

# HYBRID THOUGHTS BY FRANK GEHRY

AN INTERVIEW BY JEANNE NATHAN

**Nathan:** How did you meet Tannen?

**Gehry:** I came to New Orleans, to work on the plan I was doing for the restoration and rehabilitation of Lafayette Square in the late 1970s. Tannen had called me to meet with me about the work. People had told me he was very involved in the city, and very interesting. So we met at the Hilton. In thirty seconds we were good friends.

**Nathan:** Why?

**Gehry:** I didn't threaten him and he didn't threaten me. We just started talking about what we wanted to do. We disarmed each other, though what we tried to do ultimately did not work in New Orleans at that time. There was opposition in City Hall and in the neighborhood. We did not have the opportunity to reach an agreement on the work with those interested in Lafayette Park.

He invited me to a dinner of crawfish at his place. Tannen showed me some of his art, and I related to it, and to him. He was himself, instead of trying to be someone else. I've always liked that about him. People are often looking over their shoulders, worried about their status, their place in the pecking order. Tannen didn't do that. Approval doesn't seem to be important to him.

His "stuff," his boxes, shotguns, the fish and environmental kind of things, felt like home to me. He just never pretends to be anything he isn't. I think he

probably cares, but he doesn't wait for what you say, he assumes it's O.K. You can just kind of savor it.

You never understand where he's going to go. You're always surprised. Just like his latest thing...putting clothes in bottles. That took me off. It's about naturalness...making it easy. You don't have to do anything about it.

He doesn't appear interested in putting work in art galleries, museums or in the media.

**Nathan:** You too?

**Gehry:** There's maybe a little more edge to me. He's got that New Orleans cool, laid back stance that I don't have. I'm more on the make, more ambitious. Though I'm not that bad anymore.

**Nathan:** Tell me more about that

*LEFT:*

*Louisiana Fishing Rod and Reel Tower*  
by Robert Tannen and William Wainwright  
Proposal for theme structure for 1984 Louisiana World Exposition, 1982  
Project Drawing selected for Official Fine Art Portfolio --  
*The Architect as Artist*,  
Dedeaux Publishing, 1984

*BELOW:*

View of Louisiana World Exposition site, Mississippi River Bridge, and Warehouse District  
Foreground: Amphitheater by Frank Gehry and Perez Associates  
Photo by Robert Perrin



quality of surprise you mentioned.

**Gehry:** We can't predict ourselves. Like the little cat with the ball of twine. Its curiosity leads it to push it till it falls off the table. It's a surprise to everyone, yet it was always going to fall.

I feel that way about my architecture. Why didn't someone else think of that? Or, like my paper furniture, I always wonder why no one else thought of that. When people see manifestations of my work, it is like a weird object or new place to them.

I feel that way about Tannen putting possessions and clothes in a bottle or can or bag. It's an obvious thing to do in a way. But why didn't someone else do it?

Our work is similar in that we're not doing giant things. We focus on people, on a humanist approach. We're interested in a certain scale, in accessibility.

Right now, I'm working on a concert hall, and an important thing to me is how people will relate to the orchestra. I'm going to great lengths to move an organ two feet back, so it will be placed next to people in the audience. People will say it was an obvious thing to do. But another architect would put the organ, like the sculpture, on a pedestal way up in the hall, up in heaven. A person would have to die to get there.

Robert Tannen shares that with me. He's driven by that humanism. I don't know, maybe it's that Judeo-Christian guilt trip. Whatever in our background, it is that kind of thing that moves us forward to new sacrifices or to produce work that requires confession. I can't

imagine anything Tannen did that was made to be on a pedestal. His work is emotional, accessible and to be utilized.

I know he feels that way about my work too. When he sees what I do, he gets that shit-eating grin on his face. He really loves it. He's saying, "Oh my god, look what he's done."

**Nathan:** Tell me about your use of common, everyday materials in your work, which seems related to Tannen's use of common materials in his.

**Gehry:** I'm interested in materials that people use extensively in life that are often at the same time unacknowledged. Chain link fencing, for example. It's used in such great quantities, yet there's so much denial about it. Interestingly, if I recommend a material like this to a client, it would be hard for them to accept it. But if a client tells me that is all we can afford, then it's O.K. to use it.

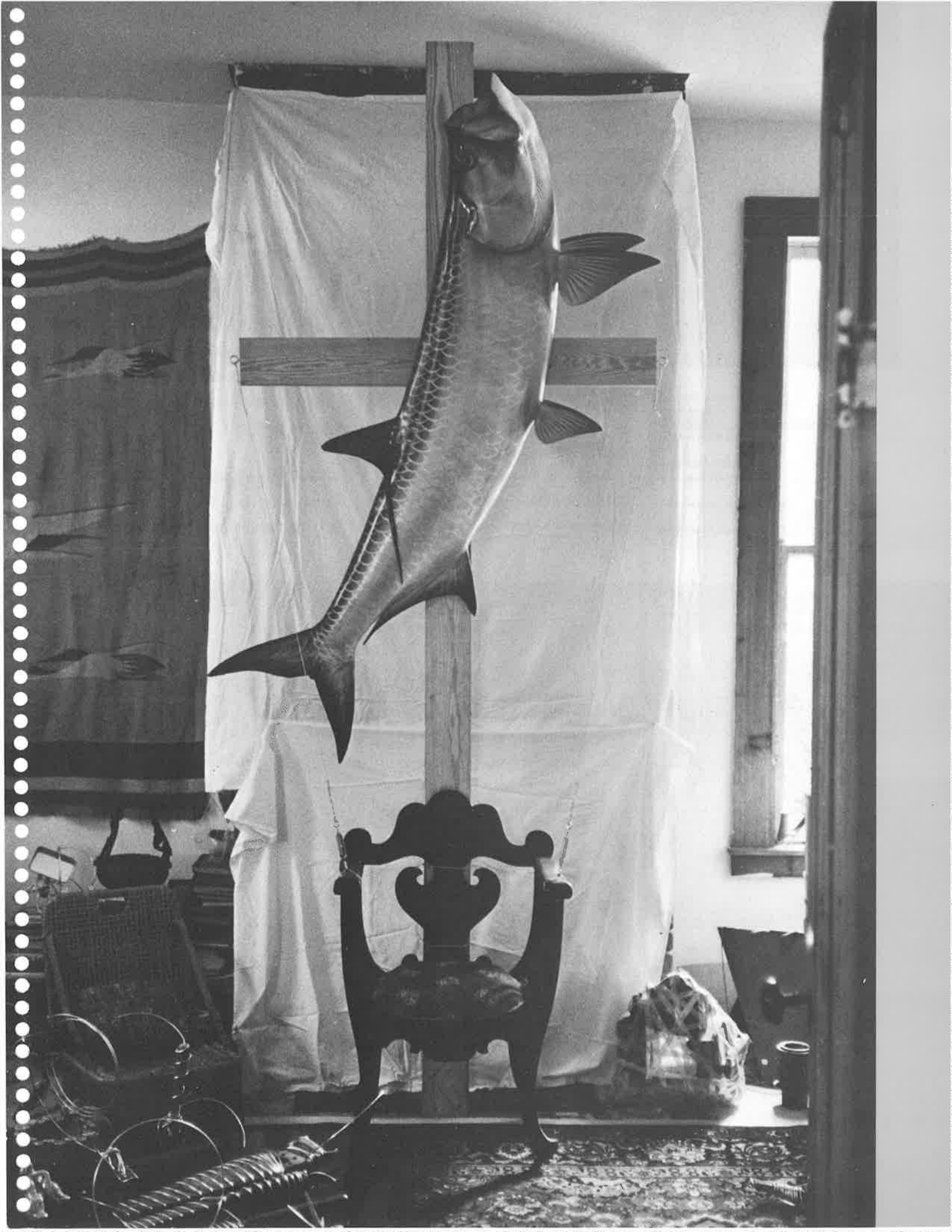
Materials like chain link represent such a legalistic, moralistic indictment of our culture. It recalls prisons and death camps. So I decided to try to see if it had inherent qualities about it that would transcend its typical use and symbolism. When I emphasize the raw qualities of wood framing, for example, I'm dealing with the question of details, of perfectionism, of how things meet properly.

In the real world, builders and contractors are always accepting certain conditions of reality. The joints might not be perfectly fitted. I have a certain optimism about what is generally considered negative. Some architects and artists gain acceptance for their buildings because of craftsmanship. But their buildings are not interesting. They put all this money into



*Robert C. Tannen's Clothing  
in Plastic Bags:  
Personal Affects Installation  
New Orleans, 1990*

**RIGHT:**  
*Crucifish, 1976*





Esplanade Avenue Home of  
Robert Tannen with  
Front Yard Installation of *Archisculptures*  
From left to right:

*Southern Comfort*,  
Galvanized Steel, 1980

*Concrete Block Pyramid*, 1988

*Concrete Block Tower*, 1988

perfecting a joint. The result is putting a Brancusi in a room that is devastating to the art work.

The values behind the choice of architectural perfectionism are wrong. Yet the world, the market place tends to endorse those values.

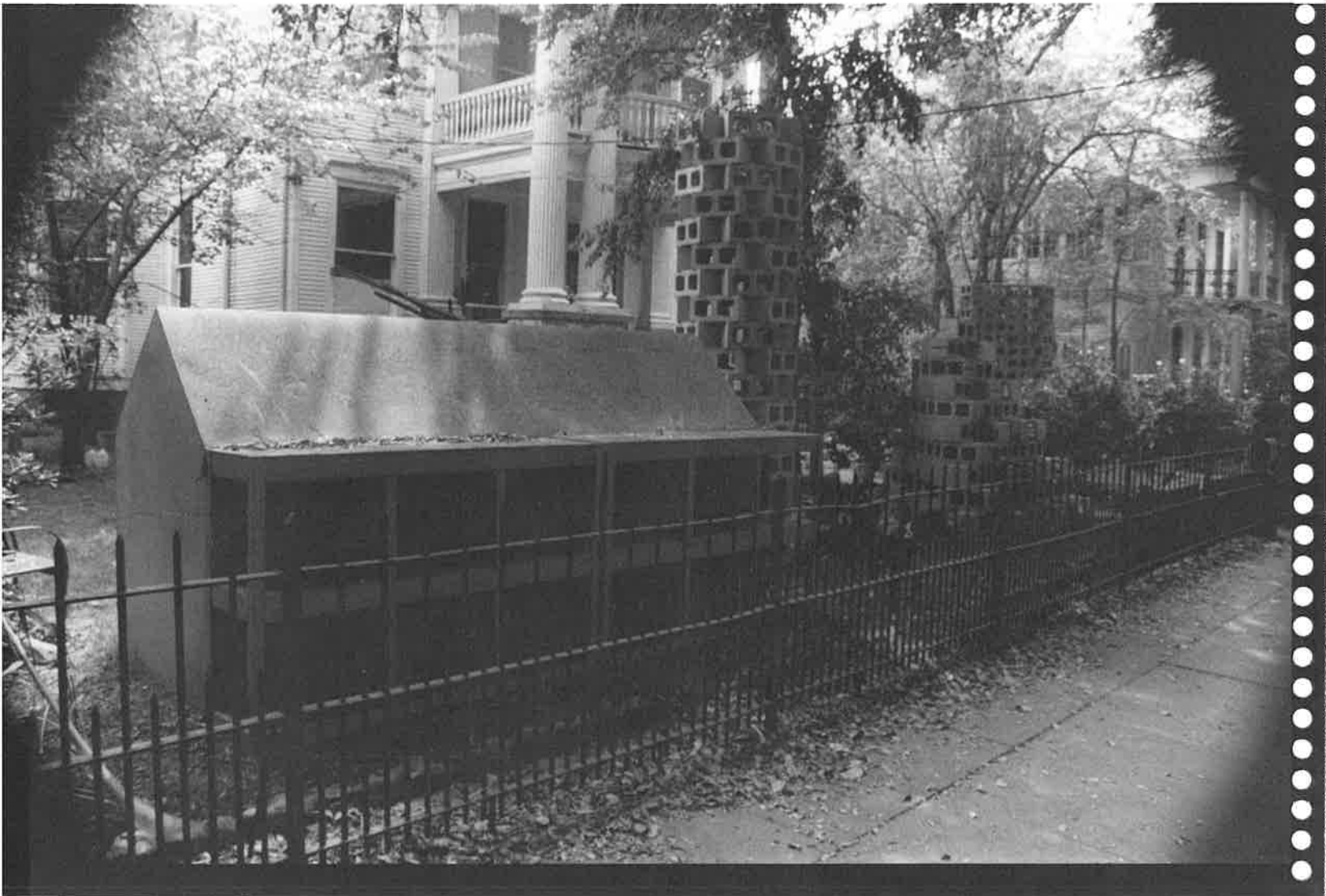
I'm always rubbing materials and people against each other and sometimes against the grain. I'm looking at human nature...human frailty is beautiful. A beautiful woman with her slip showing is beautiful. Can't people see that perfection is uninteresting? It's the collision of thought that's interesting. A meeting of people all being nice is boring. It's also about allowing a kind of intimacy. I don't care if someone

comes in my office and there are models all over the place. It's still perfect.

Letting things fall where they might. Letting your intuition drive. It's not about a preconceived, orderly perfection that you jam. One move leads to the next move, and takes with it the accidents that happen and the opportunities that come with the accidents.

I know Tannen has a similar attitude. He must say, "I could make the beautiful choice, but I'll put the concrete block down here, in a different way...I'll hang the clothes as art."

We both play off that note. Always testing ourselves. I'll always put the car just a foot away from where it's ex-





pected to be.

**Nathan:** What about the relationship between art and architecture, in your work as well as Tannen's?

**Gehry:** I've never focused on the difference between them. Historically, the architect was involved in both the outer design of the building, as well as the art that filled it. The master builders of the Parthenon had a coterie of people who worked with them on both the building and the sculptures in them. Stone and brick are the same, inseparable.

Painting is different. I always put painting on a pedestal. It's a mystery I don't understand.

Tannen has used architectural themes in art in ways nobody else has. His shotgun houses, for example. His tower of shotgun houses has remained a very powerful image for me.

In his planning work, his attitude of opening up, clearing the path, parting the waters, is key to what makes him unique.

It's also the surprises of his fish stuff, the red fish Cadillac suspended on the wall at the World's Fair, that leave powerful images that linger. The shotguns, the galvanized metal stuff, the stuff in bottles, that linger for me.

**Nathan:** How would you describe the ways in which your and Tannen's approach is related?

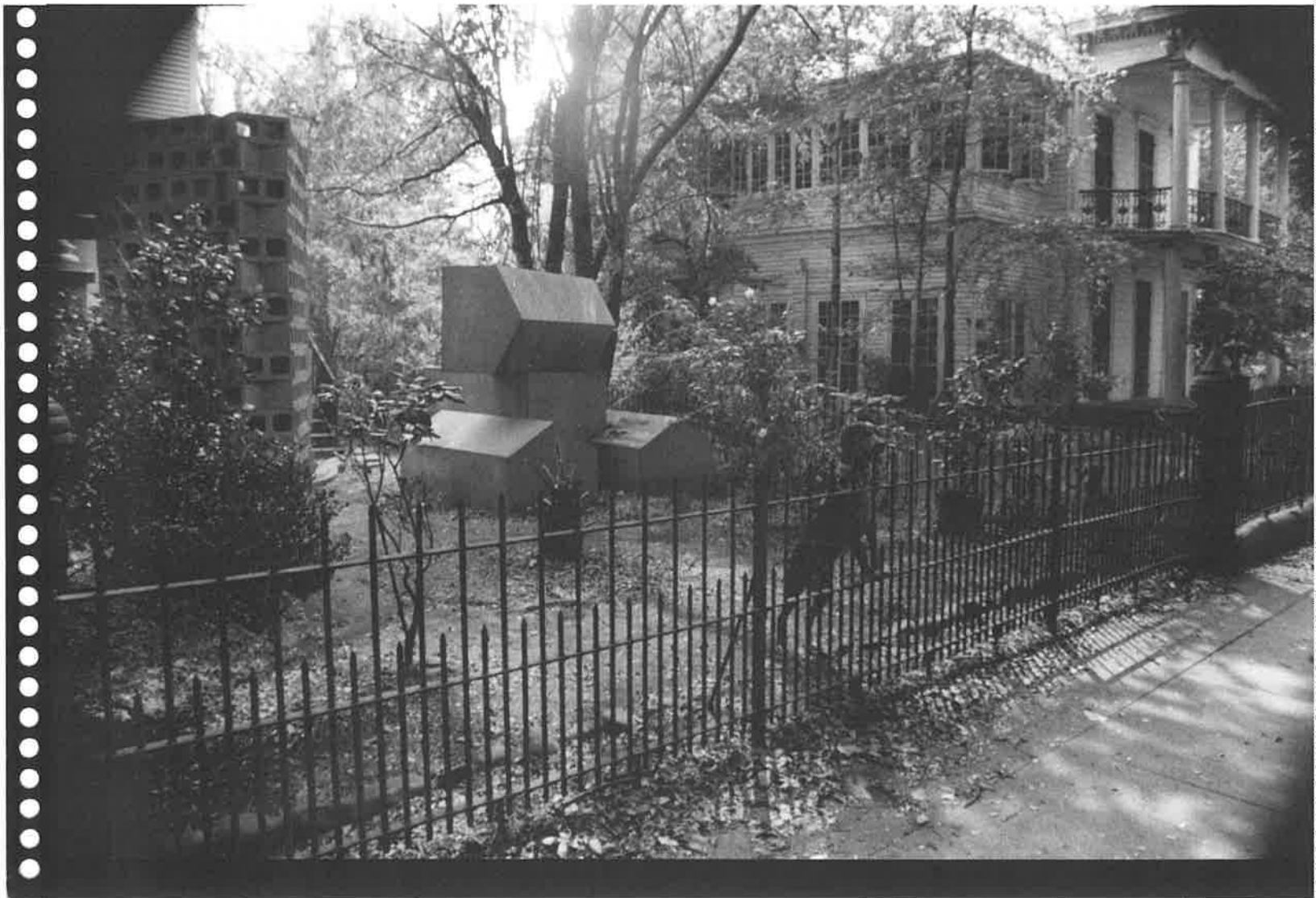


Esplanade Avenue Rear Garden  
*Ancient Camphor Tree Bodies*  
1990

Front Yard Installation  
From right to left:

*Stacked Shotgun Houses*, 1979

*Concrete Block Tower*, 1988



**Gehry:** Though I've produced art such as the fish lamps, I don't feel art is a part of my real life. I'm not interested in producing work for galleries. I started out studying art, but floundered. It wasn't until I got into architecture that I did well. My liberal instinct pushed me towards planning. But at Harvard, the writing, statistics and presentations that go with planning convinced me planning wouldn't be my primary calling.

Throughout the years of working in architecture, I've enjoyed the big projects that involved planning. Like Tannen, I still take a major interest in planning issues, including, for example, planning for Los Angeles' downtown. And I can tell you that my attitude on this matter again works off the reality of this city, and not some of the ideas I've heard that would attempt to Europeanize this city, or make it like some other place.

Tannen really is an artist. But like me, he's really a hybrid, dancing between realms. I often ask myself how he makes a living. The world doesn't really know how to deal with hybrids.

How do I explain why I love these things Tannen makes? They really spin me out. I picture his work doing

gyrations, floating down the Mississippi River. It's very clear in my head, very powerful.

Dealing with his work is dealing with his life. It's coming into his house...how you go into it, how you get there, how you leave. He's not at all conventional. His whole being is so hybrid, so related to where he lives, his environment, how he feels, even his health.

His art doesn't edit his feelings out. And his art isn't about going into a gallery, about whether someone is going to buy it. He's not a Stella or a Gehry. It's about his life as he lives it and how he experiences his surroundings. People get to see his art who get to know him, others may not get it.

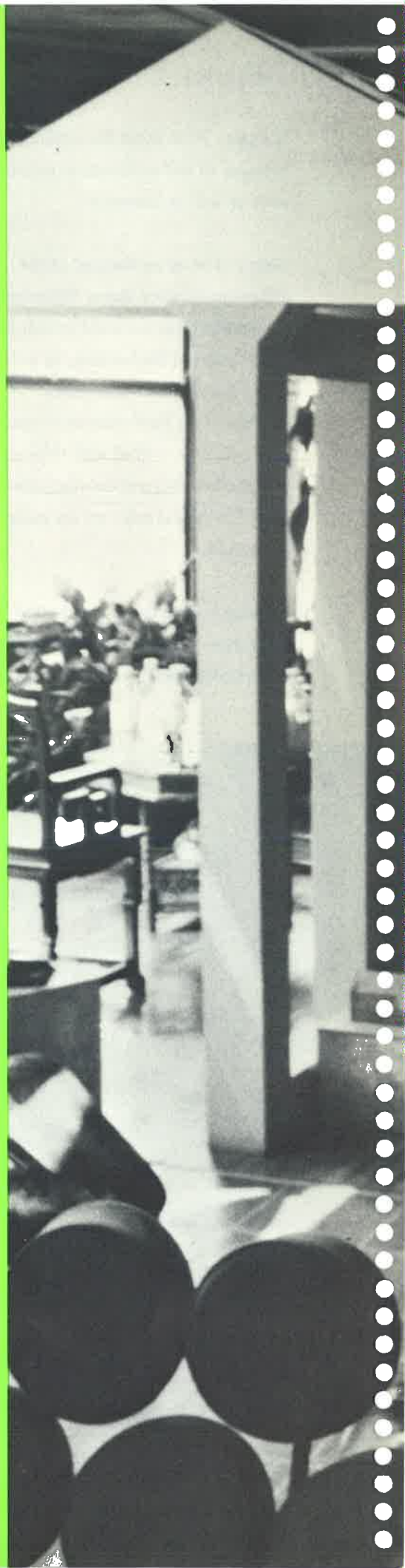
There are very few people in the world like that. I think of the poet Carl Sandburg. Very few people who have made art based on their being. Duchamp did it, the way he lived his life, playing chess, making objects that were not for sale, blurring the relationship of art and life. We don't know if Duchamp was Duchamp.

Tannen is about living, art and the world.

Interior View of  
Robert Tannen  
Esplanade Avenue  
Home

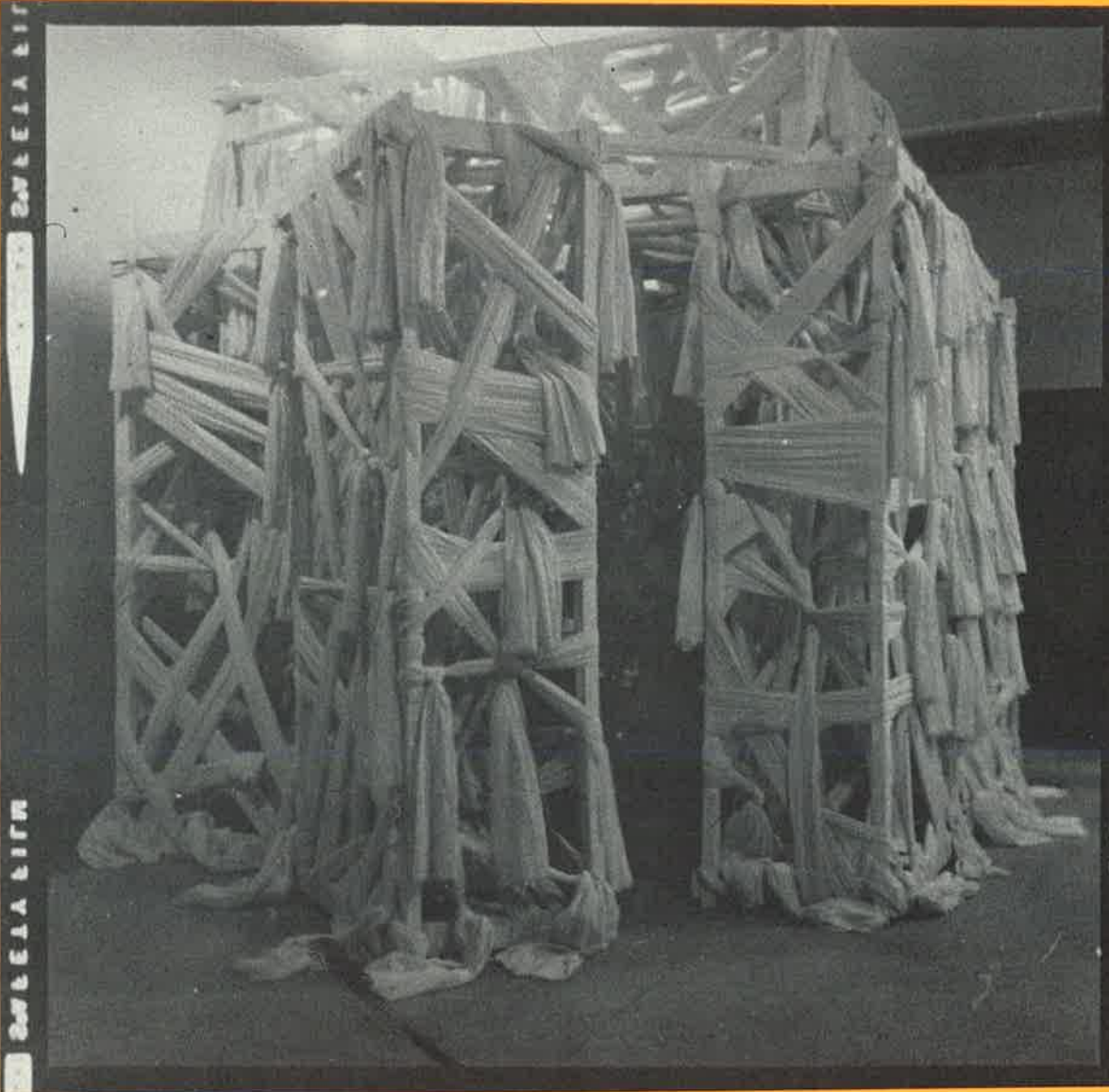
RIGHT:  
Living room featuring  
Mississippi River Bridge  
Installation

LEFT:  
Ceramic constructions  
by Robert Tannen









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