Ultimo site gets ultimate architect - Frank Gehry

HEATH GILMORE
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Shaping up ... the Ray and Maria Stata Centre at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, above, convinced UTS to approach Frank Gehry, pictured in Sydney yesterday. Photo: MIT/UTS

THE acclaimed architect Frank Gehry, who creates buildings that "look like a party of drunken robots got together to celebrate", is about to unleash his vision for Sydney.

The University of Technology, Sydney yesterday announced that Mr Gehry, who designed the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, will create a concept design to transform a former industrial site at Ultimo into a building of international repute.

The new Faculty of Business building will be the 80-year-old architect's first in Australia, pending the university's council approval of his finished concept design next year. The building, on the former Dairy Farmers site wedged between the ABC Ultimo Centre and the Powerhouse Museum, will house an estimated 2000 students and more than 400 academics.

Yesterday, food poisoning contracted during his four-day Sydney visit prevented Mr Gehry from discussing his ideas for the site. The UTS vice-chancellor, Ross Milbourne, said the architect told him the challenge of rejuvenating the contained, inner-city industrial block, which is only 2800 square metres, with a destination building excited him.

Mr Gehry has won international accolades, as well as controversy, for his buildings including the Guggenheim, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and the InterActive Corp headquarters in New York. His free-form designs have garnered the British Royal Gold Medal and the US Pritzker Prize, the two biggest honours in architecture.

When his Ray and Maria Stata Centre at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was unveiled, the famed nonconformist said the futuristic building looked like a bunch of tipsy robots that "got together to celebrate".

It was this building that convinced UTS powerbrokers to pursue the architect. An official agreement with Mr Gehry was signed on Wednesday inside the brutalist UTS high rise tower. The university declined to reveal the architect's fees, but did disclose his dislike of the tower.

The agreement follows three months of negotiation. Maureen Thurston, from the consultancy firm Second Road, which is assisting the university with its review of the business faculty, helped make the initial contact with Mr Gehry's firm.

After this approach, Mr Gehry flew to Sydney for three days of talks in early October. Professor Milbourne and the head of the facilities management unit, Robert Kelly, subsequently visited the architect at his Los Angeles workshop. The dean of business, Roy Green, held further face to face discussions.
"It was an easy meeting of minds but we had to negotiate on details of the financial package," Professor Milbourne told the *Herald*.

"Frank told me this is his chance to create a building in Australia after first visiting 20 years ago. It will probably be his only building in this country.

"This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity offers the university a chance to build something extraordinary as part of our campus master plan."

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