



Frank Gehry sketch. Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France, 2006. Artwork courtesy of Gehry Partners, LLP.

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARCHITECT AS THE ARTIST

by Dr. John Daab

Architects, in designing a building, traditionally combine squares, rectangles, triangles and circles or arcs (the elements of Euclidean geometry) to produce the kind of building you see illustrated at right. Look at most buildings or even a whole city skyline and you see – in their sides, their floors, their roofs, doors and windows – squares and rectangles with some triangles and circles. Straight, flat planes predominate. Look at any single plane such as the side of a traditional building, and you can see all the way from one end to the other without any major interruption. This is traditional building design.



Following the principles of traditional building design, the architect controls problems such as water penetration, collapse, and mismatched materials and systems. Tradition also tends to result in less expensive design, quicker turnaround of plans produced, and a faster building process. Traditional building design is a system with a set of structures which help control unintended consequences of building flaws, unnecessary costs, and poor functionality of a building.

But traditional design also results in a sameness from one building to the next, making them appear more as a background or canvas for any given area of focus, rather

than a point of focus in themselves. Most buildings under the hand of today's architect tend to look quite similar, one to the next.

Breaking with Tradition

Some modern day architects have departed from the traditional design approach, not so much as a challenge to traditional architectural theory but because their designs resemble works of art rather than traditional buildings. They are in the true sense architects-turned-artists while still building habitable and functional structures.

Daniel

Libeskind, Frank Gehry and Philip Johnson are among the architect artists. Some of their works are presented here.

Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, Libeskind's recent Denver Art Museum extension, and Johnson's *Da Monsta* mood house in Connecticut all resemble large sculptures more than buildings. All three architects disregarded squareness, circularity, rectangularity, plumbness and an unencumbered plane as the form and structured system in the design of a building. Instead of a box on a box, these architect/artists removed the level and vertical plane and replaced it with a rolling exterior with bump-outs galore. Gehry's exterior planes resemble a mass of non-Euclidean shapes overshadowing any concept of squareness and rectangularity. Johnson's entrance and lean out of verticality make it look as if the builder did not use any leveling devices or made a gross error in failing to install the proper opening and door since they are so far from a normal entrance shape. The

massive triangle used by Libeskind's as the focus point of his design appears as an appendage to the building when in fact it is a room filled with art.

Interviews with the architect/artists reveal that they share common points. They do not accept the traditions of building design – which is self-evident. Straight lines and planes tied together with rectangles and squares are not the building blocks of the avant

garde architects. If anything, their designs border on chaos. The first response is amazement that the building remains standing. It is as if no design went into the work. In fact many models were produced to actually complete the design. Gehry is reported to have developed



The Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, designed by Frank Gehry.

Photo © Dan Tanna/Stockxchng

30 models for the Lewis Library in Princeton.

Challenging accepted building design and presenting chaos in its place, the avant garde architects also seek to remove the concept of the building as a backdrop. They seem to be asking for recognition or, more significantly, striving for immortality. Their works are not just another building among other buildings. Like any sculpture, they remain aloof, clearly stand out, and are detached from the ordinary. These architects are not satisfied with being nobodies; they want the world to know that, unlike the accepted image of the architect behind the scenes, the director of the construction process, they are demanding recognition of their true status – the star of the spectacle.

All three architects share an uncommon approach in creating their design: in the most abstract unrecognizable fashion they develop what could easily be perceived as doodles. The first drawing does not emanate from the architect's drawing board but from squiggly lines that soon become clearer as the

first thought is dialectically transformed by newer renditions. The thesis is attacked by the antithesis internally and externally, comes to rest as a synthesis and again moves ahead following as the thesis under attack. The continuing transformations ultimately come to finality as the almost completed design – as any artist would note, even at the finishing stage further adjustments are often needed.

Another common trait is that Libeskind, Gehry, and Johnson look at their works as musical compositions. Libeskind, a former musical prodigy, expresses the musical nature of his designs by constantly maintaining concordance of the parts of the composition. Discordant notes or flaws in the design must be corrected by bringing about that which constantly “sounds” more harmonious in the design composition. The musical artistic timbre of how they express their creations flows from the fact that, in the case of both Johnson and Gehry, they associated themselves closely with other artists. Johnson was a close friend of Richard Serra, who provided guidance for *Da Monsta*. Gehry noted that his circle of friends were all famous and accomplished artists. Gehry would often be seen at the openings of the contemporary artists’ shows or hanging out with Sidney Pollack the film director and actor. Gehry’s recent Lewis Library in Princeton was built so as to include Richard Serra’s *The Hedgehog and the Fox* as part of the library’s environment.

They all agree that their works would not be possible without the aid of the computer to perform engineering analysis to ensure that their concepts are possible, and provide drawings to the material manufacturers and builders. The creation of the material substructures of these extremely complex, out of the ordinary buildings/sculptures requires the breaking down of all the steps into drawings and pictures of how the work is to be accomplished.



Denver Art Museum Extension, designed by Daniel Libeskind. Photo ©Stockxpert

One set of plans is never enough. Like a sculptor refining each step of his work, these architect artists provide numerous drawings indicating how each step in the process is to be accomplished.

Some would argue that the title of architect/artist is ill-founded since the architect did not actually build the sculpture himself. It was built by those under his hand. Those who make this claim fail to recognize that artists from Rembrandt and Michelangelo to modern artists, such as Warhol, Dali, Hirst and Koons, often did not complete the works themselves but had schools and others assisting them. One may even note that since the architects were supervising the work, the art belongs to them. Others may take their work to task on the basis that the resulting buildings are blemishes on the landscape, or that they just don’t fit. For the architect/artists this is their greatest compliment. Their goal after all in the production of their structures was to make the buildings not fit. 🖋️



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