



MEET THE PERSON

Organizational Transformation Through Architecture and Design

A Project With Frank Gehry

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Physical space and physical surroundings can have significant impact on the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Physical structures are particularly important in reflecting organizational values and culture, and they may even be used to facilitate organizational change. In this article, the design process related to the Peter B. Lewis Campus at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) is used as an illustration of the relationship between architecture and design and transformational change in a school of management.

On my arrival at CWRU as dean of the Weatherhead School of Management, Frank Gehry had already been commissioned to design a new building for the management school. Part of my excitement in accepting that position was what I viewed as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with the world's most famous living architect and, more especially, to use his controversial creation to initiate change in the school. When I say "controversial creation," you'll get the picture by viewing a photograph of the final model of the building (see Figure 1).

To me, this building represents not only a one-of-a-kind creation of an architectural and artistic genius, but it also provided an impetus for transformational change.

When I joined the Weatherhead School community, it already had some absolutely outstanding faculty whose work I knew and admired. It also advocated a philosophy of management education to which I was firmly committed. The school had adopted, and at least partially institutionalized, a behavioral-competencies approach to management education. Research was being conducted on the extent to which students' managerial competencies actually improved as a result of the curriculum—a topic about which I had been interested for at least 20 years. A doctoral program in organizational behavior (OB) was flourishing, with a well-regarded international reputation. The school had the beginnings of an excellent entrepreneurial program—represented by a budding curriculum as well as an affiliated organization formed to nurture incubator projects and provide internships for students. International institutional affiliations were in place to extend the global reach of the school. In

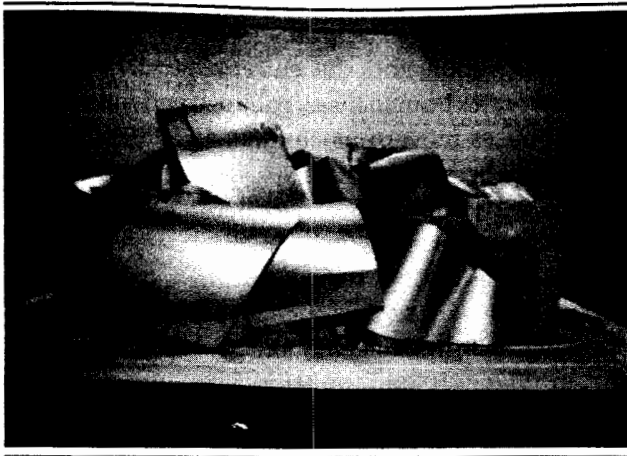


Figure 1

addition, one major donor had committed to fund 60% of the cost of a new building—an astonishing display of generosity and allegiance. Not surprisingly, I found the school to be an exciting place of quality and opportunity.

SOME KEY ISSUES

On the other hand, the school faced several important challenges. One was lack of name recognition both for the university and the management school. *The Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University* represents a lot of syllables. Outside the Cleveland area and the upper Midwest, many people have never heard of the school or the university. As a product of the merger of Western Reserve College and Case Institute of Technology more than 30 years ago, confusion still exists about what to call the place—Case, Reserve, Western Reserve, Case Western, CWRU, or Case Western Reserve. Someone told me that when they heard I had joined this university they thought it was either a winery in California or a military academy someplace in the Southwest. This name confusion, coupled with the unremitting pressure that deans face to elevate their schools in the magazine rankings, created a huge liability. (The most popular magazine rankings are largely based, unfortunately, on reputation and name recognition.)

Another challenge was a subtle aspect of the institutional culture that was particularly disconcerting. Among a few of the faculty, and a larger percentage of students, something akin to an inferiority complex existed. It played out like this: "If you were really smart, fellow student, you would have attended

Michigan, Harvard, Wharton, or Stanford. But since you're here, you must not be quite as good as those who were accepted into more visible programs." Some students made similar attributions regarding the faculty, and some evidence of it could be detected among a few of the faculty themselves. Decisions relating to promotion, tenure, recruiting, and what journal articles "counted" were sometimes affected.

Other challenges included lack of physical space for the academic programs, the need to take an active role in the continuing renaissance activities of Cleveland, and the necessity of strengthening ties to and partnerships with the business community. These issues supplemented the normal management school concerns related to curriculum, students, faculty, development, and so on.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Frank Gehry was recruited to design the new building into which the entire management school would move. He had been the designer of a corporate headquarters building and a personal residence for Peter Lewis, the retired CEO of Progressive Insurance and major donor for the new building. Unfortunately, neither of Frank and Peter's previous two designs had been constructed, so this project represented an opportunity for Frank and Peter to finally erect a structure in Cleveland.

Working with Frank to design the new building—named the Peter B. Lewis Campus—provided an opportunity to directly address several of the key issues facing the school. The new building could serve as an impetus for enhanced visibility and name recognition, as a motivation for and symbol of a best-in-class, one-of-a-kind institutional culture, and as a source of pride and entrepreneurship in the broader Cleveland community. Most important, it could enhance learning and innovative educational routines.

The process by which the design unfolded highlighted several principles associated with transformational change in organizations—namely, capitalizing on core values, fostering involvement and participation among key constituencies, identifying a desirable future and energizing vision, generating commitment, and beginning anew. For example, a prerequisite for Frank in designing any project is always a personal relationship, even a friendship, with the client. The human dimension is critical. Frank shared with

me that he had once turned down a billion-dollar project just because he did not like the people for whom he would be designing. My own first contact with Frank, in fact, was a telephone conversation in which he said, "You have got to get out here (to his studio in Santa Monica). I can't design a building for someone I don't know and like." Importantly, the key person at the school who led the coordination and design process was a senior level, chaired professor named Dick Boland, and it is difficult to imagine a more likeable and competent person than Dick. Fortunately, the human side of the equation worked splendidly.

The preparatory and diagnosis phase of building design capitalized on transformation principles. Frank asked that the institutional values and motives be articulated. He wanted us to describe our teaching and learning methods. The requirements and desires of faculty, staff, and students were identified in a participative process led by Dick Boland. Requirements for the university, the University Circle area (the neighborhood), and the Cleveland community were also identified. Parenthetically, Frank also analyzed surrounding buildings and the terrain so that the new building would fit comfortably into the required space and in the neighborhood. The design process, in other words, involved gathering information on the past as well as the desired future, what wouldn't change as well as what would change, and what lay at the heart of the school as well as what lay at the fringes.

Frank's first sketches of the building are reproduced below (see figure 2). They illustrate not the standard blueprint production process so much as a playful sense of experimentation and right-brain thinking. The process of concept creation and development of a structure that could respond to all of the aforementioned requirements occurred first of all by dreaming, speculating, imagining, and extemporizing. "What's possible?" replaced "What's probable?" as the key design parameter.

KEY VALUES

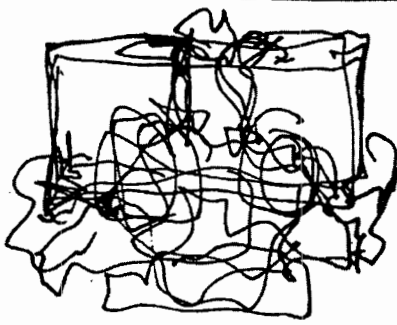
Using the new building as a symbol of and a motivator for institutional change required that certain core values be articulated. The building would communicate strong messages to both internal and external constituencies of the school. For example, the building represents the 21st century rather than the 18th or 19th century (which are more typical of most

ivy-covered college campuses in America). It represents innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit. It communicates humaneness, comfort, and interaction. It symbolizes movement, fluidity, and dynamism. It epitomizes best in class. Because learning is mostly a social activity, the building had to foster lots of chance collisions and productive interaction patterns. It had to facilitate action learning and experimental pedagogies. It had to touch the whole person—speaking to individual emotions and spirit as well as the intellect. It had to stimulate extraordinary thinking.

Most important, the building is characterized by several paradoxes that are inherent in a rich academic enterprise, including being

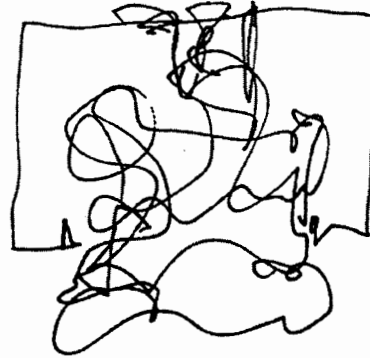
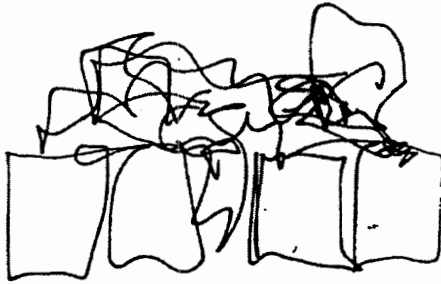
- *communal but private*: lots of social space and interaction opportunities for faculty, staff, and students, along with private space where individuals can get personal work done;
- *flexible but stable*: rooms that allow for different kinds of teaching, along with a stability that engenders predictability;
- *traditional but visionary*: a reinforcement of core values and traditional knowledge along with an inclination toward out-of-the-box thinking and learning;
- *art but science*: an artistic, architectural masterpiece able to be designed only by the application of highly sophisticated software used to design fighter aircraft in Europe;
- *enduring but improvisational*: a permanent landmark along with a building that seems to be constantly alive and changing;
- *controversial but comfortable*: a building that will start fights in bars (one stated goal of major donor Peter Lewis), along with a building that feels like home;
- *technologically sophisticated but personal*: cutting-edge technology and connection to the global environment, along with fostering human relationships.

The magic of Frank Gehry is that he was able to capture and embed within the building design virtually every requirement and preference expressed by this host of constituencies. The building (which was completed in the fall of 2002) has turned out to be an amazing confluence of paradoxical elements. Faculty and staff offices, classrooms, student study spaces, and communal areas are located on all six floors of the building, helping to facilitate movement, fluidity, conversations, chance collisions, and active learning. At the same time, faculty offices are located in spaces along the perimeter of the building, out of the traffic



"That's the game I am in. Where you have to dream an idea... Then you have to work it through the staff in my office. You have to work it through the client, all the people and the committee who have things to do with it, then the construction industry. There are thousands of people in the end that touch this thing. The problem for an architect is how to get this dream through all that to the end with the energy and the dream you had at the beginning. The trick is ending with a building that has that."

Frank O. Gehry



CAM: NOV/97

SCHEMATIC DESIGN

Figure 2

flow in the central parts of the building. Four large classrooms are located in free-standing, undulating towers that stretch six stories high and rest on large wooden "legs." Other classrooms have moveable walls and expandable spaces. One classroom has a 360-degree design where whiteboards encircle the entire perimeter, allowing for shifting leadership, contribution and instruction by anyone, and a truly democratic learning process. All classrooms and offices are fully wired, creating more portals than the MIT computer center (which Frank Gehry also designed), along with the current wireless technology located throughout the building. Yet faculty offices are slightly smaller than usual in order to create more communal space, small group meeting rooms, and even a main-floor restaurant. The building is a one-of-a-kind structure with an undulating stainless steel roof structure and curving brick exterior walls. No similar building roof on this size building has ever been constructed to date. Multifloor hallways,

catwalks between towers, and access to natural light in virtually every room via skylights creates an ever changing array of visual images. Whereas it is common for groups to go off-site to stimulate creative solutions or strategies, this building creates a new vista almost every time one turns a corner. Creative thoughts, it seems, may be just a few steps away.

THE PROCESS

The most remarkable part of working with Frank Gehry was watching the design process unfold. The process could well be described just as one might describe the building—fluid, surprising, creative, and improvisational. Frank indicated to me that great pieces of art in antiquity always have been characterized by a sense of movement. Look at the statue of Michelangelo's David, for example, and you will see fluidity rather than rigidity. Frank designs buildings

to capture this sense of movement. They are examples of emotion as well as analysis, touching the heart as well as the head, not just places to keep out of the weather but to inspire the soul. That orientation leads to a design philosophy that might be described as, "We never have it quite right," or "There is never a final, complete, or right answer." Experimentation and a constant striving for one more great idea, one more improvement, or one more innovative approach is typical of the process. Three-dimensional models are created first, then blueprints are constructed. A visit to Frank's studio revealed several hundred models of the building by the time the final blueprints were created. This approach to design is illustrated by an event that occurred in the middle of the process.

Dick Boland, the school's lead representative, met with the design team in Frank's studio in California. Their task was to find an extra 3,500 square feet of floor space in the building. That is, the requirements exceeded the available space as shown on the blueprints by 3,500 feet. After spending 2 full days scratching, erasing, modifying, collapsing, and rearranging space on the blueprints hanging on the wall, each of the participants had become thoroughly exhausted by the process. It was finally complete. However, one of Frank's design team members then took all the blueprints down from the wall, tore them up, threw them in the trash, and declared, "Now we know it can be done. Now let's start over and do it right."

By itself, one building does not transform an entire management school, of course. The transformational

change process involves a much more complex set of elements than merely participating in the design of a new structure. On the other hand, the learning activities in which the school engaged in the process of designing the building, the changes in interaction patterns and thinking that are now being facilitated by the new structure, and, possibly most important of all, the values that the building symbolizes are powerful factors in creating an institutional transformation. If one aspires to be distinctive, entrepreneurial, and excellent in a learning environment, this building comes as close as anything I have experienced in signifying those aspirations and values. Whereas I am no longer at CWRU and will not inhabit the building myself, I can't imagine that those who work there will not be significantly affected by the ambience of the place. Frank's latest creation has an enormous possibility of facilitating and symbolizing this needed institutional transformation.

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