

Bilbao: The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao

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Bilbao is a 19th-century industrial city in Spain's Basque country and like many other 20th-century cities, its industry has been eclipsed by cheaper production costs elsewhere, leaving behind, like remnants of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, deserted factories, ship yards, and blast furnaces.

Bilbao is the fourth largest city in Spain and since the 15th century had served as a major center for shipbuilding and manufacturing. A small number of wealthy families made fortunes before the city's decline and are notable members of the regionally powerful Nationalist party, which is split tactically and philosophically between the ETA (the violent wing) and the conservatives. Both desire independence from Spain. The Basque region has been semi-autonomous since 1979 and included in its plan for future independence is a huge redevelopment project expected to cost \$1.5 billion. A museum for modern and contemporary art is a major element in this plan. Up to now, the contemporary arts in Bilbao have been represented by experimental arts organizations like Consonni, an alternate space for special projects administered by the Institut Francais de Bilbao, which has organized exhibitions of contemporary Basque and international artists. Consonni is housed on the riverbank in an abandoned factory area. Frank Larcade, the co-director, argues, "There are those who hope to recycle the old buildings rather than destroy them for newer and flashier architectural structures, like in Berlin." But, as in Berlin, there are many more millions in the Basque budget targeted for new architectural projects than for renovations.

Bilbao Metropoli-30 is a Basque organization dedicated to selling a vision of the future to the city and to the world. Alfonso Martin Cearra is the visionary director general. His offices have been in close contact with the Global Business Network in Silicon Valley, California, a think tank and consultancy involved in selling futurist scenarios for cities hoping to solve the problems of decaying economies and unemployment. Bilbao's vision of the future includes the Guggenheim Museum, whose director, Thomas Krens (like any good CEO), wants to expand the borders of his museum and to compete in the global market.

Krens aspires to house the museum's burgeoning collection in a constellation of worldwide museums. In 1991, Basque officials approached Krens with a deal that would use the Guggenheim to haul Bilbao from the industrial age to the information age. This transition had already been launched with the Basque government's funding of a number of projects like the new subway system designed by Norman Foster, as well as the Santiago Calatrave bridge and airport and other projects. Knowing that art museums are points of intersection in all great cities. Their informed calculation was that this opportunity could contribute to their nationalist goals by creating spectacle and culture, and could help their city become a station on an international tourist circuit. The Basques offered the Guggenheim \$100 million for the construction, plus millions more for related operating costs over the next 20 years and \$50 million for acquisitions to be distributed throughout the Guggenheim's international arenas. They also acquired a promise to exhibit some Basque artists, but they ceded curatorial control.

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, stands as a sign of rebirth and optimism for a new age. It is perhaps the architecture and not the art that will bring international visitors here. Gehry's structure is a descendant of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, located in the posh residential Fifth Avenue area of New York City opposite Central Park. Gehry's Guggenheim sits at the end of Calle Iparragirre on an irregularly shaped site that marks the center of a cultural triangle formed by the Museo de Bellas Artes, the Universidad de Deusto, and the Old Town Hall. Formerly occupied by a factory and parking lot, it is intersected by Puente de la Salve, a vehicular bridge. The 257,000 square-foot Gehry museum is more than twice the size of Wright's building and contains 112,000 square feet of exhibition space, with more than 300 works of art currently on view.

Shimmering titanium was used as scaling for the concrete cylindrical and tilted exterior walls of the structure. The nearby bridge is embraced by a connecting museum tower which has no function other than to "flash" its inner scaffolding while extending your eye past the body of the main building. The structure curves gracefully along the limestone and-blue administration building, as it glides to embrace the river. Trains pass underneath, while walkways and highways circumnavigate or trick the eye as they seem to penetrate a curve. The titanium boat-like shapes and their reflections in the river refer to the now-stilled shipyards, and they spiral, but with a purposeful awkwardness, as a reference to Frank Lloyd Wright

Puppy(1992), by Jeff Koons, sits on the plaza in front of the museum, belying the stature of its species, retaining a puppy's ingratiating demeanor.

As if entering into a boathouse, one descends an arc of beige limestone stairs to the interior of the museum at river level. The lobby floor opens up to a central atrium, 165 feet high, which recalls Oz as well as Tatlin, Boccioni, Disney, and Wright. There are drafts of light everywhere, visually connecting the indoors with the outdoor terrace and walkway along the river. This area is shaded by a freestanding structure that looks like an umbrella or a spaceship landing pad. Looking upward along the limestone, dizzying steel beams travel in every direction as the glass atrium spirals towards the light Oldenburg's soft sculpture, *Shuttlecock*, draped over the top railing, draws the eye to the crowning glass spiral while the shuttlecock's other feather-like forms spread horizontally, suspended by ropes

Facing the river to the right is the largest space, an undivided, enormous boat-shaped gallery, 450 by 80 feet, extending under the Puente de la Salve and terminating at a tower structure which houses large-scale works by Weiner, Judd, Morris, Warhol, Flavin, Rosenquist, and others. Richard Serra's rusted steel piece, *Snake* (1994-96), one of two commissioned works currently on view, is made up of three immense leaning steel panels that echo the museum's curves.

The other commissioned work, Jenny Holzer's stunning *Installation for Bilbao* (1997), consists of nine double-sided LED strands on columns soaring 42 feet from floor to ceiling. The piece seems to float in a large dark niche while the red-lit phrases, excerpts from all of her previous work, in Basque, Spanish, and English, reflect animatedly on the granite floor. Holzer's brilliant siting provides the contrast of hi-tech luminosity in an atrium otherwise filled with natural light.

After ascending to the next floor the visitor encounters, just beyond Sol LeWitt's wall drawing installations, a small glass-enclosed alcove appointed with outdoor furniture, a table and four chairs—a place to rest, quite close to the bridge and highway movement outside. David Smith's stainless steel *CubiXXV11*(1965) perches unexpectedly beyond the glass door, emphasizing the interior-exterior aspect of the museum, whose terraces, walls, floors, and ceilings entwine with the artworks.

Light and geometry play a significant role in the museum. A room shaped like an eye is diagonally cut by Richard Long's *Line of Lake Stones*(1983). Cut into the ceiling of this room, as in many others, is an enormous square skylight. Natural and artificial lights support each other throughout the museum. One system of tracked lights, attached to catwalks, is used in various galleries, creating high, shaped arenas. The passages from one space to another are never predictably shaped or illuminated but always warmly accommodate the paintings and installations.

In one such passage is Juan Munoz's work *Sombra Y boca* (1996), which depicts two seated figures. One figure sits at a desk, the other leans and speaks inaudibly into the wall while casting a long shadow. *Humans* (1994), installed in another corner at the meeting of a curved and a straight wall, is an emotional work by Christian Boltanski made up of hanging light bulbs and photographs of children of the Holocaust. Dan Flavin's *An Artificial Barrier of Blue, Red, and Blue Fluorescent Light /to Flavin Starbuck Judd* (1968, 1993 refabrication) plays with architectural shapes by bisecting a dark room with a horizontal ladder of red and blue fluorescence.

Not all of the museum's spaces are eccentric. Of the 19 galleries, 10 are classically proportioned. Three such galleries house the Guggenheim's famous collection of early Modernism. These are elegant rooms with barrel-vaulted ceilings and central skylights. The architecture here repeats the 200year-old model of a museum as an extended palace. Having become accustomed to Gehry's logical eccentricities I was disappointed to come upon such conventional spaces but still delighted to see the collection, which included Giacometti's *Spoon*

Woman (1926) and Brancusi's *Adam and Eve* and *The Sorceress* (both 1916-24)

Currently on exhibition are many works by known artists from the '70s and '80s but few works by '90s artists. There is a sound and video installation by Stan Douglas, *Nu-Tka* (1996), and five pieces by Damien Hirst, plus familiar and unfamiliar artists representing Spain and the Basques: Txomin Badiola, Miquel Barcelo, Eduardo Chillida, Juan Munoz, Susana Solano, Antoni Tapies, and Cristina Iglesias

A few artists are given solo galleries: Francesco Clemente, Bruce Nauman, Julian Schnabel, and Anselm Kiefer. It is Krens's hope that the museum's Kiefer collection will help to make Bilbao a destination for scholars as well as tourists. The bulk of the museum's collection is focused on postwar works, many of which are huge. This inaugural exhibition places strong emphasis on Pop, Minimalism, Arte Povera, and Conceptualism, with a good many pieces by Merz, Beuys, Kounellis, de Kooning, Warhol, Judd, Pollock, Lichtenstein, and Rosenquist. The museum is accommodating to almost all of the works but it is truly Gehry's structure that dominates.

Under Krens, the Guggenheim has entered into sometimes controversial collaborations with foreign governments (Bilbao and Berlin) and with corporations, (Hugo Boss and Lufthansa) to establish permanent museums abroad, with Krens in control. It seems an unholy alliance, but it brings together mutual needs on the international level, where the art world, like the corporate world, now functions. There are those who accuse Krens of being an interloper or spendthrift, interpreting his entrepreneurial style as vampiric, but Bilbao, the Guggenheim, and Gehry's architecture celebrate the coming millennium physically, conceptually, politically, and globally. The museum itself is a marvel, with its own contemporary variations of the soaring spires, flying buttresses, and clerestory windows of the Gothic era. Like the monuments of that era, it is a signpost, a synergistic alignment of vision, technology, and internationalism and is a masterpiece on which the new age can build.

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