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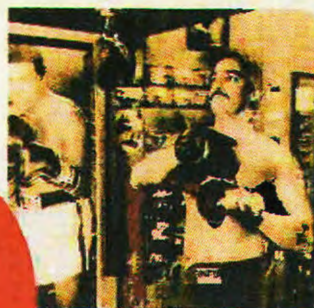
Frank Perdue Is a Breast Man By Kathleen Maxa

Helmut Jahn Has An Edifice Complex

CONTENTS

VOLUME 55 • NUMBER 5
MAY 1985

161 French fashion eases up for summer climes.



188 Elegant Ed trains for the battle of the oil tycoons.

196 Paulina helps reveal the new men's swimwear.

226 Bowa and Sandberg double up on double-breasteds.

216 Collecting Krazy Kat and other cartoons is serious business.

Architect Helmut Jahn, Chicago's aging wunderkind, is making a big impact on big-city skylines. He also cuts a mean profile. Linen suit by Norman Hilton, about $555. Cotton-linen shirt by Pierre Cardin, about $39. Silk tie by Guy Laroche, about $20. Straw slouch hat by Jay Lord Hatters, about $70. (Hair: Thom Priano for Garren, N.Y. Makeup: Margaret Avery.) Photographed for GQ by Avedon.

FASHION

161 A TOAST TO THE FRENCH *Catching France's top designers in their lighter moments*

180 SPRING MIXERS *A subtle clash of prints and patterns can yield intoxicating results*

196 FANTASY ISLAND *A new swimwear story starring prints and a princess, supermodel Paulina Porizkova*

208 WE'VE GOT THE HORSE RIGHT HERE *Creatively combining light and dark can put you on the fast track*

226 DOUBLE PLAYS *Baseball's Larry Bowa and Ryne Sandberg field summer's versatile double-breasted suits*

FEATURES

172 THE MASTER BUILDER *Helmut Jahn, like his architecture, is stylish, theatrical and controversial By David Breskin*

178 FUN COUPLE OF THE MOMENT *John McEnroe and Tatum O'Neal are making quite a racket Drawing by Ralph Steadman*

188 KING OF THE NEW YORK ATHLETIC CLUB *Oh, what a night it was when two oil tycoons squared off in the ring/By Michael Disend*

195 THE SEMIOTICS OF A TOPLESS BEACH *In considering the question of too much to bare, there are rules for both sexes to obey/By Peter S. Prescott*

206 MAKE MINE A CARY GRANT *Introducing a cocktail as smooth and subtle as the man himself*

216 BUT IS IT ART? *Just because cartoons make you laugh doesn't mean they're not serious investments*

222 FRANK PERDUE IS A BREAST MAN *The plucky man who gave us designer poultry has an eye for the chicks By Kathleen Maxa*

230 RABBIT EARS *My kid's got the best bat in the league, but he hears the crowd/Fiction by Robert Greenfield*

DEPARTMENTS

10 LETTERS/GQ & A *Comments, questions, advice*

16 ELEMENTS OF STYLE *Hot rod and reel • Cool panama hats • The lasting straws • Summer ties • Tops in hops • Gianni Versace; Ritzy robes*

50 SHEED AT LARGE *Coming of age during WWII, the big one/By Wilfrid Sheed*

54 MOVIES *Louis Malle and other foreign directors have all come to look for America/By William A. Henry III*

60 MUSIC *One can be the most lucrative number By Ben Fong-Torres*

79 TV *Where have you gone, Fred Flintstone? By Ron Powers*

82 BOOKS *Notes of a native son: on Canadian writers By Mordecai Richler*

90 BODY AND SOUL
Fitness: Shake and bake/By Michael Marino
Health: Stressed to kill/By Dean Ornish
Fitness: Yoga/Produced by Patrice Serrani

116 TECH *Multipurpose software, a CD player to go By Martin Porter*

120 MONEY *Sorry, here come the bad news bears By Michael K. Evans*

128 TRAVEL *Hôtel du Cap: 100 rms. Riviera vu/By Rudy Maxa*

136 AREA CODE 202 *A Little Madness in the Spring, Part VII of the serial novel/By Nicholas von Hoffman*

146 THE MALE ANIMAL *Class reunion/By P. F. Kluge*

154 ALL ABOUT ADAM *The recently divorced man is as available as the pope/By Erica Abeel*

234 DINING IN *Asparagus, stalk of the town/By Bert Greene*

240 COUNTER CULTURE *High on the hog along Carolina's barbecue trail/By Jane and Michael Stern*

252 FASHION DIRECTORIES *Shopping information*

256 PREVIEW *Next month in GQ*

Where are items on pages 161 to 229 available? See "Where to Buy It," page 252; "How to Buy It," page 254.
Prices quoted editorially are approximate and subject to change.

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"Jahn is a genuine genius and certainly a big man on the horizon," claims Philip Johnson, dean of modern American architects. "But he's such a comet flashing in the sky that I don't know about him yet."

THE MASTER BUILDER

Helmut Jahn, like his architecture, is stylish, theatrical and controversial. Okay, outrageous

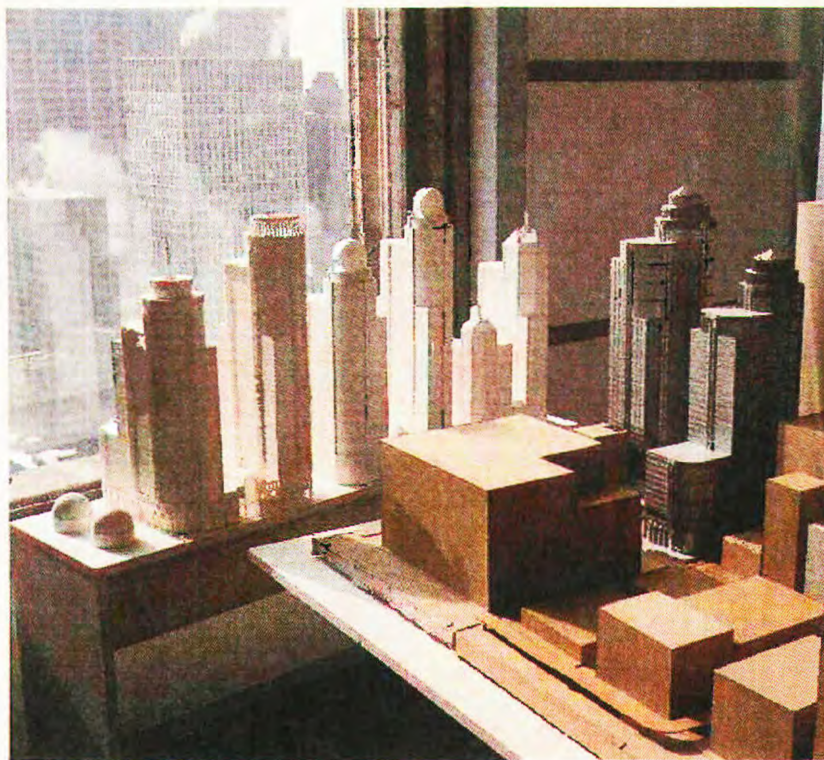
By David Breskin

Two people in clown makeup pull to a stop at the intersection of Randolph and Clark. One clown draws deeply on her Marlboro, brushes blond hair over her bright red eyebrows and, peering through the windshield, pronounces, "It looks like a spaceship. I like it." The white-faced male clown next to her smiles. "It's pretty." "It's grotesque," spits an unemployed senior citizen, toddling to the corner. "It's nuts," says a loitering female bureaucrat dismissively. "It's bold, it's new, it's tomorrow. It's what we need," opines a lawyer, dashing across the plaza into court. "A monstrosity," rebuts a female counterpart. "Outrageous!" offers a legal secretary. "If it had gargoyles on it, I might like it," laughs a young model. "I don't understand it," confides a systems analyst. A Hispanic man of no English, after careful consideration, turns his thumb down. Then a 15-year-old boy, toting books from school, stops to deliver a lecture: "I've watched it really closely as it's been built, since I was 12, and I think it's fascinating. The architect isn't gimmicky, like Philip Johnson with the AT&T building, or Michael Graves with that building in Portland. He's good at producing a visual effect any person can experience."

The architect is Helmut Jahn and the precocious punk is right: Jahn (pronounced *Yahn*) is a populist, a designer for the people, a popitect. The visual effect in question is Jahn's State of Illinois Center: a twenty-first-century crystal palace of robin's-egg-blue and salmon-pink and silver glass, reflecting mirrors, seventeen-story atrium, heroic public space, disintegrating granite columns, steel space frames, a slanting keyhole skylight, a sweeping, slicing window-wall held together with glue, and a waterfall—plunked down in Chicago's otherwise businesslike Loop. It's a daring future shock, all state-of-the-art, and (here's the rub) art of the state. The building was commissioned by Big Jim Thompson, governor of Illinois, to house elements of the state's vast bureaucracy, including his own royal vastness. People tend to take a building a bit personally when they're paying for it. Especially a building whose light-blue walls remind them of Fifties icons: parking garages, Catholic high schools and Chevy sedans.

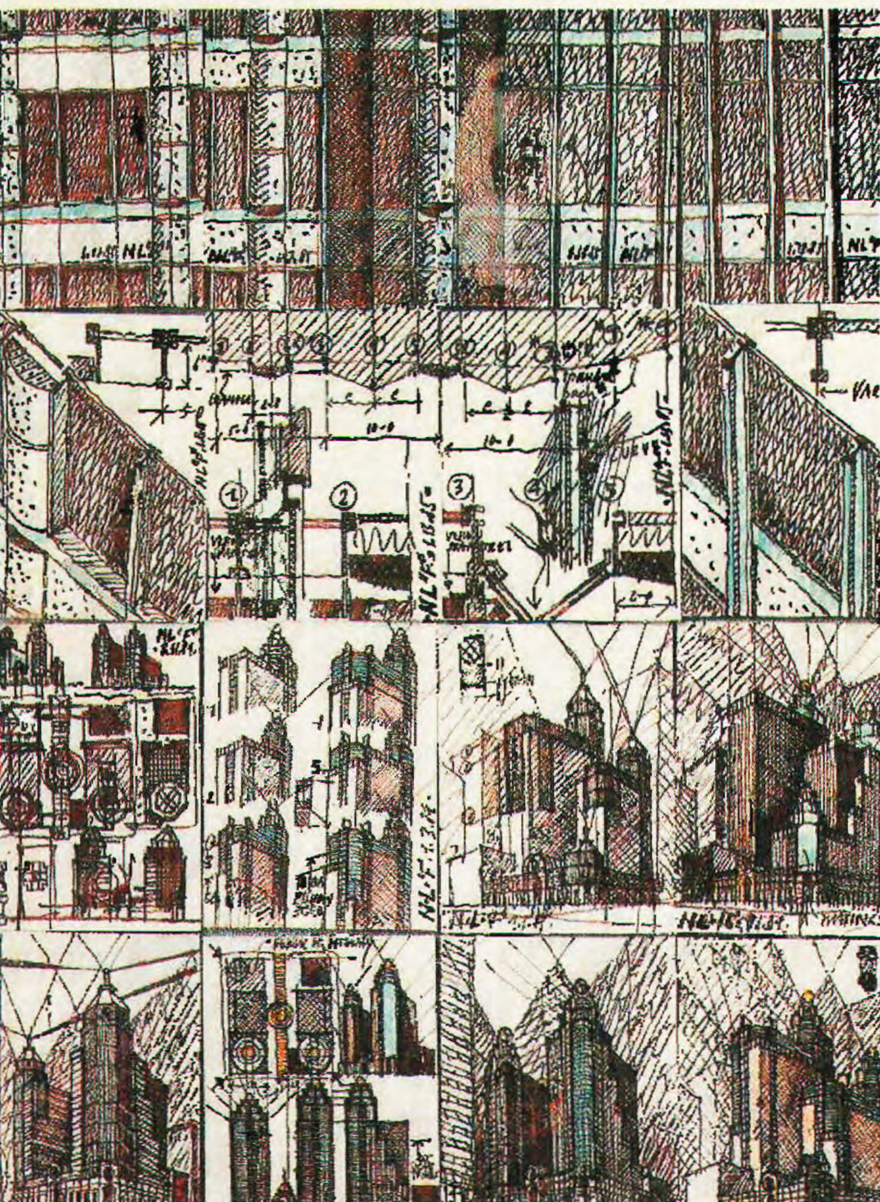
So when Big Jim blows into town later in the day to speak at a rubber-chicken lunch honoring the project, he carries with him an air of defensiveness, no doubt heightened when the jovial emcee presents Jahn with a color chart for his edification. (The audience

The firm's executive presentation room features a model of downtown Chicago: All the buildings are gray except Murphy/Jahn's, which are painted silver.



of real-estate appraisers roars.) The governor rises and speaks: "I feel like a proud parent about to have a baby." He goes on to rhapsodically describe the building—its symbolism, complexity, meaning (how the lopped conical skylight "represents" the traditional dome of government buildings, etc.)—and ascending to a climax, he quotes an architect who claimed the building was "totally unlike anything else in the history of Western civilization." The governor is aware that this was not meant as a compliment. But he is going to take it as one anyway, concluding mistily, "I didn't know we could reach that high and achieve that much." This is a stone-cold Republican talking, mind you, a conservative get-the-government-off-your-backs politico, and here he is, embracing a radically weird state-financed building, staking his claim as a papa of postmodernism. Such is the persuasive power of Helmut Jahn.

Right, the atrium of the State of Illinois Center: future shock in Chicago's otherwise businesslike Loop.



Every piece of work produced by the firm begins at the precise moment Jahn's pen hits paper.

Controversial, abrasive, handsome, young, fanatical, quite serious and, these days, very very hot, Helmut Jahn has a talent for selling left-of-center ideas to the most conservative of clients. Since 1980 he has designed a post office with the look of a mailbox, a police headquarters clothed in uniform blue, a subway station with rainbow colors beamed through undulating glass-block walls, an office tower for De Beers that looks like a diamond, and another spiraling tower inspired by Russian constructivism that is wrapped, bottom to top, with a ribbon of trees. He even proposed an addition to the Board of Trade that looked like the world's largest cash register (turned down in favor of a more traditional scheme). While other leading postmodern architects design quirky dining-room chairs and $20,000 tea sets (Michael Graves through Neiman-Marcus) and sell their precious pastel renderings to the eastern art fashionables for a couple of grand a hit, Jahn is out in Chicago—the first city of American architecture, the land of "Build, Don't Talk"—designing buildings worth hundreds of millions. Lots of them. For New York and Los Angeles and Minneapolis and Houston, Durban and Frankfurt and Philly. He's not even *selling* his drawings. Preposterous! He's building buildings with them. As they say in the world of sports, Helmut Jahn is an impact player.

"Jahn is a genuine genius and certainly a big man on the horizon," claims Philip Johnson, dean of American architects and legitimizer of the postmodern movement with his AT&T building in Manhattan. "But he's such a comet flashing in the sky now that I don't know about him yet."

Here is what we know about him so far. Dim the lights. NEWS ON THE MARCH:

Baby Jahn is born in Nuremberg, West Germany, on January 4, 1940. Never the best in class, never wants to be, teachers think him lazy. "I was just an average guy," he says. Life is not exciting for young Helmut. But he must decide what to do with it anyway. He's saved from a career in medicine or law by the sheer awfulness of postwar German architecture: "I thought I could make better buildings than the buildings I saw, which wasn't hard."

Off to technical college in Munich. A thorough indoctrination into the guiding principles of Mies van der Rohe, master of modernism. Then, in 1966, over the ocean to Chicago, adopted home of Mies, for graduate work at Illinois Institute of Technology. Lectures by Mies disciples in Mies buildings. Still

maintains "Less Is More" approach to schoolwork. When he shows up for field trip at end of year, a professor says, "Now Jahn, what are you doing here? Are you not making the exam?" Helmut says he isn't ready. "You're ready. Get out of the school!"

In 1967, young Jahn goes to work for C. F. Murphy Associates, a huge Chicago shop well known for large, straitlaced commercial work such as O'Hare Airport. At Murphy, Jahn assists Gene Summers, head of design. All under Miesian spell. Everyone knows what buildings will look like even before they're designed. Turning around a mullion or an I beam on a facade considered a *radical* step. Works on McCormick Place convention center, beginning to end, through every nail. Spends Saturdays photographing construction and climbing around on the steel. Marries in 1970. Apprenticeship abruptly ends in 1973, when Summers leaves. At age 33, Jahn becomes executive vice-president and director of planning and design. Fast track.

First building: Kansas City's Kemper Arena in 1974, an award winner, with a dramatic, clear span roof. By the time the span collapses in 1979, Jahn has produced a series of smart, elegantly simple libraries, courthouses, convention centers, gyms and one son, Evan. (Blame for the Kemper roof collapse never determined; the matter settled out of court.) In 1980, his breakthrough: Xerox Centre, a thin office tower on a difficult site in downtown Chicago. He curves the building around the corner, and it's as if the wheel has been reinvented. The developer quashes Jahn's desire for a blue facade, and the resulting white proves winning: Xerox is a light, lyrical, somehow feminine contrast to the broad-shouldered bullishness and boringness of most knee-jerk modern.

In 1981, C. F. Murphy Associates becomes Murphy/Jahn. In 1982, Jahn becomes president. In 1983, Jahn becomes chief executive officer and buys the firm. Along the way, he designs a number of huge commercial projects in rapid succession that, he claims, "create excitement, surprise, and are intended to be people-pleasing." These are not traits associated with modernism. The late Seventies and early Eighties prove a provocative time for architecture. By the time Tom Wolfe fires his sarcastic harpoon into modernism—*From Bauhaus to Our House*—the whale has already been beached, abandoned (by all but the True Believers) and replaced by, ta-da, postmodernism. Which means (what else?) "after modern," and a hundred different things to a hundred different people. Postmodernists are united in almost no ideals except their bitter renunciation of modernist ideals: rationality, functionalism, sterility, purity, abstraction and coolness, a stern esthetic where ornament is a crime and history is for those enslaved by the past. The postmodernists revolt with a conservative architecture embracing the past and everything but the kitchen sink: It tends toward the picturesque, decorative, sensuous, symbolic, whimsical, classical, colorful, contextual, ornamental, pictorial, friendly. It's respectful of historical forms and the needs of plain old folk. (Modernism did not know from plain old folk.)

Now into this muddle leaps Helmut Jahn, claiming his niche. Jahn evolves a historical conscience, a colorist's palette, and a jazzy theatricality to go along with his hi-tech sensibility. Unlike the more conservative (hence radical) postmodernists, whose work tends to be blatantly backward-looking, Jahn filters history (art deco, moderne, Gothic, early industrial, beaux arts, classical) through cutting-edge technology. His buildings carry an optimistic sense of the future, even as they energetically express themes of the past. This is his uniqueness. His work says, You can have it both ways. His mouth says, "We synthesize the past and the present. From a time when the past was excluded to a time where the past is overemphasized, we are in the middle. Expressing technology is not enough, but you don't have to go all the other way—as architects so often do now—and try to redo Grand Central Terminal. We *push* technology, not for its own sake, but rather to support the images we create." He labels his work "Romantic Hi-Tech," and to the preening, pictorial postmoderns, he replies slyly: "We do not construct decoration, we decorate construction." Jahn is really neither modern nor postmodern: He's panmodern.

Jahn does stints as visiting professor at both Harvard and Yale. He lectures and debates. But mostly he works. Works with the passion and dedication of an entrepreneur. The more successful he becomes, the less he stays up all night, but he regularly works sixteen-, eighteen-hour days. He leaves the office at eight or nine, works at home until one A.M., and wakes at five-thirty for his morning run along the lake. This is routine. His five-by-four-inch sketchbook is like his wallet; he carries it everywhere. He sketches like other people breathe. "The greatest part of your life is your work," Jahn states. "If you do better in your work, you have a better life." As a release, he skis as if he were competing against the mountain.

In November of 1982, concurrent issues of *Newsweek* and *Time* feature his work. *Newsweek* puts a drawing of his art deco-ish Northwestern Terminal Tower on its cover next to the headline "The New Age of Skyscrapers" and calls Jahn "The Flash Gordon of American Architecture." *Time* counters with a

The Xerox Centre, Jahn's breakthrough project. He overcame a difficult downtown site by curving the building around a corner. The result was lyrical.

drawing of his winning entry in a Houston competition for the world's tallest tower outside of New York or Chicago under the headline AT LAST, A SKYSCRAPER THAT AGAIN SCRAPES THE SKY. Jahn calls his wife, Deborah, from Helsinki to ask her who is this Flash Gordon character and is it good or bad that they think I'm like him? By the end of 1984, Jahn finds himself with annual billings of $14 million and something like $2 billion worth of buildings in the pipeline. By this time, he realizes it's good.

"I just can't talk right now about some bullshit philosophy," blurts Helmut Jahn when I'm summoned to his formal office for an interview. Trailing a swirl of blueprints across the room, he explains, "I'm really upset. It's just, a developer walked into the office this morning, and I need to have something for tomorrow. I just can't right now sit down." What Jahn needs is a hotel, specifically a different hotel from the one he's already designed. It seems the potential operators of the hotel think, among other things, that there should be two more rooms per floor facing the Chicago River. A new hotel in twenty-four hours. Build, don't talk, indeed.

And by the way, he asks in a soft, clipped German accent, "What is it you want to know? I don't want another flashy-suit story." It so happens Jahn is wearing another flashy suit: stone-gray with burgundy pinstripes, double-breasted, cut on a dime, a white shirt with epaulets, brown belt, burgundy tie with a gold eagle, blue-and-gray striped socks and purple leather loafers. His wide-brimmed gray gangster fedora (this *is* Chicago, after all) sits in the chair to the left of his desk. He dresses like he designs: to kill.

Jahn walks out of his "business" office and past his "creative" office, an open playroom littered with stone samples and curtain-wall mock-ups and glass panels—an archaeological dig of the future. He strides down the corridor, past young women carrying cardboard cities in their arms, young men with ties tucked into their shirts, and walls boasting huge drawings and photographs of his work. Jahn stops at the back of the shop and settles down at an open worktable, waiting for his project architect on this job, Phil Castillo, and Phil's assistant architect, Nancy Cromar. (Murphy/Jahn has eight project architects whose function is to execute what Jahn conceives, seventy-five other architects to do the dirty work, and fifty additional employees in support. Every piece of work produced by the firm begins at the precise moment Jahn's pen hits paper.)

Jahn takes out his pen. He fondles it unconsciously in large, graceful hands. When Castillo and assistant arrive, he describes the

Helmut Jahn to his critics: "People always boo McEnroe, and he always wins. Right?"

problem. Calmly, slowly, Jahn discusses why the developer has sent them back to the drawing board: "He just wants the hotel *his* way. He's saying he knows about hotels, that I don't know enough about them. The operator asked him whether they are married to us. It's not really a problem for me at this point, them talking about getting somebody else. But it's always this implied threat: 'You'd better satisfy us.' " As he talks he's already begun sketching in purplish-brown ink on onionskin paper over the old scheme.

For the next half hour, Jahn sketches and stops, sketches and stops. The developer has put him in a box, and now he's trying to find his way out of it. He parries and thrusts with Castillo over elevators, atriums, mechanical floors, step-backs, lobby entrances, alleys. There are long silences. After one, he tells Castillo, "The problem is that there isn't any principle of organization. So we do this octagon." But there is another problem, *the* problem: money. As Jahn thickens the eight-sided figure for emphasis, he explains: "Golub [the developer] keeps talking about the octagon. I say, 'I don't know what makes you think an octagon is so expensive. Just think how much richer you are because of the curve in Xerox.' And he says, 'Yeah, I lost it on other deals.' I say, 'Well, that's your problem.' " The story breaks Helmut Jahn's sleepy yawn of a voice into a sharp, high-pitched laugh. He recovers, and adds a coda: "Yeah, $20 million there, it's probably true."

They settle back down to the business of esthetics.

Jahn: "Maybe we should make it so the octagon sticks out."

Castillo: "Every time we did that we could never get it to work."

Jahn: "Maybe we could put a skylight in the lobby."

Castillo: "No, not really."

Jahn, sketching: "This is more powerful, and cheaper anyway."

Castillo: "The base now is actually pretty high. How can we minimize that?"

Jahn draws the floors stepping back to the top and says, "Take a slice here and a slice there. It's got to work."

Castillo: "You know where they'll get us—where there are all these weird rooms and they can't lay furniture out in them. They have all these bizarre standards for laying furniture."

As Jahn sketches, *(continued on page 250)*

One South Wacker: Pulitzer Prize–winning critic Paul Gapp called it "dull and intrusive, like a dolt at a party."

Frank Perdue

meat distributors, a group that includes companies with known links to organized crime, requires other skills. One of Perdue's distributors, Dial Poultry, is owned by the sons of Paul Castellano, recently indicted as boss of New York's Gambino crime family. According to a 1983 story in *New York* magazine, Perdue has met with Castellano. Perdue still declines, however, to discuss why.

His relationship with other distributors has been less friendly. West Side Poultry Company filed a $35-million antitrust suit against him in 1980, claiming that Perdue Inc. had demanded that it stop distributing a competing brand. Later that year, the Justice Department filed a civil complaint, accusing Perdue Farms of unfair trade practices—cutting off supplies to various wholesalers who refused to stop handling competing brands. The Justice Department later dropped its suit. A spokesman for West Side will say only that its case was settled, and according to West Side's owner, Seymour Addleson, it's back distributing Perdue.

If there is one lesson he's learned in life, Frank Perdue says, it's to stick with what you know. That's why he has spurned suggestions that he run for the Senate or for governor of Maryland on the Republican ticket.

"If I had any interest, it would be in the Senate," he says, perhaps hedging his bets a bit. "And I think I would enjoy the competition of campaigning. But I don't think I'd enjoy the job. There's so much unproductive time in politics."

He also believes that his only son, Jim, who has a Ph.D. in marine biology, is better off grooming himself to run the family chicken business than pursuing a life in academia. The 35-year-old is currently manager of Perdue's Salisbury plant. (None of Perdue's three daughters is in the business.) Of course, Frank Perdue admits, there is an element of self-interest in seeing the company he built remain private and one day in the control of his son.

Not that the chicken king has any intention of abdicating. His father came into the office every day until he was 91. And Frank Perdue, who has twenty-six more years to go, still works ten-hour days "protecting the quality, service and reliability of our product." The company currently has no plans to go national, focusing instead on increasing its market share in the Northeast and expanding further into such "value added" chicken products as patties, bologna and franks.

During almost a half century in the business, Perdue has outhustled, outresearched, outmaneuvered and outshone his competitors. Yes, it takes a tough man to make a tender chicken. And he's not about to go soft on us now. ■

Kathleen Maxa is a Washington writer.

Helmut Jahn

(continued from page 177) sandy hair falls across his forehead, his cool blue eyes jump, and lips purse in concentration. He looks like an energetic kid. But at puzzling moments, he'll lean back from the table, rest his chin in his right hand, swivel in his seat, his pen under his nose, and sigh deeply in a manner reserved for aging artists. Toward the end of this charette, Castillo looks at the original scheme beneath the new drawing and laughs bitterly. "This one is all but gone now."

A design team spends the night, all night, working up the new plans, making models, drawing perspectives and elevations. The next morning Jahn presents the new scheme to the developers, not in the normal third-floor office, but up in the fortieth-floor cupola of the building, the firm's new executive presentation room. With three-story windows, it commands a scrumptious view of downtown Chicago. In the center of the room is a model of the Loop: All the buildings are shades of gray, except Murphy/Jahn's, which are painted silver. Can you blame anybody for wanting one of the silver ones?

After the presentation, Jahn's off to a local television talk show. He was named "Chicagoan of the Year" for 1983, and such are the civic duties he must fulfill, much as he dislikes them. On the way back to his office in a painfully slow cab on an unusually hot fall day, he's sweating in his baggy, rough-woven suit, fedora, and tie striped the same gentle green he's used in three recent buildings. I ask him if he convinced Golub that the octagon is not necessarily synonymous with expense. "It took about an hour," he replies, as if to say, "of course." That's seven and a half minutes per side into a $100 million project; let's see, that comes to $12.5 million per side, or roughly $1.6 million a minute. Jahn has this *way* with developers.

"A lot of people who deal with Helmut have to defend him. I defend him all the time," Eugene Golub says, "because others think he's gonna design the shit out of something and that he doesn't care about anything else. But Helmut's very sophisticated. He has the courage of his own convictions, yet he knows the reality of what can and can't be done within a budget. It's a great blend. In the final analysis, I *trust* what he does, trust he will do the best for the project. And though there are other architects as talented, Helmut has *style*."

Jahn is not a warm or witty or charming man. He is a dull speaker. But he is somehow magnetic. "It's his soft manner, it's the German accent, it's the whole effect he projects," says Irv Markin, a Chicago developer. "He has that quiet enthusiasm, and it's seductive." Project architect Martin Wolf agrees. "I have personally seen Helmut sell things to people—CEOs—that I thought were unsellable. Ideas! Helmut comes in absolutely confident, brash, antagonistic, and says, 'We'll do it *this* way.' And very few people have the guts or the confidence to say, 'Helmut, we're not gonna do it that way, we're gonna do it this way.' Very few. Very few can counter his positive, profound presentation of a solution to a problem."

Wolf continues: "And if someone does offer a counter-solution, a comment, they are vaporized. *Whoooooooffffff!* Helmut will very clearly, sometimes loudly, straightforwardly and perhaps impolitely tell them that they are wrong. And that's that. I've seen it work against him. I've seen the client get up, walk out of the room, and never come back. But most clients like the fact that he's so straightforward. He will not hold anything back. He will not put something over on a client."

"He's refreshingly meticulous," says George Klein, a top New York developer who works only with the crème de la crème of architects and is building Jahn's first Manhattan tower (which features an open steel pyramid on the top to answer AT&T's broken pediment across the street). Down the block, Bruce Eichner, a 39-year-old hotshot developer, will build one of Jahn's other two planned New York towers. Eichner likes Jahn's feisty dedication: "He has a certain toughness that as a client can be challenging. Helmut tries to stick to his design principles. He and I have been battling over the color of one of his accent pieces for months. I *enjoy* the give and take."

"I always felt if you were going to make a movie and cast somebody in the role of the architect, it would be Helmut Jahn," jokes Harvey Walken, the first-time Chicago developer who chose Jahn over Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Bruce Graham for his One South Wacker office tower. He gave Jahn a difficult program to satisfy—three different floor sizes, outside atria and so on—and Jahn delivered. He also delivered a plan in which the concrete columns, which poke out from the black, silver and coral reflective skin at the bottom and top of the building, were to be painted red. Walken rebelled. "I told Helmut that if I'm negotiating a lease with a chairman of the board who went to Ohio State, then scarlet and silver is terrific, but if he went to any other school, I wouldn't make that lease." In the end, it's the developer's building, not the architect's. The columns were painted black.

In the end, as Jahn himself says when we finally get around to talking "bullshit philosophy," "These office buildings have got to be safe. If you spend all your time—or a lot of it—reminiscing about what you could

have done different, you would never go on. There isn't the *one* building, or *true* building, or *only* building—there's more than one way to design a building." In fact, this attitude—so unlike the constipated morality of modernism, in which there was One True Way—is the basis for Jahn's approach. He elaborates: "Today we don't have any accepted principles. All the rules, all the styles, are either dead or under observation as to whether they'll survive. This is causing confusion. For me, it's exciting and exhilarating. It's a kind of freedom we have and enjoy."

When Jahn says *we* he refers to a group of contemporaries with whom he is often lumped: "romantic" or "late" moderns Cesar Pelli, William Pedersen and Richard Meier, and pedigreed postmoderns Michael Graves and Robert A. M. Stern. "It's always the same four or five," comments Jahn, "but the more you go on, the less you look like what somebody else does. And," he chuckles, "I hope sometimes we actually know what we're doing."

The current esthetic anarchy has turned architects into guerrillas, furiously staking out and carving up and publicizing their own esthetic fiefdoms, though most influential architects do it on a smaller scale and are considered more "serious" than Jahn (bigness is badness these postmodern days). Jahn considers his peers. "No one looks at us like a 'school,' because we're fierce competitors. Everyone is trying to take the other guy's job away. Meier, Graves, Stern: The interesting thing is that they'd like nothing more than to build a high-rise building. They'd die for it. But they'd also be quick to accuse you of being a 'commercial' architect. I've never felt there was anything wrong with being a commercial architect."

Much of Jahn's success can be attributed to the way he marries pluralism with speed in his design process. Given a program by a developer, or a set of constraints or guidelines for a competition, Jahn whips out his sketchbook (often 35,000 feet above the earth in his preferred workspace) and draws sixteen to twenty different schemes as a way of analyzing the problem. Jahn has a reputation as the fastest gun in the West, and he deserves it: Today, at a first meeting with some health-club developers, the book was out and Jahn was already sketching halfway through their presentation. The project architects admit they cannot keep up with him. One of them, Scott Pratt, says, "Like Picasso could sit down in ten minutes and make a painting, Helmut can sit down in ten minutes and make a building. He has the same kind of productive imagination." Another architect explained that Murphy/Jahn does not use computer-aided design systems because "Helmut is faster than the computer."

Jahn will eliminate some options immediately, jotting a "no" next to a figure, and then, given practical considerations, will narrow to a handful of solutions. Models are built, plans are drawn, and options are presented to the client. Murphy/Jahn lays all its cards on the table, getting the client involved in the decision-making process. "To me it's just the natural way to do it," Jahn explains. "It gives the client a feeling of comfort that you just don't have a single idea and you want to *sell* it. Under Summers, we used to do the opposite. We strategized: How could we make this big impact on the client? How could we get the client to walk into a room, look at the one model, and say, *"Ahhhh!"*? And they never did. Because nobody likes to be confronted in front of *facts*. This way, you make the client a part of the process, and at the end you get a better building. But Philip Johnson ridiculed me for doing it this way. He told some of our clients that this is really bad, that we could not make up our minds."

Helmut Jahn is used to being ridiculed. Anyone with as much chutzpah as Jahn leaves himself open to ridicule. Here's a guy who wrote a letter to a landmarks commission *against* granting a Louis Sullivan building landmark status, a building whose ultimate destruction made possible his own One South Wacker (and then copied Sullivan's famous 1893 Columbian Exposition arch on his own Northwestern Terminal Tower just down the street). Here's a guy who wrote that his Durban tower "is of a constructivist science-fiction futuristic imagery. These aspirations represent progress and achievement for South Africa." At the same time he maintains he builds in South Africa with a clear conscience, asserting architecture is not political. That's chutzpah.

And here's ridicule. Bruce Graham of Skidmore, formerly the most powerful architect in the city, has referred to Jahn's buildings as "animals." Veteran Chicago architect Harry Weese called State of Illinois Center "tinselly and decadent" and the Houston tower "Jahn's tallest uncircumcised building." Meanwhile Charles Jencks the critic who popularized the term *postmodern*, assaults Jahn's Houston tower thusly. "The rocket-engine floors represent verticality, the tapering set-backs represent verticality, the prismatic facets, top and bottom, represent verticality and the hypodermic needle shooting its electric venom into the sky screams verticality. . . . This has been determined by the social meanings that might attract a bank, the client who picked the scheme in a competition; the psychological meanings of extreme verticality are too well known to need comment." (See Weese, above.)

Even those who admire Jahn and much of his work, such as Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic Paul Gapp, save some of their sharpest barbs for his efforts. Gapp, who considers Jahn without question the leading postmodern architect in America,

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Helmut Jahn

called One South Wacker "simultaneously dull and intrusive, like a dolt at a party."

"People always boo McEnroe," Helmut Jahn retorts, "and he always wins. Right?" Like the snotty tennis champion, Jahn thrives on the criticism and the controversy. "I don't mind someone criticizing," Jahn says, "because he does just the same favor as someone who praises you. Controversy is good. I'd rather have people talk about our buildings than say, 'Well, that's just another building that I didn't see.'" He is also aware that some of the professional criticism that has been leveled at him is fueled by jealousy: Not only is he on a roll creatively, not only is he becoming rich, but the man is also dashing. An Australian newspaper, preparing for his arrival in Sydney, wrote: "Women designers have been known to bite hard on their crayons at his film-star looks, and seasoned architects have done similar things with their artistic pride as they evaluate his contribution to architecture." This sort of talk doesn't do much for the fraternal brotherhood of architecture's middle class.

And as to the general feeling (even among some in the firm) that many of Jahn's buildings *try* too hard to be seen—in a sense, assault you visually on the street, kick you in the eyes—Jahn replies wryly, "I always tell them that we are doing the foreground buildings and others can do the background buildings." At the same time he confesses, "Today there's almost too much pressure on the architect to do something unique. Continuity is not what anybody wants. They want difference. They want a statement."

Jahn knows how to exploit a client's desire for difference (which his own reputation has inflamed), but in the past few years he's also learned how to take something off his serve. While other mainstream architects rush to emulate the aggressive flamboyance of his buildings, Jahn himself has won some major commissions with surprisingly restrained, disciplined designs. The Houston bank tower competition, against Bill Pedersen of Kohn Pedersen Fox and Richard Keating of Skidmore, provided Jahn with just such a punch line. It's a story he rather likes. "Now this competition was a sky-is-the-limit–type thing," he deadpans. "I kept saying, 'They're never gonna build something like this. This is just unreal.' We were the last ones to make a presentation. And we're known as the guys who go furthest out on the limb. And they called us in the next day and asked me, 'Do you want to see what Skidmore and Pedersen have done?' I said, 'Sure.' And I saw their entries—the overly decorated bird cage of Kohn Pedersen Fox, and Skidmore with the bowl on the top. And another client said to me, 'See what *you've* done to them! They went crazy!' And they couldn't deal with it, whereas our building looked actually like a conservative building, almost classic in its simplicity and discipline." Game, set, match.

To those who consider Jahn an obsessive, control-freaking megalomaniac simply because he authors and directs every Murphy/Jahn project, start to finish, concept to detail, he'll point to a stack of seventy-one job books next to his desk and say, "Part of why it happens is 'cause every time we get another job, the client wants to make sure I work on it. There are five, six people that work closely with me, but I somehow seem to always stay in control. I'm actually not a prima donna: I'm responsive, I'm a guy who *listens*." What he doesn't say is what we already know: An architect without a towering ego is a worthless pud destined for a career of redesigning suburban kitchens.

You will never catch Helmut Jahn measuring a Formica pass-through for a Yuppie flush with discretionary capital. But he is capable of the odd choice. Some time ago Eugene Golub called Jahn for a reference. He was going to renovate the lobby of a fifteen-year-old humdrum concrete tower he owns on Chicago's Michigan Avenue. You know, remodel, do up a little atrium. A small job, grindy and oily, for a small commission. "So I asked Helmut," relates Golub, as if he were reading out of Ripley's, "'Who can you suggest to do this?' And he says, 'I'll do it.' So I say, 'You're not gonna mess around with something like this.' And he says, 'No no no no! I walk by that building all the time and I never could stand the way it looked.'" ■

David Breskin is a freelance writer and record producer in New York.

Where to Buy It

Which stores have which items? Check this list to locate the store nearest you carrying the fashions shown editorially in this issue (pages 161 through 229). Manufacturers have selected some stores listed. For information on additional stores and how to buy items not mentioned here, see page 2[illegible]4. (Some prices may be higher west of the Mississippi.) Merchandise is subject to prior sale.

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