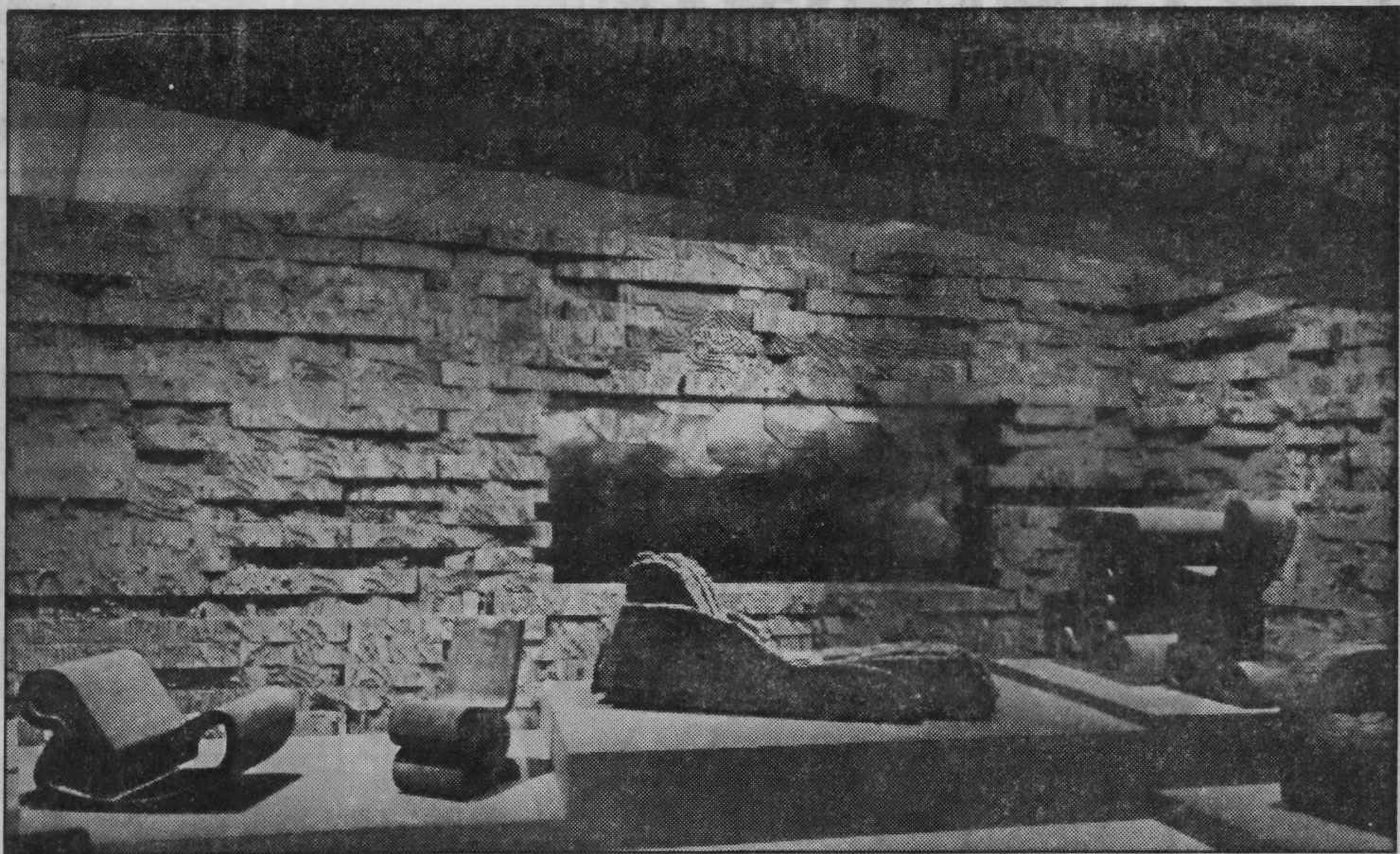




Walker Art Center

"The Architecture of Frank Gehry," featuring cardboard house interior with Easy and Experimental Edges furniture made of laminated corrugated cardboard, at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Majestic offerings by Frank Gehry

All right, let's admit that architecture exhibitions can be pretty boring.

Even when they deal with the greatest work, museum shows about buildings can be like hearing about a party you missed: the better the description, the more you feel the lack of the original.

Not so with "The Architecture of Frank Gehry," which opened last week at the Museum of Contemporary Art. MOCA's second major show at the new building (you remember that the Grand Opener was on the walls for a year) is a stunning symphony of ideas and form, born of two of the great minds of contemporary architecture.

Frank Gehry has become the undisputed monarch of Southern California architecture, and this exhibit is his coronation. As the design world has tired of the intellectual flimsiness — and downright cuteness — of "postmodern" columns and pastel colors on every bank and condo, Gehry's tough, consistent logic has brought him from the ranks of pretenders right up to the throne.

Gehry earned his first nationwide accolades for a line of cardboard furniture in the early 1970s, and he has made a career since then of using ordinary materials in distinctly extraordinary ways. Chain-link fencing, unpainted plywood and corrugated metal all show up frequently as finishes on buildings.

He takes pleasure in chance juxtapositions and clashing forms. He breaks single-family homes into several separate buildings, then strews them across a building lot.

This exhibition plunks all that into the clean, serene, almost-liturgical MOCA building. A modern masterpiece designed by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, the Museum of Contemporary Art is the most meticulous and refined recent structure in Los Angeles. Its vast, white symmetry provides the perfect foil for Gehry.

It wasn't planned that way at first. Gehry and MOCA director Richard Koshalek wanted to put the show in the obvious place: MOCA's Temporary Contemporary building a few blocks from the main museum. The TC, after

On Art

Charles Desmarais



all, had been remodeled by Gehry in 1983, and as a barely disguised old warehouse it shares the same macho energy of Gehry's most famous projects.

Martin Friedman, director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis where the show was organized, insisted on the newer building as the venue. He was right.

Entering the museum as it's currently installed is an extraordinary experience. To your right, where there's normally a large opening into a hall of classic proportions, you see a screen of dark metallic shingles.

Walk in and the screen grows, arches toward the grand pyramid of glass that caps the exhibit hall, reveals itself to be the side of a massive structure — a "house" — built in the shape of a fish with wide, lead scales.

Maneuver around the edge of the gallery to an opening in the fish house and enter a room ribbed with its own exposed wood superstructure. At the center is a table, rock-solid though of cardboard, with a fish-shaped lamp made of torn slivers of Formica.

Certainly the most notorious aspect of Gehry's reputation comes from his surprising use of materials. His own house in a quiet Santa Monica neighborhood, a proving ground for many of his ideas and one of his most famous works, is a 1920s middle-class structure with additions and reconstructions sheathed in corrugated steel. His Cabrillo Marine Museum in San Pedro boasts sails of chain link.

Not content with models and photographs, Gehry created four architectonic constructions specifically for this show to demonstrate the qualities he sees in such materials: the fish, a red-stained plywood structure, a copper and lead building and a cardboard one. Each

is nearly the size of a downtown Riverside bungalow.

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Most architects work in a circumscribed environment of constraints, imposed by the realities of business, engineering, their own professional training and their community's zoning laws. It can seem impossible to design around such formidable barriers.

Undoubtedly, Gehry feels these pressures, too. But his approach to design is to fly in the face of standard procedure. In the 1970s, when symbol and image and decoration were being embraced by both the architecture and development communities, Gehry was taking buildings apart to show us their insides. In the work of this decade, he has come to see buildings as sculpture, as well as shelter.

This approach is apparent in several private commissions, but it is also evident in two of his biggest LA projects: the Loyola Law School on Olympic Blvd. and the California Aerospace Museum in Exposition Park.

In the newest project model in the exhibition, "Brentwood Residence, 1986-1988," we see a home divided into no fewer than six separate-looking "buildings," including domed structure akin to an observatory and a room (the master bedroom?) floating on an island in the pool.

Much is made in the exhibition catalog and elsewhere of Gehry's close friendships with artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Serra and a whole range of Southern Californians. He himself credits Robert Irwin as an influence, and he's worked on cooperative projects with Oldenburg and others.

The Gehry exhibition runs at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, through May 18. An exhibit of drawings and other studies is at the Gallery for Architecture, 964 N. La Brea Ave., through March and a show for recent cardboard furniture is at HoffmanBorman Gallery, 912 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, until March 5.