

DOCUMENT

Conversations

Artist Larry Bell tells architect Frank Gehry about his addiction to beginnings

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Architect Frank Gehry and artist Larry Bell speak about their lifelong friendship and ruminate on the possibility of an unregulated art world for Document Fall/Winter 2018.

Artist Larry Bell is in the middle of an overdue career resurgence.

Following his 2017 Whitney Biennial installation, which occupied the museum's entire fifth-floor terrace, and a major solo exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in Zurich this past spring, the

78-year-old artist is preparing for *Larry Bell: Time Machines*, the first comprehensive survey of his work at an American museum in nearly two decades. Running from November through March at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, the show will feature Bell's



signature glass cubes and what the museum describes as the artist's "innovative explorations of experiences generated by architectural space."

If Bell's art approaches architecture, who better to speak with him about his practice than the legendary architect Frank Gehry, whose buildings are arguably some of the largest artworks on the planet? Bell and Gehry have been friends since the 1960s. As a young upstart in Los Angeles, Gehry preferred the company of the artists then dominating the art scene—Ed Moses, Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler—to that of his fellow architects. Like these artists, Gehry aspired to break out of the orthodoxy of his medium, but they all wanted nothing to do with him. It was Bell, he recalls, who tossed a brotherly arm around his shoulder and brought him into the fold. The draw for Bell: "You had more money," he told Gehry. "You could buy lunch!"

On a midsummer morning at Gehry Partners' Playa Vista headquarters, Elliott David chatted with the two disarmingly down-to-earth artists about glass boxes and glass buildings, intellectual poseurs in the art world, and the trouble with talking about feelings.

Elliott David—Hey, fellas. Thanks so much for taking the time to sit and talk.

Larry Bell—Now, you've got to speak up loud, because I'm deaf as a stone.

Frank Gehry—I am, too.

Larry—We're two deaf stones.

Elliott—Well, I'm stoned and becoming deaf, so that's perfect. So, I looked online, and there isn't a lot documenting your friendship.

Frank—It wasn't very long.

Larry—I never thought he'd amount to a row of beans, actually. [Laughs]

Frank—He didn't. That's true. [Laughs]

Elliott—So, how did you first meet? Or when did you become aware of each other?

Frank—I was building on Melrose, and Ed Moses started appearing in the construction site. I was working as an architect, so I knew all about you guys—I was aware of you and

[Robert] Irwin and Billy [Al Bengston] and Ed Moses and everybody. So when I started meeting Ed, he invited me home for dinner, and then he wanted me to design an addition to his house. I told him it would cost 300 bucks in fees, and he told me to go fuck myself. [Laughs]

Larry—[Laughs]

Frank—He wasn't going to pay that. So then he started inviting me to things, and I met all you guys.

“I've learned a lot about what I do from people's writings about it, because I never saw that edge to what they observed. That always makes me feel good.”

Elliott—At that time, you were developing your architecture practice, but you were affiliating with conceptual artists.

Frank—Well, I was interested in the glass stuff [Larry] was doing, because architecture uses glass. He was telling me about how you hang it. And he was putting coatings on it that were interesting to me although I couldn't access my work because I wasn't doing were interesting to me, although I couldn't access it in my work, because I wasn't doing anything that required that. But I was learning, and I watched him. I loved his work very much—and him, personally.

Elliott—So, Larry, do you remember him coming around, like, ‘Who is this fuckin' architect?’

Larry—Yeah. I have some photos of him. I have a bunch of pictures of parties and things, and you [Frank] were there in all those gatherings.

Frank—I wasn't going to become the architect that the architecture school wanted. I knew it was better than that. I was interested in the technology and learning how to make

[things]. How do you make the fucking thing? How do you do it? And that's where Larry and I aligned completely. That's why I jumped ship on architecture and became part of their world, because that was the world I was more interested in. Of all the people in that group, this is the guy that—I'm gonna cry—was friendly, took me in, treated me like a human being.

Larry—That's because you had more money. You could buy lunch! [Laughs]

Frank—Oh, okay. [Laughs] And, you know, he had acted respectfully. I was doing a [Joseph] Magnin store in South Coast Plaza. We were putting up glass, and he taught me how to hang it. We did that because of him.

Larry—I didn't know that.

Frank—No, he doesn't remember. And I lived with one of his pieces for a long time. The kids almost cracked their heads on it a few times. But I think he embodied—

Larry—It was a very—

Frank—Let me finish. Fuck off.

Larry—[Laughs]

Frank—You know, Irwin, [Doug] Wheeler, all those guys were doing ephemeral. Others were doing painterly. And Larry cut a swath right down the middle and took them all out—that's what I thought. And it was just great to see him do that. He could paint, he could draw, he could build, and he could make things, and he chose this land between.

Elliott—Something that I always admire in artists is an aesthetic versatility, or when you can tell that the artist is trying to create something that they haven't seen before.

Larry—Yeah, that's exactly it.

Elliott—As opposed to a lot of artists, particularly in the '60s, '70s, '80s, and so on, where they have a signature style and keep making that style over and over again, just slightly varying it in scale or color or form. But something you both seem to have done is consistently be like, 'I want to do something that's different.' How important do you think

that is to your process or intention or artistic satisfaction?

Larry—You describe the way I thought. I wanted to make things that nobody had made before, that I hadn't seen before, out of materials that weren't used for that kind of thing. That's what I wanted to do.

Frank—But I never heard you talk about that.

Larry—Well, it wasn't something I knew how to talk about.

Frank—That's the point I'm making. It's in your head, but you didn't tell Irwin or Wheeler or [James] Turrell that you were thinking that.

Larry—They're all intellectuals. I was not at all.

Frank—See? This is the interesting thing: because a guy reads a book, he's called an 'intellect.' Or because he's gonna spew that shit. Man, it's so phony.



Larry—I left art school, actually. For less than two years, I went to Chouinard. That's where I met Irwin—he was a teacher. I had signed up to learn animation [in order] to get a job with Disney, because I liked to draw cartoons when I was in school. But after being in school for a short amount of time, I didn't like the instructors that were in the more technical end of art school. You had to go through all kinds of shit before you got a chance to be in [animation] classes by these prominent designers. I was impatient, and I also didn't hear very well. The thing is, I didn't know I didn't hear very well. Things happened, and I got, I don't know, really depressed or something. I was 18 or 19.

Larry Bell photographed in his studio in Los Angeles.

And Irwin said, ‘What’s wrong with you? Why are you moping around like that?’ I didn’t know what to say. He says, ‘Why don’t you leave school, get a studio, and see what it’s like out there doing your painting or whatever it is? You can always come back. This is a commercial school. You pay your tuition, and you come back.’ What a brilliant idea! So that’s what I did—I quit school.

In those years, there was no real art market or art scene. There were half a dozen galleries throughout the whole city, maybe, and only one or two that showed really interesting people’s works, in my opinion. And the rest was not very interesting.

Frank—So why did you move to Taos?

Larry—I fell in love with somebody, and I wanted to get her away from my hairy-legged friends. Simple as that. [Laughs]

Frank—No—that’s all?

Larry—That was it. And I liked it out there. It was quiet. I’d never even been in a rural area before.

Frank—What brought you back?

Larry—Poverty. You can’t make a living out there unless you have a presence somewhere else. It’s a poor state and a poor, tiny town.

Frank—But in between you did a bunch of stuff that wasn’t up to your standard—is that right?

Larry—We had to hospitalize a family member three times for six-week stays. You know how much three six-week stays in the hospital are? It’s a lot of fucking money. So I had to hustle my ass off. The glass things were really interesting, but I needed to work on something that [would allow me to] produce a lot of stuff faster, no matter what, because there was a better chance [to make money] if I could have a bunch of stuff that I could peddle. So I got working on canvases and things. ‘Imitation paintings’ is what I called them. They were collages on canvas that were much more marketable than the bigger glasswork that I was doing. I gave up working on the smaller cubes—

Frank—But you kept the glass machine somewhere.

Larry—Yeah.

Frank—Where?

Larry—It's in Taos.

Frank—You brought it all there?

Larry—Yeah, I moved it, lock, stock, and barrel.

Frank—So you weren't using it. You were doing all this other shit.

Larry—No, no—I was coloring the shit I was making. I was putting the coatings that I had put on glass on papers and Mylar and laminate films and stuff like that.

Frank—[Laughs]

Elliott—Gotta use what you got.

Larry—Yeah. Right.

Frank—So what clicked and brought you back? Just old age, or...?

Larry—Well, it was financial. I had no dealers, though I'd showed with really good dealers. I'd showed with Pace—**Frank**—But were they asking you to make the glass boxes again?

“I fell in love with somebody, and I wanted to get her away from my hairy-legged friends. Simple as that.”

Larry—They were, because they sold all that stuff. But I got half of what they sold it for, and that was barely what it cost to make them in the first place, so I never could get ahead. They were fronting [me] money, but then all I saw was debt accruing for doing my thing. Again, I'm punishing myself now with this fear of being in debt to somebody.

Frank—So how could you have preempted all of that? Because it's such a waste, right? [To Elliott] That whole period gets cut out of his life because of that. Because we all felt it, and we didn't know what to do—'we' being the art guys I hung out with. Everybody was worried about him. We knew he was drinking and stuff, and I didn't know why he was doing that. I think if Larry had come and said, 'Look, I'm really broke, and I need to do this, and help...'

Larry—Well, you helped me more than once.

Frank—I think we would have jumped in more than we did. Because everybody knew who you were.

Larry—But everybody helped each other in this group of people.

Frank—But everybody knew who you are as an artist, so it's different.

Elliott—It drove you to produce a different kind of work.

Larry—I didn't see it as being driven. I saw it as finding something new. Each project leads to another project, and so there's always a beginning. And I'm totally addicted to beginnings—and working fast, being spontaneous and improvisational and intuitive. If those three things are working in my head, then I get enormously productive.

So I found working with paper was much less expensive than working with glass, and the biggest problem with my techniques that used glass was that [glass] had to be scrupulously clean, and I never could get the shit clean enough. There was equipment that could do that, but I couldn't afford to buy a glass-cleaning thing. I bought the coater, which in 1968 cost me 68,000 bucks. And Pace had been selling the cubes, so they fronted money they hadn't even collected. They were very encouraging. It was the debt that scared me, being owned by somebody. So I had to leave. And I left, about the same time as I moved to New Mexico.

Elliott—You said something about using intuition and improvisation to help find new directions for your work.

Larry—And spontaneity.

Elliott—I'm wondering, how do you, Frank, relate to those things?

Frank—Same.

Larry—Of course he does.

Frank—Exactly the same. If I know what I'm going to do in advance, I won't do it. But I've got a whole other thing. I've got a 90-story building and a guy with a lot of money. There's a lot of, 'Once I sign on to this thing, there's up to a billion dollars at risk.'

Larry—Up to how much?

Frank—A billion. So you've got a gun to your head, you know?

Larry—[Laughs]

Frank—But I'm working on glass facades and stuff, and I'm dying to collaborate with Larry, but I don't know how, because the system is so fucking regulated. But to experiment would be fun.

Larry—I'm of the opinion that everything on the face of the Earth has the right to a patina.

Frank—[Laughs] That's good. The problem is, if you do an apartment on the 60th floor, the people that buy it want a clear piece of glass from floor to ceiling, and they don't want any patina. They don't want any shit on it, you know? They don't want to hear about that. So the coating game is much more subtle. But you can play with it, and the way we play with it is by tilting the plane slightly, so the light catches it differently, and you get a variation from the outside. But from the inside, it's the same.

Elliott—That's really interesting, the dichotomy of who's viewing your work from the outside and who's experiencing it from the inside. It's like if Larry made Venice Fog but it also had to accommodate someone living inside it.

Larry—The biggest difference is not in the creative edge—it's in the fact that Frank makes something that people need, and I don't make something that people need.

Elliott—Something else I noticed: You're both working with technical processes. But it

also had to accommodate someone living inside it.

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Elliott—Something else I noticed: You're both working with technical processes. But you're creating a feeling, a sensation. That's the goal, to create this feeling that hasn't been done before.

Frank—The 'hasn't been done before' thing is common to both of us.

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Elliott—I'm interested in your relationship with using very technical processes to translate—to use a terrible term—something very 'magical' or ethereal. You're taking something ephemeral and successfully making it into a physical object, despite the tremendous technicalities. In your case, Frank, it's an enormous structure that takes hundreds of people to create, a giant chunk of the Earth that reaches into the sky and changes the landscape and economy of a city. How do you chip away at something like that? 'I had this feeling, and now I'm looking at it.' You know what I mean?

Frank—So when I saw [the Guggenheim Museum] Bilbao the first time, finished, I got there and I drove [into the city] alone in a cab. We came over the hill, and I saw this thing and thought, 'Holy shit. What have I done to these poor fuckers?'

Elliott—Really?

Larry—[Laughs]

Frank—I got so embarrassed. My ego...[it was] overwhelming. 'Why would I do this to these people?' I didn't say anything, but I was waiting for all this backlash—and I didn't get

it. I got just the opposite.

Elliott—It changed the economy. You changed the economy of the town, which is mind-boggling.

Frank—I know. I know all that. They stopped shooting each other, and they loved me.

Elliott—[Laughs]

Frank—I think that I see everything wrong with it. I see the mistakes. I see the stuff I should've solved.

Larry—Let's not talk about mistakes.

Elliott—Going back to software development, you've used different graphic design and created your own software to change the way that people can produce and create art on different scales. But this generation's big software innovation was in social media, which everyone is now addicted to. Do you think people interact with public space differently now? People are constantly staring at their phones, and if they're taking pictures of stuff, their concern is, 'How does this picture communicate to my friends?' It's less about an experience I'm having and more about trying to say something to someone.

Frank—I see it peripherally. I don't [see it] personally.

Larry—It's the same for me. I don't do Facebook or LinkedIn or any of that kind of stuff. I don't want it in my face. I just don't want it.

Elliott—Neither do I, but it seems like every young person in the world is hopelessly addicted to it and can't get away. I'm sure it's affecting the way people interact with public spaces and art in general.

Larry—Well, it's hard to pay much attention to a public space if you're looking at your phone all the time. People's minds are getting to be [small] instead of being expansive. Looking at a list of pictures of something might be educational in some sense, but the experience of being somewhere fantastic is a whole other thing. This very well might preclude the need to experience, to be there, to go out and see those things.

Elliott—How do you feel about artists explaining their work?

Larry—I can explain techniques somewhat. I'm not an engineer—I can explain essentially the flavor of what it is that I do, but I personally don't have the dialogue to make it up. There are people like [Donald] Judd who are really good at doing that kind of stuff.

Elliott—What do you think, Frank?

Frank—I'm like him. I don't do that.

Larry—There are some very literate people who can talk about somebody's work. Actually, I've learned a lot about what I do from people's writings about it, because I never saw that edge to what they observed. That always makes me feel good.

Frank—I can always talk about the feelings. If you came up to my office, you'd see there's a picture of the *Charioteer [of Delphi]* from 500 B.C. I went to Greece with Ed Moses. We got to Delphi, and I walked into the museum, and there's this charioteer in bronze. I couldn't take my eyes off it. I looked at it and looked at it, and I started crying. The thought that somebody 2,500-plus years ago working in an inert material could transmit feelings across the ages to somebody, and he'd stand in front of it and cry...that's my North Star. If I can do that, if I can make a building that makes people feel something and transmit feeling through inert materials, then that's my job. And that's hard to talk about. How do you say, 'Oh, this feels a little better, but it [still] doesn't feel quite right. I'll put a little salt and pepper here.' You can't do that.

Larry—'Salt and pepper' is good.