Frederick Luis Aldama: In what we called architecture rather than just the construction of buildings there is a fusion of the aesthetic appeal and function. Whether a residence or a skyscraper, buildings are disquieting to the extent that they are seen as uninhabitable, unlivable. That is, they disquiet when there is a rupture between purpose (function) and any kind of aesthetic criteria of ugliness (and beauty) that we want to apply.

HL: Unlike the other art forms—music, literature, the visual arts—that we are discussing, architecture inhabits two, often incompatible realms: the aesthetic and the practical. We can have an aesthetically pleasing building that’s dreadfully uncomfortable to live or work in, and we can also have a conspicuously ugly building that’s been fixed up with sufficient amenities to render its inhabitants oblivious to the ungainly space they occupy. And of course one can cite countless buildings that are thoroughly unpleasant both to look at and live or work in.

FLA: There are, for example, the medieval dungeons, Bentham’s Panopticon, and modern-day prisons—all are spaces deliberately designed to discomfort rather than comfort, to eject us rather than invite for habitation. Even in a beautiful structure like the Château de Chillon (made famous by Byron) we see how its “basement” is transformed into a space that triggers fear. These are all spaces built to dispossess us—to make us feel literally disposable.

HL: My single visit to Byron’s dungeon coincided with a memorably awful intestinal upset set off, I still believe, by my gorging myself on chocolate while touring the Nestlé factory the preceding day—with the result that the negative responses you list here were grossly compounded for me.

FLA: Thank goodness you never experienced the shackles yourself during such an upset. What do we make of another such foreboding space—the cemetery? Even in the Protestant tradition, where graves
are often only marked by white crosses (as in military cemeteries like Arlington) there is no habitable purpose created in the cemetery. If allowed, you can walk on the lawns, and so on. In many Catholic cemeteries, you find the opposite: graves are literally built upon; you build something on top of the grave, sometimes even big structures—mausoleums where in theory a family could live inside. And in the Latino community we have Día de los muertos every year—a festival that we celebrate in actual cemeteries. However, no matter how much drink and music and celebration generally, the cemetery remains a place we don’t inhabit while there’s still breath in us. Likewise, no matter the size of the mausoleum, they are not made to be inhabited by the living.

What’s disquieting about these buildings is that there is no relationship between habitation as non-living quarters with the shape and form; there is no longer a uniform whole between function and form—its shape and thus its aesthetics.

HL: But Frederick, please don’t forget the memorializing function of cemetery art, which occasionally is very good. Even though the living don’t inhabit these places, they can visit them the way they do visual works of art, and those who feel some connection to the deceased, whether by religion or personal relationship, can experience a functional pleasure together with the aesthetic. There’s a gorgeous monument in a St. Louis cemetery, Bellefontaine, that Louis Sullivan created for a local family, the Wainwrights, for whom he had designed one of the first great high-rises. Or the Stanford family tomb on the Stanford campus—severely neo-classical but with a spicy touch in front with those sphinxes, which embody the late nineteenth-century neo-Egyptian craze (figure 1):
Figure 1. Stanford Family Mausoleum, Stanford University, designed by Caterson and Clark, architects (1888). Photo by Herbert Lindenberger.

And, speaking of Egyptian, there are the pyramids, not to speak of the Taj Mahal. These have their multiple functions, aesthetic and practical at once. You and I are so secular-minded, Frederick, that we forget what functions tombs like these have for the more religious. Although the remains of the deceased may be inside, their souls (or however these may be designated in various religions) reside in some non-earthly realm—or, to use computer terminology, in the cloud. These
remains remain firmly placed within the earthly structure, and that itself must provide some comfort to the mourners, themselves still bound to earth. And one might remember that some of the most important domestic artifacts we possess from ancient Chinese, Egyptian, and Etruscan culture, to mention only three, were found in tombs, where the dead supposedly continued their ordinary lives.

FLA: Material habitats for the non-tellurian bound—what a paradox, Herbie! For the record, I’m not upholding functionalism in architecture—or art in general. When I speak about function (and maybe “role” is better given that “functionalism” carries other baggage in other disciplines) I refer to the fact that the buildings (whether an office or house) are to be inhabited. We might consider this the content (in the Formalists’ view of literature it would be the story) and that this can be given many different shapes (in the Formalists’ view of literature it would be the discourse); there is no limit to architectural creativity in this sense. Inhabiting can be done in a myriad of different shapes.

As we’ve been discussing, each art has its own specificity; its own content (matter) and shape (form); I cannot inhabit a sculpture or piece of music or painting or novel. In this sense, and only in this sense, each art form has its own function.

Architecture as an art form—as a branch of aesthetics—is the unity of shape and function. Not all buildings matter to aesthetics. Not all buildings have to do with aesthetics. The cave has nothing to do with aesthetics; it functions to shelter our ancestors. The same with those cages that are called tenements and that are built to house working-class people in cities all over the world. They are disquieting to the extent that they embody this rupture between shape and function. They disquiet to the extent that they expel the aesthetic (viewpoint or consideration). Whatever their size, these buildings are eternally disquieting because they have expelled the aesthetic. They are irredeemably disquieting.

HL: Again, Frederick, I’d like revise or at least augment what you’re saying. The lack of a builder to exercise his will to style does not necessarily condemn a habitation to aesthetic insignificance. At least some cave dwellers learned to make the dwellings that nature had designed for them remarkably pleasing aesthetically. Think of the
paintings at Altamira (whatever “meanings” they may have had for their creators in that prehistoric time), which show a superb way of adapting art to the particular configurations that nature gave to the inside of these caves. Though the inhabitants likely resided only in the anterooms, they had their own communal “museum,” or, perhaps more likely, their own set of chapels, at hand every day.

FLA: I tend to gravitate toward extremes, Herbie, to make my points crystal clear. I would argue that the paintings ornament the cave, but don’t function to unify shape with function. In this sense, there’s the expulsion of the aesthetic; there is no aesthetic aim or ambition in the shaping of the nature-given cave. There is nothing that unites shape with function with the cave, and thus there’s no aesthetic relation. And this goes for more modern habitations, too, such as tract houses. Both the cave and the tract house disallow an aesthetic relation.

In architecture there are a whole series of schools—of ways, or methods to approach and deal with the aesthetic relation with respect to building. There is a will to style—an aesthetic relation between that which is built and the procedure used for its construction, from engineering calculations through the choice of materials and the decision to inscribe the building within an aesthetic context.

HL: You’re letting bad architecture off the hook too easily by refusing to apply aesthetic categories to buildings like tract houses that make no pretense to artistic distinction (though sometimes the ads that are used to market them may fall back on traditional aesthetic vocabulary). When I first noted those ungainly tract houses that sprouted all over after World War II (at a time the US government gave cheap loans to veterans, who after all desperately needed housing for their families), I felt aesthetically violated—especially when I saw the gorgeous wooded landscapes around Seattle, where I grew up, suddenly covered with designs seeking to attract the lowest common denominator of taste. But then it’s only fair to remember a great exception: Joseph Eichler, who had once lived briefly in a Wright house and, as a result, hired a Wright disciple to design thousands of inexpensive tract houses throughout the Bay Area from the 1950s to the early 1970s. These were wonderfully livable and aesthetically pleasing houses. But they are the exception that, alas, proves the rule.
FLA: What of the introduction of disquieting spaces in earlier epochs? I think of Roman architecture, of course a facsimile (and, at its best, an adaptation) of ancient Greek architecture. Apart from the underground of the Coliseum, where slaves and animals were kept, I don’t think I can put a finger on buildings that disquiet coming out of these periods when architecture seemed exclusively predicated on the guiding principles of balance and sobriety.

HL: The same can be said of Italian Renaissance architecture, which adapted Roman styles just as the Romans had gone back to the Greeks, whose buildings were still standing when the Romans visited them.

FLA: Since the nineteenth century—and especially the twentieth century—architecture has become a part of treatises on aesthetics. When those, from Alexander Baumgarten to the present, discuss aesthetics, they talk about architecture as a discipline.

HL: And it’s fascinating how these treatises, which I studied some years ago to see how they variously classify the arts, often placed architecture at the bottom of the hierarchy—and all because those aestheticians were unable to view architecture, which necessarily possesses practical uses, as “pure” art. Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, allowed architecture top place during prehistoric times when mankind had not achieved what he called “self-consciousness,” but by his own, self-conscious time, the highest laurels go to poetic drama. Unlike these treatises, which tend to praise aesthetic “purity”—what Kant called “purposelessness”—your remarks praise architecture for its very purposefulness in creating habitation.

FLA: Hence, the importance of understanding how each art disquiets on its own terms. As mentioned already, no matter the theory formulated—no matter how monumental the sculpture, we don’t inhabit the sculpture. We cannot inhabit any other art product. The only art form that I can install myself and choose as a dwelling is a product of architecture; that is, all products of architecture play the same role of allowing *inhabitation*, and this whether a Paleolithic cave or a tenement in the Parisian suburbs. Buildings are made to be lived in and worked in; they are made to be *inhabited*. But the cave that has a function—a role—does not have an aesthetic relation with the cave dweller.
Today’s apartment buildings operate on a dollar-per-cubic-feet basis, thus the ripping in two of the possible unity of shape and function. Frank O. Gehry captures my thinking on the subject best in his oft-stated belief that innovations and responding to social needs are not mutually exclusive.

HL: Unlike me, Frederick, who cannot hammer a nail without missing its head and crushing my finger instead, you have designed, built and remodeled houses with your own hands. When you build or modify a house, how conscious are you of this aesthetic relation?

FLA: In the will to style that I bring to the designing, then building of a structure, I constantly toggle back and forth in my mind between shape and function—a process ultimately modified by cost and materials. This said, while the latter modifies the realization of the final built space, I always try to maintain a unity of shape with function.

In sharp contrast to those structures that I build to please, we have those panopticon structures constructed to cage humans. I think of the famous one in Mexico—El Palacio de Lecumberri, which was made with a will to style intended to dehumanize. What you realize once you enter is that it is not an ordinary building that would serve to allow you to live or work, but a place where people are stationed like cattle; the role of these buildings is not a human and humanistic role, it’s an antihuman role that at once seeks to pack human beings into small space and at the same time to isolate these them from one another; you realize that this is a place where people are tortured and punished. All the inhuman forms in the usage of these buildings are extremely disquieting. (In Pinochet’s Chile they used schools to store women until they gave birth, then massacred them en masse.) No matter how ornate or how much will to style used in their construction, there is a rupture between the role (function) and the shape (everything that goes into the making of the building according to aesthetic goals).

HL: If I’m being tortured, I suspect I won’t have the presence of mind to realize how disconnected my dreadful experience is from the environment in which it is taking place.
FLA: In this violent dissociation of function and shape with prisons or with mausoleums we experience something that is abruptly and deeply disquieting.

HL: I still insist on those exceptional mausoleums like the Taj Mahal or Louis Sullivan’s design in Bellefontaine Cemetery as having a function for the families of those interred there.

FLA: The first habitable dualities were the caves our Paleolithic ancestors inhabited. They served the function of shelter but did not as such have an aesthetic quality about them. There was no union between function and aesthetic categories such as ugliness and beauty.

HL: Unless, that is, you have paintings in these caves of the quality of Lascaux and Altamira. I was going to see Lascaux for myself, but they closed it to tourists just before my scheduled visit—the breathing of visitors, it turned out, endangered the paintings. But I made it to Altamira several times before it too had to be closed, and I can testify that I felt a strong aesthetic relation between the paintings and the total ambiance of the cave.

FLA: Certainly, the adornments made the caves more inviting as habitats. And caves by themselves can inspire awe in us. Today we can enter some of those great big caves in Mexico and experience what Kant calls the sublime, but we recognize the cave as a nature-made phenomenon or structure.

With architecture as art we have the work of humans—humans construct buildings—and as products of human activity, we can apply aesthetic categories to these products. But what’s disquieting about certain buildings is that they have destroyed, taken apart the unity between form (shape) and the function of the product; from the point of view of function in the abstract, with the rare exception there’s no difference between my house and the Paleolithic cave; these tens of thousands of years make no historical difference: both protect from cold, rain, animals. The function is the same as a dwelling place. But the cave is made by nature and my house is human-made—myself, usually as the builder. A Paleolithic ancestor chooses a cave according to how well it will fulfill his or her needs; the same happens when we choose our homes. Most of the time all we care about is the function—
and this from a prison to a home or apartment or favela. We make choices that follow functional criteria that are no different from those of our Paleolithic forefathers.

Today, however, we have the additional possibility of following aesthetic criteria. And it is the latter that make the difference in this fusion of shape and function. So when there’s a radical break of the possible unity of shape and function we react with discomfort—even repulsion.

HL: The proverbial 1950s tract house was highly functional, with all the conveniences its inhabitants yearned for, but, with the rare exception of those built by Eichler, it was usually aesthetically off the map. But how many of these inhabitants even thought about aesthetics? They felt lucky to have a shelter that, thanks to government lending policies, they could afford.

FLA: The disquieting in architecture, then, is not just a rupture between function (or role) and shape; it also includes buildings constructed with the aim of being inscribed within an aesthetic relation but which are extremely disquieting in certain circumstances. Beautiful buildings can be made to imprison, torture, maim, and kill people. Thus, in a different way we experience a rupture between the role (function) given to these dwellings and the shape. No matter how much of an aesthete you are, you can no longer establish an aesthetic relation with the object; the object’s role totally changes when it becomes uninhabitable. This is where the disquieting enters the picture.

Those beautiful castles that pepper the European landscape also contain those antihumanistic spaces—the dungeons. This creates a rupture in us when we visit such castles. I recall a trip to Lacoste, France, with my father’s wife at the time (French). I explored all of the nooks and crannies of the castle there, including the dungeon. It would send chills down my spine—and not those of the sublime. It turns out this was the Marquis de Sade’s castle.

HL: I feel chills like that when I see ordinary people cramped into the smallest of spaces in ugly urban buildings.
FLA: We feel uncomfortable when we encounter a tenement in the same way we do when visiting a prison, even the ghost of one we might visit at Sade’s castle or as a tourist at Alcatraz.

HL: And speaking of Alcatraz, this now decayed prison in late 2014 became the setting for an installation by Chinese dissident artist Ai Wei Wei, who, though not allowed to leave China to see the prison itself, created a scary reminder of what oppression means with an exhibit of some powerful visual and aural artifacts, the latter, for instance, including recordings of Martin Luther King and participants in the Russian feminist activist band Pussy Riot, piped into individual prison cells. The tourists I observed there seemed quite unnerved, for Ai Wei Wei’s exhibit was exacerbating the discomfort they would ordinarily have felt during a visit to Alcatraz.

FLA: Ai Wei Wei aims to trigger in us what we feel inside those spaces built to eject humanity. We see this, too, in the work of the photographer Katya Tolamacheva. Her exhibitions gravitate around such disinhibiting spaces in Ukraine. She captures just how structures are built to be *inhuman* towards humans (figure 2). The images show well how they are built spaces that turn against humans.

![Figure 2. Katya Tolamacheva, “Barbed Wire and Building” (2013).](image)
The role of shelter and covered, protected environment to relax and enjoy and grow physically and mentally is annihilated, destroyed, and changed into its opposite: a hostile environment disconnected from essential human needs and threatening the ingredients we desire for a happy life. Such architecture triggers uneasiness, disquiet and even anxiety.

I experience this same disquietude when taking Corina to the zoo; there’s this rupture between the aesthetic (the shape) and the function (the habitability) of the built environment. Zoos break this unity to such a degree that they can even trigger a sense of horror.

HL: Zoos are prisons, after all. And when the animal poses dangers, the spectator accepts this rupture between shape and function much as one would when viewing a murderer in jail.

FLA: Horror films use this rupture between shape and habitability in the turning of the plots in the house of horror. In Amityville Horror or in Psycho the houses become disquieting because of this rupture between the aesthetic and the habitability; the houses look menacing—not to mention its inhabitants—and there’s no way to turn these houses into an aesthetics of pleasure like the one we experience, for instance, with Wright’s Fallingwater house.

HL: And Fallingwater, remember, was just a weekend home, a pied à terre, so to speak, to which the Kaufmann family retreated from their doubtless sumptuous Pittsburgh house.

FLA: We also have some famous examples of architects and everyday builders who have built inhabitable, repulsive spaces. Again, what we see is a lack (deliberate or not) of a unity of function and shape. I think of those like Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, and even Ferdinand “Le Facteur” Cheval, French postman-cum-builder who thought of his ugly structure as something beautiful.

HL: I see we must disagree here: as someone who refuses to see Le Corbusier’s or Loos’s work as ugly (perhaps not “beautiful” in the Burke/Kantian sense, but certainly “impressive”), I don’t like seeing them linked to that comically eccentric Le Facteur.

FLA: Certainly, there’s greater skill and knowledge patent in the will to style they bring that’s not seen with Le Facteur. The minimalism we see in the work of those such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe was a response to the excessive ornament used in
architecture from the Baroque and rococo to the Victorian that leads paradoxically, I think, to states of discomfort.

HL: Only, I think, when it’s overdone.

FLA: This Baroque ornamentation transcends historical period. We have it in the seventeenth century just as we have it in the modern, twentieth century with Gaudí—and, a little earlier, with Le Facteur Cheval.

HL: I think we’ll need to take these strange figures up in more detail later.

FLA: Today we see these boxes with ornament pasted on that have nothing to do with the building; the ornament exists as an afterthought, and not as integrated into the whole.

HL: Nonfunctional ornament does not necessarily bother me. I happen to love Baroque ornament: functionality, after all, is a modernist bias. Living in San Francisco, I relish many of the wooden Victorian houses designed and built by ordinary carpenters who often went to other craftsmen for the ornaments that they then simply nailed onto these structures. But I agree that we feel uncomfortable when an architect today adds ornament that doesn’t feel functional to us.

FLA: There are contemporary buildings the world over that discomfort. I think of Kunsthaus Graz art museum in Austria, Frank Gehry’s EMP rock museum building in Seattle, and the Selfridge store in the larger Bullring Shopping Center in Birmingham, among many others.

HL: When a serious architect such as Gehry gives us what we perceive to be an ugly building, it’s often a product of his or her iconoclasm: to be daring enough to design the Bilbao Guggenheim means you are also taking chances that something will turn out wrong—or perhaps your client, in this case Paul Allen, pushed you in this direction. And with computer-generated architecture all sorts of shapes—plantlike, animal-like, bulbous, bloated, severely angular—have become possible, so there’s a far greater chance that ungodly-looking buildings will emerge. Still, many buildings that first strike us as ugly or outrageous eventually come to seem appropriate, even beautiful. I’m thinking here of Loos’s initially shocking 1910 building on the Michaelerplatz in Vienna, which caused many subsequent architects to
move in his modernist direction and to get us accustomed to the
daringly simple style that he had introduced.

But this is no different from what goes on in other arts: many of
the pioneers of modern painting, literature, and music all went through
the process of being labeled ugly before they came to seem beautiful
(or at least powerful, since the term *beauty* rarely seems applicable
even to the best modernist art). This is no guarantee, of course, that
the buildings mentioned above will ever cease seeming ugly.

FLA: And this calls attention to that tension we identified earlier
between the purpose of the art and the actual practices of its
consumption. The latter can and does include ideological baggage. Like
stinky people, some also deem certain buildings of a certain
socioeconomic class—and this from their very inception. I think of Loos
and the designing of the first huge tenements: gigantic rabbit cages
that stood in sharp contrast to the nineteenth-century houses in
working-class neighborhoods in places like Vienna for workers.

HL: Not only do we see a famous architect designing rabbit warrens
stacked to the sky for the working poor, Frederick, but we are also
reminded that architecture goes hand in hand with city planning. I
recall the days in midcentury when it was common practice—and
blatantly so—for city planners to “redline” areas of a city. They would
get out their red marker pens and decide where to build the
tenements, usually as far as possible from central business districts,
middle-class denizens, and basic sustenance infrastructures (grocery
store, banks, post office, and so on).

FLA: The consequences of which continue to feed the horrors that
plague the urban black population living in areas like West Oakland,
California. Favelas as makeshift houses are the result of forcing people
to live in such degraded everyday circumstances; they pull whatever
scrap available to create a shelter from the elements. Is there much
of a difference here between the favelas and tract homes in the
suburbs, however?

There’s certainly a will, a project and a plan in tract-home
development. There’s science involved in determining the size of a
house, the pattern of streets, parks, lighting, and so on. These are all
deliberate decisions made by builders, bankers, city-planning
commissions and whoever else needs to be brought in. In the favelas all is built in an improvised way; and little by little one might add the comforts of more permanent settlements. This said, from the point of view of aesthetics there is no difference between a favela and a planned, suburban residential development. Even though there’s a big difference in the planning, what they have in common is the rupture between the function and the aesthetic.

HL: In both these instances—favela or planned community—aesthetics is not on the mind of the agents. But let’s face it, much of the space within most urban areas, with some few exceptions such as Venice, Paris, Prague, San Francisco, is depressing to see. Occasionally an exciting new building with architectural integrity gets placed in an otherwise dreary neighborhood, like Manhattan’s New Museum, which boldly enlivens the Bowery in the most conspicuous possible way (figure 3):
Much as I like the building (though the small space to which it was confined allowed galleries too narrow for curators to display their
shows adequately), its surroundings also remind the viewer how discomfiting urban landscapes usually are.

FLA: When we’re talking about urban planning and built environments—recall Oscar Niemeyer’s deliberately planned-out city that became the capital in Brazil, Brasilia—where there was a will to style and also ultimately a rupture between the aesthetic and the function. Le Corbusier dreamed of building a city from scratch that aimed to unify shape and function. He wanted the buildings to harmonize with nature—city or otherwise. His planning of these small cities had to harmonize with the geography and geology (the material basis) on which it would be built. Then he would take into account this unity of shape and function, where the shape would allow the buildings to integrate themselves into the landscape in an aesthetic way, but with the aesthetic coming after considerations of geography and geology. (Those glass skyscrapers built in the deserts of Dubai clearly don’t follow this principle at all.)

We also see the same wilfulness in the nineteenth century with Baron Haussmann’s demolishing half of Paris to build huge boulevards for quick and easy movement of the punitive arm of the government so that its military and police could move quickly from one part of the city to another to squash worker revolts. This was urban planning determined by military and economic reasons. Then, in the twentieth century in Paris (after World War II) there was a law passed that determined not to separate the workers from others and to create mixed-income neighborhoods.

There are many kinds of urban planning, and they exist for many different kinds of reasons. With economic and other pressures, planning can and does deliberately separate form from function, leading to different kinds of discomfort for people.

HL: Whether it’s for a commercial building, a museum, or a residential house, one needs the luxury of a good architect to prevent this monotony.

FLA: Even though we admire some architects, it’s a very interdisciplinary art; the architect not only needs to have a full knowledge of material resistance (longevity and flexibility) as related to the geography and geology of the building site, but also many
specialists who can furnish this information along with all those with the skills to execute the plan. Like the director of a film, the architect is a master of ceremonies. When architects don’t use the knowledge of material specialists and engineers telling them what can and can’t be done in practical terms, this can lead to disasterous results, as we see with Wright’s leaky roofs.

HL: A typical city contains buildings representing a multitude of architectural styles from different periods. We are so accustomed to seeing, say, a Victorian structure next to an art deco, which will in turn be placed next to a tall glass tower, that we take in what should seem an incongruous sight without, literally, batting an eyelash. I think of this incongruity whenever I see one of those rare citiscapes, like Venice or small towns like Rothenburg, that are pretty much all of a piece. No art museum would juxtapose paintings in so incongruous a way.

FLA: Incongruity. . .

HL: Freud makes a point of this when he writes that Rome contains structures spanning well over two millennia—from ruins dating to the republican period down through Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque styles, not to speak of its many more recent buildings. He used the analogy, however, not to speak of architecture, the subject that concerns us here, but to illustrate his own main concern, the human psyche, which, as he explains, contains memory traces—all mixed together in seemingly random fashion like the buildings of Rome—from the various periods of a subject’s life.

FLA: Yes, and Gaston Bachelard likens our mental space to that of a house: the attic would be the executive brain and the basement that of the limbic system, to put it in today’s parlance. Beyond the typical structure of a traditional house Bachelard doesn’t venture into all those variations we see in modernist architecture and its stripped-down structures. I think of how Adolf Loos rejected ornament, famously creating a house for Dadaist Tristan Tzara that pushed exteriors with the aim of discomforting those passing by. Like other modernist architects of his day there was the seeming aim to create structures that overturned expectations of how we were to inhabit buildings.
Upon first encounter, certainly. But then people gradually learned how to look at these buildings, like the house Loos designed for Tristan Tzara. I remember not knowing how to deal with Loos when I went to Vienna on a Fulbright in 1952. During my first few days there I saw the once-scandalous building, called the Looshaus, that Emperor Franz Josef ridiculed for its lack of eyebrows because there was no decoration above the windows. Since I’d had no experience with modernist architecture at that point, its deliberate simplicity made it look insipid to me—especially since it was facing the heavily ornamented, massive structure across the street and, for that matter, similarly ornamented buildings all over the area (figure 4). At the time the building went up Loos wrote a celebrated essay that associated ornament with crime—not, of course, crime on the streets but the crime of ornamenting a building!

Figure 4. Adolf Loos, Looshaus on Michaeler Platz, Vienna (1910). Photo by Herbert Lindenberger.

My next, and only, subsequent visit to Vienna was some forty-five years later, by which time I’d become an aficionado of modernist
architecture. Now the surrounding buildings bored me, and the Looshaus looked defiantly right. The irony of all this is that by 1952 I was thoroughly familiar with modernist poetry and was working in Vienna on my doctoral dissertation on the poet Georg Trakl, whose radical style I was explicating and defending and who, it turned out, was not only a friend of Loos but who actually dedicated the title poem of his second volume, Sebastian im Traum, to him. I had been trained to remain so specialized that it never occurred to me there might be a connection between what Trakl was doing so radically with poetic style and Loos, with architectural style.

FLA: Your experience, Herbie, has me wondering how much does our appreciation of that which discomforts rely on our cognitive appraisal system. Does the more we know about modernist architecture make us appreciate more how an architect willfully sets out to fracture function from shape?

I’ve been drawn to Loos as much for his disruptive designs as his life, particularly the way it wrapped in and around the life of Josephine Baker—the African American performance artist who also sought to be modern. Recall that she had “Sois modern” above the entrance to her Paris nightclub. Loos even designed and presented Baker with blueprints for a rather discomforting house—one that was never built.

HL: And biographical information can also be off-putting. Those stripes on the Baker plan have a deliberately scandalous look about them. Loos was also supposedly involved in a pedophile scandal. But I’m not going to call that relevant to his role as an architect. Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn, to speak of only two major modernist architects, had their own sexual scandals, and one of Wright’s was with a client’s wife, whom, to be sure, he subsequently married. And, unlike Loos, to be fair, Wright and Kahn sought out mature women who supposedly knew what they were doing.

FLA: The sordid lives of those who seek discomfort.

HL: Since we are concerned here with discomfort, let me bring up a point about architecture that’s particularly relevant to Wright’s work. I refer to his refusal to make many of his houses really comfortable places for their occupants to live in. I know that this statement flies in the face of Wright’s influential notion that architectural form is related to the functions that buildings are intended for. But Wright had little respect for the needs of his clients—rather, he designed so that clients
could accommodate themselves to his particular vision, comfort or not. (His clients usually were submissive and continued to speak fondly of him while putting up with whatever discomforts he had designed for them.) I suspect that Wright himself—at least to judge from his and his wife’s bedrooms at Taliesin West, in which one wall was missing so that they could sleep in the desert air—didn’t much care about his personal comfort. Worst of all were his kitchens, which were usually impractical and much too small. And the gorgeous chairs and benches he designed were hell to sit on.

FLA: Purposefully discomforting—or an ego getting in the way of practicality.

HL: He was notorious for his casualness about practical matters: there’s the well-known story that when a client complained of rain dripping onto his desk, Wright replied, “Move your desk.” His great house on the Stanford campus, the Hanna house, also known as the Honeycomb House because of its hexagonals everywhere, including the furniture, almost collapsed during the 1989 earthquake because it was built of unreinforced brick, with its beautiful fireplace forced to offer support at once for the living and dining rooms and the kitchen (figure 5). Moreover, because of a slope on the hill upon which the house was erected, he had put part of the house on landfill, a dangerous thing to do in earthquake country.
I used to pass the house on my daily runs when I lived on Stanford campus, and while it was being repaired after the earthquake I sometimes talked to the workers, who complained of the shoddy construction around the foundation. I say all this in full awareness that seeing Wright’s work over the years has provided me with some of the greatest aesthetic experiences of my life. I’ve sought out Wright buildings all over the country, seen all the Oak Park houses (most of these, to be sure, necessarily from the outside) and exulted over Fallingwater, the Guggenheim, and Taliesin West. He was very great, but I would not subject my family to the discomfort of living in one of his buildings. These buildings are a little like New York: you’d rather visit than live there. And the discomfort does not derive simply from the architect’s frequent casualness about practical details: it also derived from Wright’s desire to subordinate comfort to beauty. Look,
for instance, at this furniture he designed for the Hanna house (figure 6):

![hexagonal furniture design](image)

**Figure 6.** Frank Lloyd Wright, furniture designed for Hanna house, Stanford. Photo by Herbert Lindenberger.

Since I visited the house on various occasions when Stanford provosts were assigned there to live, I had ample occasion to try out the hexagonal furniture, whose discomfort should be evident even to those who haven’t sat on these gorgeous pieces.

FLA: I think of another architect whose projects are theoretically engaging—even if discomforting—and that one certainly would not want to live in. Le Corbusier’s first project for Rio de Janeiro (presented at a conference in Buenos Aires in 1929) was of a “building-viaduct” that would house residences underneath a raised highway stretching across the city. This was never built, but others have since taken up his vision, making in the 1960s and 1970s some of the most innovative yet discomforting buildings in Rio. And, as time
has passed, they no longer instill a dizzying sense of discomfort. Rather, they’ve become monolithic concrete eyesores.

HL: I’m not familiar with these buildings but know how much of the innovative and utilitarian architecture of this period did not age well. There’s a building like this on the UC Berkeley campus that, ironically, houses the architecture school. It has become one of the least aesthetically pleasing buildings on that campus.

FLA: I think we should place Gaudí in the category of architects that seek to create buildings that discomfort the eye.

HL: Yes, and it bothers me to have to admit this, for each time I’ve visited Barcelona I’ve wanted to like his work but still found myself irritated by it. It was deemed eccentric in its time and somehow it never became absorbed within the history of modernism to the point that it ceased to seem eccentric.

FLA: I still can’t wrap my brain around La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona.

HL: I’ve walked all over the roof of the Sagrada Familia church trying to accommodate his style to my normally welcoming sensibility. But those knobs with their eye-like slits never succeeded in establishing any new norm for me, which is what a revolutionary style ultimately succeeds in doing. Were these knobs attempting to scare their viewers? But asking a question like this is to assume a philistine stance, and that’s not a stance I like to take. And then there are the towers, which rise before you like a garden gone wild (another philistine remark similar to the Austrian kaiser’s making fun of the eyebrows missing over Loos’s windows). Or to turn to another Gaudí building, the Casa Batiló (figure 7), are those balconies teasing you to guess what protrusions they represent (again, I’ve retreated into unthinking philistinism)?
As I look back at my reactions, what I find most disquieting is not the buildings themselves but the fact that I’m falling back on the clichéd thinking (or nontinking!) that I associate with the detractors of modernism, or of art in general.

FLA: Ah, how Gaudí puts us into a tailspin—a battle between our emotion with our reason system that leads itself to a feeling of discomfort, Herbie. At least Gaudí triggers this struggle in us. I say this because most of the everyday architecture we experience—actually, that we are fully habituated toward—is dull because of its ordinariness or simply unappealing.

HL: Yes, most of the architecture we see every day, as I implied earlier (unless we happen to live in Venice, Florence, or some untouched village, say, in the south of France or Vermont), is either ugly or insipid. We get so used to this we don’t realize that what we see is actually an insult to the eye. Bad architecture, moreover, affects us differently from other artistic media, for we’re forced to live with it,
see it along the street as we go out our door; as you mention, Frederick, it’s likely that our neighbor’s house and the one we live in is dull or distasteful; we pass awful buildings on our way to work and once we arrive, we often do our work in a claustrophobic, ill-designed space. With other forms of art, you can take it or leave it. If you react badly to a film you’re watching, you can walk out or stop the DVD player. With a confrontational picture such as Munch’s *The Scream*—whose unpleasantness derives not only from the screaming woman but also from the prospective suicide at the left bending over the bridge railing—you can move to another picture if you choose to, though when I took the photo in figure 8 while this pastel version (1895) was on temporary display at the Museum of Modern Art, there were crowds of people who really didn’t want to move away at all:
If a Charles Bukowski poem upsets or bores you, you close the book—or throw it out! And you can usually avoid discomforting music unless
the car next to you at a stoplight is blasting something maddening. But you’re stuck with the architecture around you.

FLA: Yes, we’re stuck with our buildings, Herbie. Unless of course one has the skill, time, and money (the class issue raises its ugly head once again) to deconstruct and reconstruct—or build from scratch spaces that enstrange (to refer to the Russian Formalist term sometimes also translated as defamiliarize). As a partial response to this need to modify architecture that we’re stuck with, without moving walls or razing and then rebuilding habitable edifices, we move our furniture around to re-experience our otherwise fixed environs.

Certainly money helps us to re-create—to enstrange, if you will—but we know all too well that money isn’t a cure-all for the recreating of ugly spaces, and ugly architecture.

HL: Except for film, money plays a bigger role in architecture than in the other arts we’re discussing. I leave out the astronomical figures that some people pay for paintings and sculptures these days—this money, after all, goes to the preceding owner and not to the artist, who got only what the original owner paid, which is usually only a small fraction of the later price. To build a good architect-designed house, one pays substantially more than one gets by going directly to a builder. When my family moved to the Stanford campus in the late 1960s, the best contemporary architect in St. Louis, whom we’d met socially while we were living there, suggested designing us a house. We told him our needs, which included having enough room, including play space, for a growing family. He made some sketches and then gave us a rough estimate of what we’d be paying. Although his ideas were genuinely appealing, it turned out that our budget allowed us only about two-thirds of the space we wanted. He then suggested we look around for the kind of builder who would be willing to make extensive modifications. Nearly all the models we saw by the Bay Area builders we sought out were so depressing that I wondered how we could ever live in one of their spaces (am I being unduly sensitive to aesthetic discomfort?). Finally we found a builder willing to let us modify one of his standard patterns, and we suggested a number of architectural details to his designer (he didn’t have the credentials to call himself an architect), with the result that we got a large and aesthetically nondescript, noncontroversial, generally OK house, yet
considerably below the standard of the work we’d seen by the St. Louis architect—or that of some Bay Area architects we might have had if we could have afforded them.

FLA: Budgets matter and so too does creativity, Herbie, and so too does scale. One can have a very pleasing house, but if it’s a space that threatens to eject us and our everyday living needs because of size (too big or too small) we experience discomfort that can even turn into deep sadness or a sense of horror.

HL: When you consider large-scale architecture—whether commercial buildings or museums, to which some of the best architectural talent has been devoted in recent years—financial considerations put aesthetics to a grave test. Although we live in an age of celebrity architects—Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Renzo Piano, Daniel Libeskind, Norman Foster, Herzog & de Meuron, to name only a few, and all of these from different countries—a large percentage of brilliant plans get scrapped for lack of financing. Architects, even the most famous, are forced into making concessions far more than other artists, but then the firms these artists create are actually business enterprises that have to make the usual compromises expected of a commercial venture. But it’s not only money that gets in the way of aesthetic autonomy. Every architect has to contend with a multitude of pressures: the local building codes, the inspectors interpreting these codes, the preferences of planning commissions, the politics of the city council, the changing whims of clients. And then there’s the problem when the money is about to run out, and this happens whether it’s a family home or a towering highrise: cheaper, aesthetically less pleasing materials need to be ordered; space needs to be constrained; the lovely façade that got the politicians and the financiers alike to come on board now gets scrapped. It’s a wonder that anything really beautiful ever sees the light of day.

FLA: I know all too well in the countless houses I’ve designed and built that one can dream (and some dreams are better than others) all we want, but in the end it does come down to access to money, materials and skilled labor. It might come down finally to whether or not there’s a unity of form and function—and the lack thereof (even with lots of money spent as well as excellent materials and skilled labor used) can
lead to extremely discomforting constructions. At a place like Stanford you and I had daily reminders of disquieting architecture.

HL: Yes, I’ve spent over half my life on the Stanford University campus, so I’ve had ample opportunity to admire the best buildings and suffer distress at the failures. The initial building project from 1887 to 1891, the so-called Inner Quad, is a masterly example of late nineteenth-century Romanesque (figure 9), and having my office in this complex (just to the left of the center corner) for much of this period was sheer joy.

Figure 9. Corner of Stanford University Inner Quad, designed by Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge (1887-91). Photo by Herbert Lindenberger.

FLA: With the exception of the Quad, my experience of the campus has been increasingly of a mess of higgledy-piggeldy architecture.

HL: Yes, the buildings constructed since the Quad have turned out to be a mixed bag. The custom has been that, whatever the architectural style, the sandstone walls and red-tiled roofs would be followed to achieve some sort of unity. But there has been no unity of quality. Most of the buildings constructed over the years have been dull, though a few have been downright hideous. One unfortunately over-wrought construction of the 1960s, the former undergraduate library
that the students, extracting the u, g, l, and y, nicknamed UGLY, was
torn down in early 2015—less for the aesthetic reasons that would
justify this than because the earthquake retrofitting it needed would
not have been cost-effective.

FLA: The interior design is similarly disquieting, Herbie. Looking back
now I think it might be less the anxiety about the PhD exams that
made me nauseous and more the concrete, red carpets, and
disorientating levels that caused this.

HL: We might consider this one of the many architectural sins that
have been committed at Stanford. In the last decade or so we see this
clearly as a consequence of the demands of donors along with the
university officials who were too lily-livered to refuse a gift-horse.
Among the most egregious of these sins is a dormitory for law
students that I have to pass, alas, when I drive to the campus.
(Instead of going to a major architect, as it has, fortunately, with a
number of fine recent buildings, the university hired a local firm,
Hoover Associates, that had also designed the football stadium.) The
cutesy little dormer windows over those massive piles are a joke—
unintended, of course. A friend who also has to pass by regularly
commented that every time she’s forced that way she looks to see if
the greenery has grown any. One might call this the ultimate test of
bad architecture: the impatience that viewers experience waiting for
trees and vines to hide the sheer ugliness of a building. The billionaire
donor insisted on the site since he wanted the students to be within
easy walking distance of the law school. There were protests from
faculty members living nearby, for the site was too small to
accommodate the amount of space needed for six hundred residents.
The result was these big piles of buildings crowded against one
another in the most ungainly way (figure 10).
With an ugly building a rich donor can flaunt his power more effectively than with a beautiful one, for he is saying, in effect, “I defy you to like this.” And this monstrosity is only a few blocks from Wright’s Honeycomb House, pictured earlier in this chapter: looking at the two is similar to Hamlet’s comparing his father to his stepfather as “Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2.140). But money, as we know, speaks louder than beauty, and this donor’s daughter, moreover, is on the university’s board of trustees.

FLA: Money does not always lead to the building of an architecture that discomforts.

HL: That’s true. Stanford has been getting some genuinely beautiful buildings to house the visual arts but only because, as you might expect, the sort of person offering many millions for art is likely to have taste, indeed, even to be an art collector. For instance, when the
collector Iris Cantor gave a large donation for an addition to the Stanford Museum (now renamed after her and her late husband), she made the condition that the architect be the esteemed James Polshek. And right now, what, at least judging from the looks of it going up, will likely be an architectural gem, a new building financed by the collectors Deedee and Burt McMurtry and designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro will house the art department; it is significant that this building, though sandstone in color, is ignoring the convention of a red-tile roof. And besides these there are also two excellent science buildings by the Norman Foster firm.

FLA: Yet we can’t assume that having money necessarily equates with good taste. And while it is likely that a donor who is giving money to the arts possesses such taste, there’s no reason that techies like Bill Hewlett, Dave Packard, Bill Gates, and Jerry Yang—to name only a few whose names grace buildings in Stanford’s science and engineering complex—should feel any commitment to distinguished architecture. So the buildings named for them are a distinctly mixed bag.

HL: The Packard building, posthumously funded, turned out to be excellent, the Gates, an utter embarrassment. (If Steve Jobs had possessed a generosity to match his aesthetic sense—something he claimed was developed growing up in an Eichler tract house—a building bearing his name, quite unlike the Gates building, would likely have displayed the elegance of the computer products he brought into being.) And, of course, the taste that gets realized in public spaces has a good bit of back and forth transpiring behind closed doors. Even if a donor has good taste—or, to put it bluntly, a taste that matches my own—there are so many bureaucratic hurdles that you have to move through to create a new public space that the original concept can be lost altogether in the ugliness or, at best, the dullness of its realized form. This is to say, the big money that well-heeled donors offer can be a force for beauty, as with the museum addition and the art building, and it can also, as in all too many instances, be a source for ugliness or, at best, boredom.

FLA: Because of the enormous cost, public, habitable art brings too many cooks to the kitchen, including unfortunately those of the pencil-pushing type less interested in aesthetics. I’ve also seen on the Ohio State University campus a case where the donor had explicitly written...
into the contract that a certain material and style to be used and incorporated for the architecture building, but otherwise gave free reign to the design. The donor nearly pulled the millions required to finish the building when it was discovered that its façade was not marble and it didn’t have any classical Greek stylistic elements. Today’s architecture building (Knowles Hall) has little to do with a classical Greek building. It is a very free-flowing building with massive open free-flowing interior spaces (with concrete and massive steel joists exposed so students can study the construction of the building while in the building). However, a compromise was reached. The building’s exterior is clad in marble tiles that fit together to cover the curved building like fish scales; and, at the street entrance stand giant Ionic, Doric, Corinthian columns.

HL: We are touching directly on a central problem in the making of viable built spaces. Unlike the creation of paintings, poems, and music, executing a building, as we’ve mentioned, means constant compromising. Architects, even with the best of aesthetic intentions, are at the mercy of those financing their work, and the latter, if they run short of money, often ensure the failure of a potentially lovely structure even as it is being constructed.

FLA: Yet there are those like the lay builder Le Facteur Cheval, who built his disquieting edifice (Le Palais idéal) on his own steam—and stone by stone. It’s actually one of the ugliest buildings I’ve ever seen (figure 11). He built it little by little out of objects he found here and there (during his daily mail round) and without any guiding aesthetic blueprint. It’s this lack of aesthetic care that makes the house so discomforting.
Figure 11. Segment of Le Palais idéal by Ferdinand “Le Facteur” Cheval, Hauterives, France (1879-1912). Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

HL: Keep in mind that it took Le Facteur thirty-three years to build this. It’s more the exception that proves the rule. Modern-day, public building is a collective effort that includes many struggles between competing interests. This is what compromised Daniel Libeskind’s prize-winning design for the World Trade Center’s main building, for instance.

I went to an exhibit some years ago showing models by the various architects competing for the job. Libeskind’s model was clearly the most exciting, and I felt gratified to see it win. But then the troubles began, many of them stemming from the developer who had rights to the land, and Libeskind was no longer listed as the main architect. From what I’ve seen watching the building go up, it will likely be aesthetically OK, as I like to say of buildings that neither excite nor depress me, but it won’t embody the model I saw. Let me
add that Libeskind can create discomforting spaces that are also aesthetically just right: I’m thinking of his Jewish Museum in Berlin, the building that made him a celebrity architect. This museum is full of narrow angles and cramped spaces that supposedly suggest the claustrophobic world of Nazi camps (figure 12):

Figure 12. Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum, Berlin (2001), segment. Photo by Herbert Lindenberger.

FLA: I’m glad you brought up the Nazi death camps, Herbie. There’s so much here to discuss in terms of how they were designed precisely to rupture this unity between form and aesthetics. Of course, there was ornament—the gate at Auschwitz’s “Arbeit Macht Frei”—but as something pasted onto a built structure not aimed to house or provide a home, but to dis-house and murder.

HL: One notorious camp, Theresienstadt, actually was grafted onto a once handsome town built around 1780 to house Austrian troops. But the Nazis, who used this camp (which did not have its own gassing
facilities) as a place to hold Jews before they were sent off to the actual death camps, kept some fifty thousand there at a time in quarters originally designed for only a few thousand soldiers. As you can imagine, it became a living hell.

FLA: No matter how much time has passed, this camp and the actual death camps continue to create discomfort and fear in us.

HL: The Berlin Jewish Museum, as I mentioned, and also the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, seek to evoke this discomfort and fear for visitors.

FLA: Pyramids like that of Chichín-Itzá in Mexico’s Yucatan region were originally built to instill a certain fear in the observer and as a show of power. Today, we stand in their presence with awe.

HL: Yes, and I’ve managed to feel this awe as I climbed the pyramids at various Mexican archaeological sites. It surely added to the awe to know that in early times prisoners were often hurled to their death down those steep steps. We’ve been concentrating thus far on buildings from various cultures and periods that are fear-inspiring, heavy, made of concrete or stone. But what about the opposite sort of building: I mean the many buildings of the past half-century that are essentially made of glass?

**Note:** In the remainder of this chapter the authors, among other points of discussion, present their sharply varying views of glass towers from the early twentieth-century International Style through the highrises going up throughout the world today.