



ARCHITECTURE REVIEW | IAC HEADQUARTERS

# Gehry's New York Debut: Subdued Tower of Light

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF  
Published: March 22, 2007

## Correction Appended

In the year since the concrete frame of [Frank Gehry](#)'s first New York building began to rise along the West Side Highway in Chelsea, architecture fans have been quarrelling over its design. Are the curvaceous glass forms of the IAC headquarters building, evoking the crisp pleats of a skirt, a bold departure from Manhattan's hard-edged corporate towers? Or are they proof that Mr. Gehry's radical days are behind him?

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Albert Vecerka/Esto

Frank Gehry designed this Manhattan building, the home to Barry Diller's media and Internet business.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Albert Vecerka/Esto

The ground-floor lobby.



Well, both. Mr. Gehry is adding a much-needed touch of lightness to the Manhattan skyline just as the city finally emerges from a period of mourning. The IAC building, serving as world headquarters for [Barry Diller](#)'s media and Internet empire, joins a growing list of new projects that reflect how mainstream developers in the city are significantly raising the creative stakes after decades of settling for bland, soul-sapping office buildings.

Yet the building, which is not quite complete, also feels oddly tame. For those who have followed Mr. Gehry's creative career, these easy, fluid forms are a marked departure from the complex, fragmented structures of his youth. Rather than mining rich new creative territory, Mr. Gehry, now 78, seems to be holding back.

The results — almost pristine by Mr. Gehry's standards — suggest the casual confidence of an aging virtuoso rather than the brash innovation of a rowdy outsider.

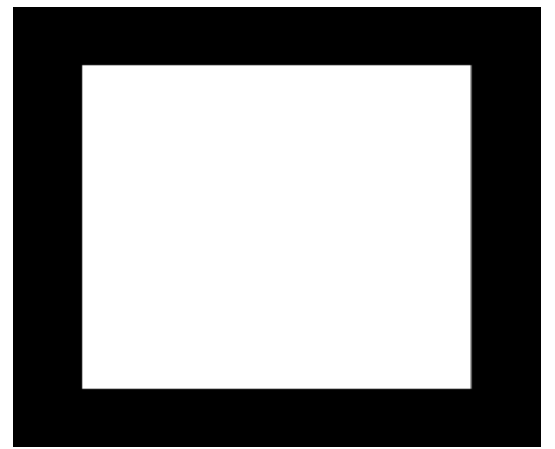
New York has long been a frustrating place for Mr. Gehry. It has taken him decades to land a major commission here, and now the IAC building joins a string of high-profile towers, all part of an effort to transform a noisy strip of the West Side Highway into a glamorous waterfront promenade for the kind of wealthy socialites who once scorned him. Three luxury high-rise apartment buildings by [Richard Meier](#), with tenants like [Martha Stewart](#) and [Calvin Klein](#), are a 10-minute walk to the

[More Articles in Arts »](#)

## Get UrbanEye by E-Mail

Sign up to find out all you need to know about New York, every weekday. See [Sample](#) [flavio@10012.com](mailto:flavio@10012.com) [Sign Up](#)  
[Change E-mail Address](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

E-MAIL  
PRINT  
SAVE  
SHARE  
ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY [Waitress](#)



## MOST POPULAR

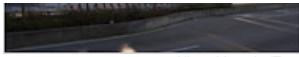
E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. [Hopes for a Renaissance After Exodus in St. Louis](#)
2. [No Spitting on the Road to Olympic Glory, Beijing Says](#)
3. [The Power of Green](#)
4. [Almost Human, and Sometimes Smarter](#)
5. [Computer Science Takes Steps to Bring Women to the Fold](#)
6. [Westcombe Journal: Paint Drying? Sorry, Wrong Link. This Is Cheddarvision.](#)
7. [Thomas L. Friedman: Help Wanted](#)
8. [Editorial Observer: A Woman Wrongly Convicted and a U.S. Attorney Who Kept His Job](#)
9. [Maureen Dowd: Cupid and Cupidity](#)
10. [Home Depot to Display an Environmental Label](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



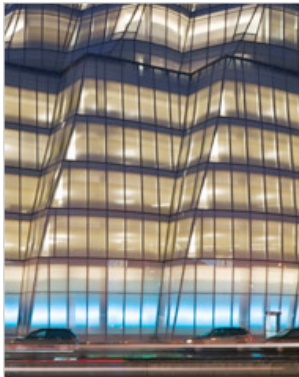
**Business**  
[nytimes.com/business](http://nytimes.com/business)



Albert Vecerka/Esto

The new IAC headquarters, not quite complete, is Frank Gehry's first building in New York. It is on the West Side Highway in Manhattan.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Albert Vecerka/Esto

Detail of the building's exterior in the evening.



Eric Levin/IAC

An unfinished atrium staircase.

[Stewart](#) and [Calvin Klein](#), are a 10-minute walk to the south. A much-anticipated residential tower by the French architect Jean Nouvel is beginning to rise just across West 19th Street.

Mr. Gehry's structure, the most fanciful of these, looks best when approached from a distance. Glimpsed between Chelsea's weathered brick buildings, its strangely chiseled forms reflect the surrounding sky, so that its surfaces can seem to be dissolving. As you circle to the north, however, its forms become more symmetrical and sharp-edged, evoking rows of overlapping sails or knifelike pleats. Viewed from the south, the forms appear more blocky. This constantly changing character imbues the building's exterior with an enigmatic beauty. And it reflects Mr. Gehry's subtle understanding of context. Rather than parodying the architectural style of the surrounding buildings, he plays against them, drawing them into a bigger urban composition. The sail-like curves of the west facade seem to be braced against the roar of the passing cars. The blockier forms in back lock the composition into the lower brick buildings that extend to the east.

But far too many of the rough edges have been smoothed over. As a young architect Mr. Gehry often said that he tried to capture the raw energy of a construction site in his finished buildings; he was actually taking aim at a complacent status quo. Forms collide, materials clash, buildings tear open to reveal the crude steel structures beneath. Later in his career, as the work became more surreal, sexual imagery performed the same function: forms pull apart to suggest a hiked dress or gently parting legs.

The lobby entries of the IAC headquarters are discreetly located on the two side streets, giving the building's main facade a smooth, uniform appearance. Horizontal, fritted white bands line the windows, an oddly decorative element meant to control the flow of light inside. The windows' prefabricated panels meet the ground abruptly, their aluminum frames lining up end to end in a neat grid. They have neither the compulsive precision of a Meier building nor the raw, exposed quality of Mr. Gehry's early work. Instead they look, well, tasteful.

This toned-down, more accessible approach continues into the lobby, conceived as a public living room for the neighborhood. Its back wall is dominated by an 118-foot-long video wall, which will project video art or abstract color compositions. A sinuous maple bench snakes its way around one end of the room. A staggered row of titled columns runs along the zigzagging glass facade overlooking the highway, giving the room a slight air of instability. The effect conjures up a luxurious fish tank, a nice metaphor for our narcissistic era.

As you travel deeper into the building, what first seems tame becomes more rigid. The floors that house the main corporate offices are dominated by a two-story atrium that overlooks the roof of the Chelsea Piers and the Hudson River, the kind of tough waterfront view from which Mr. Gehry once drew his inspiration. But the room is bloodless. The translucent glass partitions that surround the atrium are stiff and flat. A

[Which Wall Street firm may become Tom Cruise's new partner?](#)

Also in Business:

- [Who's doing business with whom on Wall Street?](#)
- [Tips for your first interview on Wall Street](#)
- [Will a Hedge Fund become the next Goldman Sachs?](#)

The New York Times STORE



MODERN LOVE  
[Buy Now](#)

**\$510,000 Mortgage for Under \$1,698/Month!**

**Mortgage Rates Fall Again!**

**Click Your State**  
Alabama

**Click Your Rate**  
3.00% - 3.99%

**Click Credit Type**  
Good

LowerMyBills.com

© 2008 LowerMyBills, Inc.

curved staircase, clad in pretentious tigerwood with brushed stainless steel handrails, looks imported from a Park Avenue office building. It may qualify as the most blandly corporate space Mr. Gehry has created.

Compare this with the service stairwell at the back of the building. Made of rough exposed concrete, the 10-story staircase is pulled back from the glass facade, creating a narrow, vertigo-inducing slot that allows you to peer down into an outdoor courtyard. The staircase overlooks a romantic, perfectly framed view of the Empire State Building, but the clash of raw concrete, glass and aluminum has more in sympathy with the surrounding rooftops: a clear indication of where Mr. Gehry's heart lies. It may be the most gorgeous service staircase anywhere in New York. (It has now been painted various shades of yellow, however, dulling the effect.)

But it is when you step onto the sixth-floor corporate terrace that you glean what's missing from the design. Leaning back against the rail, you get your first close look at the glass cladding on the upper floors, at a point where the building narrows. The faceted geometry here is more extreme, the connections between the glass panels more awkward.

Joints don't line up perfectly; corners look hurriedly patched together. At certain points the unusual curvature of a window, created by the building's odd geometry, makes it impossible to span the opening with a single piece of glass, and the additional mullion creates an odd, patchwork pattern.

The effect bristles with energy, as if the building were beginning to crack at the seams. It brings to mind early Gehry projects like the 1972 Ron Davis Studio in Malibu or the 1989 Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Reim, Germany. Neither work is perfect, but their imperfections are important. What you feel is someone struggling to make sense of something he has yet to fully grasp — the incompleteness of the creative struggle.

It is a reminder that Mr. Gehry's courage as an architect has stemmed in part from his distaste for perfection, for architectural purity — which in his mind comes perilously close to oppression. His aim has been to redeem the corners of the world that we often dismiss as crude, cheap and ugly. He intuitively understood that what seems ugly now may be only unfamiliar. If the ideas underlying a design are strong enough, its beauty would eventually reveal itself.

The IAC building is elegant architecture. But it doesn't make us rethink who we are.

#### **Correction: March 27, 2007**

An architecture review on Thursday about Frank Gehry's IAC headquarters building along the West Side Highway in Chelsea misspelled the name of the German city that is the site of his Vitra Design Museum, which the IAC building was said to bring to mind. It is Weil am Rhein, not Weil am Reim.

[More Articles in Arts »](#)

**Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.**

Ads by Google

what's this?

#### **[Executive Search](#)**

Find Top Talent for Architecture, Engineering, Landscape Architecture  
[sullivankreiss.com](http://sullivankreiss.com)

#### **[Design & Deploy with ATCA](#)**

Kontron's AdvancedTCA solutions for next-gen network applications.

[www.kontron.com/atca](http://www.kontron.com/atca)



**[SOAWorld Conference/Expo](#)**

Conference Registration Now Open! June 26-27, 2007 - New York, NY  
[www.soaworld2007.com](http://www.soaworld2007.com)

**Tips**

To find reference information about the words used in this article, double-click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

**Past Coverage**

-  [Ground Zero Arts Center Won't Have Theater Company, Only Dance \(March 28, 2007\)](#)
- [ARCHITECTURE REVIEW; Gehry's New York Debut: Subdued Tower of Light \(March 22, 2007\)](#)
- [A Museum Takes Steps To Collect Houses \(March 15, 2007\)](#)
-  [Celebrity Architects Reveal a Daring Cultural Xanadu for the Arab World \(February 1, 2007\)](#)

**Related Searches**

- [Architecture](#)
- [Gehry, Frank](#)
- [Diller, Barry](#)

**INSIDE NYTIMES.COM**



**U.S. »**



[New Orleans Gets Tough on Levee Repairs](#)

**DINING & WINE »**



[Interactive Feature: It's All About the Malt](#)

**BOOKS »**



[Less Reading, More Schmoozing at Book Fair](#)

**TimesSelect**

**Darfur Doubletake**

Readers respond to Nicholas D. Kristof on the continuing carnage in Sudan.

**WORLD BUSINESS »**



[China Leans Less on American Trade](#)

**TimesSelect**



[Vecsey: Two-Armed Cretins](#)