

Time, Space, and Materials: the Layered Worlds of Mančuška, Příhoda, and Gehry

Richard Putney, Ph.D.

Cultural Domestication - Instinctual Desire: Interpretations and Insights

Cultural Domestication – Instinctual Desire sees the international collaboration of several notable artists from the Czech Republic with the faculty and students of the University of Toledo, all in the context of a unique architectural setting: Frank O. Gehry's *Center for the Visual Arts* (1990-92). This essay focuses on conceptual and formal concerns shared by the architecture of Frank Gehry and the art of Jan Mančuška and Jiří Příhoda. I write as interested observer rather than art historian; while I will discuss common threads in the work of Mančuška, Příhoda and Gehry, I'll not theorize on the historical relationship of those common concerns. It is important to note that my comments come from a distinct point of view: I am a former client of Frank Gehry's, have created an exhibition about his design methods, and regularly teach courses devoted to his architecture. On the other hand, I'm a newcomer to—but also an admirer of—the work of Mančuška and Příhoda.

Central to my discussion is that Gehry, Mančuška and Příhoda share an inclination to blur the distinctions between art and architecture in specific and related ways. Gehry's work always has been intentionally informed by contemporary art, and—while this can easily be overstated or misunderstood—it is a commonplace to describe his buildings as sculptures. On the other hand, many of Mančuška's and Příhoda's artistic projects have profound architectural implications. Here I will confine myself to three things encountered in various combinations in the work of Gehry, Mančuška and Příhoda: fragmented compositions relying upon diverse materials, textures, and colors; ambiguous relationships of "inside" and "outside"; and evocative juxtapositions of the old and the new. A few examples should make these mutual interests/relationships clear.

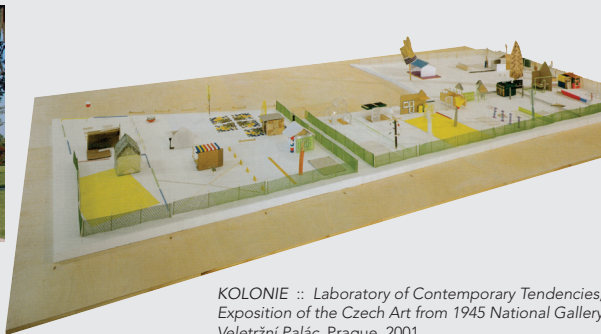
In a Prague exhibition of 2001, Mančuška exhibited *Kolonie*, a conceptual model for a cooperative greenhouse and garden settlement sited on

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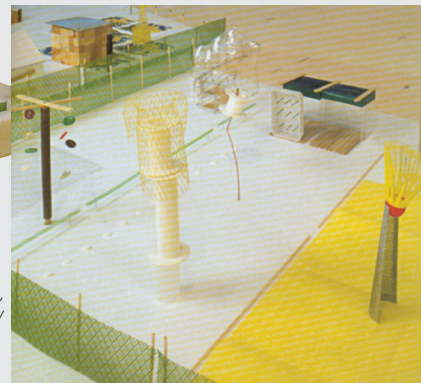
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Frank Gehry :: CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS
Toledo, Ohio (1990-92)
Photo courtesy of Richard Putney



KOLONIE :: Laboratory of Contemporary Tendencies,
Exposition of the Czech Art from 1945 National Gallery
Veletřní Palác, Prague, 2001
Installation KOLONIE, mixed media



an island in Prague. Like many of Gehry's designs, *Kolonie* skillfully unites the worlds of art and architecture. Mančúška's project takes the form of a scale presentation model whose layout and appearance were driven by the properties of the site, Mančúška's artistic preoccupations, and the responses of client gardeners to a questionnaire that Mančúška formulated ("For what reason do you maintain your garden?", for example, or "What color is your car?").

Significantly, in responding to Mančúška's request to name a work of art that "you think is most important or you most recall," some participants cited the "dancing building", Gehry's *Nationale-Nederlanden Building** that opened in Prague in 1996. More to the point, the physical layout of *Kolonie* recalled many of the major concerns of Gehry's work of the 1980s, such as the first phase of the *Loyola Law School*, Los Angeles (1981-84); the *Winton Guest House*, Wayzata, Minnesota (1982-87); or the *Schnabel House*, Brentwood, California (1986-89). The design of *Kolonie* and the Gehry projects shun overt axiality and symmetrical unity in favor of dynamic, dispersed, and balanced asymmetry. In the design of the *Loyola* campus, for example, the functional architectural components are not incorporated into a single architectural container, but divided into separate buildings—a moot court, lecture hall, chapel, and student center. This sculptural assemblage is further energized by the rotation of some of the components' organizing axes away from the subtle grid that gives order to the campus plan. What might have been a single building has taken form as a miniature city laid out

in skewed, dynamic perspective. Similarly, like *Kolonie* and the *Loyola Law School* plan, both the Winton and Schnabel homes consist of collections of discrete, highly sculptural components rather than single buildings.

In both *Kolonie* and the Gehry designs, the constructive nature of the spatial arrangements is underscored by differences in color and texture. In the *Kolonie* design, various components—buildings, portions of fence, garden plots, sculptures, silhouetted shapes and undefined "follies"—are dynamically arranged on irregular plots of ground. Composed of quite varying materials, including fragments of scrap wood, nails, pieces of brown cardboard, brightly colored plastic, white Styrofoam, sponge, metal, and green plasticized chain link fencing, they immediately call to mind Gehry's collage-like grouping of building materials in many of his projects of the late 1970s and '80s, ranging from his own house to the designs cited above. In various arrangements they combine corrugated metal, chain-link fence, plywood, glass, cardboard, concrete, stone, brick, aluminum, and stucco.

Finally, *Kolonie's* display of seemingly random objects—a giant upraised garden glove, for example, or a shuttlecock atop a section of colander—recall the incorporation of Oldenburg's pop imagery into many of Gehry's commissions, including the *Loyola Law School*, the *Vitra Design Museum* (Weil-am-Rhein, Germany, 1987-89) and the *Chiat-Day Headquarters* in Santa Monica (1985-91). Moreover, the *Guggenheim Museum* in Bilbao prominently displayed a giant Oldenburg shuttlecock at the opening exhibition of that Gehry-designed building in 1997.



TAKE 02 THE FLOOD :: 1995 - 1996
 (Exterior and Interior views)
 Blue STYROFOAM, plywood, hardboard
 Installation Version I
 7.7' X 19' X 28.8'
 Nova sin Gallery, Pargue, 1996

At first sight, Toledo's *Center for the Visual Arts* (the "CVA") seems to depart from Gehry's style of the 1980s, and to share little with *Kolonie*. The CVA's "collage effects" are minimized by its harmonious exterior skin, which is composed of grey lead-coated copper, etched green glass, clear glass, and aluminum trim. Nevertheless, the placement of these variously colored materials, some opaque and some transparent, incisively differentiates between the building's courtyard and street facades. While composed of a single building rather than a "community" of separate structures, the CVA is distinguished by the sculptural fragmentation of its massing, which boldly differentiates between the first floor and those above, and between discrete functional volumes. Similarly, while the CVA's interior is unified by the nearly uniform use of white on its walls and ceilings, several spaces, particularly the student lounge on the third floor, are fragmented by fields of intense color. In discussing the design of the CVA, Gehry declared that the art installed in its white interior would transform it into an energetic, colorful collage. He was right. Since the opening of the CVA, works in diverse media and style have supplied the variety of texture and color provided by the broad spectrum of building materials encountered in earlier Gehry buildings.

There is another quality of the CVA's interior that merits comparison with the layout of *Kolonie*. Gehry subdivided many long wall planes into rich compositions that resemble small buildings. This is particularly evident in the design of the art education classrooms and the computer

lab in the basement, the library's entrance and circulation desk on the first floor, and the same floor's conference room and administrative suite. In the latter case, a vigorously cantilevered slab of second-floor offices juts into the first-floor reception area, sliding over an exhibition case that reads as a building in miniature. This dramatic play of form and space features the same energetic, fragmented compositions that characterize Gehry's earlier designs and Mančuška's *Kolonie*.

Some of Gehry's aesthetic interests—creating buildings inside buildings, for example, or playing upon the relationship of interior and exterior space, and, as we will see, the exploitation of perceptual phenomena—are also encountered in the installation art of Jiří Přihoda. A notable example is the artist's *Take 02 - The Flood*, installed in Prague's *Nova sin* gallery in 1996, where it occupied a minimalist rectangular gallery space with a white tile floor, bare white walls and a rectilinear skylight. (Today the work is part of the collection of Prague's *Behemot* Gallery.) From outside, the boxy architecture of *The Flood* consists of a structural plywood grid supporting an inward-facing hardboard skin. Its warm tonalities, and the obviously functional nature of its untreated surfaces, resemble a "Hollywood front" turned inside out. On one of the long sides of the wooden box, a gentle ramp rises to an opening through the corner and roof, from which a set of steps descends into the installation box—a building within a building—and another reality. The surfaces of its white walls, similar to those of many galleries, are softly modulated by light coming from above, through the open end of

the box. The crowning feature, however, is totally unexpected—a “lid” of undulating blue Styrofoam. From a vantage point opposite the entrance stairs, deep within the box, the space becomes a flooded room seen from beneath the surface of a rolling wave. With the observer seemingly immersed in a flooded room turned inside-out—in a gallery space as dry as a bone—the installation provides a representational vision and a conceptual experience that play on several levels with notions of “inside” and “outside”. Like a wrapped *Reichstag*, it also brilliantly illuminates that very special place where art and architecture melt one into the other.

Přihoda’s desire to artistically exploit the perception of forms and light in articulated, occupied space is a concern that also richly informs Frank Gehry’s architecture. Although the latter is composed of functional, programmatic spaces, it frequently achieves the quality of installation art. Simultaneously, it shares a specific interest in playing upon the relationship of interior and exterior, and with the integration of nested spaces. An excellent example, which, like *The Flood*, is also representational, is one of the “building objects” Gehry designed for the *Chiat/Day* ad agency in Venice, California (1986-88). Beginning with a large warehouse, Gehry converted it into a village of freestanding offices, studios, and meeting spaces formed of various industrial materials. In doing so, Gehry gave *Chiat/Day* a particularly intriguing conference room. Representing the curvaceous body of a giant fish—headless, tailless, and thus, open at both ends—it beautifully meshes with the open working space of the former warehouse. Another example of a building within a building, its exterior skin consists of woven “scales” of galvanized metal, its interior of exposed “ribs” of unfinished lumber.

Many of Mančuška’s works also explore the conceptual implications of architectural space. One of his most intriguing projects in this vein is *Špávllovka*, a design inspired by the current effort to “rehabilitate” older buildings in Prague. In some examples of this economically motivated activity, only the expensive ornate stone façades are retained, while their interior structures are torn down and replaced with contemporary, modular ones. Between the destruction of the old and the erection of the new, modern steel frameworks—looking like interior skeletons typical of modern construction—support the façade wall. Such a configuration looks like a new steel-frame building under construction, but here a classical, load-bearing wall of stone takes the place of a modern curtain wall. Its decorated façade faces *into* the apparent building rather than out, and at the same time

articulates the interior volumes it once framed; the vanished rooms have become conceptual ghosts. Typical of many postmodern phenomena, this practice massages the distinction between the old and the new.

In Mančuška’s conceptualization, it also plays with conventional notions of interior and exterior space, and the subdivision of vertical space. A conceptual drawing inspired by his experiences of the changing Prague cityscape focuses on these issues; it shows a modern façade of two- and a-half stories supported from behind by temporary scaffolding, and which cuts vertically through a cubic space. We might well ask what is outside? What is inside? Where does one enter? At the same time, a floor in Mančuška’s conceptual cube slices irrationally through the elevation of the façade and supports a portion of the scaffold, making it difficult to trace the logic and chronology of the building process. In this architectural configuration, what is old? What is new?

Similar ambiguities are present in portions of the *Center for the Visual Arts* and in many other Gehry buildings. First the relationship of inside and outside: at *Loyola Law School*, a remarkable and highly sculptural staircase marks the façade of its student center. Located close to, but not at the center of the building, it leads obliquely to the second floor. In climbing the steps, one passes through the plane of the yellow wall that is the building’s most imposing feature. Once through the wall—although still outside—one continues to ascend by turning to the right and passing through



ŠPÁVLOVKA :: 2002
Project for the Exhibition
Prhaha 13 in the Václav
Špála Gallery

the yellow wall a second time. The continuing upward path, supported on a cantilever, moves out over space, doubles back, and leads, yet again, through the yellow wall. In spite of three transits of the building's façade, only here on the third floor does one truly enter interior space! The last segment of the climb also provides a view upward and to the right of an unglazed window, through which one sees vegetation; in normal experience this is a feature to be found *outside* a building. Variations in the size, depth and glazing of the window frames add further complexity to the nature of the wall and the "interior" space it forms.

Similar spatial complexity attaches to the meeting of the main hallway and library entrance on the main floor of the *CVA*. To the left of the library's glass wall, a small white "building" rotates into the wall of the library's administrative wing. The building's long side cuts through the glass wall and emerges inside the library, transformed into the wooden barrier of the library circulation desk. To the right of the door, the same glass wall forms a Z-shaped configuration, so that the spaces of the hallway and library fold one over the other. These compositions play upon our concepts of the enclosure of physical space and the continuity of visible space. The effects are further enriched by the fact that the entrance is incorporated within the hallway formed by the building's glazed curtain wall. Physically separating, but visually joining the interior of the *CVA* and the exterior courtyard, its forms and materials are mimicked in yet another glass wall that separates

the courtyard from the street. As in *The Flood* and *Špávllovka*, layer upon layer of nested containers—some transparent and others opaque—deepen our perception of the aesthetic articulation of space.

Špávllovka's references to the old and the new also may be seen in the *CVA*, which is directly connected to the *Toledo Museum of Art*, a classical building of the early twentieth century. In undertaking this contextual juxtaposition, Gehry was careful to give the new building a separate identity from the old. In form and materials, of course, the *CVA* is obviously different from the Museum. But Gehry also went to great length to make the two harmonize, similar in some ways to Prihoda's installation of *The Flood* in the *Nova sin* Gallery. On its street façade, the *CVA's* separation of the first from the second and third echoes the proportions of the Museum's elevation, and the rectangular shapes he specified for the *CVA's* metal skin reflect the shape of blocks in the Museum wall. More important to this discussion, however, is that Gehry's choice of materials generated ambiguous and fascinating relationships between the old and the new.

On the exterior of the *CVA*, for example, the rich skin of lead-coated copper quickly weathered from a modernist silver to a venerable, dappled grey. The hues that have evolved harmonize well with the veining of the Museum's marble skin; however, they also create a rich dialogue between the classical and the contemporary. Both marble and lead weather, after all, and two buildings of different era and style share, in part, the same architectural syntax. Similarly, the green of the glass panels in the *CVA's* courtyard façade emulate the color of the tarnished copper that graces the Museum's classical cornice. In this case, however, the material and color of the *CVA's* courtyard wall speak in the uncompromising language of the contemporary, one that agreeably contrasts not only with the marble skin of the museum, but also with the lead panels of the *CVA* itself. While differing in form, this approach to the old and the new relates nicely to Mančuška's *Špávllovka*.

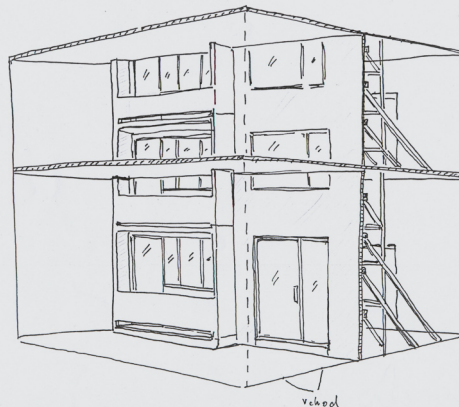
The few works we have examined show that three quite disparate designers share a number of formal and conceptual concerns. Very much more might be said, of course, and about many other



LOYOLA LAW SCHOOL
Frank Gehry : : staircase
Los Angeles (1981-84)

Photo courtesy of Richard Putney

ŠPÁVLLOVKA : : 2002 (Drawing)
Project for the Exhibition Prhaha 13 in
the Václav Špála Gallery.



issues, but this must await another day and another forum. Fortunately, *Cultural Domestication – Instinctual Desire* offers a unique experience to see compelling works in a compelling setting. The ***Center for the Visual Arts*** will unite the art of building with the building of art, and encourage all of us to think more about both.

* Due to limited space, it has been impossible to illustrate many of the works by Frank Gehry that are cited in this article. The curious reader may do two things to see and learn more: consult Kurt W. Forster and Francesco Dal Co, *Frank O. Gehry: The Complete Works*, recently issued in paperback by Phaidon Press (2003); and explore the *Center for the Visual Arts*, which is open to the public.