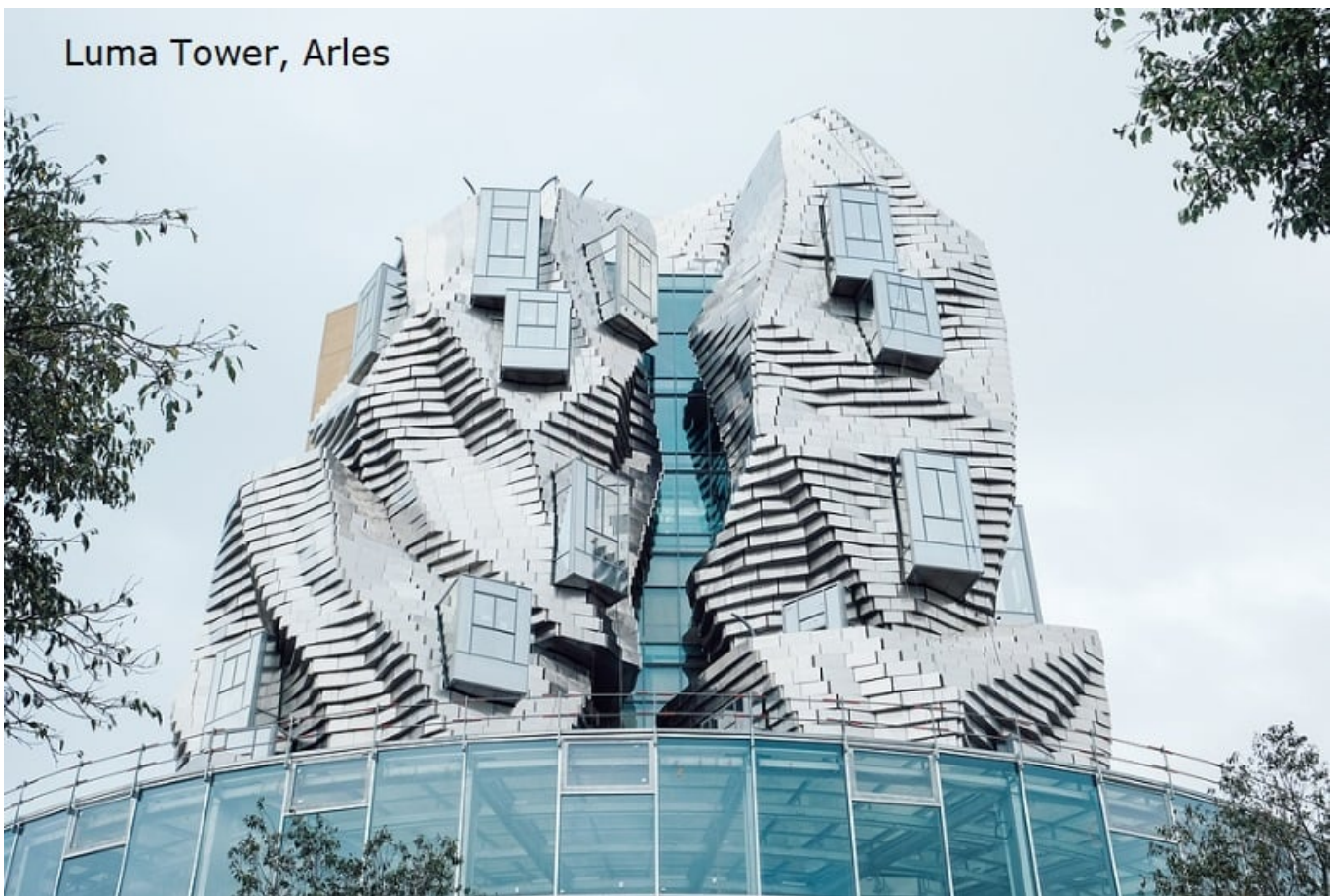


Bleak Houses

By Theodore Dalrymple

No doubt the principle that one should speak nothing except good of the recently dead is a decent and civilized one, even if it is not given to 99.99 percent of humanity to be perfectly good. The whole truth may be desirable in court, but not at funerals. One does not enumerate the faults of the recently departed to the grieving widow—unless one is a swine.



The rule is somewhat different for public figures. If ideally one should still exercise some restraint, where public praise is excessive or misguided, it is important that one should contradict or counteract it, lest the meretricious should pass for the meritorious.

The death of the architect—or starchitect—Frank Gehry at the venerable age of 96 was followed by an outpouring of obsequious obituaries so extreme and uncritical that he might

almost have been lead guitarist of a punk group of the 1970s, or even David Bowie.

Of Mr. Gehry personally, I know absolutely nothing. He might have been the most delightful and amusing of dinner guests, a wonderful raconteur, a favorite uncle of many small children, and so on and so forth. But as an architect, he was abominable and filled many places with his abominations.

According to *The New York Times*, Gehry set the imagination of architects free. The newspaper hardly noticed that this was not necessarily a good thing, if true, and depended very much on the quality of the imagination of the architects in question. One might as well say that the Marquis de Sade set sexual imagination free, liberating the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer to find satisfaction and release in the handling of the entrails of his victims.

The Toronto *Globe and Mail* perhaps took the palm, or the biscuit, for uncritical, sycophantic praise. In an article titled "Frank Gehry created a new language of architecture," we read: "Like the most intuitive and brilliant minds, Frank Gehry tapped into the poetics of the world. He attended to the mystical and captured the ethereal in architecture." As if this were not quite praise enough, we go on to read, "To dream requires the setting aside of old systems and timeworn benchmarks in order to touch fresh, glossy pearls," and "Gehry...was always dreaming of letting buildings rise off the ground in billowing curves to make the human heart soar."

Well, here is one human heart that did not soar, but rather sank, on looking at much of Gehry's work. Whenever I look at it, in fact, I think, "Gehry, Gehry, Gehry," no doubt as I was intended to think; in other words, that it is an expression of an almost mad egotism, of a determination to leave a mark on the world at any price (usually a very high one).

His Luma Tower in Arles, in the South of France, for example,

fits in with the ancient city about as well as an airport runway would fit in with the middle of Venice. I doubt that *that* would have worried Gehry; indeed, he might well have taken it as a compliment, for he was, whether he acknowledged it or not, a proponent of what could be called architectural individualism (I hesitate to call it architectural psychopathy), according to which the object of the architect as artist is to create a remarkable object expressive of himself, irrespective of anything by which it might be surrounded, and preferably making it incompatible with anything imaginable, so that it might remain forever a monument to the greatness of its creator.

When I read of touching fresh, glossy pearls, I confess I laughed and thought of the house that Gehry built for himself in Santa Monica. I will say this at least for the late starchitect: Unlike many such architects, at least he was no hypocrite and had the courage of his absence of aesthetic sense. Fresh, glossy pearl is not how I would have described this house; as Stalin wanted to build socialism in one country, so Gehry seemed to want to build a Hooverville, a bidonville, a favela, in one house. Indeed, the constructors of favelas in Rio display a much greater aesthetic sensibility than Gehry ever had.

There is something almost literally diseased about many of his buildings. The Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health in Las Vegas, for example, looks as if it has been designed by one of the brain-damaged people whom the clinic is supposed to rehabilitate, or as if Las Vegas had suffered a severe earthquake during which the building only just managed to avoid creasing to the ground. The design of the building is certainly original, but originality is one of those many virtues that is not freestanding, but requires something further to make it a virtue. Doctor Johnson said, referring to the oddness of Jonathan Swift:

...singularity, as it implies a contempt of the general

practice, is a kind of defiance which justly provokes the hostility of ridicule; he, therefore, who indulges peculiar habits, is worse than others, if he be not better.

It cannot be denied that the buildings to which I have referred, and indeed most of the works by which Gehry is known, are singular, in Johnson's sense; and since, at least in my estimation, they and their architect were not better than other works and architects, they are worse.

It remains to account for his worldly success. After all, he could not possibly have built his buildings from his own resources; he required patrons. His real talent, his real mastery, then, was in finding them. One of the things that he, and other architects of his ilk, succeeded in doing is insinuating the idea into the minds of patrons that they, the architects, were party to an arcane but advanced form of knowledge, appreciation, and understanding that the patrons could demonstrate only by employing them—which if they failed to do would only reveal their ignorance. This is a form of snobbery, the view not that 50 million Frenchmen can't be wrong, but that 50 million Frenchmen must be wrong. Therefore, an architectural splinter in the eye is proof of the enlightenment of the architect and patron alike, with the great advantage that it usually cost too much to build to be soon demolished. Uglification proceeds apace.

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