

Frank Gehry's spectacular architecture

by Steve Cohen

[The Cultural Critic](#)

When the most flamboyant architect in the world was awarded the job of redesigning the interior — just the interior — of the Philadelphia Art Museum, the choice appeared to be puzzling.

Frank Gehry's fame comes from **spectacular curvaceous structures** covered with **reflective metal**, but he is **not allowed to alter anything on the exterior of this building**. Therefore the assignment seemed like a **mis-match**. Or could it be a **brilliant upsetting of expectations?**

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"So you want to know why I'd do a project where nothing will show on the outside? Because what's always been important to me is the inside, the purpose, the function," Gehry told me in an interview just after the assignment was announced in 2007.

Gehry's challenge at the Philadelphia Museum of Art was to create **new spaces** for art and for visitors without disturbing the classic exterior of a building that is a Philadelphia landmark. There never was an **outright prohibition** against touching the outside; it simply was not part of the plan, and **Gehry later designed new doors** and exterior stairs. He is in charge of excavating under the Museum's north side on the hill of Fairmount, and will renovate the Museum's existing interiors. A 60% increase in the museum's public space is anticipated. The project is scheduled for completion in 2020.

I point out to Gehry that he's been criticized as a proponent of the DeCon Movement in architecture, the deconstructionist movement that gives more importance to impressive exteriors than to functional necessity.

"That just isn't true," he cheerfully argues. "Everything I design is from the inside. All my projects started with the function. Disney (the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles) started with the sound of the orchestra, and Bilbao started with the gallery.

And my buildings do function. Just ask any of my clients.”



Gehry's work has provoked **extreme reactions**. My late colleague Patrick Hazard wrote in *Broad Street Review* in 2006: “Gehry is such an egotist that he thinks the **only art that matters is the art he's cadged in titanium, or some other eternal material it's futile to try to destroy**. Remember, this is the guy who achieved **notoriety** in spectacle-happy L.A. when he ‘**made over**’ his nondescript residence by making it more nondescribable with weird techno materials like galvanized fencing. It's his Jesus complex: like turning water into wine. In Gehry's most recent museum (MARTa in the northwestern German town of Herford), he uses scrofulous sheets of plywood to clad the walls of the main staircase! I mean, plywood proper is tacky enough. But Gehry appears to crave oddities. It's his sticky shtick. Yuck.”

Gehry responded by telling me, “**When I was a kid, people said that I killed Christ, and that wasn't true either. To say that what I care about most is the exterior look is wrong. Thank you for giving me a chance to rebut what those people say.**”

Before the Disney concert hall, Gehry had never been hired for a **large, expensive building**. “I heard that one of the Disney people said he'd never set foot in the building if it was designed by Gehry, and I remembered the reputation Walt Disney had for being anti-Semitic.”

“Some people say that I repeat myself, that **Disney** and **Bilbao** are similar. But they're not. I've been careful not to repeat myself. Disney and Bilbao have different shapes, different functions. Even the metal isn't the same.” Gehry goes on to observe that sculptors use plaster and painters use canvas but that doesn't mean that they're all alike.

Despite all his acclaim, Gehry often feels **vulnerable** and afraid. For example, afraid to wish for things because he fears he won't get them. “**I'm always scared,**” he says. Of what? “Scared that I won't know what to do when I start a job, for instance.” And

he's aware of negative things that are said about him.



These qualities are **endearing**. Friends describe him as a Columbo, shuffling and self-effacing. He confirms that. “I want to be a nice guy, the aw-shucks type, but inside I’m competitive as hell.”

Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, completed in 1997, is such a **stunning** achievement that it’s what people see in their **minds** when they hear his name. The architect concedes that maybe some people hire him because they expect another Bilbao, “but I tell them it’s not what I do. What you want from a **building** is that the public likes it and that it functions.”

Anne d’Harnoncourt, director of the Philadelphia museum, said: “The decision to hire him was based on the exceptional range of Gehry’s accomplishments, his love of art, **admiration for our collections**, respect for the neoclassical building, and the firm’s success even in smaller projects, such as the renovations to the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena where the hand of the architect is **discreet yet** wonderfully **sensitive** to the needs of great works of art.”

Gehry told me that he sought this project because he loves Philadelphia and he respected **d’Harnoncourt**. “I **resonate** with its collections, and Anne is one of the best museum directors in the world.” [d’Harnoncourt died unexpectedly at the age of 64 in June of 2008.]

“I always wanted to do something in **Philadelphia**. It’s an **architects’** city. I look up to Bob Venturi; he’s a mentor and I treasure my friendship with Bob and Denise (Venturi’s wife and partner.) I attended lectures by Louis Kahn and we spoke

afterwards. I loved his work. Ed Bacon was a hero of mine in the area of city planning.”

This grouping is a bit surprising when you remember how Bacon and Kahn resented each other and criticized each other’s plans. Gehry’s choices also surprise because Kahn was hailed for emphasizing the pipes, ducts and other inner functions of buildings and Venturi has been complimented for his “modest, self-effacing” architecture while Gehry’s work fits neither of these descriptions.