

COURTESY THE WALKER ART CENTER

FRANK GEHRY, MASTER BUILDER

A spectacular retrospective organized by the Walker Art Center places this Toronto-born, L.A.-based architect in the forefront of contemporary art

By ADELE FREEDMAN

September 20, 1986. A crowd is milling around a curvaceous 6.7-metre-high glass-scaled fish in the concourse of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. They've been arriving all day in waves, from Milan, California, Chicago, New York and Toronto, to celebrate the opening of *The Architecture of Frank Gehry*, an exhibition honouring the Toronto-born, Los Angeles-based architect who has reserved the right to comment on the world in a vocabulary that runs to chain-link, plywood, cardboard and, increasingly, fish. Gehry's work is so personal and inclusive, it is often put down as irrelevant to architecture or, insult of insults, populist. The fact that he's never made any secret of being influenced by art and artists has added to the confusion: is he an artist who stumbled into architecture, or an architect halfway to becoming an artist?

By organizing a travelling exhibition in Gehry's honour — it will be coming to the new Art Gallery at Harbourfront in August 1987 — the Walker Art Center's adventurous design curator, Mildred Friedman, has sounded the countercharge. Gehry is indeed an architect — a "contemporary master builder", in fact, whose work "bridges the gap between the art of building and the arts of painting and sculpture." The pronouncement is, of course, controversial. The term master builder is not taken lightly in architectural circles, either by architects vying for the coveted title or critics competing for the right to crown the next king. The mantle of Frank Lloyd Wright, the greatest architect in American history, is up for grabs — and everyone who's anyone wants a say in who's going to inherit it.

That Gehry's candidacy was being announced in Minneapolis, and not New York, where important matters such as succession are usually decided, is also controversial. Friedman offered the exhibition to the Whitney Museum of American Art, but it was refused — most likely, she says, because the Whitney has commissioned an addition from Michael Graves (who, incidentally, has been declared Wright's heir by the tireless, tiresome promoter of postmodernism, Charles Jencks) and would naturally

prefer to give Graves a show. Not for nothing does the T-shirt accompanying the Gehry exhibition bear the inscription: "Being accepted isn't everything" — a comment made by Gehry in 1984 and seized upon by Friedman as quintessentially Frank.

These were only some of the currents rustling through the conversation of the opening night crowd. Some guests had already been upstairs to see the show, others were saving it until after dinner for maximum impact. What they all experienced, sooner or later, was a double whammy to the consciousness. Not only had a 20-year sampling of Gehry's projects been collected in one place, but the architect had designed his own exhibition as well, making architecture to show architecture.

The installation looks a lot like one of Gehry's recent houses, and cost more to build than most. Gehry fitted an entire little village of one-room buildings into the gallery space, co-opting the skylight, staircase, walls and windows to achieve his own ends. Each room is an elegant piece of sculpture, a miniature art gallery for the display of models, drawings, furniture and lighting, a separate *quartier* in a magical city mysteriously implanted in Minneapolis. Together, and with an intensity bordering on confrontation, the installations communicate the full range of Gehry's palette and preoccupations.

Gehry's village is made of sleek Finnish plywood, copper, galvanized metal, corrugated cardboard, steel, lead, wooden posts and raw plywood. Three of the houses are free-standing sculptural entities, the remaining two are joined at the façade to commemorate his early experiments in exploding a building into fragments and joining the pieces together in unexpected ways. The drawings and immaculate wooden models have been placed both inside and outside the five structures so that to take them all in, you're obliged to move along streets and plazas, slip through cracks and fight your way through a forest of posts niched into the stairway and arch dividing the two-tiered gallery space.



PHOTOS COURTESY FRANK O. GEHRY AND ASSOCIATES

Frank Gehry designed his own installation for the retrospective of his work at the Walker Art Center (opposite) — an entire village of one-room buildings fitted into the gallery. Gehry's house (left) in Santa Monica (1977-78): "Armed with very little money," says Gehry, "I decided to build a new house around the old house and try to maintain a tension between the two by having one define the other."

The exhibition encourages voyeurism. The temptation to peek through doorways and windows is irresistible, creating the condition whereby a tourist can become a *flâneur* — Walter Benjamin's word for a practised explorer of the labyrinth known as the modern city. The passer-by sees the most astonishing things through Gehry's windows. To show his cardboard furniture, the objects that first brought him to national attention, he designed a room, in the shape of a trapezoid, made entirely of laminated, corrugated cardboard. The walls are thick and rough-edged, their colour and texture suggesting a remnant of a long-gone civilization. A large opening provides a tantalizing glimpse of the contours of something resembling a whale. It is covered in lead scales. The metallic leviathan turns out to be a showcase for Gehry's fish and snake lamps.

The dissection of a building into pieces and their reconstruction as a miniature city, the contrast between a formal exterior and a casual, incomplete interior, the use of angled openings to create unexpected views, the play of manufactured and organic, abstract and figurative, the subversion of expectation, the joy of manipulating space, texture, form and colour — all these hallmarks of Gehry's architecture are present and accounted for. "And to think this is happening in Minneapolis!" exulted Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman, one of Gehry's greatest supporters.

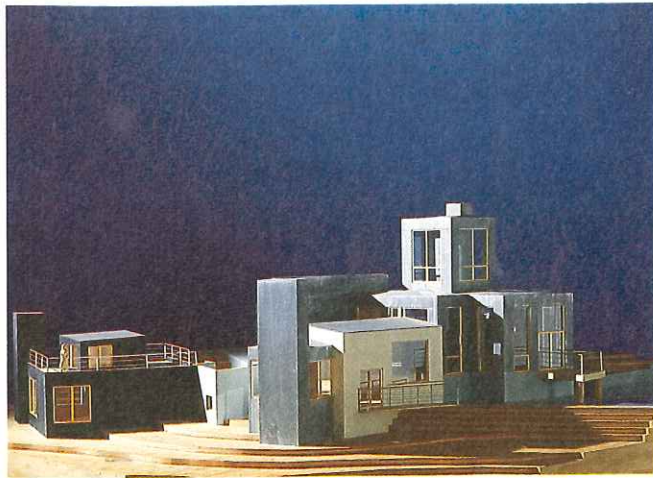
Like the exhibition, the opening-night crowd bridged art and architecture; like Gehry's buildings, it was composed of colliding fragments. Claes Oldenburg and his wife, Coosje van Bruggen, were in attendance, he a much dourer presence than might be expected of the designer of a monumental clothes-pin. So were Italian curator-impresario Germano Celant (the man responsible for *The European Iceberg* at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the spring of 1985), Los Angeles artist Charles Arnoldi, important clients, and a gaggle of art historians and hangers-on. The warmth came mainly from Gehry's family — his Panamanian wife, Berta, his 83-year-old mother, Thelma, his sister, Doreen, his

Uncle Kalman Caplan and his Aunt Ruth from Toronto, his kids — and, of course, from Gehry himself, who responded to Mildred Friedman's introduction by welcoming everyone to his Bar Mitzvah.

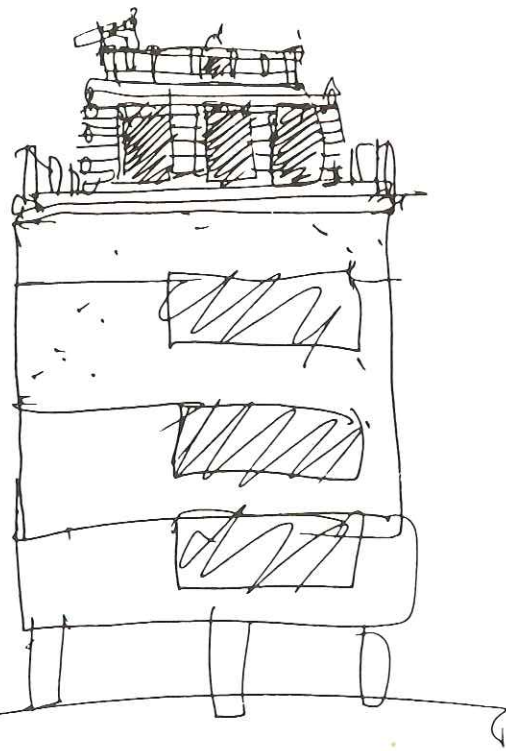
In his funny way, he was being serious. When Gehry turned 13, in 1942, his family was living in Timmins, where his father sold pinball and slot machines. Growing up Jewish in northern Ontario during World War II — think about that one and you've got the makings of a treatise on character building — Gehry, who was born Goldberg, encountered so much anti-Semitism as an adolescent his parents had to talk him into having a Bar Mitzvah. Forty-four years later, friends and family in attendance, he was being confirmed as a master builder. Being accepted may not be everything, but it can make up for a lot.

Gehry travelled a tortuous path to architecture. He was born in Toronto in 1929. His family lived on Dundas Street near Dufferin, in a neighbourhood with a large Jewish immigrant population. The family pet, he loved hanging out at his grandfather Caplan's hardware store, fascinated with the inventory. His grandmother took home wooden shavings that she and Gehry turned into toys and roads. Just before his father moved the family to Los Angeles in 1947 — his livelihood removed because slot machines had been declared illegal and he was in ill health — Gehry looked up the University of Toronto architecture exams in the library. By reading the questions, he knew the school wasn't for him. At this point, confused and upset by his father's illness, he wasn't sure what was.

In Los Angeles, the Goldbergs had it tough. For two years, according to Doreen, she and Frank took turns sleeping on the fold-out bed in one of two rooms occupied by the family. Like all Jewish sons, Gehry was under pressure to succeed. He drove a truck, delivering and installing breakfast nooks for a cousin. He enrolled in fine arts part-time at the University of Southern California, where his ceramics teacher encouraged him to transfer



The Sirmai-Peterson house (top) in Thousand Oaks, California (1984-86) is a series of one-room buildings arranged to take maximum advantage of its ravine site. Main Street 1975-1986 (above) is a project for an L.A. ad agency that will feature Claes Oldenburg's binoculars. A sketch (below) for Gehry's Wosk residence (1982-84) reveals his idea for "a village on the roof".



into the architecture program. Slowly, he found friends and mentors. In 1952, he married. His wife, a legal secretary, helped him through college. When he graduated in 1954, she insisted they change their surname to something less Jewish-sounding — a common practice in those days. She looked through the L.A. telephone book under G until she found something suitably aristocratic. Later, the whole family changed their name to Gehry, in a gesture of solidarity.

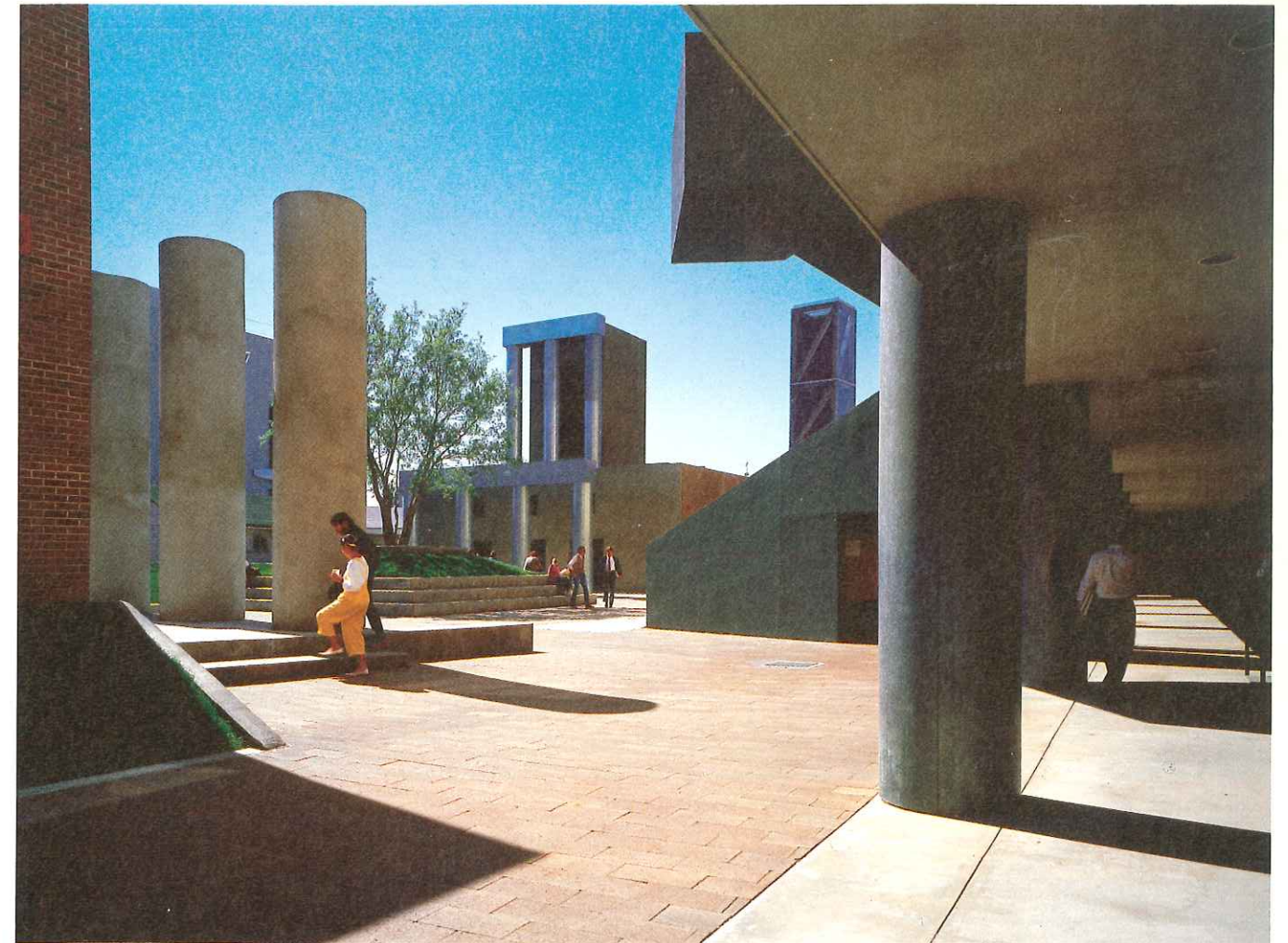
Gehry set up his own practice in Los Angeles in 1962, after spending time at Harvard, in Paris and in the office of Victor Gruen Associates, a company that does a lot of developer work. He was divorced in 1966, remarried 10 years later. An outsider by birth, upbringing and sensibility, Gehry has managed to wrest from a life of upheavals and eruptions a strange sort of beauty. It's the way Gehry's architecture has evolved out of his experience and his commitment to reality that makes it so compelling.

Gehry's relationship with art and artists is complex. Over the years he has designed studios for artists, collaborated with people like Richard Serra on exhibitions, built houses for collectors, mounted exhibitions, exhibited major works in his house, and designated art works for his own commissions. He thought a lot about painters like Cézanne and Giorgio Morandi and he counted artists among his best friends and major influences — Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Robert Irwin, Ed Moses, Larry Bell, Arnolli, Oldenburg. He's learned from all of them, but what he takes, he transforms with the part of his mind that thinks like an architect. He specializes in buildings pared down to simple forms, or "dumb shapes", as he calls them, exposed-lathing and joists, tough sculptural shells concealing incomplete interiors, illusions of perspective and space, the play of light, shadow and reflections — preoccupations that resonate with contemporary art concerns.

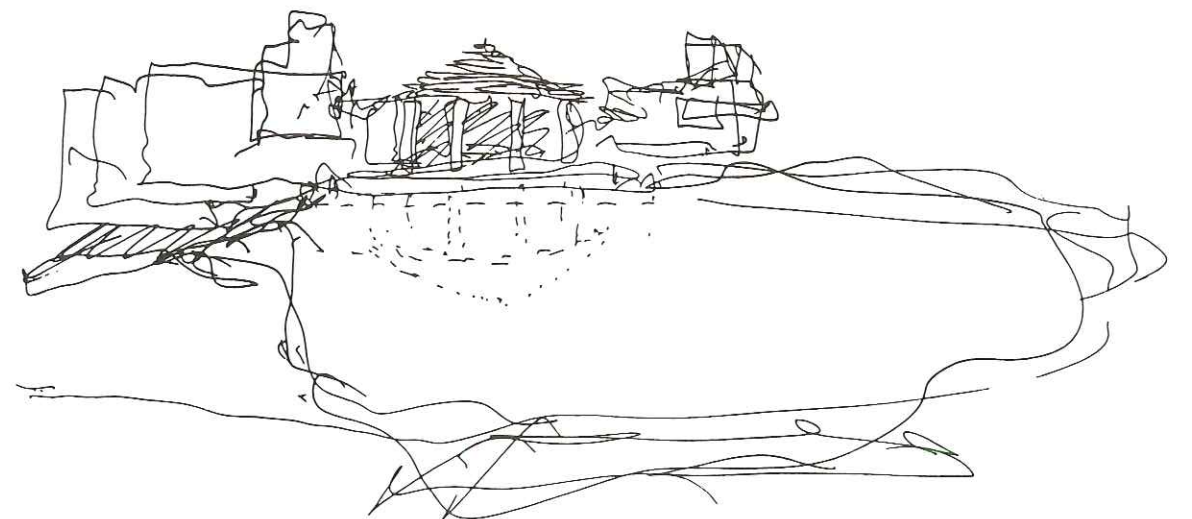
But at the same time as he's striving for simplicity, he's striving for richness and presence and inhaling the context of a project, the forms and colours of the city, so he can exhale it as architecture. Memories, images, hunches, and observations of social behaviour keep surfacing; and, of course, there are the program, the budget, the client. Out of all these, working by free association, he makes buildings where one dimension frequently contradicts another, creating surprising juxtapositions of forms and materials, textures and colours, insides and outsides. Gehry's is an architecture of simultaneity. He's dealing with everything at once — and most of all, he's dealing with himself.

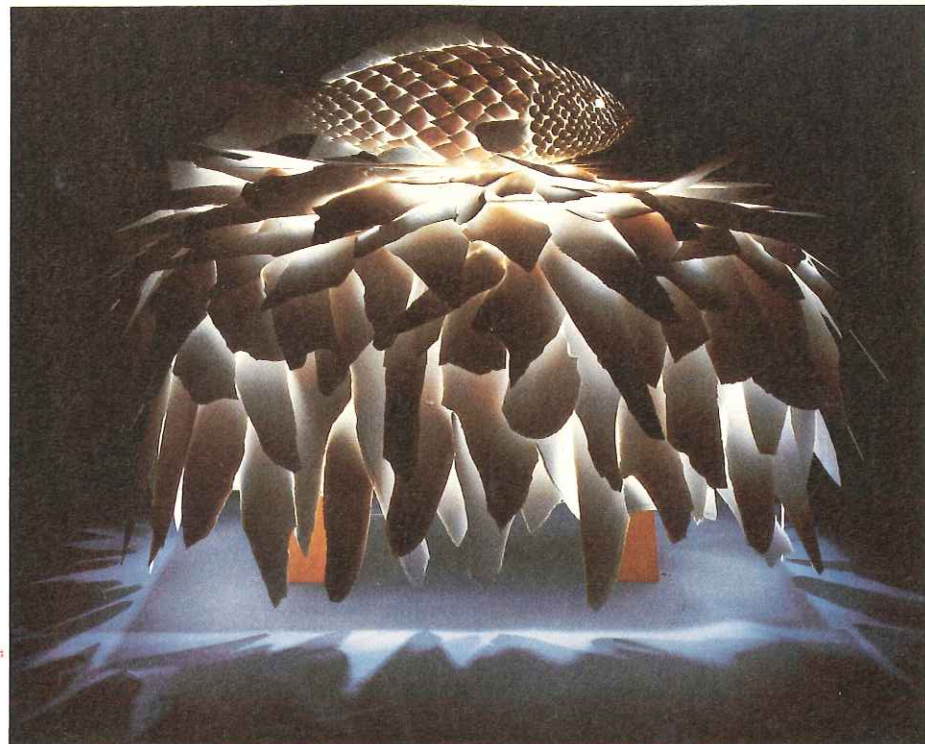
For Gehry, art is a kind of paradigm for the intensity and contact he wants out of making architecture. His houses made of one-room buildings, each expressing a different function, came to him from the idea of somebody confronting a blank canvas. "That's an incredible moment, I would guess, before you make the first stroke. How do you get close to that experience? You simplify all the stuff, you take away everything extraneous, and a one-room building was close. It's very simple: you have to face yourself."

These are not the words or attitudes of the architectural establishment, particularly now that architects have all but rejected the utopianism and social ideology of modernism and turned back the clock to classical standard time. Gehry knows his history as well as any architect, but the designer classicism favoured by his colleagues doesn't get his vote. (In fact, one of the things that troubles critics who appreciate Gehry's talent is that he could never become the leader of a movement or school.) In this context, Gehry's alignment with artists is a political statement. He refers to his work as a visual commentary: "The materials you pick, the way you deal with projects or the criticism of your colleagues — whatever you know, you criticize. You criticize yourself, you criticize your times. I'm more a streetfighter than a Roman scholar."



At Loyola Law School (1981-84), Gehry separated out the moot court, two classrooms and a chapel from the main building so that students, on what was once a site without character or dignity, could enjoy a campus village with a sense of community. Below: Gehry's ink-on-paper sketch for the Sirmai-Peterson house.





One of the most lyrical of Gehry's commentaries is the Norton House on the beach in Venice, California, which from the outside looks like a collage of boxes turned inside out. It's as though a building had been cut in half by a wrecking ball so that you could peer at the remains of the interiors. The inside is filled with light and flows with a gentle rhythm. Gehry designed a one-room studio on a perch for his client, a screenwriter who has fond memories of being a lifeguard. The elevated office overlooks the busy beach but maintains its distance. (Privacy is a prime concern for Gehry. However exhibitionist his buildings can look, they remain sanctums.)

Gehry has designed buildings of only one room, buildings with two interconnected parts, and lately, buildings with so many pieces they become villages. These can be of large or small scale. At Loyola Law School in L.A., one of his finest projects, he separated out the moot court, two classrooms and a chapel from the main building so that students, on what was once a shabby site without character or dignity, could move around a campus village and experience a sense of community. To create a feeling of diversity he had one of the classrooms clad in brick, another in wood and the chapel done in Finnish plywood. From the upper floors of the administration building three sculptural open stairways turn down to the courtyard below — a visual metaphor of human action freeing itself from the rule of law, and a simple way to animate a space.

No two of Gehry's canvases are alike, although the vocabulary of forms and materials he has used over the years is recognizably his own. The Sirmai-Peterson house under construction in Thousand Oaks, California, another series of one-room buildings, is majestic in character. The room/buildings cascade down a slope in five or six directions from a central cross-piece. They're joined by stairways and corridors, some open to the elements, others covered or even submerged. Where the living-room and

bedrooms come together Gehry created a courtyard. Instead of each piece being clad in a separate material, the house will be covered in stucco and sheet metal. The whole composition resembles a Romanesque church quietly going out of control. This isn't a case of chaos-for-chaos's sake — Gehry's seemingly casual compositions are strictly calculated — but of opening up a structure to many viewpoints, many interpretations. Compared with corporate neo-classicism, say, his work connotes anti-authoritarianism. Wherever you stand to view the Sirmai-Peterson house, the house faces you.

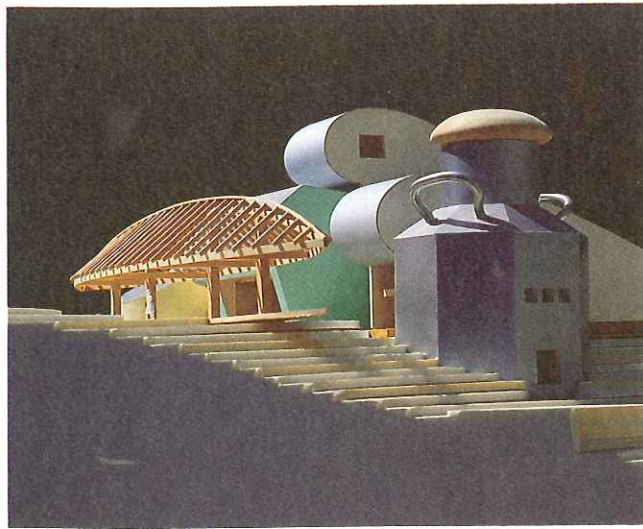
The Winton guest house in Minnesota is almost a commentary on Sirmai-Peterson. The main house was designed by Philip Johnson in the '50s and the Wintons didn't want Gehry to upstage it. His solution was to go sculptural. He gave the Wintons a pretend sculpture garden to be viewed from the terrace of the main house — no windows or doors will be visible from the terrace — an abstract ruin, a still life. The guest house is only 167 to 186 square metres, but it's been broken up into six pieces, the claddings to consist of firebrick, Finnish plywood, limestone, lead-coated copper. Each piece is a pure form and connected to the others in a way that maintains the illusion of separateness. The feeling of a town is preserved by the variegated shapes that make up its miniature jagged skyline. Because the connections have been suppressed, the guest house gives the impression of stillness despite its many skins, while the Sirmai-Peterson house conveys spatial excitement despite the reduced palette of materials.

Gehry's collaborations with Claes Oldenburg are a highly visible way to explore the relationship between art and architecture. They met in the '60s and by the time of their first project, in 1983, they were ready for each other. Oldenburg was designing monumental (or anti-monumental) outdoor projects that involved working with context, building codes, engineering and structural



The architect as "Frankie P. Toronto" (opposite, left) in the 1985 performance in Venice organized with Germano Celant, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Gehry's 1984 Low White Fish Lamp (opposite, right) is an example of his inventive use of materials — in this case, Formica's Colorcore. At Rebecca's (1984-86), a restaurant in Venice, California (left), Gehry installed glass fish and an octopus chandelier. Crocodiles adorn the bar. The Norton house (1983-84) includes a study overlooking the beach (below) inspired by the client's fond recollections of being a lifeguard.





teams, and Gehry had begun working with representational forms like fish, eagles and snakes. In 1983 Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen designed a piece for Loyola, but this wasn't a true collaboration.

That had to wait until 1984, when at the invitation of Germano Celant, the trio worked on a project in Venice that combined performance and architecture. They chose the image of a Swiss army knife to link the performance and architectural parts of the project and "to reconcile historical Venice with its present status of tourist city". The knife was an apt image for Gehry, who specializes in cutting away buildings to reveal their bones. Working with students, Gehry plotted a new section of the city in the form of a complex of islets. They made two models, one of the area around the Arsenale, and the other of Coltello Island, a structure to house artisans and to include a bank, a medical clinic, a fire station and a theatre. The buildings would appear to slice up out of the water. A Gehry snake turned up as the fire station form, next to an office building by Oldenburg drawn as the opened lid of a grand piano. To house the library, van Bruggen and Oldenburg suggested a brick façade shaped like binoculars, and Gehry and van Bruggen proposed a theatre whose rear wall would serve as a drive-in movie for gondolas.

The three had problems reconciling and justifying their images, but went on to collaborate on one of Gehry's next commissions, a mountain summer camp for kids with cancer, to be called Camp Good Times. They designed it as a village filled with the imagery of boats and sails. Their ideas really jelled in the dining hall. They decided the roof should be a literalization of a wave form — sliced frozen waves, says van Bruggen — and the kitchen an Oldenburg milk can to harmonize with the bucolic surroundings. Nothing came of the project because the camp administration decided to go with traditional huts.

Recently Gehry and Oldenburg have been collaborating on an office building for Chiat/Day, an L.A. ad agency, called Main Street 1975-1986. Oldenburg's binoculars reappear as the centrepiece of the project, forming the entrance and containing a library. Gehry's contributions are a curved boatlike shape to one side and a forest of tree forms on the other. "Rather than be influenced by dead artists, as many of my colleagues tend to be, I have always felt that living artists are working on the same issues I am," Gehry has said. But he's influenced by dead artists all the same, in a mysterious, dialectical way.

"When I started doing one-room buildings," he says, "I started seeing Morandi in a different way, and then I started looking at Cézanne's still lifes, and other still lifes, in a different way than I had. I'd always looked at them as a total composition. And now I started looking at the pieces as individual pieces, and at their relationships to each other, and then the spaces between — which made it possible for me to see Matisse's cut-outs differently. I didn't get them before. I remember seeing them when he was doing them, and I thought: 'The guy's off the end.' But now I've started to see the singular pieces playing off each other — it's objects next to objects — and they're so beautiful, because you sense the hands-on, the cut of this masterful scissor cutting through the thing, quietly, effortlessly. I hope when I'm that age — he was in his 70s — I can do something like that."

But he's already done something equally daring. Given the long and laborious process by which buildings are put up, the fact that he's gotten so many of his artistic visions built is itself an achievement. Next to most practitioners he's a one-man Paris in the Twenties — a commentary on the compartmentalization and conformism of his profession. By the time his next Bar Mitzvah rolls around, Gehry will be recognized as the true thinker of his generation.

ADELE FREEDMAN IS THE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN CRITIC FOR *THE GLOBE AND MAIL*.



Camp Good Times (opposite, top), a project designed by Gehry, Oldenburg and van Bruggen, was never built. For the Winton guest house (opposite, middle), Gehry created a string of sculptured room/buildings that the clients could view from the main house designed by Philip Johnson. Gehry's sketch (opposite, below) for *Il Corso del Coltello*: an imaginary project that formed a whole new section of Venice. Above: "The closest thing I'll ever get to designing a gothic cathedral," says Gehry of his California Aerospace Museum (1982-84). Below: Gehry's initial drawing for his own house.

