

## ForeCite

## On Springtime Conjunctions in The Warehouse of the Imagination

Peter D. Waldman

Spring has always been the proper time for cleaning out attics and warehouses in the spirit of renewal and reconstruction. This spring issue of *Cite* brings into conjunction three distinct landscapes of aggression to be discovered within the storehouses of our culture. The first territorial argument locates Houston as the forum of a debate polarized between California and Switzerland. The second encompasses both landscape and skyscape prophesied as the geography and cosmography of this city. The third establishes the frontier between familiarity and estrangement, recording temporal isolation as a Texas phenomenon.

The temporal confrontation of two major architectural exhibitions in one city – one of the work of Frank O. Gehry at the Contemporary Arts Museum and the other of Mario Botta at the Farish Gallery – confirms that Houston is either the most critically astute or fortuitous city in the land. These exhibitions, prepared respectively at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, represent the clearest critical positions in the cultural debate between the normative and the archetypal.

Albert Pope postulates that the personally contrived work of Gehry paradoxically utilizes the most accessible artifacts of popular culture. Not necessarily the vernacular, but the normative language of contemporary building types and of contemporary constructional practices is not “built upon,” but “built with,” in an extraordinary body of work, one example being the SunarHauserman Showroom at Innova in Houston.

William Sherman argues that the apparently more reductive and logical work of Botta is another paradox of archetypal domestic models evolving into stereotypical contextualism at the urban scale. At first appearing to be an exemplar of critical regionalism, this high priest of the rationalist Tendenza has been suggested by Sherman not to hold the constructional ethic so dear, but to reside within the diminished limits of Form measured by geometry, not gravity.

The month of March marks the equinox, and is a proper setting for the crossing of these polar exhibitions which will engender a debate within our community.

The second landscape is the exclusive territory of the geography of the imagination. Another aggressive debate is framed by two prophetic articles: one by Eduardo Robles, entitled “City Edges;” the other, by Christopher Genik, was inspired by the Parklane Collection by George O. Jackson. Robles takes us on a geography lesson of the familiar and the memorable from bayous by bateau to the temporal twinkling of nightscapes of Post Oak Boulevard in season. Robles, like Gehry, finds the poetic dimension in the normative conditions of our time, but returns us to the fundamental principle of taking possession of the land. Genik establishes Houston’s Messianic claim to the sky, the cosmography of this place as successor to Tycho Brahe’s obsession with the city as observatory. Genik, like Botta, postulates a poetic sensibility residing somewhere between the territory of Cabalist and Alchemist.

Finally, the third landscape brings us “back home” in a series of interviews, previews, and reviews which provide us with attenuatingly exhilarating and terrifying mirrors of our condition at this time in Houston.

This third debate is initiated in an extensive interview with Charles Moore at his home in Austin. Moore evokes none of the popularist, yet critical casualty, of Gehry, nor the exclusive anxiety and angst of Botta. Moore is more about the impression of temporal simultaneity, thus is as modern as Gehry or Botta without their respective needs for deformation or reformation.

Moore’s youthfulness permits him to reside comfortably within the warehouses of all times without the prejudices of *The Children of Light* or *The Children of Darkness* as exemplified by Gehry or Botta. [Rodolfo] “Machado in Texas” has come to a new land to project the sane-ity and gravity of ancient truths. He too seems selectively comfortable in other times and distant geographies. Machado’s reconfigurations of type on domestic and urban scales confront Moore’s more phenomenally rich appreciation and projection of history. Moore and Machado, one resident, one visitor, frame a debate within a familiar language of distinct political and temporal postures.

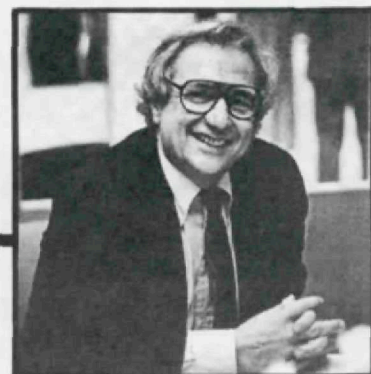
In the end, all three landscapes are obsessed with the construction of a mirror for our time. Gehry and Botta, both committed to the constructional ethic, work out of distinct warehouses; one additively, the other subtractively. Moore is obsessed not with the immediate or the abstract, but with the recollections of the voyageur who values the souvenir with no pretense for leaving monuments for another age. Machado’s monuments are so well “finished” that they already appear to be the archeological artifacts of an autonomous architecture.

These six articles are a testament to six who know the temporal holiday that is America. Far, far away from the Guilt of Eden and blissfully short on memory, America’s temporal isolation, its capacity for the aspiration of apathy, is captured in the interview with Moore, and mirrored in other “True Stories,” by Neal Printz, who brings us critically home again.

This issue ends in NoHo. “The Warehouse District,” by Stephen Fox. It is proper that this issue starts and ends in the Warehouse of the Imagination. This spring we all may begin to define the path home to Houston. Perhaps one might find direction in the literal constructional exuberance of Gehry’s warehouse of contemporary popular culture, in the elegantly evacuated terminals of Botta, in the ecstatic storehouses of Moore, or in the refound clarity of Machado’s autonomous baggage now appearing on loading docks throughout Texas. Or we may choose never to go home again, but to search out the limits of our new Texas geographies with Robles and/or Genik as our guides. In the spring of this year as we hear predictions of an early end for this youthful city, let us rather acknowledge the potential geographies residing in the warehouses of NoHo, and projected unto the flat plains of Virgil,

# The Public Gallery

Albert Pope



Rodolph Jara

Frank Gehry

**T**he idea of an architect posing as an artist is about as appealing as an architect posing as an engineer, or a sociologist, or a social reformer, or a solar expert, or any of the other roles architects have assumed in the bizarre professional masquerade that has plagued architecture since the Second World War.

The continuing presence of the architect/artist is not hard to understand. For the strictly amateur, “art” seems to provide the necessary license for the public exercise of private obsession, and while architecture has always been a public exercise, it has also been a public expression leading to the formation of the public world. The void left by the recent decline of that world (the extinction, for example, of the man on the street), has prompted some architects to assume a new role: that of the artist with buildings on display in the city, as art on display in a gallery. For an architect to promote the “city as gallery,” substituting something like a vague aesthetic shudder for a concrete civic message, is a radical re-evaluation of what constitutes a city, the implications of which have scarcely been considered.

### The Argument

This is, perhaps, a rude introduction to comments on the *gallery show* of an architect who, more than any other as notable, has come to be acknowledged as *the* architect/artist. But the characterization is as inaccurate of Frank Gehry as the prevailing evaluation of his work as “artistic,” and it is perhaps one of the greatest values of the exhibition to be able to set his work apart from the ongoing professional masquerade. The exhibition, “The Architecture of Frank Gehry,” at the Contemporary Arts Museum opened 20 January and continues through 29 March.

The understanding of Gehry’s work as being principally architectural is critical. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue Henry Cobb remarks that “the measure of [Gehry’s] achievement resides in the fact that he works not outside, but firmly within, the normative framework of institutional constraints and procedures that define the contemporary profession of architecture.” This achievement, which seems at first unremarkable, gains significance when one considers that not only does Gehry work *within* the normative framework (for anyone who builds must do this), but he also works *with* the normative framework – this framework, as will be shown, becoming the apparent language or *rhetorical opportunity* for his work. It has been Gehry’s achievement to exploit this “normative institutional framework” as found, and to exploit it not only instrumentally, but also for the associated meanings it has acquired since its implementation 40 years ago.

In subscribing to the limits of a found contemporary architectural vocabulary, Gehry sets himself apart from recent architectural trends. For both the modern

and the postmodern architect/artist, the acknowledgement of such limits in the formation of an expressive language has been difficult. On the one hand, the modernist (or member of a neo-avant-garde) would reject the idea of *any* shared language as potentially undercutting the level of creative freedom sufficient to “reinvent” a vocabulary of form. On the other hand, the postmodernist, while subscribing to the idea of a received language, sees this language as internal to the discipline and that the language of architecture is autonomous and traditionally defined. A language of “constraints and procedures that define the contemporary profession of architecture” is quite different from the language of postmodernism. Paper-thin arches, “rusticated” concrete, curtainwall pilasters, sonotube columns, stucco cornices, the asphalt piazza, the panoply of postmodern kitsch reveals the obvious stress between the constraints of an “academic” language and a normative language that stems from contemporary production.

Gehry thus stands apart from the strictly aesthetic concerns of both the postmodern architect/artist, who would substitute an academic language, and the modern or neo-avant-garde architect/artist, who would wish to substitute a language of his own. If it is clear that Gehry is no Leon Krier, it is also obvious that he is no John Hejduk. And it is perhaps because his work does provide relief from these extremes that his popularity today can be explained.

### A Normative Language

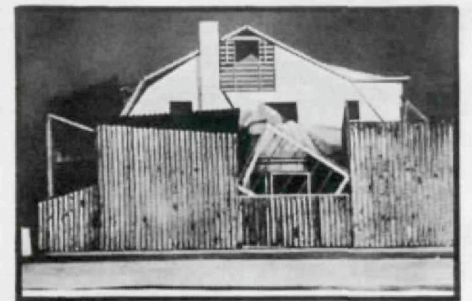
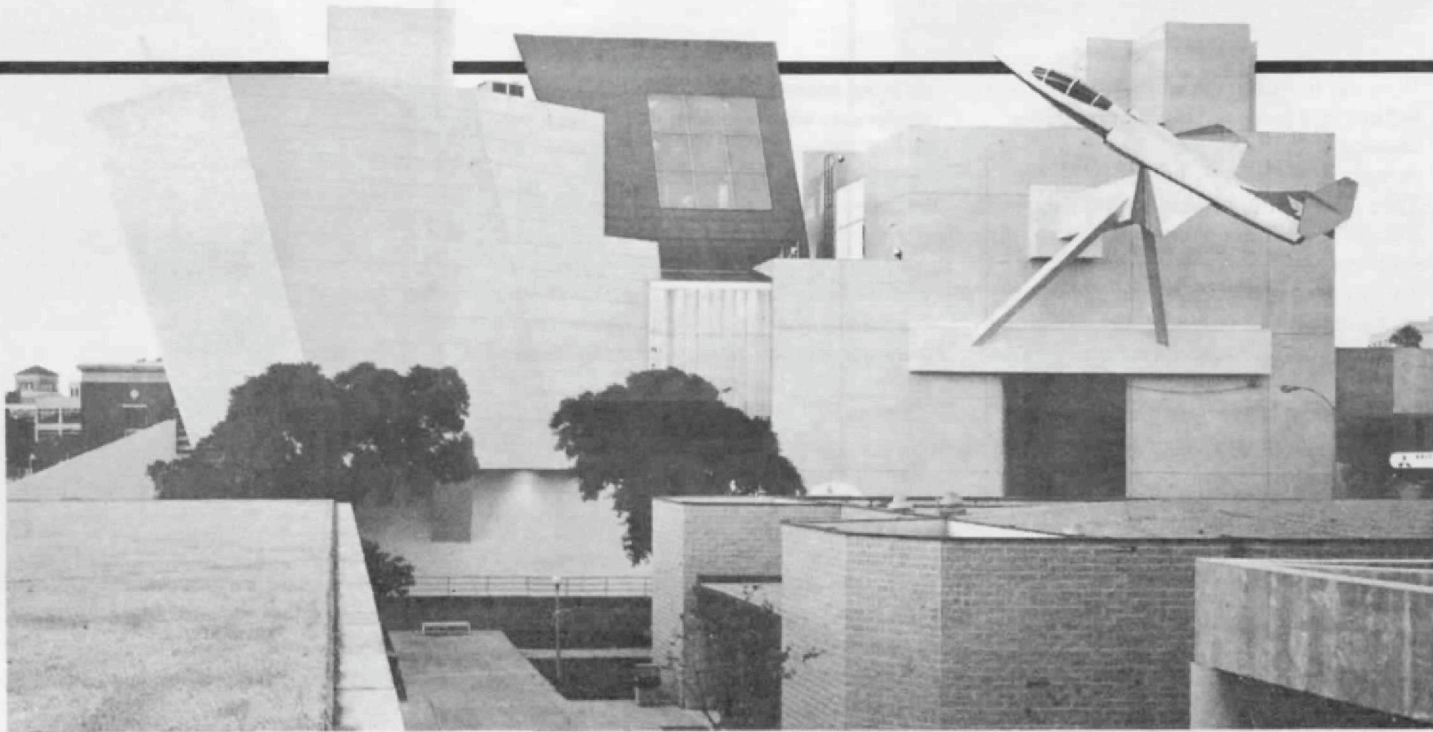
Beyond the value of a critique, however, the questions Gehry’s work ask are simple: why a *substitute* language at all? Does not a language already exist beyond our presumption to impose one? What is it that constitutes a potent language if not one that is rhetorically charged by current usage and association with contemporary institutions. The value of Gehry’s work has been to extract from the constraints of contemporary practice a normative vocabulary of materials and, such as they exist in the modern city, building types. In using this normative vocabulary, unexpected manipulations, juxtapositions, deviations, and subversions become legible with respect to this norm and constitute a critical and speculative project within the found meanings of the late 20th-century city.

Take apart any building site in Los Angeles – factory sheds, parking garages, strip development, office blocks, or houses – and most will include studs, cardboard, glass, corrugated metal, shingles, tile, drywall, and stucco amassed in a tangle of utility poles and chain link, all set in a ground of asphalt. The procedure is straightforward – uncover, deconstruct, recombine:

[children]... are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by



# The Architecture of Frank Gehry



Michael Moran



Frank Gehry Buildings and Projects, 1985, New York, Rizzoli

Clockwise from left: Parking Garage, Santa Monica Place, 1973-1980, Frank Gehry, architect. California Aerospace Museum, 1982-1984, south façade, Frank Gehry, architect. Gehry House, 1978, model, east elevation, Frank Gehry, architect. Gehry House, north elevation. Entrance, SunarHauserman Showroom, 1986, Frank Gehry, architect. Gehry's sculptured fish lamp is shown at left.

building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the fact that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely different kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.<sup>1</sup>

That the activity of reconstituting the material of the 20th-century city might result in a "small world" of great poetic force and density is clear and a substantial aesthetic achievement in itself. But as has been suggested, Gehry's work is also speculative and critical. It is most convincing where the poetic force of the small world is brought critically to bear on the larger one.

## A House, a Garage, A Mysterious Factory

The pink suburban bungalow in Santa Monica (Gehry House, 1977-1978) would have little to tell you about itself (or its neighbors) without its odd metal frame to set it off. The roof begins to list, shadows of dormers materialize, reflections in the glass bend the chimney, existing asphalt shingles and exposed guttering associate with the new corrugated siding, and the old picket fence seems threatening. Inside, bars of sunlight are thrown through old lath like a black-and-white film interior, and the household appliances are parked on the asphalt kitchen floor.

Close by, a Los Angeles parking garage

(Santa Monica Place, 1973-1980) would go unnoticed without its elusive chain-link skin. Its huge phantom letters, which sometime advertise a shopping mall, materialize in and out of the depths struck by reflections off of slow-moving cars.

And near downtown, in Exposition Park, surrounded by an armory, a coliseum, several museums, and the University of Southern California, sits what appears to be a "mysterious factory" with a real jet plane suspended off one side over an enormous hangar door (California Aerospace Museum, 1982-1984). In such auspicious settings, one might really ask if a temple with a frieze would be as appropriate for this new museum of war machines? It is precisely to the point that museums today tend to look and function more like factories than temples, which allows this building its poignant question. Its enigmatic disposition, like the institution/industry it represents, is not without complications.

From houses, parking garages, and museums the list could go on (why are what look like old park benches covered with carpet sitting by potted trees in the waiting room of a law office?), for there may be no limit to the analogical leaps to be made by juxtapositions of such conventional elements. And by conventional elements it is meant a found order, not an invented or a revived order. The present constraints upon the practice of architecture, no matter how oppressive they may be, mark the limit of some of the most potent (not to say the only) means of expression. Which is only to say that like the *bricoleur* (or Simon



Rudolph Jara

Rodia never far away), we might be able to sort out some things with materials at hand – "the starting point of a speculative organization and the exhibition of the sensible world in sensible terms."<sup>2</sup>

## An Assessment

An answer to the question of what is to fill the void left by the decline of the public world is thus suggested. If the late 20th-century city is to be more than a gallery, more than a rarified realm of aesthetic display for the architect/artist, the conventional architectural elements of the city would seem to present an important rhetorical opportunity. Perhaps only children like to play with trash, if indeed this is what our cities have largely become. Yet an impoverished vocabulary must be better than no vocabulary at all, or a vocabulary that has ceased to have

meaning for anyone but the connoisseur. For to affirm the idea of the architect/artist and its corollary – the city as gallery – is to abandon even a potential setting for public society. And if this is already unavoidable (for what sort of miraculous speech might call back this decimated theater) then before we retreat to our television parlors, it would be perhaps *important* to understand that there is magic in the trash we leave behind. ■

## Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London, New Left Books, 1979, pp. 52-53.
- 2 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 16.