

Guggenheim in Bilbao

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I HAVE a recording of Lotte Lenya singing “The Song of Bilbao” about Bill’s Ballroom in Bilbao where once were held the best dances in the world, despite a roof that let in moonlight and floorboards through which the grass grew thick. With the chorus “Bilbao, Bilbao” stuck on my mental turntable, I recently drove through undistinguished streets looking for a new building that has made “Bilbao” the last word in architecture. The Basque capital has been receiving an abundance of reporters, critics, and tourists come to view the Guggenheim Museum opened in October 1997, and almost all the visitors have been impressed. They have largely agreed that the building is not only one of the great buildings of our time but that it speaks for the others and “ends the century by summarizing the era’s achievements.” Since the century happens in turn to end the millennium, there is a millennial aura to the praise of a structure its builders have projected as a site of pilgrimage. I was having difficulty reading the map and turning corners more or less at random when I looked down the Calle Iparraguirre and there it was.

The building filling the view at the end of the street with a configuration of luminescent curving metal plates looked as if it had just arrived from a larger smoother world. Lined with late nineteenth-early twentieth-century brown stone houses and shops, the Calle Iparraguirre is very crowded. Cars back up because the street ends and all traffic turns right at the corner onto the Alameda de Mazzaredo running in front of the museum. Pedestrians slow down staring. The building appears serenely self-contained. One approaches it transfixed, until distracted by the large Jeff Koons Puppy installed, courtesy of Hugo Boss, to the right of the entrance plaza. The Puppy, clad in multicolored pansies, sits up on its haunches and at first looks as tall as the museum, but this is an illusion fostered by a plaza which steps down toward the entrance.

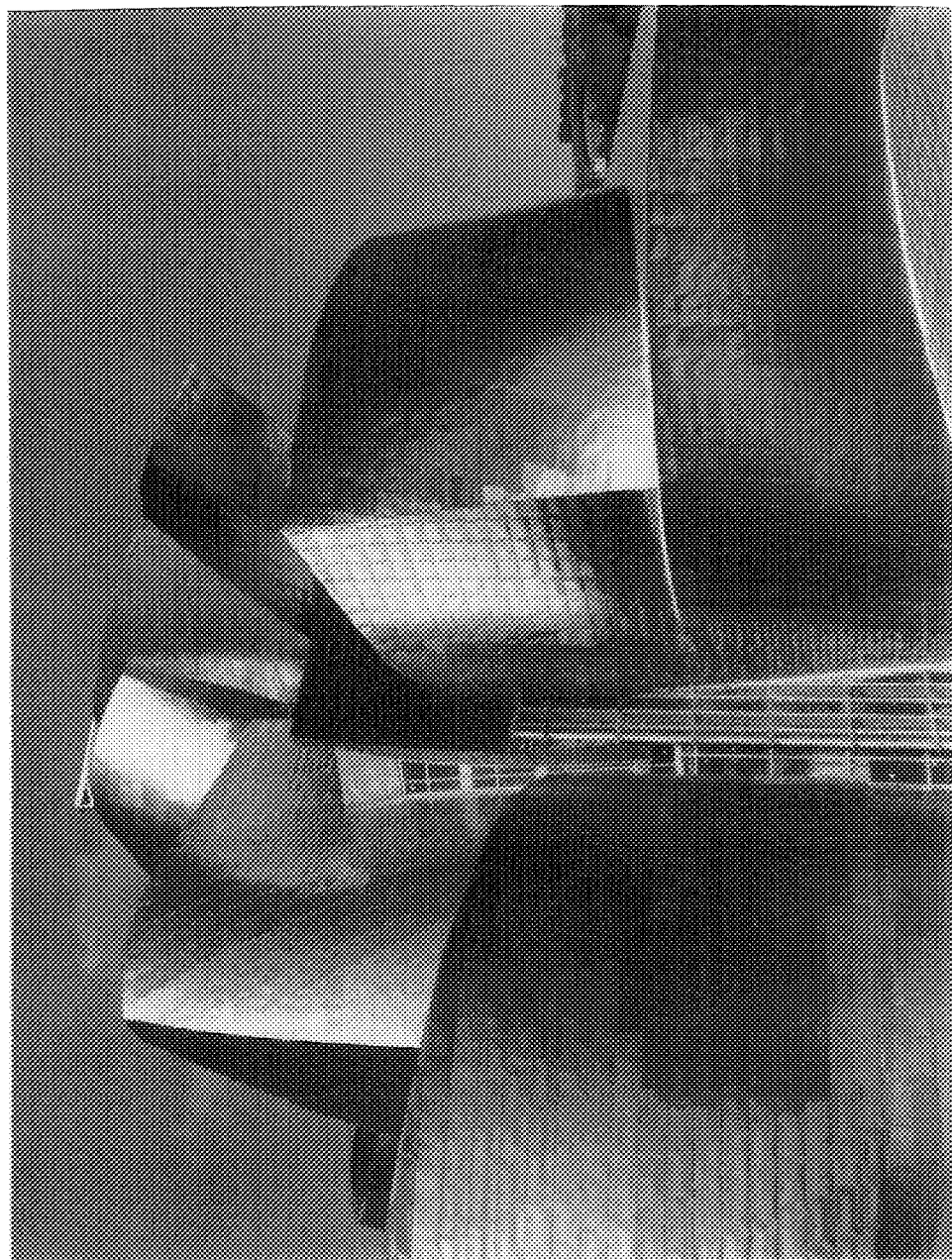
It is appropriate to ponder size when first looking at the Bilbao museum since size was a primary concern for Thomas Krens who commissioned it as director of the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation. The Foundation's two museums in New York City, on Fifth Avenue and on Lower Broadway, lack room to exhibit its collection of oversized late-modernist works. Also, Krens wanted to be able to mount and maintain large-scale installations, and, when he invited three architects to submit designs for a new museum, he told them to provide, in the words of the winner Frank Gehry, "big industrial volumes of space."

The Bilbao Guggenheim is big and feels bigger than it is. Immediately on stepping into the lobby, one cranes to see to the top of a great central atrium rising half again as high as the one in the original Guggenheim, designed halfway through the century by Frank Lloyd Wright. Gehry's atrium soars past catwalks and balconies (over one of which Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Soft Shuttlecock* droops like a bleached banana tree), up pillars and towers, to skylights almost out of sight. Yet it is less this atrium that makes the museum seem huge than a gallery plunging off from the lobby and extending farther than a football field.

At the lobby end of this gallery, I passed through Richard Serra's *Serpent*, the museum's signature piece, 172 tons and 104 feet of iron in three sheets undulating to form two not quite parallel paths along which the viewer walks the length of the sculpture sensing its weight in the looming walls. My destination at the far end was Oldenburg's *Knife Ship*, a Swiss Army knife equipped with blades, a corkscrew, and oars; along the way, Andy Warhol's white Mona Lisas, not too big not too small, almost seem conventional.

The first sight of the astonishing building had been disorienting and the dizzying atrium had offered few repairs but the clear accord of Brobdingnagian gallery and art was calming and, on returning to the

Opposite: Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (Construction Photos), 1997. Photograph by David Heald © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.



central lobby, I looked about confidently for the staircase to the second floor and the Kandinskys, de Koonings, and Rothkos. On the way to the stairs I passed one of those large installations for which Krens had the museum designed. Jenny Holzer composed *Nine Signs* for the Bilbao Guggenheim out of vertical LED signboards scrolling a message in Euskera (the Basque language), Spanish, and English. The text is a series of short declarative sentences like “I say your name” and “I run from you.” It has been praised for drawing viewers “into an uncomfortable complicity.” I have always found the peremptoriness of installations irritating and being decoyed among the 40-foot-high displays put me into an uncooperative mood not conducive to appreciating art. So I got a cup of coffee and took it outside, where I felt better at once.

The real Bilbao Guggenheim is outside. I had exited onto a terrace overlooking a reflecting pool that runs the length of the building. Across the pool is a walkway and beyond that the Nervion River. The walkway between building and river invites the visitor to walk alongside with the building keeping one company. The impression of a living presence is due mostly to its titanium facing. The museum is built of Spanish limestone, glass, and especially titanium whose name makes it sound forbidding but which seems actually to glow with geniality. It covers much of the structure in sheets a third of a millimeter thick extended over frames in pillowy rectangles that look soft to the touch. Titanium has almost never been used to cover walls because, while wonderfully resistant, it is too expensive. A fluke of the market, a sudden glut, made it momentarily cheaper than stainless steel. Gehry had it polished to a grey-gold which appears to be at once absorbing light and radiating it.

I wandered along the walkway, retracing the long gallery whose most interesting feature is visible only from the outside. Miming the oversized art within, the long gallery is overlong and extends under the Puente de la Salve which begins its crossing of the Nervion from the edge of the building site. This slide under the bridge was part of the design from the beginning and practically everyone has found it particularly engaging. Passing under the bridge, I wasn't sure.

With the underside of the roadway overhead and the wall of the

gallery close at my right, I felt cramped in. Already, viewed from a distance, the conjunction of building and bridge had appeared cramped, and suddenly the whole thing—the museum’s size, its proportions, its assembly out of those huge metal plates—seemed exceedingly out of scale. Yet, according to the more or less official *Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* (written by van Bruggen with the cooperation of the directing triumvirate, Gehry, Krens, and the Basque representative, Juan Ignacio Vidarte), the building’s relation to its site was a principal concern and Gehry designed the extension under the bridge precisely in order to tie the building to it as to a “gritty anchor.” The legend of the making of the Bilbao museum begins with a geocultural revelation. The Basque administration, on inviting the Guggenheim Foundation to build in Bilbao, had proposed to transform an old wine warehouse, but Krens and Gehry did not like the site and they were leaving town when Krens had an “epiphany” that it should be located on the riverfront at the city’s vital center. Gehry remembers it as a joint epiphany; they agree that an important building starts with an important site, and that the importance of the site is lent by history and culture.

They agree too that architecture returns the favor in that buildings literally shape the future. The difference between his urbanism and the urbanism of his mentor Le Corbusier, Gehry has explained, is a matter of tone. Le Corbusier was loud and aggressive, Gehry keeps his voice down. There is no need to shout “I’m going to demolish you,” he says. “If you understand the forms you are using—by which I mean, if you manipulate form, space, and negative space in relation to other buildings or to the city in order to make compositional relationships—you can start to take over.” Quoting this, Coosje van Bruggen doesn’t want us to be disturbed by its “slightly Napoleonic ring”; Gehry, she says, is only talking about the integration of building and site. But the way he develops his idea does have a certain grandeur: “If there was a hole in the ground where Notre Dame is today, and you had a church to build and you were really smart, you would make your church just like Notre Dame. The surrounding space is energized by the sculpture of that building and it co-opts a whole piece of Paris.”

The message is in the idiom. If you had a church to build, you would make your church just like Notre Dame: it is in the assumption that a "you" can make a Notre Dame. For Victor Hugo, who wrote a novel named after the cathedral to plead for its careful preservation, the only single "you" who could affect Notre Dame would be an irreverent official ordering disfiguring alterations: "The man, the individual, the artist, is erased from these great unsigned masses," Hugo wrote; "Time is [Notre Dame's] architect and the people the masons." Even Henry Adams, though he was American, took a great cathedral to be the "expression of energy" of an entire historical epoch. Still, van Bruggen is right, Gehry's idiom is not Napoleonic: it is self-reliant. His verb tense is not the imperative but the infinitive: "To be at the bend of a working river intersected by a large bridge and connecting the urban fabric of a fairly dense city to the river's edge with a place for modern art is my idea of heaven." The sentence projects decisive action (creating a new order of things in Bilbao) but not aggressive. A new set of relations will emerge simply as a function of his being there. To be the one on the site realizing these relations is heaven: there is hardly a transitive verb in the passage and almost no causality, or only of the least binding. Napoleon marched out and subjugated; Gehry arrives, does what he does and a desired change comes about.

Elsewhere he talks about "trying to get a sense of movement in my buildings" by which he means "a subtle kind of energy" that can radiate from a building so that it "knits into the larger fabric of the city." Here too integration goes the way of the new architecture: "Buildings are part of living in the city and it changes; there's a transient quality." The champion city-changer, the Baron Georges Haussmann, rebuilt Paris to establish order and to found the stability of a political system he hoped would prevail indefinitely. There appears to be no prior plan to Gehry's transient cityscape; it just keeps changing through the unconcerted efforts of individuals bent on their own projects. Instead of a plan, the buildings embody a force whose nature he first saw clearly one day when he attended an exhibition called "Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century." Being a passionate sailor, he had looked at marine art before but it was this show of ships

built to conquer the world that helped him to articulate his idea of architectural movement. He became conscious of the sail-like features of his buildings and of their appearing impelled as if on a conquering voyage.

It is never the same thing building an empire abroad as at home. The planners of the Getty Art Center in Los Angeles, with which the Bilbao museum is often paired because they opened at about the same time, didn't think in terms of launching ships or direct encounters. The Getty, designed by Richard Meier, is a compound of several buildings stretching over 710 acres of its own hilltop. There are no structures crowding its appending galleries and requiring acrobatic accommodation. The site offers spectacular views of Los Angeles and Meier has everywhere figured them into his design. But while the view of the city out the windows of the Guggenheim exaggerates its ties to the community, the vista commanded by the Getty certifies that it is built on very expensive real estate. The value of art is here underwritten by the value of property and sometimes, in fact, the latter takes precedence. A woman, worried that her swimming pool on a facing hill would be observable from the Art Center, was pacified by a cactus garden to prevent visitors from approaching the sensitive lookout.

On the contrary, visitors are encouraged to appropriate any views surrounding the Bilbao museum, the more previously owned the better. There is a railroad-yard next door and through the atrium's tall windows one looks out at tracks, trains, and loading cranes. Gehry had to take steps to preserve this scene for, when he came on the site, the riverfront was to be transformed into a green park. Context matters: Gehry must have imagined his shining metal building set among lawns and trees and seen there was a danger of finding himself in Disneyland unintentionally (he has designed a hotel for Eurodisney near Paris). Instead the titanium invokes the historical Bilbao of steel-mills and mines.

But the city fathers had planned a park by the river because Bilbao's heavy industry has mostly died. The titanium and the similarly evocative iron *Serpent* are commemorative. The present-and-future Bilbao is characterized by a mosaic of projects promoted by Bilbao

Metropoli 30, an organization composed of business executives, government officials, university professors, nonprofit activists, journalists, and cultural figures, to rebuild Bilbao, in the words of the chairman Alfonso Martinez Cearra, as a capital of “knowledge, culture, and art.” Bilbao is to be remade from the ground up. One of the major projects is a spectacular steel and glass subway designed by Norman Foster (one enters it through futuristic glass tubes everyone calls *Fosteritos*). Another is a new airport designed by Santiago Calatrava. Calatrava has also built a pedestrian bridge like a cat’s-paw spanning the Nervion and visible from the museum. Unlike the railroad, the loading docks, and the cranes, Calatrava’s bridge is perfectly in tune with Gehry’s museum which is one of Metropoli 30’s most important projects.

Cearra likes to cite a book titled *Pittsburgh: Then and Now* in which he showed a journalist before-and-after pictures chronicling the transformation of a Pittsburgh freightyard into a park. Bilbao is breaking with the past by getting rid of its material remains. Old factories are being razed, warehouses levelled. Gehry’s enthusiasm for the industrial feel of the site was not naive; he understood that he would not be surrounded by booming industry. So it was rather the preservation of industrial ruins he defended, like that which has become almost routine, for instance, in New England. He had been involved in North Adams, Massachusetts in MASSMoCA’s remaking of a factory into a museum and had designed the Temporary Contemporary (now the Geffen Contemporary) in Los Angeles out of obsolete warehouses. His first attention-getting project, rebuilding his own house, suggests how he would be committed to such preservations, both out of appreciation of an industrial aesthetic and for the additional vocabulary. The “gambrel-roofed bungalow” in Santa Monica that Gehry surrounded on three sides with an angular addition of plywood, corrugated metal, and chain-link fencing retains its distinct dialect in a mutually exegetical dialogue with the addition.

Others have tried to save parts of the old Bilbao, mostly foreigners or people who work for foreign institutions, like the curator at the local branch of the French Institute, Jerome Delormas, and the director of the Fine Arts School of Bordeaux, Guadalupe Echeverria, who have

preserved a former electrical-resistor plant by recycling it into an arts compound. But this oddity, Bilbaons destroying their heritage while strangers try to preserve it, is less paradox than parable. One could call it the parable of the two culturalisms.

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Frank Gehry came to Bilbao to create something newer than new, a Guggenheim Museum of modern art more modern than the Guggenheim Museum of modern art. For him there is no conflict between the new Bilbao and the old or between any new and any old, not just an industrial old. He has intimate experience of the way the old nourishes the new. His grandmother, he recalls, gave him the idea of building when she made houses with him from sticks and bits of wood. But it was her cooking that really shaped his career, for his grandmother often cooked fish and ever since the fish shape has been Gehry's aesthetic standard. Proving that childhood impressions are unpredictable, he tells an anecdote that might have had the opposite effect: "We'd go to the Jewish market, we'd buy a live carp, we'd take it home to her house in Toronto, we'd put it in the bathtub and I would play with this god-damn fish for a day until the next day she'd kill it and make gefilte fish." One could understand his never again being able to look at a fish, but instead the fish came to represent the ideal form: "I kept drawing it and sketching it and it started to become for me like a symbol for a certain kind of perfection that I couldn't achieve with my buildings. Eventually whenever I'd draw something and I couldn't finish the design, I'd draw the fish as a notation . . . that I want this to be better than just a dumb building. I want it to be more beautiful."

The fish appeared in Gehry's architecture as soon as he began to develop a personal style. In 1981, he collaborated with Serra (who feels the same way about snakes) in a show illustrating the link between art and architecture, and imagined a bridge one of whose pylons was a fish rising from the Hudson. He has also designed a prison in the shape of a fish for a show on architectural follies; *Standing Glass Fish*, a 22-foot fish sculpture; another still bigger fish sculpture for the Villa Olimpica in Barcelona; a formica lamp in the shape of a fish; and the Fishdance

restaurant in Kobe, Japan resembling a huge fish supported upright on its curved tail. Coosje van Bruggen, who had long conversations with Gehry for the Bilbao volume, sees this all culminating in the Guggenheim, where “‘fish’—truncated, without head or tail, transformed into leaf or boatlike shapes and applied in some of the side galleries—is endowed with a more elusive metaphorical quality, and comes to signify fluid, continuous motion; it is a tangible sculptural abstraction vivifying the building.”

Out of his memory of his grandmother's bathtub, Gehry lifted an image that was psychically and culturally drenched, shook off the personal and historical stuff clinging to it (he didn't reject this stuff, he just didn't carry it off along with the image), and transported it into his architectural vocabulary. Transported, it became nomadic; translated, it became multilingual, became, in other words, capable of multicultural relations. In the form it takes as the source of Gehry's idea of architectural beauty, Gehry's grandmother's gefilte fish could be served at the Kobe Fishdance with zarusoba; it no longer implies horseradish. It has no automatic adjuncts, is responsible to no grammar of images decreeing what goes with what, has independent relations with other cultural references.

Gehry's grandmother would be very proud to see how far he's gone with her carp, and she probably wouldn't mind that to get to Bilbao he had to put her kitchen definitively behind him. I returned from Bilbao to Paris just as France was winning its first soccer World Cup ever. The hero of the last match was a Kabyle born in Marseilles of immigrant parents and named Zinedine Zidane, dubbed Zizou. The day after the victory, the television news feature saluted a newborn Gypsy Zidane and Breton Zizou. “Zizou” was already a French-style diminutive. Like Gehry's fish, M. Zidane's name has floated free of its associations with other features of a foreign culture and now enriches French culture as an all-purpose ethnicity.

The night of the game, when there were as many people in the streets as at the Liberation in 1945 and more flags, a television commentator proposed a change of colors from “bleu, blanc, rouge” to “black, blanc, beur”: black for the Africans, blanc for the Whites, and

heur for the Arabs, the communities represented in about equal numbers on the winning team. The team was mixed, France is increasingly mixed, still the team was French and a more racially inclusive France remains France. There must have been Arab and African inflections in the French game but the French Africans and the French Arabs did not transport their whole cultures into their playing any more than Gehry installed his grandmother's kitchen in Bilbao. The French playing style the commentators talked about exists only as French. German recruiting policy, taking note of France's winning mix, is supposedly changing to include more foreign residents. The German team apparently has a distinctly different way of playing from the French, and if in the future, players of Turkish background alter this way of playing, it will change into another version of a German style. Embracing a soccer player of Kabyle origins, the French press has declared him wholly and gloriously French. For Americans, a French immigrant, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, defined the new mode of nationality already in the eighteenth century: an American is one who started out from anywhere but came to America. There's no loss of national identity involved for the nation when it includes different ethnicities; naturalization means becoming French, German, American, of Kabyle, Turk, or Korean origins. The origins never have precedence.

Becoming Spanish of Basque origins is exactly what the Basques in Spain have been resisting for generations. They are not immigrants, they have stayed home, why should they not on their own ground be a nation as well as a culture? No doubt they know that the history of nations is largely independent of the history of indigenous cultures. But if a cultural group wants political sovereignty as such, what other argument is there but the rightful identity of nation and culture? Alone in Spain and maybe in Europe, Bilbao's soccer team, the Athletic, has an official policy of restricted recruitment. The Basques do not want to be Basque the way Gehry is Jewish or the way he is American (by way of Canada). They do want his fishlike building to sustain their claim to cultural nationhood, and this compounds the contradiction: however it divides among Jewish, Canadian, and American, the building does not seem at all Basque.

It has escaped no one that there is some lack of clarity in the museum's relation to its purchasers. While I was buying *Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* in the museum store, I overheard a conversation between a clerk and a French visitor who wanted the book in French and was annoyed to find it could be had only in English. The very polite young clerk snapped in fluent English that not having it in French was hardly the problem, there wasn't even a Basque version. During preparations for the museum's opening in October 1997, a policeman was killed when he tried to question two florists tending the Puppy's pansies. It turned out that the fake florists had planted twelve bombs to go off during the ceremony. They were members of the radical wing of the Basque separatist movement which has denounced the Guggenheim as an imperial intrusion and a misappropriation of communal resources. They have pointed to the building's cost. After providing the land, the city put up at least \$100 million for construction (one interview has Krens saying \$150 million); they paid \$20 million to the Guggenheim Foundation for advice and the use of its name; provided \$50 million for new acquisitions; and guaranteed a budget of \$12 million a year for operating expenses. In return, the Basques own a magnificent museum over which they have no artistic control. Everyone agrees that they will have some in time, and that Basque art is to have a prominent place in the collection, but not yet.

Vidarte, who signed the agreement with the Foundation as Director of Tax and Finance at the Regional Council of Bizkaia (the Basque region) and is now Director General of the Guggenheim Museum-Bilbao, is aware how it looks but not worried. There will be Basque curators; meanwhile, he says, "to play in this league, you have to be associated with someone in it." To understand the delicacy of the position he and his political colleagues are in, one has to see that for them the idea that you have to have associates to play in the global game does not imply that you should allow strangers on your soccer team. The international status of the Guggenheim is a trophy not an identification.

The delicacy of the balance between leaving the past behind while continuing to press for autonomy may be one source of the puz-

zling eagerness of Bilbao Metropoli 30 and its associates to remove the physical vestiges of their city's history. If for Gehry there is no conflict between old and new, there is some conflict for the Basques trying to recast Basque cultural identity in terms of industries of art and communication. Basque nationalism arose in the nineteenth century in the factories and warehouses now being levelled and among workers whose descendants have been largely displaced. The struggle between radical and conservative wings of the movement is to an important extent a class struggle: unemployment in the region is still nearly twenty-five percent and includes many who will find it hard to retool for the new industries.

Twelve miles down the road from Bilbao is the town of Guernica or, in Basque, Gernika, martyred for its resistance to Fascism, a resistance in which Basque nationalism confirmed its ties to the working-class culture of industrialism. After Franco's death, as Picasso had decreed, his *Guernica* came to the Madrid Reina Sofia Museum with which Gehry is now negotiating a transfer to the Bilbao Guggenheim. In Guernica itself, meanwhile, there is a Gernika Museoa which retraces the history of the town from the middle ages to modern times. Most of this museum is devoted to displays about the Civil War, including an archive of photographs of the Fascist blitz that inspired Picasso's painting which, in a small faded print, marks the end of the exhibit. If it has been suggested that the *Guernica* go to Gernika rather than to Bilbao, I could not find any reference to it. There may be problems of preservation and security that preclude it, but that the possibility does not seem to have been considered is curious.

Yet Vidarte and his Basque associates, who are pressing the claim for the painting, could reasonably worry about settling it into their museum. In Madrid, it fits into a landscape of antifascism; this is how Picasso must have envisioned it. But in the Basque capital it will be a monument to Basque antifascism specifically and to a past militancy with which the Guggenheim Museum has nothing to do; once in Bilbao, in short, the *Guernica* will look as if it should be in Gernika. Or else the contrary: when it is no longer associated with its journey to a Franco-free Spain and to the city that was the heart of the Spanish Republic,

its political character may dim and, taking on the local color of modern art, it will look as if it could as well be on Fifth Avenue. Tipping in either direction, the painting is likely to exacerbate the museum's own ambiguity. Its Basque status will seem still more disputable when the museum places a local icon in the context of a transcendent art-history.

Exposing the Bilbao Guggenheim's political ambiguity won't bother Gehry, since for him the building constitutes the museum and its coherence inheres in his vision of it. And it will rather please Krens precisely in making more evident the way the museum is both local and transnational, with nothing in between. Krens has developed a model of a museum of the future which is no longer located "in the center of the universe" but anywhere the space is good. Travel is now easy, people travel. He visualizes the Guggenheim "as one museum that has a constellation of spaces." So far the constellation has stars in Massachusetts, Venice, and Bilbao, besides the two in New York City; a sixth is being born in Berlin. Some observers of this expansion have called Krens a franchiser, others an imperialist, but both epithets are off the mark. The Guggenheim in Bilbao is not a franchise, like a Benetton, but an extension, a new wing; Bilbao has twice the gallery space of the New York museums combined and less than half the staff. Nor is the Guggenheim Foundation imperialist; Spain, Italy, and Germany aren't colonies and modern art isn't American, even if American art is modern.

Krens, who described his sudden realization of where in Bilbao to place the museum as an "epiphany," insists in the same idiom that people will "make a pilgrimage" to see significant art. The words "icon" and "cathedral" pepper the talk of the museum's American planners and builders until one begins to wonder why Protestants and Jews should have such a Catholic turn of phrase. Or why purveyors of modern art who claim to have built a museum for the twenty-first century portray it as an edifice from the middle ages, apparently not finding in the intervening centuries another category of building to which their new museum can be as well compared. How is a Guggenheim Museum of modern art like a medieval cathedral? Possibly in that they're both

houses of worship. That is, the Guggenheim and Notre Dame are not simply sites of the spiritual life but its politically efficacious incarnations. Medieval cathedrals were built the last time Western society joined spiritual and political authority. Between then and now, the major task of the West's history has been to separate them. But Gehry's abstracted fish and Krens's global museum rejoin the spiritual and the political.

The medieval cathedral is a congenial concept for Gehry and Krens because it has aspirations beyond single nationality or the secularity of modern cultural institutions (Americans, whose religion is within, have never really accepted secularity). The art enshrined in and by the Bilbao Guggenheim is at once personal vision and worldwide institution. Much like European soccer, modern art happens multi-culturally and demonstrates how culture can be both immanent and transportable. All the major European nations are in the throes of multicultural redefinition which they often represent as following the American model that fueled the United States' rise to world power. It is hoped that amalgamation, cultural as much as economic, will produce a renewed European ascendance. The powerful nations' nationalism, (not the Basques' or Croats') is becoming a matter of transnational cultural influence and multinational markets, a lot like the institutionalism of the Guggenheim Foundation.

Not that chauvinism is dead in these powerful nations. Winning the World Cup brought on paroxysms of patriotism in some very internationalist Frenchmen and women. And, on the other side, for one American critic, Gehry is John Wayne and Henry Ford: his building "is American in its wildness"; it is "exporting raw, generous, Western vitality to the old world," and besides "represents the first significant architectural idea to land on European shores since Frank Lloyd Wright's Wasmuth portfolio" (containing his Oak Park work). But such fifties talk is almost quaint. Krens's museum-as-cathedral concept enshrines the current consensus that national cultures are powerful in the degree that they command many constitutive cultures: the more catholic, the more travel-worthy, the better-travelled, the more commanding. And,

indeed, the less nationally or culturally specific: the Bilbao building looks as if it has landed from outer space because it has landed from Los Angeles.

One group will probably find culture less transportable in Krens's museums: those on very restricted travel budgets. As in the changing definition of Basque identity, there is a class issue latent in the changing definition of museums represented by the Bilbao Guggenheim. The traditional museum, says Krens, is "an eighteenth-century idea, which is the idea of an encyclopedia." The idea of the encyclopedia, expressing the republican idealism of the eighteenth-century revolutions, is to distribute knowledge more widely. Museums have made art accessible beyond the salons of rich patrons. But art in the Bilbao Guggenheim is less widely accessible than in the British Museum, the Louvre, the Metropolitan, MoMA, or the New York City Guggenheims because poorer tourists, unless their destination (like Disneyland) can absorb their entire vacation, generally can't afford to travel to a place where there is just one thing to do or see. It is likely that Krens's pilgrims will be mainly knights and merchants.



Krens has not initiated this antidemocratic trend; the coherence of Western society seems generally to have shifted its ground. Economic equality was never achieved in Europe or the United States but for about two centuries a more economically egalitarian society was the political ideal. It does not seem to be any longer except insofar as it enters into the ideal of cultural and racial equality that has replaced it and made difference the basis for social cohesion and of aesthetic order as well. That the Bilbao museum is out of scale with its surroundings doesn't indicate the builders' lack of sensitivity to the site. Gehry's building is carefully attuned to the site but according to an aesthetic of incongruity. When the architect says that what he finds especially interesting about building in cities is putting "dissimilar projects next to one another" and figuring out "how to include rather than exclude existing buildings," he points to an aesthetic moral, namely, that congruity, as he might paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, is the hobgoblin of small

artistic visions. Emerson did not find inconsistency a problem when reasoning in a world destined to unity within one's mind. Gehry doesn't find incongruity a problem when designing in a world that is becoming one constellation of cultural spaces.

I continue to think that the museum's long gallery crowds the Puente de la Salve and that the flourish of shining metal condescends to the freightyard. Moreover, I doubt the fit of building and site will improve with custom, though one could become used to their not fitting. Fit is very little in the eye of the beholder. Looking up the Avenue de l'Opéra toward the astonishing Opéra Garnier is not disconcerting, like one's first sight of the Bilbao Guggenheim. On the contrary, it cues one at once to the imperial world of Napoleon III manifest in fitly broad avenues converging in state upon the splendid building which looks not too big but of just the right immensity. The colossal Pantheon built by imperial Rome is excessive for the baroque Piazza della Rotonda in which one now finds it but this isn't perplexing either because one recognizes the misassortment instantly as having been arranged by history. The effect is poignant, even tragic, but the Pantheon was there first and the piazza surrounded it in its good time; as Victor Hugo said of Notre Dame, time was the architect of this disproportion and time is an essential order.

Gehry's building is perhaps not disproportionately large but because it contrasts with its surroundings all of it stands out. It is as if the Nervion riverfront did not know how to take hold of it. The building is a dream and a nightmare to photograph, for any angle offers a striking picture and none really captures it. In books and postcards, foreshortened perspectives collapse giant titanium wings onto a dwarfed city; a tangle of curved shining metal looms inexplicably over an assortment of trains; an arrangement of shapes in blue, grey, and gold projects against the sky but has no apparent relation to the ground. Virtually all the photos are both dazzling and unlikely. Only with the river's width for distance is it possible to produce pictures of the whole building. These show a tremendous construction of irregular masses difficult to identify as a building at all.

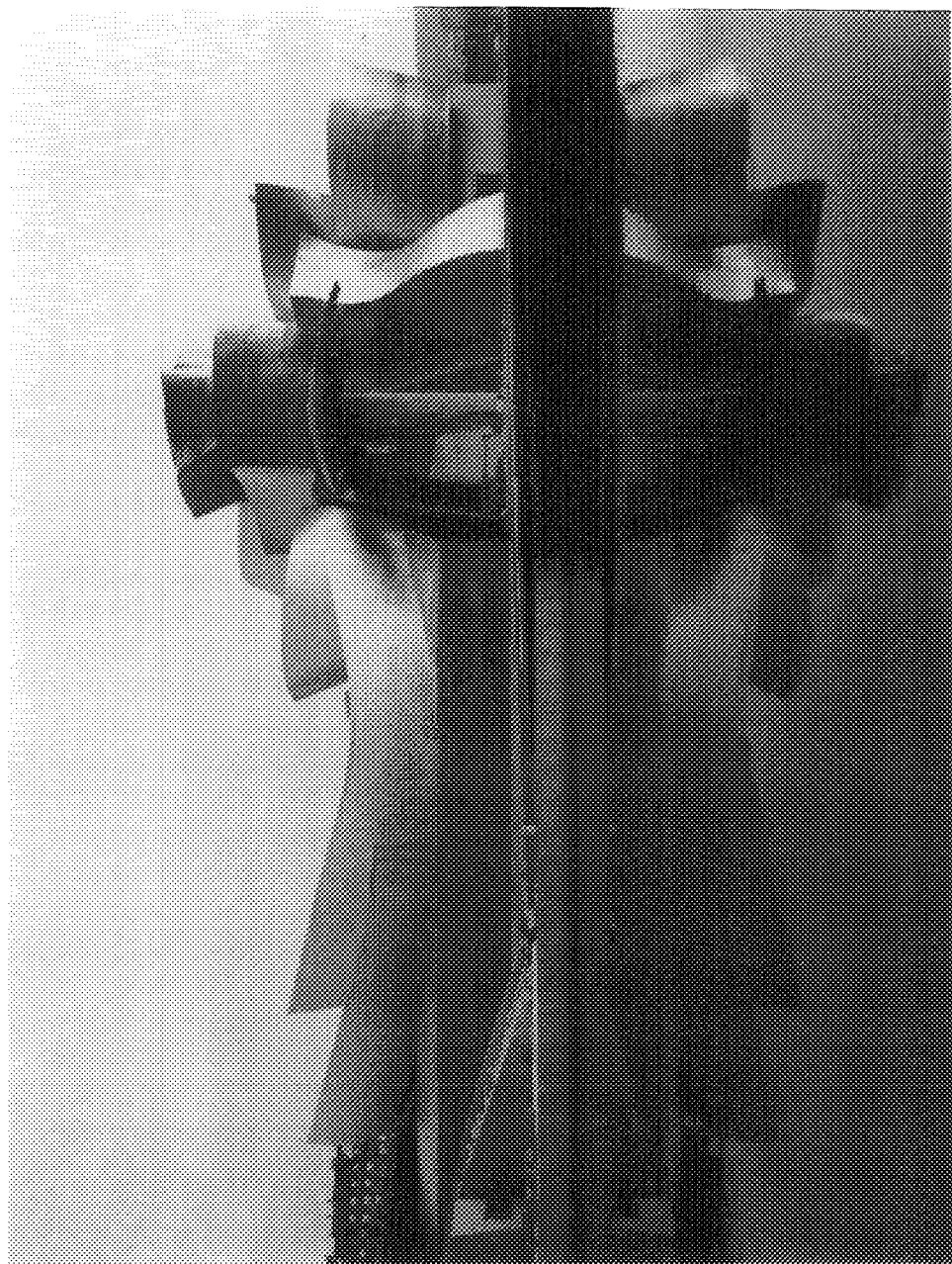
The pictures do not lie: no one has been able to visualize this

building clearly, not even its builders. *Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao* has two appendices. One is a paragraph written by Gehry describing the decision to use titanium, which now gives the building its single visual certainty. The other is called “On the Use of the Computer” and explains how it can be that a building should rise almost incomprehensible to the eye. It is done with computers, in particular with a program called CATIA developed by Dassault Systems, a French builder of airplanes. CATIA’s distinction is that it can map entire surfaces rather than points at intervals; since it thus represents shapes, it permits their almost infinite permutation (Jim Glymph, who works for Gehry, describes it as “the most infinitely shapable technology we’ve ever been presented with”). This allows the architect to propose any shape he can imagine even when he himself can’t quite see how it will work. “Many of the forms [Gehry] is developing now are only possible through the computer,” says Glymph.

Before CATIA, these new forms “would have been considered something to move away from. It might have been a sketch idea, but we would never be able to build it.” Now the staff takes a sketch idea, investigates and refines it into a model, and returns it so Gehry can deal with “the slightly altered shapes as a thought . . . and as a gesture.” And so on, back and forth, Gehry rethinking the shapes and CATIA showing him the full figure toward which he has gestured. Technology has always intervened in architectural design, of course. But this relation of computer and architect seems more involuted. If one said that reinforced concrete, for instance, furnished a new architectural grammar, then, by comparison, CATIA would be finishing Gehry’s sentences.

He remains in control of his text however. “Gehry’s forms are exciting, but they’re not perverse,” one critic writes, and goes on to explain away the building’s strangeness by asserting that it’s skin deep;

Opposite: Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (Construction Photos), 1997. Photograph by David Heald © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.



it “isn’t nearly as weird as it appears to be. It’s a sheep in wolf’s clothing.” Given that the museum is everywhere reviewed as visual art, do the clothes in that case not make the wolf? But this aside, it is true that Gehry draws a line between inventive and eccentric. On later looking at the sketch that had won him the commission for the museum, he recalled, “I realized that this stuff was so arbitrary and off the wall . . .” Doing the sketch “was great, it was exciting, and then I became Mr. Architect.” The process he describes of translating an initial vision of skylights into a workable drawing is the opposite of arbitrary: “I have a road map, and I know where I’m going. It frees me too, I decide where and how the pieces fit the site, determine the scale, and start a formal vocabulary, which I then can explain to somebody.” Freedom in this account follows from knowing where he is going; he does not define it as permission to wander at will. The formal vocabulary he develops is a code to which everyone works, including him. Mr. Architect is a responsible citizen. Unlike Frank Lloyd Wright of the famously unsuitable spiralling walls, Gehry cares very much that his building work well as an art museum. Philip Johnson’s dismissal of the issue of utility has become the final word on Gehry’s success: “When a building is as good as that one, fuck the art”; but Gehry would never say that. First because many of his best friends are artists, but also because iconoclasm doesn’t seem to be his style.

On the contrary, he assigns the aesthetic of the museum, the a-geometry that makes it so difficult to visualize and that one takes to be supermodern, to the oldest of all formal repertoires. He explained to a reporter that another reason, besides childhood memories, that he designs in the shape of fish is disaffection from the postmodernist way with traditional shapes: “When everybody started doing Greek temples again,” he recalled, “I got mad and said, ‘If you really want to go back into the past, why not do fish, which were there three hundred million years ago?’” He was only half joking for on another occasion he speculated “that the primitive beginnings of architecture come from zoomorphic yearnings and skeletal images.”

It is unlikely he was proposing a zoomorphic school of design although there are some respectable zoomorphic buildings built in this

century: Antoni Gaudi's Battlo House in Barcelona (Gaudi is frequently mentioned in relation to Gehry), Eero Saarinen's bird-shaped TWA terminal at Kennedy Airport in New York, and, more recently, Jean Nouvel's Harbour Exposition Center in Rotterdam and his Vinci Conference Center in Tours, both whalelike. Le Corbusier's Notre-Dame-du-Haut chapel in Ronchamp has a roof shaped like a conch. Still, zoomorphism is a minor rill in the modern architectural stream.

The Ronchamp chapel is one of the most beautiful buildings of this era and a site of pilgrimage (which relates it to Krens's aspirations for the Bilbao museum). But Le Corbusier led the mainstream movement to an ever more purified geometrism and his *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles for instance, though its proportions are based on the Modulor's natural scale, never mimics nature. Wright's Falling Water does not resemble a waterfall; on the contrary, it incorporates its waterfall in a design whose strict rectangles bring it inside the house's perimeter to serve its architectural vision. The wavelike facade of Alvar Aalto's Baker House at MIT is a theoretical allusion to the Charles. The shells making up the Sydney Opera House (the Bilbao museum is constantly compared to it and Krens asked specifically for a building that would be equally innovative) come closer perhaps to imitation but only so far as to embody the shell concept, hardly the irregular reality of shells on the beach. Gehry's structure looks enough like a fish to flesh out a dispute with those who see it instead as a boat. So that, even if its weirdness is a matter of surfaces, the incomprehensibility of Gehry's building goes deep; it may not be a wolf but it is not a sheep either.

A few days after returning from Bilbao, I was in the courtyard of the Louvre and realized that I had just travelled to two ends of the world of modern architecture. I. M. Pei's pyramid is the antithesis of Gehry's museum. Its form being instantly grasped, the surprise passes quickly and instead, even on the first visit, there is a sense of recognition. Not itself a building but only the threshold to a building, the pyramid is also liminally incarnate: its glass triangles embody their form only enough to make it visible. This may be all that is needed, for the prestige of the triangle gives even this transparency authority over the solid stone quadrangle it mirrors and refracts. In the middle of the old

courtyard, the pyramid seems to offer an explication of architectural form across the centuries. There is a definitiveness to the geometry of palace and pyramid that makes sitting on the low wall around the pyramid's reflecting pool particularly restful.

The Bilbao museum induces continual motion. Since the form is almost impossible to fix in one's mind, its contemplation is a restless business and even the surroundings seem swept up in an eddy of shifting shapes. Gehry's notion that a building ought to express movement is no doubt involved here but movement doesn't require this radical irregularity in which no two pieces composing the surface are identical. Gothic and baroque geometries can pulse with energy but the energy is directed or at least channeled; even when it aspires to infinity, it flows within and toward predictable ends. But the eye doesn't foresee the ends of Gehry's organic shapes. They are undecidable in their lifelikeness; there is possibly a whiff of blasphemy in the zoomorphism of Gehry's cathedral.

His advice to postmodernists to "do fish" rather than Greek temples, pointless when directed to them since they want to engage with an architectural tradition, makes sense in relation to the Bilbao Guggenheim where Gehry tried to compose in a natural idiom without transposing it into Pythagorean. It is not harmony with nature he sought; his business was with cities and industry. Beyond that, the search for harmony presupposes division, and in this building, the division between nature and architecture doesn't seem abrogated (Gehry doesn't think a building is a tree) but unimportant. Stonehenge's vertical defiance of the horizontal field around it challenges nature. Gehry's fish is not a challenge; it is simply his fish that he has made of titanium because he does not work in flesh. With the division between nature and culture attenuated, so is the one between organic and invented shapes. Gehry has not so much abandoned geometry in the Bilbao museum as stopped caring about it: if geometry is the grammar of architecture, the Bilbao museum is a tangle of incomplete sentences, dangling modifiers, and crossed tenses. But Emerson would have approved: nature should be one's grammarian, not convention.

It was almost two centuries ago that Emerson thought one should pattern one's creations on nature, and with the accelerating rate of technological evolution, it might as well be four. An architect making a building he himself cannot see whole without the aid of a computer while imagining that he was copying nature seems unlikely. But of course Gehry does not think that when, as he puts it, he does fish, he is following nature directly; he is being an artist. Gaudi, Le Corbusier, Wright (to take three architects often cited as Gehry's precursors) represent the modern enlargement of the architectural mission to include a political dimension. They were each in their way utopians. Not Gehry; indeed his turn toward art can be seen as anti-utopian: as pragmatic rather than visionary. Gehry wants to rebuild the world according to an image but not a system.

The fish-shape is more than an aesthetic opportunity but less than a cosmic scheme. It embodies a conception of self-sufficient and at the same time globally effective creativity; the connection between fish and both the beginning of time and the origin of life (in his own biography and in the history of the race) attests to this conception without extending it into a philosophical program. Similarly Gehry's relation to technology, in contrast, say, to the relation of the Bauhaus to the machine, is personally empowering but does not engage him in a world view. The computer that is enabling him to replace geometric abstraction with zoomorphism has simply made Gehry, in his words, "once more the master builder." "Once more" because the technology had developed beyond the control of an individual builder and now he has regained mastery. The technology remains as powerful or more, but he has become still more so. This makes him a new sort of master builder who needn't, in conceiving his buildings, stay within his own limits. He can build what he envisions and not only what he can see. It does not occur to him to build what on their part either the technology or the times project.

Wielding CATIA, then, Gehry sculpted the Bilbao museum as Serra did the *Serpent*. He did not incorporate sculpture into the building, as he had several years earlier when he used a rendition of Olden-

burg and van Bruggen's *Binoculars* for the entrance to the Chiat/Day office building in Venice, California. In that arrangement, the sculpture, unperturbed by the swinging doors that have been installed between its lenses, has all the good lines and takes the building as straight-man. Gehry didn't repeat this error: Koons's big Puppy sits at a distance from the Guggenheim warming up the audience for the main attraction; in Bilbao, the building itself is the sculpture. This makes much clearer Gehry's ambition to treat architecture as art; except that the relation of art and architecture itself remains far from clear.

Wright's Guggenheim opened empty and was its own first exposition. But could it have stayed empty? Falling Water is an exposition, as is Versailles, though they became expositions only after being inhabited: they didn't start empty but were emptied. I went to Bilbao to see the building: why should that not be an exclusive end, like the Vermeers at The Hague? The artistic status of architecture has been disputed for as long as it's been recognized. The question is not whether architecture is an art, obviously, but whether it is a fine art. In April of 1998, in Marfa, Texas, the Chinati Foundation held a conference about architecture and art. Several speakers hailed the triumph of Gehry's just-opened museum as signalling the end of the distinction between buildings and sculptures, or its demotion into a distinction without a difference. But there were artists as well as architects in attendance and some of the artists seem to have hesitated. Notably, Oldenburg remarked (loudly enough to be heard by the press) that art has neither windows nor toilets.

Fresh from Bilbao and dazzled by the vision of an architecture apparently unbound from its own necessities, I read the newspaper accounts and was much struck by Oldenburg's invocation of windows and toilets, these being code for the recognition of necessity. The great architectural theorist of the nineteenth century, Viollet-le-Duc, would have approved Oldenburg's quip: for an architect, Viollet-le-Duc stipulated, "purely artistic questions of . . . apparent form are only secondary conditions." The Bilbao Guggenheim embodies an opposite view.

Actually, in elite architecture circles, artistic issues have been primary conditions for some time. Fifteen years ago, I taught on a campus

which was an architectural showcase. Philip Johnson had been the supervising architect but the humanities building in which I had my office was by Robert Venturi. The architect, I learned later, thought of this building as an amusing copy of a 1940s high school but no one I knew was amused. In our experience this was a 1940s high school, only modified to add a few additional torments. A major one was the central staircase which set off in the direction of the exit at its foot but, four or five stairs from the bottom, veered 180 degrees to the right so that one now descended heading away from the door and, at the bottom, had to turn around and retrace a distance about half the length of the staircase in order to arrive at the point it would have reached had it gone straight forward.

The U-turn in the staircase was bounded by a low granite wall that one was each time tempted to vault, had its wide rounded top not made any foothold precarious. So, willy-nilly, we walked downstairs as the building directed, but I often wondered whether Mr. Venturi had thought about the possible effect of enforcing detours on the occupants' appreciation of his design; even whether, intent on imagining the form of the staircase, he had imagined occupants at all. But of course he had: the militancy emanating from declarations that architecture is art only expresses everyone's recognition that, however primary their artistic goals, architects can never entirely ignore the practical. It occurred to me, teaching literature on my showcase campus, that the practices of architecture and of language have a basic element in common: at their most aesthetic, both retain an irreducible necessary functionalism. Even writing *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce had to convey a cognitive message; the building Gehry made for the Fishdance restaurant had to keep out the rain.

Gehry has no ambivalence about his responsibility to keep out the rain. Pointing to the moment in his designing of the Bilbao museum when he passed from artist to architect ("in the . . . sketch, it was great, it was exciting, and then I became Mr. Architect"), he clearly finds it half the fun of the job. Unlike Frank Lloyd Wright with the first Guggenheim, Gehry was anxious that the second accommodate its tasks as an art museum. It is odd, therefore, that he nowhere ponders a relation

between the dual aspects of architecture. He has often spoken about his commitment to serve both beauty and utility but nothing that I could find about possible interactions between them. No doubt it is the bias of one whose primary example of the beautiful and the useful has been literature that makes me wonder at this silence on the link between them. Still, it is striking: Gehry embraces architectural necessity and pursues architectural beauty on parallel paths. The fact that to get his building built, he has to straddle the paths does not seem to inspire him to consider how they might be connected. He may even be thinking the contrary, that in making the museum useful, he is abandoning some portion of his artistic ambition. He makes this concession voluntarily and even gladly, but it is a compromise between distinct purposes. In other words, if, due to his conscientiousness, the architect's museum turns out to work well for artists and visitors, this is pleasant but not essential.

In literature at least, the relation between the beautiful and the useful works differently: a poetic phrase is beautiful and precise in the same breath. The beautiful and the precise are not identical but they are reciprocal, and reading Wallace Stevens or Flaubert, it seems obvious that the aesthetic is a way of knowing. The equivalent principle in architecture would make the aesthetic a way of building true to function. Observing, as many have observed, that there is a certain disjuncture between outside and inside in Gehry's building, I wondered whether he were not proving this principle in the breach. Other than the long gallery whose form and function fuse into a figure as evident from within the museum as from without, the rooms and the overall floorplan are difficult to fit into one's exterior vision of the building. And the same difficulty arises in reverse. The story is repeatedly told that Gehry asked his artist friends how they wanted him to design the museum. They told him to build an architect's building that would be in its way as strong and important as their art. Yet for all the good will on both sides, there is this odd disjuncture between the inside of the building, where the art is, and the outside where the architecture is.

In fact, the disjuncture arose out of the good will. Wright's Guggenheim building, careless of art, is an organic whole, expressing

the architect's artistic/architectural vision unmitigated by any of the artist's vision. Gehry's Guggenheim is a building divided between its architect's vision and the vision of the art it houses. Had Flaubert tried to write someone else's ideas in his prose he would have had the same unresolvable problem as Gehry. Gehry has several times cooperated with artists on architectural sketches but these never became architecture and Gehry never became Mr. Architect but remained an artist sketching. When he collaborated with Serra he drew one pylon and Serra the other; in Bilbao, Gehry designed a roof in the form of a flower whose function was to keep the rain off Serra's sculpture.

This was a task destined for disjuncture: as a fine art, architecture becomes primarily a means of individual expression. For the architectural artist, construction's utilitarian aspect is extraneous since it is not he who will make use of it but the sculptors and painters the museum exhibits. As an individual artist, he sculpts a shape in an assortment of materials; the building's windows and toilets are outside this process, "pro bono" work for the community of artists and visitors. I proposed earlier that Gehry's choice of Notre Dame to represent a generically important building by which an architect shapes a city occludes the most important feature of the building of Notre Dame, that no single architect was responsible nor expressed himself therein. While, in this century, it is almost impossible to imagine an act of creation that is not individual, Gehry's inattention to the difference between himself as a singular artist responsible for his project from start to finish, and the builders of Notre Dame has produced a problem reflected not only in the disjuncture of the building's inside and outside but in a set of incongruities of size, material, and outline that combine to impart its spaceship look. Disjuncture (incongruity, even incoherence) is not inherently displeasing; and in this instance it is distinctly attractive: enlivening, energizing. It is a feature rather than a flaw, but a significant feature and moreover one which may point to a flaw in its context.

The flaw would not be in the building but in ourselves, in an ideology that exceeds classic individualism by casting the individual as not only self-sufficient but culture-sufficient. Gehry is not just an individual master builder; he designs indivisibly as an individual and as an

incarnation of his culture (North American–Jewish–Los Angeles). Culturally as well as personally global, this individual has only voluntary relations to others. Roofs, windows, and toilets acknowledge that architecture erects its structures for others to inhabit. But the community, in the current cultural thinking, has been internalized: it has become an aspect of selfhood, of individual identity. Actual roofs, windows, and toilets are then without personal significance to the architect and extraneous to his art. The disjunctions, in the Bilbao Guggenheim, between function and form (between inside and out) flow from the paradox that the museum's communal function is fulfilled by the form its architect/artist has designed to reflect his personal cultural-sufficiency. The Bauhaus architects aspired to social reform by inserting their buildings into a political matrix extending beyond them; Gehry, though by all accounts an affable man with a social conscience and no megalomaniac, has absorbed all the relevant politics (history, culture) into his building. It is not just his building, though it is exclusively his; it is also inclusively a whole cultural program.

This sufficiency, however, has engendered another major disjunction, this one in respect to the building's function not as a museum of art but as an element in the reconstruction of the city of Bilbao. There is little in the structure, on the walls or in the galleries of Gehry's Guggenheim, to identify it as a Basque institution; but this could change. The more intransigent problem lies in the ideology of multiculturalism that informs everything about the Guggenheim, starting with its aesthetic character and extending through its artistic program to its institutional identity and organization. The projection of individual cultural self-sufficiency at the center of this ideology is inimical to the Basque city's cultural nationalism which envisions neither transportability nor personal wholeness but exactly their opposites: a way of being that is locally fixed and specifically delimited. To do the job for which the Basque administration of Bilbao intends it, the new museum would need to project a definition of both art and architecture as the creations not of culture-sufficient individuals but of persons for whom their cultures are sufficient.



My first amazement on seeing the Bilbao museum never abated but rather deepened with the conviction that its exoticism reacts to very familiar issues. In the hypermodern American building standing proud and incongruous on its historic Basque site, two major disjunctions of recent years seem to have materialized: the first, at once aesthetic and epistemological, is the disjunction of form and function that has rendered form freely expressive but also vertiginously arbitrary. The second disjunction is the political opposition between multiculturalism and cultural nationalism, or between the transnationalism of the rich and the localism of the poor. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao absolutely merits the pilgrimage Krens envisages, though not, as to a medieval cathedral, in order to recover a sense of global unity in a catholic God. Frank Gehry's church of art, brilliantly prophesying the gospel that is closing the second millennium, celebrates schism: to each era its message.