

editor's note



A LITTLE MORE THAN TWO DECADES AGO, I CAN REMEMBER SITTING WIDE-EYED THROUGH A LECTURE BY ZAHA HADID AT THE DAWN OF THE DECONSTRUCTIONISM MOVEMENT. The models and drawings (while her fame was growing, she hadn't yet built many significant structures) were amazingly beautiful and complex. And all I could think was, sure, they might work when someone with a degree in mathematics does the design, but what happens when others emulate her work?

While Hadid, the first woman to win the Pritzker Prize for Architecture, is well-known to the public in Europe, in the U.S. the leading practitioner of this complex and trendy architecture is the inimitable Frank Gehry. And as with Frank Lloyd Wright before him, questions remain about the constructability—as well as the long-term durability—of his projects.

Now those questions have blossomed into public view through a lawsuit filed by MIT over the award-winning Stata Center. While architectural critics adore the project, it hasn't been such a hit with students and faculty, who complain the building is too loud, complicated, and distracting, and doesn't provide

occupants with enough privacy. The lawsuit claims that Gehry and the general contractor on the project (Skanska USA) “committed design and construction failures on the project, which caused, among other things, masonry cracking, efflorescence, and poor drainage at the outdoor amphitheater; efflorescence and mold growth at various locations on the brick exterior vertical elevations; persistent leaks at various locations throughout the building; and sliding ice and snow from the building.” Further, the suit contends the designer “failed to provide design services and drawings in accordance with the applicable standard of care.”

So what does this mean for the rest of us? First, I think it points to a need to fully embrace building information modeling. While Gehry is recognized for his use of sophisticated modeling tools, he has long insisted on using an incredibly complex program that does not readily integrate with standard structural engineering packages. How many of these issues could be avoided if

there were greater cooperation and teamwork between the full design and construction team?

Second, it demonstrates the need for greater practical experience in the design office. The nature of the “starchitect” is that young graduates flock to work under the master while the more experienced flee to shops where they can gain greater recognition and autonomy. The story of Stata Center is in reality a cautionary tale about the danger of hubris. The result? Those who should naturally question and improve the details of the project are too inexperienced to do so. And this lesson can easily be extrapolated to the detailing and fabrication community. In the short term, you might save a buck or two by off-shoring a lot of your work. But in the long term, you lose the value provided by an experienced and knowledgeable detailer and the innate value-added advice that an experienced fabricator can't help but provide.

Finally, it points to the need for architects, engineers, and contractors to work more closely together, a lesson that Gehry never seems to embrace. In 1998, I had the opportunity to tour the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao with its designer. His insights were fascinating. Afterwards, I asked Gehry if he was interested in keynoting the 1999 North American Steel Construction Conference (for more information on the 2008 Steel Conference, please visit www.aisc.org/nascc), and he responded that at his age he wasn't really interested in traveling to talk to a bunch of engineers. How many problems could be avoided if he had a different opinion of his design colleagues?

(Do you have an opinion on Frank Gehry's work? Visit www.modernsteel.com and post your reader feedback!)

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