

Frank Gehry's IAC Headquarters

France-Irene Morusma

Once upon a time: Frank Gehry!

Frank Gehry has taken on an almost Le Corbusier status recently. When one hears of a Frank Gehry building, one thinks innovation, creativity, and surprise and, most often, a contextuality and modernity.

I find all of this to be true of what used to be a truck garage, the IAC Headquarters located at 555 West 18th Street, New York, on the West Side Highway across from Chelsea Piers. It was completed in 2007.

I was hoping that seeing pictures of the IAC/InterActive Corp building wouldn't spoil the fun. It did not. But as in the pictures, the building seems to disappear in the clouds, like a sail. With its white-washed glass and curvilinear exterior, it seems to meet the clouds. Great angles of this building can be seen from two city blocks away on 18th Street. The structure sits at the corner of 18th Street and the West Side Highway, yet it appears to have more than one "corner" due to all the ins-and-outs of the glass exterior.

The building's acontextuality is loud. There are no other buildings in the vicinity like it, none with a glass exterior, none with so many angles, none creating this cloud-like or sail-like experience. On the other hand, it maintains the average height of the surrounding structures. But that average height won't last long. New construction adjacent to the IAC is going up. For example, an 11-story building by Annabelle Selldorf, Jean Nouvelle's 20-story condo, and a condo-cum-gallery by Shigeru Ban and other apartments by Robert A. M. Stern and Neil Denary are in the works ("He'll Take Manhattan," 2007).

Presently surrounding the IAC site are schools, truck garages, storage warehouses, a women's prison and, across West Street, the well known Chelsea Piers. The building is surrounded by structures with stone facades, and others of heavy masonry facades, none as modern as the IAC.

The innovation of the structure is that it is made of all reinforced concrete slabs and columns. It's a concrete superstructure. The columns, instead of being vertical, were erected with a tilt, lending to the unusual shape of the skeleton hence also the exterior. Lasers were used as a guide for proper positioning of the columns (<http://iacbuilding.com/interactive/content.html>).

Enclosing the structure is the glass curtain wall. Each sheet or panel was individually designed, first on a model, then with the data fed to the fabricator. Out of the total 1,450 curtain wall panels, 1,150 are unique. They were

manufactured or sent flat, then underwent cold warping. The curvature in the glass was achieved by cold-bending it on-site. It is the tensile strength of the silicone adhesive anchoring the fourth corner of each sheet of glass that lends to its flexibility, and that determines a maximum torque of up to four inches. The three corners were first connected, then the fourth was manually forced into place. A special anchoring system was designed to absorb tolerances between frame and wall. The anchors, of vertical and horizontal aluminum brackets, bolt to the slab edge, then slide three dimensionally until the connection point is found. As with the tilted concrete columns, a 3D model, in conjunction with a GPS system and lasers, was used to find the exact location (“He’ll Take Manhattan”; <http://iacbuiding.com/interactive/content.html>).

The glass surface, clear across the middle section, shades gradually to opaque white due to mini-ceramic frit dots, the densest at the top and bottom of each sheet of glass.

From the outside of the IAC building, standing close to the glass, one can see the inside through the unobstructed view which is about eye level. One can see that the form of the lobby follows the form of the exterior. As you gaze up a few floors, also from the outside, you see the set-up of the cafeteria also follows the form of the exterior. Looking back at the open floor plan rendering which follows linear design of cubicles against a linear exterior, you see form seems to follow function. On the east side, you find the only point in the design where it does not curve like the other facades. The arrangement of desks and chairs seems to fit within the curves of the wall of the other facades (<http://iacbuiding.com/interactive/content.html>).

Looking for the entrance with only the help of the IAC dark blue and yellow logo, we see the glass doors continue with the glass curtain wall making the entrance difficult, rather than easy, to find. I understand this since an overhead or lighting or support of any kind announcing the entrance might take away from the exterior design of the building. The two entrances, one on 18th Street and the other on 19th Street, are not particularly dramatic in any way.

Once inside, in an open forum, like in a gallery, you are greeted by the security/reception desk, and then the dramatic 118-foot-long video wall, as you follow the curvilinear wall of the lobby. The video wall is an integral part of the design. It advertises a number of IAC brands, such as Ask.com and Match.com. It is somewhere between advertisement and art.

I would like to have seen Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in person or some other work to compare that building with this one. However, at its present location, this structure, I would argue, is hardly tame. According to the *New York Times* review, the IAC building is a “...subdued tower of light...” in the sense that this structure is “...oddly tame...” (Ouroussoff, 2007). It’s true, the entrance and part of the lobby were a little unimpressive in comparison to the surprise of the exterior. They seem tame when compared to the exterior. I could agree on that note.

Overall, however, the building is well executed and its form actually follows the specifications to reflect the client. I can imagine that each curve, angle, and corner would represent each of the more than sixty brands of the IAC.

References

He'll take Manhattan. (2007, April 4). *The Architect's Newspaper, Online*.
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Ouroussoff, N. (2007, March 22). Gehry's New York debut: Subdued tower of light. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com>

Nominating faculty: Professor Phyllis Sperling, Architectural Technology 2480,
Department of Architectural Technology, School of Technology and Design,
New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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