



Growing Up Canadian

A conversation with Frank Gehry

Frank Gehry is the world's most famous architect. His major buildings include the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997), the DG Bank Building (2001) in Berlin, the Walt Disney Concert Hall (2004) in Los Angeles and the Millennium Park Music Pavilion and Great Lawn (2004) in Chicago. In 1989, he was awarded the Pritzker Prize in Architecture—the highest honour in the profession. At the time of this writing, Gehry was completing the design of the Art Gallery of Ontario's redevelopment and Le Clos Jordan, a winery in the Niagara Region. Gehry (b. 28 February 1929) is a Canadian who spent the first 17 years of his life in Canada, splitting his time between Toronto and Timmins. I interviewed Gehry in his Los Angeles studio about how Canada has shaped him.

LISA ROCHON: To sketch a building is to imprint it on your mind. Le Corbusier believed this. But to be part of the land—to work it—is surely another way to know the intimate relationship between landscape, buildings and people. Let's begin this conversation talking about you, the farmer Mr. White and a small town located about 600 kilometres north of Toronto called New Liskeard.

FRANK GEHRY: How did you know about Mr. White? My mother, my sister Doreen and I would go to

New Liskeard for the summer from our home in Timmins—a lot of people went there from Timmins from all walks of life. Doreen was born when I was eight, so she was just a baby when we first went. It was a small resort, with small cabins and fancier cabins and a cookhouse. It was on the lake, and there was fishing and boating. I used to swim in Lake Temiskaming all the time. We had a cabin, and you could see Quebec across the way. And Mr. White was a farmer who owned the farm and the cabins on his land. I used a pitchfork and put hay on the truck. I was on vacation, so I wasn't really supposed to work.

I do remember one thing: they used to have a woman who would come by and she could analyze handwriting. And I'll never forget this: she told my mother that I was going to be a famous architect. I swear to this! I did not make this up. Once that happened my mother used to talk about the Toronto architects to me—like Sprackman.¹ And so she was always looking up their work and showing me, and I never quite fitted into what she expected of me. Later I did, but during that time she was always disappointed. I was into myself. My parents used to call me a dreamer. They didn't know what I was dreaming about.

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Frank Gehry, the teenager—the dreamer—with his friend Ross Honsberger posing in front of Gehry's Toronto house. Some sixty years later, Frank and Ross are still friends.

ROCHON: Your family moved to Timmins from Toronto in 1938. What do you remember about Timmins?

GEHRY: I always think of the snow and the crunching of the hand-made black cross-country skis that the miners used to wear going to the mine in the morning. You'd hear them, they were mostly Finns, with their white backpacks. And at night the northern lights and the Christmas and the cold. In the spring we'd go out onto the rocks south of Timmins and go blueberry picking in the woods with my parents, and swim in the Temagami river and watch the loggers bringing the logs down to the mills. I was in the Boy Scouts, and I used to go hiking and have overnights in the bush, and I loved that. And, a lot of hockey—there was a rink at every school and you'd go out at recess and after school and during the weekends, but I never took any skating lessons so I was just rag tag and we didn't have much money so I had kind of dredgy skates.

ROCHON: I imagine the people in Timmins could be as hard as the rock and minerals that were mined there. And when you were there the town was split along religious and cultural lines.

GEHRY: I got beaten up for killing Christ. There was this Polish kid—Poland was incredibly anti-Semitic and still is—so he was probably a product of the crap his parents fed him. So he beat me up and then I chased him and beat him up. In the end we became friends—I remember we had lunch together.

ROCHON: Your dad was a boxer from New York—did he teach you how to fight?

GEHRY: No, I was a sissy.

ROCHON: What was your dad, Irving Goldberg,² doing in Timmins?

GEHRY: He was into slot machines, pinball machines. We used to go to all the carnivals in the region. He had machines in bars and restaurants throughout that region, and he used to go every week and collect the nickels from the machines. And then it was made illegal, so he went back to Toronto, and he found a furniture place making lazy susans, ashtray stands, and he started struggling. He didn't have an education, and he had a hard time, and he lost it, had a heart attack, and that's when we had to leave [in 1947 for Los Angeles].

ROCHON: Did you ever build together—work on some jerry-built construction?

GEHRY: I helped him in the shop with his things. I was good at that, and had I known what I know now I would have put him on the map, right? But I couldn't—I wasn't ready to do what he needed me to do. He didn't understand that I had any talent. He didn't get it, and neither did my mother. People told them; I remember Rabbi Linder told them because he was an artist himself and he sang. He was the actor Cecil Linder's son. He sort of saw something in me. But my father was into the business.

ROCHON: So you were the dreamer and didn't understand the value of a dollar.

GEHRY: My mother didn't have the stuff to defend me. Although she knew better. She took me to places, to Massey Hall, and she introduced me to art.

I ALWAYS THINK OF THE SNOW AND THE CRUNCHING OF THE HANDMADE CROSS-COUNTRY SKIS THAT THE MINERS USED TO WEAR . . .

The author interviews Gehry in his Los Angeles studio, among the corrugated cardboard chairs he designed, models of his architecture projects, and hockey sweaters from National Hockey League greats.



ROCHON: Let's talk about solitude for a minute. Glenn Gould said something interesting about solitude—that it's the prerequisite for ecstatic experience. And he thought that to experience ecstasy and the condition of heroism, you had to experience being cast off.

GEHRY: That I understand—being cast off. I don't know about solitude. I think that the outsider—Camus and *L'Étranger*—I can relate to because I was that in my own family. It was like maybe I was gay or something, maybe not quite as extreme as that, but I was close to that. So I was always on the outside. I've learned that even with talent, even though you would think that I would recognize finally that I'm an insider, I still don't. Intellectually I do, but emotionally I don't. I'm so comfortable now with all of this.

ROCHON: In those fundamental growing years in Timmins, how would you spend your time? What were your obsessions? Did you draw?

GEHRY: I read a lot of books. I was always reading. The Hardy Boys and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Alexandre Dumas. I used to draw with my father—he'd draw with me sometimes. I did some drawings—that's how the rabbi knew there might be something. I did a drawing of Theodor Herzl,³ and he pinned it up on the wall. I used to sell the Timmins *Daily Press*. My father thought that I was just a schlepper—I was never going to be any good at business. He wrote me off. So they sent me out to earn. I would go to the newspaper and I'd buy five of the papers and I would walk toward my house on the main street and I'd sell these things for a nickel. I'd make maybe two cents a paper. And I could always sell three, maybe four, but I never could sell five. And I would come home, and he would take my sister to some bar with the fifth paper and sell it—he always said she had the knack for business, that she was the one. And that I should

learn from her. And you know she was just cute, and she was outspoken. She had a big mouth from the time she was born. And I was quiet. I told that story to Ken Thomson—his father owned the Timmins paper when I was doing that. Imagine that! My father would bring home friends from the carnival business—there was a black boxer who used to babysit me—he was blind. I was maybe ten or eleven. The business thing—if you follow your dream it’s inevitable that all the clues are there, how to deal with it. [Business] It’s peripheral—it’s a secondary issue and that’s what he didn’t understand. If he saw me now he would be amazed.

ROCHON: Your design for your house in Santa Monica used the crappy stuff of the modern age—chain link and corrugated iron—to wrap and re-present a cute little house. It used the strategies of artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—your pals—to layer what was commonplace onto architecture.

GEHRY: The house was about considering myself middle class and moving into a middle-class neighbourhood. And trying to understand the middle-class neighbourhood instinctively. Which I did—which they misunderstood. There was a lot of denial. They didn’t realize that they had corrugated metal and chain-link fence around their houses—so when you showed it to them as a value they said, “Wait a minute, that’s not normal.”

ROCHON: When you lived in Toronto, you experienced, I think, a public city. There were all kinds of possibilities to learn and flourish there, within the city’s public institutions and its civic realm. When you were a teenager you went to the free public lectures at the University of Toronto on Friday nights, and heard Alvar Aalto speak there in November 1946. His organic forms—the humanity of his architecture—resonated with your work.

GEHRY: November 16, 1946. I found that out because later I went to Aalto’s office in Finland and I asked them whether he’d given a lecture there and they picked it out and said, “Yeah, November 16, 1946.” He’s the guy that I was probably closest to that was making architecture for people.

ROCHON: Five months before that, Glenn Gould gave his first concert at Massey Hall. He was thirteen. You were sixteen when you heard Aalto speak. These two people...

GEHRY: Weirdos...

ROCHON: ... were in these halls in Toronto at what turned out to be pivotal moments in their lives. Frank, you’re not a weirdo. Did you ever meet Gould?

GEHRY: No, but I knew about him. Because one of my friends played classical piano, so we used to talk about classical music all the time. But I never studied music—that’s something I always wanted to do.

ROCHON: There was the Art Gallery of Toronto [now the Art Gallery of Ontario], where you were introduced to art. And there was Kensington Market, where you and your grandmother would buy carp on Thursdays to make gefilte fish for the Sabbath. There was Grange Park, and Varsity Arena where you would skate, and Massey Hall where you went to concerts.

GEHRY: And there was that dance place down by Sunnyside Pavilion.

ROCHON: Palais Royale.⁴ Did you go there?

GEHRY: Used to go dance there. I seem to remember that Glenn Miller played there.

ROCHON: When you think back on Toronto, do you think of it as a public city?

GEHRY: Yes, we didn’t have much money, but I could go to Sunnyside [a beach and amusement park], and I would take dates to Casa Loma. And then the YMCA had dances every Friday night with the kids. Since I was Jewish, I didn’t quite fit in, but I used to go out with girls who weren’t from Bloor Collegiate and had friends who accepted me. I was always the outsider. I went to the Friday night dances at the YMCA because I worked out at the YMCA and swam there and played and knew all the guys. But I never took a girl home. I got to dance with them, but that’s all. They were nice to me—I was accepted to a point. I was a cheerleader at Bloor.

ROCHON: You were a cheerleader? Did you do other sports?

GEHRY: No, I was a sissy. I swam—I could swim ten miles without stopping. I could beat a lot of people in Ping-Pong. I skated.

ROCHON: Did the anti-Semitism you experienced in Timmins and even in Toronto turn you off from wanting to do your bar mitzvah?

GEHRY: No, not really. My bar mitzvah happened on D’Arcy Street—across from the AGO, behind those Victorian houses, the street behind. The building on the northeast corner of Beverley and Dundas was called Chudleigh’s. It was a catering place, and they did bar mitzvahs and weddings. That’s where my bar mitzvah dinner was. At the end of the ceremony, the old guys would go drink schnapps, and I remember trying to talk to them

about what the Torah meant, and what I’d read—because I’d studied it, and I can still recite it. I remember going home and saying to my father, “You know, those guys didn’t know anything about it. They were just there for the fucking drink.” And that’s when I quit, right then. Never went back. I did study the Talmud—because I loved to read it. My friend Ross and I were in third form with my physics teacher, Mr. Joe Noble. We studied the Bible, read it, found the contradictions and a whole bunch of stuff. And we would argue with Mr. Noble about atheism—that there was no God. And the word got out at school that we were atheists, and the girls wouldn’t talk to us. I’ll never forget those funny little girls—they’d never go out with us. They were afraid of us.

ROCHON: How does it feel going back into your memory bank?

GEHRY: It feels all right. I’m going back to Timmins with Frank Mahovlich—he wants to bring the Stanley Cup back to Timmins.

ROCHON: Do you remember when Ken Dryden interviewed you at Harbourfront Centre as part of the Creative Geniuses series [October 2001]?

GEHRY: That was really fun.

ROCHON: He was the thinking man’s goalie. He used to stand with his chin resting on his goalie stick during the face-offs. It was a casual stance.

GEHRY: Yeah, that’s part of my DNA—not making things too precious. I just don’t have the stomach for the other stuff.

ROCHON: I know that Glenn Lukens, your ceramics teacher at the University of Southern California, taught you to believe in the beauty that can come from creative accidents, from the surprises. He enrolled you in an evening architecture class when you were about nineteen. And then you started touring around in Los Angeles to visit the work of the California modernists like Richard Neutra, Rudolf Schindler, Craig Ellwood and John Lautner. They were an influence in Canada. But whose work interested you more—Neutra’s or Schindler’s?

GEHRY: I thought Neutra was an actor, that he put on a front. Schindler was much more accessible, and I knew him better. When I finished school, I went to get a job at Neutra’s, and I showed him my work from school. He looked at it, and he was very impressed, and he said, “You can come here.” And then he gave me a sheet of paper showing me how they did it, how I had to pay tuition to work there. And I remember leaving there and ripping up the paper—I couldn’t afford to pay him. I used to go and see all of his work, but in the end I don’t consider it that interesting. Schindler was much more interesting—much more of an artist.

ROCHON: There was a craft to his architecture, and he had a gift for articulating volumes, compressing space and then releasing it.

GEHRY: Yeah, and he took it somewhere. He took Frank Lloyd Wright somewhere. They were all in my memory.

ROCHON: The first house you designed for a client in Los Angeles—the Steeves House—was completed in 1959, the year that Frank Lloyd Wright died. There’s a lot of Wright in that house—in the cruciform plan and its low-slung profile.

GEHRY: Oh yeah, absolutely. I was well into that. It was veering toward the Japanese, but there was the formality of the axial plan. Frank Lloyd Wright, Harwell Hamilton Harris. I think I tried everything once—I think you have to. And then I knew I was going to go out and start from scratch, but I didn’t know where. The relationship to the artist was what gave me confidence to move off. It was like what I just experienced this weekend, going to Mark di Suvero’s studio in New York⁵—it was like coming home. I haven’t been to an artist’s studio for a long time. It’s the excitement of it—the inspiration of it. There are more options in the art world. Architects have to think of social issues and we need to worry about the environment. All that layering of responsibilities that keep appearing in our lives, and they vary from time to time

ROCHON: And you’re meant to absorb the interests of various lobby groups and political pressures. And ultimately you want to enclose space in an interesting way.

GEHRY: I think you’ve got to do all those things, but to make them the number-one value is not my thing. My work is driven by people, but some say that I’m not driven by social values—it’s just sculpture. I gave a talk in Rome the other day, and a kid got up and he said, “Your buildings shock people, but what else do they do? What about the social issues?” And I said, “Have you been there and seen them?” He said no. And I said, “Well, shut the fuck up!” Bilbao turned around what that city was to what it is now. Kids are staying there, there’s a viable economy, there are smiles on people’s faces. And it wasn’t just my building—there were significant changes made to the infrastructure, the metro, the airport.

ROCHON: It is a huge transformation. I remember backpacking through Bilbao when I was seventeen, and it was a dark, disconcerting place.

GEHRY: My museum did deal with the social issues. People love it and identify with it. But I think that architects get into these things without realizing, wait a minute, you’re supposed to be making a place of beauty that people want to be in and that they will enjoy through the ages. You’re not just creating a social experiment—it’s part of that, but you’re not an expert in social issues. You’re not a social scientist.

ROCHON: But at the same time, the global star system of architecture is producing more and more buildings that aren’t about architecture that can endure through the ages—they’re about titillation.

GEHRY: I know, but I get put into the box, and I don’t think I belong there.

ROCHON: I don’t think you do either. Both because you’re an innovator and because you are extremely attentive to site—at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, your museum practically makes love to the river and to that massive bridge running alongside it, the Puente de la Salve. Your architecture finds a peace between insanity and humanity. It wins us over. But there are lots of architects out there who are producing sci-fi fantasy or three-dimensional interpretations of their own personal angst—the public’s experience doesn’t figure.

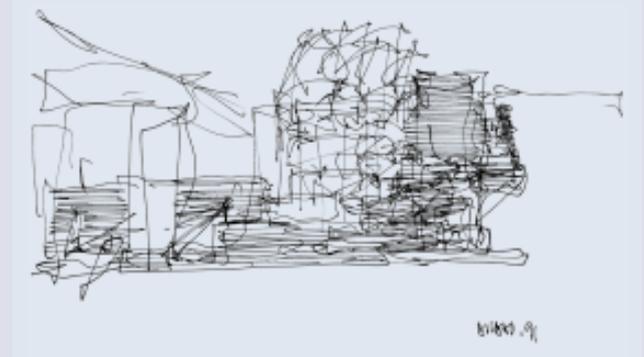
GEHRY: I know, and the kids at school think that I dropped out of an airplane with Bilbao and that I did nothing before.

ROCHON: Did you travel to Ronchamp this year, as you do most years, to see the chapel by Le Corbusier?

GEHRY: I haven’t gone this year—I go there and I go to Grünewald’s altarpiece in Alsace.⁶ It’s a great work. Jasper Johns thinks it’s a great painting.

ROCHON: How did Canada inspire you?

GEHRY: Certainly my high school teachers at Bloor Collegiate Institute—my English teacher, Ms. McDonald, my math teacher Miss Timm, my trigonometry teacher Mr. Philips, Mr. Joe Noble who taught physics. Mr. Palmer was the shop teacher. I learned how to do all the sheet metal work there so that was pretty prophetic. That was what kept coming back to me. Those people moulded me pretty well. They were important people. I love them very much. They treated me good.



Gehry’s sketch of Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 1991