

Gehry's Last Stand

At 90, architect Frank Gehry is juggling more projects than ever. One is poised to redefine his legacy: a sprawling master plan to reimagine the L.A. River—and solve an infrastructural problem that has vexed the city for generations.

BY TONY PERROTTET
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN SHORE

FOR AN ARCHITECT who has dreamed up some of the world's most fantastical structures—designs that have been compared to billowing clouds, undulating sails, alien spacecraft and (during a cameo on *The Simpsons*) crumpled pieces of paper—Frank Gehry has chosen a relatively sober place to meet: the Ellen Ochoa Learning Center, a public school in the city of Cudahy in southeast Los Angeles County, one of the most densely populated corners of the United States. Reaching it involves grinding along a traffic-clogged freeway through urban sprawl unrelieved by greenery. A brief change of scenery arises when the route bridges a 100-yard expanse of raw, sunbaked concrete with a thin ribbon of water running through it. This is the Los Angeles River, whose course was fixed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1930s to control winter flooding—a decision made eight decades ago that shaped America's second-largest metropolis and doomed this area to be one of the poorest parts of California.

Gehry hopes to repair this historic scar. If he has his way, a three-mile section of river here will include an arching platform covered in parkland, transforming an urban void into a futuristic, linear version of Central Park. It's just one part of a master plan for the waterway that Gehry is overseeing in collaboration with numerous partners and consultants. Last year, he revealed designs for a concert hall in nearby Inglewood as a new home for the L.A. Philharmonic's youth orchestra, and is in discussions with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art about creating a satellite museum, perhaps in this area.

This morning, Gehry is hosting an event to assist the neighborhood. One of his philanthropic projects is Turnaround Arts: California, through which he and other L.A. luminaries (including actor Tim Robbins and artist David Hockney) run workshops at struggling public schools. The idea was born after the mayor of Cudahy pointed out to Gehry a few years ago that the life expectancy for his son is nearly 12 years shorter than for a child born in a wealthy zip code like

Brentwood a few miles across town. One problem is a lack of parks in Southeast L.A., which can contribute to asthma and diabetes; another is the high dropout rate, resulting in more crime. Not long after, Gehry teamed up with Malissa Shriver to propose a Californian wing of the Kennedy Center's national arts education program then presided over by Michelle Obama. Gehry, who himself comes from a poor family, donated \$1 million to launch the initiative in 10 schools.

Before meeting the students, Gehry sits in the tidy school library wearing a black T-shirt, jeans and sneakers, slugging down coffee from a paper cup as he cracks jokes (and swears like a longshoreman) to the assembled VIPs and staff. Almost everyone addresses him as Frank. An assistant confides with a wry laugh that Gehry is slightly hung over, having spent last night drinking whiskey with his two sons, Samuel and Alejandro. As the architect begins his tenth decade (he turned 90 at the end of February), the sheer range of his projects is dizzying—including the enormous Facebook offices in Menlo Park, California, the Eisenhower Memorial in Washington, D.C., and a massive development in Bunker Hill, in downtown L.A. There are international creations, like a curvy college building opened a few years ago in Sydney, a new Guggenheim museum in Abu Dhabi, the stainless-steel-sheathed Luma Tower in Arles, France—not to mention, back in the U.S., the high-profile Hudson Yards in New York, where Gehry will join a crowded field. "We're playing," says Meaghan Lloyd, a partner and Gehry's chief of staff. "It's a chessboard with all the other architects."

"He's always been able to run us into the ground," says one of his long-time design partners, Craig Webb. "There's more work than ever," adds Lloyd. "Every day, the phone rings, and it's someone offering a great new project. We just laugh. He does what he likes now. He's having a blast."

As Gehry enters a classroom, a group of sixth graders looks up wide-eyed at the architect's entourage, which includes a half-dozen black-clad twentysomethings from his design studio;

a camerawoman recording the event; Shriver, the co-founder and president of Turnaround Arts: California; and Anthony Rendon, Speaker of the California State Assembly. "My constituency has always been ignored," Rendon says. "For Frank to spend so much time here is incredible."

The kids smile politely when the principal introduces Gehry as the architect of the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Gehry puts the 11-year-olds at ease quickly. "You know what's wrong with this room?" he asks. "It's too clean!" He turns to the teacher. "Do you mind if we mess it up?"

The day's project is to create an imaginary city, for which the kids will each model a structure. "The buildings don't have to look like any you have ever seen," Gehry says pointedly. "They don't have to look like any of the things built around you."

The class gets to work using cardboard, chunks of wood and colored sheets of cellophane. Watching the tumult, Shriver observes that bringing artists like Gehry into classrooms has a powerful effect. The students "start to feel seen and valued, where they used to feel invisible and helpless," she says. "When someone of Frank's stature visits, they think: 'I matter.'" The effect can reverberate throughout their lives.

An hour or so later, the students show off their wildly playful creations, which Gehry helps place around parks and roads in their fantasy metropolis. "Look at this new city!" he says when they finish. "Is it boring? No! So it's possible to make a new city without it being boring." It's a disarmingly simple statement that could be on the Gehry coat of arms. The kids then ask him a string of endearingly blunt questions: "What was in your head when you decided to make your buildings?"

"To make buildings so people feel better in them," he says. "Beethoven, Mozart, they were making beautiful things for the ages. Architects and artists are trying to do things that make the world better."

"Where do you get your inspiration from?"

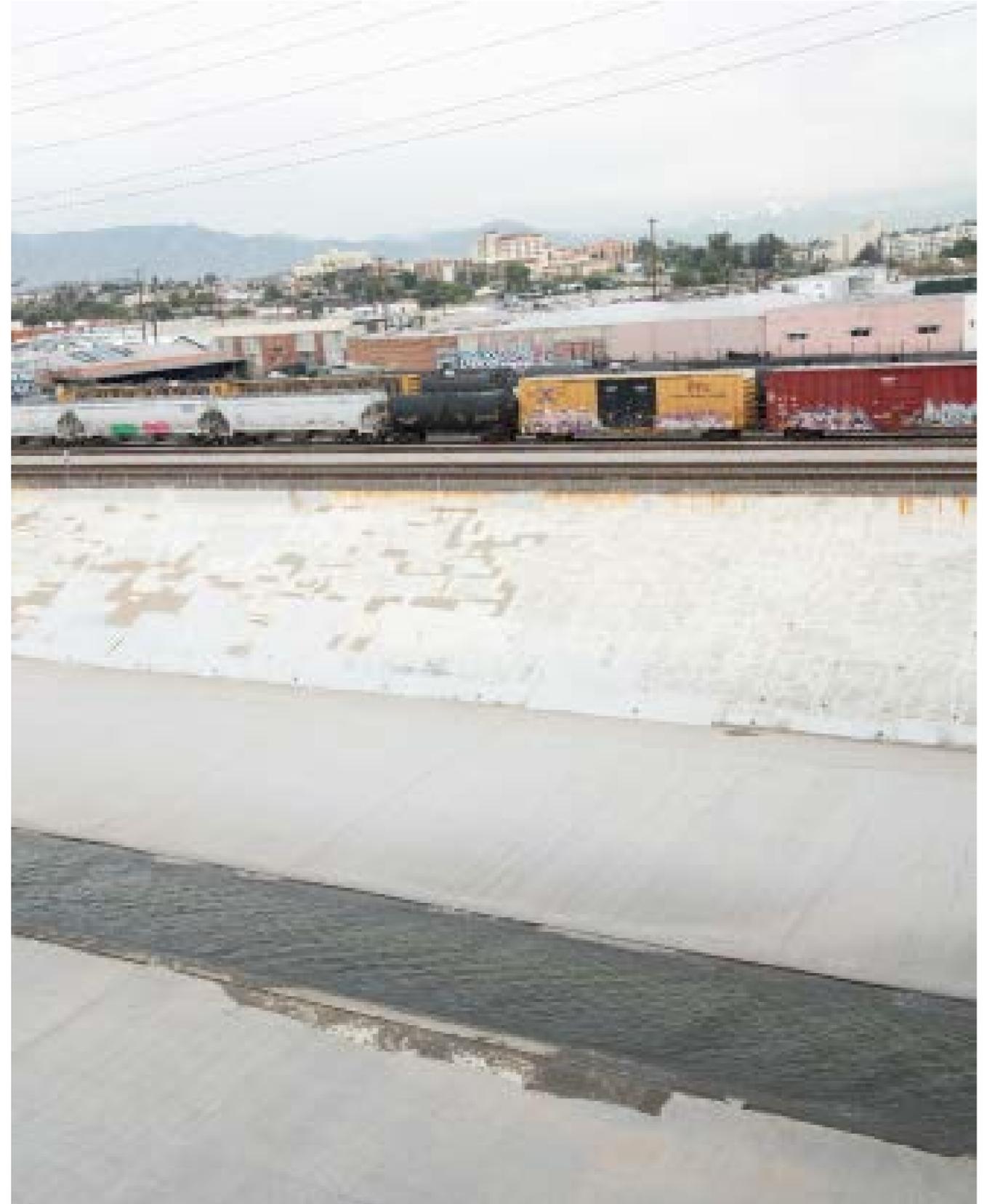
"From the world around me, life around me. The good and the bad." He once said, though he doesn't



DEALER'S CHOICE
Gehry at his firm's headquarters in Los Angeles. "Every day, the phone rings, and it's someone offering a great new project," says his chief of staff Meaghan Lloyd. "We just laugh. He does what he likes now."

CONCRETE DREAMS

Work on the L.A. River's concrete sheath, seen here from the East Fourth Street Bridge, began in 1998 to control flooding. Gehry envisions adding parkland and platforms to some sections, transforming the river into a vibrant public space.





tell the kids, that he could get ideas from a wastepaper basket. Then comes a question that makes him pause: “How does it feel to be successful?”

“I have a healthy insecurity,” he says. “Do you know what that means? I am always feeling insecure, I think that’s healthy.” He smiles: “You know, I started out in Los Angeles as a truck driver.”

ALTHOUGH GEHRY IS possibly the world’s most famous living architect—and the only one apart from Rem Koolhaas to score a guest appearance on *The Simpsons* (“I loved being on the show,” he says. “The only thing is that people stop me on the street and crumple a piece of paper and ask me to sign it”)—his life story is not so familiar. To many Americans, he sprang ready made as an avuncular, silver-haired figure at age 68, when his first major triumph, the meringue-like Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, opened to ecstatic reviews in 1997. (Philip Johnson hailed it as “the greatest building of our time”). Six years later, he became fixed in the popular imagination with L.A.’s Walt Disney Concert Hall.



Before then, he had thrived as an outsider. In fact, the quintessential Los Angeles architect, whose name, biographer Paul Goldberger writes, is now linked to the city “in the same way that Christopher Wren’s name is linked to London or Stanford White’s to New York,” was born in 1929 as Frank Goldberg to a poor Polish-Jewish family in the chilly climes of Toronto. As he was growing up, his doting grandmother would bring home scraps from a nearby wood shop and spend hours on the floor with him designing buildings, bridges and imaginary cities—perhaps the only time anyone in his family recognized that Frank had a creative spark as a child.

His move to L.A. came about by accident in 1947, at age 18, when his diabetic father survived a heart attack and the family sought warmer weather for his health. Frank emerged from Union Station into a sun-drenched city of booming postwar industry. Still, the family struggled to survive. “I remember scrounging money to get a chocolate sundae,” he recalls. He got a job driving delivery trucks for a furniture company that sold breakfast nooks; family entertainment consisted of sitting in their old Ford on the Sunset Strip hoping to

spot passing movie stars.

Gehry’s early career trajectory could serve as a fable about the benefits of aimless youth. He took night art classes in perspective drawing (“I got an F. That pissed me off. So I took it again and got an A”) and detoured into ceramics before dipping his toe in architecture. (“I still wasn’t convinced.”) He soon drew inspiration from the West Coast’s distinctive, Asian-influenced

aesthetic. “I loved L.A. architecture,” he said. “The teachers at USC were all returning GIs, and they had all been to Japan and seen the Ise Shrine and the Katsura Imperial Villa.” The wood-framed houses spreading in waves across L.A. suburbs seemed to echo the elegance of the East. “I can’t explain how exhilarating that was,” he says, “until they f—ked them up and covered them up with plaster.”

Accentuating his outsider status was the anti-Semitism of postwar L.A., with architecture an especially WASP-y enclave. After he married his sweetheart, Anita Snyder, in 1952, she and her mother asked that he change his name from Goldberg to something less overtly Jewish. He insisted on keeping the name’s original initial and shape, with letters rising in the middle and dipping at the end. They came up with Geary, which he altered to *Gehry*. “They were being creative,” he says with a shrug. “They were f—ing around with names.” His university teachers praised the change as a good career move, but he remained ambivalent. “My father was really upset about it,” he recalls. “I’d intro-

duce myself for years, then say, ‘But my real name’s Goldberg.’” (Once, at an event, he turned to Whoopi Goldberg and said, “Hey, I’m a Goldberg, too!”)

In other areas, he began to show an independence that to some verged on the bloody minded. After a stint in the military—for a time as infantry in the Third Army, Eisenhower’s old unit, with a young Leonard Nimoy as his sergeant—he headed to Harvard on the GI Bill to study urban planning. But he found East Coast teachers too inflexible and quit. He was allowed to audit classes, which suited his restless spirit, dropping in on the likes of J. Robert Oppenheimer and Margaret Mead. “I was free to roam,” he says. “That’s the best education anybody could have.” Gehry then traveled with

Anita and their two young daughters to Paris. Nearly broke, they explored Europe on weekends in an old VW, seeking out Romanesque churches and the curlicues of Gaudí. Even so, when the renowned architect Victor Gruen offered him a partnership to open a Paris office with a fantastic salary, Gehry turned him down. “He got really angry with me,” he recalls. “I had my mind set to do my own thing. I didn’t know what that was, but I figured I’d do it.”

Gehry returned to L.A. and started his own firm, designing private residences and apartment buildings in the 1960s to respectful local attention. At the same time, his marriage to Anita began to dissolve. The turning point came in 1966, when he was in therapy with legendary psychiatrist Milton Wexler, who would become his friend and mentor. Wexler said that Gehry was drifting aimlessly in his marriage and should either commit to it for three months or leave. That night, he moved out of his house and into a room at the Beverly Wilshire.

Gehry’s interests continued to range beyond architecture. He spent more time with actors and artists

than colleagues, becoming friends with Peter Falk, Elaine May and John Cassavetes, as well as a string of East Coast artists. Education continued to fascinate him. In 1968, Gehry volunteered with his sister to teach fifth graders in an L.A. public school—just as in Cudahy, by designing an imaginary city. With unkempt dark hair and a frayed mustache, Gehry ran the class like an improv group, according to Goldberger. It was all too hippy-dippy for the teacher, who closed down the experiment soon after it started. Frustrated, he declared to a filmmaker present: “All we’re talking about is trying things and taking chances.”

“I’m always curious about what goes wrong in the system,” he explains today. (It’s a word he returns to over and over again: *curious*. During one introspective digression, he observed that the Talmud begins with a question. “If you look at art, music, jazz, the source of creativity is about questioning. I think creativity starts with: Why?”) When it comes to schools, he wanted to know why kids who were bright and enthusiastic in third grade were by the sixth “buried within the system.” The long-term effects resonate in another of his interests, prison reform: “There are 300 schools in trouble in California, with high dropout rates. Statistically a lot end up in prison,” he says. “You have all these 50-year-olds with fourth-grade educations!”

The story of Gehry’s own big break has passed into architectural legend. In 1977, he and his new wife, Panamanian-born Berta Aguilera, bought a modest two-story Dutch colonial home in Santa Monica, which Gehry then radically redesigned. Instead of altering the original house, Gehry created another structure around it, as a sort of exoskeleton, using chain-link fencing, corrugated metal and raw plywood. Windows extruded in rhomboid shapes. The driveway became the kitchen. One upstairs wall offered no light, says Meaghan Lloyd, “so he said, ‘I need a window!’ He just picked up a hammer and knocked a hole in the wall. There was nothing precious about it.”



The kinetic result, evoking a Cubist sculpture, may have appeared chaotic but it was meticulously thought out—all for his own pleasure. “I was doing it for the hell of it,” Gehry recalls. The avant-garde Santa Monica house soon became an L.A. art pilgrimage site, to the bemusement of Berta and their two sons, Samuel and Alejandro. “I remember going out to get the paper and there was this click, and 10 or 12 Japanese tourists were there,” Gehry says. “I’m big in Japan. Their heritage comes out; they could see it.”

The house might have remained a footnote in Gehry’s résumé if not for a dinner-party conversation in 1980. One of the guests—Matt DeVito, a developer who had been giving steady work to Gehry for office buildings and, most recently, a shopping mall, Santa Monica Place—was fascinated by the home’s explosive design. “I don’t understand,” he said (as Gehry recalls the conversation). “Do you



like this stuff, this house?”

“Yeah, of course I do,” Gehry replied. “I did it.”

“Well, if you like this,” DeVito said, “you can’t possibly like that shopping center.” After stammering that the mall was “a commercial project”—he had to make a living—Gehry imitates DeVito’s New Jersey accent: “H-e-e-y, Frank, don’t do that! You should do this. Stick to your guns.”

“I was trying to influence him to use his talents,” DeVito, now retired, recalls. “I said, ‘Any architect can design office buildings. You should be designing museums, music halls. This is what you’re good at.’”

The dinner occurred on a Friday night. On Monday, Gehry came into his office of 40-odd employees and let them go, reducing the staff to three, including Berta, who was overseeing accounts. It was a leap in the dark, but new work soon came Gehry’s way—a string of creative residential projects, as well as his first major public work, California’s Aerospace Museum. He even designed a building in Venice Beach shaped like giant binoculars with pop artist Claes Oldenburg.



His increasingly fluid designs were by now testing the limits of technology. In 1989, he hit a wall during construction of a museum in the Vitra Campus in Weil am Rhein, Germany, which the Swiss furniture company had turned into a showcase for avant-garde architecture. When his expressionist structure of colliding geometric shapes was built using standard blueprints, a kink occurred in the curved staircase. “There was a flaw in the translation of the design,” Gehry says. Although he refused to touch a computer, his office tracked down CATIA, heavy-duty engineering software developed for the aerospace industry. It allowed designers to create 3-D models of intricate parts on-screen, which could be translated directly to machine fabrication—a specialized task at the time used for aeronautics. Gehry’s team tested it on a giant fish sculpture being made for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, whose twists were flummoxing their Italian contractor. “He went back to Italy and put the fish drawings into the computer. About a week or two later he calls me and says: *Perfetto!*” Gehry recalls. “That hooked us on CATIA.”

This method for blending art and engineering soon made possible the titanium-sheathed Guggenheim Bilbao, whose voluptuous curves critic Herbert Muschamp memorably described as “the reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe.” It’s regularly voted by architects as the most significant building of the late 20 century, on par with Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim in Manhattan. Despite the accolades, Gehry remembers a sinking feeling when he first set eyes on the building. “I came over the hill in a cab, and I thought: What the f— have I done to these poor people?” He confesses that it takes him “a couple of years” to get used to one of his own buildings—a form



of “postpartum blues”—and he still looks back with incredulity at his creations. “Where’d I get that from? It’s like a magic trick.”

Few of the half million annual visitors to his second major triumph, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, realize that the city shelved his design in the early 1990s for being costly and unbuildable; at the time, he was regarded as a risky eccentric. Gehry felt bitterly disappointed and rejected by the L.A. establishment, to the point where he considered moving to New York or Paris. The Concert Hall was revived only after the fanfare of Bilbao made L.A. look embarrassingly provincial. A full-page ad in the *Los Angeles Times* signed by the likes of Rem Koolhaas and Richard Meier demanded that Gehry’s “visionary design” be implemented. “City officials and city fathers and civic leaders all went to Bilbao and said, ‘Shit, we’ve got to do this!’” recalls Lloyd.

Despite his successes, Gehry hasn’t always stayed above the bruising fray of the architecture world. Many critics have argued that his buildings are attention-grabbing projections of ego whose flashiness detracts from their purpose—museums, for example, that overwhelm the art within it. “I think criticism is healthy,” Gehry says. “I always try to figure out who is doing it and where it’s coming from. That makes a difference to me.” Still, he has sore points, including a particular dislike for the term *starchitect*, which started off as a compliment before taking hold as an unflattering term. Gehry is even more galled by suggestions that his work involves construction delays and cost blowouts. “We are very careful about being within budget, and our clients know it,” he insists. “I can publish letters of appreciation.”



Gehry’s experiments with cutting-edge materials have also had glitches. When Disney Hall was done, its steel panels acted as giant parabolic mirrors, heating nearby apartments and sidewalks and blinding passing drivers. (The panels were sanded to dull them). In 2007, MIT sued him over structural problems in the Stata Center, opened three years earlier; they alleged it was leaking and developing mold, while the amphitheater was showing cracks. (The lawsuit was settled amicably in 2010, according to a joint statement by Gehry, MIT and the construction company).



GEHRY’S STATURE IS WHAT inspired the nonprofit River LA to approach him in 2014 for his most monumental project to date. The organization

had been created five years earlier to handle the mind-boggling task of coordinating the dozens of government and private entities that have a stake in the L.A. River, which runs 51 miles through L.A. County, from its source in the San Fernando Valley to the Pacific Ocean at Long Beach. River LA’s founding executive director and senior advisor,

Omar Brownson, came to Gehry’s office with two board members, the Hollywood director Gary Ross (*Seabiscuit*, *The Hunger Games*, *Ocean’s 8*) and producer Jordan Kerner. Describing the river as a great untapped resource, they said they wanted to replicate the restoration success story of New York’s High Line and hire Gehry to become the Frederick Law Olmsted of the L.A. River.

Gehry was initially uninterested. “They wanted something recreational with a logo,” he says. “Landscaped, high tree lines, bathrooms along the way. They were thinking of it as something they could brand.” Unlike the now-ornamental High Line, the river serves a crucial practical function during floods. Gehry offered to oversee the master plan without charge, on condition that he could first take his time to study the river in detail. “I’m a dum-dum,” he says. “I fall for shit like that. I was curious. And then I got caught in it! You’re up to your ears in it. I didn’t expect to come this far.”



The saga of the L.A. River is inseparable from the fate of L.A. itself, which was shaped by water long before the agricultural boom times of the 1930s,

as fictionalized in the movie *Chinatown*. Downtown L.A. sits 16 miles from the ocean because Spanish settlers found fresh springs there in 1781. Although the flow seems barely a trickle for most of the year, the river can unleash destructive force. Descending more in 51 miles than the Mississippi does over 2,300, it turns into a raging torrent after winter downpours.

For L.A.’s first 150 years, the river’s course whiplashed back and forth across seven miles of flood plains at the city’s southeast end. But in February 1938, a severe storm broke the banks and surged into more developed neighborhoods, knocking down bridges, carrying off houses and killing more than 100 people. A number of Hollywood stars were stranded on their ranches, postponing the Academy Awards for a week.

The disaster prompted the Army Corps of Engineers to fix the river in place by paving its entire length with 3.5 million barrels of concrete, creating the world’s longest rain gutter. This concrete straitjacket allowed the city to expand, turning a former flood plain into a sprawl of factories, rail yards and dense housing. But the river itself was declared off limits to the public as unsafe, cut off from surrounding communities by mile after mile of barbed-wire fencing. It eventually fell from the city’s collective memory, such that

many lifelong Angelenos will flatly declare that it does not exist, despite its regular appearance as a surreal setting for films like *Grease* and *Terminator 2*. *Continued on page 110*

MASTER BUILDER
Gehry’s studio, crowded with architectural models and memorabilia spanning his career, includes furniture of his own design.

GEHRY'S LAST STAND

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In 1996, L.A. County came up with its own master plan for the entire 51-mile river, followed in 2006 by a “restoration study” by the U.S. Army Corps for the 11 miles that run through L.A.’s urban heart. In the lushest stretch, Elysian Valley, a few miles east of Hollywood, the community organization Friends of the LA River helped remove decades worth of garbage and created bike and hiking trails. By 2014, this section and the leafy Sepulveda Basin were opened to kayaking. Since then, other projects have gone ahead in a piecemeal way: a derelict railroad site, Taylor Yard, was purchased by the city with the goal of turning it into a terraced riverside park; other housing and commercial developments are underway downtown.

And yet, as Gehry discovered, the L.A. River remains a tangle of competing interests, smothered in layers of bureaucracy: Winding through 17 independent municipalities within L.A. County, it involves dozens of local, federal and state agencies. The past 30 years have seen more than 130 separate community plans. “It’s like a CAT scan of all the societal issues in Los Angeles,” says Tensho Takemori, who helped oversee the research for Gehry Partners. He and another former partner, Anand Devarajan, set out to sift through the myriad plans, evaluating and recombining them in one place. The aim was to view the river in holistic terms.

One major issue involves neighborhoods such as Elysian Valley and Atwater Village. In the event of a catastrophic deluge—Gehry likes to call it “Godzilla the flood giant”—3,300 houses are in danger, a once-remote possibility that is now becoming much more likely due to climate change. “FEMA has to redraw the maps,” he said. The Army Corps of Engineers postulated that a tunnel through Griffith Park could siphon off potential floodwaters, but at a prohibitive price tag of \$1.5 billion. Other, more creative options are still being weighed. “We didn’t know what the f— to do,” Gehry says.

The project has called upon all of Gehry’s diplomatic skills. “We’re talking to politicians, we’re talking to lawyers, we’re talking to traffic people, we’re talking to public health people,” he says. There have been meetings with mayors and environmentalists and community listening sessions in Southeast L.A., where he has been at pains to convince residents that change is not necessarily a harbinger of gentrification (soaring rents have already hit Frogtown, a riverfront neighborhood in Elysian Valley) and inviting the organization Street Level Advisors to make the case for low-rent housing.

“Democracy is messy,” says Brownson. “Frank knows how to roll up his sleeves. His openness to new ideas wins people over. Frank understands the technical side as well as how to deal with hearts and minds. Artists have empathy and compassion. Engineers are not always known for that. Frank brings people to the

table. They stay because he listens and has no definite idea of what the solution will be.”

To understand what activists call “the Terminator part of the river,” Brownson takes me for a drive in Southeast L.A. Five minutes from the Cudahy school, we pull up to what appears to be a dead-end but is actually the concrete lip of the waterway. “This is the challenge,” he says. “You can be right next to it and not even know it’s there.” An ocean of concrete is framed by power lines and freeways, with water flowing in a rule-straight canal only a few feet wide, thick with algae and stray garbage. Its creation by the Army Corps of Engineers opened up the flood plains to development and coincided with the city’s industrial boom. But by the 1970s, as industry decayed, it became a polluted and charmless rust belt.

“You can land a 747 on this stretch,” Brownson says as we wander the river’s concrete sheath. “But when Godzilla comes, you need this space.” He gazes around. “You need someone like Frank to reimagine it.”

When Gehry first became involved, design ideas focused on landscaping the floor or banks of the channel. “But then Frank said, ‘We’re trying to put a square peg into a round hole,’” Brownson recalls. Instead of trying to fill the river, why not cover it? He proposed an arching platform that would create parkland but preserve the river’s essential role when floods hit. L.A. imports more than half of its water, much of it pumped from the San Joaquin-Sacramento river delta, a huge power expenditure; winter floods, if they can be managed and siphoned, could significantly help the city’s water needs.

It’s a 21st-century solution, exploring new frontiers of city planning. “It used to be there was a single purpose for urban infrastructure,” says Brownson. “But half the world’s population lives in cities now. Infrastructure has to solve multiple problems.”

For an alternate view of the river, I made the pilgrimage to Elysian Valley. The hum of freeway traffic fades as you arrive at a sandy bank shaded by cottonwood trees. In Frogtown, small cafes and galleries have sprouted by the bike path. The scene feels light-years away from the concrete expanse only a short distance downstream. But the vision of a prelapsarian California here is an illusion: Only a fraction of the river emerges from fresh groundwater; during the dry season, far more comes from the city’s

waste-water treatment plants and so-called urban drool, the run-off from washing cars and watering lawns. (A helpful website recounts *E. coli* levels for the river; swimming is still banned.) The plants in Elysian Valley are mostly nonnative imports. Still, the lush stretches arouse intense, almost spiritual devotion among Angelenos who know about them, many of them local artists who visit for reflection and meditation.

Community groups such as Friends of the LA River raised an outcry in 2015 when Gehry’s involvement in the LA River Master Plan was announced. “The initial response was: Does he get it?” said Steven Appleton, co-founder of LA River Kayak Safari, which has guided some 7,000 people on trips in the area since

2012. “Has he got his feet wet? A lot of designers see the river as their life’s work.”

Appleton has worried that Gehry’s office could bring a top-down, “rational design process” that focuses on grand infrastructure at the expense of the subtle ecology of the watershed. Even so, he now concedes that Gehry’s vision may be just what the L.A. River needs: The future may lie in creatively mingling a man-made wasteland—relics of L.A.’s industrial past rising like ancient ruins—with a riotous and unpredictable return of nature.

ON MY LAST DAY IN L.A., I become enveloped in Gehry’s world. At his studio, I’m sitting on a Gehry-designed chair (made from recycled cardboard), leaning on a Gehry-designed plywood table, drinking coffee from a mug bearing a Gehry design. Gehry himself is in a philosophical mood, meditating on the true aim of good architecture. At bottom, he says, it’s to help human beings relate to one another better.

“Shakespeare said the world’s a stage and we are players on it,” he says. “I think that we’re creating a stage set for life by building a building. It should enhance the relationship between people rather than destroy it. If you walk into a concrete walled room with a little window at the end, you have a different feeling than if you walk into a light and airy room with wood frames and glass. Informality in the structure engenders informality in the user. I think you can make buildings friendlier and more accessible and because of it make it easier for people to meet and get along and interact.”

In a sense, his involvement in the L.A. River is meant to create a stage for life on a colossal scale—to lift the entire spirit of the city where inhabitants are famously isolated for hours in traffic. One million Angelenos live within a mile of the river’s banks, and a quarter of the population of California is within an hour’s drive. If Gehry’s plans proceed, it could become a “true public commons” for L.A., says Brownson: “The river project is creating a place where people can bump into one another and connect.”

Gehry’s musings are interrupted by his assistant, who calls him to the phone. “Rob Venturi died,” he says as he leaves to speak to the widow of the architect often called the father of postmodernism, who passed away at 93. As I wait, I remember some thoughts on mortality Gehry had shared earlier. “The problem when you get to my age is that all your friends fade away,” Gehry had said, pausing fondly before a photo of Ben Gazzara, who died in 2012. “Sometimes I think I should fade away.” He then let out a raucous laugh: “Not gonna happen!”

When he returns, he recalls the “healthy insecurity” he’d spoken about to the kids at the school in Cudahy. “The only reason you keep going is if you know there’s something more to discover,” he says. “You start repeating yourself, you gotta get rid of that. You gotta get clean somehow. You gotta get into your new space. Getting there makes you insecure: You’re not sure you’re going to get there. A lot of my artist friends are the same. There is a kind of trepidation about going into the unknown.

“I love that feeling,” he says. “I love it. You can live on it, because it spurs you on. Otherwise you would do the same old thing.” ●

