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The Tony Davidson Issue, 'Making Sense of Nonsense'
£9.95

Looking at Frank Gehry Upside-Down

As President of D&AD (The D&AD award scheme crosses the creative industries to award excellence in the field), I was fortunate to spend an evening in the company of Frank Gehry and Sydney Pollack who had just completed a film about the architect. What I like most about Gehry's work is that it causes controversy. People either love it or hate it but at least they have an opinion on it, which is more than can be said for most new buildings. One of the reasons for this is that he didn't train in the classical way and therefore challenged the shape and form of structures. There are some of his pieces that I'm not so keen on but I really loved his first home in L.A. where he built a glass box around the old building. The Guggenheim gallery in Bilbao is disliked by some who say its function as an art gallery is questionable, as more people come to see it than the art. And yet it has become an icon that has rejuvenated the city and at the very least got more people to appreciate architecture and the art inside than would have previously.

Tony Davidson

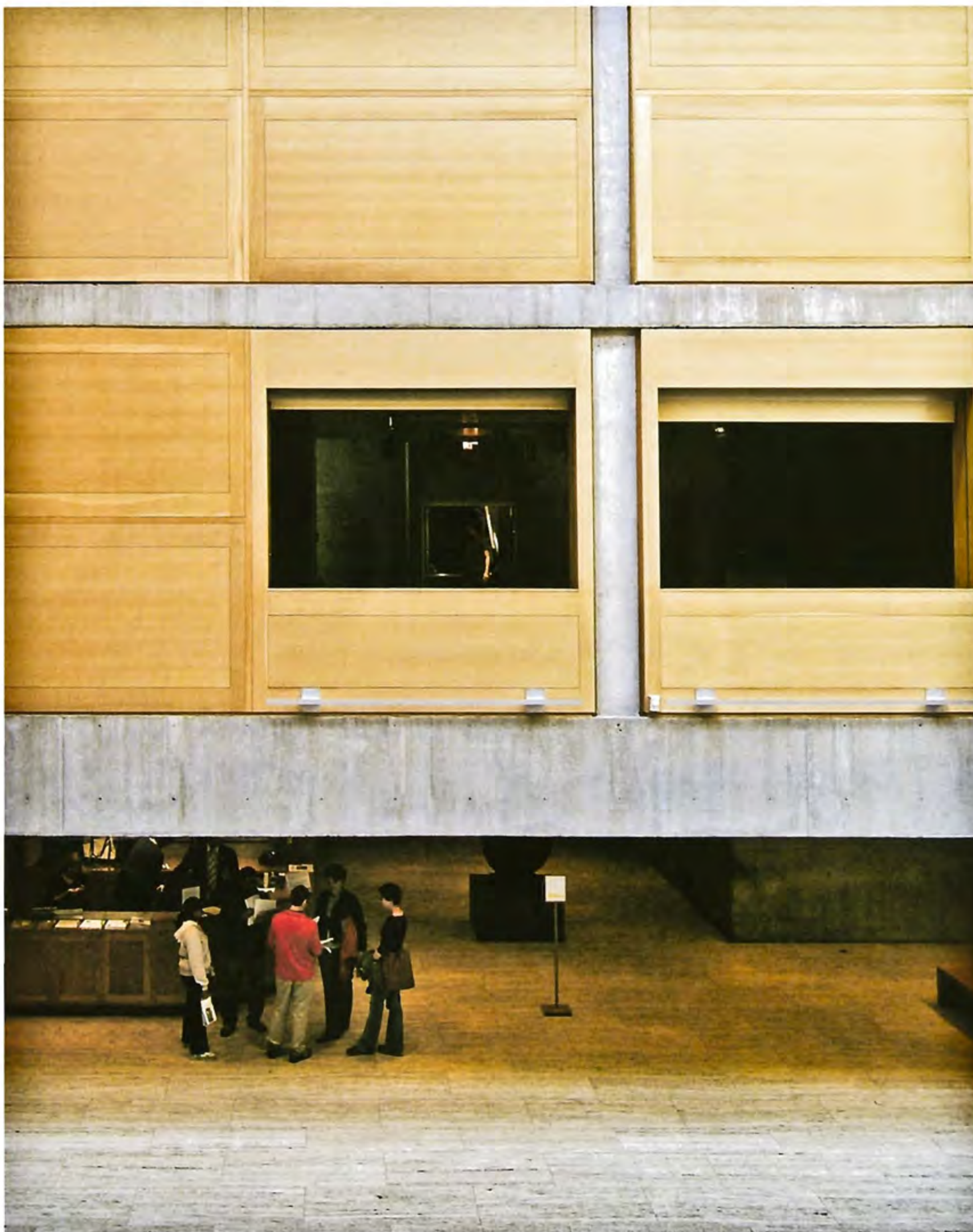
I just happened to open the last .Cent issue 'Ornament' on pages 36-37 holding it upside down, and found myself staring at the mannequins' beautiful gowns by Basso and Brooke, from a different angle - one inspired by the Hotel Principe di Savoia in Milan, the other by Le Meurice in Paris. The long, ornate dresses, which opened out as they met the floor, appeared like art nouveau columns that flared up to hold up the ceiling when viewed upside down. It occurred to me then that I had had a 'Frank Gehry' moment. After thinking about his work for a while, I would expect him to take an art magazine or a fashion magazine, turn it upside down and reflect on it for a while, perhaps doodling the outline of his next project at the same time. I would expect him to get down to his knees to see the underside of things, to turn an elaborate vase on its head, to take his grandmother's armchair apart, if he could, the way a kid does, the way we all did until we were told not to.

One cannot approach Gehry's architecture head on. It does not sit still for a formal, frontal photograph. It reveals itself through different angles, both metaphorical and literal, in a process akin to turning a kaleidoscope. You have to let all the pieces fall to the bottom before you turn it. Then a new, unexpected order is revealed in the light, lasting until the next turn. At first, I approached Frank Gehry's work while wearing my formal hat of an architectural historian. I teach in an architecture school where most of our students have not visited a Frank Gehry building. Historians of art and architecture often have to check at the door their own excitement about art or architecture that brought them to the field in the first place because part of academia's project is to create a critical wall between the viewer and the object of desire. If I claimed in a class lecture or in an article that Frank Gehry (or any other architect) was the best architect ever, both my colleagues and at least some of my students would consider me with suspicion. My job is not to share likes and dislikes but rather, to place every major architect within a broader cultural and historical context, drawing from the architect's own writings as well as that of the architect's defenders and detractors.

Next, I tried to bring my experience of having visited some of his buildings in person—notably the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (2003) and the Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago (2004) but not his Guggenheim museum in Bilbao (1997). Travelling is the age-honoured way architects and architecture writers have to learn about other buildings, a tradition going back to the Grand Tour of the Beaux Arts artists who travelled to Italy or of the British archaeologists who travelled to Greece. But there are also the inevitable limitations of this approach, preferable as it might be from learning about buildings only through the media. Did I really understand the Disney Concert Hall from one short visit a few summers ago? Does my liking a building, as vague as that term may be, make for a good building? Conversely, does my not liking a building discredit it? And what if I change my mind later? Gehry's buildings are demanding. They take you by surprise. They leave you tongue tied. They challenge you to come back again and again in order to begin recognizing their vocabulary and entering their space, literally and figuratively.

It is much easier to write about buildings I have liked upon first encounter. Last October, I visited Louis Kahn's Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut. The building was begun in 1973, a year before Kahn's death, and opened to the public in 1977. I vaguely knew about it but I was not prepared to be overtaken by its pitch-perfect design, proportions, materials and masterful play with light. Now I realise that part of the reason I was immediately positive about the building was the fact that its design followed the familiar principles of classical architecture. The Yale Center did not look like the Parthenon in Athens, or the British Museum in London. It was a decidedly 20th-century modernist building. However its strong geometric layout and the disciplined relationship of the parts to the whole embodied the classical order. Like Kahn, Gehry has always seen himself as an artist-architect, more inspired by the work of artists and sculptors than architects. But unlike Kahn, who searched for the elemental, timeless order in nature, society and design, Gehry captures, rather, society's inherent disorder in playful, monumental, explosive and at times even tragic shapes.

Yale Center for British Art. Photos by Eleni Bastéa.



Yale Center for British Art. Photos by Eleni Bastéa.

In Los Angeles, Gehry's adopted city, we can witness the competition between the old, classical order in architecture, and the new—anti-order order?—by comparing Gehry's Disney Concert Hall with the prominent Getty Center by Richard Meier (1997). Like the Acropolis in Athens, the Getty complex sits atop a hill high enough to afford a full view of LA on a clear day. Its austere, stripped down classicism plays its paeans to the familiar, old-world, academic order. But its cool monumentality failed to win many supporters in LA, both within and outside the art world. Did Gehry declare that the pantheon of gods have forever left Mount Olympus? Is he challenging us to replace those old gods with our own gods, of the moment, of ethnically diverse downtown LA. or of gritty, industrial Bilbao? Maybe those classical references from Rome and Palladio that Thomas Jefferson brought to Virginia have run their course in today's world. Ambivalent as I might be about the volume and pompous presence of Gehry's buildings on the street, I find myself drawn to them all the same, thinking about them long after my visit.

This debate about familiar, orderly modern architecture versus the architecture of Frank Gehry (and younger famous practitioners like Zaha Hadid or Daniel Libeskind), which follows its own rules, brings to mind the 19th-century English debate between the Classical and the Gothic Revival architects. While Neo-classicism appealed to the mind, the Gothic Revival captured one's heart. Many critics felt torn between the two styles then as many still feel torn today between the stately, if aloof, presence of Meier's Getty Center and Gehry's restless angles and controlled pyrotechnics. I believe we can only understand Frank Gehry's iconoclastic architecture by seeing it in its own urban context, as it contrasts with the high-brow classical modernism, on the one hand, and rubs against the

Walt Disney Concert Hall. Photos by Mark Forte.

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proletarian, ephemeral culture of LA, on the other hand. If it weren't for that context, we could not appreciate how Gehry has broken away from tradition. By itself, Gehry's work wouldn't make sense, just like Picasso's work wouldn't make sense as path-breaking, were it not for the traditional milieu out of which it grew.

Finally, I have to take off my architectural historian's hat because it gets in the way of understanding what buildings are about. I prefer to think about buildings as telling tales. The late Charles Moore, another California-based architect whose post-modern designs often seemed akin to stage sets, insisted that we need fairy tales, as did Louis Kahn, who reflected at a talk at Tulane University in 1972: 'It is the fairy tale that is so important. I know if I were to think of changing my profession at this moment I would think of one thing—that I would love to write the new fairy tales'.

In Sydney Pollack's documentary, Sketches of Frank Gehry (2005), we see the process of the architect as he creates these new fairy tales—which, by default, cannot be familiar or even recognisable in form. I would like to think that they come out of constant play and irreverence, irreverence towards the accepted truths of the day, akin to the biting playfulness of M. Hulot, the uncle in Jacques Tati's movie Mon oncle (1958). I show parts of that movie to my students in modern architecture because it pokes such delicious fun at the seriousness and perfection of the modern world, with its spotless design and predictability. But unlike M. Hulot, Gehry literally transforms the staid, predictable world, changing it forever. I have not met Frank Gehry in person but I imagine that when he got the commission to design the Disney Concert Hall he saw himself not only as an artist and an architect, but also as a bard and a music maker.

We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams

Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy "Ode", Music and Moonlight, 1874

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