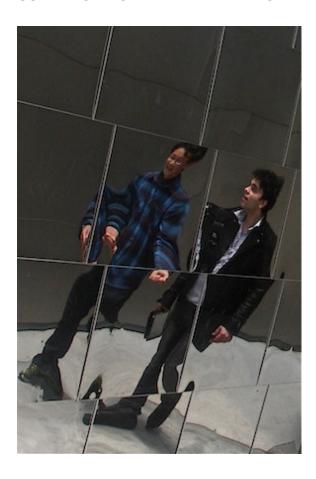# CONVERSATION WITH IMAN ANSARI

With his eccentric forms and uncommon use of materials, Frank O. Gehry has established a new language for architecture. His imaginative approach to the making of architecture has challenged the traditional conventions of the industry, and led to the formation of a new model for architectural practice. Taking advantage of aerospace technology and computer software, Gehry has mastered the tool that has enabled the rationalization and therefore construction of his unorthodox forms. But much of that lends itself to his interest in arts, and his conviction in blurring or merging the boundaries between art and architecture. Throughout his career, he collaborated with many artists of his generation including Richard Serra, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. His unusual work has displaced him in the conventional boundaries of art and architecture. And as architectural critic Kurt Forster notes, "the most fragile component of Gehry's personality, namely his desire to

be an artist, delayed as well as secured the professional recognition he now enjoys."

I contacted Edwin Chan, Gehry's long time design partner who recently left the office after 25 years. Edwin invited me to Los Angeles for a tour of some of the projects in the context of the city: Los Angeles. I took that opportunity and traveled to LA. I met Edwin, on Saturday March 30th 2013, in Rose Cafe in Venice - a beachfront neighborhood on the west side of Los Angeles that houses some of Gehry's early projects, including Spiller House and Chait/Day/Mojo building, as well as his first office. As Edwin put it, "it all started here in Venice." We began our conversation in Rose Cafe then walked to see Spiller House, and the Chait/Day/Mojo building in Venice. In the afternoon we drove downtown and visited Loyola Law School, and finally ended at the exuberant Walt Disney Concert Hall.

IA: You have been working at Frank Gehry's office for twenty-five years, and have been involved in some of the most celebrated projects such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. And I think hard to neglect your role and contribution to the success of that practice. But above that, your personal take on architecture, and more specifically your interest in the reciprocal relationship between art and architecture has helped in better defining the direction of the practice and developing a new language. I would like hear your story, and how did you end up at Frank Gehry's office?

EC: I'm not sure if you know this, but I was born in Hong Kong, and I came to the U.S. when I was a teenager. When I was growing up in Hong Kong, I never imagined that I'm going to be an architect. At that time, there were no buildings that I would call "architecture" over there. People built office buildings, large apartment buildings, shopping malls etc, which didn't really interest me very much. There wasn't much "Design" in the way we would define it here in the US. So at first I thought I was going to become a filmmaker. I thought that would be a way to exercise my visual imagination. And then I came to the US for high school, and during my junior year I attended

the Career Discovery program at Harvard. That experience opened me to a whole new world of architecture, as we know it. I learnt about Le Corbusier and the Modern Movement, and that was when I decided to become an architect.

So after high school, I went to UC Berkeley for Environmental Design, and afterwards I returned to Harvard for my Architecture degree. After graduating from the GSD, I decided that there were three architects I wanted to work for. I will not mention names, but one of them - whom you had a discussion with recently - was a professor of mine at the time. The second one was starting his office in Rotterdam. And Frank Gehry was the third architect. At the time Frank wasn't doing a lot of international work; he was only well known as a California architect. But I was very interested in how his work was always related to the arts. He had a very strong connection with the art world, and I was very interested in that relationship. I also knew I wanted to be in Los Angeles, so I applied to the office. I was very lucky that I got the job. So I moved here and have been working at Frank's office until recently.

IA: Gehry's early work is many ways is different from what would be commonly understood as a Gehry project today.   So which projects in particular stood out for you at the time?

EC: Well, his house for example was one of his early works that was very well published, and he was already doing medium size projects, like Loyola Law School. He was also starting to get international exposure, like the project at Vitra. I wasn't interested so much in the specific style of the work. But as mentioned earlier, what I was really interested in was the relationship with the arts; and the dialogue between the architect and the artist, which I thought was very strong and powerful.

IA: When we look at the work of Frank Gehry or Thom Mayne, as LA architects, there is a certain relationship to city evident in the work: the industrial character and elements of the highway or automobile culture, that

you read in the scale or use of materials like metal and concrete. But as free-standing (machine-like) objects sitting in the city they also embody certain ideals or values, like freedom of expression or individualism, that are perhaps uniquely American. In your opinion how is Gehry's work tied to Los Angeles or the American culture?

EC: Absolutely. I think Frank's work definitely has DNA of LA as a city. We talk about the idea of a democratic city a lot, and coincidentally Hillary Clinton mentioned that in her speech recently saying: "We need a new architecture for this new world, more Frank Gehry than formal Greek," because it's the expression of democracy. In that sense, you could think about the work in the way it embodies those values, and how they are manifested architecturally. You alluded to a lot of them already, like diversity of materials, the scale and the heterogeneity, and those are also the DNAs of the society we live in.

But for me personally, I think in addition to everything you talked about, there are two main urban aspects that stand out. First one is light; LA is a city that you are very much aware of its unique horizontally. When you are in the city, you are constantly seeing the sky, and the sky is always a part of your peripheral vision - as opposed to a city like New York where you are always surrounded - and because of that, you are very much aware of the change in light. Therefore, the architecture, and also the materiality of the architecture, always have to be very sensitive towards the light, and sometimes they are very important part of the decisions. This approach also carried through to some of the projects that we worked on internationally. For example, one of the reasons we used Titanium in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao was the way it reacted to the light in that city. It wasn't a stylistic decision per se. As you know, Bilbao is a city with heavy industries, and we knew from the beginning that the building would be made of metal that would speak about the industrial character of the place. So we looked at stainless steel and other metals for a long time, but we didn't like the way they responded to the light. In northern Spain it rains lot, and we wanted a material that would radiate a kind of warmth and bring the sky into the building. So that is why we came to

the decision to use Titanium for the building. In other places we used other types of materials. So it really depends on where the project is. But the idea of materiality, and how it responds to the light is very important, and I think we developed that sensitivity from being in LA.

The second aspect is the "mundane" quality of the city. In other words, when people visit LA, especially Europeans, they notice a very different kind of city than a traditional city. Part of it is the "mundane" quality, but at the same time there is a beauty in the mundane. So how do you capture that quality? And how do you bring that into people's awareness? A lot of times people are in denial about that- Frank talks about that also - and that's how he arrived at the chain-link fence. It's a material that people use in their front yard all the time, but when you use it as architecture people start to question it. So it's about bringing out those kind of values and focusing on it. In some ways it's very Duchamp like, you know. Because it is part of a sensitivity that came from Modern Art: to give value to mundane things, or to emphasize the beauty of the mundane.

IA: So here we at Spiller House in Venice. We see that interest in using the "mundane" corrugated metal or wood, but beyond that I think even the way the house is assembled and the materials come together expresses that mundane quality. The materials seem so raw, untreated or unpainted, and you can see the joints and connections bringing them together.

EC: That is true and part of this has to do with the construction culture in the West Coast with the use of two-by-four wood framing. Also there is this unfinished aspect to the building, which is one of the characteristics of Frank's early work. But I think this project is important because it is very much part of the street-escape. The building on the front is lower, which relates to the street scale and adjacent buildings, and there is a second piece in the back that is taller. In Frank's work, there is always this idea of breaking the building into smaller pieces as a way to address the scale. You can also see that kind of scale and aesthetic is very much aligned with other buildings in Venice,

California. So there is a unique industrial character to it that makes it fit right in.

IA: Let's talk about art. You talked about your interests in art and the dialogue with artists. But art is a vast concept and could often be ambiguous. I'm interested to hear what is your definition of "Art"? And what aspects of art are you particularly interested in?

EC: Well if you asked any architect I know, they would tell you that they are interested in art. I cannot imagine one architect who would tell you that they aren't interested in art. So in some ways it's a little bit of a cliché for me to say that. Although I would have to say that I am much more visual because my eyes are much better developed than my ears. When I was growing up I played the piano, but ironically, as part of my rebellious nature I stopped playing the piano when I became a teenager because I became interested in a new things. When I started working at the office, I shied away from the longest time from working on concert halls; I have been more interested in museums. So for me art is visual. But I think nowadays, as I mentioned to you earlier, the younger generation of artists work in multi-disciplinary ways, which is fascinating for me. I admire artists who work in traditional mediums, but I think I'm more and more interested in artists who work with different types of media.

And although I said I was interested in art, I never fantasized myself as a sculptor or a painter. I do like taking pictures, but I never have the patience to paint or make sculpture. I think for me, it's the dialogue with the artist that is the most interesting. Because the issues that interests artists are in some ways more tactile or less theoretical. So the discussions that I would have with artist on the creative process are usually more exciting for me.

IA: So in that sense, do you consider architecture as another medium of art?

EC: I wouldn't define it like that. I think in a sense we are all involved in a kind of creative endeavor, and I think that architecture is just one of many different creative endeavors. I hesitate to label it because I don't think it's healthy to think about it that way. Its just that in architecture, the medium that we choose to express these ideas happen to be the built-environment, whereas for the artists they might have chosen a different medium to explore the same set of ideas.

IA: I'm glad we are here at the Chiat/Day/Mojo building. This project was particularly interesting for me because of what you were saying about the dialogue and relationship between art and architecture. The large binoculars here as you noted is a collaboration between Frank Gehry and sculptor Claes Oldenburg. Claes' work is ironic here because his work is always about taking everyday objects and building them in a very large or monumental scale.

EC: The building was designed at the time for Chiat/Day/Mojo advertising company, but is now owned by Google as a part of their Los Angeles campus expansion. Jay Chiat was a longtime friend of Frank. Jay really wanted to create a building that would encourage creativity. So going back to your question is this art or is it architecture? As you mentioned, the binoculars was a collaboration between Frank and the sculptor Claes Oldenburg, who was one of the most important pop artists of the time (in 1960s). A lot of people looked at the building as a kind of pop architecture with the binoculars. But I would like to think of it as a kind of urban streetscape.

When you build anything in Venice, California, you have a height limit of about 30 feet. So when you think about the building in relation to the street, what do you do to address the street? You also have to keep in mind that when this building was done in the 1980s, the discourse of architecture was Post-Modernism. And you had architects like Michael Graves who were doing this kind of flat two-dimensional facades. So one way I suppose - and this is just a speculation - is that, as opposed to making a flat facade, is to create a facade

that addresses the street with a series of objects or sculptures that have depth, or three- dimensionality.

IA: That's an interesting point because the building does look like it could be three or four different buildings, with different purpose or use, and perhaps even done by different architects. But what's interesting to me here is also the breaking of the scale. Because considering the 30 feet height limit, if you were to have a monolithic expression, the street front of the building would appear short and very long.

EC: The other way to think about it is that each element here would express some aspects about the program of the agency, by giving the type of spaces inside some form of identity along the street.

IA: So are you suggesting that the binocular is not just a sculpture or art, but it is actually architecture?

EC: Well, this is a different type of topic and depends on whom you talk to. But let's just say that spatially it is inhabited and is functional. So the left wing has offices that have a different function than the offices in the right wing. And then in the middle, which is directly above the entrance, there are conference rooms. And inside the binoculars, you have more private meeting rooms. And when you look at the back of the building also has its own unique expression with punched windows. So they are not just sculptural pieces, but in some ways they project the different uses and spatial requirements. So by expressing the building elements with this variety, it creates a sense of uniqueness within the monotony of generic "office" spaces.

IA: I'm interested to hear more about the binoculars and the collaboration with Claes Oldenburg. Have the two done more collaboration together?

EC: Yes they have. But if I remember correctly, this is the only one that was actually built. Frank has also collaborated with other artists of his generation,

like Richard Serra. I seem to recall that Frank has had the same kind of conversation with Claes as the one we are having now about what constitutes art versus architecture. Either Frank (or Claes) at one point said that, for it to become architecture it needs to have windows. So they decided to put those small windows you see in the binoculars.

IA: That's very interesting. So the sculpture becomes architecture by acquiring windows. Here in the work of Claes Oldenburg we see a sculpture, the binoculars, striving to become architecture, even at a price of forcing domestic elements into it. But what about the artworks, like the work of Richard Serra's that are already spatial, and have architectural characteristics imbedded in them? In Serra's work the art or sculpture is experienced, not simply as an object or a spectacle, but rather as a subjective experience that involves the experience of the spaces within the art.

EC: Well, I think it's very easy for people to draw a close correlation between Frank's work and Richard Serra's sculptures. For instance people think the big gallery space in Bilbao was designed for Richard Serra's sculpture; but Frank (and I) would disagree. In fact the sculpture came later. And in my personal opinion, I'm not so sure if the sculpture looks that good in the big gallery. But generally in Serra's work, there is an interest in surfaces, and as you know there was a period in Frank's career when he was exploring the fish as inspiration. The use of the aerospace software Catia has enabled Frank to pursue that interest, and also in this case quite deliberately enabled Serra to pursue his work as well, since Frank introduced him to the use of that technology. So in that sense the similarity may be the overlap of the software and technology that has enabled both the architect and the artist to pursue their own interests.

IA: But what about the way art is perceived? One aspect is, as you said is the interests in surfaces and materials. But for me, what distinguishes the work of Richard Serra or Anish Kapoor is the subjective reading and

experience of the art. In the traditional conception of art - for example - an impressionist or even cubist painting of a scenery - the object of art (the painting) represents an idea or impression of a concept (the scenery) outside of itself. In modern art however, when we look at the work of Mondrian and his paintings for instance, the object of art itself is the real idea and it is not referring to any concept or signifier outside of itself. What Richard Serra and Anish Kapoor in my view have achieved, is a step further from the modernist movement in art, for not only the art isn't referential to an idea or concept outside itself, but is also addressing and acknowledging the viewer or the subject in a fundamental level; the object demands a cognitive participation with the subject, and the meaning or purpose of the artwork lingers on that subjective experience. This is what I would say is the new subjectivity in art.

EC: I very much agree with that. I think this goes to a bigger question that is about the sculptural aspect of architecture. Historically I think there was not that kind of boundary between the artist and the architect. When I experience some of the work of Richard Serra, it is very easy for me to imagine that I could live in the space of his sculpture. Or I think it's not so different to look at Frank's work and say it is very sculptural. So the idea of this kind of duality, that architecture in some ways is a living sculpture is a fundamental value that we believe in.

IA: So do you think the collaboration with Claes Oldenburg and inhabiting the binocular was an attempt towards merging the two boundaries, an attempt to live inside the space of the sculpture?

EC: I wasn't there at the time, so I cannot talk about that experience. But I would think it happened in a more intuitive way, that they wanted to use design as a vehicle to further their artistic conversations. But the official story is that Frank and Jay Chiat were having a meeting in the office. Frank always has things that interest him in his office and around his studio. That day, Frank happened to have a pair of binoculars that Claes had made for him sitting next to his desk. So as they were talking about the project and they were

brainstorming on what to do with the facade, Frank put the binoculars in the model and said it could be something like that! So it happened in that sort of spontaneous manner.

IA: I think the whole story is interesting because even with Gehry's exploration of the fish there is similar approach to Claes in that you take that object, or the idea of the object, and you build it out of scale.

EC: I would like to think of it a little differently. In some ways, going back to some of the things you brought up earlier at Rose cafe, here there is an idea about movement and how to embody or explore the idea of movement in architecture, which goes back to the idea of the city. Because I think in some ways Frank's interest in the fish is a way to indirectly explore the idea of movement because the way the fish moves is very beautiful. And this idea of movement has been explored before in the Baroque period, or in Modernism through the work of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe. So with the technology today, the form of the fish is just one of the ways to explore the idea of movement.

IA: When you think of great architects, like Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe, which you just mentioned, they each had a larger project that they were investigating and exploring in their work, and each project was step toward that larger search or exploration or the project of their career. In your opinion, what is Frank Gehry's project?

EC: Frank has created pretty amazing buildings in his career. But from my point of view, and I suspect that Frank would probably agree with me, his greatest legacy is the way he has designed his office. And when I say design, I don't mean design as a kind of physical edifice or style, but I mean that he has conceived of and organized his office in a certain way that has enabled him to make the kind of architecture that he wants to make.

Frank always felt that in the early days of his practice, his ability to explore architecture and creative concepts were limited to the way the construction industry has been established. So the focus of the practice is about trying to take control and responsibility of the situation, and be able to empower the architect to freely explore the entire process of making architecture. This is has to do with the design process, the way the office is organized, and a lot of it has to do with the use of technology, such as using aerospace technology and CATIA, that has freed him from the kind of constrains that the construction industry imposes, to be able explore the kind of aesthetic and formal ideas that interests him. So the design of his office in this way is an important part of his legacy that is different from a traditional office.

IA: I think the point you made about reinventing the practice model itself is key because I think that the contribution his practice model has made to the profession, especially in terms of integrating the technology and bringing that technological aspect into architecture is immense. Having that in mind and looking at the projects themselves do you think there is a linear progression or evolution of a thought that you can follow from one project to another? Is there a theme that it is being explored? You talked about the fish and the idea of movement and the city. When we look at the projects in the 80s and 90s and finally today, we see them moving into a new direction. What is the theme or the project?

EC: Obviously architecture is a very complex thing, so it is hard to identify it in that way. I hate to say, well, it's like the fish or something. That would be overly simplistic. But I would like to say that looking at the works urbanistically is an interesting angle; and to bring the urban sensitivity to the work is an important part of it. In a sense that despite the sculptural responses and all those projects, they are parts of the repertoire, of a language that one would use to try to construct a kind of city for today.

And that is why Loyola Law School is a very important project in Frank's collective projects, and an important millstone for Frank. It was a jumping point

where he started to get larger more institutional projects. The project is all about creating public spaces. On a school day you see how the spaces are being used by the students. It is about architecture making an urban landscape. Each one of these buildings are classrooms, so part of the idea is to have the offices separate while the classrooms have their own identity and they start to make public spaces for the students.   And a lot of the stairs here are the egress stairs and they are made as part of the architectural experience. Most people would put the egress stairs in the shaft space and forget about them, but in this case, why not make them as part of the urban experience. The buildings here are in a dialogue with each other.

IA: When I look at this project, there is a mystic and uncanny quality to it, which reminds me of the work of John Hejduk or Aldo Rossi, and the idea of fragmented architecture and assemblage of individual buildings. The architecture here attains not just individuality but character, and the buildings begin to communicate with each other. As an observer, you find yourself caught in the middle in that moment of encounter.

EC: This project is important piece of the puzzle. In the morning you saw the early work and you now you can start to see the continuity of the work in medium scale, which will continue all the way to a large scale projects like the Disney Hall and Bilbao. But in the end it would be interesting to think about it in a context of the evolution of all three kinds of work as a continuity of development of the certain urbanistic ideas about Los Angeles. It's not just sculpture for the sake of being stand-alone sculptures or to be iconic per se, but to be at the service of the experience and activating the public realm.

IA: It is also interesting to me because Loyola also resembles a laboratory of different ideas, materials and styles that each will emerge later in different projects: We see the use of steel in the parking building, the use of glass in the cathedral, the reflective stair tower, and the concrete monolithic painted wall of the classrooms.

EC: The cylinder stair tower is the work of Jean Nouvel and it's his first work in the United States. And it goes back to what we talked earlier, of how Frank likes to bring to his jobs his friends. So he invited Jean to do this tower.

The first building I worked on at the office is at the end. It's a simple building, an extension of the existing library, with some classrooms and offices, and a bridge that connects the two buildings. This is the back of the campus, so we created a lantern or a lighthouse to activate this part of the plaza. The top of the tower illuminates, it functions as a skylight and it makes the place.

I came here a couple of months ago to take some pictures for myself. Out of curiosity I crashed one of the classes in the auditorium, the professor recognized me and said: aren't you from Gehry's office? He was in the building committee, and he was telling me how the all the spaces still function very well and people love it. I think in general the clients like the buildings, and when the buildings are built they still stay in touch. But people also really enjoy being here. For example I worked on a business school in Cleveland, and I'm still in touch with the professors from there. And it really opened their mind and for institutions like this, people realize the value that architecture has brought to the endeavor. And good architecture should play the role to inspire the next generation or the community.

IA: Let's talk about Bilbao. Oftentimes Bilbao is thought of as the one single building that changed an entire city. It's when a project becomes so strong that it is no longer simply an architectural project, but it becomes an urban project.

EC: I think a lot of people also think about Bilbao as a standalone sculpture but they miss the point. We always think about it as an infrastructural project in fact. When the officials from Bilbao first approached the Guggenheim, at that time they already had the vision to create a master plan that included not just one building but also an infrastructural or holistic approach in how they envisioned the city. So Bilbao museum is only a small piece of the puzzle. And

I would say that's a common misperception about Bilbao. It just happened that we did a pretty interesting building. But the building has to be understood in the context of a larger vision, which included the subway, new train station, and series of other cultural buildings, and a vision about the waterfront and everything else that they implemented in a very systematic way. So it's not just one piece but it's a synergy of different pieces that created that. Of course each piece had to be distinctive. There were many other cities that were under the impression that you could just make one building and that would achieve what's called "Bilbao Effect", but it never really works that way. The architecture for the sake of being iconic without the program, infrastructure, the support etc rarely succeeds.

IA: You talked about this idea of reconceptualizing the practice, and I think with that comes a new way and process of architectural production. And one of the things that interest me in that process is the use of models. From what I understand, in that process you always begin with programmatically color-coded massing blocks and try to figure out a configuration between them that works. Once you arrive to that, then the project becomes a wrapping exercise and how you designed a surface or an envelope that contains the programmatic boxes inside. How is that any different from the Dutch pragmatic approach to architecture when architecture is essentially about the relationship between the programmatic pieces?

EC: This is a good point! As I mentioned to you earlier, the "Dutch" approach has always been of interest to me. But I think that one of the main aspects about Frank's work and mine is that architecture without program is not interesting. That said; because the formal or sculptural expression of Frank's work is so strong, people tend to forget that the expression is ultimately driven by the program and the spaces inside. And I think maybe that is one of the main differences between art and architecture, which you asked earlier; and that is architecture has to address or express certain aspects about the program. And the program in this case is not just where the toilets are, but it is its purpose. Whereas in art, it's a different kind of program, and to me this is

the biggest distinction between the two. It's not scale or form, but it's purpose. Because of that, a lot of time in the design process in Frank's office is dedicated to the exploration of the program, even before we would discuss the formal attributes. And the configuration of the spaces or the volumes is absolutely an integral part of architecture. But the massing blocks are also a way of engaging the client in the process so that you can have a dialogue with them.

IA: So once you arrive at that moment when the configuration of the massing blocks is working, begin wrapping them with surfaces. The massing blocks are essentially rigid rectilinear blocks while the surfaces wrapping them are playful and fluid. So, what happens to the spaces between the surfaces and the blocks? Are they poche spaces? Do they ever become program themselves?

EC: The arranging of the boxes is in many ways, very rational and analytical - for a lack of a better description. So in some ways the developments of the blocks push the project to the point that "transcends" reason into intuition. This is when the "boxes" are replaced by three-dimensional volumes.

IA: So are you suggesting that the interior surfaces are also following the exterior expression of the building?

EC: Absolutely, that would be ideal.

IA: We talked about the unique process, and the inclusion of technology as the Gehry's practice pioneered that. But that also changed the way architecture was made: from a practice that begins with drawings and diagrams, and then moves into the physical model, here we begin with sculpting the physical model, and then go to drawings. It is a reversal of the traditional process of architectural production and because of that, the expression of the 3D form and spatial composition of the model supersedes the precision and geometric relationship of two-dimensional drawings. You

are no longer designing a plan or a section, but the 3-dimensional object or sculpture as a whole. You also spoke about your own interest in drawing before joining Gehry's office, so in your view, what is the implication of this shift in architectural production and representation today? And with advancement and integration of technology, what is the role of drawing in this new practice?

EC: I think drawing here in some ways is about sketching in 3D. So when you are talking about the models, the way I see it and I experience it, is that I have learned how to sketch in 3D as opposed to 2D. And a lot of the stuff that you were referring to as the paper models was a way of freeing ourselves with the sketch model, more so than the distinction between the wood massing blocks and the curved surfaces. It is a shorthand and it is not really meant to be literal per se, but it is a gesture. So in an ideal world, if technology had evolved and were sophisticated enough, we would be able to sketch in a hologram or some kind of device like that. But since we don't have that luxury, we would have to just be content with messing around with the paper models.

IA: But drawing has not only been a representational tool, but an analytical tool for architects to communicate their ideas. Do you think that analytical aspect of architecture is beginning to diminish in the digital era? And how can we reconceptualize the role of drawings in today's practice of architecture?

EC: I agree with that, and today when I look at computer renderings, I think they would fit in the category of drawing as representation, and I think throughout the history of architecture, representation is always less intelligent than analytical drawings that are about exploration. So in that sense, I would be interested in the computer technology when it is used as explorations of geometry rather than being representational. If you use the computer right, you could achieve the same kind of analysis or analytical knowledge as, say Peter Eisenman's axonometric drawings were back in the 80s.

IA: You talked about the paper models being a shorthand for 3D sketch drawings. But the quality and characteristics of paper as a material remains present in Gehry's architecture. At the end, the stainless steel or titanium panels mimic the behavior of an enlarged paper model quite literally and precisely. And in fact, the whole technological advancement of the practice was centered on translating that paper model precisely into something build-able.

EC: Exactly.

IA: So which is the "real architecture" here: the building or the model? It seems to me that the paper model is the "real architecture" and the building is merely a large-scale representation of it. The building is a large-scale model of the sculpture that is the real thing.

EC: I think Frank would disagree with that. For Frank the real architecture is in the building, and he very much sees himself and his practice as the Master-Builder. And it is very much about being in the spaces. When you visit the buildings, it is very much about the pleasure of being in the building and the kind of sensuality and the experience of being in the spaces. And the is no question that the building is the most important goal. In that sense everything and every step you take is a way towards getting to the end result that is the building. I think he believes in it. So the model, as much as it is "architectural," it is not "architecture" as an end product. And definitely the representations, as in drawings or even models of the building, are just by-products of the process.

IA: We talked about the binoculars earlier in the Chiat/Day/Mojo project. The binocular was interesting in that it was a large-scale representation of the idea of the real binoculars in Frank's office, which is of a much smaller scale and material characteristics. But it was forced to being "architecture" by adding program inside it and punching windows through it. So In that sense

how is Frank Gehry's architecture different from Claes Oldenburg's art and the binoculars?

EC: I think with Frank, it is very much about being in the spaces. And the model and the different scales, whether they are computer models or other mediums, they are only steps that allow you to finally achieve the result of being in the spaces. And in that sense I would say that for Frank, the idea of human activities, and the architecture as a sort of backdrop or a way to activate the spaces, is absolutely paramount and essential to what he is trying to create. In some ways, there is the idea that a sculptural architecture lends itself to stimulating human interaction and supporting urban activity and life.

IA: Yes but I think that raises more questions. For instance architecture clearly has a scale at which it functions, but do you think art has scale?

EC: Yes I believe art has scale. And in fact ironically in artistic conversations you hear artists talk about scale a lot more than architects do. Architects talk about scale only in a very superficial way. They don't talk about it in the most fundamental experiential way, because architects are afraid of talking about subjectivity, and the experience with scale is subjective.

IA: I agree that what is tied to the issue of scale is subjectivity; and that's exactly why I asked you about that. If the traditional conception of art is of a representation of an idea outside of the object of art itself - such as a painting of a scenery (impressionist or even cubist paintings) the object of the art (the painting) represents the idea or impression of a concept (the scenery) outside of itself. In modern or contemporary art however, when we look at the work of Piet Mondrian Composition series for instance, the object of art is the real idea, and it is not referring to or signifying anything outside of itself. It is an autonomous object in that sense as opposed to being a signifier. What Richard Serra and Anish Kapur in my view have achieved was a step further from the modernist movement in art, because not only the artwork isn't referential to an idea or concept outside itself, but is also addressing the

viewer or the subject in a fundamental level: it demands a participation from the subject, and if the subjective experience is taken out of the equation the art loses its meaning. And this new subjectivity is something that is different from "affect" or the sensual experience of the space.

EC: It's true, but I think for me it is the idea of experience of the sensuality of architecture that I am interested in and people are often afraid to talk about. And that is why I have always been fascinated by the art because in some ways the discipline of art is much more free in addressing those issues. I think the creative process is very much like a journey, where there is a starting point and presumably a destination, which is perhaps in the building. So the process is accumulative of all the experiences that get you closer to the end. So they are bit and pieces of a bigger picture and it's not so much of representation per se, but rather milestones. So in some cases we may start with a physical model because that is the most immediate and tactile thing one could do. But as the ideas evolve and when it is appropriate we may want to rely on the computer or do freehand sketches, or build a mock-up of the building, but they are all part of this creative process that would get us eventually to the ultimate fulfillment, which is the building.

IA: Let's talk about Disney Music Hall, as we are almost arriving there. Last time I was in LA, I was walking to Disney Hall and looking it up on the satellite map on my phone, but I had a hard time finding it because in the aerial view you see a box. And when I finally realized that is Disney music hall I couldn't believe it because that wasn't the image I had of the building and I expected to see from above.

EC: It is true, and Disney hall is interesting because as you experience the building there is a very clear demarcation between the box, which is the interior of the hall, and the very sculptural exuberant exterior, which is where all the public functions are. And the reason for that is that the acoustics for the hall is best when it is a rectangle. Although within the hall there are sculptural elements that would help enhance the acoustic experience. So in

that sense the interior was very successful. The building was very much inspired by Scharoun's concert hall in Berlin, and it is an architecture that is about how people move around and is about creating experiential spaces.

But also Disney Hall is sitting on a few floors of parking, and the idea is that the building would welcome the people as them come up from the parking below. So there is that connection to LA car culture, and there is an infrastructural aspect to it. And the circulation to ground level is very much designed as an important experiential sequence to the building. So as you work your way up towards the lobby, you are occupying the space between the exuberant exterior, and the shoebox-like interior of the concert hall.

IA: So is this clear demarcation the way those sketch models - the massing wood blocks and the added paper surfaces around them - evolve or translate into architecture, or is it only unique to this project?

EC: Although this is an interesting strategy in design, because the best configuration for the concert hall just happened to be a box. So I would rather call the spaces in between as interstitial spaces as opposed to poche spaces. Through these spaces you are always navigating through the rigor of the box and the sculptural expression if the exterior surfaces. And then the garden outside is also interesting because it very much connects the experience of building to the city.

There are moments in the project when the box makes its appearance. The skin erupts into enclosing the volume. So there is always this kind of a dialogue between the surface and the box. But in some projects the box disappears completely. It depends on the circumstances. In this case it was absolutely crucial that the rigor and the discipline of that becomes the core of the project, and all the spaces evolve around it. You could also say that when you design a project that is very sculptural it's useful to have some kind of rational anchor. So even in Bilbao there is a very rational anchor, those are the classical galleries that are made for the permanent collection.   The

classical core becomes the anchor that makes everything work. As a compositional strategy there is something to be said.

IA: Looking back today at Frank Gehry's work, which projects do you think stands out the most for you?

EC: I think most people might think Bilbao or Disney Hall. But I would guess that if you ask Frank that question, he would probably have a very different list. I think that one of the projects that was very important to Frank was the Rouse Company. It was a project he worked on before he became the "Frank Gehry" he is today. He always talks about it as a very important piece in a sense that a lot of the ideas that he developed later came out of that project, such as ideas about open workspace, furniture design, and etc. In Frank's mind it was a unique project in a sense that he was able to bring the interior, exterior, and the planning all together in a coherent solution.

Another project of Frank's that I really like is a little house that he did in the 80s called the Winton guesthouse, that was an addition to a Philipp Johnson House. I have always liked that project because there is a very clear expression of volumes and sculpture, in a sense that the guesthouse is a very beautiful sculpture in the landscape. And at that time Frank was very interested in the idea of still life, and the project works as series of volumes that relate very well with the original Philipp Johnson house.

IA: So you left Frank Gehry's office as a Design Partner after working there for 25 years. What instigated that decision? And why now?

EC: When I first started working in the office, I never thought that I would be there so long. I thought that I would be there for maybe five years, work on a project through construction, take my license exams, and then I would leave and start my own office. But the reality is that it takes a long time to become an architect. You know, Philip Johnson said, "An architect is not born until he is 50." But he lived until he was a hundred. And when you think about Frank,

he just turned 84 and he is still extremely creatively active. So we have a long career in front of us, and it take a really long time to get ready for that.

But at the time I started, working in the office was a pretty intimidating experience and it took time to get used to how it works, and to make myself comfortable with the process of the office. And then of course Bilbao came along, and it was such a great opportunity to work on it. But it took us about seven years to do that building. And then Bilbao was so successful and we started to evolve a language and it was so exciting. So before you know it, 20 years have passed. I never forgot the fact that I wanted to "grow up" and have my own practice, but it just took a long time. I think it's been a good experience and I consider working in Frank's office as an extension of my Harvard education. It was a long degree! So in 2008 when the recession happened the office got a little slow, and I saw that as a good opportunity to pursue the things I always wanted to do. Teaching was one of them, and that was when I took a year off and went back to teach at the GSD, which you know. I also spent some time traveling to places I wanted to go, such as the Himalayas. After that, I came back to the office for a year to work on a competition with Frank. But the thing is, when you've been in the office for so long, and then take a sabbatical for a year; it's difficult to come back to the office after you have tasted the freedom. So that was when I realized that it was time for me to finally move on, as opposed to being on the fence. I also knew that I am at a stage in my life that if I don't do it now, it will never happen. And so far it has been very interesting, and I don't regret it. Not yet!

IA: What do you think is your take on architecture and how is it going to be different or similar from the work you were doing at Frank Gehry's office?

EC: I think the similar thing is that I have taken it upon myself to reinvent my practice. In that sense I have taken the bigger project or ideology of designing a practice as the continuity of my experience, but what I do with it is hopefully going to be different. Stylistically I hope the work would be different. I am going to have different clients, and by virtue of the economic conditions of

today and because of the reality of the post 2008 world, I don't think that I would really be able to apply that aesthetics we developed from the office, and consequently the projects would look different.

But I think what would always stay with me is the rigor of the process, and how we solve problems creatively. And I hope that I would find my own architectural expression. Right now I am doing a project in Bogota, Columbia, and I have shown it to a lot of my friends and a lot of them have thought it's a very "anti-Gehry" building - I mean it's not like anything we would do together. As we talked earlier, I'm also interested in the idea of the dialogue between the artist and the architect. I'm also working on a small social salon/art space in Hollywood with some artist friends of mine, which I am pretty excited about. I would like to show you while you are in LA.

IA: I would love to see it.

EC: But aside from my own practice *EC3*, I am also thinking about a new collaborative practice platform that works with other offices on projects. For example, one of the things that I feel missing from my education is landscape architecture; and your interest in urban design is another. I don't consider myself an urbanist, so for projects that are more urban, I would collaborate with other colleagues of mine who are more experienced in urban design. Last year we worked on a proposal for a redevelopment plan for Westwood in Los Angeles. For that project I collaborated with two colleagues of mine - Roger Sherman and Neil Denari, who I think you know.   So I think what is interesting about this collaborative platform is that it also allows each one of us involved in the project to bring our sensitivities and our assets together, and we would end up with things that none of us would normally do on our own. And that for me is very exciting.

IA: Thank you very much Edwin for your time and for showing me around.

EC: Thank you and enjoy your stay in LA.

Iman Ansari studied at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard; and is a freelance writer on architecture and urbanism in New York City. This interview will be published in the architectural journal (name) in Tehran, Iran.