

Tenth anniversary of the Bilbao Guggenheim

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

LONDON. This month the Museo Guggenheim Bilbao (MGB) celebrates its tenth anniversary with two big exhibitions: the comprehensive “Art USA: 300 Years of Innovation” co-curated by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (SRGF) in New York and the Terra Foundation of American Art and *chacun à son gout* site-specific installations by Basque artists. Dance performances and concerts have been commissioned; there is a Daniel Buren installation at the La Salve Bridge and a renewed focus on the museum’s own collection.

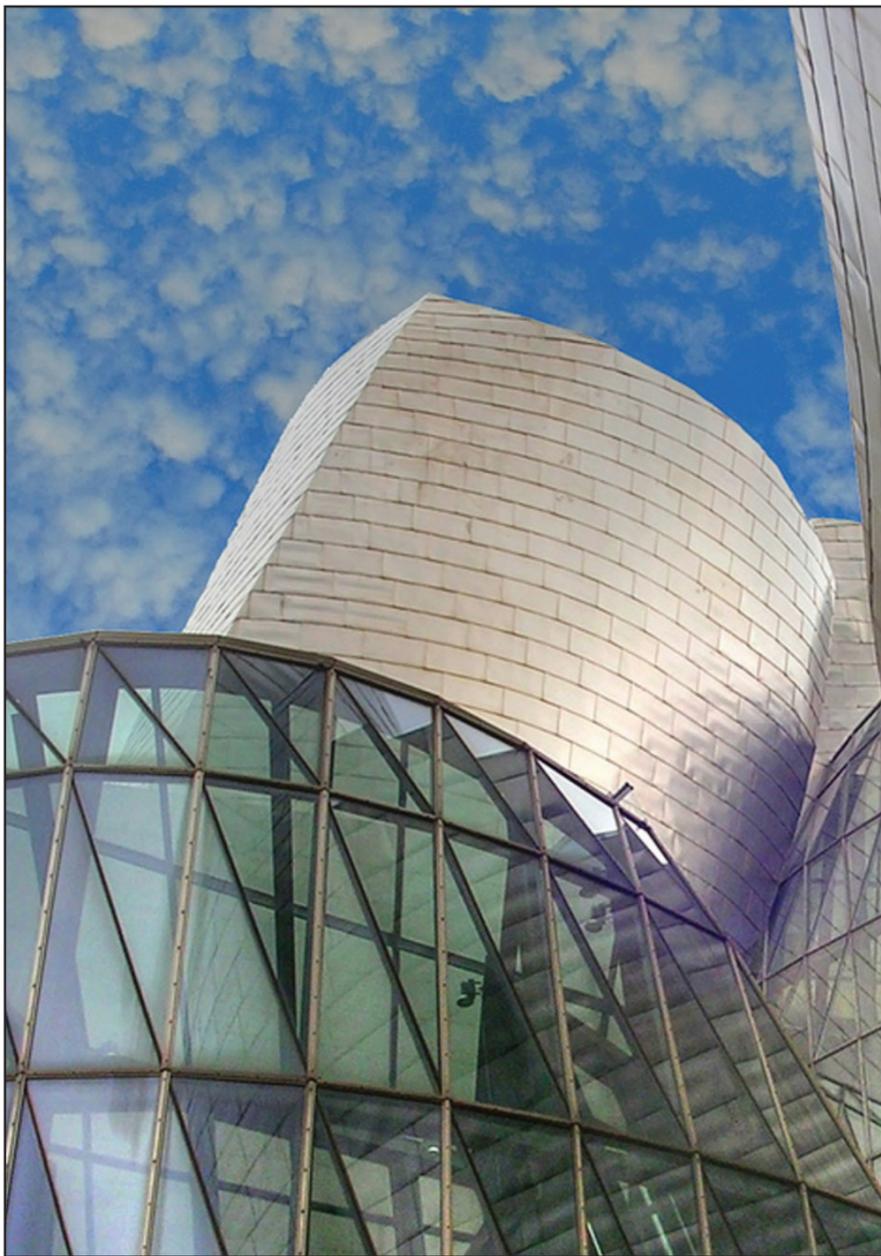
Can it be that the Bilbao Guggenheim has been with us for only ten years? It feels more like a lifetime.

A quick “Google” search reveals a partial explanation in the sheer presence of this museum in the communications environment. The phrase “Bilbao Effect” shows up 12,300 times on the internet. There are 141,000 entries for “Guggenheim Museum Bilbao”. The single word “Bilbao” turns up an astonishing 40 million mentions compared to the single word “Guggenheim” with ten million.

The “Bilbao Effect” has entered the language: for the general public, it probably means a fantastic museum building. For urban planners, politicians, museum directors and trustees, it means the transformation of a city by a new museum or cultural facility into a vibrant and attractive place for residents, visitors and inward investment.

To understand the effect, we need to step back and look at its origins in the Basque country 16 years ago. Bilbao, like Glasgow, Salford, Liverpool, Lens and the cities of the US rustbelt, was in the grip of an economic recession and identity crisis because heavy industry was in precipitous decline. It was de-industrialisation that stimulated Glasgow to compete for and win European Capital of Culture in 1990; inspired Liverpool to lure the Tate to the Albert Docks in 1998; Salford to build The Lowry in 2000 and the French region of Nord-Pas de Calais to compete in 2006 for the Louvre to establish a branch in Lens. The response of the Bilbao and the Basque governments was a plan to create a major international cultural initiative to revive the city and put it on the map in a period of European integration.

At the same time, the Guggenheim under the leader-



Regenerator: Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

ship of Tom Krens had started to explore the possibilities of international partnerships, first in Venice and then in Salzburg. In January 1991, the Reina Sofía hosted the first stop of the travelling exhibition “Masterpieces from the Guggenheim Collection”. The main sponsor was BBVA, 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—now considered one of the greatest 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 new museums and a river esplanade where the local community gathers to stroll and play amidst sculpture and cafes, all basking in the silvery glow of Frank Gehry’s building. Bilbao is today a destination for culture and gastronomy, despite continuing problems of terrorism.

Gail Dexter Lord

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Bilbao babies

The powerful motivator of de-industrialisation has been a reality in many second-tier cities for at least three decades. As a result there are examples of the Bilbao Effect that pre-date 1997. It was Bilbao, however, that gave us the name of the phenomenon.

The Lowry, Salford, United Kingdom

The project to transform the derelict Manchester Ship Canal into Salford Quays started more than 20 years ago. In 1987, the idea of jump-starting this project with a cultural centre was born. It grew to include two theatres, a home for Salford’s little known but nationally important collection of paintings by L.S. Lowry and a changing exhibition gallery, becoming the largest millennium project



(£120 million, \$239.7m) outside London. The Lowry Trust recognised the need for a critical mass of cultural attractions and persuaded the Imperial War Museum to locate its northern branch near the Lowry. The Lowry opened 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 hotels, shopping, residential development and has just won the competition for the location of “Media City”, which will rehouse the BBC’s Manchester offices. The total value of inward investment surpasses £3 billion and has already created 6,500 jobs.

City of Art and Science, Valencia, Spain

Planning for the three Santiago Calatrava-designed buildings that make up this cultural destination began in 1996. The vision was to transform a medium-sized traditional city centred on sun and sea tourism into an innovative tourist destination. With a strategy of opening in stages, the City of Art and Science has been reminding visitors every two years since



1998 that Valencia, one of Europe’s faster growing cities, is changing and improving its tourism infrastructure and leisure and cultural activities. With a capital budget of €845 million (\$1.17 billion) and 100% public funding, the City of Art and Science has re-positioned the city of Valencia both in the minds of local visitors, who are now staying longer in the area, and the international events organisers. The main consequence has been that Valencia was host city for the Americas Cup this year and will be again in 2009.

Museumsquartier, Vienna, Austria

When planning started in 1990, the aim of this initially controversial cultural project was to change Vienna from being the staid Waltz and Masterpieces capital to a cultural magnet for young people, families and contemporary art and architecture enthusiasts. From its opening in 2001, the Museumsquartier has consisted of the Mumok Museum of Modern Art (pictured), the Leopold Museum (a private collection of Viennese art of around 1900), the city Kunsthalle, and many other facilities such as a centre for dance, an architecture centre, production studios for new media, studios for artists-in-residence and so on. The site chosen was an 18th-century royal stables complex, so the project, by architects Ortner & Ortner, combines contemporary buildings with historic architecture.



Good urban planning links the neighbourhood with the city and redefines it with clear and impressive structures. The Museumsquartier gets more than two million visitors a year, who use it as a piazza and visit the cultural institutions.

Denver Art Museum, Colorado, USA

Detailed planning for the expansion of the Denver Art Museum started in 1999 after the success of Bilbao became apparent. Denver voters approved a bond initiative to fund a 14,600 sq. m extension by Daniel Libeskind for the existing 21,000 sq. m museum, increasing the gallery space by 40%. The \$62.5m of public finance was topped up by \$47m in private money raised by the museum for capital funding, with a \$61m endowment for future operations. The project is conceived as a trigger for the redevelop-



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Bilbao by numbers	
Capital Cost: €90m (\$124.8m)	2006 Acquisition Budget: €26m
2006 Operating Cost: €24m , of which 75% is raised by the museum through admissions, sales, rentals and donations and 25% from government. Operating expenses include variable fees for services (depending on services used) paid to the SRGF in New York.	1997-2006 Total attendance: 9m
	2006 Economic impact: Maintenance of 4,200 jobs
	Contribution to GDP: €212m
	Contribution of Basque Treasury: €29m

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opment of the museum neighbourhood, which is near the city centre, involving also the renovation of the plaza and History Museum, the creation of museum residences and the new Clyfford Still Museum.

Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi

In 2004, the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority embarked on developing Saadiyat Island ("happiness" in Arabic) into a world-class, environmentally sensitive tourist destination that includes as its centrepiece the creation of a new cultural district for Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates. The cultural



components, designed by a range of internationally famous architects such as Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Tadao Ando and Zaha Hadid, will include branches of the Guggenheim and Louvre. The island will also include the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, the Maritime Museum, a five-venue Performing Arts Centre and a Biennale site with 19 pavilions. The massive project will be surrounded by residential properties, resort hotels, recreational facilities, and nature preserves. The first three components, the Guggenheim, Louvre and the National Sheikh Zayed Museum, are planned to open in 2012, the rest later in the next decade. Saadiyat Island, with total costs of around €23 billion (\$31.9 billion), represents one of the most ambitious urban and cultural development projects ever conceived.

City of Culture, Galicia, Spain

City of Culture of Galicia is the largest cultural project currently under development in Spain solely funded with public money. It is a 41,800 sq. m complex on the outskirts of Santiago de Compostela at Mount Gaias. In 1999 Peter Eisenman Architects won the competition with a design inspired by the old city of Santiago and the five pilgrim routes inside the medieval city

that lead to the cathedral. The objective was to convert Mount Gaias into a beacon for pilgrims of knowledge. With an initial capital budget of €109m, 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 2012. During the planning process the capital investment trebled, 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 core idea strong enough to attract the 21st-century cultural pilgrim.

Louvre Branch, Lens, France

In 2003, Henri 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



growth to the region. In 2004 the Nord-Pas de Calais region, a former mining area, was selected for the museum. Daniel Percheron, President of the Region, promised support, the region taking on the role of contractor and principal backer. It is putting up 60% of the construction costs of the Musée du Louvre-Lens, estimated in May 2005 to be €117m. The building, which has been designed by the Japanese agency Sanaa, is scheduled to open in 2010 and is expected to get 500,000 visitors a year.

Pompidou Centre Branch, Metz, France

The Pompidou Metz project has been led by Metz Métropole in close partnership with the Centre Pompidou. The region of Metz is located in a thriving area with strong cultural awareness so the aim of this decentralisation is to provide wider access to the Musée National d'Art Moderne's collection. It expresses 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 expected from the French government (€4m) and the European Union (€2m). Pompidou Metz, which will be France's first example of cultural decentralisation organised by a national museum, is being designed by architects Shigeru Ban and Jean de Gastines and is scheduled to open in 2009. It is expected to get 300,000 visitors a year.



Gail Dexter Lord and Maria Fernandez Sabau

How to achieve the Bilbao effect

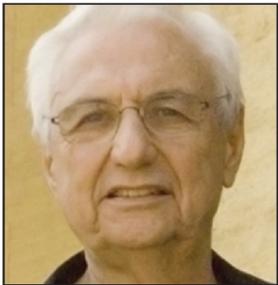
Win friends and influence people: seven steps to make your tired town a cultural centre of excellence

Vision

The project needs to be motivated and guided by a clear vision for social transformation. In the case of Bilbao, the aim was to transform Bilbao from a regional industrial city to an international, knowledge-based economy. Every city will have a different vision.

Leadership

The leadership of the project has to be strong, unified, broadly based and long range because it has to outlast several political



Gehry: every aspiring city needs outstanding architecture

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—matter. A great building helps, but people will only come back if there is stimulating content and if 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.

G.D.L.