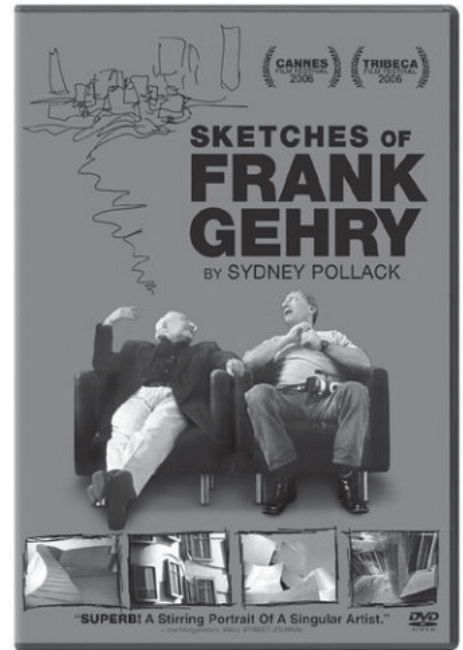# Media Review: Sketches of Frank Gehry

Studio: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

DVD Release Date: August 22, 2006

Run time: 84 minutes

Director: Sydney Pollack

In 1988, an exhibition of new group of architects' works at MOMA, New York, U.S.A., manifested "new images" in architecture. Those works respond to architectural issues of complexity and diversity different from the movement of Historicism in architecture, which began in 1960s as a part of Postmodernism[1]. The title of the exhibition was named "Deconstructivist Architecture." These architects, championed by some architectural theorists, believed that the historical type was not a concrete answer to the development of western architecture. Such "Historical Postmodernism" was thought as merely the superficial re-presentation of "old images" from the past. And it did not respond to contemporary ways of life, which was enormously effected by newly developed technologies.

Frank O Gehry, an American architect[2], was one of the Deconstructivist members, who has played an important role in forcing western architecture to walk out of the domination of historicism. Before the exhibition, Gehry had designed many buildings with modern vocabularies in the U.S.A. Until 1978, the light was spotted at his modified residence at Santa Monica after its publication in several design magazines (Figure 1).

The work of Frank Gehry is a direct reflection of "Pop culture," a cultural phenomenon of urbanity as a production of Postmodernism and rebelliousness to Modernism. His work, as we might call "Pop architecture" – has become a "commodity" for public realm. Praised as a Master of LA School[3], Gehry has designed many buildings throughout California, i.e. California Aerospace Museum and Chiat / Day building, which become an outstanding identity of Los Angeles for his followers. He has received public recognition in working with ideas of "fragmentation" – an aggregation of oblique geometries and disjointed volumes – and "urban

Figure 1. Frank Gehry residence, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

junkyard" – the use of raw, cheap, mass-produced and industrial materials – manifesting an architectural aesthetic of the incomplete and unfinished to Los Angeles' contexts[4]. In this way, most of his buildings could be seen as being alienated to the immediate contexts. But in a more sophisticated level, his work manifests a deeper relationship between buildings and their contextual networks. Some buildings show the urbanistic or community character with a careful thought, i.e. the location of entrance and exit, circulation. In other words, his works appear to play with a concept of complexity – both forms and materials, but they tend to reveal a strong coherence in a quality of "oneness" in stead of "strangeness"[5].

In 1992, Gehry showed the world a newly radical experimentation on computer technology when he had to design a "sculptural-formed fish" to be a symbolic entrance to the Olympic village at Barcelona in Spain. Its curved enclosure was planned to be cladded with wire-mesh which could not be built precisely in a conventional construction. Finally, the software named "CATIA" was used to solve this geometrical problem[6] (Figure 2). The complex curved surfaces of the fish were digitally analyzed and calculated, and then transferred to the computer-controlled cutting machine to cut metal panels with precision. This digitally paperless procedure has opened up a new ground in the creation and construction of architecture for both Gehry and other following architects.
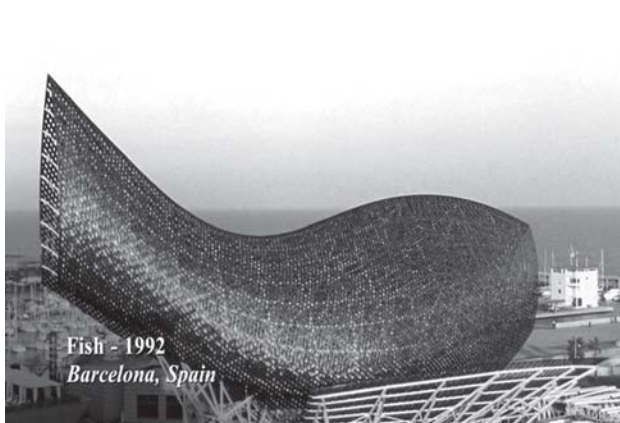

Fish - 1992
Barcelona, Spain

Figure 2. Sculptural Fish at the Olympic Village, Barcelona, Spain.

Sketches of Frank Gehry

Directed by Sydney Pollack[7], "Sketches of Frank Gehry" was released in 2005. This documentary conveys the thinking and working processes of Frank Gehry, placing an emphasis on his recent projects between 2000-2005. These works have been continually influenced by the design of Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, Spain, when the computer has become a very important for the design process in his office. The film "Sketches of Frank Gehry" attempts to show Gehry's thinking process from "sketches" to culminate at an architectural production. This documentary, however, does not show many sketches as the film title suggests.

The term "sketch" has an intrinsic quality of "incompleteness" since a sketch is a two-dimensional representation or a trace of ideas that needs to be developed to become finished or completed. In "Sketches of Frank Gehry," the director takes such incompleteness of sketch as a main concept and breaks down the conventional linearity of narration. The film is structured without a clear order, and is fragmented into four pieces of incomplete sketches which seem to have no internal connection among them. These four sketches consist of as follows:

Sketch No. 1

This first sketch is composed of Frank Gehry's sketches on white paper with a voice background by Gehry himself. These rough sketches are an essential tool to convey his initial design concepts to his staffs who will develop them into a series of three-dimensional studied models. The documentary stresses this theme at the beginning scene when Gehry's sketches are superimposed by an image of real building in the end (Figure 3 and 4). Gehry acknowledges that, however, the first moment of design process in each project pushes

him into a state of fear. It was the fear that the architect had no idea to do for the next design step. However he said he could pass it well after starting to do it.
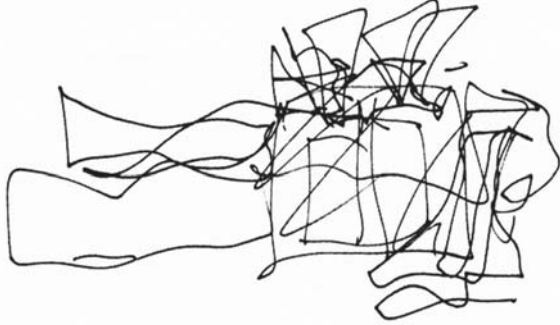

Figure 3. A Sketch of Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain.

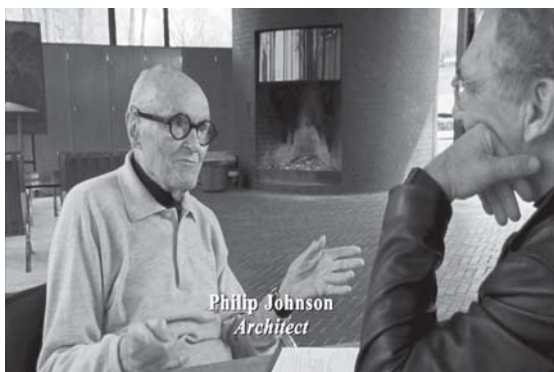**Figure 4.** The building of Guggenheim Museum after the construction.

Figure 5. Philip Johnson, architect.

Sketch No. 2

This second sketch consists of short interviews from a number of celebrities, patrons, admirers, including Gehry's closed friends (Figure 5). These interviewees are:

- Mildred Friedman, writer and museum curator
- Michael Ovitz, businessman and art collector
- Milton Wexler, Gehry's psychiatrist
- Julian Schnabel, one of Gehry's clients
- Charles Jencks, architectural historian
- Philip Johnson, New York architect
- Dennis Hopper, Hollywood actor who lives in one of Gehry's designed residences
- Edwin Chan, architect in Gehry's office
- Jim Glymph, computer consultant in Gehry's office
- Bob Geldof, musician
- Michael Eisner, the president of Disney studio who hired Gehry to design many buildings
- Hal Foster, architectural instructor and critic from Princeton University

Sketch No. 3

The third sketch is a collection of informal interviews between the director and the architect in private and professional parts set in different locations. The director filmed this part with a hand-held camera to create the intimate atmosphere where the viewers virtually participated in the conversations. All of the interviews in this film took place in different locations, i.e. design firms, auto-mobiles, residences, architects' works and even in construction sites. The interview taken place at the design firm showed the collaborative design process between Gehry and other design staffs, beginning with the use of physical models as a major tool. Afterward, the computer will replace this role to move the design to another state of building fabrication (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The interview at Frank Gehry's Office.

The interview in the car riding around Los Angeles conveys Gehry's unexposed personal information. His previous name, for instance, was "Goldberg" before his ex-wife persuaded him to change it. Another secret story is that Gehry was told by his architectural instructor at USC (University of Southern California) to quit the education. Such information reveals the viewers the private part of his life more than the story from any magazines.

Sketch No. 4

The fourth sketch contains a series of moving images of Frank Gehry's projects with the instrumental music background; each is presented without details in depth (Figure 7). This part shows the completeness of design process developed from the incompleteness of the sketches.

Figure 7. Fredrick R. Weisman Museum, Minneapolis, U.S.A.

According to these four fragmented sketches, the entire structure of the narration is deconstructed. The director did not conventionally connect the four sketches to become a big scenario, but he disperses these fragments by leaving them untouched without a chronology of before-after events. Therefore, the role of director is no longer the actual director, but the collector of primary data from the architect. The viewers, in turn, become the "subject" who composes together these four pieces of sketches. When the sketches are constructed to become an ultimate complete sketch, the quality of "oneness" eventually reveals itself in the mind of the viewers. The disordered structure of narration in "Sketches of Frank Gehry," therefore, is coincided with the real essence of the architect and the polemic qualities of his works. The role of the film viewer who passively receives the story from the director is transformed to "an active receptor." The viewer can find both "complete" and "incomplete" sketches, depending on his or her own method of significance.

Epilogue

"Sketch" is a significant tool for architects for presenting design concepts. In other words, the sketch is "the representation" of an abstraction from the designer's mind. Frank Gehry utilizes this representation framework as other designers do, which is the making of three-dimensional models – assemblages of cardboard and tape – out of the sketches, and the developing of their physical appearances by the processes of modification. From this point of view, Gehry is considered as an out-of-date designer in a Pragmatic manner. In the process of transforming the models to a more tangible level, however, Gehry deconstructs the traditional way of professional practice. The inno-vation of computer software replaces the vital role for altering "represented image" to "new image" of architecture.

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"Sketches of Frank Gehry" is not a well-constructed piece of documentary which thoroughly explains the life and work of a single person. Nevertheless, it could be praised as the best ever-made documentary of an architect. The film is not merely a catalogue of some promising landmarks of Frank Gehry, but also a modest record of constructed details which offering a closed look to this architect. The director "deconstructs" the fixed, static structure of narration, and allows the film viewers to "reconstruct" their own ones. The weakness of this film, however, is the long-established friendship between Pollack and Gehry, which overtly shows Gehry's positive side. The film also lacks different perspectives of criticism, as well as some clear answers emerging during watching the film.

Santirak Prasertsuk

Faculty of Architecture and Planning,
Thammasat University, Thailand

Notes

[1] Harvey, D. (1990). "Postmodernism in the city: Architecture and urban design". *The condition of postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell, pp. 66 - 67.

[2] Originally born in Toronto, Canada, Frank Gehry has moved to the United States since the age of 16. He studied architecture at University of Southern California, and city planning at Harvard University. He founded his own practice in 1962 in Los Angeles. He was awarded "the Pritzker Architecture Prize" in 1989 at the time that the name of Deconstructivist Architecture had faded away from the global architecture scene.

[3] The members of so-called "LA School" are, for example, Morphosis, Franklin D. Israel, Eric Owen Moss, Hodgetts and Fung, etc. Most of their works have been built in Los Angeles, the post-war city with dynamic environment.

[4] Frank Gehry gave an interview in *El croquis 74/75*, pp. 7 about the context of Los Angeles: "… was a city on the move; everything was happening very fast you didn't have to build in permanent materials because of the climate and the energy of the development. It was the place where the post-war fast food culture reached its highest expression. After being through the war, we wanted everything fast…"

[5] Alejandro Zera-Polo, the interviewer, pointed out that in spite of the contrasted materials and forms, Gehry's works manifest the polemic quality of "oneness" – one single material and one volume of space adapted to the site. This oneness appears very often in Gehry's work, for example, in Ron Davis House, Easy Edges cardboard furniture, Gemini GEL, Spiller House, Toledo Arts Center… See *El croquis 74/75,* pp. 23-24.

[6] CATIA (Computer Aided Three-dimensional Interactive Application) was a software created and developed in the late 1970 for aerospace, shipbuilding and pother industries.

[7] Born on July 1, 1934 in Indiana State, U.S.A., Sydney Pollack was an American film director, actor and producer. He has created more than 21 movies, and several have been received high praise from critics and viewers around the world such as *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), *The Way We Were* (1973), *Absence of Malice* (1981), *Tootsie* (1982), *Out of Africa* (1985), *Havana* (1990). He won two Oscars and a number of film-making awards. Pollack died on May 26, 2008. His last film was *Sketches of Frank Gehry* (2005). (from http://www.imdb.com)