

INTERVIEW WITH FRANK GEHRY



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We are here, at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, in a now completed building, at the end of an extraordinary adventure during which you have subjected the entire process of conception and construction to constant experimentation. How did you reconcile the various phases of the project while constantly adapting the design, as an open work in progress, subject to mutation? How, through this “work in progress,” did you manage to set all the phases of this complex construction project in motion?

FRANK GEHRY

Well, the only reason for this setting in motion, for this expression of movement is to kindle and to generate the sensation of it. Buildings are inert. They show their presence. They manifest their inertia by their rootedness, by the idea of a foundation into which they settle. Thus, while seeking to free them from their moorings, while attempting to express a new drive, a new freedom, I grew attached to this idea of sensation. By which I mean passion, not little sensations, but rather an intense emotion. Because we are in the Bois de Boulogne, in the heart of these woods so charged with history, and for the public, the viewers who will come here, the Foundation must find its place and comfortably fit in, like a garden pavilion.

F.M. — You had already designed projects in which this dynamic of movement was an essential aspect, such as the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Guggenheim Bilbao, but the Foundation stands out as truly singular. Because here, in the heart of the Bois de Boulogne, we are surrounded by the city, which is

in such contrast to the calm of this expanse of green, a city in movement, urban chaos bringing conflict and tension. Can one say that your project echoes these tensions in its dynamic, in the complexity of its structure?

FRANK GEHRY — Is that how you see it? Yes, I suppose it could be my response to this environment. But more directly, I see my building as if it were moving through the forest, tracing an alley, a fluid, liquid element, an entity whose unity and direction from whatever side, always seems different, not easy to determine, whose nature and ephemeral quality blend with the clouds, variations of the sky and rain being factors constantly changing the perception of the building.

F.M. — A number of critics' reviews evoke a ship, the building as a boat with its rigging. But it seems this ship is being blown by winds coming from different directions. The twelve differently oriented sails accentuate this impression of fluidity. Is the architecture therefore entirely determined by movement?

FRANK GEHRY — You know, when I began the study for this project with my client, Bernard Arnault saw a few sketches and really liked them, and the one he chose was the most chaotic. There were simpler ones, but they were not what he preferred. He chose one sketch, and in the spirit of his conviction, we developed this project. I am convinced that if he had not been part of the equation, if he had not made this rather extreme choice, the project would have been different. I like it when the client is involved; it is essential in determining the conception of the project.

F.M. — The building was developed through this dialogue, constantly evolving over many years, being transformed into a laboratory where all the dimensions of research on structure, materials, and engineering were explored. Did all these possibilities originate in these exchanges?

FRANK GEHRY — Absolutely. This dialogue between Bernard Arnault and me was, in the end I think, the most important part of the project. We developed the paradox of a museum without walls, a discontinuous glass surface because for us glass seemed necessary. But glass does not provide surfaces for hanging works of art and this led to the notion of an envelope.

F.M. — When visiting the Foundation, at first glance the spaces seem highly complex, but then one realizes that everything is organized around the circulations and the terraces, which are placed within the interstitial spaces between the sails and the icebergs. Were these architectural promenades part of the program?

FRANK GEHRY — No, I never thought of them like that. They were imagined as the natural liaisons between the staggered levels of the construction. One thing I wished would happen, of course, was to be able to see the works of art in these spaces, but also between the glass sails, and I hope that can be experimented with.

F.M. — Here, the interaction between the interior and the exterior, a fundamental aspect of your work, reaches new heights. The foundation has no façade, the plan seems fragmented according to the levels; you overturn the relationship between horizontality and verticality. One is reminded of Hans Scharoun's concert hall for the Berlin Philharmonic.

FRANK GEHRY — I hope I have employed as much humanity as Scharoun when he built the Berliner Philharmonie. He was a master for me. We will see once the works of art have been installed, when the art has found its place. It is hard for me to look at this architecture without the art. The entire program was designed around art, like an arrangement for entering into a relationship with the works of art. Inside, the path through the collections flows naturally, the galleries are simple ones, as requested.

F.M. — This natural continuity between the spaces, this inclusive idea of the architecture, of a relationship with the context, with a linked and unified organization of all the elements of the program, strongly points toward the idea of organicity, of the organic; one thinks of Frank Lloyd Wright...

FRANK GEHRY — I don't know if there is an unconscious strand of Wrightian DNA. In my younger days, I studied Wright a great deal of course, but for me, Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings remain static, they make you occupy space in a determined way, in a given place. He defined how to look at a building, how to sit in it, sleep in it... I feel much freer than that, my architecture requires nothing...



From left to right Suzanne Pagé, Artistic Director of the Foundation, Larry Tighe, Partner at Gehry Partners, the architect Frank Gehry, Bernard Arnault, Chairman of LVMH, President of the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Jean-Paul Clavierie, Advisor to the Chairman of LVMH and Christian Reyne, Executive Director of the Foundation and Project Manager, at the Foundation

F.M. — But you play with this ambiguity of the organic, beyond the overall organicity of the project, the revealed or concealed reference in the shape of a fish, an animal form which seems to speak to the children of the Jardin d'acclimatation.

FRANK GEHRY — I think it is an important dimension of the project, to speak to the children, get them to dream, as a way of showing younger generations everything is possible.

F.M. — With the Foundation, the tension between the formal unity of the building's appearance as an envelope and the complexity of its spaces, of an assemblage of distinct, almost fragmentary elements, is pushed to the extreme. Are there two approaches to the project?

FRANK GEHRY — My project is in France, and it speaks to France. Think about what it means to be French. You are French... The French character is steeped in complexity. I have always noticed this. It is a way of thinking in which you develop your reasoning, first in one direction, then you shift toward something else... I took this mentality into account in the way I responded to the necessities of the context, of the city, to the engineers' questions, of all the details, to the procedures. It was not a combat for me. I accepted this typically French way of interacting, which in the end has left its mark on the project, but of course this preserves and affirms its identity.

F.M. — What were the most important difficulties encountered over the course of the entire project?

FRANK GEHRY — It was a tangle of difficulties. The first one lay in the fact that at the very beginning, my client, Bernard Arnault, fell in love, was totally seduced by a particular model. But it was in an "unfinished" state. So we had to work on resolving a whole series of problems this state of the project could engender. It was complicated, and difficult. I think we managed all that for the best, finally realizing what he desired. The most important thing in the end was that he had to love this project, to appreciate it. He was the client and we had to meet his expectations. Another difficulty arose when we tackled the installation of the glass sails, the complexities associated with the double skin, with the way of

attaching these sails to the structures, the “how to” of this type of endeavor. We could have installed these glass elements from the ground up and would not have run into these difficulties. It would have been simpler, but did not correspond to the project as defined by the original model. Obviously, in France, with all its administrative procedures, it became even a bit more dramatic, in the French meaning of the word. I had already had to deal with this with the American Center.

F.M. — How did the collaboration work between your office and the various teams here in Paris?

FRANK GEHRY — We had no problems. No one complained. I think everyone was rallied around the project. What really helped us was our computational platform with Dassault, which is a French concern and which enabled us to constantly transmit information between all the different trades and consultants. I think it was the first time such a collaborative platform was set up at this level in the field of architecture. I believe that it had never been done on this scale around a project, that it can serve as a model that can be used by all, and that pain is often involved when giving birth to something. But the result we see now erases past difficulties. All these efforts have been rewarded by the satisfaction of our client, Bernard Arnault, who today sees his vision materialized.

F.M. — An important stage of the project was decided when you reduced the number of glass sails from 14 to 12. Was this a major decision for you?

FRANK GEHRY — We were worried about the architect overseeing construction, who was increasing the number of details, and therefore incurring cost overruns, which was not necessarily acceptable for Bernard Arnault. When I made this modification to the project, I did not know if he would be satisfied with what I was proposing, at first for economic reasons, but which I came to see as an improvement. When I presented the project in its new state to him, he smiled and I assumed he agreed. Today, I prefer the project with its 12 glass sails.



From left to right Bernard Arnault and Frank Gehry, visiting the construction site of the Fondation Louis Vuitton, June 2011

F.M. — Has this been the most complex project for you to implement thus far?

FRANK GEHRY — Yes, it is probably the most complicated I have ever built... Today, I just want to see it live and the thing I am waiting most impatiently for is to see it with the works of art installed outdoors, in dialogue with the building in the interstitial spaces, between the glass and the Ductal. The installation of the works of art will be the completion of the project. The art must not be confined to the interior, and must interact with the exterior. Do you remember Jeff Koons's *Puppy* in Bilbao? I think the Fondation must initiate constant interactions between the architecture and the works of art.

F.M. — The spatial conception of the project, with its different levels, and its interlacing of interiors and exteriors, this permanent openness onto the Bois de Boulogne and the city, were they determined by the nature of the program, a project for contemporary art?

FRANK GEHRY — A museum is a different sort of animal because you have to take into account the distribution of exhibition spaces. And you have to define a philosophy of the paths for the visit, of the interrelation between spaces. In the heart of the Bois de Boulogne, the building could have been a block or a lower rising construction, but with glass, we were able to raise the construction, to open it, and to make it more sculptural. We took advantage of the constraint imposed by the circulations between the interiors and exteriors on each side to develop a genuine outdoor itinerary, as we did with the height limits, which required us to leave a very big part of the building open. In this way the project was adapted, extended, and unfolded to open on all sides, as you observed. The ensemble is highly porous, and in relation with the garden on every side. It is a new way of taking advantage of glass, which is no longer a curtain wall. I wanted to humanize this material, imbue the whole building with a sense of movement, a more sculptural form, in order to draw the public into another sort of experience open to art.