

## intelligence



# A CANAL RUNS THROUGH IT

When the US leaves the Panama Canal this year, an architectural elite, led by Frank Gehry, hopes to step in. Mission: to oust postmodern pastiche and make Panama a world-class contender. By **Alice Rawsthorn**

**THIS STORY WOULD HAVE BEEN** very different if, back in mid-70s Santa Monica, a young Panamanian émigrée named Berta hadn't replied to an ad for office assistant to a still-struggling-in-his-forties architect called Frank Gehry. Her English was too stilted to bag her the job, but he liked Berta so much that he asked her to dinner. She accepted, expecting to be hired, only to find that they were on their first date.

Berta is now Mrs Frank Gehry, while her professional role is finance director of what has become one of the world's most prestigious architectural firms. For each of the past 25 years, the Gehrys have spent several weeks in Panama. Last year, two of Berta's cousins asked Frank to look at the plans for a stretch of land due to be returned to Panama by the US when it cedes control of the Panama Canal on 31 December 1999.

'They took me to this beautiful piece of land by the canal, then showed me the development, and I freaked out,' recalls Gehry. 'It was the worst kind of postmodernist pastiche – not even second-rate, further down the line than that. I thought that if it went ahead, this place is finished. And that would be a tragedy, because Panama is a great country.'

The site is one of scores of military installations to be abandoned by the US. Gehry knew that the hand-over was an opportunity for Panama to redefine its identity after centuries of foreign occupation, but realised

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it could be wasted. His response was to take a posse of young architects – including Ben van Berkel, the Dutch designer of Rotterdam's Erasmus Bridge (see 'Dam Fine', page 100), Lindy Roy, the South African architect of an amazing, but as-yet-unbuilt floating safari station, and Sylvia Lavin, UCLA's chair of architecture – to a symposium in Panama City last December, where they discussed the issue with their Panamanian peers.

'I've never seen a decent building in Panama,' says Gehry. 'There's talent, but it's not had a chance. I thought that by exposing Panamanian architects to international standards of excellence, something might happen. If we can produce ten really decent projects that capture international attention, it will be a different place architecturally.'

**GEHRY HOPES THE PROJECTS** will do for Panama what his Guggenheim Museum has done for Bilbao. There, with the Basque authorities eager to coax tourists and investors into their economically depressed city with headline-hitting architecture, he was given carte blanche. The result surpassed their wildest dreams by bringing 1.5 million tourists to Bilbao in the year since its opening, and generating \$350 million of revenue. And it was the Guggenheim that gave Gehry the political clout to persuade the Panamanian government to endorse his plan.

The architects who attended have formed a task force – Architects' Strategic Alliance for Panama, or ASAP – to devise a masterplan for Fort Sherman, one of the largest sites, and to advise on the redevelopment of others. The government also asked Gehry to design an Interpretative Culture Centre, and he has since gone back to choose a site.

As Gehry is aware, these good intentions could come to nothing. The ASAP initiative synchs neatly with other plans to kick-start ecotourist programmes. Yet all these could be scuppered if a less sympathetic regime wins May's elections. There is also the ongoing spat between Panama and the US to contend with, over the bill for cleaning up the old military sites, and the prickly question of whether it is possible to develop eco-conscious tourist facilities in a country with a notoriously corrupt construction industry and rather lax building regulations.

Even so, the Gehrys have pencilled in extra trips to Berta's homeland this year to chivvy ASAP and his own building along. And, as we're always game for great new architecture, we sav: go Frank. go. 🇵🇲