

This article appeared in *Harvard Design Magazine*, FALL 2007/ WINTER 2008, Number 27. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

© 2007 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher: [hdm-rights@gsd.harvard.edu](mailto:hdm-rights@gsd.harvard.edu).

## The Crystal World

Frank Gehry's *IAC*

by **Reinhold Martin**

*Crystalline* is not the first adjective that comes to mind when one looks at Frank Gehry's new *InterActiveCorp Headquarters* (IAC) in New York. Located on Manhattan's West Side Highway within sight of the Chelsea waterfront and down the block from the postindustrial High Line, the building is enclosed on all sides by a shell made up of hundreds of pieces of glass, each a little different and most slightly curved. The cumulative effect is one of gentle, rhythmic pulsation. The built-in metaphorical cliché: a cloud or billowing sails. So why insist on *crystalline*? Because that word, with its hard edges and its glint, evinces a sense of brute mechanical construction, whether in the form of a geological prism or of the prismatic units of curtain-walled corporate space, such as Mies van der Rohe's *Seagram Building*, to which Gehry's *IAC* will inevitably be compared. In contrast, the carefully prepared rhetoric surrounding the building, beginning with Gehry's sketches and flowing seamlessly into the building's very own corporate website, is one of softness, of organic process, or more precisely, of what Gehry has called "juice."

Liquidity, juice: the very definition of capital, and therefore appropriate enough to describe this instance of corporate architecture. Anything more solid — geological rather than fluid or atmospheric — implies indifference (or resistance?) to capital's inexorable, circulatory pulse and therefore might seem behind the times, out of sync. But that still may be the most advantageous position from which to consider this building. Formal dynamism in architecture may or may not be related to the suppleness of today's corporations and the economic flows they channel. In any case, the question is better approached in historical perspective rather than from within the blinding glare of the present.

In 1966, a year in which urgent calls for memory and meaning appeared in the form of Aldo Rossi's *Architettura della Città* and Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, the science fiction writer J. G. Ballard published a novel called *The Crystal World*. Its title refers to a process of crystallization that befalls a remote Cameroonian forest, turning it into a "landscape without time." The effect is spreading. Apparently, something has happened at the molecular, atomic, or subatomic level that causes both organic and inorganic material to become brittle, vitreous, and prismatic. It is as if Bruno

Taut's luminous *Alpine Architektur* has finally arrived via a science fiction descendent of Paul Scheerbart, perversely converting Joseph Conrad's notorious "heart of darkness" into an iridescent, foreboding *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Unlike those early modern dreams of *Glasarchitektur*, however, Ballard's crystal world brings on a deadly stasis. Plants cease to grow and rivers cease to flow, with uncanny consequences. Time itself, which is normally measured in organic or environmental cycles, goes cold. In this petrified, entropic forest, nothing really happens.

Something similar can be said about Manhattan at that same mid-'60s moment, by which time there were enough cool, glass-and-steel Miesian copies trimming out the skyline to give the impression that the entire city was gradually being frozen in place, neutralized. A Modernist sense of forward motion was giving way to a postmodern ennui accompanied by looming Cold War dread, like that registered in Ballard's novel. The transparent optimism of glass and steel was trapped in the deadening pseudo-rationality of the corporate box, which now rolled off the assembly lines of culture into interchangeable arrays that dampened the big city's dynamism to the point that it was barely audible or visible. Modern architecture receded into the background, becoming a kind of white noise. Or at least, such was the fantasy.

The reverse seems to be happening today, if Gehry's building is any indication. The ice-cold curtain-walled office building, still a fixture in New York's skyscraper forest (think of Norman Foster's recent *Hearst Building*), is melting. Or maybe it is coming to life. In any case, at *IAC* the process that made this image technically possible involved the "cold forming" of glass. The molecular structure of plate glass — technically, a non-crystalline "amorphous solid" — is such that it tolerates a certain amount of deflection before the glass begins to crack. Thus, a flat sheet may be bent into place on site. Though in any case the allowable curvature is slight, the limiting factor at *IAC* was not the tolerance of the glass itself but rather that of the vacuum seal running around the perimeter of each double-glazed piece. Bend too far and the seal fails. Even then, the actual curvatures used were well within the tolerance of this seal, having been further reduced by a factor of safety required by an insurance company to bring the risk of failure within acceptable limits.

In that sense, the artifice and the accounting that brought the *IAC Headquarters* into existence turned, in part, on the molecular configuration of glass. Not that this mattered to Gehry's personal "creative process," which exhibited its usual resourcefulness in recognizing aesthetic potential in the natural tendency of so unnatural a material as glass to deflect under pressure. But it does raise a number of questions. The first has to do with authorship. Who designed the *IAC*? At one level, the answer is simple: Frank Gehry. But maybe we should also say "Frank Gehry," which is another name for the system behind the "star system": long lists of extras and bit players, assistants to the assistant producer. To put it slightly differently, this may or may not be a "real" Gehry building. And oddly enough, this possibility makes the entire operation more revealing about what constitutes an authentic work of architecture in the first place, and about the world in which that work may or may not exist.

Presented with such a possibility, the task of criticism is not to reproduce the vernacular of movie advertisements and declare a particu-

lar building a "stunning achievement." Nor is it to register disappointment, via the usual combination of scorn and condescension. Either response only offers more raw material to the culture industry. Instead, the task of criticism is to pose questions — to *de-contextualize* and to *re-contextualize* — to understand what is at stake in the situation at hand. So to ask whether (and in what sense) we are actually dealing with something that can be called a "work" of architecture here is to detach the object from the name (or "signature") of the architect to see the social, economic, and aesthetic function of both more clearly.

Thus: Whether or not Gehry himself arrived at the insight to use cold forming at *IAC*, an entire team of professionals was necessary to pull it off, not a few of whom worked for the glass manufacturer Permasteelisa. Where is the line between architect / author and consultant / collaborator here? Unclear. Likewise for the building's interiors, most of which were actually executed by STUDIOS Architecture. Though here, the demarcating line may be a little more visible. Generally, it can be drawn a few feet in from the facade at the perimeter cove light that lines the building on each floor and the accompanying layer of mechanical shades, each custom-cut (and many curved), that can be lowered to reduce or eliminate the sunlight. Regardless of what particular combination of architects and consultants actually designed this combination of details at the building's perimeter, together with the fritted glazing they construct a layered depth that may be seen from the outside during the day and a phosphorescent glow at night. These visual properties are central to the building's architectural claims.

Equally important, however, is that STUDIOS, headquartered in San Francisco and veterans of Silicon Valley, are experts in the reinvention of the office. From their early, jaunty-yet-relaxed campus for Silicon Graphics (now the *Googleplex*) in Mountain View, California, to the New York interiors of *Bloomberg L.P. Headquarters*, they have developed a systems approach that combines informality with efficiency. Though office culture was evidently not an overriding concern for Gehry, judging from the results it was most definitely of concern to his client. *IAC* Chairman and CEO Barry Diller presides over a conglomerate comprising over sixty Internet-related entities, each with its own identity and mission, gathered together here for the first time in one building. And so, inboard from the cove light we find a new-economy office landscape dedicated to intra-office social life (snack bars on every office floor, cafeteria above, etc.). The plans demonstrate the difficulty of squeezing this system of social systems — quasi-modular, loose, but still systematic — into Gehry's undulating shell and core. STUDIOS accomplishes this with a certain finesse, though the two architectures grate against one another at their many points of contact.

One such point of contact is metaphorical. It has to do with the cliché of the billowing sails which, incidentally, carries a distant echo of Jorn Utzon's *Sydney Opera House* with its own ingenious solution to the technical problem of building the compound curve. *IAC*'s interior architecture picks up the exterior curvature on a number of floors to produce ship-shaped conference rooms bearing nautical names like "Prow," "Windward," and "Leeward," "Wheelhouse." The board room is unofficially dubbed "The Bridge." Again, regardless of the particular combination of architects, consultants, and / or *IAC* em-

ployees with whom these theme-park names originated, they stand as evidence of a basic architectural problem. Such corporate poetics, which have frequently been known to overlay the culture of spreadsheets and profit margins with “meaningful” experiences, highlights here the question of what this building actually means — to say nothing of what it actually is.

This too seems a question out of sync with the times, an anachronism more suited to 1966 than to today. But judging from the study models generated by the Gehry office, the problem of cultural meaning was implicit from early on. For example: The glass ultimately used is very slightly reflective, with a gradient of white ceramic fritting that conceals the spandrel and gives way on each floor to a band of clear glass. At one point, uniformly mirrored glass was tried on an undulating shell quite close to the one finally built. This option, Gehry reports, was unequivocally rejected by Diller (to his architect’s apparent chagrin). The association of mirrored glass with cheapness, lack of substance, and emptiness was apparently insurmountable. This, despite the fact that it solved two problems at once: the economics of the skin and compliance with energy codes. Still, too many corporations had apparently occupied too many generic mirrored boxes for the material to be an option at IAC, despite its distinguished origins in the hands of Eero Saarinen and Kevin Roche at the *Bell Telephone Laboratories*, or Norman Foster’s use of reflective, bronze-tinted glass to similar effect at the *Willis Faber & Dumas Headquarters*, among other notable historical examples.

So we can speculate that a curved transparent material with a uniform mirrored coating was rejected in favor of a curved transparent material with a variable white coating because the latter was assumed to be a more effective carrier of meaning, whether by the client or by the architect. This is not only verified by the aforementioned nautical and atmospheric metaphors (sails, clouds), but also by an incipient contextualism that becomes apparent when one looks north at the building and the West Side Highway. Not only does the overall massing of the *IAC Headquarters* comply with the contextualist ideology built into the New York zoning code by reproducing a zoning envelope that holds the street edge and steps back above; it rather literally mimics the streamlined, horizontal fenestration of the comparably nautical *Starrett-Lehigh Building* a few blocks uptown.

The effect is compounded when a strange pair of precedents on 57th Street in midtown is taken into account. In the first, a yes-and-no expression of an existing window pattern is accomplished by a curtain wall with the help of layered gradients of white fritted glass at the Louis Vuitton flagship store designed by Jun Aoki. Down the block at the *LVMH Tower* by Christian de Portzamparc, the pre-*Seagram* stepped-back skyscraper type, historically clad in stone, is converted into a faceted crystal that combines transparency and translucence while holding the street edge. In both cases the apparent abstraction of glass, particularly in its aloof, precision-cut incarnation at *Seagram* but also in that building’s rougher offspring, is turned figurative. In one case this yields the ghost-image of a traditional facade, and in the other a rapprochement, comparable to that attempted by Philip Johnson’s *AT&T Building*, between the urban context and the stand-alone architectural allusion — an image of a “crystal,” nestled comfortably into the city fabric.

To the extent that the combination of massing and glazing at Gehry’s *IAC* locates it within this vitreous return to figuration (we could expand the list to include works by Herzog & de Meuron and others), it still seems more the exception than the rule. As in many other Gehry projects, figuration and defamiliarized materials happily coexist. Think, for instance, of his Formica fish lamps. The building thereby elicits “meaningful” readings for the most part only indirectly. Surely to the degree that such readings remain open-ended and negotiable, this is a positive attribute. But just as surely, the slyness with which Gehry follows an architect like Johnson in pumping this commercial office building full of content — “juice” — is telling. The difference is that whereas earlier in his career Gehry too might have relied on historical citation to set the wheels of metaphor turning (as he did, for example, at *Loyola Law School*), by now meaning has been displaced to another level. The assumption, it seems, is that this building means *something*, though we are not sure what.

Were this not the case, *IAC* would stand merely as an instance of technical achievement that ably serves a practical purpose, rather than as a potentially serious work of architecture. Compound curves built with glass hung off of a tilted concrete frame, enclosing flexible office space equipped with state-of-the-art systems furniture — this would likely reflect the combined expertise and judgment of Diller and Marshall Rose, his development partner at The Georgetown Company, among others. Its architect, however, would be an abstraction named “Frank Gehry” rather than the artist named Frank Gehry.

The Gehry firm has acknowledged as much by spinning off Gehry Technologies, Inc. to collaborate and consult with other architects, engineers, and construction managers in the complex process of building other people’s complex buildings. Unlike Gehry Partners, LLP (the architecture firm), Gehry Technologies, Inc., is not in the business of producing cultural meaning. In that sense, it carries the Gehry name only as a quotation that leverages the famous architect’s aura. This aura has repeatedly proven its worth in Gehry’s own projects by helping to accumulate the symbolic (and real) capital necessary to enable a wide range of technical achievements. So where, for example, the customized use of the Catia digital modeling platform made the *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* possible, the impression that that building contains meaning has, in turn, helped make it possible for Gehry Technologies to offer its technical expertise for sale to the entire construction industry. But in the case of *IAC*, does the appearance of meaning actually emanate from the building itself or from the technical, organizational apparatus behind it?

Some will object, perhaps, that either way my use of the term “meaning” still leans too heavily on metaphor or other quasi-literary devices, and that architecture’s specificity, especially in Gehry’s hands, lies elsewhere — in formal innovation, for example, or in the production of something like a pre-cognitive spatio-temporal experience. Such a perspective would likely reorient our attention toward the building’s sculptural and spatial properties. And indeed it does. But it also returns us to the novelist Ballard, whose words have little that is metaphorical about them. Instead, their force comes when we take his vivid description of the “crystal world” at face value, as a surreal technical report from the edge of narrative time, rather than as novelistic pathos. In contrast, Gehry’s building resists being taken literal-

ly at every turn of every corner. It exudes narrative and metaphor. Beginning with its “voluptuous” curves, it reeks of meaning and of “juice” with an earnestness that seems immune to a perverse realism of the sort practiced by Ballard. Even exit stairs are turned into significant architectural events.

Here, while appearing effortless at so many other levels, the *LAC* tries too hard. It may outshine Richard Meier’s *Perry Street Towers* a few blocks south. But as with so much contemporary architecture desperate to remain interesting in the face of overwhelming odds, barely concealed anxieties come to the surface with competitive urges. This occurs, for example, when it is revealed that the construction site across the street is being prepared for a luxury apartment building designed by Jean Nouvel, while the block immediately to the south awaits a work by Robert A. M. Stern. How will the Gehry building fare when compared with these new neighbors? Will it look as new as Nouvel or as solid as Stern?

Regardless of how things turn out, *LAC* has one distinct advantage, which resides in the relationship between Frank Gehry and “Frank Gehry.” This relationship can be described as a chicken-and-egg affair, a sort of shell game in which artistic aura and anonymous technical innovation continually trade places. For example: The *LAC* is not nearly as adventurous formally as is the *Disney Concert Hall* or *Bilbao*, though its no-nonsense qualities do lend it a certain rigor. Witness the semi-smooth transition in the west elevation from five bays at the base to three at the top, which poses a geometrical problem elegantly solved with a set of fluent passages from concave to convex. That these bays exist in the first place, however, is as arbitrary as the ripple effect they produce for passers by. Likewise, despite the care and sophistication of the curtain wall detailing, the relatively uniform exterior surface endures an uncertain, somewhat tentative encounter with the ground plane. This uncertainty is compounded inside by the ambient vagueness of the lobby space, the format and experience of which are not much different from that of an off-the-shelf tower, circa 1966.

Still, the sheer existence of these particular forms in this particular material carries an aura of its own. So where the architecture falters, the technology picks up. This is the genius of Frank Gehry, or “Frank Gehry.” It is a genius that at one level plays directly into the role of master builder previously assigned to that other Frank who designed that other *Guggenheim*. This is the myth of “genius” itself, in which architect and architecture enter into an eternal, mystical union that is usually consummated with a freehand sketch. At another level, it is all business, cool and calculating. This combination is the key to the question of whether this is a serious work of architecture. Automatically assuming that it is (because, say, there are sketches) risks missing the possibility that in its relative economy, as in its matter-of-factness, the building cannot help but yield to its own artifice. Its meaning (whatever it is) ultimately appears forced, as does its formal resolution. Which makes it all the more evident that, like glass itself, the building is a construction in the sense that “Frank Gehry” is a construction, to say nothing of Frank Gehry: simultaneously magical and mechanical, surprising and predictable.

A final clue lies in the abandoned mirrored glass, which never really went away. Instead, it went inside, into the very depths of the Gehry-

designed core that accompanies the Gehry-designed shell. In the vast empty lobby there is a very long, very high translucent glass wall. Behind it, there is a very long, very narrow space, lined with eighteen digital projectors facing away from the wall, and eighteen pairs of angled, crystalline mirrors that reflect their digital light back onto the translucent glass. The result is what the building’s website calls the “world’s largest high-resolution video wall,” supporting a single, rear-screen projection that is the cumulative, coordinated output of the eighteen projectors. In this pulsating, animated wall as in the building itself, whose pulsating, animated figure requires the technical coordination of hundreds of pieces of glass, the mechanical part is subordinated to the organic whole. The hall of mirrors that makes such a trick possible is necessarily invisible. Likewise, “cold-formed or ‘bent’ glass” is another name for the behind-the-scenes technical virtuosity that takes over where the work of architecture leaves off, thereby encouraging us to believe that this brittle shell-and-core holds together just enough to contain something like meaning. And “Frank Gehry” is another name for the hall of mirrors that takes over when the real Frank Gehry has left the building, again.

To the extent that it too can be considered part of a larger whole, whether actual or virtual, every building implies — or imagines — a city and a world. The city implied by the *IAC* is a city of proper names administered by capital: Gehry, Nouvel, Stern, Meier, etc. This city already exists. There is nothing visionary about it, whatever particular form it takes. But to the extent that the proper name, in architecture, stands in for an abstraction, there is another city lurking behind each. To sign a building is to sign a contract with the crystal world. Bound by such a contract, one service that few signature architects are able to resist providing is that of bringing this cold world to life by delivering meaning. With consummate professionalism, Gehry’s architecture attempts to render this service at *LAC*. To its eternal credit, it fails. Instead, we are left with the cold hard thing itself: a complex set of carefully balanced curves interrupted by the occasional straight line, digitally calculated and mechanically produced. In its crystalline surfaces we can catch a murky glimpse of the world that has made it possible and that it, in turn, has helped to make. In such a world, real materials like glass are transformed into wish-images whose aura has far from withered away. This new form of aura is defined by an unresolved oscillation between “original” (Gehry Partners) and mass-reproducible “copy” (Gehry Technologies). If the resulting effect can be called meaning, then this is a meaningful building. If not, then all the better. □