

The design story of
OPUS HONG KONG



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INTRODUCTION

Frank Gehry's sketch study for OPUS HONG KONG captures perfectly the paradox that makes it such a unique, intriguing and magical building. Embodied in the quick pen strokes and the seemingly scribbled outline is a structure that is part mountain and part motion, a paradoxical marriage of the apparent immutability of geography and the delicacy and fragility of biology, of permanence and the temporal.

The qualities Gehry captured in that sketch have been almost miraculously translated into an apartment building which is unique not just in its Hong Kong Peak position but anywhere in the world - a building that seems to grow solidly from its hillside site but also to sway and twist like bamboo in the breeze.

The common yardstick by which to define contemporary top-end development is market price and certainly these apartments have attained levels only rarely seen in even the highest echelons of global real estate. But Gehry's building is characterised more by its architecture than its expense - it is unique not because of its desirability, the expense of its finishes or materials, and not because of its exclusivity but it is desirable because the architecture is at the heart of its success.

These brief essays represent an effort to understand how Frank Gehry, perhaps the architect who has changed the way we see architecture and the expression of built culture in the city more radically than any other contemporary designer, created one of the world's most remarkable residences. It is a tracing of how architect and client, Gehry and Swire Properties, worked intimately together to extrude from Hong Kong's hilly landscape a structure which could only be here, but which has also transcended place and time, and will perhaps become one of the defining residences of our age.



ORIGINS OF OPUS HONG KONG

In 2005 Swire Properties commissioned Frank Gehry to design a speculative proposal to transform Hong Kong's waterfront and docks and to create a museum commensurate with its influence, its international profile and its renowned intensity. The design was a response to the West Kowloon proposals which the company felt represented a lost opportunity to unite the two sides of the harbour and use culture as an anchor to revivify the waterfront and tie together some of the last remaining disparate parts of the central city. It was always a speculative design, an expression of an idea that was unlikely ever to be built, but it was also an important statement, a crystallisation of an alternative future which may yet have echoes in the way the city develops over time. Once seen, the designs are unforgettable and their memory has become part of the alternative history of the city, just as did Zaha Hadid's unrealised designs for the Peak or Foster and Partners' sinuous covered waterfront proposal.

Gehry's Guggenheim had radically redefined Bilbao, transforming the city's one-time industrial dockside and shifting the urban focus back to the abandoned and isolated waterfront. The docks and the water in them became, once more, the lifeblood of the city and the scheme made sense of the post-industrial city. In Los Angeles too, Gehry's stunning Walt Disney Hall began to reunite the city's depressed Downtown with the deadening Central Business District, using culture to tie a city, which had been torn apart by traffic engineering and social division, back together again.

Gehry's proposals for the Hong Kong museum were dramatic. A vast billowing cityscape of glass and metal, a dispersed landscape which evokes sails, entire dispersed city blocks and waves. It might have been a twenty-first century riposte to the Sydney Opera House. This was a building

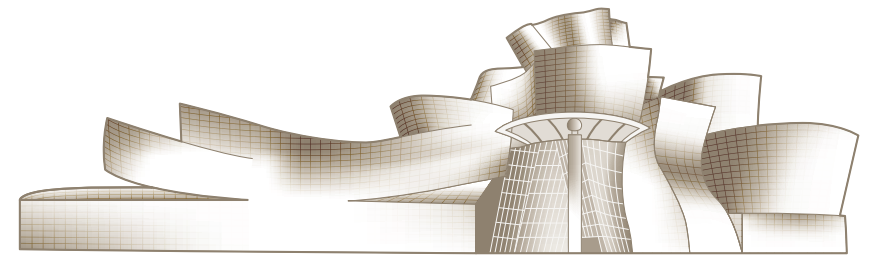
to define a new relationship with the sea and to establish a dialogue with Kowloon across the harbour. 'Swire was responding to the West Kowloon proposals' Gehry says. 'It made sense to us that Central could absorb a great museum, something like the Bilbao Guggenheim. It would have made sense to develop the cultural assets in the centre. But we always knew it was never going to happen.'

The project also foreshadowed a new direction for Gehry's architecture. 'I guess those designs and the models were the beginnings of what happened in Paris' he said. 'We were going down a route.' That route culminated in the Foundation Louis Vuitton in the Bois de Boulogne, a spectacular cultural blockbuster that continues the city's tradition of 'grands projets'.

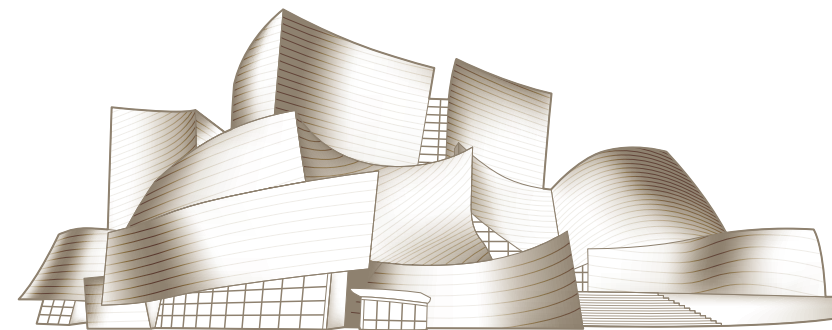
So although the Swire proposals were more about ideas than actuality, those ideas enjoyed a significant afterlife. Obviously there was Paris, but there was also Gehry's involvement in Hong Kong and with Swire Properties. That collaboration led to the company approaching Gehry when it decided to rebuild their Stubbs Road site. Gehry may not have been the obvious collaborator on this project - he wasn't then known for residential commissions (although since then he has gone on to design significant residential projects including New York's Spruce Street Tower and London's Battersea Power Station). But he had clearly developed a real affection for the island and its culture. And he proved to be the perfect choice.

'Growing up in architecture in Los Angeles, I've always studied Asian art, Japanese, Chinese; it's a very Asia-centric culture on the West Coast.'

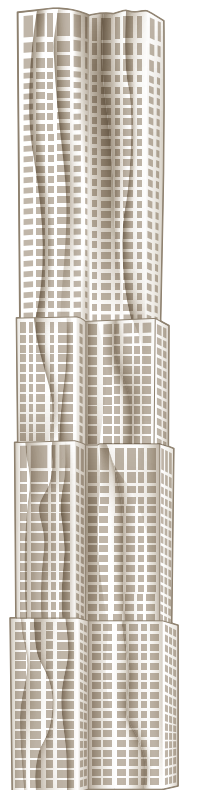
'So I was always very open to the influences and had a good, basic understanding of Asian art. I was made to do this job!' he jokes. 'My whole training set me up for it.'



Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, 1997



Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, USA, 2003



New York by Gehry, New York, USA, 2010



OPUS HONG KONG, Hong Kong, 2011



FRANK GEHRY

Architect Artist

Frank Gehry is a paradox. He is the man who seismically shifted architecture from its orthogonal roots, making it sway and swirl, forcing it to twist and flutter like the fabric sensuously chiselled and polished into a baroque sculpture. He is an architect who insists that his profession is an art. But he is simultaneously a practical maker, a professional who revels in his ability to bring constructions in on time and to budget and finish with buildings that do what the client wants. He is the man who integrated high-tech digital modelling into the messy, conservative industry of construction and turbo-charged architecture with a whole new set of possibilities and challenges. But he is also characterised by his expressive, scribbly sketches and rough cardboard models which convey the most human, most low-tech translation of idea into form. And he is the architect who introduced the ad hoc, DIY language of builders' yard materials into avant-garde architecture, using the language of art to inform architecture. But he is simultaneously also the figure who reinvented the public building as a spectacle capable of dragging an entire city in its wake and rejuvenating an idea of what architecture can do for the public realm through sheer sculptural and formal panache.

He is unarguably one of the most influential architects of the modern era - yet one whose sculptural oeuvre and visual signatures have made him inimitable. And finally, he embodies the paradox that when you are confronted by a Gehry building you are in no doubt that you are in the presence of one of his works - yet each building is radically different from every other.

Born in Toronto but coming of age as an architect in Los Angeles just as it was becoming the world's most dynamic focus of art, architecture, practice and theory in the 1960s, Gehry embodies a particular cocktail of blue-collar, no-nonsense toughness and laid-back West Coast spirit. He was immersed in the art and the music of a Los Angeles which was the swirling centre of the architecture and showbiz world and his influences lie way beyond the parameters of conventional architecture - Baroque sculpture, classical music, jazz, industrial buildings, and minimalist installations. He also sucked in ideas and images from across the Pacific, from Japan and China, using his West Coast location as something to differentiate his practice for the more European-focussed New York scene.



So how do you define the achievement of an architect who so perfectly encapsulates the contradictions inherent in contemporary architecture? Perhaps you don't, you just sit back and enjoy the show. Certainly Gehry himself has never been keen to espouse a theory or a set of ideas which encapsulate his architecture. Instead he has exhibited a reluctance to be pinned down, a restlessness which is as apparent in his discomfort when asked to explain ideas or propound a theory, as much as it is so obviously present in the constantly changing, dynamic forms, curves and billows of his buildings.

Gehry's architecture had been provocative, intriguing and profoundly original and he had been mostly known for a series of striking private houses (including, most famously, his own), but his impact had mostly been felt within the relatively hermetic worlds of art and architecture. All this changed with the opening of the Bilbao Guggenheim in 1997. Suddenly, not only did Gehry become an international star, that once rarest thing in architecture - a celebrity - but he changed the idea of what architecture could do. There has been much overstatement of how a single building turned an entire city around - with the idea of the 'Bilbao effect' now embedded in urban myth - but it is incontrovertible that this remarkable building not only revitalised the centre of a broken city but revived the requirement for architects to once again attempt to create a public architecture as an expression of civic pride and a sense of place. If this appeared to be a signature building it was also one which drew on the language of Bilbao's industrial past, on the shimmering grey reflections in the city's docks, of its history of marine trade and nautical imagery. It was a building of its particular place but one which invented a new language of dynamic urban form.

Each one of his finest buildings illustrates his urge to make architecture move - to use the most static of all the arts to convey a sense of motion. The 'Fred and Ginger' house in Prague sees a corner composed of two dancing towers, whirling in an intimate embrace. The Walt Disney Concert Hall reflects and refracts the bumpers of the cars on Los Angeles' Grand Avenue and brings the fluffy clouds in the blue sky back down to the ground. The Dr Chau Chak Wing Building in Sydney reimagines brick as a billowing membrane, a textile knitted into the urban fabric. The Spruce Street Tower in New York appears to flutter in the Atlantic wind, shimmering and dematerialising the solid form of the skyscraper. The Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris appearing in the Bois de Boulogne like the sails of an incongruous ship rising above the grass. And OPUS moves too. You can see it in the architect's models, the levels of the building reacting to and reflecting the contours of the hilly site. The block twists and turns as



it rises, writhing as it emerges from the landscape like Michelangelo's sculpted slaves struggling to free themselves from the marble.

In an age when architecture is increasingly globalised, in which the big name designers jet around the world designing signature buildings for unfamiliar contexts - the problem is inevitably that of the potential for deracination - an increasingly uncomfortable sense that buildings are designed for a global rather than a particular context, for image rather than visceral presence. Gehry is adamant that OPUS resolutely refutes any such ideas. 'This is' he says 'a building that could only be here. You can't take it and put it somewhere else.'

Does this building represent a continuity in Gehry's oeuvre? Or a new direction? Perhaps it would be better to say it feels like an evolution, refining elements that have been seen before and tailoring to this, very specific environment. There are glimpses here of the sinuous dance of the Fred and Ginger house in Prague but the expansive curving glass panels echo some of the moves in the Foundation Louis Vuitton and the IAC Building beside New York's High Line. But there are real innovations too, in the fragile, glass-wrapped columns which appear to twist and turn counterintuitively in a hilltop breeze, in the swelling glass walls of the apartments in which rooms become bays and in the decks which create a fluidity between inside and out. Gehry had, early in his career been known for his designs for houses - distinctive, sculptural, inventive and eccentric - they were influenced by the vernacular roadside architecture of Los Angeles as much as they were by minimalist art and avant garde ideas. Only more recently has he turned his hand to the apartment blocks and condo towers where many of his contemporaries - Robert Stern, Richard Meier, Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano and others have made their mark on global skylines in recent decades. Here, Gehry's contribution has been to bring that sensibility and individuality to bear on the creation of apartments as stacked houses, in which each dwelling is subtly different to the others, each is distinct and eccentric, formed by the landscape and the location rather than the grid or the neighbours. It is a unique building and a remarkable addition to the landscape. Sometimes architecture is driven by fashion or by finance and, whilst the buildings that emerge from those motives may look fine when they first appear, they fade from memory and from the history books fast. 'Architecture' Gehry famously said 'should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness.' It's an ambitious aim but one which, perhaps, Gehry has achieved here, on the journey up to the Peak.





OPUS HONG KONG

Conception

Frank Gehry is fascinated by movement. But, of course, architecture does not move. It is resolutely still, its permanence is its essence. Like a Baroque sculptor however, Gehry's entire oeuvre is an experiment in imbuing the physical permanence of architecture with the sense of motion and movement, a defiance of gravity, space and time.

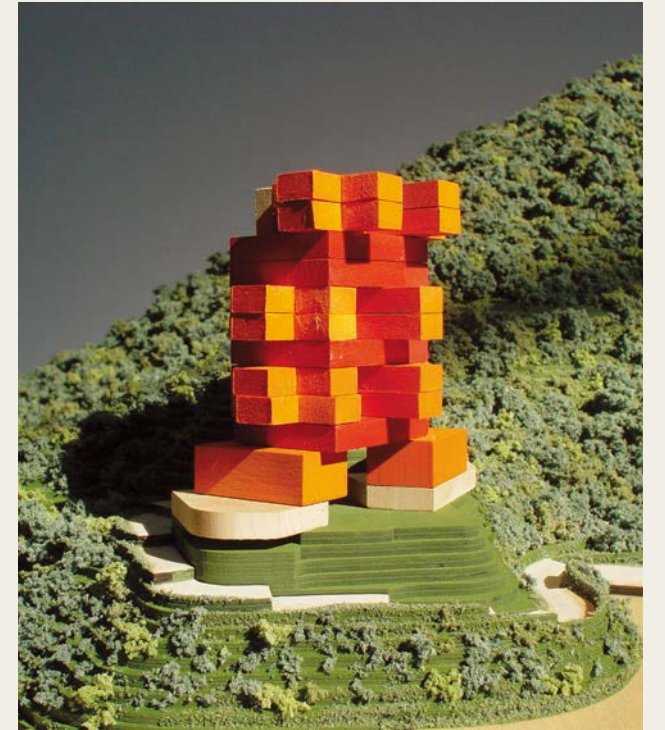
The most characteristic trait of his architecture is this attempt to capture motion, to bring the static art of architecture into the more frenetic modern era, to make something relevant to a world of cars and planes, of global travel, digital technology and film - yet something still intimately human, relating to the body as much as it does to the fast-changing world outside.

Gehry's early designs for the building were completely characteristic of his oeuvre, full of flair, undulating movement and sculptural intent. 'You have to start somewhere' he explains 'it's intuitive. So we started making moves and models, self-critiquing all the time and of course it evolves. Slowly a design emerges. It's three or four months till you get to the Holy Land!'

'I don't believe that an apartment building should be iconic like the Disney Hall or Bilbao' he says 'they're public buildings and they demand a presence in the city. This site was in a spot all by itself, so we made something special but not an icon.'

'Keith [Keith Kerr was then the Chief Executive of Swire Properties]' he continues 'had a good eye and knew how to create value - and he created a blockbuster return. Swire was supportive all the way which was how we could make something special together.'

The final building might be stripped of some of the extravagance, the formal experimentation of Gehry's most familiar buildings but it still retains that sense of sculptural movement which all his work embodies. The structure seems to sway in the breeze, but at every point its form confounds norms and expectations. The structural columns that emulate reeds are encased in glass, juxtaposing the malleability of an idea of bamboo with the fragility of the most inflexible of materials. The block defies the architecture of the city below and the architecture surrounding it en route up to the Peak



(which Gehry refers to as surprisingly 'banal'), its plan form is organic and curvaceous, yet not willfully so. Every move has its reason. Even the seemingly irregular plan, the bulging, curving extraordinary form is no improvised whim, but rather a careful controlled device to give the finest, most panoramic views; to enhance the sense of being surrounded by sky and hillside, and to make the inhabitant feel immersed in the outside and wrapped in glass rather than solid structure.

'We were thinking of China.' Gehry says of the origins of the plan form. 'The symbols of Asian life, the influences on its art. So, yeah, I guess we were thinking of a flower, which is where it started.'

If the origin story is organic, so is the structure that climbs up the elevations. 'We did a lot of studies for those reeds' Gehry explained 'and they worked very well for the structure. The idea of encasing them in glass was so that it would feel as if the glass walls were wrapping around the columns, that it was all a continuous glass facade, all reflective and transparent. There's a delicacy to it.'

That structural move - the placing of the columns on the outside of the building, freed up the interiors to be open and fluid, with uninterrupted space and a connection to the view and the outside from almost every point in the interior. Hong Kong apartment blocks tend to be compartmentalised, as series of discreet rooms which allow for a more conventional (and more economical) internal structure. At OPUS, Gehry introduced something more like a West Coast style of living, the expansive vistas of a modernist villa in which the landscape is brought into the interior. And to emphasis that immersion in the scenery, he introduced decks, terraces running between the columns. The move also breaks up the mass of the building, making it more delicate, complex and airy and creating more shadow and play between solid and void. The development of the models in the months before sign-off show a clear evolution, a gradual refinement of the ideas which were always inherent in the design but which slowly coalesced into the building which ultimately emerged.



FLOWERS, ROCKS AND REEDS

Design, Construction and Site

Any building starts with the site - and this is surely one of the world's most spectacular. 'I couldn't believe that sites like this were still available' Gehry commented on visiting the location. And this one was only available because it had been in Swire Groups' hands since the 1940s, dating from the days before the island's eye-watering building boom. It once accommodated a house for an executive of the company and was unique in its location and in its potential as a stand-alone building around which it would be impossible to build in the future.

Having been around for two centuries, The Swire Group is one of Hong Kong's longest-standing businesses and most respected and resilient brands. It embraces everything from property and hotels, to oilfield services, green energy, docks and aviation and its depth and its historic success has allowed it to invest and innovate for long-term benefits in ways that might otherwise be alien to the rapid deal-making business culture of Hong Kong.

The Group had decided to develop the site at 53 Stubbs Road but its remarkable location, on the serpentine route that leads from Happy Valley to the Peak high up on the dramatic Mount Cameron, they thought demanded something out of the ordinary. And the architect they chose to approach, Frank Gehry, was deemed to be someone who could be relied on to create something special enough to justify building here.

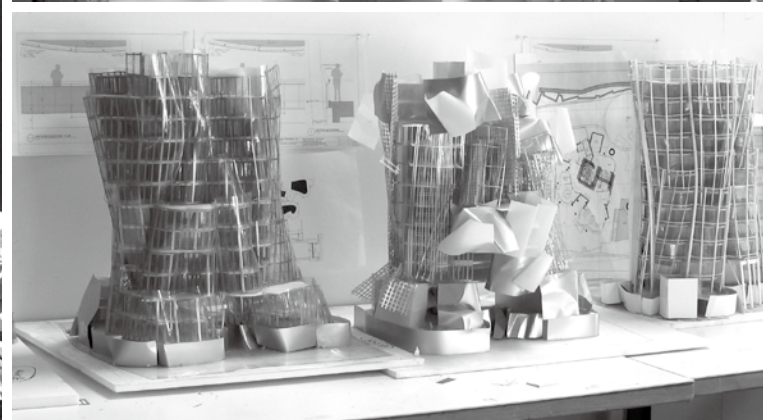
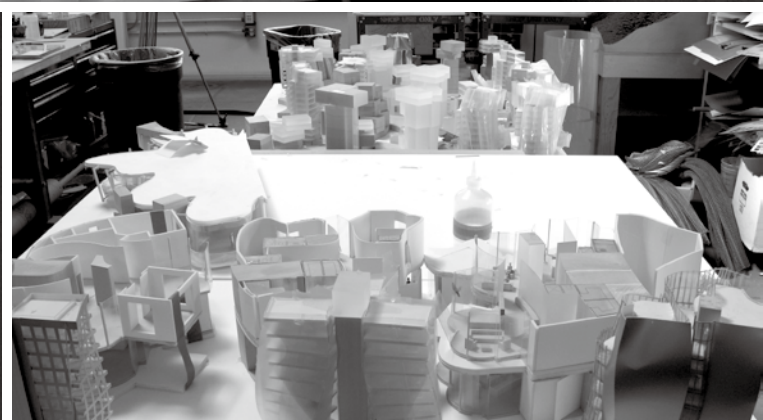
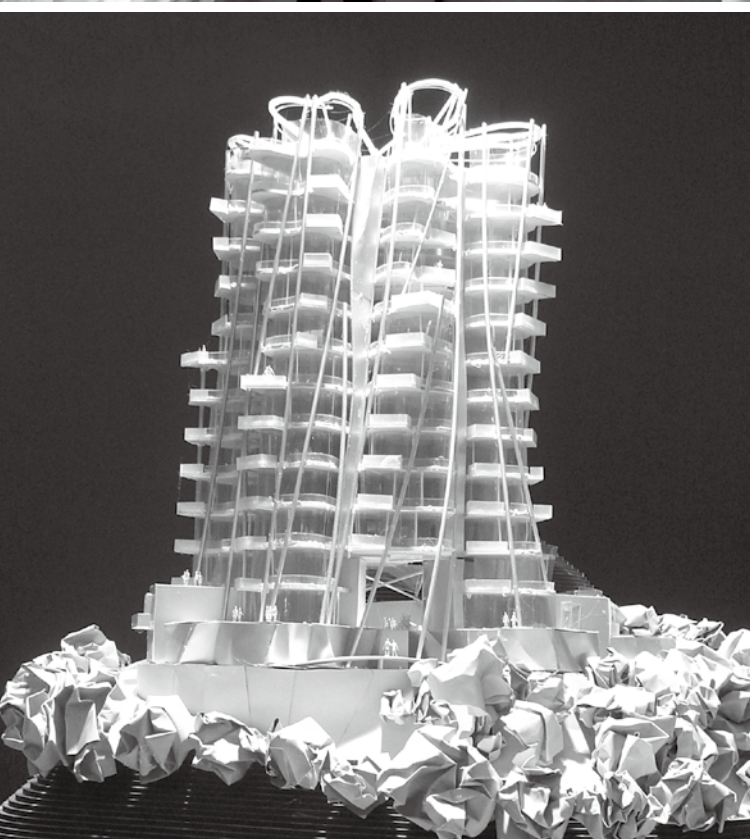
Gehry and his team crossed the Pacific from his Los Angeles studio a number of times, spending time at the site and finally accepting the commission in 2005. Back



in the studio Gehry developed an approach to the site, first using blocks to represent the accommodation and piling these into an assortment of arrangements until they arrived at the final configuration of a 12-storey tower containing 10 apartments of an entire floor each, plus two duplex dwellings with gardens. The building was to be topped with a series of irregular pools and terraces following the organic shape of the plan, spaces for contemplation of the landscape.

The stacks of models in Gehry's office eloquently illustrate the laborious design process, first finding the optimum plan and vertical arrangement and then transforming that dumb stack of blocks into a delicate, fluid, sculptural form. Gehry was famously one of the early adopters of digital technologies for construction. So early in fact that the programmes he needed to build the complex forms he had in his mind didn't yet exist. So the practice ended up adapting software designed for the aerospace industry to construction, in the process establishing Gehry Technologies, a parallel business which now markets its expertise to the industry and without which many of the complex constructions that have become a mainstay of global architecture would have been inconceivable.

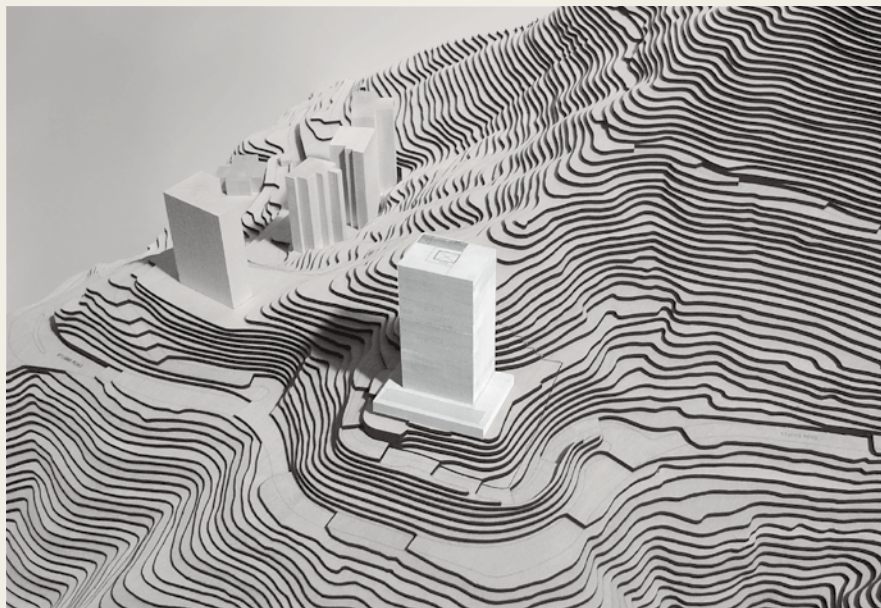
What is remarkable about Gehry's approach however is that he works not from within the machine - using software to construct the sculptural forms for which he has become renowned - rather he and his team hand-build models from cardboard, foam, timber and sheets of foil - the ad hoc materials of studio culture, and it is those models that are then mapped and digitised. It is the form of the handcrafted model - the artisan artefact - which is then translated into the building via the computer. This translation allows the architects to maintain the essence of the object created in moments with improvised materials - it retains the spontaneity of the crafted form rather than flattening it out and dehumanising it through the translation into digital.



The subtle twists and torques that OPUS undergoes as it rises and the little differences between each apartment mean that this was a building that was only made possible by the adoption of digital modelling and computerised manufacture. The complexity of the curves in the glass alone makes this a formidably complicated construction - even if the end result appears to flow effortlessly and seamlessly.

The structural 'reeds' similarly curve through subtle twists so, unlike a more conventional building, the frame is not orthogonal - adding entire layers of complexity to the construction process. In sheathing these steel columns in glass, Gehry suggests he is playing with their appearance - asking a question about whether they are functional or decorative. It could be compared with Mies van der Rohe's application of I-beams to his towers where, what appeared to be structural elements were in fact appliqué features illustrating the nature of the structure below a frame which had to be covered in fireproofing so couldn't reveal its actual skeleton. In the end the glass-clad columns give the tower a sinuous fragility, their slenderness adding to an illusion that the building is thinner and taller than it actually is.

The curving glass diminishes reflections and reduces the idea of window-as-frame, allowing the resident to stand entirely encased within glass on three sides, giving the impression of immersion into the view rather than framing a picturesque tableau. It's a technique that others have also used - notably Japanese architects SANAA and Spanish practice Selgas Cano, one which begins to dematerialise the wall, reducing our understanding of an opening as a window and, in a way, realising Mies van der Rohe's extraordinary 1922 design for a glass skyscraper in which the plan was similarly organic yet the projected building was sleek and almost invisible - with only its floor plates appearing against the sky. To have captured the essence of Mies' idea and then destabilised it through putting it in gently swirling motion is surely something that only Gehry could achieve.



ARCHITECTURE

From Model to Monument

A corner of Frank Gehry's capacious studio is piled up with experimental sketch models for OPUS. It looks like a city of archetypes, a dreamscape of subtly changing Gehry towers. It is an illustration of an idea being gradually refined and whittled down to the elegant, translucent form of the final building itself.

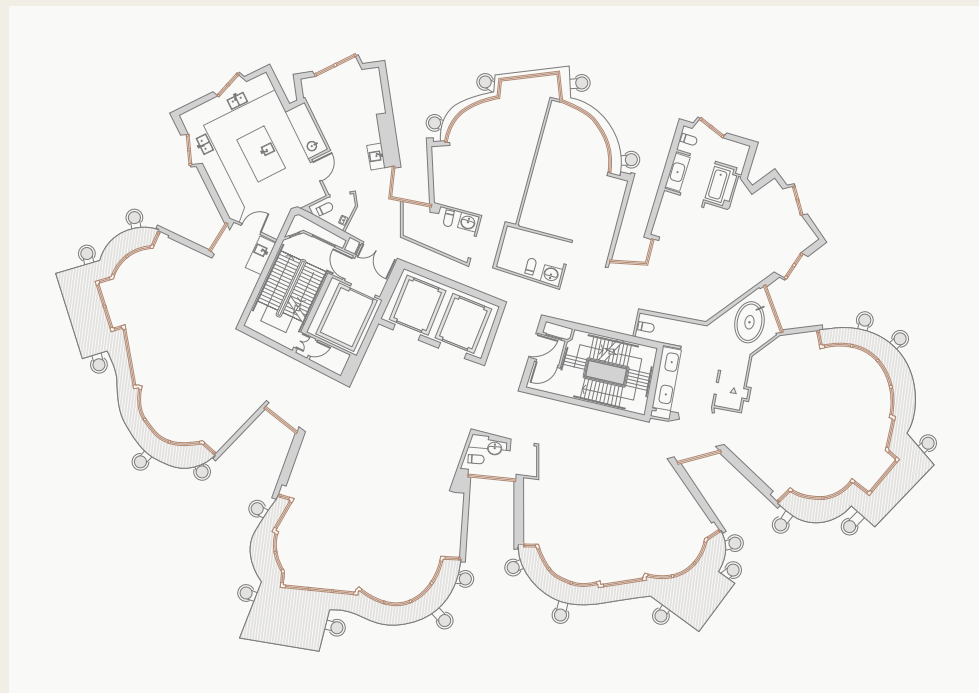
The design seems to have gone through a series of iterations that outline Gehry's entire practice - the whole of his aesthetic, formal and architectural universe. But what was constant throughout the process was a sense of the place. As the architect himself says, 'the hills, the bay...this is a building emerging from the landscape and nature'. From the familiar mash-up of crumpled surfaces and grids to ad hoc blocks and sticks, the successive models reveal a process that begins with assembling the programme - the basic building blocks of the accommodation on the site model and slowly allowing a form to emerge.

In this case the plans emerged as a response to the magnificent views and breathtaking location of the site on Stubbs Road rising up Mount Cameron towards the Peak, the building nestled into the steep green slopes and looking out over the harbour, one of the world's great urban vistas.

Gehry describes the building as 'organic', a reaction to the trees and the topography, but it is in a way also 'geological', describing a transition from the rock to the foliage, from ground up to sky. The building sits on a solid base of stone which the architect refers to as 'the Quarry'. This stepped, fragmented mass creates the landscape from which the building emerges and which anchors it in context. Its solidity, its angularity and its mimicry of the cubic forms of a quarry with blocks cut from its walls rise up the base of the building, anchoring it to the site and are in deliberate contrast to the transparency and more immaterial delicacy of the apartment building above. Two garden apartments here are settled deep into the structure, arguably as much like houses as flats - a character expressed in their stone cladding and discreet windows at the rear of the block. Terraces and pools make these an intermediate zone between the site and the glassy stack of apartments above.

The swirling landscape, approach roads and planting suggest the contour lines of the models and immediately set up the impression that this is no ordinary development but one which emerges directly from the topography of a unique site.





Quite how much of a departure this approach is from the Hong Kong norm becomes obvious when the building is seen against the backdrop of the city, its bristling mass of towers rising up below. Almost every one of those buildings appears as a simple extruded cube, each seems to take as its point of departure a gridded square - even if this form takes no apparent account of the exigencies of Hong Kong's street plan or geography. Its neighbours on the hillside too take little account of the drama of the site or the panoramic splendour.

OPUS instead addresses the ground on which it sits and, elevated above the city's tallest towers, it seems to rise to a crescendo as it emerges from the hillside like a plant caught in time-lapse as it sprouts from the earth. 'I thought a building on such a beautiful natural spot should have an organic feel to it,' the architect says.

He brings the structure of the building to the outside, an exoskeleton which frees up the interiors of the apartments as fluid, uninterrupted space of a type which is completely unfamiliar in Hong Kong - where even the most luxurious of apartments tend to be constrained by the island's astronomical

real estate prices and a surprisingly conservative culture of construction. The column-free spaces inside flow into each other with the living spaces linking in to each other, but with each retaining its distinct character formed by the configuration of the wraparound windows.

With floor areas of 6,000 - 6,900 sq ft these are undoubtedly generous apartments by Hong Kong measures. The word 'luxury' is so often applied to contemporary development that it has lost its power to impress - but here the luxury resides not in the finishes but in the sheer scale of the space. Gehry describes the plan form as a 'flower', inspired by images from Asian art and, with its strange protuberances and rooms expressed as bays; it is surely one of the most surprisingly organic plans on the island. In allowing each internal space to be a discreet form within the plan, each is given a distinct character through the subtly changing views and light the enveloping windows admit, yet each remains part of the whole, connected to it visually. The architect compares those windows to 'wrap-around sunglasses' which give an all-round, panoramic vista, surrounding the resident in greenery and sky. They also allow light to penetrate



deep into the heart of each apartment and the directionality of the bays ensures light is caught from dawn to dusk as the sun travels around the building across the sky.

'Once we had the flower' Gehry explains 'the rest was formed by the need for the rooms to be independent - they couldn't overlook each other, they needed a sense of privacy.' In this way a series of 'bays' was formed by the bulging of the 'petals' in the plan.

The subtle torquing of the tower as it ascends means that each floor is slightly different to the one below and above, each gives its own slant on the city, each responding to the landscape in a marginally different way. The spaces are irregular, organic and a little eccentric. The sense is that one is immersed in the view, not that it has been engineered through an opening.

The apartments are then extended into a still-sheltered but outdoor zone, the terraces which wrap around the building. These were conceived as decks with a nautical flavour. 'I'm a sailor' jokes Gehry. 'I'd just designed a boat, I'm into that and it made sense, that each floor was like a deck on a cruise ship. It kind of worked - you wanted to be able to go outside your apartment and connect.'



The floor runs through from interior to exterior, then, at the edges of these decks, the structure appears in the form of the glass-encased columns. The effect of the extension of the horizontal surface into the outside of the building and the delicacy of the transparent column-casing is to dematerialise the structure, to blur the boundaries between interior and exterior, between room and landscape, private realm and city.

Frank Gehry is renowned for turning typologies upside down and inside out. His characteristic organic designs embody the motion of contemporary life and are closer to the fragmented, panoramic and perceptual way we see life happening around us than they are to the conventional tropes of modern architecture. He seems to coalesce the ideas behind art, from baroque folds and mannerist spaces to hints of cubism and expressionism and filter them through a Pacific Coast ideal of leisurely, contemplative living. He is one of the few architects who are happy to categorise their calling as an art rather than just a profession and here, on the slopes of Mount Cameron, he has created a building that is every inch a work of art.





LANDSCAPE

The Mountain, the Sea, the Oak and the Reed

Gehry describes the base from which OPUS grows as ‘The Quarry’. It is as if the glassy, ethereal building is emerging from a solid base, built from the rock excavated from the mountain below. But more than that, what the jagged, stacked forms of the stone planters which make up this effect do is to create a solid base on the steep hillside, sheltering the infrastructure and services of the building whilst also integrating the hillside foliage and the architecture. It seems to owe something to the ‘wall trees’ which appear in this part of the island, in which the roots entwine with the structure of the retaining wall, each strengthening the other, engineering and nature in symbiosis. As well as anchoring the building on the hillside, the planters root nature firmly in the architecture. The seemingly random stacked planters break down the mass of the building as it hits the site and mediate between the rocky terrain and the stony architecture, between the picturesque romanticism of the greenery and the regular bond which defines the Spanish stone cladding.

On this site, you could argue, landscape is everything. Despite the structural daring, the irregular and the sophisticated architectural moves, the expression of the building is founded on the drama of Mount Cameron, on the steep, green slopes rising to the Peak, the winding roads and the breathtaking views back down across the harbour. Gehry tacitly acknowledges this at every step. From the carefully fanned and tessellated road paving to the angular stacks of planters and terraces which give the building its almost geological aspect, to the opening cut through its base revealing views of the hills and the generous decks giving each apartment a view back to the city

framed by landscape. Even the building itself is an extrusion from the topography, a tribute. If you look at the site models you can read the floors, visible through the transparent walls, as a continuation of the dense build-up of the curving contours indicating the steep slope of the site.

In its conception, as structured through swaying reeds, in the organic plan form which mirrors the profiles of the trees surrounding the site and in the way the planters insinuate themselves back into the terrain whilst allowing foliage to tumble down their sides, it is as if the building acknowledges nature's appetite to always take back what has displaced it. It is a structure which not only grows from the landscape but which revels in its drama.

The prevalence of the organic and natural aesthetic, from the flower-shaped plan to the quarry-like base, from the counter-intuitive structure of glass-encased reeds to the curving glass, recalls one of the most famous of fables. In Aesop's story of 'The Oak and the Reed', the Greek writer expresses the value of flexibility over the seeming strength of solid immobility. The powerful oak taunts the reed for its insubstantial nature, swaying in the gentlest of breezes, yet, when the storm comes, it is the oak that is felled by the wind and the reed, having bent almost double, simply pops back up again. Intriguingly, Aesop's fable chimes with an old Chinese proverb, 'A tree that is unbending is easily broken,' a phrase which can be traced back to the 6th Century BC Tao Te Ching. OPUS appears visually to embody the lessons inherent in these folk tales and proverbs, with the glassy reeds bending subtly in the breeze and a plan derived from the most organic of forms. It is a riposte to the blocky architecture of its surroundings and its strength and resilience is entirely derived from nature and the landscape. It aims to be as much a part of the mountain and the landscape as it does a contribution to the culture of contemporary architecture.



LEGACY

The Tower, the Island and the Future

Hong Kong is constantly reinventing itself. From trading post to port to manufacturing centre and then to international centre for finance and business, it has a remarkable capacity to reimagine and rebuild itself. Its most striking transformation though has been through its fast-changing and hyper-dense architecture. The limitations of an urban centre hemmed in by hills and sea have forced it to build upwards and the extraordinary density and intensity of this vertical city have produced a singular character. Amidst the towers are blockbusters like Norman Foster's Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, I.M. Pei's Bank of China Tower, the ICC and IFC Towers facing each other off across the Harbour and even Zaha Hadid's Jockey Club Innovation Tower. There is also the ghost of Zaha's proposed hotel on the Peak, a Suprematist dream which never materialised yet which has continued to loom as a potential presence on the hill. Hong Kong has, particularly in recent years, become an architectural destination. It has even turned its nighttime illuminations into an animated architecture show, managing to find a way of making buildings and skyline pure entertainment and spectacle. But none of its most characteristic or innovative buildings have yet been residential.

Perhaps the scarcity of real estate, the pressure on accommodation and the desirability of Hong Kong as a place to live has resulted in a kind of complacency. It is enough to build acceptably well and the apartments will sell. Why do more?

OPUS has done more. With a spectacular site, a world-renowned architect and Swire Properties, an ambitious and experienced developer based in Hong Kong, the aim was to create a landmark which would embody something more than the adequate, to make something that would challenge the status quo and stand as an architectural achievement. You could argue that with this site and with this floor area the development that became OPUS could hardly fail. But it was a risk, to attempt to do something so ambitious, so unusual in the context of Hong Kong real estate.

The risk paid off and it propelled the property into the sphere of international developments at the highest end, not only in expense and expanse but in terms of ambition and architectural intent. Its context isn't local but global and it stands with the finest condos in Manhattan or apartments looking over London's most prestigious parks. That scale of ambition represents a shift, a new model. Certainly this is a special site and a special project - not every new development will attract an architect of Gehry's stature but this building has reintroduced radical architecture into the residential arena and its success will echo through the buildings that follow in its wake.

Perhaps the most intriguing facet of OPUS HONG KONG as a work of residential architecture is its desire to be part of the place. The real estate market at this level is a rarefied setting but it is also the realm of a global financial elite whose tastes and desires are taken also to be as global as their travel plans and business interests. The assumption seems to have been that this deracinated class, a global elite, mainland Chinese investors and assorted others who might occupy this property niche will therefore also desire a flattening out of lifestyle which makes them increasingly comfortable wherever in the world they might be. The same way that, say, top-end shopping malls accommodate the same global luxury brands wherever in the world they may be, that hotel chains should aspire to the same levels of luxury and decor or the most expensive art is displayed on the same white walls of the same white cube galleries.

In fact, OPUS proposes something different. It suggests that at this level a home should offer something else. It should be a home and not just a property or an investment, a dwelling precisely where the owner is immersed in the specificities of place. The idea behind the wraparound expanses of glass, the decks, the openness towards the bay, the fluidity between interior and exterior is calculated to ground the dweller in the beauty of the site and the panorama. This is a building about the breathtaking nature of its situation, one which luxuriates in its hilltop setting and in its view of the fast changing city itself, the clouds in the sky and the harbour criss crossed by the wake of innumerable boats, ships and ferries. It could only be here because it wants to be here. And it wants those who live in it to be here not because of the expense of the prestige, not because of the size or the specification of its materials but because of the place and the elegance of the sculptural envelope which frames every view.

This is an architecture of home as well as of the mountain and the metropolis.



OPUS HONG KONG VITAL STATISTICS

DEVELOPER
Swire Properties

DESIGN ARCHITECT
Gehry Partners

ARCHITECT
Ronald Lu & Partners (HK) Limited

ADDRESS
53 Stubbs Road, The Peak, Hong Kong

SITE AREA
Approximately 32,500 sq ft

NUMBER OF APARTMENTS
Two double-level garden apartments
and ten single-storey apartments

SIZE OF APARTMENT
6,000 – 6,900 sq ft

ADDITIONAL FEATURES
Underground parking, five swimming pools,
clubhouse, fitness centre, rainwater recycling
for irrigation, electric car charge system

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