

FRANK GEHRY AND ...(*IPHIGENIA*): SET DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTIVE FORM

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‘Music is mass and it builds things’, esperanza spalding said she dreamt one night as she struggled with the libretto for ...(*Iphigenia*), the phrase forming the turning point for the work.¹ The oneiric formulation extends the material nature of music, granting sonic vibrations architectural abilities. This paradox approaches a paradoxical aim at the heart of Frank Gehry’s building practice: to imbue solid matter with motion. His free-form sculptural designs, instanced most famously in the spectacular designs for the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, have granted him global auteur status. However, the set design for ...(*Iphigenia*) offered and continues to offer him an attractive state of unknowing, one in which emerges the possibility of non-directed constructive form.

Gehry has described the ...(*Iphigenia*) project, along with the LA Philharmonic with Gustavo Dudamel, as ‘two projects that are way outside my norm... [W]henever I feel comfortable about something, I go there and feel uncomfortable.’² This sense was heightened for him in the development stages of the project with Shorter and spalding: ‘I have no idea what I’m doing, because jazz is unpredictable. Wayne says you can’t rehearse what you haven’t invented yet. And I love that. I can’t predict whether it’s going to be successful or a bust.’³ Unexpectedly, as theater sets are often simplified structures that are viewed frontally, the set for ...(*Iphigenia*) was an occasion for an extreme articulation of Gehry’s style.

Gehry turned his famous Santa Monica home into an incubator for the project, housing Shorter and esperanza as they collaborated on the opera. Created in 1991, the Gehry Residence is one of his most iconic works: the chain-link fencing, plywood, and metal framing that Gehry used to extend an existing Dutch colonial style house disrupt the planarity of its walls and redirect its angles of vision. Although the house’s philosophy resonates with ...(*Iphigenia*)’s iconoclastic ethos, Gehry’s account of the development of the opera is marked by incomprehension and absence of mastery. As he related to me in a phone conversation on November 17, 2022:

1. spalding was interviewed, along with Wayne Shorter and Frank Gehry, by Renée Fleming for *Real Magic* (2021).

2. Florsheim (2020).

3. Florsheim (2020).

I can't explain to you. The house on 22nd street where I lived for a long time, to have it inhabited by Wayne and his wife and esperanza and Danilo Perez and a bunch of other crazy people. And, Herbie Hancock came to visit with Gigi, his wife, and, and, uh, people would drop in and out and Wayne was sitting there and smiling and, uh, I don't know what he was saying. Every once in a while, he'd get up and say ju je je je ju ju [waving] with his arm, and I hadn't a clue what that meant, but everybody else seemed to know him. I can't explain [it by] anything other than that. It was really scary at the same time. And I can't read music, so I didn't know what they're talking about. I didn't understand anything.

Gehry's account communicates his attraction to the disorientation, risk, vulnerability, and collaboration characteristic of artistic production. Most crucial in this description is his fascination with material forms of composition and communication: repeated syllables that are wordless soundings at the frontier of the creative process. Music building things.

When I asked about links between his design process and jazz improvisation, Gehry remarked: 'Spontaneity has always been interesting to me...there's a tendency with architecture schools today, a lot of theory that I think gets in the way of really solid creativity.' Likewise, he refuses to theorize the set for ...(*Iphigenia*). Asked about the challenges of designing a built form for an improvised performance, his response was summarily self-deprecating, referring to the contingencies of Shorter's health, lapses in the development process, and 'people coming in and out...., I don't know how to explain it as an intellectual or theoretical concept'.

The development of ...(*Iphigenia*) was particularly idiosyncratic. Vowing to work with Shorter to realize his dream of an opera based on Euripides' myth, spalding approached Jeff Tang to establish an independent production company called Real Magic. With Tang as executive creative producer and Cath Brittan as producer, the company avoided the customary procedures for the development of an opera—schedules, budgeting forecasts, commercial expectations, board reviews, and even the conventional order of composing the libretto before the music. As Tang remarks, 'Perfection is something that is demanded of opera singers... That concept does not exist in this project. I think Wayne would say it doesn't exist in jazz. So for us, process is our product. That, in and of itself, is radically different from how most opera exists in the world, and how it's meant to be received in the world.'⁴

Tang expressed to me his amazement at the extent of Gehry's involvement in that process as it unfolded over time, participating on Zoom and in person.⁵ The design process turned out to be the most involved for Act III, the act in which

4. Shea (2021).

5. In a video conversation I had with Tang and Brittan on November 16, 2022.

everything is decided for and by Iphigenia of the Open Tense. The striking metallic set comes as a glorious contrast to the previous two. In Act I, the sacrifices of the Iphigenias take place in front of a huge double-sided drop printed with an image of dark trees. In Act II, Shorter's ensemble play on a bare, open stage masked by matt black duvety'n 'soft goods', as Tang and Britten described them to me, while the Iphigenias discuss their fate. In Act III, the myth plays out again under large masses of crumpled silver-colored mesh, pierced by rods, and, unseen from the auditorium, fixed with angled aluminum tubing to wheeled wooden trolleys, painted a glossy black to match the floor (Fig. 2, 3).

The set for Act III was arrived at after several earlier design concepts. Inspired by the impasse of the Greek navy and his own experience as a sailor, Gehry initially worked with images of ships and reefs. Later, he produced a more formally developed design of paper leaves, which, he told me, 'would open up into a heavenly sort of future' in Act III. In 2012, Gehry had created a crumpled paper landscape for the LA Philharmonic's production of *Don Giovanni* at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Yet ...(*Iphigenia*) was more complex for multiple reasons, as Gehry told me in our conversation: 'I mean, if you do *Don Giovanni* you've got a set thing. You know what you're doing. This was not like that, this was like a jazz combo, so it changed on the fly.' The Boston run added to this complexity as the stricter Massachusetts building regulations made it necessary to improvise a new set for that premiere. Gehry instructed members of his team to create shapes out of aluminum mesh sheets they were using on a nearby project: 'We had about fifteen minutes to decide how to do it, as the original one didn't

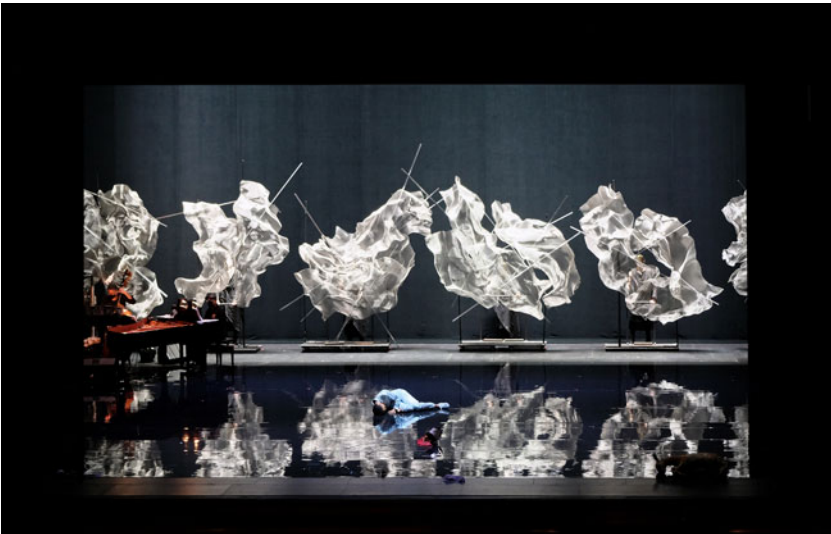


Figure 2. Set of ...(*Iphigenia*). Devised by Frank Gehry (Act III). © Gehry Partners.



Figure 3. Set of ...(*Iphigenia*) from backstage. Devised by Frank Gehry (Act III). © Jeff Tang.

work because of the code. So we had to think fast on our feet. We'd been working with the metal mesh and it was just easy. I looked at it and said, well, let's do this right now. So that's how it came about. It was like the jazz.'

The beauty of the crumpled mesh forms was unanticipated. When I remarked on their aesthetic appeal, Gehry responded: 'I was overwhelmed by that. Cause we didn't think of that, you know, we weren't sure what we were doing.' In our conversation, Cath Brittan remarked on the set's responsiveness to lighting: 'Each time you lit it, it morphed into different configurations.' This mutability also features in the divergent descriptions of the set. While Brittan associated it with 'an army moving across an ocean on boats but static because of lack of wind', others have described the forms as 'cloudlike...mobile sculptures.'⁶ A *Wall Street Journal* reviewer remarked that 'it's unclear if they are trees or clouds.'⁷ This ambiguity expresses the challenge at the heart of ...(*Iphigenia*): how can we create freedom in rigid, inherited forms?

Appropriately for a project that questions hierarchical rule, Gehry was involved in the opera not as an auteur but as an individual in a collaborative

6. Swed (2022).

7. Waleson (2021).

process, whose ideas led to experimentation the products of which might or might not be retained. His team created several multiple aluminum masses and the company chose among them: ‘We designed more of this stuff. Some of that didn’t go, some did.’⁸ His consistent lack of specificity in describing the forms indicates the absence of a defined, articulated design. Furthermore, the malleability of the aluminum sheeting allowed manipulation beyond any overarching prescription. Gehry described this in terms that evoke his own account of Shorter’s nonverbal communication during rehearsal, from the same conversation: ‘It’s just metal fabric, metal sheeting. And it’s pliable so you can bend it and crumple it. And we were working on another project with it so when we got the snag that we had to change, we had to move quickly and it was just like, oh yeah, we can do that, ba ba bah.’ In their new sculptural, theatrical life, these glimmering building materials rhyme with spalding’s silver Afrofuturist space suit. The crumpled forms’ small folds resemble the minute musical decisions of the Shorter trio’s improvisation and spalding’s wordless ‘vocalise’: small-scale, idiosyncratic adaptations of physical and sonic material that proceed without overarching design or semantic content.

Accordingly, the ...(*Iphigenia*) set can be understood as a free riff on what has been seen as Gehry’s signature style. It contrasts with the rippling claddings of the Corcoran Museum, the Concert Hall for the Bard College, and the Manhattan Guggenheim, designs that were conscious variations on the sculptural forms of the Bilbao Guggenheim and that were planned to an unprecedented degree of accuracy. The construction of the museum in Bilbao was enabled by a radically new kind of computer-assisted design: beginning with CATIA software developed by the French aviation company Avions to model jet fuselages, Gehry’s office developed its own software to produce comprehensive 3D representations of building projects, down to their smallest construction details.⁹ Gehry’s team’s process of taking sheets of metal mesh and crumpling them under time pressure ahead of the Boston premiere departs from such design procedures in more ways than one. If the outer surfaces of those buildings often mass independently of their interior spaces, the set of Act III, produced by direct engagement with material, is entirely free.

With its emphatic plasticity, the set reconfigures what has been seen as the theatrical character of Gehry’s work. Theatricality is a loaded word in architecture, used, for example, to refer to the illusionistic effects of the Baroque period, or, in modernist architectural discourse, to designs that depart from function or material.¹⁰ Gevork Hartoonian has suggested the term ‘theatricalization’ to describe some of Gehry’s buildings, arguing that they are instances of a phantasmagorical ‘spatial commodity’ emblematic of capitalism.¹¹ Yet the set and the architectural

8. Gehry in our 2022 conversation.

9. Gehry (2020).

10. Harries (1998), 313.

11. Hartoonian (2002), 3.

style it riffs on are more readily described by older uses of the theatrical that Har-
toonian builds on. The nineteenth-century architect and theorist Gottfried Semper
understood theatricality, according to historian Harry Francis Mallgrave, as ‘the
conscious pursuit of drama, of dramatic effects intended to impress, inform,
amuse, but above all to sever the viewer’s “normal” (as Nietzsche once recorded
in his close reading of Semper) or everyday complicity with the world.’¹² Mall-
grave locates this theatricality primarily in the ‘fleshiness and materiality’ of
Semper’s architecture.¹³ A voluptuously deployed materiality is the distinguish-
ing feature of Gehry’s buildings and is central to their intervention in viewers’
perceptions of their contexts.

This possibility of plastic form—material, embodied, sonic—to interfere with
conventional situatedness is central to ...(*Iphigenia*) and its collective investiga-
tion of complicity. We can connect this sense of interference with another nine-
teenth-century account of theatricality, that of Charles Garnier, the architect who
designed the ‘new’ Paris Opera, which became known as the Palais Garnier. For
Garnier, theatricality is an impulse that subtends all human interaction: ‘To see
and be seen, to understand and to make oneself understood, this is the fatal
circle of humanity: to be an actor or a spectator, this is the vital condition of
life; this is both the end and the means... All that happens in the world is, in
essence, only theater and representation.’¹⁴ Theater, then, is concerned with
embodied presence that alternatively projects and receives and in doing so
actively constitutes the world. If Garnier upholds the division between audience
and performers in the Opéra Garnier (although allowing spectators to become
performers during their movements into and around the building), the jazz
dynamics of ...(*Iphigenia*) undo this separation: improvising performers
respond not just to one another but also to the audience. The ad hoc, shifting, sug-
gestive set of Act III is part of this mobile assemblage, an articulation that aims to
intervene in conditions rather than merely represent them. Gehry talked with
enthusiasm of future stagings of ...(*Iphigenia*) in our conversation: ‘I would
hope that what you saw, even though you liked it, won’t be what you see in
the next venue... All of us want to keep going. That’s the good news. No
one’s dropping out.’

12. Mallgrave (1996), 35.

13. Mallgrave (1996), 39.

14. Mallgrave (1996), 35.