The “Bilbao Effect”:
from poor port to must-see city

Frank Gehry’s shiny cultural citadel has shown the world what a museum can do for a regional economy

Bilbao by numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital Cost</td>
<td>€845 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating Cost</td>
<td>€52 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Impact</td>
<td>€4.25 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to GDP</td>
<td>€212 million</td>
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City of Art and Science, Valencia, Spain

Planning for the three museums began with the design of a modern university campus in 1992. The project was launched in 1998; Salford to build The Lowry, Liverpool, to open in 2000 and the Imperial War Museum of the North in 2002. Both are architecturally remarkable buildings, by Michael Wilford and Daniel Libeskind respectively. One of the most successful regeneration projects in Europe, Salford Quays is now home to shops, shopping, residential development and has won the competition for the location of Medial City, which will house the BBC’s Manchester offices. The total value of inward investment since £15 billion and has already created 6,500 jobs.

Bilbao babies

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The Lowry, Salford, United Kingdom

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Museumsquartier, Vienna, Austria

When planning started in 1990, the aim of this initially controversial cultural project was to change Vienna from being just a city of art and culture into a cultural magnet for young people, families and contemporary art and architecture enthusiasts. Forty years on, it is a major museum that would compete in the public domain and continue to be a major tourist destination. A total of 1.1 million visitors visit the complex every two years since 1993. For Valencia, one of Europe’s faster growing cities, is changing and improving its tourism infrastructure and is a cultural and leisure destination. As part of Bilbao’s regeneration, the Guggenheim was considered one of the best cultural buildings in Europe, and the site chosen was an 18th-century royal stables complex, so the project, by architect Santiago Calatrava, became the project’s centerpiece.

Planning for the three museums in the Museums District began in 1996. The project was launched in 1998; Salford to build The Lowry, Liverpool, to open in 2000 and the Imperial War Museum of the North in 2002. Both are architecturally remarkable buildings, by Michael Wilford and Daniel Libeskind respectively. One of the most successful regeneration projects in Europe, Salford Quays is now home to shops, shopping, residential development and has won the competition for the location of Medial City, which will house the BBC’s Manchester offices. The total value of inward investment since £15 billion and has already created 6,500 jobs.

Regenerator: Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Ship of Tom Krens has helped to explore the possibilities of international partnerships, first in Venice and then in Salzburg. In January 1991, the Reina Sofia hosted the first stop of the travelling exhibition “Masterpieces from the Guggenheim Collection”. The main sponsor was BRV, the Bilbao-based national bank that would become one of the founding sponsors of the Bilbao project. Representatives of the Basque local government went to the opening in Madrid and expressed interest in collaborating with the Guggenheim to build a modern art museum. The rest is history—and an incredibly short history. The Basque administration mobilised €90m ($124.8m) in public funds. Frank Gehry was appointed architect in January 1992. The project broke ground in 1993 and the building—and considered one of the best cultural projects of the 20th century—was fast-tracked and opened on time in October 1997 to international excitement and rave reviews. The public thronged to Bilbao at the rate of between 800,000 and one million a year, of whom 90% were, and continue to be, from outside the Basque country and of those more than half are from countries other than Spain.

The economic impact is so marked (see box) that it is said to have paid back the initial investment many times. It has also sparked a transformation including new hotels, a concert hall and convention centre, transport system, more museums and a river esplanade where the local community gathers to stroll and play amidst sculpture and cafes. It has revitalised the business district and of Bilbao’s most impressive structures. The Museumsquartier gets more than two million visitors a year, who use it as a symbol of the cultural initiatives.

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How to achieve the Bilbao effect

Win friends and influence people: seven steps to make your tired town a cultural centre of excellence

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Leadership

The leadership of the project has to be strong, united, broadly based and long term because it has to sustain several political administrations and governments to get the job done. These projects usually take seven to 12 years from planning to opening.

Content

The meaning of the museum— its collections and exhibitions—matters. A great building helps, but people will only come back if there is stimulation. A city's content and the museum generates new knowledge. These projects are "cultural accelerators", they speed up the entry of cities and communities into the knowledge economy by educating people and by encouraging other developments to locate nearby, creating critical mass.

Outstanding architecture

People are inspired by exciting architecture and by the way that three-dimensional space changes their perception of themselves and of art. Frank Lloyd Wright's 1959 Guggenheim Museum Building in New York is an exceptional example that draws public interest to this day.

Planning

Despite its impressively rapid implementation, Bilbao was exhaustively planned, with feasibility studies, business planning and visitor projections. The promise of economic benefit to the community cannot be delivered without a rigorous plan.

Global impact

Bilbao has proven that in ten years a regional city can be a player on the world cultural stage. They teamed up with an internationally famous museum to achieve this. Other cities and other communities will achieve global impact in different ways.

Civil society institutions

Cities aspiring to harness the Bilbao effect need to establish a flexible type of organisation that can be responsive to change. Most such projects are led by foundations, charitable organisations or redevelopment agencies at arm's length from government.

Gehry: every aspiring city needs outstanding architecture

Guggenheim: Bilbao was an unexpected project that has to outlast several political based and long range because it must be strong, unified, broadly and devoted to different visions. Every city will have a different vision.

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851, held in Crystal Palace in London, marked the beginning of the museum movement. The idea that a museum should contain the whole of human knowledge was a critical mass and a feature of the world's first major international exhibition. The vision behind the project is that it has a clear idea strong enough to attract the 21st-century cultural pilgrim.

City of Culture, Galicia, Spain

City of Culture of Galicia is the largest cultural project currently under development in Spain society (Canfranc)--public money. It is a 41,800 sq. m complex on the outskirts of Santiago de Compostela at Mount Gaias into a beacon for pilgrims of knowledge. With an initial capital budget of €101m, the City of Culture is formed by six cultural buildings, including two museums (one devoted to Galician history, the other an international art centre), the National Library, National Archives, a research centre for heritage and a performing arts centre. The first five are almost built and are expected to open in 2010. The performing arts centre is being designed and should open in 2015. During the planning process, the capital investment intended, the planned contents changed and the vision evolved so that the City of Culture will engage with Latin American arts. The challenge for the Galician project is to prove that it has a clear idea strong enough to attract the 21st-century cultural pilgrim.

Louvre, Lens, France

In 2003 Pierre Loyrette, president of the Musée du Louvre, announced plans to create a regional branch of the Louvre in Lens. The idea behind the project is decentralisation, making French national collections available to a wider public and bringing economic benefit to the community can- not be delivered without a rigorous plan.

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Pompidou Centre, Metz, France

The Pompidou Metz project has been led by Metz Métropole in close partnership with the Centre Pompidou. The region of Metz is looking to an attracting area with strong cultural awareness so the aim of this decentralisation is to provide wider access to the Musée National d'Art Moderne collection. It represents the Pompidou Centre's commitment to providing development within the enlarged European Union and in the context of globalisation in the arts. Metz Métropole is providing €34m, while additional funding is provided from the French government (€44m) and the European Union (€34m). Pompidou Metz, which will be France's first example of cultural decentralisation organised by a national museum, is being designed by architects Nigel Pav and Jean de Gadiou and is scheduled to open in 2009. It is expected to get 500,000 visitors a year.

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G.D.L.