

## JANE GREGORIUS

*Gridded Church #20, 2009*  
monotype, 30 X 22 in



courtesy the artist

## DAN WHITE

# Frank Gehry's Spirit of Play

## A Conversation in Santa Cruz

It takes a certain amount of arrogance to write a single sentence, let alone an essay or—God forbid—an entire book, knowing that someone else is going to read it and occupy it for a while. It takes even more self-regard to bear up against the backlash that creative people must face if their work makes any kind of public impression. Just imagine how much self-regard it would take to design a building. Every time I read about highly successful architects, I think to myself, “How can they stand it? How can they bear the weight of their enormous egos?”

After all, the writer of a bad book or a terrible story hasn't built something that must stand for generations. People don't have to go to work every day inside his short story, or take classes or undergo surgery inside her novel. People don't have to walk through someone's prose on the way to the subway. I've always wondered how architects handle the expectation, the crush of public opinion, and the constant compromises and budget limitations, without losing their minds in the process.

The legendary architect Frank Gehry offered some insight into these questions during his recent appearance at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), where he had a public dialogue about creativity with his official biographer, Paul Goldberger, a contributing editor for *Vanity Fair*. Gehry, famous for looping, billowing, swirling works that function as sculptures as well as buildings, has a ready answer to these questions: In the face of such pressures, creative-minded people must pass “through the looking glass” and embrace a sense of anarchic childishness that will help them overcome self-consciousness, deal with the inevitable setbacks, and cope with backlash if it comes their way.

To channel our best creative energies, we must embrace the inner child. Perhaps that sounds a little hokey, self-helpy, or glib—and in most circumstances, I would agree with you. But consider the source: an uncompromising, risk-taking, and sometimes curmudgeonly figure who often talks about feeling like an outsider, and who once said, “Each project, I suffer like I'm starting over again in life. There's a lot of healthy insecurity that fuels this stuff.” Gehry clearly drives himself hard for his work, and is pained at the idea of repeating himself. He is unafraid to fail, to miss the mark; and he's had to face up to ridicule—and at one point, even a few murmured death

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threats—because of his ideas. So if he identifies himself as “the little boy who tells the truth” in his work, I cannot dismiss the idea so easily.

During his talk, I had a chance to press him on this “little boy” idea. In a question I submitted on a note card, I asked him the following question: “In an interview in *Conversations with Frank Gehry* [by Barbara Isenberg], you mentioned the spirit of play that informs some of your work. Could you talk for a moment about this spirit and how it is brought to bear in your buildings despite the pressure of deadlines, budgets, and other constraints?”

I was quite surprised when Gehry not only answered my question, but spent a good ten minutes batting it around on stage:

“When you are a little kid,” he said, looking in my general direction (though he had, of course, no idea who was posing the question or where I might be sitting), “you play with your friends, and that becomes the beginnings of your socialization, and it continues to create relationships throughout your life, into your business world and other worlds. You will hear somebody say, ‘Let’s have a retreat with the senior staff to play around with some ideas.’ That is who we are as people. We do play with ideas. We test things, play with things. The most incredible business-people are artists in that sense—it is *all* about play. *Serious play*. It is trying to maintain a kind of innocence. It has to do with feeling that you are better in touch with what

is happening than if you come in pro forma and end up dealing with the past. The only way to get in contact with the present and, hopefully, a direction, is to allow yourself to play with ideas.”

This philosophy is apparent in his wild design. In a 1994 profile in *The New Yorker*, UCSC alumnus Lawrence Weschler remarked on Gehry’s “aesthetic of juts and jumbles; he seldom shows any particular allegiance to the perpendicular.” Weschler mentioned Gehry’s use of “chance alignments,” “negative spaces,” and “disorderly order.” These descriptions hold true for virtually all of Gehry’s best-known buildings—including the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, which transformed the run-down city into a bustling tourist destination; and the Walt Disney Concert Hall, which reenergized classical music performance in downtown Los Angeles. His Fred and Ginger building in Prague looks as if a giant fire-breathing monster had melted and squeezed its midsection, making it bulge on either end. His design for the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health in Las Vegas looks as if some of the buildings have toppled like so many dominoes.

I like the sense of release and the shameless goofiness of his best works. They bring to mind the loopy unselfconsciousness of Gaudí and the manic works of Dubuffet, who counted children and madmen as influences. Gehry’s idiosyncratic style has made him the target of haters over the years. But Gehry suggested, during his presentation, that nurturing that sense of childish creativity can also help the creator bear up when the inevitable reactions come pouring in. He once wrote a letter to his younger self, beginning by saying, “I guess the most important advice I would give you is to keep copies of *Don Quixote* and *Alice in Wonderland* on your bed stand at night.” He still keeps those books close at hand.

“Whenever I get disgruntled or something, I open the books and read chapters,” he said at UCSC. “Cervantes was amazing, as was Carroll.” To this day, he aims to “go through the looking glass” when working on a project. “It is all very serious,” he said. “The programs, the budget; and there ultimately has to be that kind of innocence—the kind that tells the truth somehow. You have to preserve that in the process. I do that through architecture. And if you do this, you need to be willing to take the stuff that comes at you for doing that. Initially, when I showed the

models for the Walt Disney Hall publicly, people called them ‘broken crockery.’ When I showed the model for Bilbao, there was an article in the paper that said, ‘Kill the American architect.’ That was serious. At the time, separatists were bombing everybody. It was crazy.” And then he added mischievously, “Whenever I got in public, I stood next to the president.”

The other problem, aside from public taste and controversy, is potential clients who underestimate the amount of time it takes to finish a viable creative work, he said.

“A lot of stuff comes at people like me from someone who wants to use the name and says just do it quickly. ‘Eighty-story building? You can do it in a week.’ ...I am very polite. I’ve passed on stuff even when I needed work. I talked about this in my notes to myself. A teacher told me, whatever you do, it has to be the best thing you’ve ever done because you will be judged by that last work.”

Discussion of serious play and inner kindergarteners can only go so far in explaining Gehry’s process, if he even can be said to have a process. But I found it heartening that an artist who works at such a high level spent so much time talking about a state of mind that allows creative people to throw it all off their shoulders for a little while: the reactions, the comments, the demands of the ego, the difference between the vision in your head and the one on the paper, and all the compromises large and small. In a state of “serious play,” all of these things, just for a moment, lose some of their power and relevance. Gehry once summed up that polarity in his work—the struggle between the demands of the practical adult and the willful anarchic child—with another analogy drawn straight from his childhood:

“There are two kinds of energy,” he remarked. “There’s the energy that probably comes from my mother pushing me for many years to do something, and I guess I’m afraid to disappoint her even though she’s gone... But there’s also the energy of the work that grows out of the excitement of the project. A lot has to do with the people involved and their willingness to play with me. I think the best buildings come from that.”

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Dan White’s first book *The Cactus Eaters*, published by Harper Collins in 2008, was a *Los Angeles Times* “Discovery” selection. Dan has his MFA from Columbia University.