

# Frank Gehry (1929–2025) and his search for a “sliver of space”

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Last month, the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism published the first artist impressions of the Dar al Funoon performing arts venue to mark the start of construction. The design is instantly recognisable as that of architect Frank Gehry, who died at the age of 96 on December 5 last year. Dar al Funoon, one of the last buildings Gehry designed before his death, provides us with an opportunity to consider the significance of this remarkable architect.

Frank Gehry, who worked up to the end of his life, profoundly changed the very nature of architecture. Gehry essentially catapulted architectural form into the realm of sculpture, creating many unprecedented and beautiful buildings. His life embodied the paradoxes of art under late capitalism.

Dar al Funoon, Abu Dhabi, is the next addition to a cluster of major projects by world-renowned architects on Saadiyat Island in the UAE. It is close to the nearly completed branch of the Guggenheim Museum also designed by Gehry, the Zayed National Museum by Foster + Partners, the Louvre Abu Dhabi by Jean Nouvel and the National History Museum by Mecanoo and TeamLab.

While Gehry’s building will be part of the Abu Dhabi ruling elite’s competition for tourist patronage against nearby rivals Dubai and Qatar, it is an aesthetic of chaotic intriguing form that sparks an emotional response of enthusiasm and vibrancy.

Gehry was the world’s most well-known architect outside of the architecture profession. While discourse on architecture and broad public knowledge of its main proponents is generally limited, the iconic and dazzling forms that Gehry produced secured him a place in popular culture. Though often described as a “starchitect,” Gehry rejected the term. “I’m just an architect,” he insisted.

## Gehry’s early career

Frank Owen Goldberg was born February 28, 1929, in Toronto, Canada, to parents of Polish-Jewish descent. His father, Irving, was a truck driver and sometimes slot-machine supplier. His mother, Thelma, a thoughtful and creative woman, encouraged her son’s artistic inclinations. As a child, Gehry (who changed his surname at age 25 to avoid antisemitism) spent hours building imaginary cities from scraps of wood under his grandmother’s kitchen table—an image he would later recall as his first architectural act.

In 1947, at age 18, his family moved from Toronto to Los Angeles, California, in search of better opportunities. After a brief stint driving trucks and attending art classes, Gehry enrolled in the University of Southern California where he earned his Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1954. During his studies, he developed an early interest in modernism and the works of architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.

He married Anita Snyder in 1952.

In 1954, Gehry joined the office of Victor Gruen Associates, a pioneer of commercial modernism and known as the inventor of the shopping mall. Two years later, he enrolled at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design to study urban planning but dropped out before completing the program, disappointed by its bureaucratic rigidity. After brief periods working with firms such as Pereira & Luckman Associates, Gehry returned to California and opened his own practice in 1962 at the young age of 33.

Gehry married his second wife, Berta Isabel Aguilera, in 1975, and the couple settled in Santa Monica, where he lived more than four decades. Friends described him as deeply curious, emotionally attuned, and dedicated to his craft until the very end.

Gehry always admired the work of Alvar Aalto, having attended a lecture by the Finnish architect when he was 16. In the 2003 book *Gehry Talks: architecture + process* Gehry also spoke about his respect for Frank Lloyd Wright, “When I came back from Harvard, I was driving across the country with my first wife and daughters, and I wanted to go to Taliesin West. I went to Taliesin and the flag was up, which meant that Wright was there. I was excited. I drove up, and they wanted a dollar each for us to go in, and I said, “No way” I was furious. I was a Socialist, and that offended me. So, I didn’t go in. I was always sorry.”

Gehry’s self-identification as a socialist was no doubt a response to the tumultuous events of war, depression, fascism and the Nazi holocaust during his childhood. Gehry came of age in the period of the official McCarthyite anti-communist hysteria and while he does not appear to have been politically active, his identification as a socialist was bound up with his humanistic outlook and anti-establishment aesthetic strivings.

In the 2006 documentary *Sketches of Frank Gehry* directed by Sydney Pollack, Gehry related a discussion he had with the director years earlier: “I was struggling with the world I was confronted with which was the commercial world. They weren’t interested in what I was doing. I talked to you about it one night and you said that you faced the same commercial world and that you made peace with it by finding this small percentage of space within that commercial world where you could make a difference. And that was amazing to me. I’ve never forgotten that. I always say there’s a sliver of space.”

Gehry has been categorised incorrectly as a post-modernist which, as an architectural style, had proponents in the US like Charles Moore and Robert Venturi. While their responses reflected a reaction against the modernist movement’s shunning of decoration and striving for simplicity and economy of construction, they also dispensed with the core modernist conception that good design could change social conditions as evinced by the Bauhaus movement.

Founded in Germany in 1919, the Bauhaus was inspired by and intertwined with the explosion of creative work—including in design and architecture—made possible by Russian Revolution of 1917 and a mutual desire to merge art with industry to forge a new, egalitarian society.

Perhaps the most apt description of Gehry is a contemporary cubist. Gehry said, “I grew up a modernist. Decoration is a sin. That’s the mantra of modernism. So, if you can’t use decoration then how do you humanise a building? Materials could be expressive.”

Gehry rejected the classical stylistic references adopted by the post-modernists and strove for beauty in the choice of materials and form. His work is more that of a sculptor whose creations are inhabitable by people. Gehry’s long standing collaboration with, and respect for artists and sculptors like Richard Serra, Claes Oldenburg, Carl Andre, Donald Judd and many others was critical to his architecture.

Gehry developed what he later called a “cheapskate aesthetic.” Drawing inspiration from everyday materials like corrugated metal, plywood, and chain-link fencing, he explored the beauty hidden in the banal. This phase culminated in his iconic 1978 Gehry Residence in Santa Monica, Los Angeles. Built around an existing suburban house, he wrapped the structure with raw industrial materials, exposing beams and surfaces that seemed to clash and collide.

While traditionalists were appalled, critics hailed it as one of the most original houses in America. Architect Philip Johnson declared it was simply the freshest piece of American architecture in years. It launched Gehry into the national spotlight assisted by Johnson’s patronage.

Gehry’s signature building, the 1997 Guggenheim franchise in Bilbao in the Basque region of Spain became the paradigmatic example of buildings transforming the fate of cities. In the case of Bilbao, the destruction of its ship building industry rendered it a post-industrial city with high unemployment and social devastation. In the year it first opened the Guggenheim in Bilbao, a city of 350,000 people, attracted 700,000 visitors. Many city administrations have since attempted to emulate this strategy.

Clad with shiny titanium sheeting and made up of extraordinary free form shapes, this effusive art museum gained international recognition. The “Bilbao effect” became the shorthand term for the ability of popular architectural design to become such a magnet for tourism that the economy of the city was resurrected.

The Guggenheim Bilbao demonstrated Gehry’s innovative use of computer-aided design. Using specialised 3D software adapted from French aerospace engineering, Gehry and his collaborators were able to design each panel and curve with unprecedented precision. A separate entity, Gehry Technologies, was able to translate complex forms directly to computer driven machinery used to manufacture thousands of unique pieces of steel and other materials needed to build. The building’s revolutionary form was not merely decorative—its digital model redefined how complex architecture could be drawn, analysed, and constructed.

While Gehry’s reputation soared abroad, one of his most celebrated projects took shape in his adopted home city. Commissioned in 1987 but delayed for nearly two decades due to political and financial hurdles, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles finally opened in 2003. The gleaming stainless-steel clad structure—a cluster of billowing, sail-like forms—instantly became a defining feature of the city. Though he worked internationally, the city remained his creative home, housing both his firm, Gehry Partners LLP, and his famously unpretentious studio filled with cardboard models, paper sketches, and experimental prototypes.

Gehry won many major architectural awards including the Pritzker Architectural Prize in 1989. Some notable works include the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany (1989), the Dancing House in Prague (1996), a whimsical duet of glass and stone nicknamed the Fred and Ginger building, the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago’s Millennium Park (2004) and the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris (2014), a cloud-like composition of glass “sails” reflecting Gehry’s mature fascination with transparency and movement.

This author visited the Gehry designed University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Dr Chau Chak Wing building, home of the UTS Business

School, named after its benefactor. The external form resembles the folded façade treatment of Gehry’s 76-storey Manhattan apartment building at 8 Spruce Street completed in 2011. Unlike some previous designs such as his Peter B. Lewis Building at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio where more traditional brick volumes are counterposed to free form metallic cladding, the UTS building is clad with bricks, used in an unprecedented way.

The use of brick in this free form manner is technically impressive, and the craftsmanship of the bricklayers is sublime. There are five different types in a total of 320,000 custom made bricks. But in some way the result veers towards the cartoonish. In a number of areas, the curving brick walls sit on concealed steel shelf angles, that is, they are not grounded. The structure supporting this is hidden but obviously substantial, and the effect somehow unsettling.

Gehry spoke about the UTS building as an exploration of the fold. In discussing his 2011 high-rise apartment building at 8 Spruce Street, Manhattan, Gehry said, “One of my greatest influences is the Italian artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The first time I saw his sculpture of Saint Teresa was in 1960. I’ve always been fascinated with folds. All artists through the ages have spent time on the fold. Michelangelo had stacks of drawings of fabric. At 8 Spruce, we’re using Bernini’s folds to inspire the façade. I look for ways to express feeling in a building without using historic decoration.”

Gehry stated that his choice of brick was to make the building contextual in its Sydney locale, but it may be more plausible that Gehry used this opportunity to push this material to its limits, an aim achieved.

### **Gehry’s design methodology**

At the heart of Gehry’s architecture was a belief in imperfection, energy, and humanism. His buildings appear chaotic, yet they were always rigorously constructed. He often likened architecture to musical composition. He once joked that he derived inspiration from his lifelong fascination with fish. He related how his grandmother brought live carp to his childhood home. The fish had a temporary reprieve from being turned into gefilte fish in the family’s bathtub where young Frank would observe them turning and swimming for hours. For Gehry fish represented movement and grace long before computers made such forms feasible. Indeed, the fish motif swims throughout his career.

Gehry’s process was tactile and experimental. Before any digital modelling, he would build countless small paper and cardboard models. “That’s how I think,” he said in a 2017 MasterClass lecture. “I need to make it, see it, and feel it.” His vast team of architects and engineers would then translate the physical models into digital form, merging handcraft and high technology.

Not everyone loved Frank Gehry’s work. Critics like Hal Foster accused him of producing “spectacle architecture,” designs so self-referential and photogenic that they distracted from the art or function within. Detractors claimed that Gehry’s buildings were too expensive, too ego-driven, too sculptural to belong in a city’s practical fabric.

Yet even the criticism confirmed Gehry’s relevance. He was the rare architect whose buildings consistently provoked strong emotional reactions—delight or disdain, rarely indifference. For Gehry, architecture was by nature an expressive, public art, meant to be experienced both intellectually and viscerally.

But for every detractor, there were legions of admirers: scholars, fellow architects, and ordinary visitors whose perspective on a city changed after walking through one of his spaces. Gehry’s own response to controversy was typically humble and humorous. Once, when asked how he handled

critics who found his work disorienting, he replied with a shrug: “Life is disorienting.”

In his later years, Gehry often resisted the label of “genius,” preferring instead the idea of perseverance. “I’m a 90-year-old who still gets scared every time I start a new building... Fear is part of the process. You have to go through it to find something honest.”

For Gehry, architecture was never about perfection—it was about curiosity, risk, and empathy. His structures breathe, twist, shimmer and laugh. They invite human habitation but also human wonder. In this, Gehry achieved what few architects ever do. He made buildings that people feel as much as they see.

Gehry took a generally oppositional and humanistic approach. There is something deeply progressive in Gehry’s work. Even though he has worked on massive projects he has always stood out of the mainstream. Gehry’s attempt to find a “sliver of space” to work in is the outcome of the inability of capitalism in its systemic decline to allow architects more generally to practice their art in a manner to serve the widest needs of humanity for shelter and beauty.

Leon Trotsky wrote in *Literature and Revolution* in 1924: “There is no doubt that, in the future—and the further we go, the more true it will be—such monumental tasks as the planning of city gardens, of model houses, of railroads, and of ports, will interest vitally, not only engineering architects, participators in competitions, but the large popular masses as well...

“In this struggle, architecture will again be filled with the spirit of mass feelings and moods, only on a much higher plane, and mankind will educate itself plastically, it will become accustomed to look at the world as submissive clay for sculpting the most perfect forms of life. The wall between art and industry will come down. The great style of the future will be formative, not ornamental.”

The architecture that Gehry produced is just a suggestion of the future that Trotsky foresaw.



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