

Gehry and Cancerland

In September 2003 Frank Gehry flew briefly into Dundee to launch the Maggie's Dundee Cancer Care Centre. Here Gehry talks about his love of wood, Gehry hospital designs, and why, for him, all materials are of equal value. On page 48 the building is discussed as part of the growing Maggie's Centres' movement. And on page 97 Mark O'Connor examines the craft dimension of the Dundee construction



photo James F Stephen

Sustainability and the postmodern architectural movement are not immediately spoken of within the same breath. If in the past two decades postmodern architecture has populated the planet with some stunning signature buildings, these do not exclaim any outstanding environmental credentials on their jaw-dropping sleeves. And within the league of master postmodern architects, the current pre-eminent practice of Frank Gehry isn't framed within any conventional environmental architectural context. There are currently stories circulating that the titanium cladding on his most famous building, the Bilbao Guggenheim, is already suffering decay, calling into question the general, let alone the eco-wisdom, of using such a fast-diminishing metal resource.

Yet Gehry, as he puts it, 'likes the environment' and likes wood. There is something of a case, beyond the surface differences, that there is or could be more of a connection than environmental architecture gives time to. Part of the key to the connection is Gehry's abiding interest in wood, and his commitment to making timber buildings. Indeed Gehry's early buildings, as well as intermittent forays into furniture design, show a first-hand familiarity with the material. The elegant chairs and tables he has designed embrace a craft aesthetic that comes from the tacit knowledge of a maker. Gehry grew up in Canada; and there, he says, there was plenty of examples of a Scandinavian feel to timber building types. And with last year's opening of Dundee's Maggie's Centre, the first Gehry building in the UK, he adds another notch in the life-long on-off connection to this material. This building, with its light tower and its remarkable signature roof – this time a strangely welcoming dance of lines ricocheting and squeezed in concertina form along the buildings front aspect – is all supported by one of the most elaborate timber-frame structures that has this far been completed in Scotland. When I ask him during a short interview at the opening of the Dundee building if there are any timberbuild projects involving wood that he has on the go, he says, 'Well, I'm building my new home out of wood.'

This affinity extends to his being one of the few in the stellar league of planet-wide architects who acknowledges an abiding fascination with the craft process. Indeed with the very personal Maggie's Dundee, he has placed craft, and the skills needed for its realisation, as a centrepiece of the building's conceptual backbone. In Dundee he harboured the illusion that Scotland would still have its timber-craft skills intact. At the *Breathing Space* symposium, the day after the building's launch, Gehry mentions this: 'I thought there would be a home-building craft in Dundee, which would be able to build quickly with a couple of carpenters. I presumed they existed in a town like Dundee in Scotland. The associate architects (James Stephen) searched around and could only find a bunch of old

guys who'd done that way back. So, in the event, it was not easy to achieve.'

Although it may be a craft which needs sophisticated computer modelling to bring it to the state where carpenters can get to work (see Mark O'Connor's piece in this issue's *Makeshift* section, p97), and as such the building is singularly expensive, such is the cost of loyalty to a craft aesthetic. And underpinning the wood frame is a steel frame, while overhead is the stainless steel roof, which was sent to the USA to be shaped. It is hard to make a conventional case for this building as fitting into the sustainable tickbox.

And yet at the same time the forms Gehry uncovers are generally organic, and bespeak a relation to the natural world that whilst not wholly new in the architectural history of the last hundred years – I am thinking of the middle-European Expressionists – has found an untold receptivity in these organic form-centred days which would have been unheard of even forty years ago. Landscape, the architects coding for the natural environment, feels as if it has touched everything Gehry is about. In another of the many interviews that inundate his schedule in the first half of the launch opening days, his friend and husband to Maggie, Charles Jencks, interposes when a Canadian film crew interviewer asks Gehry about landscape. 'Frank, you've been such an influence in landscape. Bilbao is landscape!'

To which Gehry responds: 'If you go to the Schinkel building outside Berlin, in Slotthoven, Germany, you go out the door and you're in an absolute axial Brecht landscape. And it's very tightly organised with a little trellis at the end, flowers, beautiful. And you're enticed out into the garden. You get out there and you turn in the other direction ... and you look, and it's the most incredible experience. So this landscape has this power. There aren't many people who practice with this knowledge in our day. Part of the reason is that it has become a subservient profession to architecture. That's an important issue, and problem, and the schools have developed ways of training more people to serve architecture. And it's a misuse, because we need that, but the profession is dying from some of these other areas, like in the case of Schinkel where the landscape is every bit as powerful. They each hold their own. Neither one suffers; they gain ... There are a lot of talented people. It isn't that there's not talent, it's that there aren't the opportunities, where people can express their talents.'

This is all said in a context of both Charles and Maggie Jencks having been deeply involved in landscape architecture, and of both having worked for many years on the extraordinary garden at their southern Scottish home, Portrack. Since Maggie's death, Charles Jencks has gone on to complete the garden, as well as a number of other landscape projects, perhaps most noticeably, in Edinburgh's Leith Gardens.