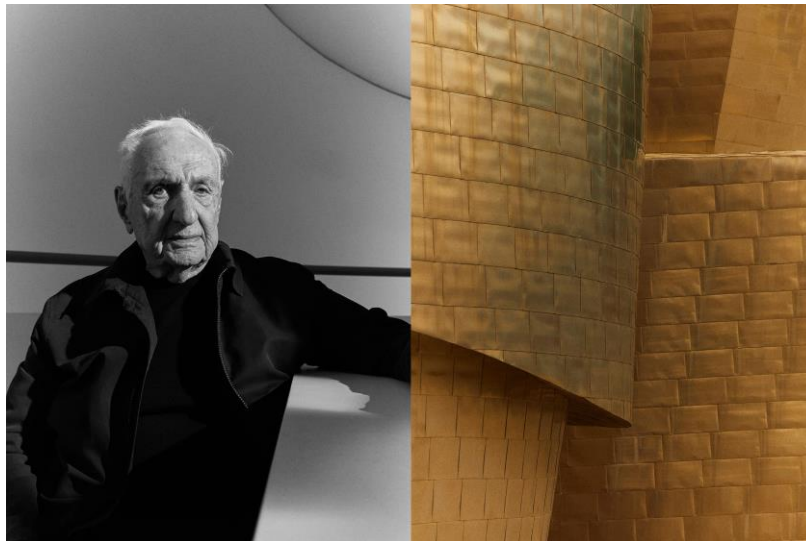


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TIME

## How Frank Gehry Changed Buildings—and Cities—Forever

Belinda Luscombe



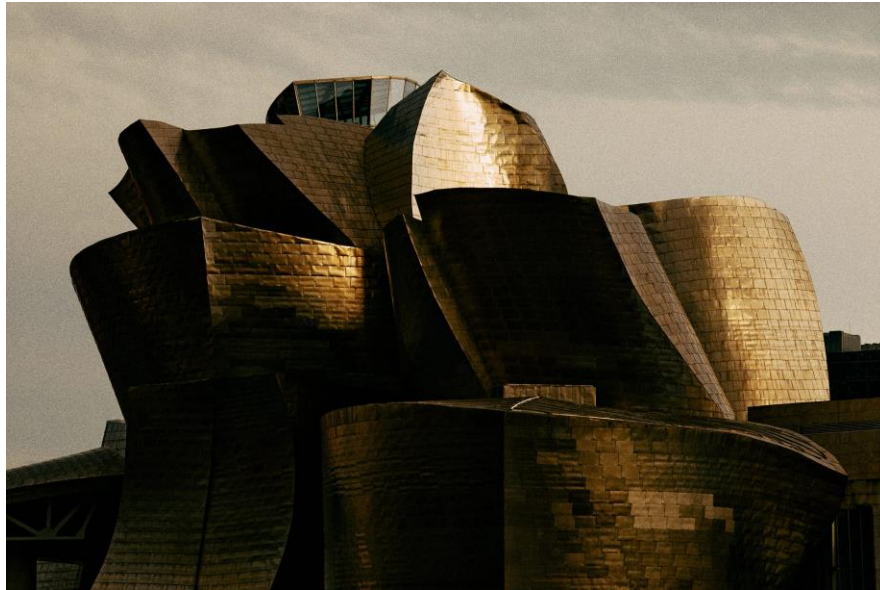
*Frank Gehry says he won't retire, but he might "just leave one day and not tell anybody about it." Vivek Vadoliya for TIME*

Frank Gehry wants to build a park in Los Angeles. Not just a normal park on empty land; that's for lightweights. Gehry wants to take chunks of the legendarily unlovely Los Angeles River, a 51-mile engineered waterway mostly lined with concrete, and suspend parks over them. It sounds like a pipe dream, or in this case more of a channel dream; it's expensive, unprecedented, structurally complex, and anathema to many of the locals. But Gehry, 94, has made a career of overcoming such obstacles and, in the process, transforming cities.

Skepticism was also the initial response of officials in charge of selecting the architect for the Guggenheim Museum in the northern Spanish town of Bilbao, upon seeing the extremely rough models Gehry presented in 1991, in one version of which a tower was represented by an old bottle. "There was a lot of 'Oh my God, what?'" says Juan Ignacio Vidarte, the director general of the gallery, who was at the meeting where Gehry made his pitch. "But after trying to understand, there was the unanimous decision that this was the right project."

Gehry won the competition with a design that looks from some angles like a silverized Spanish galleon and from others like a prayer circle of titanium nuns. The finished building not only put Gehry on the map globally, and Bilbao on the map globally, but also became that very rare thing: a cultural artifact that was a classic as soon as it appeared. The officials behind the plan to revive

Bilbao had hoped to get 500,000 people a year to visit. In the first three years after its 1997 opening, they got 4 million, and have had 21 million in the years since.



*Revisiting the museum that started it all, the 94-year-old architect reflects on his methods, his influence, and his ambitious new projects Vivek Vadoliya for TIME*

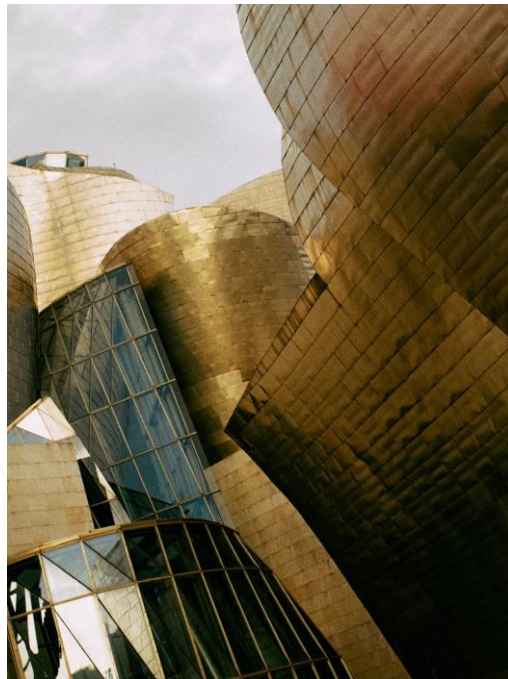
Partly because of that museum, and partly because of his string of pioneering edifices that followed, Gehry is now regarded as the most significant North American architect of his era, and perhaps the most celebrated living architect in the world. He has buildings on almost every continent, and shows no sign of stopping. He still heads into the office—and swims—every day. Construction will soon begin on his tallest building ever, in his birthplace of Toronto, and has just finished on one in Santa Monica, Calif., his home since the '60s. A recent study in the *Harvard Business Review* claims he is the only architect whose buildings deliver the promised return on investment. And he's got plenty of fire left, talking smack about how Santa Monica "builds a lot of high-level crap," leading that ambitious charge for the riverway, and hopping on a plane to Bilbao for a fiesta.

"I think it's a lot of happenstance," Gehry says of his success. He's not particularly interested in being an oracle; he leans into his Canadian diffidence, perhaps to disarm clients who are expecting a starchitect. He's not invested in the complex geometry he favors becoming the prevailing style. His working theory of how to create worthwhile structures is simple: "I don't think you have to spend egregious amounts of money to make buildings that are good for the community, good for our world, that are interesting, and that are humanly accessible," he says. "I don't think you have to pay a lot extra. You just have to want to do it."

Nevertheless, standing on the third floor of the Guggenheim during its 25th-anniversary celebrations in October 2022, even Gehry seemed a little awed. "When you look at your old buildings, you're very critical of every little detail," he says, looking around. "And I love it, I think. I find I love it." Even more, he loves how vibrant Bilbao now is, compared with when he first visited in 1991. The streets are buzzing. "There's a whole feeling of life that's different," he says. "It makes me feel good that we contributed to that."

**Even 30 years ago**, Gehry's success seemed very unlikely. In 1991, the year he won the Guggenheim commission, he was known for his quirky home in Santa Monica, a bunch of fish sculptures he now calls kitsch, and some oddball local structures. His most promising project, a new concert hall for the Los Angeles Philharmonic paid for by the Disney family, was in the limbo Hollywood calls "turnaround." Bilbao changed everything. "They were making accusations that [Disney Hall] was unbuildable," says Vidarte. "So we said, 'Well, we can prove them wrong.'"

Every great movement starts with discontent, and Gehry's was that he couldn't figure out how to build what he could draw. "I was looking for a way to express movement," he says. He found Modernism cold and post-Modernism reductive. Inspired by fish, he landed on curves. "I got into fish because they are millions of years old, they express movement, and they have an architectural quality," he says. But fish are slippery; he'd send builders detailed plans and mathematical calculations for sinuous walls and they'd follow them closely, yet the two halves wouldn't meet.



*The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao cost \$97 million and added an estimated \$3.5 billion to the local economy Vivek Vadoliya for TIME*



*Vivek Vadoliya for TIME*

While traveling, he wondered how the curves of plane fuselages were fabricated, which led him to CATIA, the software the French aerospace company Dassault used to design aircraft. Digital Project, the software that Gehry's office developed out of CATIA, now used by many of his peers, enables his team to iron out any wrinkles—or in Gehry's case, add them—before the builders break ground.

His 135-person office (Gehry barely knows how to use a computer) produces sometimes hundreds of digital iterations before they arrive at the combination of shapes and forms that meet all the necessary criteria. Having crunched the input from each of the project's many consultants, Digital Project then breaks those shapes into buildable structural elements, and produces data to allow factories to fabricate those elements. When the process is complete, and it can take a while, there are no surprises during construction.

**Gehry loves music.** He has always had artists as friends, but his circle has expanded to musicians, including Gustavo Dudamel, Herbie Hancock, and Daniel Barenboim. He especially likes the way jazz players improvise around themes. His design process could be likened to structural jazz; he messes around with form over and over, getting the building to turn this way and that, iterating until he finds the version he wants to put down.

The software also enables Gehry to control costs. Once he has broken down the structural elements, he has a method for estimating how much the building will cost, based on volume, floor area, and exterior surfaces. Much has been written of the totality of Gehry's vision—as one Bilbao Guggenheim employee put it, they can't change so much as a fork in the restaurant without the approval of his office—but his obsession with costs is an equal plank of his success. "That's my ego; I gotta do that," says Gehry about bringing things in on budget. It may be that he learned the hard way that if he wants people to embrace his design ideas and way of building, he has to have a spotless budgetary record. He's still smarting over Disney Hall cost overruns. "I have a letter from the county people that we delivered the building for [its budget of \$207 million]," he says. "Several

board members that tried to control it wasted \$150 million. That's all documented now, but I got blamed for it, as you can imagine."

Gehry's are among a tiny proportion of projects—0.5%, according to figures collected by Bent Flyvbjerg, a management professor at Oxford University and IT University of Copenhagen—that deliver on time and on budget and provide the economic benefit that they were intended to, whether it was to bring in more foot traffic, make transport more efficient, or elevate a city among tourists, investors, or developers. "What Frank Gehry accomplished in Bilbao and elsewhere is astonishing," says Flyvbjerg, whose book on the economics of building projects, *How Big Things Get Done*, analyzed cost data on 16,000 built structures from the past 87 years, including very mundane projects. "Nobody is doing what he's doing. Nobody has done these crazy things with materials."

The budget for the Guggenheim was \$100 million, and it cost \$97 million—and that's with a titanium exterior. Vidarte puts that down partly to Basque industriousness, but also to the fact that the local builders learned to trust Gehry's methods and he learned to trust that local officials weren't trying to cheap out. The Bilbao model, however, may not be replicable. Dozens of eager civic officials have come to the region since 1997 to find the secret lever that would catapult their once industrial cities into desirable cultural destinations. Pioneering buildings have been commissioned across the globe, in such underloved metropolises as Ordos, China; Dresden, Germany; Valencia, Spain; and Cincinnati, hoping to catch some of the Bilbao magic. None have had as much success.



*Vivek Vadoliya for TIME*



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While Gehry's memory for names sometimes fails him—he has a right-hand architect, Meaghan Lloyd, who acts as his memory bank—his curiosity does not. When he was very young, Gehry's grandfather used to read to him from the Talmud. The religious part never stuck, he says, but the way of looking at the world did. "The first word in the Talmud is *Why?*" he says. "That whole religion is based on curiosity. I love that about what that meant for what I was gonna do."

Long in a position to be picky about his clients, Gehry now tends to choose those who both pique his curiosity and give him a high level of autonomy. He finds houses to be taxing. ("I like people; I just don't like being in the middle of their personal lives.") And big commercial developers are too inflexible. ("It's very hard to convince them to work the way I work.")

If he gets his way, Gehry Partners will not carry on under his name once his curiosity peters out. He hopes the people who work at the firm, who include his son Sam, 44, will forge their own paths. But Gehry has no plans to retire. "I suppose the clock will stop when it wants to," he says. In the meantime, he's going to surround himself with the folks he likes best—the disciplined improvisors. "I love hanging out with people that don't know what they're doing or why," he says. "And then they do it."