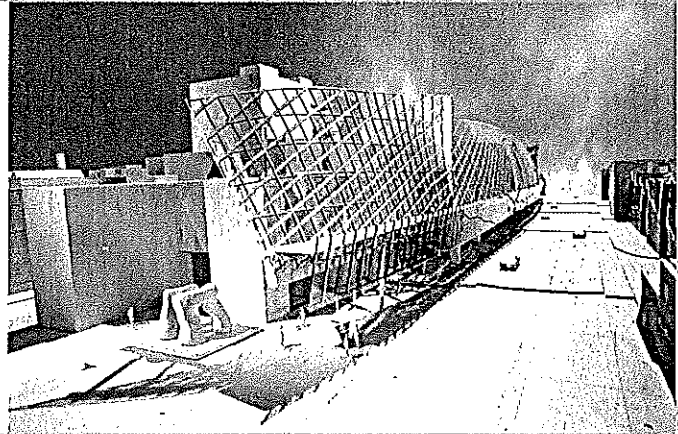


Studying Gehry

You know you've made it when you're featured on *The Simpsons*. But even without this animated appearance in a cameo role, Frank Gehry's place in architectural history seems both deserved and secure.



While curating an exhibition of Frank Gehry's drawings for the University of Toronto Art Centre, it became clear to me that his fame is a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, having just turned 77 and as the author of some of the world's architectural masterpieces, such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, and Disney Hall in Los Angeles, he deserves the showers of attention that descend from the design professions, the media, and the general public. Even the producers of *The Simpsons* recently put Gehry on a pedestal, giving him a cameo role as his animated-self.

Can there be any doubt that Toronto-born Frank Owen Gehry now holds the same kind of top position in architectural culture that another masterful manipulator of form and space, Frank Lloyd Wright, attained in the 1950s? Indeed Gehry's place in history seems both deserved and secure.

At the same time, the high recognition factor of his sometimes shocking sculptural projects, accompanied by the troublesome phenomenon of product branding, lead to an unfair commodification of his work.

So in conceptualizing the exhibition, *Frank's Drawings: Eight Museums by Gehry* (Feb. 18 through June 17), I decided to explore a period spanning 25 years, from 1979 to 2004 and, more importantly, to enable visitors to get close to Gehry's creative process. Accepting that we cannot really get inside his mind, it is nevertheless inviting to try to "get close to Gehry," starting with his initial idea and "imagining" for a building and his first sketchy lines on paper. Sets of original Gehry sketches for eight museums (some built, some not) – a total of 49, 9-inch x 12-inch, pen-on-paper drawings – make up the core of the exhibition.

The 49 museum sketches are bracketed by other kinds of drawing. A selection of sketchbooks from the late-1970s and early-1980s open an intimate Gehry world in which, amidst sketches of classical buildings and volumetric studies for new projects, the architect's two young sons have scribbled with crayons. Father Frank returns the favour with a sketch he labels "For Alejo from

Papa." In another sketchbook, dated 1981, we find a mini-manifesto by Gehry in which he says, "I consider preoccupation with nostalgia a decadent move. I believe in progress & to me that means exploration of the unknown. Scientists are my role models."

Equally engaging are the telephone pad, thumbnail sketches that Gehry has been doing for many years and that, rather surprisingly, he agreed to place on public display for the first time. These doodles, typically in the upper-left corner of yellow-lined paper, constitute a magical world of Gehry stream of consciousness.

In the middle of the exhibition, there is a wonderful 3-D "wire drawing," commissioned by Frank Gehry for the University Art Centre. Made in New York in January 2006, this tiny, cloud-like "sculpture" is based on several wiry drawings that he did for the Panama Museum of Biodiversity, one of his favorite but still unrealized projects. (Gehry's wife, Berta, grew up in Panama.) The contemplative "wire drawing" communicates the delicate, sweet side of Gehry, an architect too often known only for his outrageous, shocking side.

Through presenting *Frank's Drawings: Eight Museums by Gehry*, the Art Centre reveals a personal, intimate side of the architect who is simultaneously represented at the Art Gallery of Ontario's exhibition, *Frank Gehry: Art + Architecture* (Feb. 18 through May 7). Whereas, via large architectural models and videos, viewers at the AGO can quickly familiarize themselves with several of Gehry's recent, extraordinary projects, including the transformation of the AGO itself, the University of Toronto show is an intentional contrast, requiring a quieter, "slow read." Although very different, together the two exhibitions offer a wide range of opportunity to leave Gehry's fame-factor in the shadows, at least for a while, and to actually study the exhilarating, humanizing work of Frank Owen Gehry.

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Architectural model of Gehry's design for the new wing at the Art Gallery of Ontario.