



**FRANK GEHRY**

**IN CONVERSATION WITH**

**BARBARA ISENBERG AND ALEX ROSS**

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**Celeste Bartos Forum**

**LIVE from the New York Public Library**

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**KIM IRWIN:** Good evening. I'm Kim Irwin and I'm Manager of LIVE from the NYPL and thank you so much for coming tonight. I know you love LIVE and you love the New York Public Library, so tonight I'm asking you to show your support and join us to keep your library open. And that's by taking just a few minutes to write a letter to a city council member or a borough president. Record numbers of New Yorkers are relying on our libraries as a resource for job searches, and as you probably know by now, Barack Obama got his Chicago job through the New York Public Library, and we also face fifty-

seven million dollars in budget cuts, so in the packet on your seats you will find letter-writing materials. The information includes names of representatives, samples of language for your letter, white paper, and an envelope and if you've come to the library in the last few days, I'm sure you've seen the tables set up right outside the bookshop. All New Yorkers have been writing letters every day. And in your letter, please ask your representative to restore the funding for the New York Public Library and explain why the library is important to you. You can write the address on the envelope or simply put your letter in the envelope, making sure you that who you've addressed it to is in the letter, and we will have a volunteer address it for you. Letters will be collected at the end of the night as you go out the door, or you can put them in the box on the table as you go out the door. So again, thank you for supporting the New York Public Library.

Now some upcoming LIVE events, Adam Gopnik, Steven Pinker this month, New Eyes on the Arab World: Breaking Down Barriers of Fear and Prejudice with five Arab and American writers such as Peter Theroux and Muhammad Al Mur and Alain de Botton with a very interesting program on the pleasures and sorrows of work and then in June, from June 9<sup>th</sup> through the 11<sup>th</sup>, LIVE will be participating in the Muslim Voices Arts and Ideas Festival, which is part of a ten-day festival presented by the Asia Society, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the New York University Center for Dialogue. The festival will feature over a hundred artists and speakers from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, who will present diverse perspectives of the Muslim world. So stay tuned, go to our Web site and find out about these five exciting events in June.

And then I want to thank our booksellers, always, 192 Books. Barbara Isenberg and Alex Ross will be signing your books after the program and you can pick up signed copies—purchase signed copies, pre-signed copies by Frank Gehry at the table right over there. And also on your way out, you can also become a Friend of LIVE, a Friend of the Library, and as you probably know by now, you can reduce your ticket price ten dollars and pay no service fee, so it's a really good deal for as little as forty dollars a year.

And finally we're going to have Q and A tonight and I believe you have cards on your seats, and if you don't have one, just ask your neighbor and please write legibly your question and then approximately quarter of eight, eight o'clock, we will have LIVE staff picking up the cards with the questions that will then be incorporated into the discussion. And be sure to check out LIVE from the NYPL on Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter. And now to introduce our guests is the Director of LIVE and the no-longer-virgin Twitterer, Paul Holdenraber.

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So I lost my virginity, I guess. It's a pleasure to have you here tonight. I'm Paul Holdenraber, indeed I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library. It's a great, great pleasure to welcome Frank Gehry to the New York Public Library for this program, to welcome Barbara Isenberg, and Alex Ross. I know them all from my blessed days in Santa Monica in Los Angeles. I always say that one year in New York is like seven years in Los Angeles. I've never aged as much. But

still it's a great pleasure to be here and a great pleasure to have them tonight. I must start with some fairly sad news, but we will make the evening work beautifully. Esa-Pekka Salonen hurt his back—too much conducting, I suppose—and he is unable to come tonight. It's a great sadness for me, because there's very, very few conductors in the world and composers in the world today that I admire as much as Esa-Pekka Salonen. Nevertheless, I will be a stand-in for him. I have perfected my Finnish accent and I will try to do as well as I possibly can.

To explain who Esa-Pekka Salonen is, I'd like to read a very short passage from Etgar Keret's book *The Girl on the Fridge*. This will explain to you, I think, the kind of absolute precision that EPS has when he speaks, a precision I really pine for. This is called "Asthma Attack." "When you have an asthma attack, you can't breathe. When you can't breathe you can hardly talk. To make a sentence all you get is the air in your lungs, which isn't much. Three to six words, if that. You learn the value of words. You rummage through the jumble in your head. Choose the crucial ones. Those cost you, too. Let healthy people toss out whatever comes in mind the way you throw out the garbage. When an asthmatic says 'I love you' and when an asthmatic says 'I love you madly,' there's a difference. The difference of a word, a word's a lot. It could be 'stop' or 'inhaler,' it could even be 'ambulance.'"

Esa-Pekka uses his words with extreme precision. I am here tonight to help the conversation, to help goad in some discreet way Alex Ross, to have him unravel for us his experience of knowing the work of Esa-Pekka Salonen for about fifteen years and for

having interviewed him many times. I'm here also to make sure that the conversation moves nicely along between Barbara Isenberg, who has written a spectacular book of interviews with Frank Gehry and it is a great pleasure to bring them now to the stage. Alex Ross, Barbara Isenberg, and Frank Gehry.

**(applause)**

**FRANK GEHRY:** There's people out there.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Barbara, start us off.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Okay, talk among yourselves for one more second. I wanted to start with this morning in the *New York Times* there was an advertisement for UCLA which featured Eli Broad speaking about the great value of UCLA and Los Angeles as a great place for artists, and it struck me as just the perfect way to start an evening in which we're talking about artists who live and work in Los Angeles. So if it's a wonderful place for artists, it's obviously a wonderful place for composers and architects. So what I'd like to do is start with our architect and ask—you were raised in Toronto, you came to Los Angeles in, we know, when you were seventeen years old. I'd like to start with what you found there and then we'll sort of come forward a little.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Scared the hell out of me. Well, it wasn't great times that I'd got to because my father had lost everything, which wasn't that much, but he did, he lost it, and

so we both became truck drivers. He worked for a soda pop company and I worked for a furniture company, and—but L.A. was a lot rawer, I remember parts of Sunset Boulevard were—it's 1947—were still dirt roads, were not paved. I can't remember which streets weren't. I vaguely remember that the end of Wilshire Boulevard wasn't that finished a place.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** And what about the light? You're always talking about the light.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, the light was startling. It was very different. It was—it was soft and clear and but, you know, I was having a rough time, so I didn't—I only got into the light later.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Okay, Let's zip ahead then, let's zip ahead to when you were starting out as an architect, then, and sort of—Los Angeles at that time when you were starting out was a great place, there was a lot of freedom. Can you talk about kind of the carnival-like atmosphere and how Los Angeles struck you when you first got there?

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, the construction of what they called dingbat houses was like a carpet going across the land and everywhere you went there were wood studs and they were putting up these homes, which I finally realized looked better before they put the—finished them. And that influenced me. That had a big—I still resonate to that kind of stuff, and in fact the Serpentine Gallery we did in London last few months ago comes

from some of that. There was a lot of freedom because the—nobody on the East Coast cared about—much about the architects on the West Coast, and we didn't have all the interarchitect, you know, sibling rivalry, because everybody was so spread out that you never saw anybody. But architecture school had the art school and ceramics. In fact that's how I got into architecture, from ceramics, because the ceramics teacher, I think he paid for my first class, but I'm not sure, but I couldn't have afforded it, so he must have.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Which then began your lifetime affection for artists, didn't it? Affection, respect for—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I already loved art before that. There was an art school, there were people painting, there were people making sculptures. They were doing—they had classes where they had the nude stand there. I went into those a few times. **(laughter)** But some great old guys, Francis De Erdely and Keith Crown, I don't know if these names are—but Glen Lukens was my ceramics teacher. And my ceramics—the work I did was terrible, so that's why he said, get out of here and go over there—

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Tell how about when Glen Lukens was building a house with Rafael Soriano and you were still not sure kind of where you were going and you went to visit that house and saw the great architect Raphael Soriano in action. Do you remember that?

**FRANK GEHRY:** Yeah, absolutely. So Raphael Soriano was from the island of Rhodes, he had a broken nose, he wore all black, like I am, although this is blue, I think, and he had an orange tie and a little beret. And he was building a steel-frame house—he was a very Miesian architect, he was very purist, and he used to play Bach and said that that’s what his influence was, and so I heard him talk and I’d seen some of his work, but I went to the site, and this guy’s there with his little beret and people are erecting steel and he’s telling, you know, “move that over there, move that over there, move that”—and I must have—my eyes must have lit up because Glen called me into his office the next day and he said, “you gotta go there.”

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** *There* being architecture school. Well, maybe we should go back to your grandmother, then, let’s go over your grandmother for a second, because when you were a child in Toronto and your grandmother—shall I lead you in or?

**FRANK GEHRY:** My grandmother I had been told—they left Poland in 1913 from the town of Lodz and she was, as I was told, now this is folklore, she ran her family had a foundry and she was a foreman. And it was believable, she was a tough babe. And my grandfather had a hardware store. And so—and she had a woodstove, that’s how they cooked, on a woodstove, and she would get wood shavings from the cabinet shop, where they were making moldings and stuff, so they had a lot of scraps, they were very interesting looking, I mean they weren’t just little blocks, they were curves, and she would bring them home and before she would use them she would spill them on the floor with me and start playing. And we made cities, like freeways, before there was—I mean,

I didn't know what I was doing, but I always remember that it was—after I remember that as a license to play when you're an adult and my good friend Milton Wechsler talked about that a lot in the time I spent with him, that creative play or play when you're a kid is a preamble to work and the spirit of creative play is valuable and a valuable thing to do, to think about.

And I think, you know, you go to meetings with businesspeople and high-powered financiers and you often hear them say, “Well, why don't we come in Saturday and play around with this idea?” So people think that way, I think not just artists, but everybody. And the freer you are and the people who are successful, I think more likely they are to be relevant or to come up with things that are relevant to the moment because they're a response to the moment instead of premanufactured kind of ideas, that there is a kind of free association that pays off because it's immediate, and if you trust it, I think it's—it's incredible.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** There was a segment of the *Simpsons* which was about Frank Gehry which actually addressed this point where he received—in this particular segment, he received an invitation from the elders of Springfield—

**FRANK GEHRY:** From Marge.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** From Marge, Marge Simpson, asking him to come in and design a building. And in this segment, he looks at the letter, goes Unh!, crumples it up,

throws it in the trash, does a double-take, and says, “wait a minute,” pulls it out of the trash, and looks at it and says, “this is pretty good,” right?

**FRANK GEHRY:** No, I said, “Frank Gehry, you’re a genius,” **(laughter)** and then Julie Kavner, I think her name is, Marge, trained me for ten minutes how to say that.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** You were great, you said it perfectly.

**FRANK GEHRY:** It was a line they gave me. But it dogs me now, people say that all the time. I crumple up—and that’s how everybody thinks I design.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I was wondering if that sense of play that Frank Gehry was talking about you find it in Esa-Pekka Salonen as well?

**ALEX ROSS:** I think so, I wanted to jump in with a question about to what extent were you aware of this amazing world of the European émigrés in Los Angeles? Sounds like you were arriving at the tail end of this golden age, and as a music person—

**FRANK GEHRY:** Schoenberg—

**ALEX ROSS:** Schoenberg and Stravinsky, was this—

**FRANK GEHRY:** Thomas Mann—

**ALEX ROSS:** Were you conscious of these and did they sort of shape your sense of the Los Angeles landscape?

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, the artist Wally Berman was in constant contact with Thomas Mann, there was a lot of talk about him, I never met him. I used to go to Stravinsky things at UCLA. I think I was at one of the last concerts he conducted, with Robert Kraft—Yeah, I was aware of it. I don't know what else to say. I went to concerts at UCLA—

**ALEX ROSS:** When Esa-Pekka Salonen came to Los Angeles, he was very much, of course, conscious of these relationships. There was even a moment when Stravinsky's old house was up for sale—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** He didn't want to live there—

**ALEX ROSS:** He thought of buying it and then he was walking around—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I had the same thing with Charles Eames's office—I almost moved into—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Why didn't you?

**FRANK GEHRY:** I couldn't.

**ALEX ROSS:** Esa-Pekka said that he when he walked into one room and there were impressions on the carpet and this was where Stravinsky's piano was, and he found that rather eerie as though Stravinsky was lurking in the house, so he didn't do it. But I think this is a story of so many people arriving from faraway places in Los Angeles and there is certainly a remarkable transformation that can happen as well as discovering these legacies of—transplanted legacies of Europe—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I delivered Max Steiner's breakfast nook.

**ALEX ROSS:** Great film composer Max Steiner.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What did he have for breakfast?

**FRANK GEHRY:** I don't know.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** And you created a breakfast nook for Roy Rogers and Dale Evans.

**FRANK GEHRY:** No, no, I know, but that's an old story. I've never told this one before, I've saved it for tonight. I think in my experience with Esa-Pekka he goes through the same agony that I go through, but he has to—when he faces his composition periods, he has to face it alone. At least I have a bunch of kids to play with that I can—but both of us avoid it, we're in great denial. Very similar. He does all kinds of things—even I suspect, he threw his back out. Not quite, but—I think circling the field because you're afraid of it, it's such an unknown thing you're going into territory that you're exploring.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** How do you do that? How do you circle the field?

**FRANK GEHRY:** I call people on the phone. I make up things I have to do in the office to clean up. I'm very tidy. Megan is here, she can testify. I tidy up constantly, I move things and my office doesn't look tidy—I mean it's not like Richard Meier's office where everything is—I'm a little bit messier, but I do that. It's a denial thing, I guess.

**ALEX ROSS:** Can you talk a little bit about your experiences early on with music, it's a leading into the question of Disney Hall and how this came into being and just—your experiences as a concertgoer and with concert halls and what satisfied you and what didn't satisfy you and what gap you wanted Disney Hall to fill—

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, when I was a kid, my mother played the violin, and she used to take me to Massey Hall in Toronto and I remember the conductor Sir Ernest McMillan and he used to ride his bicycle in the park, which I saw on the way to school, so I used to

see him, he was a very friendly guy. But I think that was important, that it was kind of accessible. He made it accessible to somebody my age. My mother took me there, I can't remember, Jann Kapur, he's a tenor, I'm dragging it out, and she also got me into—took me to art galleries as well. When I was in college at USC I had a close—I have a close friend, still a close friend, Greg Walsh, he wasn't a concert pianist, but he can't play, he's a very accomplished pianist and he had a great teacher in Pasadena, and Marylee High, why do I remember names like that, I wouldn't have remembered in a million years, and he talked often about her and we would work together on projects, like, you know, separately, but as company, but he loved music and in fact he took me to hear Rosalyn Turek to play the Goldberg Variations and you know my name was Goldberg was a kid and now I've changed it to the Gehry Variations.

**ALEX ROSS:** Great. That's catching on. Slowly.

**FRANK GEHRY:** But he was instrumental in just keeping it in my space constantly and we'd go to concerts and you know it was mostly—it never got into the new stuff, it was always kind of Mozart and Bach and Haydn and I don't really remember him getting me into Mahler, though we did, because Stravinsky was in town and because Schoenberg was in town, we did get into some of that.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Can you talk about what happens when you're sitting in a concert hall, kind of what the music does for you and—

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, it depends.

**ALEX ROSS:** On what concert hall?

**FRANK GEHRY:** What concert hall? I fantasize. You know, I design, I fantasize. It's more of an inspirational thing. But I pick up the structure, which I can hear the coda and it repeats and all that, I'm aware of that and as I've gotten older I'm more aware of the influence of certain composers on other people and I can now see Esa-Pekka's—some of his influence is from Sibelius, which I think is—is it more recent that he's—

**ALEX ROSS:** Well, I think what he would say is that as a young man in Finland, Sibelius was this absolutely towering presence and national symbol, the most famous Finn who had ever lived, and so as an avant-garde youth, he ran as far as he could in the opposite direction but has slowly come to terms with Sibelius and has sort of understood the radicalism as well as the conservative aspects. But isn't that an interesting question about—this whole question in the twentieth century, I think the same debates happen in architecture as in music—who is modern, who is conservative, which side are you on? And I think somehow with your work and with—

**FRANK GEHRY:** But it's become more interesting in music recently, in the last ten years—

**ALEX ROSS:** Well, I think a lot of people have sort of just moved beyond—

**FRANK GEHRY:** It's more exciting, I don't know.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I wonder if a musician would say it's more interesting in architecture?

**ALEX ROSS:** Probably. There's always envy.

**FRANK GEHRY:** I don't know, maybe.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** It's in contemporary art as well, you know that one of the things that—

**FRANK GEHRY:** But this seems more of an awakening—and it seems like we went through that, postwar.

**ALEX ROSS:** The synthesis of all the radical sounds, all the radical ideas that were put forward, with the tradition and I think especially the Romantic element of nineteenth-century music being folded together with these more radical sounds. But I think, I mean, when I go to Disney Hall, it's a Romantic place, it fits with Beethoven and with Mahler—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I always think of it as an eighteenth, nineteenth century—

**ALEX ROSS:** As well as it's very apt for Stravinsky and Ruiz and John Adams and the most modern music, and I would say that there is a sort of double-sidedness there.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Did you try to create a Romantic space?

**FRANK GEHRY:** No, I tried to create—I mean, we should talk about Ernest Fleischmann, too, in a minute, don't forget, because he was my real mentor in classical music and he was the director of the L.A. Phil when we started Disney Hall and I'd worked with him for twenty-five years at the Hollywood Bowl, so I knew the terrain, I knew that the orchestra had to hear each other, that was an important thing, because you know at the Hollywood Bowl, they could not. And one of the things we did with those tubes and balls and things was to neutralize the effect of that rainbow shape so they could hear each other, so I knew that was important and I knew from theater, or even from giving a talk like this that the relationship between the person talking and the audience is really important, and these lights are terrible because they break that, but and I knew that if they heard each other they played better and Yasu Toyota, our acoustician, said that if—that it would take a couple years for the orchestra to find its sound, and I think that he was pretty close to accurate, that they started to understand each other and play better. And then the thing was to make a room that the people that were listening felt a relationship with the orchestra and the orchestra felt a relationship with the people so that the music was better, they respond because it's better, and they respond because they feel it, they play better, da da da da da, so it's that simple, you make a room that as best you

can it creates a sense of intimacy, so one of the things that a lot of the former patrons of the L.A.—of the orchestra were mad about is I took out all continental seating. The continental seating would have made the space bigger and by taking it out we created more intimacy and that pays off a lot in the feeling of it.

**ALEX ROSS:** What I feel as I—what I first feel when I walk is a slightly negative feeling, which is a gnawing envy that I have to go all the way to L.A. and can't go to Lincoln Center or somewhere else close by to have this experience—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I'd be happy to come and do one here—

**ALEX ROSS:** But it's—yeah, what Ernest Fleischmann, the sort of revolution that Ernest Fleischmann started when he was running the L.A. Philharmonic was, you know, we have this great tradition, let's not abandon it, remain absolutely in touch with the great tradition, but try to create an orchestra and a space that is also very hospitable to the newest sounds and to create a sort of—a continuity from the past to the present and also yet there's a question of intimacy, bringing the audience closer to the music, don't put it up on this sort of a pedestal with a proscenium and so on and yet to preserve a somewhat mystical atmosphere and not to make it plain and nothing vulgar about it, and all these things are what Esa-Pekka Salonen would say as well, I think, about the place that he wants classical music to have in the society, to be sort of in the midst of things, not up on a pedestal, and yet to retain its special aura. And all those things somehow amazingly this hall does, and it sounds great and it looks beautiful.

**FRANK GEHRY:** You know, the orchestra is made up of rugged individualists, right, some of them have garlic with their food, and some of them do funny things. They are funny, right? And some of them have figured out how to play footsie with the stagehands so they get their seat moved and over time that the—the organization of the orchestra on stage disintegrates into a kind of a messy thing and I picked up on the messiness and I hadn't seen that in other orchestras and I asked Esa-Pekka about it and he said, "yes we have to do something about it," and Ernest got us Royce Hall for a day, and we moved the orchestra over there and Esa-Pekka was also teaching me how if he can change the room, the acoustic by how he conducts, so there's a—and you know, it's obvious a musician can do that, right? I mean, Gergiev came into L.A. Phil, first concert, no rehearsal, in playing the Shostakovich he nailed it—so the intuition and it's obvious that they would have that so they—we moved the orchestra around at Royce and then we measured it and built risers in the Chandler exactly like that and the orchestra went and sat on that, and Martin Burkheimer, the former critic, who never gave the L.A. Phil anything nice, said, "I don't know what happened, but it sounded so much better," and it was—you know, it was obvious. They were playing tight, and it worked. Within the next few weeks, they started stuff, and—but we watched it and monitored it, some of them were, you know, they were legitimate, they were going to fall off the edge and stuff. But we modified it a couple of times, and that's what's in Disney Hall.

It was a lot of—but because Esa-Pekka is who he is and because Ernest is who he is and we had a lot of freedom, free flow with orchestra, with the stagehands, that were willing

to play with us and the normal fights between acoustician and architect didn't exist in this case, it was totally wonderful. When I met Dr. Nagata, who was Toyota's boss and mentor it was with Ernest in Berlin at the Kempinski. We met with Lothar Kramer, who was von Karajan's acoustician, and who's the architect—Scharoun was the architect—

**ALEX ROSS:** Who designed the Philharmonie—

**FRANK GEHRY:** The Philharmonie was at that point kind of the best example and we went there a lot, we went there a lot—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Did you go there to learn—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I went there to learn about the people thing, because every time I went I met people easily—if I went alone—not picking up, it was funny, I never experienced it. And it has industrial pipe columns, handrails, concrete floors, all of the things the L.A. guys thought I was going to do to L.A. and they didn't want me to do but there was a thing that Scharoun had about people that that hall had and the library across the road by Scharoun, I went to it, and it also had that feeling, and the chamber hall, which was built after Scharoun's death, didn't have it—same designer, you know, same language, but it doesn't have the feeling, so there's something in that that I knew and you know it's not something you quantify, you just kind of hope you can do it, but—

Meeting with Kramer, he said the hall should be like that with the orchestra at the wider part, and Toyota said the hall should be like that with the orchestra at the narrow part, and each one told me how greatly they respected the other one, and I said, “well, what do I do with that information now?” **(laughter)** and they got into the biggest fight over it, the Japanese guy won because he was so polite, **(laughter)** but I think it’s a feeling thing and I think Ernest understood it, Esa-Pekka understood it, Toyota understood it.

And there are wonderful tapes that nobody’s seen of—that the Getty made and someday they should see the light of day, I hope, where every time a musician came to L.A. to play with the Philharmonic, I hijacked them to the office, and we had a one-to-ten model where you could go into it and we put Pierre Boulez in there one day and I brought him a sandwich for lunch and he was still in there and he came out and he came out and said, it’s going to work, no problem and Simon Rattle, same and—

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Zubin Mehta—

**FRANK GEHRY:** Zubin.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** And you built a model—when he was building all the models, he also built a model of Esa-Pekka hall in Sweden, so that Esa-Pekka could look at the two models, the model of Disney Hall and compare it in size—

**FRANK GEHRY:** So he could understand the language, right. I did that. He was great to work with, this kid. I mean, he was—I met him when he was twenty-three.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And he still is a kid in some way, he's somehow—he's still cool. I wonder, Alex, how does Esa-Pekka Salonen maintain his cool, I mean, how does he remain so cool?

**FRANK GEHRY:** It's Finland.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You think it's Finland? Everybody in Finland is cool?

**FRANK GEHRY:** He said recently, somewhere, I don't know if you were there when he said that, he said when you praise a Finn, he looks at his shoes, and if he's an egomaniac Finn, he looks at *your* shoes.

**(laughter)**

**ALEX ROSS:** He is, I think, unusual among conductors and I think the thing about him is he wasn't sort of *born* to be a conductor, he didn't *dream* of being a conductor, he really did sort of blunder into it and just sort of showed a knack for it before he really intended to make a career of it. There is that self-effacing quality, just sort of not taking this whole maestro business too seriously and dedicating oneself to the music and to his own work and not sort of participating in this sort of grandiose fantasy of elevating

yourself and I think that's very important. As well as I think—yeah, but there's also—there's a real determination there, to—at a certain point it would have been so easy for him to just continue going along with his international conducting career and sort of let the composition fall by the wayside, and I think in the last ten years his determination to put that back front and center and to carve out the time—very difficult to do amid all his other commitments—to write these big pieces, piano concerto, violin concerto, and *Wing on Wing*, and I think—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Which I'd love you to play, but a second before you play it, I read a piece of yours that you wrote in 1994 about Esa-Pekka Salonen and in a way then he was already so clear about what his vision, mission was—

**ALEX ROSS:** Right. Yeah, to shift the repertory more toward the twentieth century without abandoning the tradition, to put classical music back into the general cultural conversation. People know modern art, they go to galleries, they know the great architects of the modern era, they go to art films, and classical music is just sort of missing from that menu for a lot of educated people. And he was saying, we can bring it back, and we can do it by emphasizing precisely what so many people are scared of—the twentieth century and contemporary work but by choosing and curating the programs very carefully we can show how Beethoven relates to Mahler and how Stravinsky relates to Ligeti and to bring it all together. So this piece, *Wing on Wing*, was written for the first season of Disney Hall and it is a piece that was written very much with I think the acoustics of the space in mind as well as the shapes, the flowing contours, of the space

and as if that's not enough, to relate it to the subject matter, I think you will hear a familiar voice in the passage we'll hear a tape that he incorporated and electronically modified to some extent, weaving it into the orchestral fabric.

**(music)**

**ALEX ROSS:** So what was your reaction when you discovered that Esa-Pekka—

**FRANK GEHRY:** You didn't have the part where I said, "Why the fish?"

**ALEX ROSS:** I think that was right at the beginning, "Why the fish?"

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, he hijacked me for this. He said he needed my voice and that nobody would recognize me and they would scramble it and so I went to a sound studio with him and we talked and then I went to the concert. There were two coloraturas, I mean, you didn't hear the whole thing, and at one I point I say very loudly, more loudly—he must have cut it out of the recording, because at the first concert I say—I hear my—I'm sitting there, thinking it's fun to be in a piece, you know—and I hear little snippets of my voice, which was fine, nobody—I didn't care about that. And then all of a sudden I hear, "Whyyyy the fish?" **(laughter)** I wanted to crawl under the—

**ALEX ROSS:** What was that? What were you saying? What were you saying about—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I don't know—he asked me, I don't know, why I bothered with, why I was working with fish shapes and things—“Why the fish?” And so when the orchestra plays that in rehearsal, when that comes on they say, “Because there's no beef.”

**(laughter)** And when they play it in concert, they mouth it. **(laughter)** Somehow, you got rid of the part that was embarrassing.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Barbara, how did you come about writing this book and what was it like over these years interviewing Frank Gehry?

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** I think this evening is fairly typical. It—I actually was at Disney Hall, this was in December 04 and I was there for the *Tristan and Isolde* that Esa-Pekka was conducting. And at the intermission, Frank Gehry said, “Could you give me a call? I have a little something I want to discuss with you.” So I said, “Yes.” And then I called him the next day and I went to see him. And he at that time was seventy-five years old, may I give you age away? He is now eighty years old and he was thinking about his legacy, he wanted to do an oral history and at that point I had interviewed him for years. I had followed the progress on Disney Hall through the *L.A. Times*. I'd written about the building at MIT for *Esquire*. He was a major figure in my last book. And I thought, “I'd love to do this, I love interviewing him,” and then as we progressed with our interviews, they sort of took on a life of their own and became this book.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A life of their own, meaning—

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Well, they were sort of like an oral history to begin with. But we would meet at his office I would say every—sometimes it would be like every week, sometimes it would be three months in between, and he has a studio in the Gehry Partners office and in that studio is a large conference table, which is filled with whatever is on his mind at that given moment. It could be a model that he’s working on. It could be—the first time I went in he had the prototype of his new Cloud lamp—do you remember this? Probably not, okay. And there’d be photographs of a building under construction and then there would be always paper and pencil. Because as we started to talk, his memory is a visual memory and he would start to remember something—am I right? Well, I’ll keep going.

**FRANK GEHRY:** I remember this story all different, but I’ll tell my side of it.

**(laughter)**

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Okay, we’ll each tell it our own way. But he would start to talk about like an experience from his childhood or about the neighborhood in Toronto where he grew up and he’d kind of say, “well, wait a minute,” and then he’d take paper and pencil and start drawing it for me. And at some point I said, “We can’t do this, this is prose, we need to put this into prose, into words.” And the other thing about our process is that I would come in all prepared to talk about Bilbao or Disney Hall or the building, the Weisman Gallery or inspiration or whatever and I would walk in and that was not

what he wanted to talk about that day. So it was a constant kind of reshaping of a conversation.

**FRANK GEHRY:** So here's how I remember it.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Uh-oh.

**(laughter)**

**FRANK GEHRY:** Ernest Fleischmann, the guy we talked about, had an oral history done at UCLA and he started bugging me that I should have that done, and then Milton Wechsler, my friend, said "Do you ever write down these stories, that what happens in your life?" And I said "No," and he said, "You should, just for someday over the rainbow." And then so I had another friend who urged me to have an oral history in case there was a chance in the future to write a biography and he thought that I do should that. I went to the UCLA thing and met them and it was too toxic for me, the way they set it up, and I wasn't going to be able to do that, what they wanted to do, and I was at a funeral and I was sitting next to Barbara, I don't remember whose funeral.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you remember?

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** No. We knew a lot—we actually know a lot of the same people. In that case we *knew* that particular person, who is no longer with us.

**(laughter)**

**FRANK GEHRY:** But it was a big funeral, they had a lot of people there and I started talking to her at intermission. **(laughter)** And said, “Do you know how I could get an oral history done that would be not toxic?” And she said, “I’ll do it.” That’s the way I remember it.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** I like his story, let’s make that the official story.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Yeah, it’s probably a little of each, but I knew her really well and felt comfortable with her persona, and the way she writes, the way she thinks, her—the—she has breadth beyond architecture is in all the arts and it was comfortable for me to talk to her. I had no idea we were going to do this, but—and I was shocked when we started doing it, but—and I’m happy with it, I’m happy for Barbara that we did it. I don’t know. I don’t want to sign them all, though. **(laughter)** It’s interesting to ruminate, to rummage through some of those days. When I was in the army there was a music connection, too. Henry Lewis was in my company in basic training—Henry Lewis, he married Marilyn Horne and he conducted the Army’s symphony orchestra, it was 1955.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You spent a fair amount of time talking in your book also about the whole notion of process and Frank’s process with the work. I think that’s—

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** The process and the inspiration, which is sort of what I was touching on a little bit with the *Simpsons* story, because one of the things that I find most exciting now and which I've found most exciting all these years is how everything can be inspiration. The cover of the book is a picture of a building in Düsseldorf. It's a three-part building. This particular building complex in Düsseldorf had the influence of two things—do you remember—it was the Giorgio Morandi bottle villages and a picture of Madonna and child with the saints. Those were among the many influences for this particular—these were sketches—he sketches. But why don't you talk about sort of the notion of how you sketch and then it becomes a model and how you sketch again.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Since the people have been publishing my sketches, I've stopped sketching, I've become self-conscious.

**(laughter)**

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Now, wait, that's not true, 'cause at one point when we were talking—I can correct you, right? So, at one point we were chatting and I said, “well, how long does it take to do a sketch?” So Frank Gehry looks at his wristwatch and goes, “okay,” and then he sketches and he goes, “Fifteen seconds.”

**(laughter)**

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well and they're—it's free association with hand-eye coordination. I think it's crucial to be able to do that. And the computer coming in now is wrecking it a little bit for the younger kids, in architecture school, they're not drawing as much, they're losing some of that. I think some of the schools are aware of it now, and are creating drawing programs because, you know, it's immediate, hand-eye coordination, you're thinking, it's a shorthand. It looks like a scribble to me when it's done, so it really looks like a scribble to everybody else, but then when the building gets built, you can recognize it.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** I mean, an example would be the InterActive Corp building in Chelsea across from the Chelsea Pier when I interviewed Barry Diller about that building and the original sketch and he said the original sketch was almost exactly the building that was built. Now I know there was a lot of anguish in between that sketch and the building, but there are various sketches—I think that's what's particularly interesting is that there is a sketch that's sort of immediate but then there are all those informed sketches. What are they informed by?

**FRANK GEHRY:** I always think about them as like the slaves—you know Michelangelo's chipping away, he knows that thing's in there and he's going to find it but then I think it's very similar. I know something's there and then I dig for it through these drawings. Some of them are—like the first three or four drawings of the Bilbao building are very close to what got built, but I wasn't aware of it until after the building was built, so I didn't take that drawing and then say “build this.” I started with models

and ideas that came out of those drawings and then I had to suffer—it's a Jewish thing—**(laughter)** that you have to *suffer* and you go through this suffering, and then you sometimes you go back, and often you continue, you know, but there is always a relationship when you see the, you know, hundred drawings or so for every project, you can see the thread of the thinking.

And I'll draw a bunch of stuff, then I'll talk to the kids to make models and I'll sort of direct them, but I don't look and say, "here do this," I just put the drawing away and the thoughts are in my head and I start down them down a path and then when I see the beginnings of the models, I go back, when I'm alone I sketch again from the knowledge of that and what I'm doing is trying to understand the program, the site, the budget, all those practical things that so it's like a—I'd say it's like a crystal. So it's I keep it liquid as long as I can, so as I gather information and it starts to inform the project and that changes—you know, you're working on something for six months and a lot of things change, a lot of things in every area, every facet of the building's life and its clients and its budgets and the people involved and I try to respond to all of that as best I can, and so I keep that fluid for as long as I can. It frustrates people, sometimes.

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** And then you start over.

**FRANK GEHRY:** And then I sometimes start over, but I usually stay within the normal gestation period that's normal to an architect, architectural practice, but I can usually do it. Now I can do it a little quicker.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In your book, you ask Frank a question about libraries, and, Frank, you say that libraries are very important for you, that they're a place of silence, a place of reflection. I wonder if you could say something about why you— We're in one. And maybe you could say something even about this particular library.

**FRANK GEHRY:** No, I don't want to say anything about that.

**(laughter)**

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** You could talk about your library, the library you built in Hollywood, you know, comment on that?

**FRANK GEHRY:** That was funny. It looks like a fortress and—because Hollywood was—when I was doing that, the Hillside Strangler had just had been found using that library. It's not a very good—

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** Then lets go back—let's go back to the New York Public Library, it seems like a nice, safe place here. Let's talk about this library and the silence, what about the silence and the—of the library.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, there's not much refuge where you get complete silence unless you go into a anechoic chamber somewhere and books tend to absorb all of the ambient

sound so it's kind of anechoic of I don't know, I think any library it's like discovering what you don't know about, just start one place and you know, like I was studying Nijinsky once when I was in college. I was fascinated with his dance and the music and Diaghilev and that whole thing I think because I met Mary Brand, who was—she was an assistant or had something to do with Diaghilev, so it became very interesting, so I went to the library and I just started picking up books on Nijinsky and it leads you on a wild trail if you follow it of the existential thinking which was around the time of Camus wrote *L'Étranger*, so it's like discovery of picking up threads and information. I usually don't talk about this, it's kind of—I don't know how to talk about it. It's not because it's overly private, it's just you know I'm late years now, my wife can read a book, she reads a couple of books a week and remembers every bloody thing in detail and I don't, so it's frustrating.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You don't read or you don't remember?

**FRANK GEHRY:** I read a lot, but I don't remember a lot. I read his book, that's how we got together.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You've interviewed Esa-Pekka Salonen now for and written about him for the last fifteen, seventeen years and I'm wondering now that he's leaving his post at the Los Angeles Philharmonic and going off to London how you perceive his evolution from the early days when you wrote about him in the early

nineties, maybe even before and now and where he found the orchestra when he arrived and where he's leaving it now, with Disney Hall.

**ALEX ROSS:** You've known him longer than I have, but—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's a different orchestra.

**ALEX ROSS:** Yeah, well he refined the sound. What I say about the L.A. Philharmonic and can argue endlessly which orchestra belongs in the top five or the top ten or the top seventeen and which plays Brahms' Second better and which plays Brahms' Third better and how do the horns compare and all this and that—you know, all the technical level. And you know by these standards, the L.A. Phil is an extremely good orchestra, you know, sort of in the top tier. But when you look beyond that to there is a vision, what is the purpose of all this practice and sort of perfecting the details sort of what it's all about Alfie? And I think he created a sense of mission and a vision for that orchestra that made it the most interesting orchestra in America, maybe in the world. It made news year after year. I had to go out there to see what was going on. Festivals, premieres, *Tristan and Isolde* with Peter Sellers's multimedia projects, the Disney Hall moment, and the magnificent growth and transformation that happened there. So it's an incredible story, but I think your hall made that final leap possible.

**FRANK GEHRY:** You know, it really is sold out every night that hall, and the seats are filled, and it's amazing.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you have a perception what it's due to that the hall is so inhabited and sold out, is there a reason for it?

**FRANK GEHRY:** That's what I said, they can feel each other, there's a response. I mean, I've had longtime concertgoers who are Philharmonic patrons for years tell me that they used to buy the tickets and would only go to a third of the concerts. Since Esa-Pekka and the new hall, they come to all the concerts, so there's very little no-show stuff even in the so-called fancy seats where the board people or the people that are supporters—they are usually filled, you don't find them empty.

**ALEX ROSS:** What were your feelings about his final concert on April 19<sup>th</sup>, Stravinsky?

**FRANK GEHRY:** I went twice, so the second time I closed my eyes and listened to music. The first time Peter Sellers was a little startling, but I love what he does so it was just—a bit overwhelming, but he moved the chorus around. They circled the orchestra for the songs and it created a sound in the hall that I hadn't heard. It was amazing. Bloody amazing. That the emotion—everybody, all of us felt very emotional about Esa-Pekka's leaving, as we do, and it's—I wish he was here and I'm going to miss him a lot, except he promised to come back and see us from time to time. The new guy I've met. And it's going to be a new experience, a whole different—Dudamel is young. Frankly, he's conducted here so people here know him. His repertoire is different, he's going to do a whole different thing, it's not the same. And he loves architecture, so that's good. He

likes architecture, period. He follows it and so he's and he's outgoing where EP is like this, this guy is (exploding noise), he's a tsunami, it's a different kind of feeling and so I think you know for L.A. to have a Latin conductor will do things that Ernest Fleischmann tried to do from the beginning, which is to bring that community which lives around the Hall into the Hall, and this might help do that. They've already started a program like the Sistema that comes he comes from in Venezuela, they've already started an incubator system like that in Los Angeles, so—

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** I'm just remembering back to when Esa-Pekka first came to Los Angeles and I remember interviewing some of the members of the orchestra who were not entirely welcoming. I remember one violinist telling me, "Well, you know, I've been in this orchestra since before he was born." But, if you contrast that with the way he *left* the orchestra, can you describe the way—I mean, your piece in the *New Yorker* about his final performance was like reliving it again so could you just kind of sum up your prose, just a little bit, because I thought you really captured what he—what Esa-Pekka had captured all those years at the Philharmonic.

**ALEX ROSS:** Well, I think that the really striking thing about that final concert was he could have very easily gone out with some enormous noise, a big Mahler or Beethoven's Ninth, something that would sort of train the spotlight on him and instead he created this fascinating evening in which Peter Sellers's production of the Stravinsky pieces was playing off of the architecture of the hall and people were moving around, so it embraced everyone who had been involved—you and the orchestra and everyone he'd been

working with to the point where somewhere toward the end I had to remind myself that this was his final concert and this was really about him, you were so swept up—

**FRANK GEHRY:** He didn't even want to take a bow by himself.

**ALEX ROSS:** And so he kept dragging people onstage with him during the final bows and then finally there was rhythmic clapping from the audience and he was forced to take his solo bow and then this really emotional moment happened where the violinists and violists who had not played in the Symphony of Psalms, which has only cellos and double basses for strings, brought—came back onstage and some of the women were holding flowers and that was when people started really breaking down in tears and he was hugging each member of the orchestra and the point is in the classical music world, players are really not supposed to be particularly emotive onstage, and especially orchestral musicians, you know, you keep cool. And particularly if it's a conductor, you know, there's a certain distance there, one of respect and also of a bit of skepticism and so on toward that whole profession and it was so different, you know, and it was so intimate that I almost felt as someone from New York, I was intruding on a family affair.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Yeah, it really felt like that.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I love that line where you say, "Salonen beamed, blushed, cried a little and mouthed a phrase that looked like, 'Let's go get a drink.'" "

**FRANK GEHRY:** That's what he always did.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Say "Let's go get a drink?"

**FRANK GEHRY:** He'd go in the dressing room after the concert and that's—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Well, before we go and get a drink, a few questions there are about twenty here, we'll have about two or three. A question for you, Frank, from a BBC radio reporter here tonight.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Oh my God.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We can skip it. But I'll read it nevertheless. The Guggenheim Museum celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year. Were you inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic design when you conceived your own Guggenheim building in Bilbao? Is there a unifying theme or spirit between these two structures and your next Guggenheim in Dubai?

**FRANK GEHRY:** Abu Dhabi.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Abu Dhabi, see you got it wrong.

**FRANK GEHRY:** Not Dubai. Well, as a student I studied Frank Lloyd Wright very closely. I visited as many buildings as I could. I loved his work. I didn't like his politics, I didn't and so I never attended any of his lectures and I went to Taliesin after leaving Harvard, driving back cross-country, I had a wife and two kids. The flag was up and he was there. And they wanted a dollar for each of us to go in, so I told him to shove it and left. **(laughter)**

I, you know, I don't think—I think the Guggenheim Museum was compromised. It wasn't *completely* as he wanted it. It was antithetical to contemporary art. He hated contemporary art. He was making tokonomas to Japanese Edo period screens. He was—so there wasn't much to emulate except the bravura of it and that he couldn't have done it exactly the way he wanted. I think he did a parking garage like that as a predecessor to that building. So it didn't influence, I don't think it influenced me but having said that, I mean Diane Waldman was curator there for twenty-five years, and she loved—and she never complained about it so it shows you you could, you know, there were some magnificent shows there over the years that *worked*. They made them work.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It brings me to the next question. At what point does the form of a building interfere with the art it houses? How is this different in a museum and a concert hall?

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, it's the same issue, isn't it? It's the audience, it's the relationship between the audience and the artist, the work, and so there's a certain amount of comfort that has to happen. People have to—I mean, you shouldn't—you shouldn't be punished to go look at a work of art.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It should only hurt slightly.

(laughter)

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, sometimes. I think that the—when Bilbao was finished I got that rap, the rap was, “Oh, yeah, the building's terrific and it's toxic for art and it doesn't matter, people are going to come anyway.” And that infected a lot of artists. In fact, recently Cy Twombly had a retrospective there, and he refused to have the show there for a long time and Carmen Jimenez, one of really, arguably one of the best curators on the planet, convinced him to do it and then he loved it and has raved about it said it was one of the best places to show his work. And she's done many shows there and said that that was a bad rap and other curators have said that, too, so I think—and I don't, I mean, Bob Rauschenberg, who hated architects, didn't “shhhh” like that. And I was friends for years but I did a little gallery for Gemini and he hated it, so he didn't talk to me for ten years, and the day Bilbao was opened there he was in the atrium with a blue pea coat and I thought I don't give a damn if you're here, I'm not going to let you ruin my day, so I walked around trying to hide from him and he caught me and he grabbed me and he actually kissed me on the lips and loved it, so we rebuilt our friendship, but I haven't had

much kickback. Jim Dine liked it. Helen Frankenthaler. And these are people that would normally like the white cube and the sort of faceless thing. I think that the faceless thing, when carried too far, becomes a perfection pedestal that interferes with the vision, the seeing of art, and it is more intrusive in the end and you see it in some shows.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** There's some kickback here, there are about seven questions about this—I will boil it down to one. People want to know what more plans you might have for New York City, particularly in the context of a March comment you made about the Atlantic Yards where you say “I don't think they will happen.” And people want to know what do you mean by that?

**FRANK GEHRY:** That was misread. I probably said something like that. I'm always you know the glass is half-full. It's going ahead, it is—there is work been going on ahead. Every developer in the world is struggling with the times we're in and reassessing everything and a lot of that's going on and all the development projects, all the developers I'm working with are doing the same thing. And so it's frustrating for somebody like me, because, you know, we've been working on it for five years, and we've done all this work, and it's all ready to go. And in Brooklyn there's a lawsuit, one lawsuit that persists, and they can't start until that's settled.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Barbara, how did this book transform you, or did it?

**BARBARA ISENBERG:** I think I learned about appreciating everything as inspiration and I mean, I don't know that it transformed me. I enjoyed it enormously, I mean, how many times in life do you have a chance to really, truly get to know the creative mind? And, in fact, what intrigued me about the whole prospect of doing this book was I wanted to ask the question, "how does art happen?" And if you ask somebody "how does art happen?" they're going to roll their eyes, as he would, but if you ask them for four years, over and over in a million different ways, you are bound to get an answer.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You know, it always reminds me of that Leonard Cohen line where he said, "If I knew where inspiration came from, I would go there more often."

**(laughter)**

**FRANK GEHRY:** Well, I always say if I knew where I was going to go ahead, I wouldn't go there, but the neuroscientists are now on to the whole thing of creativity. Are you aware of that? They're getting into it, they're trying to get into the act.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** How are they doing?

**ALEX ROSS:** Spoil the fun.

**FRANK GEHRY:** So I gave a keynote address to the neuroscientists, seven thousand of them, a couple years ago, including a lot of Nobel guys and I didn't know—I never prepare, I just got up and started talking. But the questions that they're asking are like they want to know whether the effect of square or round shapes or things like that and I keep saying, you know, "Get a life, that's not the issue." **(laughter)** The issue, the real issue they should, I think they should pose, is go out a little further into space and look back, is "why do we do it?" Why did Mahler do that stuff and why do people love it and why do—how does it nurture us and why do—and to understand the importance of it in our lives and what it does for our children and our world and our daily existence, that's the issue, why we need it, so why deny that? I think these efforts to whether circle or square is a denial mechanism.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I think to find out much more about your own creativity, reading your conversations with Barbara Isenberg—

**FRANK GEHRY:** I'll have to read it sometime.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, you don't have to read it, you have to live it, right?

Well, Barbara Isenberg, Alex Ross, Frank Gehry, thank you very much.

**(applause)**