

# Life and work of frank gehry



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Many of Frank Gehry's early works reflect a refined manipulation of shapes and structures, whereby many of his buildings present distorted shapes or apparent structures. From the Guggenheim museum to the Walt Disney concert hall, Frank Gehry's architecture is close to none. He cleverly plays with shapes and geometries. In this essay, I shall start with a brief analysis of Gehry's house and the influences in the design of the house. I shall then analyze the extent to which Frank Lloyd Wright has inspired and influenced Gehry in the design of his house through a comparison with Frank Lloyd Wright's Jacob's house.

Gehry draws his inspiration from famous paintings such as the Madonna and Child which he qualifies as a "strategy for architecture" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 42) and which he used as an inspiration for a project in Mexico. Through his interpretation of the paintings and artwork, Gehry looked for a new kind of architecture. His search for a new type of architecture culminated in 1978 with his own house in Santa Monica. What was once a traditional Californian house would be redesigned to become one of the most important and revolutionary designs of the 20th century, giving Gehry international prestige and fame. Frank Gehry's "Own House" uses a mixture of corrugated metal, plywood, chain link and asphalt to construct a new envelope for an existing typical Californian house. This house has been inspired by Joseph Cornell, Ed Moses and Bob Rauschenberg. Gehry comments on his house by saying that there was something "magical" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 54) about it. He admits having "followed the end of his [my] nose" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 54) when it came to constructing the "new" house, which led Arthur Drexler, former Director from the Department

of Architecture and Design at the museum of Modern Art in New York, to actually describe the house as a joke. (Friedman M., 2003, p. 54) Through his work, Frank Gehry can be considered as an artist rather than an architect. His own house is one of the best works of art he has ever produced. In many of Gehry's early works such as the Danziger building, we learn about his worry of " the translation of ideas through the many people involved in the process of making a bulding" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 44), which according to him " drain the strength and power out of an idea" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 44); but in his " Own House" however, he proves us that his worry only makes his ideas and designs more powerful. He makes use of large openings, peculiar wall cladding or large lighted rooms as well as visible structure frames to reflect the postmodern style of the house as well as to convey his wish to bring architecture to its roots, to its bare beauty.

What Gehry loves about architecture and what is reflected in the style of his Own House is " the humanity of it" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 42). The barricading of the old house reminds us of artists such as Christo and Jeanne Claude with the Rheimstag wrapping while the angled protrusions and " cuts" through the old house shows Gordon Matta Clark's influence in the style of the " Own House". Gehry says in an interview that his desire to use metal as a primary construction material came with Donna O'Neill's hay barn, for which he used metal because he could now " make a very tough sculptural shape" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 45), making the building fit the site hence creating " a sculptural identity" (Friedman M., 2003, p. 45).

Just like for the titanium-clad façade of the Guggenheim museum, Gehry makes use of metal cladding for his " Own House". He builds walls around

the old house using corrugated sheets of metal and chain link. Gehry justifies his use of chain link by saying: “ The chain link for me was about denial. There was so much denial about it. I couldn’t believe it.” (Friedman M., 2003, p. 47) He explains how modern domestic design for him is all about challenging the culture, using cheap, recycled materials and transforming them into a work of art. (Friedman, 2003) The use of metal to create new shapes for buildings, such as for the California Aerospace Museum, Los Angeles, 1984 or the University of Toledo Center for the Visual Arts, 1992 prove how Gehry’s vision was beyond that of architects of his time. He admits that “ A number of artist friends have influenced” (Friedman M., 2003, p. 43) his work and that architecture is reflected in a painting: the materials used, the texture applied or the theme of the painting but he also expresses a great admiration for the works of his modern predecessors such as Frank Lloyd Wright or Le Corbusier.

As mentioned before, Gehry was inspired by many modern architects, namely Frank Lloyd Wright. Gehry is referred to as a postmodern architect, applying modernism of the 20th century to his buildings all while challenging the conventions of that time. Frank Lloyd Wright is certainly a pioneer of modernism. To him we owe the idea of organic architecture, buildings on L, X, or T shaped grounds. Wright once said: “ To thus make of a human dwelling-place a complete work of art...this is the tall modern American opportunity in Architecture.” (Humphries, 1970, p. 25) We notice how his vision of architecture resembles that of Gehry, with the reference to art. Nevertheless, the planning of Wright’s houses with his idea of form following function contrasts with Gehry’s idea of free plan. Still, the idea of using

cheap materials for the Gehry house is a “ déjà vu” of Wright’s wish “ to cure this defect with houses that were simpler and more economical to build, that combined living and dining areas into one and separated them from a bedroom zone, and that finally turned the blocky walls into windows on nature” (Maddex, 2000, p. 80) basically, Wright’s Usonian project. Wright wanted to build small, single storey, flat-roofed affordable houses which would make the garden as a main part of the house and create a new type of dwelling and lifestyle for the Americans. He wanted to make housing more affordable and energy efficient. The Usonian project is a development that started with Wright’s transformation of the “ symmetrical, cruciform and pinwheel Prairie House plan into the courtyard plan.” (Carter, 2001, p. 250)Hence, Wright saw the Usonian Houses as “ asymmetrical quadrants of the bigger symmetrical Prairie Houses.” (Carter, 2001, p. 249)

Perhaps one of the most famous Usonian houses by Wright is the Jacobs house, presenting an L shape plan as well as the idea of pleasant geometry, hence the very rectangular and strict edges of the house. Wright’s plans of the first Jacob’s house reveal adequately his vision of the Usonian houses. Hence, from his plans, we see how the garden is the “ geometric centre” of the plan and the focus of the spatial arrangement. The idea behind the layout of the spaces in Gehry’s house reflects that of Wright in Jacob’s house. Hence, in the Jacob’s house, the two wings of the house are well planned so as to differentiate between the public and private areas of the house. There are two entrances into the house; one leading to the private quarters, the bedrooms, and the other one to the living room and dining area on which the kitchen opens. The dining area is used as a transition between the private

and public areas of the Jacob's house. To further differentiate between the nature of the different spaces, Wright uses brick wall cladding within the living room and the entrance to indicate the public nature of these spaces. We can also ask ourselves whether Wright has not influenced Gehry in the addition of the many windows and openings in his "Own house". Wright's idea of architectural purism and organic architecture preach a relationship between agriculture and architecture: "The American landscape was for Wright unique and in need of integration into American daily domestic life" (Carter, 2001) We note how Wright makes the garden the most important space in the house. When we look at the Jacob's house from the street, the view is not inspiring; we do not feel the warmth of the house. The street view offers a dull empty front yard with no indication of how to enter the house except from the carport. If we compare this to the garden view, we immediately feel as if we are in the house. The garden view provides floor to ceiling windows, Jacob's house street view p. 254 (Carter, 2001)

which enable us to see the on goings of the inhabitants inside the house. Similarly, the house becomes a mere object in the landscape. We instantly understand that Wright wants to pull our focus towards the most important member of the house, the garden. We observe how by adding "new" walls to the existing building, Gehry incorporates the surroundings into the house, creating a new space to contain the public/service areas of the house.

Other than the relationship between the house and its surroundings, Gehry has also applied Wright's Beaux arts planning with the idea of the raised floor level as well as the hierarchy of the spaces. Hence, in the Jacobs house, Wright has created a certain hierarchy of spaces with "a geometric module

governing horizontal and vertical spaces” (Maddex, 2000, p. 82). A large open area is dedicated to the living room and the kitchen. As we enter the Jacob’s house, we are oriented towards the garden by the glass doors. Similarly, the dining room is “projected” (Carter, 2001, p. 254) into the garden by horizontal wood walls with high windows which allow people standing in the kitchen to see into the garden. The public areas are all oriented towards the garden, creating an open space as we walk into the house. The master bedroom is clearly set apart by the bending corridor which leads to the private areas of the house. In Gehry’s Own house, he uses the same principle, with the entrance leading directly onto the living area which is raised above ground level. The public areas namely the kitchen, dining room and living room are all located on the right while the bedrooms are on the left, well secluded by walls. We highlight how the dining room and the kitchen are both located on the lower level, again creating this idea of hierarchy planning of spaces. We also point out Frank Lloyd Wright’s idea of interlocking forms and symmetry that is reflected in Gehry house design. The Jacob’s house presents itself in an “L” shape, which if we think of it, is barely the interlocking of two rectangles at 90°. All the spaces in the Jacobs house are also connected at right angles. This same scheme of interlocking forms is clearly visible in the Gehry house with the notable glass cube that hangs on top of the kitchen acting as a strong source of natural light which again puts a lot of emphasis on Wright’s notion of organic Gehry’s Own house, kitchen view, design, using the maximum amount of natural resources from the surroundings for use in the house.

As mentioned above, Gehry states that his choice of materials only results from their workability (for metal) or their personal significance (for chain link) but we can question that and ask ourselves how far was the choice of materials for his own house influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's idea that "from standardized materials, economy" (Maddex, 2000, p. 82). Wright once said: "The sense of interior space as a reality in organic architecture coordinates with the enlarged means of modern materials" (Humphries, 1970, p. 124). For Wright, the materials used had a connection to earth. In the Jacob's house, Wright made use of a lot of wood and glass to create a comfy and warm atmosphere as well as a connection with the surroundings. He used modern materials which he believed could evoke the idea of empathy through his buildings. The low proportions of the Jacob's house oriented the house horizontally rather than vertically and Wright saw the horizontal line as "the true earth line of human life, indicative of freedom". (Carter, 2001, p. 255). To him, the horizontal planes of the house helped convey the idea of empathy. Hence "the planes parallel to the earth in buildings identify themselves with the ground, do most to make the buildings belong to the ground" and represent the "true foundation for life within" the house. (Carter, 2001, p. 255)

Wright's notion of modernism has with no doubt pushed Gehry towards creating a new kind of architecture. When we compare how both architects interpret modern architecture, we understand fairly easily how much of an influence Frank Lloyd Wright has had on Gehry. Wright said: "In organic architecture the hard straight line breaks to the dotted line where stark necessity ends and thus allows appropriate rhythm to enter in order to leave



suggestion its proper values. This is modern.” (Humphries, 1970, p. 125)

When we read this quote, we find that it fairly relates to Gehry’s idea of deconstructivism in his own house, whereby there is a fragmentation in the design of the house. Frank Gehry has a different approach to modern domestic design. Wright wanted modern human dwellings to have earth “ as a great human good” and make the “ garden be the building as much as the building will be the garden” Both Wright and Gehry have been influenced by the Japanese culture. The construction of the Jacob’s house is said to be related to the traditional Japanese house and “ the four primal elements” that Gottfried Semper identified in 1852: earthwork, hearth, framework and roof and a screen-like infill wall. Wright combined the first two elements (earthwork and hearth) by passing pipes into the concrete flooring that would carry steam or hot water so that the floor would become a source of heat. The heating of the Jacob’s house coincided with Wright’s wish to use natural lighting; hence the south facing glass doors provided the house with heat during winter. This made the Usonian houses “ extremely energy efficient long before this was an issue for other architects” (Carter, 2001, p. 255)

Having compared Wright’s Jacob’s house to Gehry’s own house, we can justly say that Gehry was influenced by art. So much that we can refer to him as an artist rather than an architect. His interest in paintings and sculptures has given him the opportunity to design buildings that would change the course of architecture for the future years to come. Gehry has also applied some of Frank Lloyd Wright’s principles to his designs. The extent to which this influence can be measured is unsure but a parallel comparison between the

Jacob's house and Gehry's own house has allowed us to conclude that Wright's principals of Beaux arts planning, interlocking forms, organic architecture and symmetry can be found in Gehry's own house. Frank Gehry has taken the principles of modern architecture from his predecessors and applied it to his designs with his own twist of magic. He uses Wright's concepts and ideas to create new design conventions for himself. Through his designs, Gehry wishes to challenge the ordinary. He is said to have founded the new wave of Californian architects. Frank Lloyd Wright, on the other hand is considered as one of the founders of modern architecture but what is certain is that they have both had a tremendous influence on the world of architecture today.