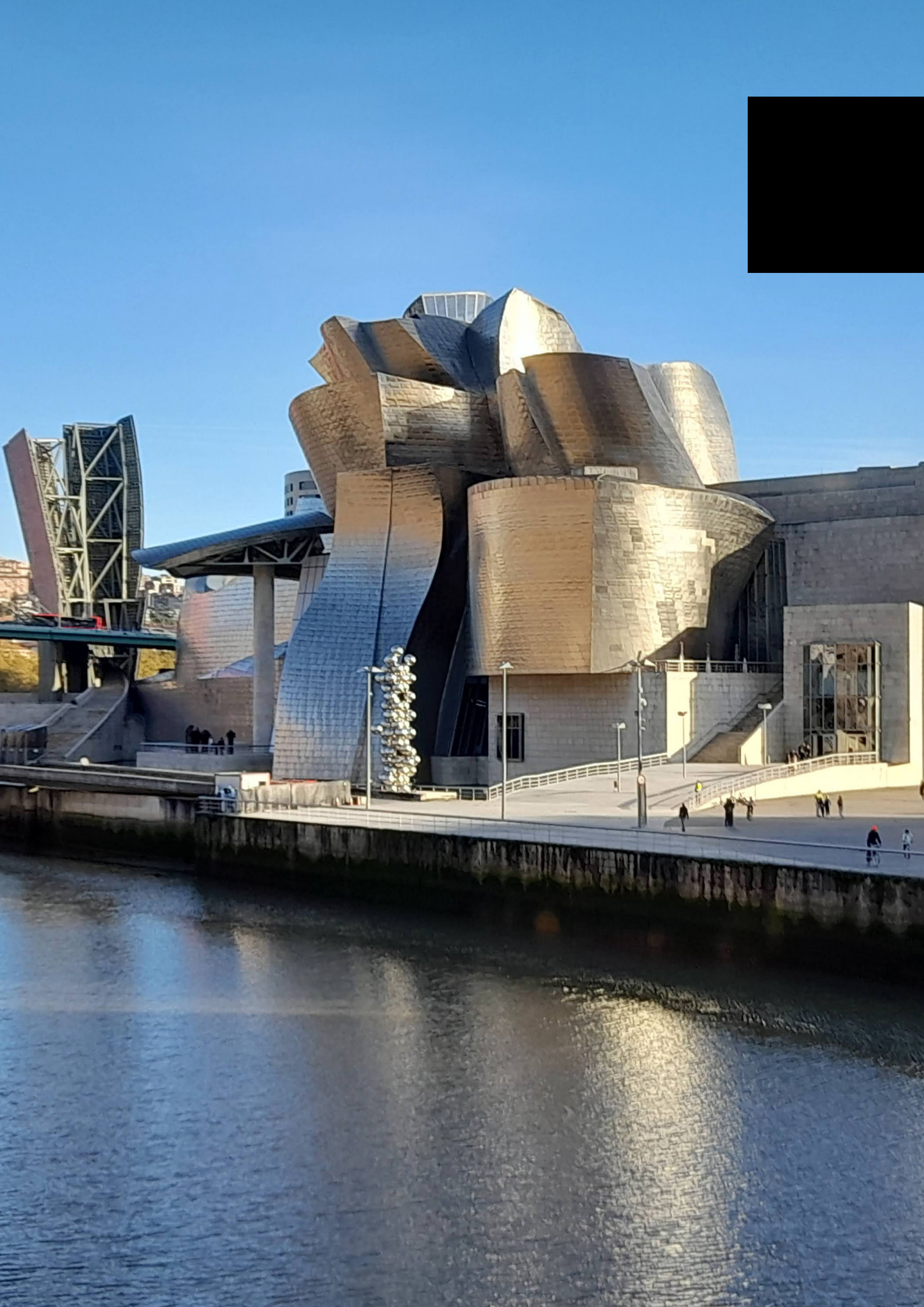
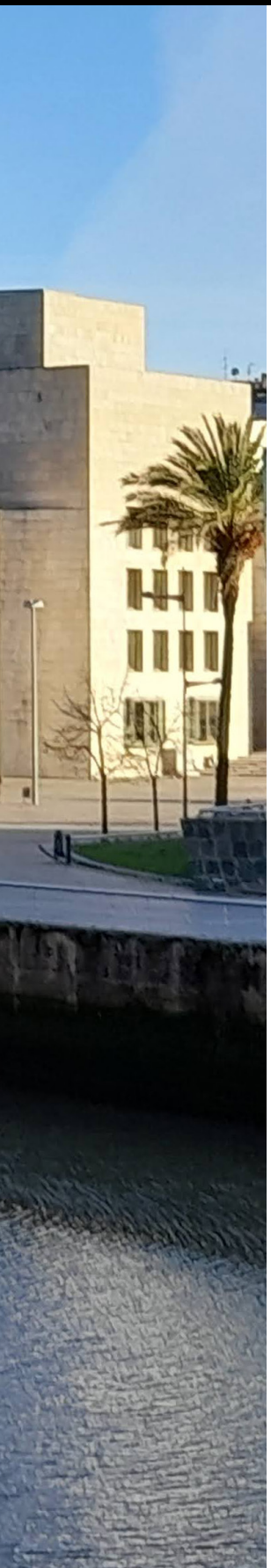


Symbol of an era?: The Guggenheim Bilbao as an epitome of new museum tendencies at the turn of the millennium

Jesus Pedro Lorente

Keywords:
Museums, Contemporary art, Urban revitalization, Cultural districts.



ABSTRACT:

The Guggenheim Bilbao, inaugurated in 1997, soon became the most talked-about museum in the world, a global benchmark characteristically postmodern, for its architecture and its rupture with the introverted modernist canon, recovering all sort of connections with the city. Greater allure, spatial permeability and visual interrelations would be common features of new art museums, with 'iconic' artworks decorating their façades and surroundings. It was part of a formula of arts-led urban boosting replicated worldwide, looking for the so-called 'Bilbao effect'. This role-model has been broadly emulated but also contested. Perhaps it is about time for a reassessment of its critical reception and for a museological reconsideration of the 'Bilbao era', pointing out some controversial issues and idiosyncratic curatorial 'effects' in cultural districts. It is a legacy worth keeping, while other features are no longer seen as culturally desirable or politically palatable –to the point that some scholars have coined the term 'post-Bilbao era'.

Il Guggenheim Bilbao, inaugurato nel 1997, è presto diventato il museo più discusso al mondo, un punto di riferimento globale caratteristicamente postmoderno, sia per la sua architettura sia per la sua rottura con il canone modernista introverso, ristabilendo ogni sorta di connessione con la città. Maggiore attrattiva, permeabilità spaziale e interrelazioni visive sarebbero diventate caratteristiche comuni nei nuovi musei d'arte, con opere 'iconiche' a decorarne le facciate e i dintorni. Questo modello faceva parte di una formula di rilancio urbano basata sulle arti, replicata in tutto il mondo alla ricerca del cosiddetto 'effetto Bilbao'. Questo modello di riferimento è stato ampiamente emulato, ma anche contestato. Forse è giunto il momento di una rivalutazione della sua ricezione critica e di una revisione museologica dell''era Bilbao', mettendo in luce alcune questioni controverse e gli effetti curatoriali idiosincratici nei distretti culturali. Si tratta di un'eredità da preservare, mentre altri aspetti non sono più considerati culturalmente desiderabili o politicamente accettabili, al punto che alcuni studiosi hanno coniato il termine 'post-Bilbao era'.

Opening Picture:

Fig. 01: 1 View of the Guggenheim Bilbao and the Nervión riverside (Photo: J. Pedro Lorente).

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In a recent book, Julian Rose repeatedly uses the label 'post-Bilbao era',[1] although not intending to express a watershed partition, comparable to the 'Post-Pompidou Age' devised by Douglas Davis –Prof. Rose considers Guggenheim Bilbao one of the four milestones that have marked paradigm shifts in recent museum architecture. Certainly, the inauguration of a Basque branch of the Guggenheim Foundation in 1997 was not the beginning of new period, but could be considered the epitome of a cultural tendency. Frank Gehry's dazzling building features in countless publications as emblematic of the exploits of postmodernism, although not all experts in architecture would share the enthusiasm of Herbert Muschamp, who acclaimed it as a miracle in a famous article published by the *New York Times* on September 7th, 1997. Some authors have pointed out that the 'Guggenheim-mania' experienced at the turn of the millennium then stirred 'anti-Bilbao' reactions by setting alternative countermodels.[2] Whatever the case, Guggenheim Bilbao has become a benchmark for museums involved in city boosting,[3] which could entail some curatorial reconsiderations breaking new ground in arts-led urban regeneration policies.

1: Conspicuous museum architecture and urban entanglement: the 'Bilbao effect'.

Jean Baudrillard coined the expression 'Beaubourg effect' to warn against the political deterrence supposedly operated by an institution, which he feared would become a populist cultural buffer in the revolutionary capital of France, but the philosopher failed to acknowledge its urban novelties. Modernist architects had favoured introvert and rather shy buildings, often in the shape of cube-like boxes. Yet in 1977, the extravagant appearance of the Pompidou Centre in Paris set a new trend, whose momentum peaked in the final decades of the 20th century when postmodern architecture pursued audacious plasticity. The sculptural forms of the Guggenheim Bilbao were ranked by Victoria Newhouse among the most evocative ever made;[4] such boastfully 'iconic' eminence, seeking greater visual attention from outside while offering captivating views, was the quintessence of 'the city as spectacle'.[5] In part, this urban entanglement is precisely what the now omnipresent idiom 'Bilbao effect' mostly refers to. A former industrial city, once identified by its factory chimneys and blast furnaces, has become one of the most glamorous cultural destinations in the world since Frank Gehry erected an outstanding museum rising spectacularly above its urban setting, which has, in turn, been successfully transformed, particularly the Nervión riverside area (Fig. 1).

Competing with other 'iconic' buildings, new museums in the 'Bilbao era' were to become increasingly prominent in the urban scenery as proud icons of the city and the cultural district into which they are inserted. This quest for urban visibility found another landmark in London's Tate Modern, inaugurated in 2000 with a stunning view of the Thames and St. Paul's cathedral from the museum café, to which a new tower was added in 2016, commissioned to the same architects, Herzog & de Meuron. They were also

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the authors of the Young Museum in San Francisco, whose elevated tower is both a privileged vantage point over the Golden Gate district and a new emblematic feature on the skyline. Another outstanding American instance is the 2007 expansion of the Akron Art Museum, an unusual city landmark by Coop Himmelb(l)au with a spectacular steel and aluminium cantilever, known as the Roof Cloud, which connects the new building with the institution's headquarters. Between 2002 and 2008, Frank Gehry himself devised a most remarkable telescopic gallery called Galleria Italia in the expansion of Ontario's Art Gallery, while the rear façade, finished in titanium and glass, is enhanced with an external helical staircase towering over a historical park and the Toronto skyline. Truly enough, museums are not the only 'iconic' buildings competing for urban prominence, which is now sought for all types of temples of consumerism.[6] This is obvious in Bilbao, particularly around the cultural and leisure riverfront, which became a prototypical architectural showcase for international 'starchitects' at the turn of the millennium.

Yet the 'iconicity' concept in museum architecture could have a deeper meaning because it should be attributed to, above all, buildings that are a formal sign of a museological ideal. This is the case of Guggenheim Bilbao which, according to Gerardo del Cerro, in addition to being exuberant, is also welcoming and liberal, wanting to be a cherished symbol of regeneration and progress for all citizens, even those who do not visit museums, but finance them with their taxes.[7] Thus Basque people not only celebrate their 'Guggy' for its photogenic architecture, but also for the new values that it stands for, combining cosmopolitanism with increasing local cultural attachment and social permeability.[8] In fact, it can be traversed with no need to buy entrance tickets, going from the main entrance through the museum shop to the riverside door. A precedent was set in Paris by the Pompidou Centre, conceived as a continuation of the plateau Beaubourg, whose inclined ramp guides our steps into the large lobby, fittingly called *Forum*. Similarly, transit spaces, balconies and other points of connection were paramount for Frank Gehry, both in Bilbao and in Seattle, where his concomitant project for the Experience Music Project would be another landmark of what he termed 'gateway buildings'.[9] *Muséologie de passage* is the French academic designation in museum studies for this structural arrangement, where visitors flow by forging their own wandering paths: an international trend reaching the apex with the ramps of Jean Nouvel's Musée du Quai Branly.[10] Indeed, Nouvel calculated gradients for that museum by the Seine in Paris much better than those designed by Gehry in Bilbao, where the stairs leading from the La Salve bridge to the restaurant door and riverside are too steep, while the museum main entrance is flanked on both sides by very gently sloping steps, which are so long that they can be unnerving because one tends to descend each and all with the same foot.

Hence protruding passages and interconnections at different heights became typical of postmodern museums, entwined with the respective urban milieu. In Helsinki, the Museum of Contemporary Art designed

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by architect Steven Holl, who named it *Kiasma*, the Danish word from the Greek χίασμα meaning crisscrossing, consists of an intertwined geometry of curved and straight lines with internal spiral stairs providing views of the urban context, which were celebrated worldwide when it opened in 1998. Similarly, Peter Cook and Colin Fournier's striking biomorphic building of the Kunsthaus Graz, inaugurated in 2003, established daring contrast with the typical Austrian houses in the old town, but also deferential panoramic interactions with the city from the Needle gallery. Another extrovert museum, created in 2003 by Zaha Hadid, would be the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, which features gently sloping stairs in the manner of an 'urban carpet' that zigzags from the sidewalk up to the atrium and onto the building's six floors. Many other highly influential North American examples followed suit, but the most acknowledged Bilbao-like emulator is perhaps the expansion of the Denver Art Museum because the director had been at the inauguration of Gehry's Guggenheim and asked Daniel Libeskind to connect the new Hamilton Building to the rest of the museum with a walkway that flies over the external esplanade offering views of very postmodern works of public art.[11] Bilbao also proved inspirational in Canada to Randall Stout, an associate architect and follower of Frank Gehry, who expanded the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton with a building of contorted shapes in shiny enamelled zinc that opens onto a new pedestrian area and the Sir Winston Churchill Square.[12] Similarly, Zaha Hadid's most famous museum project, the MAXXI in Rome, has also delimited a square open to the public (Fig. 2): a peaceful *piazzale* with benches to sit on while the museum 'is about movement inside, not rest'.[13] Akin architectural/urban strategies were adopted everywhere, including Central Europe, where new museums of contemporary art looking for the 'Bilbao effect' could not always emulate Gehry with striking buildings, but would often relate with the street and engage in a visual dialogue with it, as in Torun Centre for Contemporary Art inaugurated in 2008.[14]

In the meantime, urban entanglement also grew indoors. The turn of the millennium was a historical moment of triumph for what has come to be known as 'hysterical atria',[15] one of the greatest exponents of which would be the central atrium of the extension of the Hunter Museum of American Art opened in 2005 in Chattanooga, where architect Randall Stout, emulating the Bilbao precedent of his admired Frank Gehry, created a striking multifunctional lobby with flowery geometries that provides access to the auditorium, café/shop and exhibition halls by also allowing the passage of pedestrians to the river and gardens. Another very spectacular case is the large semicovered piazza designed by Mario Botta as the nucleus of his Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, inaugurated in 2002 near Corso Bettini, with public transit spaces. It seems as if every museum of the 21st century aspires to hold a covered agora! Good museums are even better if they open to the city *via* walkways and atriums to boost interconnectivity with their neighbourhood and to promote urban

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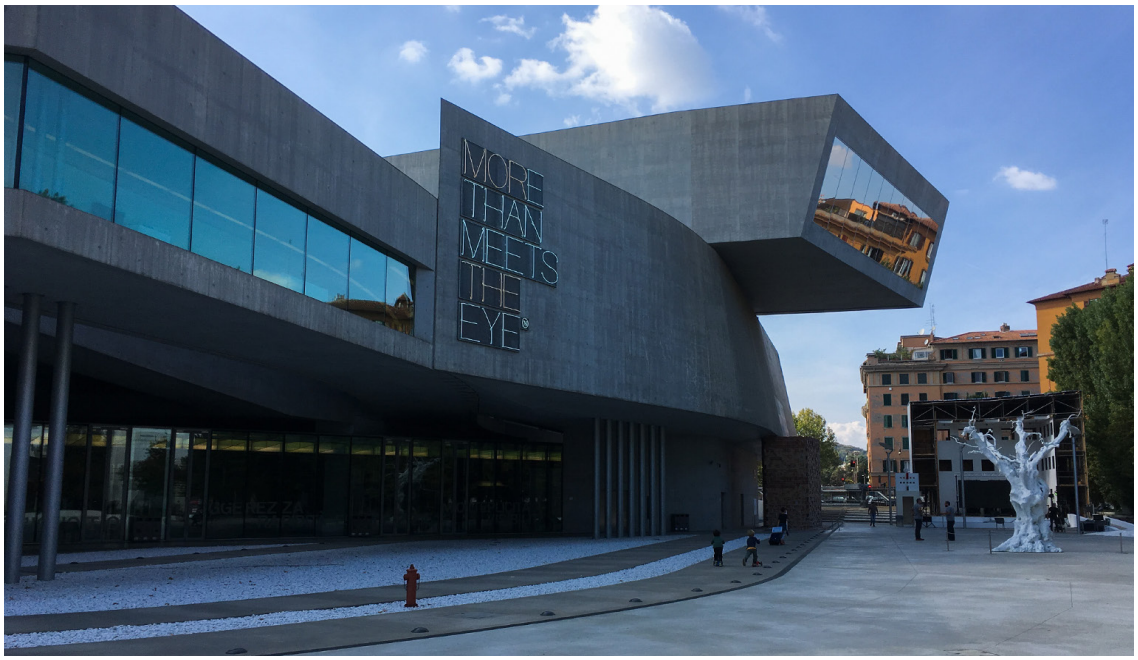

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Fig. 02: Piazza of the MAXXI in Rome (Photo: Mika Stetsovski, Wikipedia)

permeability. Hopefully, as Robert R. Janes claimed in his book *Museums without Borders*, museums are becoming good conductors of citizen movements and their concerns.[16] Their architectures are "designed with the urban flaneur in mind", as Charles Saumarez Smith stated, referring as his favourite examples to the new Whitney Museum embracing the High Line in New York since 2015 and the 2016 expansion of the Tate Modern in London.[17] All the more important was symbolic urban connectivity in typically postmodern buildings of deconstructivist architecture, with their sculptural shapes protruding outwardly, such as the Pablo Serrano Aragonese Institute of Contemporary Art and Culture built in 2008-2011, whose windows on the north side mirrors offer stunning views of the bell towers of Saragossa, while the southern front faces the Caixaforum, which also features a balcony looking back at the IAACC (Fig. 3). Such visual interconnections that induce returned gazes are inspired by the northern terrace of Guggenheim Bilbao, where museum visitors can take photographs of the Nervión riverside and the crowd and, at the same time, would inevitably attract the attention and cameras of waterfront strollers. The same happens now at the Bilbao Museum of Fine Arts thanks to the viewing deck terraces added in 2025 by Norman Foster.

In parallel, even architects not at all identified with postmodern effusive rhetorics have followed similar trends by designing new museums that are more plastically and visually interconnected with their urban environment. Some cases of such are: the Museum of Modern Art built by Tadao Ando in Fort Worth (Texas), inaugurated in 2002, with views to/from the pond and the plaza, decorated with a huge steel sculpture by Richard Serra, followed by other outdoor artworks from the collection; the new headquarters of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston Harbor, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro and opened in 2006, with an overhanging structure and transparent glass walls by the waterfront. In Europe, a cele-

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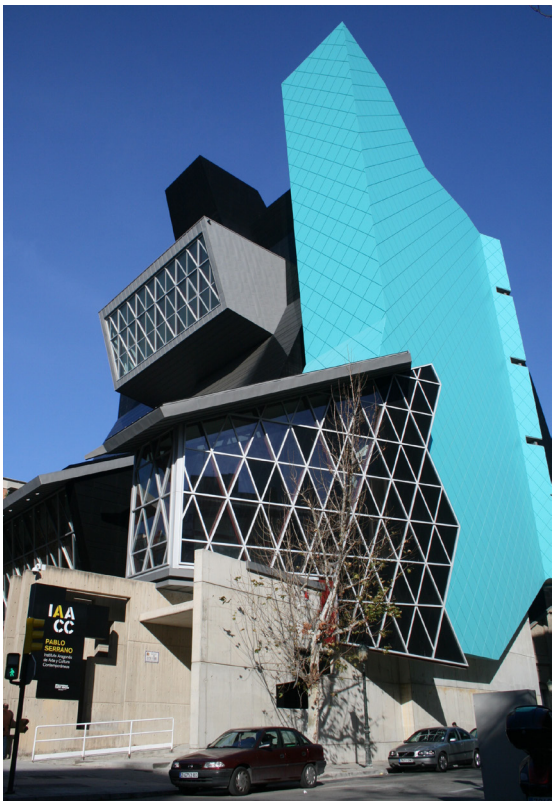

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brated instance is the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) inaugurated in 2011 in Antwerp, a ten-storey building in the old port. The city erected this block to house several museums whose different collections are interconnected by a so-called 'vertical boulevard' with glass walls affording spectacular views of the city. This public space can be accessed from 9:30 a.m. to midnight, much longer than usual museum opening hours, and is frequented by many residents who also take out of town visitors there.[18] A comparable case is the MuCEM in Marseille, inaugurated in 2013, with its impressive panoramas of the coastline and urban landscapes, not only from the box-like museum building, but also along the *passerelles* linking the quay to Fort Saint Jean or to the Saint Laurent church in the Le Panier district. Another stunning example is the Botín Centre in Santander, built by Renzo Piano between 2010 and 2017: the rear opens up and extends over the bay with a metal structure of public walkways called *pachinko,* while the front advances towards the park and city centre. The limits between architecture and urbanism seem quite blurred in the new civic spaces typical of what some museologists have called the 'connecting museum'.[19]

"It is no longer acceptable that the museum should be presented as a secluded sanctuary disconnected from the wider world", sentenced Charlotte Klonk, who added: "For this reason, many more art museums now have windows, so placed that the spectator can put his or her art experience into some kind of geographical context".[20] Windows, beyond their functional use for ventilation and lighting, have always held artistic significance in all types of constructions, including museums, but modernist architecture often preferred mirrored glass façades and windowless 'white cube' galleries inside. Yet most austere cube-like museums are now keen on establishing visual interrelations with the surrounding urban district, as in the case of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, inaugurated in 2001 with strategically located holes peering towards Cologne Cathedral and other heritage attractions. Even New York's MoMA, which used to be the paradigm of the enclosed 'white cube' museography, has now some rooms employed to house the permanent collection with windows allowing urban views, a novelty gradually developed there since Yoshio Taniguchi's penultimate expansion carried out in 2004. Furthermore, external views of Lake Michigan can be enjoyed at the Milwaukee Art Museum from the pavilion and walkway designed by

Fig. 03:
South façade of the CAACC in Saragossa (Photo: J. Pedro Lorente)

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Santiago Calatrava, and from the new expansion created by local architect James Shields, also allowing reciprocal views of the interior from outside (Fig. 4). Such double visual exposure becomes very significant at the Acropolis Museum in Athens, designed by Swiss-American architect Bernard Tschumi and his Greek partner Mijalis Fotiadis. Their arty edifice provides beautiful views of the surrounding archaeological complex while, on the other hand and seen from the city, this 'site museum' also acts as a beacon of light and a showcase by displaying since 2009 its treasures to the outside world, as well as its flagrant gaps of great symbolism, to support the call for the return of the Parthenon marbles kept in the British Museum. More than an artistic choice, architectural transparency has generally become a political metaphor for public-minded institutions. Not surprisingly, museum buildings are often eager to demonstrate 'openness', which is a key concept for Renzo Piano,[21] proven at the Whitney Museum of American Art with its huge glassed façade engaging with the Meatpacking District in New York since 2015, or the Istanbul Modern Museum over the banks of the Bosporus since 2023. Similarly, the Museum of Contemporary Visual Culture (M+) in Hong Kong by Herzog & de Meuron and Farrells, inaugurated in 2023, has some transparent galleries towards the West Kowloon waterfront.

Furthermore, Hong Kong's M+ that faces the harbour with impressive moving-image screens shows that, in addition to being architecturally iconic, a museum front can present arts on its external face. Just as the visage is the mirror of the soul, a museum façade also reflects its museological spirit: contemporary art museums are no longer restrained containers of unwavering principles; hence little or nothing remains of the hermeticism that characterised the modern idea of the museum as a neutral box.

The quintessence of it is Guggenheim Bilbao, whose external walls are used as backdrop for emblematic sculptures and technologically experimental art interventions. Re-

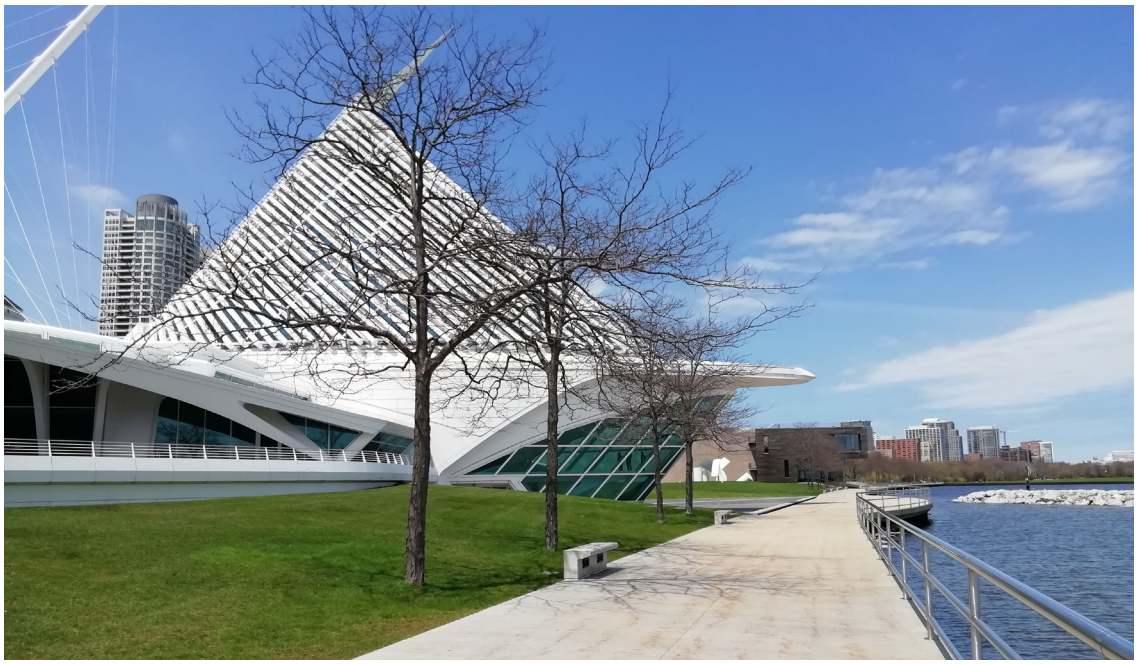

Fig. 04: Windows of the Milwaukee Art Museum, with urban vistas and reciprocal views of the interior.

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markably during Jenny Holzer's solo exhibition in 2019, texts in Basque, Spanish and English were projected onto the façade, which was the origin of her augmented reality work *Like Beauty in Flames*, permanently visible since 2021 inside and outside the museum through a mobile phone application. Meanwhile, technological experimentalism has become commonplace in the latest generation of art museums all over the world. Rather than serving as mere support for artworks, their outer skins now function as the media used to produce them. A pioneering instance was the Zentrum für Kunst und Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany, proudly engaging with technological art, both inside the building and through a large transparent cube added in front of its façade, situated in the Human Rights Square. Another media façade was installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, as well as many artworks playfully interacting with the museum interior, in particular Carsten Höller's *Double Slide*, transporting riders from the 3rd floor to the outside. In Spain, the most notable case is the Centro de Creación Contemporánea de Andalucía (C3A) in Córdoba, which opened in 2016 with a large multimedia wall, for which visual artists were commissioned moving images, visible every night from the other side of the Guadalquivir River, while in daylight, arabesque-inspired cells and windows pierce this vast façade.

By the way, such homages to household idiosyncrasies are frequently added to museums façades now that former modernist cultural homogeneity is being substituted by particular features honouring local distinctiveness. When Guggenheim Bilbao bought a monumental version of Jeff Koons' *Tulips* for five million dollars, it was conspicuously installed in 2007 on the north-side main terrace, where its bright colours contrasted with the titanium coating. A steel sculpture by Richard Serra, *Plow*, was also added the following year to the eastern front, facing the Abandoibarra Avenue, on another balcony where a work by Chillida had been temporally on show. Understandably, criticism was voiced by local artists and nationalist opinion makers, whose mental association of rusty Corten steel with the Basque metallurgical industry were closely linked with autochthonous sculptors.[22] Complaints of colonialism from those considering Guggenheim a bridgehead for US cultural dominance had always been serious reproof.[23] Thus in 2022, the museum replaced Koons' monumental bunch of Dutch flowers with two large works by Eduardo Chillida *Aholkua espazioari V* [Advice to Space V] and *Besarkada XI* [Embrace XI] (Fig. 5). Analogous art additions, highlighting local traits, are actually gaining significance on museum façades throughout the world. Documented instances abound in, for example, Australia, where the affirmation of plural identities and cultures is a patriotic priority by paying particular attention to native heritage. This emphasis is reflected in the commissioning of artworks with indigenous symbolism to adorn the most emblematic buildings of power and culture. The Monash University Museum of Art in Melbourne is installed in a converted modernist building completed in 2010 with an art installation by Callum Morton covering its façade, conceived as a ceremonial welcome to the MUMA.

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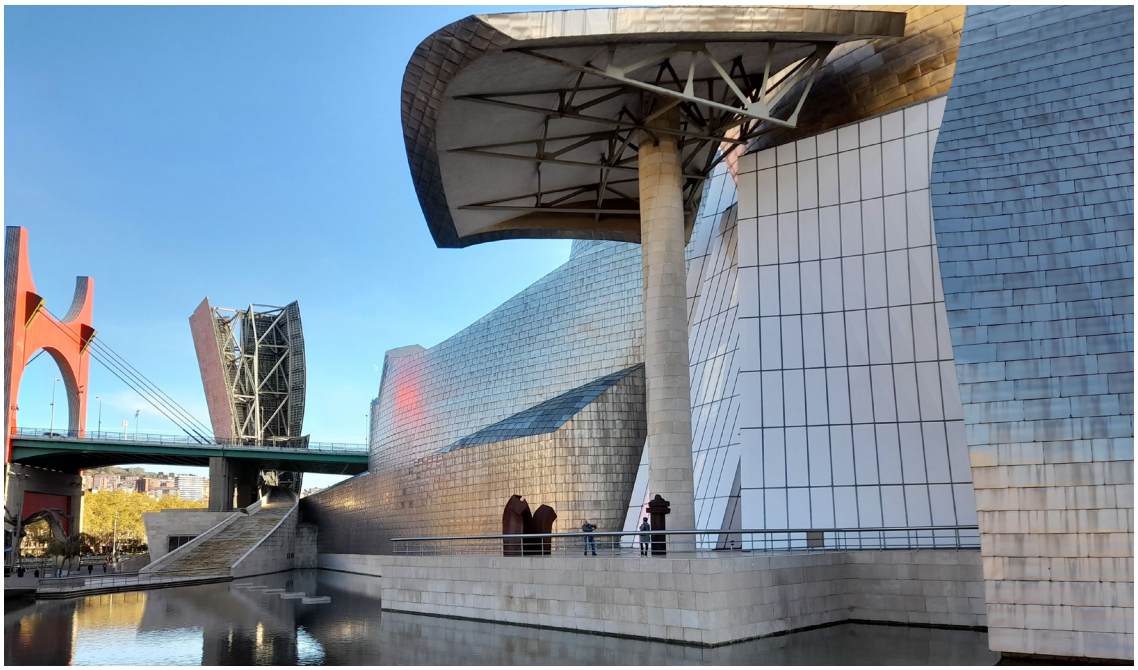

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Similarly, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney sought distinctive renovation and its purpose-built extension was adorned by local artist Brook Andrew, of Wiradjuri background, with an installation entitled *Warrang*, the Aboriginal name of this port city.

As a culmination, let's consider how emblematic art pieces from a museum collection placed outside its building are also adding identity reinforcement in many ways. Surprisingly enough, the intervention commissioned by Guggenheim Bilbao from conceptual artist Daniel Buren to ornate the neighbouring La Salve bridge in 2007 immediately won popular estimation because its white and red colours –chosen by a voluntary response poll– match those of the local football club. Everybody also seems to admire, for whatever reasons, Louise Bourgeois' *Maman*, the colossal spider whose iconic figure is a prevalent background for selfies and a best-seller souvenir in shops or stalls. Such is its popularity that further versions of this gigantic arthropod have been purchased by different museums, and some have also placed them by the respective entrance; e.g., the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the Samsung Museum of Modern Art in Seoul, the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC or the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Nothing new under the sun here seeing that the early history of museums was already marked by a recurring type of eminent monuments in threshold areas. Modernist architects imagined museums in quite retreated isolation, often surrounded by enclosed sculpture gardens, described by Marcel Breuer as buffer zones, withdrawn from traffic hustle: his secluded terrace at the Whitney Museum entrance was separated from the street by a 'moat'. Derivative inheritances of such modern enclosures are the not-to-be-stepped-on greens and water ponds, dully ornated with sculptures, around Guggenheim Bilbao. Beyond them however, in well-trotted areas much frequented by passersby, the museum literally cultivates the arts by regularly changing the 40,000 flowering plants of Jeff

Fig. 04: Rear portico of the Guggenheim Bilbao publicly enshrining collection highlights (Photo: J. Pedro Lorente)

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Koon's *Puppy*, another iconic sculpture well loved by tourists and local people, who pose in front for photographs with family and friends. In surrounding streets, everyone can find a museum piece to their liking, strategically placed to attract public attention with enticing iconographies, style and material, or immateriality, in the case of Fujiko Nakaya's mysterious fog activated every hour and the fire fountains by French artist Ives Klein lighted at nightfall. You can be in Bilbao and decide not to enter the Guggenheim, but you will not miss the chance to see around its building the conspicuous appetizer to the cultural banquet served indoors. All in all, this very variegated assortment of artworks scattered outside the museum walls constitutes a visual lure and a wonderful strategy of audience development for contemporary art, which is now adopted everywhere, starting at the surrounding waterfront.

In public places near the Guggenheim, monumental sculptures and ´perimuseal' heritage have proliferated, installed by private and public initiatives, particularly along the 'Paseo de la Memoria' [Memory Walk], which spreads 3 km down the estuary.[24] Besides, not only has the Itsasmuseum placed some maritime materials in public spaces, but also a sculpture by Jesús Lizaso entitled *Ozeanoaren Sustraiak* [Ocean roots], made in 2010. Further artworks surround the Fine Arts Museum of Bilbao, increasingly conscious of its thresholds and outer spaces, after its glamorous architectonic 2025 extension, designed by Norman Foster and Luis María Uriarte. Moreover, much to Gehry's concern, who would have preferred to keep the rusty industrial ruins in the surroundings, striking new buildings have sprung up around it, from the Euskalduna Auditorium by Federico Soriano and Dolores Palacios to the Iberdrola Tower by Cesar Pelli, plus some hotels and establishments designed by starchitects in adjacent streets. Prof. Iñaki Esteban diagnosed here a 'logic of ornament', which assumes that embellishing an emblematic area will boost beauty around it.[25] This

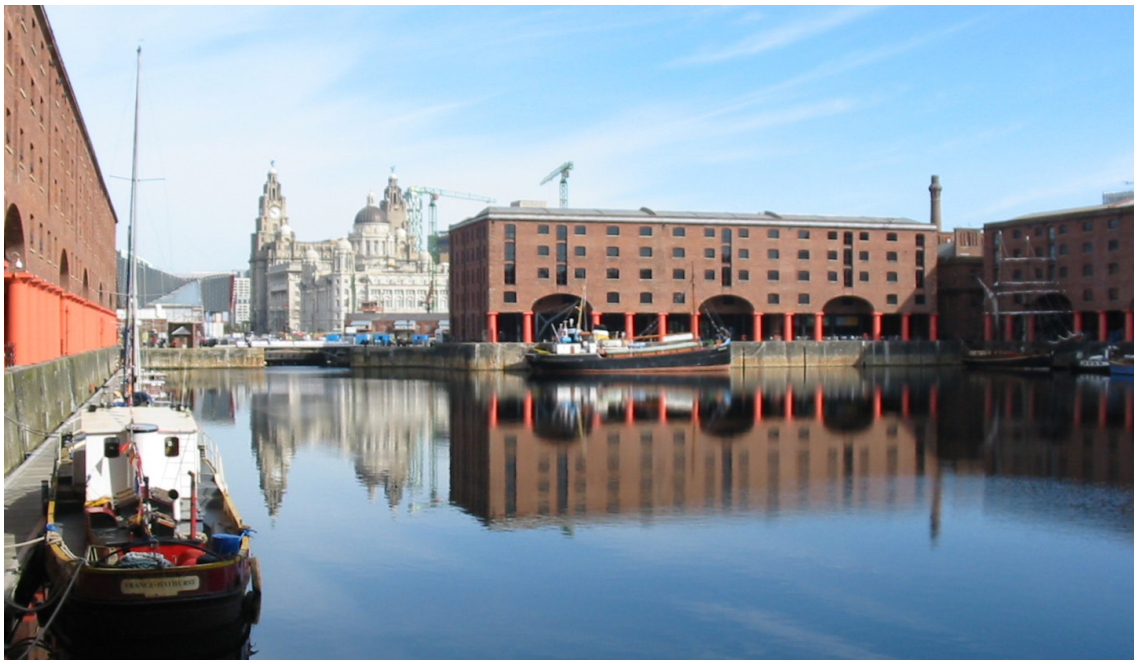

Fig. 06:
The Albert Dock in Liverprool (Photo: Mika Stetsovski, Wikipedia).

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notion could somehow act as the reverse of the 'broken windows theory' posited by social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling: just as misdeeds spread, the cultivation of beauty might, through aesthetic empathy, foster an atmosphere of civility. Thus Guggenheim Bilbao has not only been the museographical epitome of iconic architectural and sculptural urban entanglement, but its 'effect' has created a booming cultural district by the Nervión estuary, where there were once shipyards and other manufacturing facilities.

2: The 'museum effect' and other curatorial idiosyncrasies of the Bilbao era.

Port cities around the globe compete to make their waterfronts uniquely attractive to citizens and visitors. The North American model of transforming degraded port areas into cultural, recreational and commercial hubs has been replicated worldwide. Such a strategy typically includes some kinds of museums, aquariums, planetariums and other facilities alongside offices, hotels, shops, cafés and restaurants. This formula has been successfully applied at various sites, such as the docks of Boston Harbor, New York's South Street Seaport, Pittsburgh's riverfront, Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco Bay, Chicago's North Pier, Boston's Quincy Market and the Inner Harbor of Baltimore.[26] Following these examples, cultural and recreational uses have brought new life in Europe to the ports of Malmö, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Liverpool, Bordeaux, Porto, Marseille, Genoa, Thessaloniki, Istanbul, etc. (Fig. 6). One particularly spectacular case is Barcelona, which underwent significant transformation in preparation for the 1992 Olympics. This period saw extensive investments and monumental public art commissions, especially along the maritime coastline. The urban renewal strategy, championed by Mayor Pasqual Maragall, who had previously been a visiting professor at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, was inspired by the North American model. Its influence is evident in the Maremagnum aquarium and shopping centre opened in 1995 in the old port, where the museum of History of Catalonia was inaugurated the following year in a port warehouse. Hence exploiting the popularity of Gaudí and other cultural assets, Barcelona became the trendiest tourist destination among European ports for large cruise ships, but also a favourite choice for fairs and conferences. This accelerated the redevelopment of Poblenou, a former manufacturing district rebaptised in 2000 as *22@Barcelona Districte de la innovació*, where the Universal Forum of Cultures took place in 2004, leading to the construction of a gigantic convention centre and several museums at the mouth of the Besós river.

Another example of this global trend, also mirroring the American model, would be the regeneration of the Nervión estuary, where the Guggenheim Museum became the catalyst of a cultural hub. This new area is called Abandoibarra, which in Basque means riverside of Abando, the latter being once a township assimilated as a homonymous district of Bilbao. In the 20th century, Abando became the economic and commercial heart of the city, now expanded

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to the riverbanks and beyond. In Spain, as in Britain, city-branding strategies tend to use different urban terminologies by distinguishing, on the one hand, pre-existing quarters with historical heritage and perhaps a trade concentration resonant with older medieval times, specialised in particular crafts, cultural or ethnic activities, as distinct from new adjoining districts, which are characterised, on the other hand, by state-of-the-art infrastructures, amenities and cultural facilities like theatres, museums or other leisure 'attractions'.[27]

The latter is obviously the case of Abandoibarra, a regenerated waterfront, where little remains of its past activities. Other ports have more carefully preserved some remnants of industrial heritage, such as chimneys, old pipes, pieces of cranes and anchors as public ornaments along coastal promenades, sometimes converted into museums and tourist attractions. While some view these old heritage relics as Proustian mementoes, others perceive them as mere stage props in an urban 'theme park' setting. In any case, only a single port crane named Carola has survived in Bilbao, now a protected monument, and serves as a visual lure to the Maritime Museum, Itsasmuseum, inaugurated in 2003 in the old Euskalduna shipyard premises. This museum displays many other outdoor exhibits, although none as large as the colossal anchors that hold a place of honour in the docks of Baltimore and Barcelona. The term 'anchor' is, by the way, a recurrent metaphor in many texts on urban revitalisation, while other nautical tropes are also commonly used to describe cultural facilities on waterfronts: e.g. Guggenheim Bilbao is usually considered the 'flagship' project in the renewal of the whole conurbation, while the architecture of the Euskalduna Conference Centre, erected at the nearby site of the old shipyard, is said to evoke the shape of a boat.[28]

The pairing of art and maritime museums with a convention centre, plus other amenities, might remind us of tourist attractions in old ports, such as the docks of Liverpool and the nearby zone of former warehouses that became the Creative Quarter. Yet urban speculation, based on quick real-estate profits, has eliminated not only such buildings in Bilbao, but also the creative people who were reusing them. Artists-run alternative art spaces were thriving around 1995 in numbers 35 and 29 of Alameda Mazarredo by revitalising old industrial buildings on the left River Nervión bank and many more down Deusto, especially in Zorrotzaurre.[29] Few artists can now afford to have their dwelling or studios in the Abandoibarra area, where a more noticeable presence of the 'creative class' would be, according to Richard Florida's theory, a luring asset of attraction. Nevertheless, apart from peculiar-looking people, eye-catching buildings and arty entourages could be cleverly used as a marketing strategy by entrepreneurs and city councils spreading colourful murals, street lamps and signposts, which happened in Birmingham to foster Digbeth as a Creative Quarter or in Leicester with St. George's Cultural Quarter.[30] To be identified and 'labelled' is indeed crucial, according to Hilary Anne Frost-Kumpf: "A cultural district is a well-recognized, labelled, mixed-use area of a city in which a high concentration of cul-

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tural facilities serves as the anchor of attraction".[31] Therefore, the first detectable evidence to take into account is explicit designation, which must be publicly stated, whether in municipal ordinances and/or in urban signage, and even on websites promoting tourism or cultural dissemination. This was accomplished by the agencies in charge of regenerating the Nervion waterfront, which coined the designation Abandoibarra and distributed street signs pointing directions to museums and other cultural venues (Fig. 7).

One swallow does not make a summer and a vibrant cultural district requires more than a single museum. Even a triangle of excellent institutions, such as the Fine Arts Museum of Bilbao, the Guggenheim and Itsasmuseum, could have been too constrained in urban scope and activity terms. In his famous book *The Image of the City*, social urbanist Kevin Lynch railed against precincts exclusively dedicated to self-absorbed cultural consumption.[32] In contrast to the monofunctionality of such arts complexes American cities developed mixed-use cultural districts, where people could stay, meet, shop, eat and drink round the clock. In 1978, a lively New York neighbourhood devised a local festival with the label 'Museum Mile', which the city would officially use henceforth to mark the area on Fifth Avenue between 82nd and 105th Streets, home of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and many other amenities, shops or services. In Europe, a trend-setting case was established in Frankfurt with its Museumsufer [museum shore] created in the 1980s with thirteen museums integrated into the urban fabric along the Main River. Another notable example is Vienna's Museumsquartier, inaugurated in 2001 next to the Museums of Art History and Natural History, in the former court stables, with the Kunsthalle, the Leopold Museum and the Museum Moderner Kunst, as well as shops, offices and galleries and artists' studios. Other cities switched to this scheme. For example, Amsterdam which had the traditional

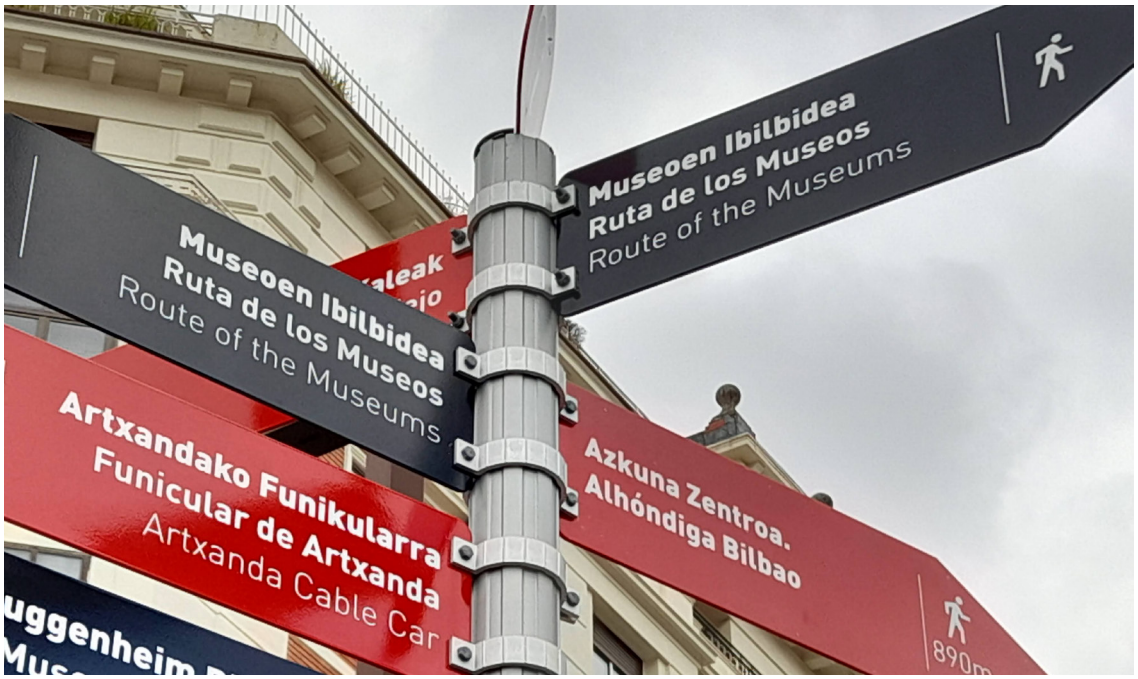

Fig. 07: Street signs in the Bilbao district of Abandoibarra, pointing to the Guggenheima and other museums.

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Museumplein, but opted for a post-modern mixed-use complex at Blauwe Museumplein in the port area of Oosterdok. Similarly, Barcelona had the cultural acropolis of Montjuic, but the latest arts scene is now bustling around the MACBA and the Centre for Contemporary Culture in the Raval neighbourhood, or in the area of Calle Montcada with the Picasso Museum, the European Museum of Modern Art and the MoCo, alongside vivacious art spaces, shops and bars and street art. Similarly, the vibrant ecosystem of Abandoibarra is made out of a mixture of museums, conference/concert halls, university venues, shopping areas, hotels and other amenities, including public art.

Regarding the latter point, what makes Abandoibarra a special case is the fact that every item of the Guggenheim Bilbao art collection installed in public places has a museum label detailing *in situ* the title and author, and also adding QR codes for further information available on the museum website. Similarly, both Itsasmuseum and the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum have placed cherished treasures outdoors with their respective museum labels. Furthermore, standard signage accompanies every single artwork in the so-called 'Paseo de la Memoria', landmarked with sculptures by Anthony Caro, Chillida, Dalí, Garraza, Lüpertz, Rückriem, Tücker and Zugasti, whose authors and titles are detailed on respective labels (Fig. 8). Analogously, such information is provided for other public art installations clustered on this waterfront. The resulting assortment could be called 'perimuseal' because of its location around museums, but also 'paramuseal' due to museum-like identification labels: however concise, they serve a crucial social function, especially regarding some conceptual pieces, which uninitiated passersby may otherwise not remark as art. This could be considered another version of the so-called 'museum effect', an expression academically used referring to the conceptual transmutation of objects that, detached from their original function and context, are in the museum perceived merely as works

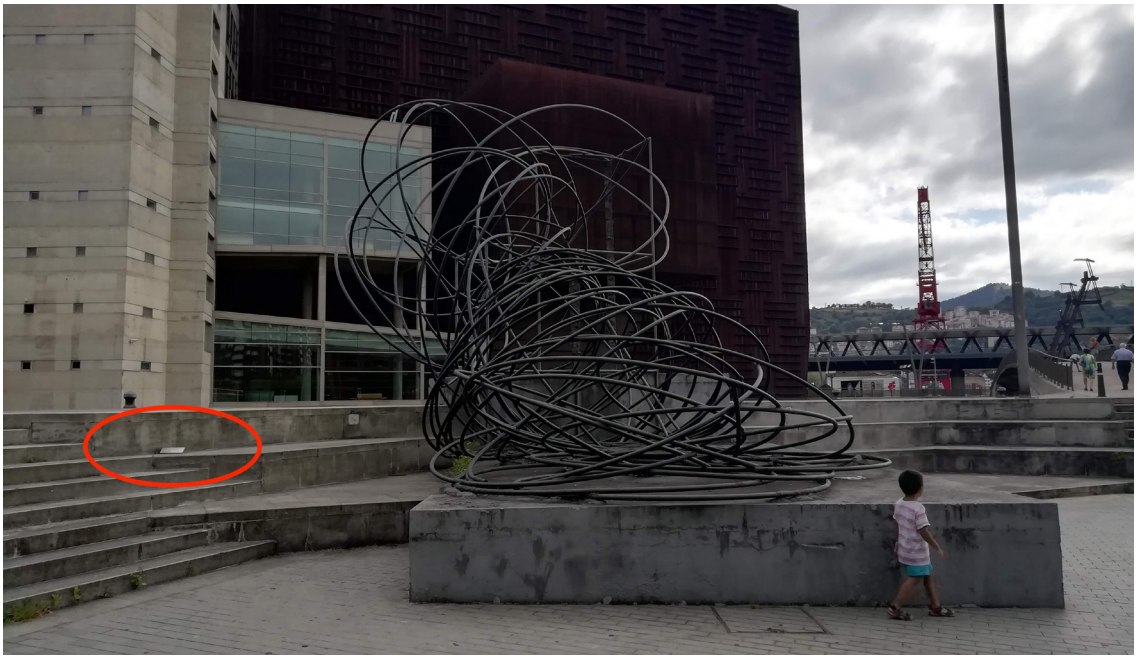

Fig. 08: Conceptual sculpture in 'Paseo de la Memoria', with museum-like label identifying is an artwork made in 2002 by José Zugasti with the title: A la deriva (Photo: J. Pedro Lorente).

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of art.[33] In the same way, thanks to sprawling curatorial policies like these para-museal labels, Abandoibarra is being transmuted into a distinguished cultural landscape.[34] Definitely, the human hustle and bustle inside and around Guggenheim Bilbao are characteristic of a museum-like social space. Inspired by the nomenclature of postmodern geographer Edward Soja, who made famous the term 'third space', as differentiated from home –the 'first space'– and the workplace –the 'second space'–, other geographers and sociologists consider a third category for some public spaces frequented by regular users: café gatherings or social clubs, temples where a community of parishioners regularly meets for worship or other regular points of socialisation between neighbours/acquaintances in squares and parks. Yet it can also be considered in and around great museums a 'fourth space' in which all sorts of people, who may not know one another, can mingle without feeling threatened or uncomfortable.[35]

Great museums are indeed catalysts of arts-led vitalisation to boost urban areas, often located on waterfronts. Although other remote historical precedents can be cited, it might be argued that the openings of the Tate Liverpool in 1988 and Guggenheim Bilbao in 1997 marked a turning point in the spread of national and international branches. In the case of private North American foundations, the comparison to the franchises of large brands of global capitalism, such as McDonald's, sparked controversy –inspiring the sarcastic nickname 'McGuggenheim'.[36] Thomas Krens' favourite counter-argument was that the McDonald's sign, package and menu are identical anywhere, while every Guggenheim branch has a peculiar identity. Guggenheim Bilbao has set the standards for this idiosyncrasy by combining cosmopolitan character with Basque traits so as to counter accusations of cultural imperialism. Having learned this lesson, international trends in international museum developments have followed suit.[37] French cultural diplomacy took the cue, firstly with the Rodin

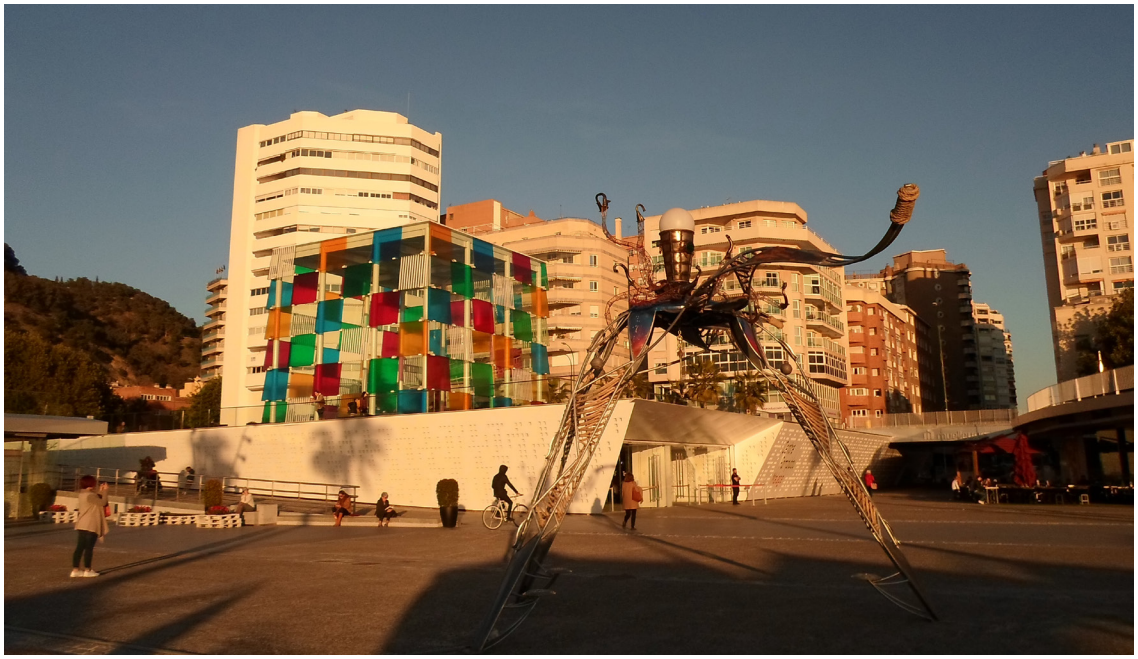

Fig. 09: Pompidou Centre in Málaga, with intervention by Daniel Buren and sculptures by local artists around (Photo: J. Pedro Lorente).

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Museum branch, opened since 2009 by the port of Salvador de Bahía, with 62 statues by the French sculptor, although many other works by Brazilian and Latin American artists are also on show. This was followed in 2015 by the brand of the Pompidou Centre opened in the docks of Málaga showcasing blockbuster exhibitions exported from Paris, but with tactful selections regularly featuring contemporary Spanish art (Fig. 9). Then the diplomatic ideal of 'French universalism' was hailed for the Louvre Abu Dhabi, inaugurated in a huge building by French architect Jean Nouvel with an impressive sample of some 300 works lent by French national museums in 2017, then incremented by abundant acquisitions paid for by Abu Dhabi through its Tourism Development & Investment Company.[38] The same happens with Guggenheim Abu Dhabi designed by Frank Gehry, in a similar architectural style to that in Bilbao, but three times larger, which is also shaping its own collection with a singular profile: signature pieces by established Western artists will be combined with post-1965 contemporary art from the Middle East.[39] Eventually, the pearl in the museum crown of Saadiyat Island will be the Zayed National Museum, dedicated to recount the history and development of that emirate, with advice from the British Museum.[40] Even more on the defensive against any hint of colonialist dependence are the Hong Kong authorities, although they intend to recreate the 'Bilbao effect' on a grand scale with seventeen cultural institutions clustered in a large park reclaimed from the sea, according to an ambitious project by Norman Foster on the West Kowloon peninsula.[41] China keeps at arm's length all partnerships with great Western museums in urban regeneration policies by not allowing direct managerial dependence: British collaboration has been regular at the V&A in Shenzhen, but its administration is the responsibility of a Design Society instituted within the Shekou Harbor regeneration framework, where the institution has been open to the public since 2020 on the ground floor of the new Sea World Culture and Arts Center, a mixed-use building whose six floors are filled with restaurants, luxury shops, apartments, etc.[42]

All over the world, cultural policies of territorial museum expansion encourage arts-led urban regeneration with 'situated' curatorial policies. Instead of spontaneous urban boosting from the bottom-up, the 'Bilbao era' consecrated top-down art policies of cultural branding, implemented by political powers hand in hand with urban developers. It remains to be seen whether the proposed territorial expansion of Guggenheim Bilbao in the Biosphere Reserve of the Urdaibai estuary will mark a different model, an epitome of a 'post-Bilbao era'.

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Endnotes

1 Rose 2024, pp. 26-27.
2 McClellan 2008, p. 98; Marshall 2012, p. 45.
3 Gómez, Juan, Lorente 2022.
4 Newhouse 1998.
5 Giebelhausen 2003, p. 9.
6 Sklair 2017.
7 Del Cerro Santamaría 2020.
8 Plaza, Tironi, Haarich 2009; Moya Valgañón 2015; Caso, 2022.
9 Gehry 1999, pp. 176, 187.
10 Mairesse 2015, pp. 366- 369.
11 Lindsay 2016, p. 102.
12 Uffelen 2010, p. 28.
13 Lindsay 2016, p. 250.
14 Jagodzinska 2011; 2018.
15 Skellon, Tunstall 2018.
16 Janes 2015, pp. 325, 330.
17 Saumarez Smith, 2021, pp. 183, 189.
18 Lindsay 2016, pp. 214, 220-221.
19 Stuedahl 2015.
20 Klonk, 2009, p. 206.
21 Rose 2024, p. 235.
22 Aguirre 2011, p. 183.
23 McNeill 2000.
24 Lorente, Juan 2023.
25 Esteban 2007.
26 Bonillo, Donzel, Fabre 1992; Brownill 2013.
27 Evans 2015.
28 Marshall 2001.
29 Aramburu 2023, pp. 260-267.
30 García Carrizo 2023.
31 Frost-Kumpf 1998, p. 7.
32 Lynch 1960.
33 Alpers 1991, pp. 26-7; Poulot, 2022.
34 Lorente 2024.
35 Kirschberg 2010; Jagodzinska 2018; Saumarez Smith 2021, pp. 183, 189.
36 McNeil 2000; Zulaika 2003, p. 109.
37 Grincheva 2020a.
38 Grincheva 2020b.

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39 Ersoy 2010; McClellan 2012.

40 Doherty 2012.

41 Lam 2019.

42 Chen, Qi 2021.

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