

Wrecked angles

Taikoo Place exhibition sheds light on the twisted ideas of celebrated architect Frank Gehry, writes Tessa Chan

Frank Gehry rejects the term "starchitect". But cities wear his buildings like badges of honour, and tourists flock to see them. He has been hailed as one of the most culturally influential people in the world, precisely because he bends all the rules, just as he does the surfaces of his buildings.

While his trip to Hong Kong for the opening of the Outside the Box exhibition was cancelled as the 82-year-old was recovering from an operation, Gehry shared some thoughts about his recent milestones with the South China Morning Post from his home in Los Angeles.

The exhibition, open until the end of next month in Taikoo Place, throws light on his most famous works - including the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles - via sketches, images and models. "I am looking forward to visitors seeing my process," Gehry says. "My models show the path of my explorations."

It's partly this process that has made his name. People have always struggled to label him, though many settle for "deconstructivist". Fans admire his unconventional genius, while critics call him radical, complaining that he puts form over function, and makes no attempt for his buildings to blend in with the local environment.

One such building - his latest, and perhaps biggest, milestone to date - is 8 Spruce Street. It opened in New York in February, and now soars unapologetically over lower Manhattan, a live example of how digital technology can create the illusion of a handmade sculpture. This overt symbol of wealth (it was created for developer Bruce Ratner) is the tallest luxury residential tower in the city's history and has provoked both criticism and rave reviews with its crumpled, twisted form.

"I feel very proud to be a part of the New York City skyline," Gehry says. "I tried very hard to make a building that could only have been built in New York. I am happy that New Yorkers have embraced it."

The building is already so prominent in the public's mind that it turned up in an April Fools' Day spoof in The New York Times this year, which said its shiny facade was setting fire to local buildings.

And now Hong Kong is getting a Gehry badge of its own: the near-completed luxury property Opus Hong Kong at 53 Stubbs Road. It's his first residential project in Asia, expected to attract the city's highest rental prices, and its evolution can be seen at the exhibition. Despite what critics may say, Gehry insists that the surrounding environment was a crucial design factor to be considered.

"Hong Kong is a dense and vibrant city. It has a special feeling to it. As an architect you have to be sensitive to this and try to make a building that adds vibrancy," he says. "It is not a city for dull buildings; it is a city of constant innovation. The architecture has to keep up."

"This is the challenge for West Kowloon, also," he adds, referring to a project for which he submitted ambitious plans six years ago - plans that were rejected for not complying with the government's design parameters. "The challenge is to create a new paradigm for the arts rather than copying from the past."

Gehry says the inspiration for 53 Stubbs Road came from the client (Swire Properties) and the outstanding site that they had. "Their brief was to create intimate, beautiful homes that took advantage of the views," he says. "The views change as you go around the building, so I started laying out the rooms, trying to make each have an intimate Hong Kong connection. The resulting plan shape resembles a flower, which was quite accidental."

Visitors to the Out of the Box exhibition's website are invited to partake in a "perceptive intelligence" test, a tactic designed to underline the prolific partnership between the left and right sides of Gehry's brain.

"You have to be creative and able to run a business," Gehry says. "If you don't run it well, you won't get projects to express your creativity."

His work has never been, he says, a question of reconciling his emotional/intuitive side with his analytical side. "If you start with logical analysis and solve the functional problems, it gives you freedom. I am proud of the fact that my clients all love their buildings and each of the buildings functions like a Swiss watch. I also like to bring beauty and innovation to projects. But that needs to go hand in hand with functionality. If you put them in silos, it doesn't work."

One thing he takes pride in, unlike some other "starchitects", is sticking to his original budget. "In every project you face challenges such as budget, schedule, zoning and programme. My method pays close attention to all of those issues from the beginning," he says. "I am very thorough and make sure to solve the fundamental problems before I introduce any form. Once I introduce form, I am as thorough, and keep constant watch on the budget."

The architect says part of his secret is that he works with a proprietary 3-D software and requires that all consultants use the same system, so that all the information about the building lives in one shared model. "Clashes can be detected and fixed in the model, which greatly reduces change orders during construction of the building," he says.

It was Gehry's grandmother who first encouraged creativity in him.

"My grandmother brought home scraps of wood and we made cities," he recalls. "When an adult suspends their reality and plays with a child, this is a huge encouragement."

One wonders what she'd think of her Pritzker Prize-winning grandson's long list of accolades and achievements if she were alive today.

"I think she would be happy and proud. She was always very supportive and loving," Gehry says.

"My buildings are like my children: I love them all equally," he adds. "There are always dreams to reach for. I cannot imagine stopping."

"The greatest achievement for any architect is the next challenge that he or she faces."
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Where and When

Outside the Box is open until October 27

ArtisTree, 1/F, Cornwall House,

Taikoo Place, Island East

www.gehryexhibition.com