

Gehry on Gretzky

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It was a tired, rather frail-looking Frank Gehry who stood at the lectern at the Art Gallery of Ontario yesterday, a bamboo cane in his left hand. But even though the 76-year-old architect had just flown into Toronto on an early-morning flight from Los Angeles and his back was bothering him, he had some things he wanted to share right away with the local media -- and they had nothing to do with his \$210-million reconstruction of the AGO.

No, Gehry's thoughts were with Wayne Gretzky, the executive director of the Canadian men's Olympic hockey squad who's currently entangled in an investigation into an illegal gambling ring allegedly run by his friend and Phoenix Coyotes assistant coach Rick Tocchet. "He's getting beat up by the press right now" in an "unconscionable" way, opined Gehry, whose friendship with Gretzky and passion for hockey are well known. "The guy is one of the straightest arrows in history. He deserves better. He did nothing wrong and I swear by that."

Gehry offered his defence wearing a Roots hockey bomber jacket, complete with maple-leaf logo, over a black turtleneck and sports jacket that, on its left lapel, had the Companion of the Order of Canada snowflake awarded to him in 2002. The jacket had been handed to him that very morning by Roots co-founder (and fellow Gretzky pal) Michael Budman on behalf of the former number 99, just before Gehry attended the media preview of Frank Gehry: Art + Architecture, an expansive exploration-exhibition of five Gehry projects of the last decade that opens at the AGO on the weekend. Gretzky, of course, was off to Turin that same morning from Toronto to cheer his team on to a gold medal. The jacket was Gehry's way of expressing "my solidarity with him."

Gehry made his remarks to a muffled soundtrack of jackhammers. The demolition of much of the old AGO has now begun in earnest, with the expectation that Gehry's much-anticipated renovation, with its ribs of Douglas fir, glassed promenades and pillows of titanium, will be completed sometime in 2008 when Gehry, born in Toronto on Feb. 28, 1929, will be 79.

In some interviews, the superstar architect has expressed a measure of, well . . . ambivalence about the AGO overhaul, which represents his first large-scale signature work in the city of his birth. There have been concerns about budget (too small), site (too compromised) and the gallery's footprint (too constrained). But yesterday Gehry said the AGO renovation "hasn't been any more complicated than any other project I've done. The community support has been extraordinary. And Matthew [Teitelbaum, the AGO's director] pushes me, questions me in interesting ways."

"I tend to worry a lot about stuff," he confessed. "I'm always unsure. There's a level of insecurity I have to get past [where] everything seems impossible and futile. I get schizzy about it sometimes." Even the fact that the AGO project now seems to be well on its way, six years after he was first approached about it, is not cause for exultation.

"Now," he said with a smile, "I get to worry about what it's going to look like."

Gehry thinks this insecurity is "healthy" because it doesn't allow him to get by with half-measures or to get stuck in a creative rut. That creativity continues to flow in many directions. In April, for instance, Tiffany & Co. in New York is unveiling six distinctive jewellery collections designed by him. And last year, he came up with a new bottle for Wyborowa, a Polish vodka. He is starting to design a 19,000-seat arena for the New Jersey Nets in Brooklyn and -- perhaps most daunting of all -- a new home for him and Berta, his Panama-born wife of 31 years, on three lots of land he purchased about a mile in from the beach at Venice, Calif.

This means that Gehry will be eventually have to vacate the famous "dumb little house" in Santa Monica that he moved into in 1978 and, in short order, "deconstructed" into one of his most distinctive structures -- so distinctive, in fact, that its mix of chain-link fencing, asphalt, corrugated metal and plywood prompted neighbourhood protests, letters to the mayor, threatening phone calls and, on at least two occasions, a bullet through a window. Gehry says he won't sell the house: The National Historic Trust wants it, but "the rules are such that I can't give it and get a tax benefit. A wealthy person would have to buy it and give it." In the meantime, the plan is to rent the property and use that money to help realize the Venice design.

"My wife gave me an ultimatum a few weeks ago," Gehry laughed. "It has to be done in three years."

Frank Gehry: Art + Architecture runs from Saturday through May 7 at the AGO in Toronto. A companion exhibition, Frank's Drawings: Eight Museums by Gehry,

*opens at the University of Toronto Art Centre Saturday
and runs through June 17.*