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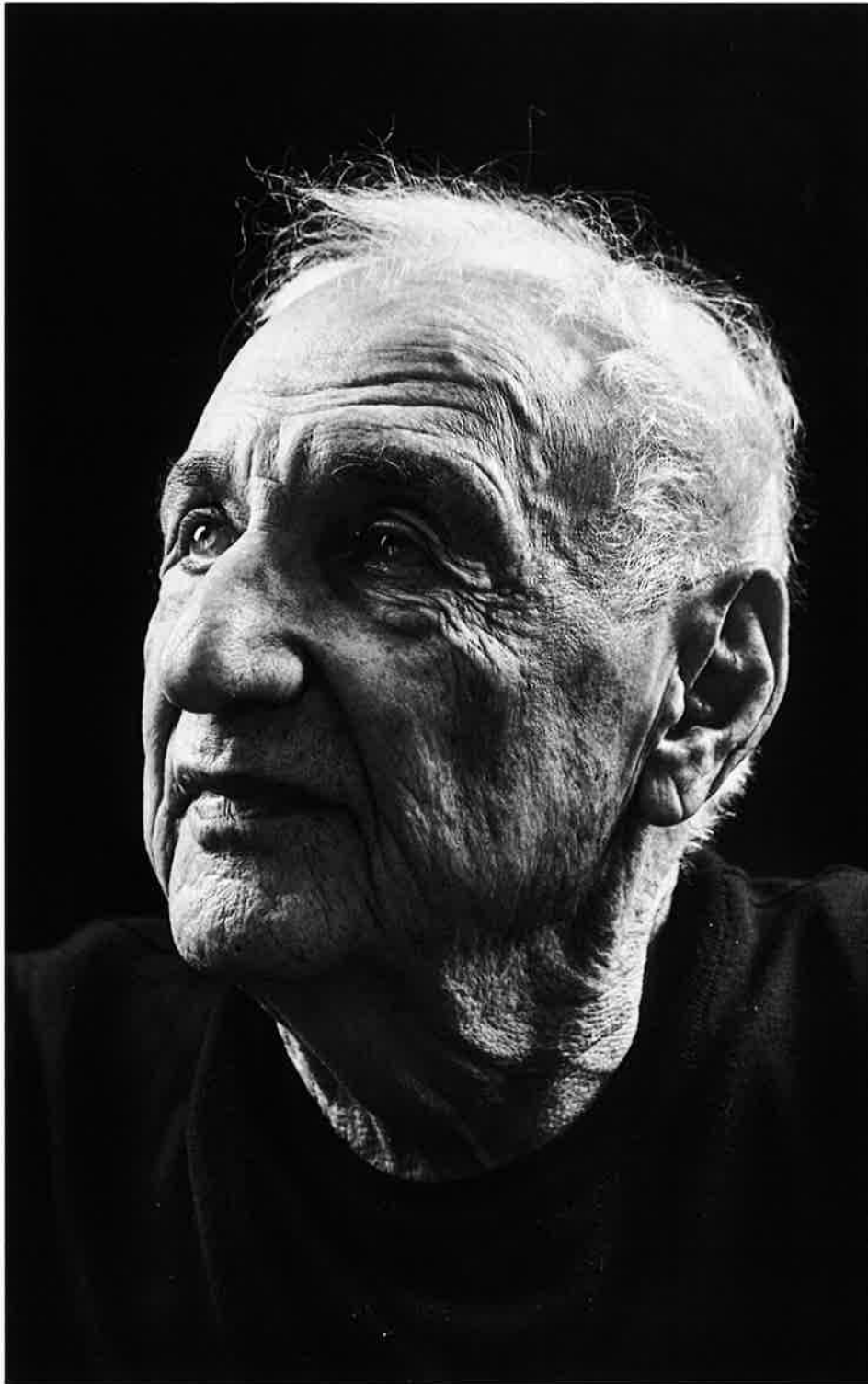
FRANK O. GEHRY,
ARCHITECT



FRANK GEHRY

THE WORLD'S MOST CELEBRATED ARCHITECT SPEAKS HIS MIND ABOUT LOS ANGELES, DEVELOPMENT AND HIS ABIDING PASSIONS

By Hunter Drohojowska-Philp / Portraits by Sam Frost



In his warehouse offices conveniently close to LAX, with models and plans and desks extending as far as the eye can see, the world's most celebrated architect sits at his desk wearing a green T-shirt emblazoned "Frank O'Gehry." It is St. Patrick's Day and, no, Frank O. Gehry is not Irish. "The family name was Goldberg and my mother, who had some kind of fantasy about having English roots, which she didn't, assumed airs every once in a while," he says. "She decided that Frank should have an O, for Owen, so I could become Frank Owen, very British, and get rid of the Goldberg."

That didn't happen until 1956, after Gehry had moved to Los Angeles from his native Toronto and graduated from USC architecture school. He says that his former mother-in-law chose the name Gehry to avoid any anti-Semitic bias that might affect his career. Gehry, however, has never denied his upbringing. Most recently, his support of Jewish causes led him to design Boulez Hall in Berlin for the Divan Orchestra, which combines Israeli and Palestinian players.

From his chain-link-and-corrugated-metal-clad 1978 Santa Monica house—where he raised his two sons and still lives with his wife, Berta—to the much-lauded 2003 Disney Hall in downtown L.A., Gehry established a personal vision of architecture that has only gotten bolder with time. Now 88, he remains astonishingly busy. He is designing multiple commercial and residential buildings—including, in Los Angeles, the Grand Avenue project, a Sunset Boulevard development and the L.A. River project—along with an impressive roster of pro-bono commitments. His work has earned him countless awards, from the Pritzker Prize in 1989 to the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2016. The Getty Research Institute recently acquired his archives from 1954 to 1988 and is currently honoring Disney Hall in the exhibit "Berlin/Los Angeles: Space for Music."

HDP: You've worked in Los Angeles for six decades, and your buildings have had a tremendous impact in locations around the world. In what ways do you think your work has been formed by the city?

FOG: That's a long story, but L.A. is West Coast and therefore very Asia-centric. In architecture, when I started, professors were returning G.I.s who had seen the Katsura and Ise shrines and all those beautiful buildings. We were building tract houses out of two-by-fours, and it was easy to put those two ideas together and say, wow, you've got this wood, you could build beautiful things like they do in Japan. So I studied Japanese literature and the music and the art as well as the architecture. I really dove into it. That's a West Coast thing. I think it infected the art world here, too.

HDP: When you started here, L.A. was suburban and not so cosmopolitan. It was a horizontal sprawl with mostly single-story houses and dingbat apartment buildings. How did you come to terms with that lack of a developed sensibility?

FOG: I used it, I think. It became part of my building vocabulary. I still take from what is happening around me. When I was young and starting out, I had to work with wood and plaster. I found a way to find a personal expression in that. Once I became aware of Rauschenberg's Combines, I could relate to that, because some of that was going on in Bob's work, using raw materials. It was very matter of fact.

HDP: From the beginning, you did things like using rough concrete stucco on the Danziger house. How were you able to see that such industrial materials were useful and had their own aesthetic potential?

FOG: Nothing was precious. I didn't have rich clients. I'd seen some of the freeways being built, and they sprayed a concrete called tunnel mix. I liked the texture, so I mimicked that on the Danziger building to get a surface that you didn't have to clean, that would withstand the dust and smoke of the traffic on Melrose Avenue. It was a contrast. The outside was a fortress, in a way, with a protected interior that was wood and plywood.

HDP: I can think of influential buildings from MOCA's Temporary Contemporary [now the Geffen Contemporary] to Disney Hall. How do you see your impact on L.A.?

FOG: I could do the Temporary Contemporary because I was willing to take the rough-and-ready and use it, to make a few moves that made an old warehouse work as a museum.

If you think about it, that's what I just did in Berlin, where I took an old warehouse and turned it into the Pierre Boulez concert hall. Maybe I'm more inclined to do that than some people. I'm not precious about stuff. I don't need marble and fancy materials. When I build for myself, I don't do that.

HDP: John Baldessari is excited about the house you designed for him. It isn't a huge budget. Why did you decide to do this house for him?

FOG: Because I love him. [He laughs.]

HDP: So you still do projects just for the passion?

FOG: Yes, always.

HDP: Why?

FOG: I can deliver better. I can do better work. I'm emotionally involved. I love classical music, so when anyone calls me to do a music room, I'll go flying. I think the more commercial projects that we've been doing, like Grand Avenue, is completing a part of cultural history, and that's exciting.

HDP: And Grand Avenue will relate to your Disney Hall.

FOG: The developers think Disney Hall is a big asset to their development, so it's a very positive relationship so far and I hope it continues.

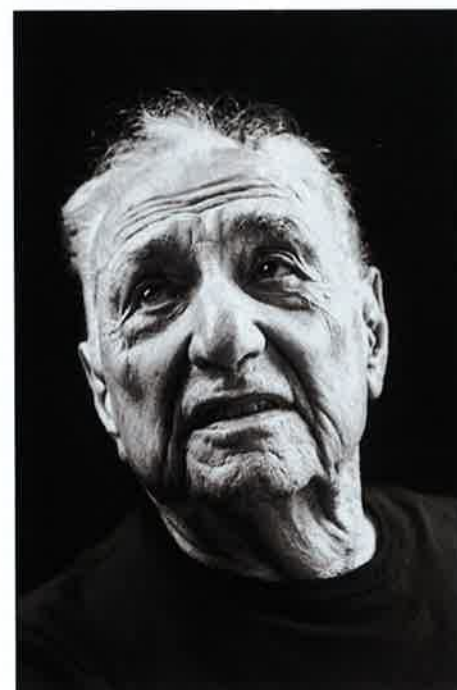
HDP: It has also been a bumpy one.

FOG: That has nothing to do with what I'm involved in. That has to do with world economies, God knows what. They are finally doing it, and it is exciting.

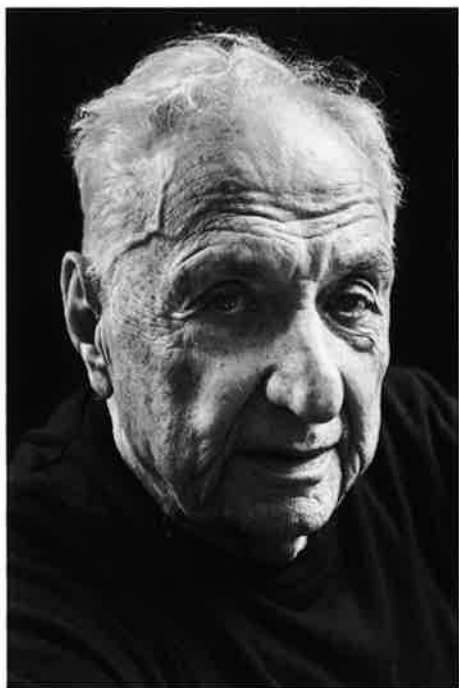
HDP: Another commercial development you're doing is on Sunset Boulevard and Crescent Heights.

FOG: Yes, the developers [Townscape Partners] are young guys who worked for Related, the developers of the Grand Avenue project. I'm old enough to remember the Garden of Allah there on Sunset when I first came to L.A. Then Bart Lytton tore it down to build a bank. The Garden of Allah was historic—it was a big piece of Hollywood history that was replaced with a bank. And now they're trying to preserve the bank! I've had five of my buildings torn down, and none of those people came out to stop that from happening.

"I DON'T NEED MARBLE AND FANCY MATERIALS. WHEN I BUILD FOR MYSELF, I DON'T USE THAT."



"IT IS POSSIBLE TO TRANSMIT FEELINGS WITH INERT MATERIALS. I THINK THE WORD FEELING IS IMPORTANT."



HDP: How do you feel if one of your buildings gets torn down?

FOG: It depends. Santa Monica Place was a compromised building. I never felt that deep ownership that I feel for Disney Hall. When they tore that down—and it was done by John Jerde, who was a good friend—I figured I wasn't going to make any fuss over it. But nobody asked me. The point I'm trying to make is that nobody asked me how I felt about them tearing down my building. And this is bigger than Kurt Meyer's bank building.

HDP: You have a lengthy and informed interest in urban planning. When you are asked to build a big project on Sunset Boulevard and Crescent Heights, how do you feel about its impact on traffic? How do we reconcile building better buildings with people getting to them?

FOG: We're providing a lot of parking with access from many sides. I think the studies show that we've mitigated a lot of the impact. If you carry that further, why would you get up in the morning? Or go to work? As soon as you get in the car, you're creating traffic. [He laughs.] That's a bigger problem. The city doesn't have adequate preparations for the amount of stuff that's getting built. I'd like an ordinance that says you've got to do better buildings. Put more humanity in them, look out for people. Buildings that are more humanly oriented do pay off. The Bilbao [museum in Spain] certainly paid off. People love going there.

HDP: It will be hard to live up to the Garden of Allah in the humane department. How can you do that?

FOG: I think it's ethically important for architects who make buildings for people to consider that there are feelings people have about materials and scale and relationships of rooms and sizes and walls. Architects should be required to do that. The buildings are backgrounds for our lives. It is possible to transmit feelings with inert materials. I think the word *feeling* is important.

HDP: That's a Frank Gehry specialty. You've always made an effort to do that, even though it was in conceptual opposition to the architectural standards of your time.

FOG: Well, you border on kitsch if you start to carry that line of thinking too far. I'm not talking about cutesy little houses with thatched roofs. There's a feeling in a space when you enter it that makes you feel comfortable. It's that kind of thing. The worst offenders are the buildings all over the world that are built in

downtowns. They look the same. They are tall, glass, mirrored, they twist here and there, but there is a lot of sameness. The process creates the sameness.

HDP: Can that sameness be avoided in L.A.?

FOG: Yes, if someone took the time to think about feeling and make it a value. And it doesn't cost extra. That's the thing I've been proving. Not only can you avoid sameness, you can be humane and welcoming and have feeling. It's not that hard to do.

HDP: Since the 1960s, L.A. seems to have become a place for innovative architecture. Are you finding that?

FOG: No. In the individual house realm you have a lot of good people doing good projects, but in the commercial realm you don't see a lot of good work.

HDP: So there is room for more innovative architecture in the commercial realm of L.A.?

FOG: Yes, but you've got to change the culture of commercial developers. Right now, most of the money for commercial development in L.A. is coming from China. And it's very overpowering. It doesn't have an aesthetic mandate that comes with it. It has a commercial mandate, period. It's short sighted, but most of these buildings are built quick, resold and turned over, so there's no sense in the culture today of long-term ownership or pride.

HDP: Is that something unique to L.A., or is that international?

FOG: It's around the world. I think it's unethical. When you're building things like that, you're creating spaces and places that affect the lives of many people. And yet you don't have a sense of responsibility to the nuances of feeling. Frank Lloyd Wright, who I didn't pay much attention to, though I loved his work—I thought he was crazy. But I've come full circle on him, because he really was out there all alone, and he really was doing humane environments that were his own language but had humanity and scale and love in them.

HDP: Giving back is a big part of what you're doing now. You're active in the Turnaround School Project, but you were doing something similar with your sister Doreen Nelson in 1968. What is it about education that appeals to you?

FOG: It's very satisfying to feel like you're making a difference in a few people's lives. It doesn't take much.

"I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT MY LEGACY."



HDP: Another of your pro-bono efforts is the L.A. River project, which seems like a microcosm of all the problems that could possibly emerge around urban planning, architecture and development.

FOG: Mayor Garcetti and a group asked me if I would help them conceptualize what to do with the L.A. River. I started by meeting with all the cities along the fifty-one miles of river. That's something they hadn't done. There are fifteen cities with mayors. Garcetti is only one mayor. There has been a notion that you could make the river open space. The only problem is that the river is a flood-control project, and every once in a while Godzilla comes through and washes everything away. And people with it. The flood-control issues are in conflict with the recreational issues. People have been trying to mash them together, and it hasn't worked. If you separate them and say there is a flood-control system *and* there are recreational issues, then you get an opening for an idea. I think there are solutions.

HDP: With all these projects, how do you keep going?

FOG: Boulez Hall was a different kind of love affair. I read about Daniel Barenboim and [the late] Edward Said. Their Divan Orchestra has Palestinians and Israelis playing together, so they talk to each other through music. I thought, What if we were to give a concert facility for the Divan orchestra? I always take the kids to Berlin, because the philharmonic by Hans Sharoun is the turning point for modern concert halls. While I was in Berlin, they were building a school in this warehouse in which Barenboim was going to have a small rehearsal hall. I had dinner with him and asked what he was planning. He said, "Frank could you help me?" I did some sketches of an oval design in front of him. But you couldn't have risers for the orchestra, so I drew it later as a box, made a maquette and took it to him. He looked at it and said, "You're Frank Gehry, what are you doing?" He had no patience with me. He said, "What happened to the oval? We should start there." I said, "It can't have risers." He said, "I don't give a damn about the risers, I want the oval." So then we came up with the new design and this balcony, which is beautiful. It dips down on the end. What a seat to watch the performance from! It's like having them in your living room.

HDP: That sort of work feeds you on some level. You waived your fee.

FOG: I always forget about the fee anyway. My office runs like a business. Now I'm older and I can do what I want with some of my time.

HDP: What do you still see that is good and pleasurable about L.A. today as a city where people can live, work and be creative?

FOG: There is still a freedom here. Because it's spread out, people aren't looking over each other's shoulders like they are in the dense forest of New York, where the old architectural scene was really claustrophobic. It doesn't exist here.

HDP: Is there hope for L.A. in what seems to be rampant development?

FOG: There's no hope for it to be architecture. Architecture will still remain a small percentage of the built environment.

HDP: Do you have advice for Mayor Garcetti and the developers here? Your voice carries a lot of weight.

FOG: [long pause] Well, I think they are ethically responsible for a better built environment. I don't think they see it that way. Everything is against it, because nobody cares. They should take the time to understand what is available architecturally, what talent exists, and then try to manifest it as part of these projects. Not just let people come in with third-rate developments that make the city uglier and uglier. I don't think elected officials think about that. Architecture is not a real value in their lives. They want it to be, maybe, but they don't understand it. Though Mayor Garcetti has my chairs in his office! But I don't see capital *A* architecture that made the great cities, the great buildings. I don't see that as a valued priority in today's politics.

HDP: It was recently announced that a large portion of your archives will be maintained by the Getty Research Institute. What legacy do you want to leave at this point?

FOG: I don't give a damn about my legacy.

HDP: Isn't that the premise of architecture? That it is lasting?

FOG: Well, it's there. Go look at it if you want. I did it, I loved it, I enjoyed it, I got paid, mostly. It's been fun. I'm still doing it. ■