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Frank O. Gehry
Guggenheim Museum
Bilbao, 1991-1997

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The Museum as Civic Catalyst

Museums emerged as public institutions in the early nineteenth century. As long as only one wing of a noble residence, or even an entire building, was designated as a picture gallery, the museum in the modern sense of the term had not yet taken form, for only as an independent structure on a prominent urban site could it begin to play its role as cultural protagonist. Not unlike the grand theater buildings that preceded the museum, and the railroad stations that followed it, the first shrines of art made their appearance in a number of cities within an astonishingly short time.

While the history of collecting is long and complicated the museum is a relatively recent institution and yet it has already witnessed dramatic transformations.¹ Museums found their initial identity in the royal treasure house and the private cabinet of curiosities. They gradually expanded to accommodate ever larger accumulations of artifacts and increased public access through the nineteenth century; only recently have they assumed a much more spectacular role in cultural life.²

Also in the twentieth century, a new kind of exhibition inspired by the experience of temporary exhibitions at the world's fairs of the nineteenth century came into being. The "loan exhibition" burst onto the scene, stirring the public with its theatrical nature and its often nationalistic or otherwise partisan aims. Although rare and ephemeral at first, loan exhibitions have completely transformed the modern museum and permanently altered the public's perception of art in general. No longer is the museum's primary mission to uphold the exclusive value of highly select works of art; rather it propagates knowledge of many diverse and often competing - if not mutually exclusive - artistic practices.

The maintenance of permanent collections and the fairly frequent modification of their display remain central to many institutions, yet the presentation of a museum's traditional core collection has been deeply affected by recent events.

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao extends this general development a step further. Conceived to form a link in a possible chain of institutions under the aegis of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Bilbao becomes the test site of an entirely novel museological concept. After Peggy Guggenheim's death, her private museum in Venice reverted to the mother house in New York in 1976. Director Thomas Krens began to envision further expansion of its ambit to yet other cities: in 1989, he tested the waters in Salzburg, and, after Hans Hollein's operatic project of a museum hewn from a rocky cliff failed to materialize, Krens moved on to open a temporary branch of the Guggenheim in Berlin and laid the groundwork for an affiliated museum in Bilbao.

The "modern" idea of developing a chain of museums is both startling - when considered in light of the innate conservatism of museums - and disarmingly simple. If museums are indeed the unsuspecting heirs of the theater, then the idea of a chain of houses is only a logical consequence of

their new condition. Instead of confining works of art to the place where they have found a permanent home, more often than not as a matter of accident rather than design, they would be periodically rotated, shown in changing assembly and under differing local conditions. This new "franchising" of museum collections represents one response, and a precisely calibrated one at that, by which museums might react to the conditions that define their operation throughout the world.³

These expectations for the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao surely played a role in its architectural conception. In 1991, Thomas Krens invited four architects to Bilbao - Hans Hollein, Arato Isozaki, Coop Himmelblau, and Frank Gehry asking them to sketch out their ideas for a museum building in keeping with this novel purpose.

His choice of architect was tempered by his previous experiences with museum projects and the ways their architects had of conceiving of them in terms of their recent typology and urban role.

Almost two decades earlier, the opening of the Beaubourg museum in Paris marked the advent of museums that owe their identity less to permanent collections than to visceral impact.⁴ Comparable to an "aircraft-carrier of culture," the Beaubourg berthed the idea of the "maison de la culture" in one of the neglected precincts of Paris, playing up its purpose as an attraction for the uninitiated as well as sophisticated elites. Just as Les Halles were once the place where the bourgeoisie went for oysters and champagne at midnight, the new cultural tourism now finds its mecca among collections dedicated to industrial design, film, video art, and a spectacular rooftop view of Paris thrown in for good measure.

Ever since the Beaubourg opened in 1977, not only do new museum buildings need to stand the test as adequate repositories of art, but they are also expected to act as catalytic agents of urban transformation.

Gehry's projects for the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Museum in Bilbao are both located in what had become derelict urban zones, places scored by traffic and trade arteries, criss-crossed by major sight lines, but lacking in any clear manifestation of character. The compromised conditions of both sites are an apt metaphor for the complex circumstances under which the Bilbao commission was precipitated by the regional and municipal governments in negotiations with the Guggenheim Museum in New York.⁵

Such grand projects as the Bilbao Guggenheim place extra burdens on the traditional institution of the museum.

As museums have been forced to find new ways of financing themselves, they resort to the kind of gambits with which Phineas Taylor Barnum filled his circus tents. The exaggeration of the public status of museums - not in all cases dependent on new buildings, though rarely accomplished without them - has also led to important changes in their architectural character. New museums require a grand and ever more impressive public presence, and equally inventive and varied interiors. The achievement of volumetric presence on the outside and a partial expansiveness on the inside calls for dramatic transitions, even magical transport, of the visitor's experience.

With his buildings of the 1980s, Frank Gehry returned to an architecture possessed of powerful corporeal qualities. He does not think of the volumes of his buildings within the confines of abstract space (which is also the space of economics); rather, he engages these volumes in intimate relationships with one another. One need only observe Gehry's manner of drawing to gain an immediate sense of his way of thinking: the pen does not so much glide across the page as it dances effortlessly through a continuum of space. His affinity for the transitory and his conjurer's grasp of minute displacements are fueled by his knowledge of performance art and enriched by his collaborations with artists, such as Claes Oldenburg.

At Bilbao, Gehry has been planning with and for artists, providing spaces for specially commissioned installations as well as flexible galleries for the inevitable variety of exhibition

displays. The building complex includes generously proportioned areas for public events and unforeseen opportunities that vastly expand the purposes of contemporary museums.⁶ It is entirely purposeful that the museum has been anchored in the cityscape of Bilbao like a vast circus tent surrounded by a congerie of caravans, for the variety of events anticipated to take place there requires large and ever varying venues. Subsidiary spaces are clustered together, squeezed through the bottleneck between river and embankment, made to duck under bridges, and finally allowed to soar over the building's core in a spectacular canopy.

If it is possible to speak of a spatial realm that lacks figural contours yet possesses powerful bodily qualities, if ambulation can unlock the complexities of a building's order beyond the cutlines of the plan, then the Museum in Bilbao revives an architecture that has lain dormant for centuries. If one examines historic architecture in search of buildings that might presage what Frank O. Gehry has been able to achieve, one is likely to pay attention to Francesco Borromini. Because the sheer effect of the Bilbao Guggenheim overwhelms and continues to intrigue, not unlike the fascination Borromini's buildings held for his fellow architects and even his sometime-employer Bernini,⁷ the phenomenon of its excessive nature deserves some consideration. Before it can be considered anything else, the Bilbao Guggenheim must be reckoned overweight, overdone, and overwhelming. It is an immovable pile in the city and a sinuous creature draping its body along a narrow ledge above the river. As a luminous cave on the inside, and a metallic mountain from without, the museum appears to be both a perfect fit and a perfect stranger in its site.

The vigor and resolve with which Gehry attacked the Bilbao project sprang, initially and violently, from his disappointment over the Concert Hall.

When it became clear that years might pass before the concert hall would be built, Gehry was saved from an all-too-familiar decline into resentment by the even more challenging opportunity in Bilbao. Here, Gehry tapped the full capacity of computer-assisted design. Leaving its auxiliary role far behind, he and his collaborators made use of programs that were originally developed for the design of airplane fuselages, but which in this case provided the matrix for the shaping of every part and the refinement of every element in the design and construction of the museum. The age-old distinction between the hands that design and the instruments that execute has been overcome: the separate phases and techniques of conceiving and executing a building here were woven into an unbroken "loop." Only in this way can the inaccurate fit among the conventionally separate phases of invention, transcription, and execution be perfected, and the exponential degree of geometric complexity of such a structure be realized without costly trial and error.

Not only will the Bilbao museum go down as one of the most complex formal inventions of our time, but it will also stand as a monument to the productive capacities that are now at our disposal, insofar as an architect like Gehry pushes them to new heights of imaginative use. When complexities of an order commensurate with our understanding of the world can be restored to architecture, we shall no longer have to be content with the subsistence diet dictated by economics any more than with the impoverished aesthetics of an earlier era.

This text is based on an essay published in Forster, Kurt W. *Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa* (Stuttgart and London, 1998). It has been abridged and revised by the author.

¹ Compare: Krisztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums* (Berlin, 1988); Horst Bredekamp, *Die Geschichte der Kunstammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin 1993); Ekkehard Mai, *Expositionen, Geschichte und Kritik des Ausstellungswesens* (Munich and Berlin, 1986)

² See: Kurt W. Forster, "Shrine? Emporium? Theater? Two Decades of American Museum Building," *Zodiac*, 6 (1991), pp. 30-75.

³ The following offer useful surveys: Heinrich Klotz and Waltraud Krase, *New Museum Buildings in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Frankfurt a. M. and Munich, 1985); Josep M. Montaner, *Museums for the New Century* (Barcelona, 1995); "Contemporary Museums," *Architectural Design* (London, 1997).

⁴ See: Nathan Silver, *The Making of Beaubourg: A Building Biography of the Centre Pompidou, Paris* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

⁵ The evolution of the museum in Bilbao has been chronicled by Coosje van Bruggen in her book *Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* (New York, 1998).

⁶ See note 2.

⁷ Critique often cuts closer to the nature of certain phenomena than praise, and Bernini's somewhat envious description of Borromini's way of invention is very much to the point when he characterized Borromini's methodical search as "dentro una cosa cavare un'altra, e nel altra l'altra, senza finire me." For a more detailed comparison of Borromini's and Gehry's method of evolving architectural forms, see the monograph on Gehry: Francesco Dal Co and Kurt W. Forster, eds., *Frank O. Gehry* (New York, 1998). Cf. also Christof Thoenes, "Die Formen sind in Bewegung geraten - Form Has Been Set in Motion," *Daidalos*, 67 (1998), pp. 63 - 73.