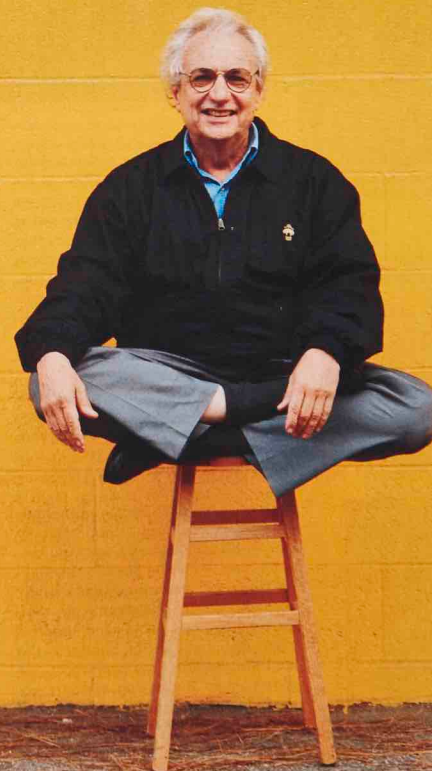


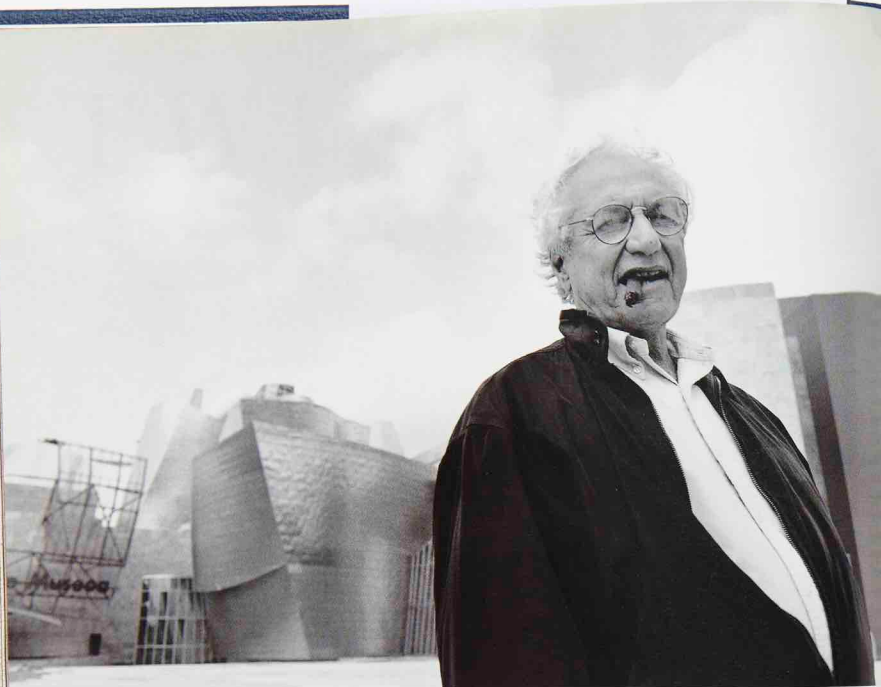
TWISTER

In which star architect Frank Gehry invites you to explore his acid house style and remarkable career. Mark Isitt went to the house-warming party of his latest European fantasy, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Enter at your own risk

Christ! Wherever he turns up nowadays he's attacked by total strangers praising his work, shaking his hand, almost kneeling before him, kissing his Brooks Brothers shoes, pulling at his corduroys and windbreaker, hoping that some of that oh-so-pure and unspoiled genius will

TIMOTHY BURSLEY
MARK BELLISHEM



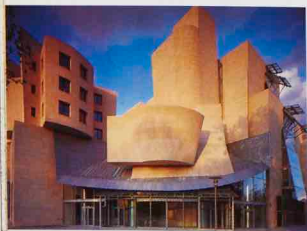


Lighting up: Gehry at the new Guggenheim, Bilbao (above and below); American Center, Paris (1994); and (previous spread) the Team Disney building, Anaheim (1996).



JEFF GOLDBERG/ISTO

If only they knew: in his own eyes he's more like an outsider



SCOTT FRANKS/ISTO

rub off on them. As if he was some kind of King Midas. If only they knew: in his own eyes he's more like an outsider, an incorrigible dreamer who only does what he takes a fancy to. A bit like that Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. And talking about Joyce – now there's a genius! The last few months he's been reading almost nothing else. So complex, so psychological, so – dreamy. The same kind of qualities he himself strives to include in his work.

He squeezes his way through the pack of admirers. Tagging behind him are most of his 65 employees and somewhere

in there is his wife, Berta, and his two sons, Alejandro and Sam. Someone touches his shoulder, even bows and kisses his hand, calls him Maestro. It's Dennis Hopper. Further on stands a wildly grinning Robert Rauschenberg, wine glass and sardine tapas in hand – a terrific guy, Bob, but difficult, mind you, the kind who wouldn't hesitate to criticize you in public. But he, too, says he loves the building and adds that the overlapping shapes remind him a lot of his own

art. Well, maybe. Then someone calls out from behind, "Mr Gehry, you've realized one of the century's greatest works of architecture! You're in the Frank Lloyd Wright class!" At that he cannot hold back; he plugs the air triumphantly with his clenched fist – "Yeah!" – then spins around, "But who the hell is Frank Lloyd Wright?"

Frank! Have you said hello to Lee Radziwill, the late Jacqueline Kennedy's sister? Frank! Have you said hello to Miuccia Prada, the Italian designer? Frank! Have you said hello to

Jeff Koons, the artist? Frank! Have you said hello to Stephanie Seymour, the supermodel? Frank! Have you said hello to your architect colleague Rafael Moneo? A major job of introductions is being done. A whole Warhol gallery is here. And they've all gathered here in "his" museum to flatter and impress him, Frankie from California, known as possibly the most innovative architect of modern times, with ideas so far out that nobody really can get it into their minds

that he's this chubby 68-year-old working-class Jew. Some people seem to wonder, who the hell this guy thinks he is, designing this curving \$100m art museum, twice the height and length of the Centre Pompidou in Paris and – believe it or not – dressing it all up in crazily expensive titanium. After all, that's what they use on the space shuttles, isn't it?

For himself, it's a relief. Just think how horribly wrong it might have gone. Remember those headlines? Guggenheim Foundation to build new museum! Frank O. Gehry to equal Frank Lloyd Wright's New York masterpiece from 1959! And this in a working-class port in northern Spain. In Bilbao. In terror-struck Basque country! This was the spot the expansive Guggenheim director, Thomas Krens, had chosen for the Foundation's European headquarters, this was where he asked for 24,000 square metres of exhibition space with a total of 19 exhibition halls of which one was to be the largest in the world, 137 metres long and 24 metres wide, as big as not one but two basketball courts (Krens's love of art was born during the year he spent playing professional basketball in France in the early 1970s).

And then there was that little matter of the atrium courtyard, 46 metres high, twice the height of the Guggenheim in New York and "a lot more contentious than Frank Lloyd Wright's", according to Krens's plans. A lot more US-imperialistic, too, in the view of a few critical Spaniards.

Standing around him in this magnificent atrium – they in their evening dress and he in his inconspicuous dark-blue

outfit – they look as if they're trying to figure this little man out. They call out their toasts, make loose gestures at the meandering walls and opine that Mr Gehry must be soooo happy here at this inaugural evening. He replies honestly that "Actually, this is the part which is hard for me, when I finish a project. It now belongs to somebody else, it belongs to the clients, the users, they start to do things to it, and I have to sit back and keep my mouth shut as they use the building in the way they see fit. I always hate this part!"

Someone makes an attempt at a joke by saying that the museum's irregular façade looks as if it's been inspired by a piece of crumpled paper. "Hmm, crumpled paper..." ponders the architect. "I'm furious when people say that. The impli-

cation is that I do a hooty-doo and that creates a 'thing', like 'it's nothing more than that'. That comes out of some idiot so-called 'savant' who's never read a book, has never seen a building, has never studied art, and who doesn't know anything. That's what that question implies and I resent it. It's stupid. It's not even funny."

Not even funny. Way to go! Give 'em a dose of that notorious outspokenness. 'Cos surely they know he's got a reputation to live up to, that in Californian dailies he's regularly referred to as something of a prima donna, uppish and inaccessible. Probably the daily press's way of expressing resentment at the fact that he seldom bothers to defend his "crumpled" buildings against onslaughts from the esoterics. And why should he? When the alarm rings in his Santa Monica villa at 6.00am and he wakes up after a good night's sleep (never less than seven hours), rubs away those dreams of Fritz Lang's *wunderbar* Metropolis and pads his way down to the kitchen to make a pot of Java, then out onto the sun-drenched terrace, sitting in the shade of the two cacti with his feet splashing in the apple-tinted pool and leafing through the *Los Angeles Times* – oh sweet morningtide! – what can they think is going to anger him then? What does he care if, for example, his ongoing project – the concert hall for the L.A. Philharmonic – is castigated and condemned as being too playful? "Hey," what else is there to do than shrug your shoulders and think, "It's controversial, some people hate it and that's good. But

"It's controversial, some people hate it and that's good"

once it's built, people will embrace it. And, let's face it; most of these journalist guys – they're illiterate, anyway." And then turn to the sports pages.

Or as Krens puts it, puffing away on his eight-inch Monte Cristo in Bilbao's festive throng: "Frank's so goddam confident. He's so confident that he believes that his intellect and his ego are so powerful that he recognizes it would be a sign of weakness to respond negatively to criticism."

The Gehry family villa on 1002, 22 Street was what made his day. And life. Because it was here he polished his design philosophy: always to let his buildings reflect their surroundings. "When I moved here in 1978, the neighbours had trailers and boats in their front gardens, all over the place, and cars being



From top: "Fred and Ginger", Prague (1996), known for its masculine and feminine towers; Anaheim Mighty Duck's practice arena (1995); entrance to the Chiat Day Offices, Los Angeles (1991).

TIMOTHY HURSELEY



GRANT MEDFORD



Above: Gehry's own residence on 1002, 22 Street, Santa Monica, California (1978). Below: private residence of politician Rockwell Schnabel and wife Marna, Los Angeles (1989).



ably in one of those chaises longues of corrugated cardboard, of his own design. It's 11.00am, two weeks have passed since the inauguration of the Guggenheim Museo Bilbao and he is back in his Santa Monica office. He is tired, his morning gym and weightlifting have taken their toll, he explains over the phone - "I have muscles like Arnold under this" - and he's hungry. "Pardon me, I'm eating something." He chews for a while. Then, in his Californian drawl, he says suddenly: "You know, I wasn't supposed to be this." As if to explain why, despite 20 years at the top, he still can't accept the demands for business spit and polish that come with international fame: don't talk with food in your mouth, sit up straight, don't use the tone to journalists.

"I was a dreamy kid, you know. I never seemed very ambitious. My parents probably did and said, 'you better...' I worked hard, I wasn't lazy, but I seemed always

dreaming about something and not on this earth. So my parents were very frustrated about that - constantly. They were always sure I wouldn't be what, you know... They never thought of me as, you know... It was always touch and go what was gonna get to do."

Anyway, who cares about parents when there's ice hockey. Growing up in Toronto in the 1930s, that was all he dreamed about. Imagine playing for the Toronto Maple Leafs, winning the Stanley Cup time and time and time again - what's wrong with that ambition? The truth is even today he wouldn't have anything against lifting that trophy - who designed that horror anyway. "I still play, I've got my own team! We call it FOG, like for Frank Owen Gehry. It's me and a few friends. Oh, just some former pros from Montreal Canadians and LA Kings. How about that?"

Then the family moved to Los Angeles. He was 17 and his dad had developed heart trouble and the doctors of the day prescribed summer warmth, believing that would help anything. Maybe so, but not a hockey career; there weren't any of those in Sunny California at the time. So the ice melted and art took over. "I was studying fine arts and on Saturday mornings I took a class in ceramics. My ceramics teacher was building a house by an architect named Rafael Soriano, who had a very compelling rap at the time; he was very simple, almost a Californian style

Mies van der Rohe. My professor took me to see the house going up and I was quite taken by the process. So he got me into this night class in architecture. I was immediately shot to the top and I provoked them to recommend me for the second year. I was kinda' like 18 or 19, it was the first kinda' recognition of any kind. It grew from there. I couldn't quit.

"I dunno where I got it from really," he goes on. "My mother worked in the local department store, in the drapery department, doing interior drapery. My father won a couple of competitions for window dressing but most of the time he was into, oh, you know, popcorn machines and jukeboxes, he was a distributor, he put them in stores and stuff. It wasn't a very lucrative business, they were very poor people. I suspect had my father had a chance, he probably would have gone ahead and done something more artistic. But he never got to high school, let alone to college. He was a street kid, he had to work, you know. He never had the opportunity to read Joyce. He died without reading *Ulysses*. And, you know, had he read it, he would have loved it."

His father died in 1962, the very year Gehry's career took off with the founding of today's so thriving Frank O. Gehry & Associates. "But my mother lived to see my success, she died only three years ago." And by that time the prodigal son had realized everything an architect can hope to achieve, including winning the 1989 Pritzker Prize (the "Nobel Prize" of

architecture). Which one assumes was reason enough for his Jewish mother to forgive him for turning his back on religion at the age of 13 and - and, as if that wasn't enough - later marrying a Catholic. Who can blame him? Apart from the fact that he dreads his Bar mitzvah, singing in Hebrew in front of all those people and all - what Jewish teenager would not have begun to question his faith after the Holocaust.

"My grandmother left Poland with my mother in 1912 because anti-Semitism was on the rise. Then, during the war, we lost 37 relatives in the camps. Not people I knew, but cousins. Three came out in the end. They came to Canada to see us, with their tattoos on their arms. It was awful.

"I think, growing up a Jewish kid in Canada, you felt like the outsider and, I guess I have, if anything, a tendency to relate to the outsider. But now I've become a great insider, so I dunno... It's

hard to be the outsider, it's hard to carry that mantle, when a lot of people are saying nice things about you. It'll probably be over soon and then I can go back to being the outsider."

It's easy to see the magnitude of his achievement. Or rather, the magnitude of his achievement is that you can't see it. Imagine yourself flying around in an aeroplane - let's make it one of those single-seaters that Gehry's favourite, Le Corbusier ("Corb" to Gehry), always scribbled on his designs - and that you're flying above Hollywood, Prague, Paris, Kobe or any one of the other cities where Gehry has built. Even if you know exactly where to look you still see nothing. Only a clutter of broken geometrical shapes, a chaos which more or less reflects the surrounding cityscape.

Maybe this urban camouflage can be explained by the fact that he fell in love with town planning and studied it at Harvard after getting his Bachelor's Degree in architecture from the University of Southern California. It hasn't been a question of whole towns for the populace yet but each and every one of his buildings offers variation and originality sufficient for a city.

In fact, Gehry's work is so far removed from the conventional design restraints, that his buildings tower, revolve and soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of architectural history stands

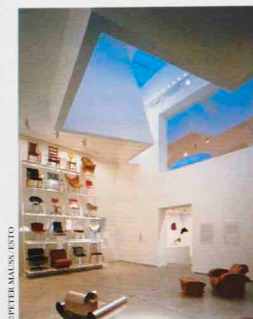
"The issue is to respond to the time you're in, that's all I'm interested in."

helpless. He doesn't even have a proper name for it himself. "At times, you know, I call myself a 'Living-in-my-time-ist'. But I dunno, it's a semantic thing. The issue is trying to respond to the time you're in, that's all I'm interested in. I know how to do 19th-century details and make buildings look decorative and all that Prince Charles stuff, it's easy. But to move beyond that, to find ways to express the times you live in, is more difficult. That's what I strive to do. Time will tell whether it's relevant.

"You know, from inside me this style feels very normal and it's taken me a long time to realize that it's unique, that it isn't normal to other people. For a long time I couldn't figure out what they were talking about 'cos it seems very logical to me. I haven't worried too much about that, however, 'cos to me it feels there is nothing else I can do. I'm just doing what I can do, and I wouldn't know what else to do if I wasn't doing this."



From top: Visual Arts Centre, Toledo (1992); Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany (1989); concert hall for the L.A. Philharmonic (completed in 2001).



MARK ISITT is the editor of Scanorama. He writes frequently on design and architecture, but prefers billiards to ice hockey.