



OPUS HONG KONG

A MONOGRAPH

BY MARCUS FIELD

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Field trained as an art historian before becoming an architectural journalist. He has worked on *The Architectural Review* and *The Architects' Journal*, and is a former editor of *Blueprint*, the international magazine of architecture and design. He has written widely on art, architecture and design for British newspapers and magazines, including *The Guardian*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *Wallpaper* and *Monocle*. He is the author of a monograph on the architects Future Systems (Phaidon).

OPUS HONG KONG BY FRANK GEHRY

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COMMISSIONED BY SWIRE PROPERTIES



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INTRODUCTION

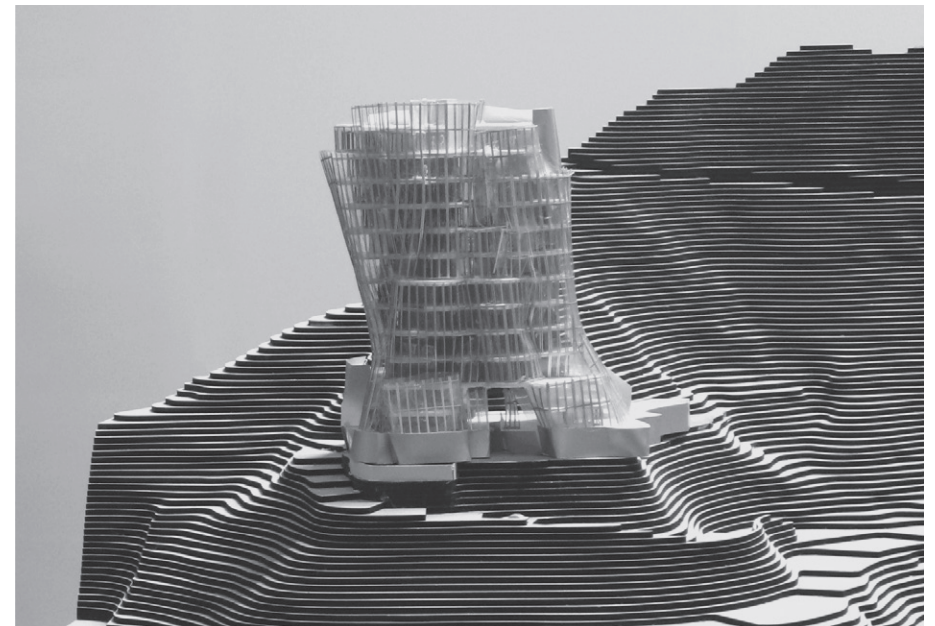
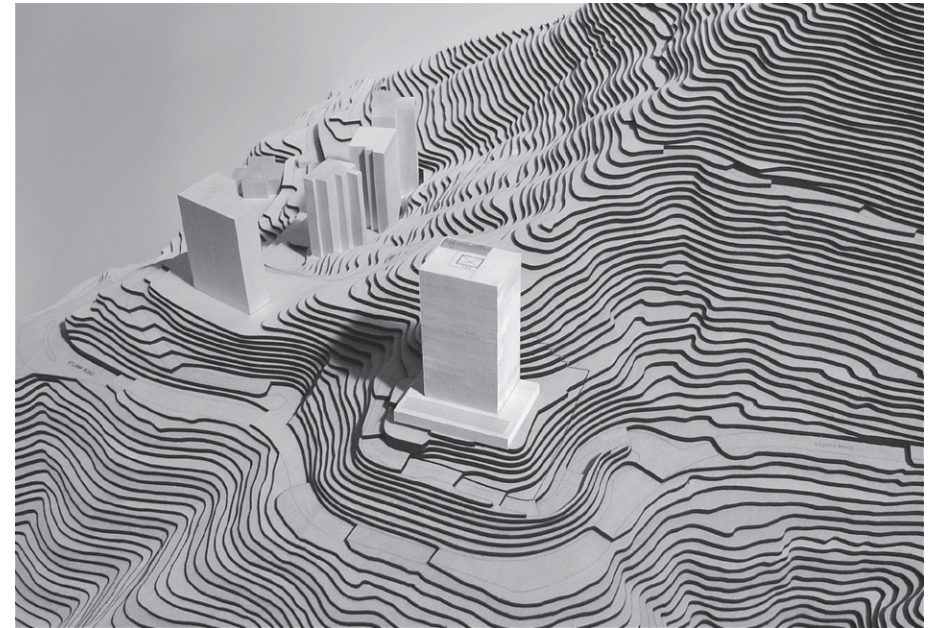
“I APPROACH EACH BUILDING AS A SCULPTURAL OBJECT, A SPATIAL CONTAINER, A SPACE WITH LIGHT AND AIR, A RESPONSE TO CONTEXT AND APPROPRIATENESS OF FEELING AND SPIRIT. TO THIS CONTAINER, THIS SCULPTURE, THE USER BRINGS HIS BAGGAGE, HIS PROGRAM, AND INTERACTS WITH IT TO ACCOMMODATE HIS NEEDS. IF HE CAN'T DO THAT, I'VE FAILED.”

FRANK GEHRY

Houses and apartment buildings occupy a special place in the history of modern architecture, often acting as testing grounds for wealthy, daring clients and their avant-garde architects. In the first half of the 20th century a number of houses were built as three-dimensional manifestos for how the modern home should look. Of these, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (France, 1931) and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (USA, 1950), continue to exert the most influence, with their principles of exposed structure, truth to materials and flexible open-plan layouts remaining key tenets for many architects today.

Gehry's approach to design is rooted in the same Modernist tradition that gave birth to these icons of 20th century design. Throughout his career he has remained committed to expressing the integrity of his materials and forms. However, in his mature and most recognised style, epitomised by his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, he has rejected the straight lines and boxy shapes of the past in favour of a more dramatic, organic Modernism of which he has become the leading exponent.

OPUS HONG KONG now joins Gehry's oeuvre as another remarkable achievement: his first residential building in Asia and a new landmark in domestic architecture. What follows is the story of how it came to be built.



A VISION MADE REAL

“THIS IS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY, NOT LIKELY
TO BE REPLICATED ANYWHERE.”

FRANK GEHRY

The history of OPUS HONG KONG begins with the Swire Group, which for more than 60 years had owned a site of rare and exceptional beauty. This plot is on Stubbs Road, a winding hillside route that climbs from Happy Valley to the Peak on Hong Kong Island.

Swire, whose roots in Hong Kong can be traced back to the 19th century, understood that the development of this special site demanded an outstanding architectural imagination. Whatever was built there had to be breathtaking to admire, as well as original and exciting in the possibilities it offered for 21st-century living. For Swire, one architect stood out: Frank Gehry, who has been critically acclaimed for his long line of distinctive work across the USA and Europe.

After repeated visits to Hong Kong to examine the location, Gehry realised that Swire shared a similar creative direction and he readily accepted the commission. He was convinced that the natural beauty of the site, combined with the dynamism of the city, could inspire a truly innovative building – his first residential project in Asia.

With Gehry onboard, Swire Properties, the innovative development arm of the group, had all the pieces in place to create one of the most significant new works of domestic architecture in the world.



FRANK GEHRY: PORTRAIT OF THE ARCHITECT

“I AM OBSESSED WITH ARCHITECTURE. IT IS TRUE. I AM RESTLESS, TRYING TO FIND MYSELF AS AN ARCHITECT, AND HOW TO CONTRIBUTE IN THIS WORLD FILLED WITH CONTRADICTION, DISPARITY AND INEQUALITY.”

FRANK GEHRY

Frank Owen Gehry is one of the most influential and important architects of modern times. His buildings are strikingly original, often sculptural in form with seemingly anarchic structures, making bold and inventive use of unconventional materials. He is known for pushing the boundaries of architecture, his approach resulting in buildings that are refreshing and full of surprises. Yet at their core, Gehry’s buildings offer inspiring spaces for those who experience them.

Gehry was born into a family of Jewish émigrés in Toronto, Canada, in 1929. His father was a furniture-maker and Gehry spent his early childhood building imaginary cities with wooden blocks given to him by his grandmother, an experience to which he later attributed the playfulness of his designs. When he was 11, a handwriting expert predicted that Gehry would be a successful architect; indeed the boy’s natural curiosity and interest in the discipline were apparent from an early age.

In 1947 the family moved to Los Angeles to better its fortunes. In California the young Gehry was exposed to a series of diverse movements, both architectural and artistic. He graduated with a degree in architecture from the University of Southern California in 1954, going on to Harvard to study city planning. After returning to Los Angeles he worked for a number of firms before setting up his own practice in 1962.



Los Angeles in the decades of Gehry's youth was a hothouse for experimental buildings. Great talents such as Rudolph Schindler, Pierre Koenig and Richard Neutra were busy building the graceful glass and steel houses that came to define the California style. Gehry admired their work – as he did the achievements of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Californian Progressives, best exemplified by Maybeck, Gill and the Greens – but he wanted his buildings to be different, to have more movement and excitement. The young Gehry also closely studied the revolutionary achievements of Le Corbusier, particularly his radical conjuring of space and volume into new sculptural forms, and he found further inspiration in the soaring façades and dramatic interiors of the great medieval cathedrals of France.

Other influences came from the artistic community in Los Angeles, to which Gehry found himself increasingly drawn. The world of painters and sculptors offered a freedom from the restraints of traditional, rigid architecture. The collages of Robert Rauschenberg, the sculptures of Richard Serra and the Californian funk art movement of the 1960s were important cultural reference points for Gehry's developing style, particularly the way in which he began to see buildings as series of objects grouped together as if in a still life painting. Gehry soon attracted his own cult following among the local artists and designers who appreciated the groovy Californian aesthetic of his work.

Two other lifelong loves also play an important role in informing Gehry's work. "I love classical music," he explains, "and somehow I wanted to create musical buildings, lyrical buildings with a lot of delight." Much of the sense of movement in his buildings comes directly from this interest. His love of the sea and sailing has also played a role as a visual and structural metaphor. Many of Gehry's buildings are not only close to water but also reflect the symbols and forms of seafaring – sails, hulls and decks.

It was with the re-working of his own Santa Monica home in 1978 that Gehry first began to attract attention from critics and other architects. He set about converting what he called his "dumb little house with charm" into a radical expression of intent. "I was

looking for a way to break down the monolithic scale of modern architecture," he says. "I realised that if I did 10 one-room buildings and jammed them together I could make really beautiful spaces. They wouldn't have to be compromised." He wrapped the exterior of his little house in unconventional materials – chain-link fencing, raw plywood, corrugated aluminium and other industrial materials – much to the dismay of his neighbours.

This project signalled Gehry's willingness to experiment. It also gained him public recognition for his brave and unconventional use of materials, his iconoclastic aesthetic, and for the way in which the buildings came together with unexpected elegance.

By the mid-1980s Gehry's style had progressed and he was experimenting with the organic shapes in which some critics saw allusions to the fashionable ideas of chaos theory and deconstruction. The seminal project of this period is his proposal for the Lewis House, a residence for the philanthropist Peter Lewis in Lyndhurst, Ohio. Over a 10-year period Gehry drew up ever more fantastical schemes for this sprawling but still-unfinished house, experimenting with cutting-edge computer-aided design programmes to create sculptural and audacious shapes which had never before been seen in architecture.

During this decade of research Gehry completed the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, the first built expression of his new style. The spiralling composition exhibits such dynamism that it almost appears to be in motion. However the most complete manifestation of the lessons learnt on the Lewis House came in 1997 with the opening of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, a moment and a building that caused the world to look in wonder.

In response to a commission for an art museum in Bilbao, Gehry designed a building whose form is directly inspired by the history and geography of the northern Spanish city and the particular site. Taking its cue from the shapes and materials of the city's shipyards, the Guggenheim stretches along the riverside like a series of glistening hulls, which have been carved up and re-arranged in a composition of exuberance and joy. It wasn't just its

shape that was revolutionary, however, but the whole way in which the museum was designed and built. Using computer technology created for the design of military aircraft, Gehry ensured that every piece of the titanium building was different and yet fit together as snugly as if he had been using conventional rectangular sheets. What's more, the Guggenheim changed the way art could be displayed and viewed. Suddenly the building became as much an exhibit as the artworks inside, and its series of sinuously flowing spaces – some vast, some intimate – gave curators exciting new possibilities for showing work and for the public's experience of art. At the same time the fame that the building attracted transformed Bilbao at a stroke into a world-class destination.

The Bilbao Guggenheim signalled a genuine shift in architecture; a revolution made manifest in shimmering titanium. Gehry's radical achievement was confirmed when the veteran architect Philip Johnson, the man who christened the International Style in 1932, described the museum as “the greatest building of our time.”

Six years later, in 2003, Gehry sealed his reputation as the most important architect of his generation when he completed the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, another writhing mass of shiny metallic forms which contained not art but one of the most advanced performance spaces in the world. Like the Guggenheim, the Disney project transformed a downtown part of the city; so iconic is the silhouette of the building that it has been officially adopted as a symbol for Los Angeles itself.

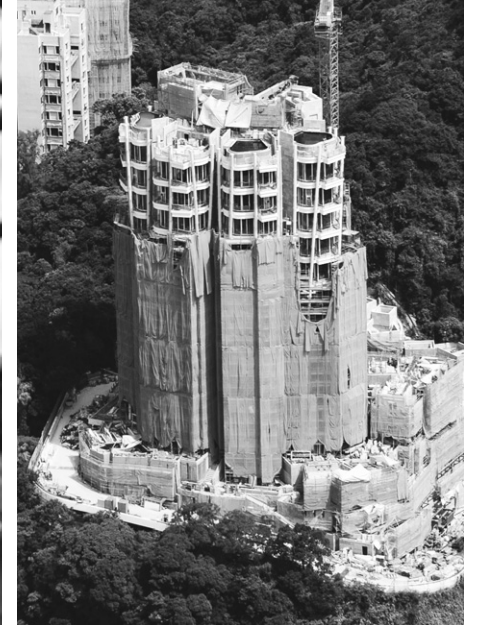
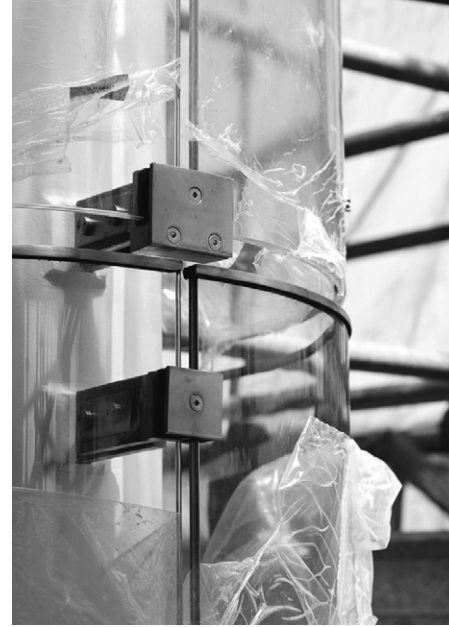
It was this ability to reinvent both a building type and its location that drew Swire to Gehry. The Swire team was convinced that the magic Gehry worked to reshape public expectations of what constitutes an art museum, or a concert hall, could also be applied to a residential building. Nothing like it would have been seen before; Gehry would create a new icon for domestic architecture, as well as for Hong Kong.

Gehry continues to work from his Los Angeles studio, designing such landmark buildings as the recently completed apartment tower New York by Gehry, the yet-to-be-completed Guggenheim

Museum in Abu Dhabi and the New World Symphony Concert Hall in Miami. He has also taught architecture at Harvard, Columbia and Yale.

The number of distinguished awards that Gehry has received emphasises the wide recognition of his original contribution to architecture. The awards include the highly coveted Pritzker Prize, which honours “significant contributions to humanity and the built environment through the art of architecture,” the RIBA Gold Medal and the AIA Gold Medal.

To his impressive list of accomplishments Gehry has now added OPUS HONG KONG, his first residential building in Asia.



OPUS HONG KONG: GENESIS OF THE BUILDING

“ARCHITECTURE IS A SMALL PIECE OF THIS HUMAN EQUATION, BUT FOR THOSE OF US WHO PRACTISE IT, WE BELIEVE IN ITS POTENTIAL TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, TO ENLIGHTEN AND TO ENRICH THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE, TO PENETRATE THE BARRIERS OF MISUNDERSTANDING AND PROVIDE A BEAUTIFUL CONTEXT FOR THIS LIFE’S DRAMA.”

FRANK GEHRY

“I couldn’t believe that sites like this were still available,” says Gehry, recalling how he felt when he first saw the setting for OPUS HONG KONG, with its breathtaking views across the city to Victoria Harbour. The plot has been owned by Swire since the 1940s, and it originally housed a villa for a company executive. It is one of the last unspoilt sites of its kind on the island.

After visiting Hong Kong, Gehry and his team set about exploring ideas for how the new building might look. “I work mostly using models,” he explains. “We pile together little wooden blocks that represent the programme on the site and look at how it works. That way I get a clear vision in my mind of what scale the building is going to be in relation to the surroundings.”

Gehry also uses sketches to develop his ideas, and his drawings have been exhibited around the world. “I think of them as scribbles,” he says. “I don’t think they mean anything to anybody except to me, and then at the end of the project we wheel out these little drawings and they’re uncannily like the finished building. It’s from these drawings that I organise the space.”

In the case of OPUS HONG KONG, a proposal for a sculptural 12-storey building gradually emerged, with two double-level garden apartments and ten unique apartments above, each of some

6,000 sq ft – 6,900 sq ft – one per floor. The shape of the building is highly inventive, a spiralling series of graceful curving façades in place of a conventional monolithic apartment block. “I’m fascinated with the interaction of shapes,” Gehry says, “like in a still life painting, so I always start with an idea of breaking the building apart.” As a result of this creative design process OPUS HONG KONG adds a unique profile to the city’s skyline.

The building overlooks the city from the slopes of Mount Cameron and its design draws its inspiration from the breathtaking scenery surrounding the site. “I thought a building in such a beautiful natural spot should have an organic feel to it,” says Gehry. Finely tuned glass-enclosed columns form the structure, twisting up around the building like reeds swaying in the breeze. “It gives a delicacy to the façade,” Gehry adds.

The building’s helical external structure also reduces the need for load-bearing walls, which allows the open-plan apartments to flow around a central core and the sinuous façade of the building to be composed almost entirely of glass – even the columns are encased in it. As a result the interiors are light and airy with minimal interruptions to the view.

The building turns as it rises, giving each apartment a unique plan and its own spectacular outlook. Each apartment has a series of balconies conceived as “boat decks,” that are carefully orientated to make the most of the city’s dramatic sights. Views of the building from the city are also striking, as the tower’s distinctive silhouette stands out against the lush green landscape of the Peak.

DESIGNS FOR LIVING: TRANSFORMING THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE HOME

“I’VE ALWAYS DESIGNED MY HOMES AS OPEN-ENDED THINGS TO WHICH PEOPLE BRING THEIR OWN LIVES. I’M NOT OFFENDED WHEN THEY KNOCK DOWN A WALL OR MOVE SOMETHING, OR PUT GRANDMA’S PICTURE ON THE WALL OR BUY A COUCH THAT IS IN BAD TASTE. I KIND OF LOVE ALL THAT.”

FRANK GEHRY

Throughout his long career, Gehry has remained adamant that his domestic architecture should be flexible enough for the occupants to make their own mark. “I’m not a typical architect when it comes to designing homes,” he says, “because the tradition is that the architect will design the furniture, the lighting, and place everything so that it’s perfectly composed. Then the poor people have to come and live that way. And I’ve never liked that.”

Instead, Gehry’s projects invite interaction. “For me,” he says, “the most important thing is to make the spaces liveable, and I think the spaces I build are strong enough to look good with those kinds of interventions. In fact, I welcome them.” For this reason decisions about the final finishes and configuration of each apartment at OPUS HONG KONG are left to the occupants. Although the outside walls of the building are curved, the internal walls have no structural role and can thus be either curved or straight. “There’s lots of flexibility in the walls, and in the building as a whole,” says Gehry.

The building is grounded in an array of artfully stacked planter boxes clad in Spanish stone, whose rectilinear shapes highlight the ascending spiral of the glass-clad columns above. Together with the stone planter boxes, the landscaping creates an intriguing transition between the openness and delicacy of the building and the dense green forest that surrounds the site. “It’s pretty raw and pretty exciting,” Gehry says of the scheme.



A LANDMARK IN ARCHITECTURE

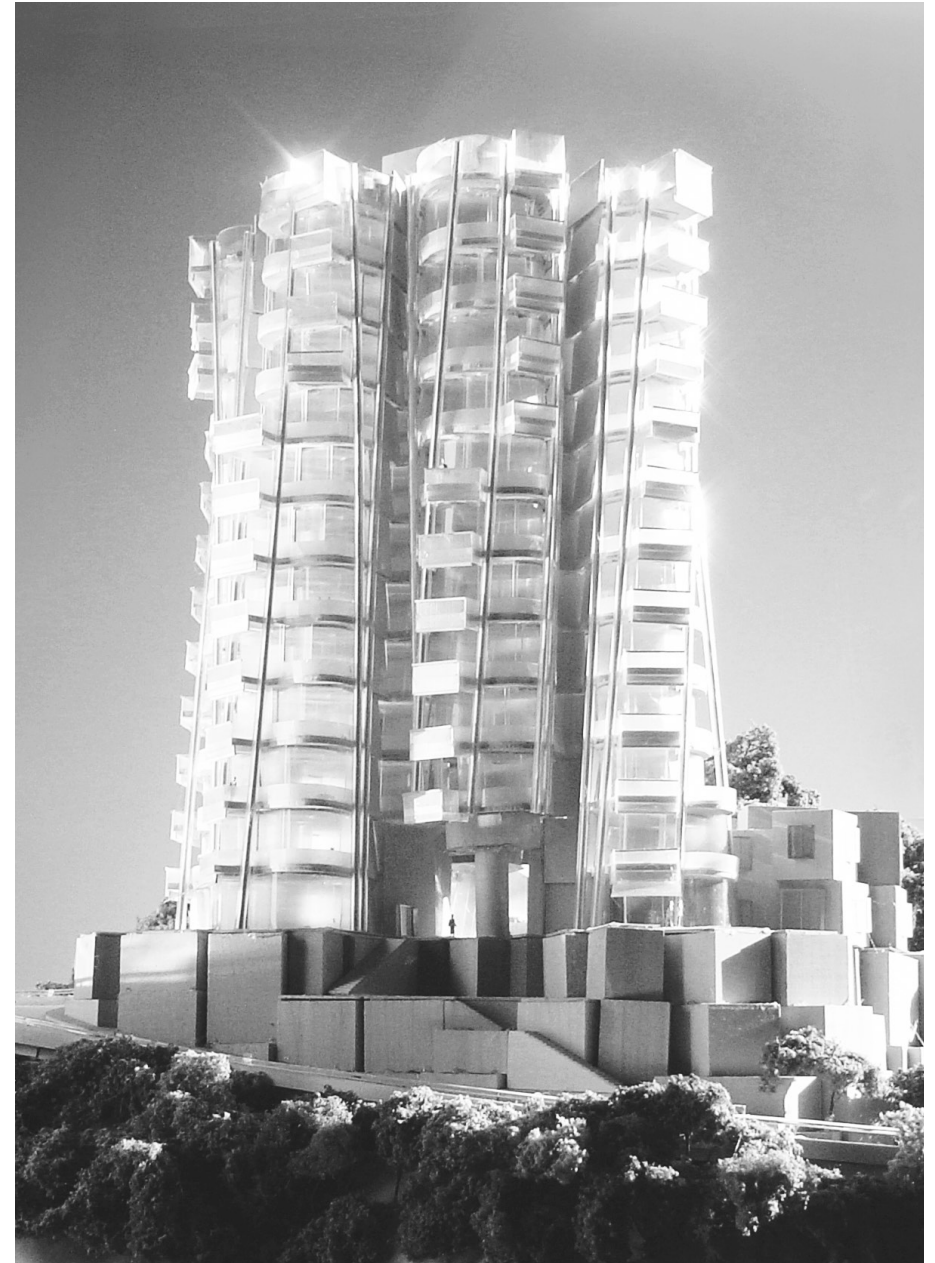
“FIRST AND FOREMOST YOU WANT TO MAKE SOMETHING INCREDIBLY BEAUTIFUL, THAT PEOPLE WILL RESPECT AND LOVE FOR GENERATIONS.”

FRANK GEHRY

At the start of the 21st century a growing number of apartment blocks and mixed-used buildings designed by the world’s foremost talents have been added to the list of modern architectural masterpieces. They are considered architecture of the highest order, worthy of being visited and studied, as well as comfortable places in which to live and work.

The design of OPUS HONG KONG reaffirms Gehry’s position as the recognised heir to the great Californian Modernists like Neutra and Schindler. While its shape is highly original, it remains an object lesson in Modernist belief, with its open-plan and flexible living space, roof gardens and highly visible external structural elements, partially expressed in the bending columns. “In the crudest sense you would call these decoration,” says Gehry, “but they’re not, you know, they are really structural and they’re holding up the building.”

Frank Gehry’s achievement in OPUS HONG KONG ranks it alongside his other distinguished works, worthy of a place in his legacy.



A GLOBAL CITY

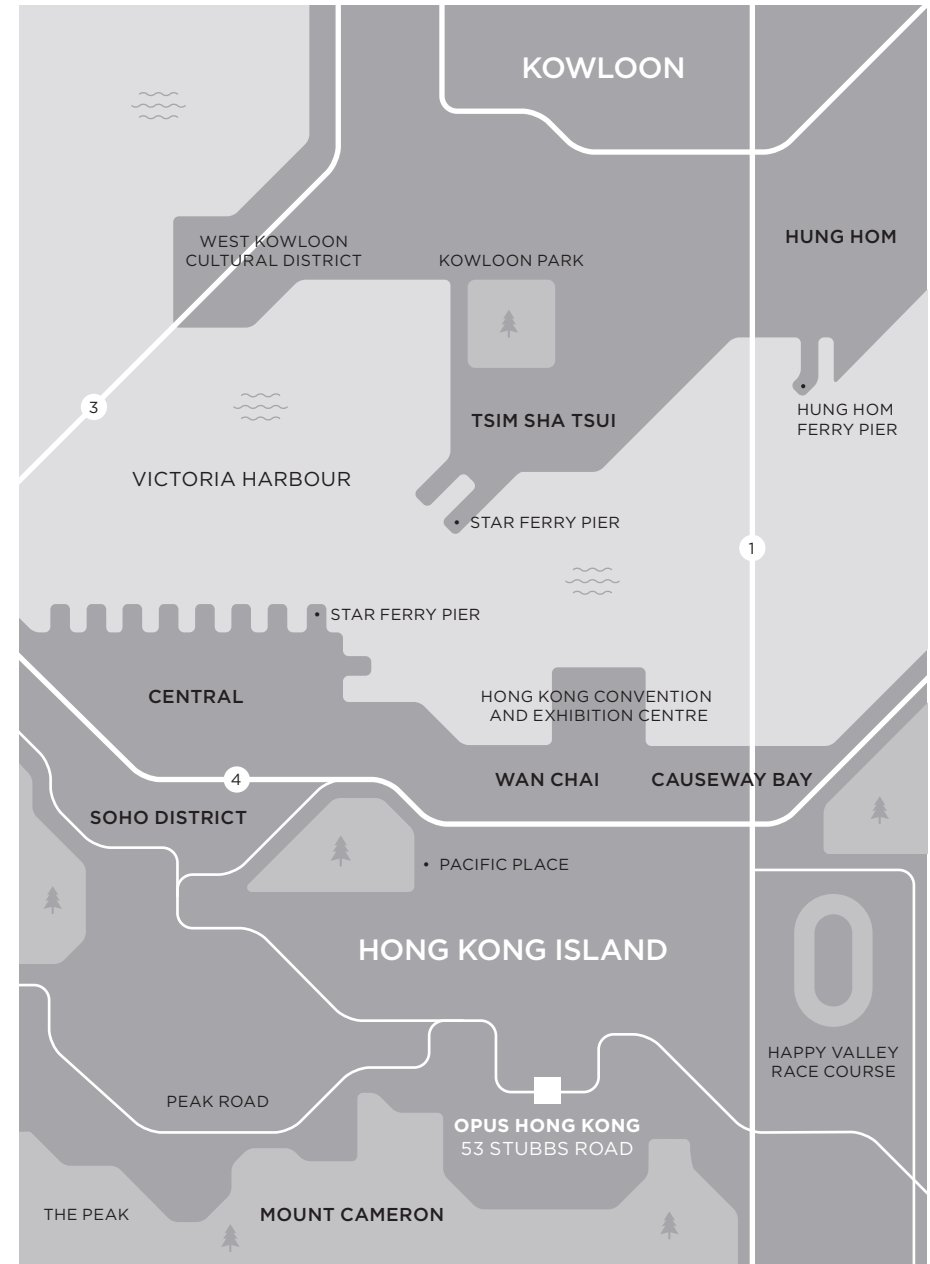
“WHAT MAKES IT WORK ARE THE HILLS BEHIND IT AND THE BAY. IT IS GETTING A PERSONA THAT’S DIFFERENT FROM MOST CITIES.”

FRANK GEHRY

For Gehry, one of the most inspiring aspects of working on OPUS HONG KONG has been the chance to design a building in one of the most thrilling cities on the planet. The contrast between the dense urban fabric of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, and the rural hinterland and wilderness spread across the 262 Outlying Islands, makes Hong Kong unique.

From its vantage point on the Peak, OPUS HONG KONG is surrounded by forest and yet it overlooks the financial heart of Hong Kong, the vibrant commercial gateway between East and West. In OPUS HONG KONG, Gehry has created an experimental work of architecture custom-made for its setting. “If you were to put this on a flat site, it would look clunky,” says Gehry. “It wouldn’t have the same persona. You can’t take this building and put it somewhere else. It’s designed for here.”

For Gehry, the building is a direct response to both the extraordinary man-made environment and natural drama of Hong Kong – a place where the unique topography and global significance has always demanded experimentation. OPUS HONG KONG is a testament to the vibrancy and dynamism of the city of tomorrow.





OPUS HONG KONG: VITAL STATISTICS

DEVELOPER

Swire Properties

DESIGN ARCHITECT

Gehry Partners

ARCHITECT

Ronald Lu & Partners (HK) Limited

ADDRESS

53 Stubbs Road, The Peak, Hong Kong

SITE AREA

Approximately 32,500 sq ft

NUMBER OF APARTMENTS

Two double-level garden apartments
and ten single-storey apartments

SIZE OF APARTMENT

6,000 – 6,900 sq ft

ADDITIONAL FEATURES

Underground parking, five swimming pools,
clubhouse, fitness centre, rainwater recycling
for irrigation, electric car charge system

“ARCHITECTURE SHOULD SPEAK
OF ITS TIME AND PLACE, BUT
YEARN FOR TIMELESSNESS.”

FRANK GEHRY

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SWIRE PROPERTIES

Incorporated in 1972, Swire Properties develops and manages commercial, retail, hotel and residential properties, with a particular focus on mixed-use development in prime locations at major mass transportation intersections. The Company's investment portfolio in Hong Kong totals approximately 16.6 million sq ft (over 1.54 million sqm) of gross floor area, with Island East and Pacific Place as its core holdings. In addition to Hong Kong, the Company has a presence in Mainland China, the United States and the United Kingdom.

In Mainland China, Swire Properties has a portfolio amounting to approximately 12.9 million sq ft (approximately 1.20 million sqm), the majority of which is under construction. The five projects consist of mixed-use developments in Beijing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Shanghai, with Sanlitun Village and The Opposite House hotel in Beijing being the best-known among them.

The Company is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the publicly-listed Swire Pacific Limited whose businesses are grouped under five operating divisions – property, aviation, beverages, marine services and trading & industrial.