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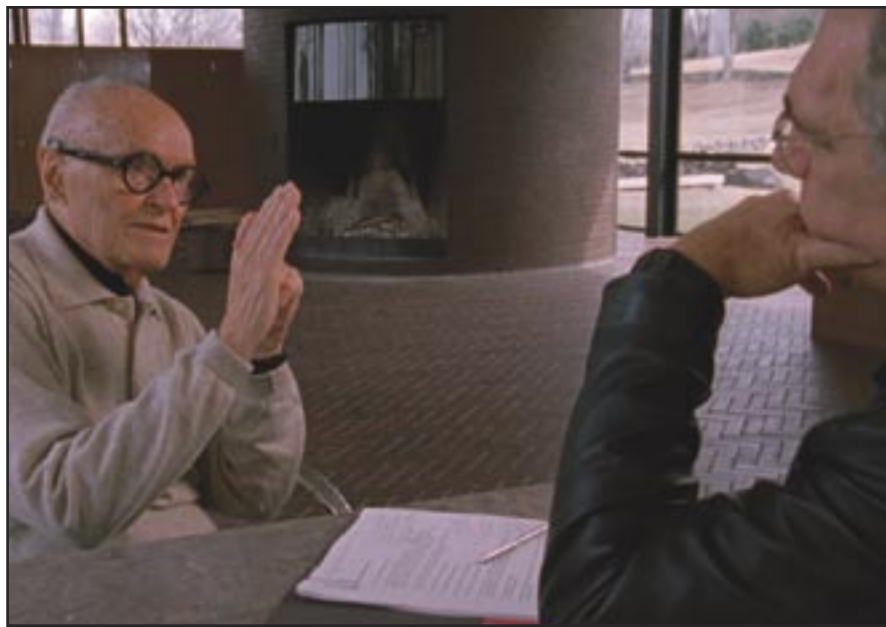
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Architect Phillip Johnson in *Sketches of Frank Gehry*

THE ARCHITECTURE OF EGO

Sketches of Frank Gehry

review by George Sax

"It wasn't just that I didn't know anything about documentaries," director Sydney Pollack (*Tootsie*, *The Firm*) says self-effacingly near the beginning of *Sketches of Frank Gehry*. "I didn't know anything about architecture."

On the first count, Pollack's skeptical modesty seems unwarranted. His carefully crafted portrait of the personality and work of the internationally renowned and pioneering California architect is consistently involving, both aesthetically and intellectually. His second reservation doesn't seem to have been much of an impairment. His movie is more of a personal depiction of Gehry than a measured examination of the institutional and historical significance of his often widely popular, and almost as often controversial, buildings.

This is very much a cinematic sketch of the architect as artist, in itself a conception with problematic aspects at which the movie barely hints. Pollack is a friend of Gehry and has managed things so that his own persistent presence in *Sketches* doesn't seem intrusive, or too cutely chummy.

Gehry appears to have wanted to give the filmmaker a lot of latitude, even granting him access to his psychiatrist (which doesn't yield much insight to his work). Pollack hangs out in the architect's Los Angeles studio, rides with him as he navigates the city in his car, talking of his life. (He claims he changed his name from Goldberg because of his domineering former wife's insistence.) Pollack accompanies him to Gehry's own first house, which he boldly redesigned, building an ostensibly incompatible shell around the original structure. He also speaks with a fair range of critics, commentators and connoisseurs, professional and amateurs (e.g., *The Boomtown Rats'* Bob Geldorf).

The director has kept his movie effi-

ciently paced—its sidelights, building-site stops and interviews adeptly placed. The inclusion of three entertainment industry barracudas—Barry Diller, Michael Ovitz and Michael Eisner—is a little disconcerting, although it does, probably unintentionally, remind us how architecture's fortunes and aesthetics are often in thrall to the powerfully self-promotional.

The late Philip Johnson (it looks like he's sitting in his famous glass house in Connecticut) tells Pollack that Gehry's work involves "the shape of light as it hits another shape." Gehry says his designs were early on impacted by Modernism's dictum that "decoration is a sin," and that his work most resembles that of the modest Modernist Alvar Aalto. This sounds odd when Aalto's simply elegant designs are compared to Gehry's often flamboyantly complicated and deliberately unbalanced buildings. (The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain is visited and commented on.) Gehry's inspiration seems to come more from Cubism and the post-Modernist artists he's known and admired, people like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

This brute flamboyance is touched on by Princeton professor Hal Foster, who expresses his concerned ambivalence at Gehry's achievement of "spectacle," his creation of "sublime space that overwhelms the viewer." Gehry himself offers a crass and dubious estimate of how such work is validated: "If it's no good the market place will deny it."

Sketches is probably more provocative than it was intended to be. It makes an attractive and thoughtful introduction to Gehry's accomplishment, and his place in the architectural firmament. If Pollack's feature films had been as visually and thematically coherent and involving as this one, they'd have had more artistic heft than has too often been the case.

av