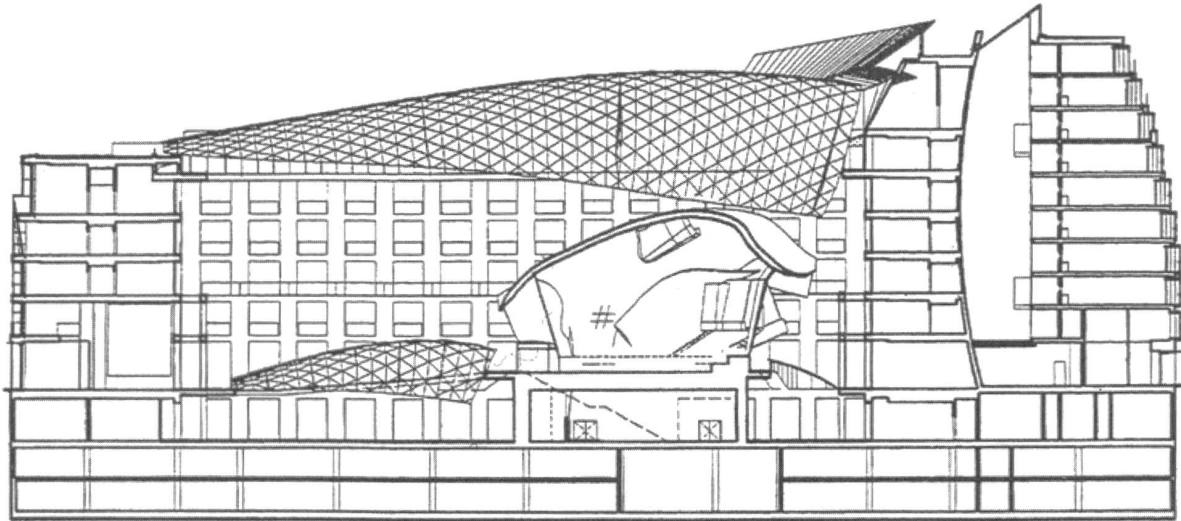


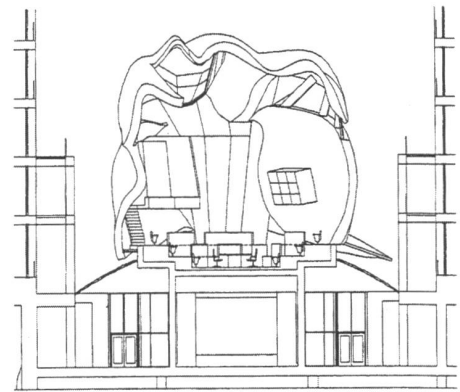
Abb.: Berlin, Pariser Platz 3, Längsschnitt
 Berlin, Pariser Platz 3, Schnitt Auditorium

In his lecture here, Peter Eisenman stated that from Corbusier to Koolhaas, modern architecture is always originated from or related to theory. But you definitely do not fit in this group who consciously constructs a discourse.

So I am the big exception. I mean, what is the theory? It is convenient for Peter to call it a theory, because he is good in concocting these things. He does what Steven Holl does to me, he tries to make me talk like him. I have a theory. I show you my theory! Is it relevant, who cares?

Mies never had a theory.

That is true, another exception. I had to give a talk on Mies the other day at IIT, I ended up talking twenty minutes on Mies and twenty minutes of my own work. And I made my work part of Mies's. I said: first of all, he was passionate about architecture; secondly, he was also interested in craft. The craft of his days and the craft of my days are different; I think my work would not be less enough to be more for Mies. But the development of craft in my buildings would probably intrigue him, being in the same spirit of a visual exercise as well as a technical exercise. The way I detail is very precise, I work endlessly on those details, it appears casual because I want them to be, I do not want that to be "the thing" itself, so that it does not look like a Carlo Scarpa exercise. Architects read it as casual and uncaring about details, and they are totally wrong. People do not read that in my work so much, but they will in the years to come. Somebody will look at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and think: How did he get that there? Because the common perception of me is that I throw the things together, and yes, I do, but I am very interested in getting the energy to the end. And that is what impressed me so much about Danny Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, all the anger he has about the Holocaust, it's so much in the building. It survives all the way to the end, it is the most powerful thing I have seen, I could not believe it, it moved me to tears.



ON INTER-DISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIONS

There is a tendency implicit in your development as an architect: your collaborations with artists. Claes Oldenburg have said that he had absorbed certain entropic vibrations from working with you. Is it a reciprocal relationship for you when you work with other architects like David Childs or Philip Johnson; or with engineers, like Jörg Schleich, or Ove Arup?

I just worked on a competition together with Richard Serra for a bridge in London in front of the future Tate, which we did not win but it was an exploration for both of us. What was common for both of us in the collaboration there was the willingness to explore something intuitively, because we each have our personal preferences and they are not always consistent with each other; there are some overlaps, but I watched those inter-disciplinary thing happening while we were working together. He did his and I did mine and there are lines you would not cross. But we did not sit down in the beginning and started with a theoretical construct or philosophy. Our method was more of an intuitive exploration that we took on. And it led to a solution that is more a sculpture than a building - that's probably why we lost. Because architects do not like it when you step over this fine line between architecture and art. Most of them think you should stick to your own shoes, but anyway, I loved what we were doing. And we really want to go on with it, because I think it could be quite beautiful and I also can understand why Jacques Herzog did not want to have it right in his face. I am more open to that, I mean I let Claes put his binoculars in front of my building ... Collaboration is like going to the library, taking out a book and reading it, and encounter a piece of somebody's life, it's like tapping into a living library. You tap into this brilliance of thinking, which has it's own history, presence and future. I find that really exciting, like reading a new book or to be exciting about a new movie. For engineers, unlike artists, it is hard to find ones that you can play with, I just found Jörg Schleich so new, it's my new candy store. I have never collaborated with Ove Arup, for I have never met Peter Rice, so I never got the relationship that the Brits had or that Frank Stella had with them. Actually

I was always fascinated what these guys were doing, but I never had the right project they were interested in.

ON CONTEXT AND CREATIVITY

Mies took the form of his Barcardi Office project in Cuba, changed the dimensions, painted the steel black, and put it in Berlin as the National Gallery. He had found an architectural model that he was so convinced in that it transcends particular programs and sites. Is it similar for you, when the sculptural form is so powerful that you would transpose it to another project like you did to the Pariser Platz project in Berlin with the horse's head from the Lewis Residence? And by doing so, does it mean that certain forms are not contextual to you, that they become some how exchangeable?

There are parallels with the Mies situation, but it is not the same for me, I would not do that. I had a different approach. I do not believe that you can take one thing and appropriate it and take it somewhere else. I think the context changes. I think the most important thing about form is that everybody has to develop his own language. The horse's head of the Lewis Residence is one of the most beautiful pieces I have ever done, and when the project was canceled, I was really devastated. When I started working on Berlin competition I had the idea of building an auditorium inside, because the urban issues with Berlin were different. There were certain regulations to the facade and a whole catalogue of other things. When we started to work on the auditorium, for the competition I put something in there that looked like the horse's head, because we only had a couple of weeks, so instead of putting in a block, I put in that beautiful monster. And then I started to like it, although I was self-conscious about it and thought I could not do that. Then we spent weeks and months trying to develop a new form, but all of them were not as good as the horse's head. So I finally gave up and I put it in there. It's not contextually related to the outside, I have created the space around it like a pedestal for this thing. The owners wanted me to give it to an artist and I refused, because that is a major piece

of the building. So I started with the horse's head and during the design process there was just one corner left the same as it used to be in the Lewis Residence.

The critical establishment regarded certain projects as departures in your career -- from the juxtaposition of your house to the still-life of the Winton Guest House, to the double-curves of the Disney Concert Hall. Perhaps it is difficult during the design process for one to be conscious about it; but in retrospect, are there certain moments in the course of these projects where you become aware that things are coming together, that new breakthroughs are being materialized?

It is very hard to be aware of things like that when they happen to you, like in Vitra I did a curved stairway and we used descriptive geometry to describe it in order to build it, but the builder could not build it, because when he cut all the pieces the way we showed him to, it did not work, so when you look at it now, there is a little bump, it was not completely resolved. In the Fish Dance Restaurant in Kobe, we used descriptive geometry to construct the fish; in the Frederick Weisman Museum in Minneapolis I did not use the computer either, they were different. So we were looking for a way to deal with it in the future, because I really wanted to do more of that, and we started to work with the CATIA computer system and started exploring it. So on the Barcelona project we worked together with Skidmore Owings and Merrill. The CAD projected drawings of the fish sculpture, which were then given to the contractor; but they said they could not do it. Coincidentally, we already had the fish in the CATIA as a test, so we showed them, and they said "that's it, that will do it". They immediately went home and bought CATIA, we put the telephone on modem and our CATIA started to talk to theirs. Within three weeks we had the construction documents for the fish – this time without any bumps. Henry James once said that creativity is probing in a barrel with a long stick, poking into a deep well with a long pole and every once in a while you pull the pole out and something is there. I think it is a beautiful definition of creativity. You cannot really fathom exactly why.