







Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). Main entrance view from 22nd Street  
*Image: Tim Street-Porter*



Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). Façade on Washington Avenue: the 'falling' glass box  
*Image: Josh White, Gehry Papers. © Frank O. Gehry. Courtesy of Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.66). Frank Gehry Papers*

There is, of course, more to be told about this charming little house at the intersection of Washington Avenue and 22nd Street. More than anything, it constitutes the act of resistance against then growing in popularity new attitudes in the profession, namely architects' falling out of love with the overbearing discipline of **modernist** ideology and indulging themselves in rediscovering classical and vernacular vocabulary in their pursuit of unbound theatricality that ranged from clever and ironic commentaries to frivolous imitations and pure kitsch.

The Santa Monica house is the quintessential Gehry building, a microcosm of inquisitive deconstructive and destabilising ideas that over the course of subsequent decades materialised on a much grander scale in dozens of global cities. Nevertheless, many practicing architects and architectural critics, thoroughly seduced by the power of its creative potential, insist that the house remains Gehry's best work. It is just the right scale, just the right program, and just the right materiality that he employed in questioning seemingly all assumed conventions subtly, precisely, and critically. It is the ultimate iconoclastic suburban house that emerged at the exact moment when two architectural paradigms—Modern and **Post-Modern**—collided with a bang.

The house had been barely completed when architects started coming here on a special pilgrimage, even if just to catch a glance from a safe distance. How did the local architects react? Let's start with **Thom Mayne** who received his Master's Degree from Harvard in 1978 and then just came back to **LA** to resume heading his practice, Morphosis Architects. He told me in May 2016: "I got off the plane from **Boston** and went there the next day. It was not quite finished. It was a huge sigh of relief and a breath of fresh air. I was not very interested in the specifics, but I was completely enamoured with the ambition. It justified my instincts to challenge the norm. What I liked was the freedom of thought. There was none of that East Coast over-intellectualised insecurity. It was clear that his sources were coming from outside of architecture, particularly such artists as **Frank Stella** and Richard Serra. But I am much more systematic and eventually, I was driven toward the work and methodology of such architects as **Bernard Tschumi** and **Peter Eisenman**. Also, I am into a discourse, but Gehry is complete. There is nowhere to go. The same with Rossi. His work was complete. He himself ended it. The same with **Mies**, unlike **Le Corbusier** who left so many trails. He had so many ideas and kept moving to something else all the time."



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Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). View of the kitchen  
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Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). View of the dining room  
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Earlier this year I asked Mayne’s then-partner, [Michael Rotondi](#) to share his impression of the house. He was similarly moved by it: “It was liberating. It was like reading a manifesto that opened other ways to think and to see the world. In 1978 Thom came back to LA after getting his Master’s degree from Harvard. I picked him up at the airport and we immediately went to see this house. We drove right to the house, parked outside, and talked about what it was and what it meant to us as young practitioners. Although we didn’t go inside, it clarified for us quite a bit because we were still trying to figure out how to take experiences and ideas that we have been accumulating for some years, and put them all in one place. When you grow up with the second-generation modernists and hear from them, ‘All you need to do is to follow the formula, and you’ll get it right.’ We resisted those words. We were looking for an architecture that embodied the present day, not the values and ideologies born and matured in [Europe](#). I always thought it was a blessing that the umbilical from Europe did not make it over the coastal mountain ranges.

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Frank’s house was liberating because we realised that no one could call us crazy anymore. Because from then on, we could point to him and say, ‘Hey, he is the crazy one.’ [Laughs.] So, he was our remote teacher. He was our alibi. And he was supportive of us. Of course, you can never copy what he does. It is not like Corbu’s Five Points. What you learn from Frank is the confidence he has in his intuition and artists’ sensibilities. His work has intelligence and play, and it is about communicating ideas. It also seems to be an apt progression of the work of such architects as Aalto and Stirling, both of whom had the strongest influence on Thom and me early on, as we searched for our own voices and skill sets.”

**Barcelona**-based architects Eva Prats and Ricardo Flores who both worked at the office of Enric Miralles before establishing their practice, Flores & Prats Arquitectes in 1998, one year after Gehry’s **Guggenheim** Bilbao was completed. They told me this summer that much more than by Bilbao they were seduced by Gehry’s own house. Prats said: “At the exact time the Bilbao opened we visited LA and we saw Gehry’s house in Santa Monica, which is an **adaptive reuse** project. It seduced us even more than Bilbao. We really liked it, not to the point that we would do something similar but we enjoyed it. We liked the way he collapsed different geometries. The house reminded us a bit of Miralles. There is a similar idea of the juxtaposition of materials, even if the articulation is different. There is this fascination and joy of layering and accumulation which is similar in the work of the two architects. Just by looking at it, we could see the real joy of making it. Even though we were not able to go inside—there was a sign about the place being on alarm and the entry was strictly prohibited—there are so many clues on the outside. The place is very extraverted, as the Miralles projects are. The house is very charismatic, which is probably a reflection of the architect’s character.”



Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). Detail of the ‘falling’ glass box from within  
*Image: © Frank O. Gehry. Courtesy of Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.66). Frank Gehry Papers*



Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). Study model, Main entrance view from 22nd Street  
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Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). View of the bungalow in the early stage of the transformation  
Image: © Frank O. Gehry, Courtesy of Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.66), Frank Gehry Papers



Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). View of the bungalow as wrapped in plywood  
Image: © Frank O. Gehry, Courtesy of Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.66), Frank Gehry Papers

It is true that a lineage can be traced between Miralles and Gehry both of whom were also influenced by **Carlo Scarpa's** sensibilities and particularly the intention of fusing the old and the new. In all three cases, there is a strong appetite for inventing a distinctive tectonic language. Ricardo Flores continued: "We can imagine that everyone in Santa

Monica was mad but we loved it. We observed the house very carefully and we went to see many of Gehry's early projects when he used very rudimentary materials such as plywood, corrugated metal, and chain-link fence. It was surprising but not an influence on us. We liked the energy, passion, and originality. It is a beautiful thing with its own logic. It was a joy to see it and we could tell that the architect enjoyed designing and building it."

**Kenneth Frampton** is known for being critical of Gehry's sensationalism and his tendency to be more of an artist than an architect. In his seminal ***Modern Architecture: A Critical History*** book, originally published in 1980 and extensively revised and updated in its 2020 fifth edition, the historian made a point by not including an image of the architect's iconic Guggenheim Bilbao. In fact, the only image of Gehry's buildings that's featured in the book is of the house in Santa Monica. When I spoke to Frampton recently, his dismissal of Gehry's expressive sculptural projects suddenly switched to a different tone once the Santa Monica House was brought into our conversation. It mellowed him as a critic. He never visited it in person but he suggested that it remains the architect's best work. Frampton told me, "All in all, I am more interested in Frank Gehry's early work than in his 'baroque flamboyant masterworks' that made his name. I prefer that moment when he had yet to prove himself to be an artist after all as opposed to a mere architect! I have in mind, of course, his early work such as Santa Monica Place, an outdoor shopping mall; Edgemar, a mixed-use shopping centre also in Santa Monica; and his own deconstructed suburban house which was a kind of 'anti-house' in much the same way as Duchamp's *Large Glass* was an 'anti-painting!' I prefer that moment when he was still playing ironically with cheap, standard, popular American inexpensive, mass-produced building materials, chain link, etc., which made up and still makes up much of our everyday environmental reality, i.e., the stuff of Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard*! This is before he found his way to his 'bad boy' indifference towards the tectonic logic of his steel-framed armatures plus his indulgence in expensive envelopes of glistening titanium which in the last analysis hardly qualify as sculpture in Richard Serra's sense of the term."

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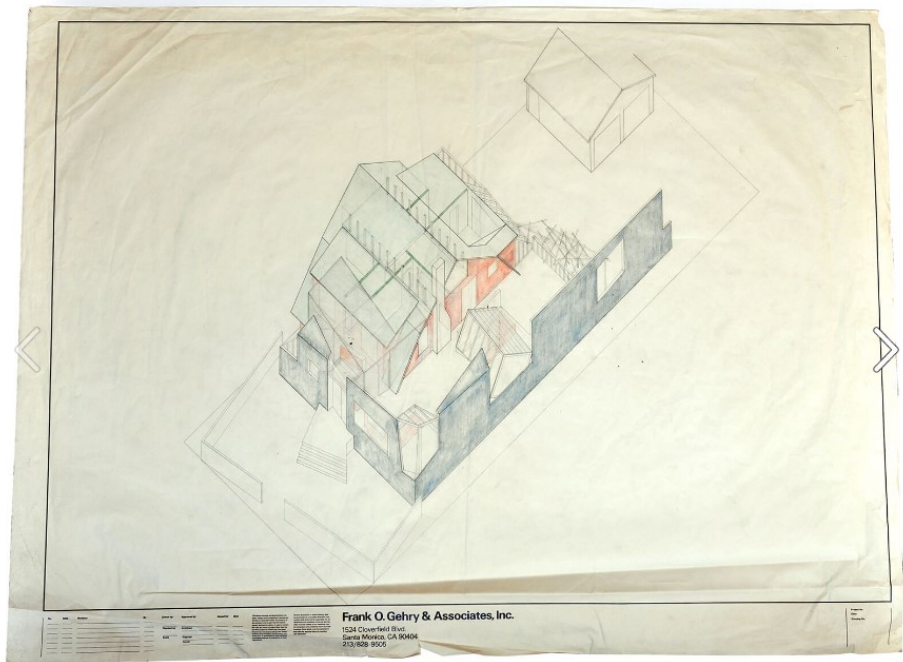
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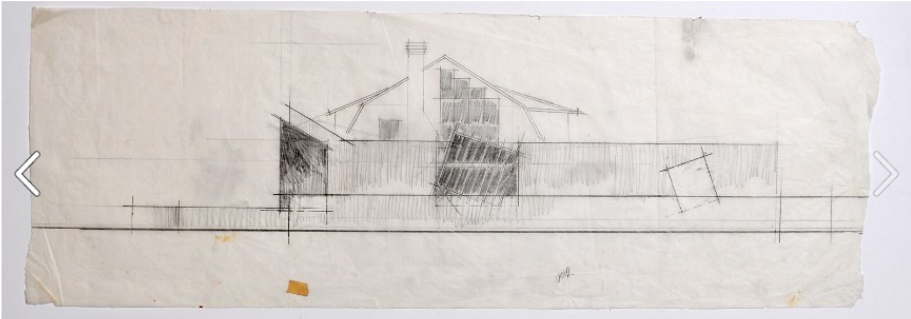


indulgence in expensive envelopes of glistening titanium which in the last analysis hardly qualify as sculpture in Richard Serra’s sense of the term.”

Unlike Frampton, the late **Paris** and **New York**-based historian Jean-Louis Cohen was a genuine fan of Gehry and perhaps his most avid supporter. He authored many texts on the architect’s work, including *Frank Gehry: The Masterpieces*, a collection of some 40 significant built works, and the monumental *Frank Gehry: Catalogue Raisonné of the Drawings*, of which he completed two out of planned eight volumes. In our conversation in 2021, Cohen told me he personally visited at least 120 out of 180 completed buildings by Gehry. He studied most of the architect’s projects in drawings and sketches—close to 600—and discussed his design intentions over many years of close friendship. They first met in LA in 1981 in the architect’s house in Santa Monica which he would visit frequently over the years. Cohen was surely the most qualified scholar to summarise Gehry’s legacy going beyond his own house where many of his ideas first manifested.



Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). Wood frame construction detail. Drawing by Paul Lubovicki. Black and colored pencils on tracing paper  
Image: © Frank O. Gehry, Courtesy of Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2017.M.66). Frank Gehry Papers



Frank and Berta Gehry Residence, Santa Monica, California, 1978 (Modified). Elevation on Washington Avenue, study. Pencil on tracing paper  
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I am concluding this multi-referential essay with an excerpt from our conversation: “Gehry’s work in general is a great lesson of creative freedom and fighting for it, of course, in a responsible way, addressing challenges of use, energy, and context. Gehry has reinvented a series of building types. He really rethought the notion of a house—in his own house and in other domestic projects that followed. He has developed a language that can be understood and analysed, but it is very difficult to reproduce, even by himself. His work is really about his own condition of architecture. Sure, his influence can be identified in some of the LA architects who are about 10 to 15 years younger. But not directly. He has a liberating role. He helped architects to get rid of their own uncertainties and pursue their intuitions. And all these local architects went in their own directions.

He reinvented the tectonics of architecture, the skin of architecture. What he did not reinvent is structure; he rather took advantage of it, particularly in the case of balloon framing, a **timber structure** widely used in **residential construction** in **America**, which became the main condition for his early attempts to reinvent architectural space and form. I am convinced that Gehry would not have emerged in the same way if he practiced in another country where buildings are built, let’s say, mainly in reinforced **concrete** or steel. From the wood frame, he moved to other structures and systems. Gehry is most interested in tectonics and completely revolutionising the way buildings could look like. He is constantly mining in his own work to discover something new. Many of his projects are valuable because they are the markers of what architecture can be.”

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Vladimir is an American curator, critic, and columnist with STIR. He graduated from the Cooper Union School of Architecture (1996) and after practicing architecture for 12 years, founded New York-based Curatorial Project. It focuses on the curation and design of architectural exhibitions. He has interviewed over 400 architects; written 15 books, including *Conversations with Architects* and *China Dialogues*; curated over 50 exhibitions, and has lectured in more than 30 countries.

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