Architecture: Brand-New Cities: Frank Gehry's Bilbao Effect looks a lot like 1960s-style urban renewal
Author(s): Wayne Curtis
Published by: The Phi Beta Kappa Society
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41222543
Accessed: 23/07/2013 16:07

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
When he was eight years old, the future architect Frank Gehry and his mother paid a visit to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. It was within these hushed halls that Gehry made a discovery: something called art existed, and art was something he should strive to make part of his life.

We know this because a brief, handwritten account of his visit appeared in a full-page ad in *The New York Times* last summer. It was accompanied by a long, loosely rendered sketch on yellow-lined paper, which looked like a seismograph chart of a fairly significant earthquake. Just above this was a photorealistic illustration of Gehry’s new façade for the gallery, its roofline roughly tracking the tremors below. The revamped gallery is slated to open in 2008.

The ad wasn’t taken out to promote Gehry Partners, LLP, or even the Art Gallery of Ontario. It was paid for by the city of Toronto, which has been busily re-branding itself of late.

It’s evidently no longer enough for a city to have a defining single icon or a richly textured and complex history. It now must have a brand, complete with a strategy to implement it.

The Toronto Branding Project spent tens of thousands of dollars developing and promoting Brand Toronto (this included creating its own retro-futuristic typeface), and the city took out its Gehry ad to let the world know that it had joined the ranks of The City Envi-able. Like a mall developer crowing that it had signed Neiman Marcus as an anchor store, Toronto wanted the word out that Gehry was bringing his pixie dust to the city.

Same year, another place: It’s the ground-breaking of the Art Museum of Western Virginia in Roanoke. The $46-million building features a daring design of stainless-steel ribbing and zinc shingles. It’s the work of Randall Stout, who was employed by Gehry for seven years before heading off on his own in 1996. Stout was told by the local Medici that they didn’t want a conventional building beholden to context (the context being the rough edge of downtown), but something that would stand apart. Something, perhaps, that

~ Wayne Curtis’s new book, a cultural, economic, and political biography of rum from 1640 to the present, will be published in 2006.
would give passersby a sharp (but playful) slap on the bottom. He delivered, exploding a traditional box, not unlike the work of his former boss. “This city has had the courage to be bold,” said Virginia’s governor at the ceremony. “This city is on that path to greatness.”

That path, as many know, began in Bilbao. And the route has proven to have been stunningly short and steep. In 1992 the hard-luck Spanish industrial port of Bilbao lured then-little-known Gehry to design Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. He produced a fantastical, swirling palace of titanium, and throngs soon poured in by oxcart and airbus ogle the stunning new building. The world took notice. Every city suddenly wanted to be Bilbao. Museums, performance halls, universities, and real-estate developers scrambled for Gehry’s affection; then the other high-profile architects were pulled into the vacuum left by his sudden unavailability—Santiago Calatrava, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Richard Meier, Norman Foster, and Thomas Mayne, among others.

Much of this is good. The new breed of “starchitect” has put large-scale urban architecture back in the limelight after some years of lingering in the alley, still smelling of the sour milk of the 1960s-era urban renewal. Starchitects (and their designs) attract glowing media coverage; tickets are at a premium whenever they lecture; and they have provoked small runs on interestingly shaped eyeglasses. The Pritzker Prize has become the new MTV Awards—with Hadid as Sheryl Crow, and Rem Koolhaas as Moby. Gehry, of course, is Bono.

It’s now all but essential to land a name-brand architect to prod a major project from boardroom to backhoe. As Los Angeles Times architect critic Christopher Hawthorne has written, celebrity architects are now regarded reverently as “urban alchemists,” wizards who can make downtown magic with a wave of their wand in a way no comprehensive master plan could ever hope. He reported that the developer of a new $1.8-billion project in downtown Los Angeles “begged” Gehry to come on board. (Gehry will be designing an iconic 50-story tower to rise directly across from his iconic Walt Disney Concert Hall.) On the opposite coast, Gehry has been attached to the $3.5-billion Atlantic Rail Yards project occupying six blocks of Brooklyn, which will include four residential towers, a professional basketball arena, and some zesty retail—all pending the successful navigation of the shoal- and shark-filled waters of New York real-estate politics. In Boston, Gehry has teamed up with Cooper Robertson Partners on Harvard’s plans for an expanded campus across the Charles River from Cambridge.

And it’s not just the big cities that are trying to nab some of that Bilbao Effect for themselves. Celebrity architecture, like floodwaters, has overflowed the urban channels and is now pooling and eddying everywhere, including many smaller cities. This includes Sønderborg, Denmark, which has 30,000 residents and, in a couple of years, a new Gehry-designed hotel. Local backers have said they hope the new structure will cause tourists to flock here. Perhaps more notably, a second splashy Gehry is going up in another backwater Basque town, in the form of a five-star hotel attached to a winery that will offer epicurean adventures and “vinotherapy.”

A Scottish newspaper recently described this new apparition: “Towering above the 18th-century chapel outside the little Basque town of Elciego, deep in the arid hills of Rioja territory, shimmering swathes of double-sided titanium and sweeping curves of steel in pink, gold and silver are taking shape.”

Bright shiny objects. Just the sorts of things that attract the attention of crows and infants.

There’s a new midpriced chain hotel not far from my house in Portland, Maine. Set amid the brick downtown, it’s a plain hatbox, albeit one clad in titanium panels. The panels are slightly puckered along the seams, as if crafted by an inept quilter. It brings to mind the fate that befell high-minded modernists who saw their glass curtain walls and ornament-free exteriors hijacked and bastardized by office park developers. Titanium has become the spray-on suntan of contemporary architecture. It goes up quickly and sends a message that the developer has signed on to the program, that the backers have that vision thing.

All cities need iconic architecture; a city without an icon isn’t a city, it’s a suburb. We’ve seen...
all kinds of icons over the decades, as trends have ebbed and flowed: Greek Revival courthouses, Gothic churches, Olmsted-esque city parks, Roman Empire banks bedecked with rich Corinthian columns, art-deco movie palaces, brutalist sports stadiums. Iconic buildings are the footprint a city leaves behind, the landmarks that provide anchors on which the rest of a city can be moored, both spatially and spiritually. And of course they carry a message to later generations: this is what we valued during our time on earth. We love individuals above the community, and, among individuals, we love celebrities the most. (Of course, in this, starchitecture is a perfectly truthful message.) Our vision of a city is not a collection of functioning neighborhoods, but a collection of what amounts to very large and shiny Hummel figurines. The city is not a living organism but a lifeless curio shelf of willfully stylish buildings. It’s as if the city’s ecosystem was failing, and the response was to truck in large and exotic royal palms and line the avenues with them.

Every generation or two, it seems that society manages to forget the grammar of the city—how to connect nouns with verbs and when to use adjectives. We’re now in the middle of such a time. The emphasis is on big, muscular, German-like nouns, and little interest has been shown in the softening conjunctions or prepositions.

We’ve been here before. This is old-style urban renewal, clad in titanium.

Toronto isn’t just the home of Frank Gehry. Since 1968 it’s also been the adopted home of Jane Jacobs, the author of the massively influential 1961 manifesto of urban life, _The Death and Life of Great American Cities_. She’s been among the fiercest advocates for nurturing the intricately layered ecology of neighborhood life: mixing retail with residential, mixing income levels of all sorts, mixing ethnicities and social classes.

It’s no wonder she felt at home in Toronto after she left New York’s West Village. (She didn’t agree with America’s policy on Vietnam.) Toronto has long been defined by its vibrant and distinct neighborhoods, places with memorable names like Cabbagetown and the Beaches, where nearly half the city was born abroad, and where there’s a strong sense of place in these leafy streets off the commercial strips.
Life happens here. Of course, this sort of life doesn’t fit neatly on postcards, nor does it attract the attention of benefactors with robust checkbooks. But they define Toronto in a way that celebrity buildings can’t ever hope.

“As usual, the master planners and architectural theorists forget that a city’s energy and vitality is generated on its streets and in its neighborhoods, not by ‘a skyline fraught with visual tension,’” writes Aaron Naparstek in his New York Press criticism of Gehry’s Brooklyn project. “Gehry’s attempt to create an energetic urban metropolis from scratch ends up looking like the New York New York Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas, a cartoon version of a real city. Our city.”

In the end, the defining unit of the city isn’t its buildings. It’s the neighborhoods. Yet few city boosters or backers of cultural institutions want to be sous-chefs to the greater genius of the city. They all want their own signature dish. The press clamors for free-range crown-of-prairie hoofstock with a peach-ginger compote. In fact, what the cities need is more chowder, made with a bit of this and a bit of that, nothing standing far apart from the rest. It’s far more nutritious than the higher-calorie confections.

Montreal—Toronto’s rival down the St. Lawrence River—has lately trekked along its own path, and it’s one of the few these days that didn’t start in Bilbao. For the past decade, Commerce Design Montreal has been actively promoting design on the storefront level. It hasn’t agitated for gleaming celebrity-linked edifices, but it has looked at ways to make life on the street more enticing, thereby adding to the quality of hidden places. Part of the program is a well-publicized people’s choice contest for design excellence. Each year some 20 businesses attentive to good interior design or architecture are selected, and residents and visitors are encouraged to spend some time in these locations and vote for their favorites. The chosen places aren’t concentrated downtown but are scattered across the city, in neighborhoods well known and not. (The program currently is on hiatus, reassessing where it should go next.)

The businesses, ranging from convenience stores to oxygen bars, benefit from increased traffic, the design teams get a measure of street cred, and neighborhood architecture migrates slowly to dinner table discussion. Above all, neighborhoods are strengthened with nurturing coming from the streets themselves. Montreal is thus quietly marketing its brand—as Canada’s design metropolis. Or as Jane Jacobs has noted more generally, “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

When neighborhoods work, tourists will be drawn in to experience these small miracles of urban life. They’ll spend their money in local shops rather than at souvenir stands or museum gift shops. The cities will flourish quietly and without a lot of braggart posturing. The brand reveals itself.

And the ordinary becomes the new extraordinary.