

Challenging the seductions of the Bilbao Guggenheim

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Abstract

The seductive qualities of the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao are usually attributed to its technological and aesthetic sophistication and its striking presence. Hardly less seductive, however, in the view of Basque cultural critic Joseba Zulaika, were the tactics employed by the Guggenheim's director, Thomas Krens, in the conception and planning of the museum. The article looks briefly at some of the challenges to each of these forms of seduction, before concluding that, six years on, the challenges and seductions of the project remain very finely balanced.

Picture this. On the banks of the Nervión a cluster of bright, metallic petals is opening onto the city's flower-heart; glistening boats and giant leaping fish are poised beside the water; a spaceship hums in a dark landscape. Spaceship, boat, fish and flower, these epithets have all been applied to Bilbao's spectacularly seductive Guggenheim Museum. They do not describe its appearance, however, so much as conjure the visual impact of 'una de las grandes obras arquitectónicas de este siglo': 'a viscous steel dragon [... an] incredible urban presence [...] an explosion of light, a starburst of energy, unstoppable white larva, overlapping waves [...] silvery eruptions', '[una] catedral de titanio [...] tan nuev[a,] [...] tan irreal [...] que pronuncia palabras de otros mundos'.¹ Now picture this:

El Museo Guggenheim Bilbao está [...] compuesto de una serie de volúmenes interconectados, unos de forma ortogonal recubiertos de piedra caliza, y otros curvados y retorcidos, cubiertos por una piel metálica de titanio. [...] Debido a su complejidad matemática, las sinuosas curvas de piedra, cristal y titanio han sido diseñados por ordenador. Los muros-cortina de cristal han sido tratados especialmente para que la luz natural no dañe las obras, mientras que los paneles metálicos que recubren a modo de 'escamas de pez' gran parte de la estructura son láminas de titanio de medio milímetro de espesor, material que presenta unas magníficas condiciones de mantenimiento y preservación. En su conjunto, el diseño de [] [arquitecto Frank] Gehry crea una estructura singular, espectacular y enormemente visible.²

Complexly sinuous, minutely mathematical, visually compelling; like its spectacular presence *in situ*, the museum's technological-aesthetic sophistication is at the heart of its much-debated 'seducción'. In his influential study of the Bilbao Guggenheim's genesis, however, Joseba Zulaika applies the term not to the impact or design of the museum but to the tactics used in its conception and planning by the Guggenheim Foundation's director, Thomas Krens.³ In

Keywords

Guggenheim Museum
Bilbao
Basque culture
Basque economy

- 1 Marisol Guisasaola, 'Paseo por el espacio urbano del 2000', *Geo*, 1998, pp. 34-46, p. 34; Charles Jencks, *Ecstatic Architecture: The Surprising Link*, London: Academy Editions/John Wiley, 1999, pp. 167-68; Jon Kortázar, 'En la catedral de titanio', *Geo*, special edition no. 2, 1998, pp. 64-68, p. 64.
- 2 <http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es.caste/edificio/contenido.htm>, p. 1, accessed 30 August 2003.
- 3 Joseba Zulaika, *Crónica de una seducción: El Museo Guggenheim Bilbao*, Madrid: Nerea, 1997.

- 4 José Antonio Ardanza, 'Cuando los proyectos se hacen realidad', *Geo*, 1998, p. 5.
- 5 Ardanza, *ibid.*
- 6 Coosje Van Bruggen, *Frank O. Gehry. Museo Guggenheim Bilbao*, New York/ Bilbao: Museo Guggenheim, 1999 (1st edn. 1997), p. 29; Philippe Jodidio, 'De Venise a Bilbao: interview with Thomas Krens', *Connaissance des Arts*, special issue (Autumn 1999), pp. 12-22, p. 22; Thomas Krens, 'Prefacio' in Van Bruggen, pp. 9-14, p. 14.
- 7 Ardanza *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 8 Krens, cited in Zulaika, *op. cit.*, p. 232.
- 9 Zulaika, *op. cit.*, p. 295.
- 10 Jencks, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

the light of Zulaika's study, this article looks briefly at some of the challenges to each of these forms of seduction.

The Bilbao Guggenheim was challenged first as an assault on the region's history and culture. For the Basque administrations involved in the initial planning, the construction of the museum was the centrepiece of a project to transform the region's future – and to do so, in part, by transforming its past. José Antonio Ardanza has observed that the Basque Country in general 'y Bilbao, en particular, son lugares a los que durante mucho tiempo les ha estado vedado aparecer en los medios de comunicación con noticias que no guardaran relación con la violencia o la conflictividad'.⁴ The museum was designed to distract the attention of visitors and investors from 'nuestra realidad – crisis económica, desempleo, violencia', from eruptions of regional-nationalist energy and other tensions within the local and regional body politic.⁵ One aspect of this was the reconfiguring as heritage of the tragic legacy of the Civil War and an older history of dogged persistence under external oppression; if Basque history, prehistory and myth were traditionally rooted in the Gernika tree, the region's new dawn would be inaugurated by a non-organic and spectacularly visual icon.

It is, above all, this challenge to rootedness that has fascinated and alienated the museum's critics. For the Basque negotiators' desire for an architecturally striking building, one with a 'poderosa identidad icónica' able to 'vehicular l'identité d'une ville', has been achieved through a visual and verbal rhetoric that magnifies the museum's incongruous relation with local contexts in order to ensure its pre-eminence in international ones.⁶ As the Foundation's director has repeatedly observed, the Bilbao Guggenheim's appeal is not directed exclusively, nor even primarily, at the local collectivity which is financing it: the construction that has placed Bilbao so firmly 'en el mapa' is, in these respects, ageographic and deparicularized.⁷ This underlies the notorious 'efecto OVNI' or estrangement from its locale that has intensified the building's cultural and economic magnetism while debilitating regional and municipal integrationist discourses that cast the museum as one jewel in the fine Basque crown.

Nowhere are these tensions clearer than in Thomas Krens's conviction that 'este proyecto sólo triunfará donde existen débiles connotaciones culturales';⁸ any failure of the museum, he insisted, would be the fault not of the international Guggenheim Foundation but of nationalist sentiment among local franchise-holders.⁹ The now-banned separatist party Herri Batasuna was not the only nationalist grouping to see the Basque administrations' attempts to purge Basque history and cultural symbolism of its more atavistic features as a key stage in a process of economically-motivated cultural dilution. Despite the avowedly local and regional dimensions to its symbolism and styling, the radical party coincided with Krens in the view that 'the museum had little to do with "Basque culture", much less "Basque reality"', and with taxpayers critical of the project in their objections to financing what they saw as the 'imperial art of America'.¹⁰

Zulaika rather tritely reduces these objections to tensions between the local

and the global. The case is more complicated, however. Basque cultural producers bridled at being assigned the status of ‘merely local’ in relation to a self-styled international modernity that they saw as a local, if hegemonic, North-American one; but they were less ready to acknowledge how far some residents of their locales – usually, but not always, younger people – periodically collude or routinely identify with its potent vision of modernity. In common with many visitors, and with virtually all of its local advocates, these people tend to be seduced more by the architectural qualities of the museum than by its changing contents.¹¹ In the process they obliquely affirm the view of its Canadian architect Frank Gehry that architecture is art, and that the art and architecture of the museum are equally important. For Zulaika this is a key element of the building’s ‘compleja seducción’.¹² So, too, is Gehry’s discourse of democratic humanism and pluralism, his honesty, and his populism: contrary to the claims of some of its critics, he insists, the Bilbao Guggenheim was explicitly non-imperialist in its conception, and was even made of inexpensive materials.

The alignment of art, politics and economics evoked here motivated some of the most resonant challenges to the museum. The director of its Viceconsejería de Turismo is in no doubt that Bilbao’s reconversion, its emergence from ‘las cenizas de la industria pesada tradicional’ as a fully-formed tourist destination, would simply not have been possible without a ‘grand project’.¹³

La creación de una imagen positiva es la primera estrategia necesaria para el márketing turístico; con el museo Guggenheim hemos logrado pasar de una ciudad industrial, degradada, sin interés turístico a una imagen de ciudad moderna.¹⁴

This historic challenge represented a major economic gamble for the parties concerned.¹⁵

Arte y economía, un edificio emblemático para Bilbao y el fin de su decadencia urbana, la creación de las grandes conexiones internacionales y la expansión universal de lo vasco ... todo ello podía suceder si Nueva York y Bilbao [...] tenían el arrojo necesario para responder al reto que la circunstancia histórica les había deparado.¹⁶

For the Basque negotiators the museum project transcended politics and culture: it was an investment that will promote rapid progress and well-being in the region.¹⁷ It was designed to produce a newly optimistic micro-climate in which the region’s decaying infrastructure might be reconverted and re-motivated. Less clear, at first sight, is why the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation should put its authority, its experience of international cultural mediation and management and other more tangible resources behind such a project: a project based, as its director was only too aware, in ‘cette ville [qui] n’était certainement pas le centre de la vie culturelle espagnole’.¹⁸ Spain’s

- 11 See, for example, <http://geocities.com/colosseum/arena/8926opinion.htm>; Zulaika, op. cit., p. 239.
- 12 Zulaika, *ibid.*
- 13 Mercedes, <http://suse00.su.ehu.es/euskonews/0039zbk/gaia3909es.html>, pp. 1–2, p. 1, accessed 12 September 2003.
- 14 Rodríguez Larrauri, *ibid.*
- 15 Zulaika, op. cit., p. 111.
- 16 Zulaika, *ibid.*
- 17 Zulaika, op. cit., p. 289.
- 18 Krens, op. cit., p. 14.

- 19 Guisasaola, *ibid.*
- 20 María Gómez and Sara González, 'A reply to Beatriz Plaza's "The Guggenheim-Bilbao Museum effect"', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 25: 4 (December 2001), pp. 898-900, p. 898.
- 21 Krens, cited in Zulaika *op. cit.*, p. 283. The Bilbao Guggenheim has enhanced Gehry's reputation as a 'fine topographic interpreter: the clustered fish and boat forms that emerge from the landscape of the city's old port area, the melting of the Museum's reflective surface into its surroundings' (James Steele, *Architecture Today*, London: Phaidon, 1997, p. 402). Set in the context of Gehry's other work, however, where fish, boats and reflective forms recur obsessively, the specificity of his interpretation seems more limited.
- 22 Gómez and González, *op. cit.*, p. 899.
- 23 On this, and on the nationality and spending habits of these visitors, see Beatriz Plaza, 'Evaluating the influence of a large cultural artifact in the attraction of tourism: the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao case', *Urban Affairs Review*, 36: 2 (November 2000), pp. 264-74, p. 264; and Gómez and González, *ibid.*
- 24 See Rodríguez Larrauri, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

increasingly chic profile in the United States and Europe was a factor in this move to the supposed periphery but it was not the most pressing. Financial pressures linked to reductions in US government support for culture, and increasing competition for private-sector sponsors, were leading the Guggenheim to seek to exploit its collection more fully. Globalizing economic and cultural forces and the growth of cultural tourism were also making international diversification increasingly desirable. At the point in 1991 when discussions with the Basque negotiators began, however, Guggenheim projects in Venice, Salzburg and Japan were already held up by difficulties in finding sufficiently large sites or in securing what were seen as the necessary political and economic guarantees. It was at this point that Thomas Krens, the Foundation's director, was approached by representatives of the Basque administrations and, after initial reservations, was won over by the massive investment of capital and energy they were prepared to make in the proposed project.

But how do these aspirational abstractions, these appeals to 'el progreso y bienestar', mesh with the cultural and economic polarization highlighted and, in some instances, exacerbated by the spectacular presence, for example, with the actual, material needs of the unemployed in as yet ungalvanized and unmodernized areas of the city? The mantra used to bridge this gap and to legitimate the sheer scale of the investment in the museum and other major architectural projects in Bilbao – Calatrava's Zubizuri bridge, for example, the airport, Foster's metro stations – is 'la cultura, motor de la vida económica'.¹⁹ But the logic of this equation – and in particular the assumption that a rhetorically inflated and consumer-oriented construction can generate broader socio-economic change – remains to be demonstrated. For the construction of 'urban flagships' in contexts of economic decline is not without risk.²⁰ Their impact, and especially 'la seducción de [su] incongruencia', tends to wane over time, especially if undermined by replication.²¹ In the Bilbao case, following the museum's official opening in October 1997 the city's tourist figures grew well above the most optimistic predictions of consultancy firm KPMG – though it remains unclear how much of this growth was attributable to the ETA ceasefire.²² Within less than a year, however, the number of individuals visiting Bilbao primarily to see the museum had fallen significantly. The precise extent of this fall, like the broader financial benefits to Bilbao of the museum's operation, is not easy to establish. In a report commissioned for the museum, for example, KPMG estimated that it had generated a net inflow of tourists of 97,525 during June/July 1998, while academic evaluations of this estimate suggest a figure closer to 35,600.²³ Despite this major divergence, KPMG's data continue to be used uncritically in municipal publications.²⁴ This preference for optimistic performance statistics over more measured and academically sustainable ones reflects the perceived role of confidence in maintaining the museum's appeal to visitors and business sponsors, while tending to increase cynicism among its critics. A more recent and equally upbeat consultants' report, commissioned by the museum to mark the fifth anniversary of its opening,

estimates that its broader economic impact over this period has been equivalent to ten times the initial investment made in its construction.²⁵ Despite the enlarged network of corporate supporters and sponsors, however, there is little clear evidence so far of the increased economic activity in the form of advanced services that the museum was designed to attract.

But perhaps the most vocal challenge (in and outside of the Basque Country) to the museum's articulation of economic and cultural objectives comes from critics of 'McDonaldization'. The label 'McGuggenheim' has been used to evoke both the project's combination of cultural and politico-economic objectives and the tendency of grand cultural projects more generally to 'homogenize place', to repeat standard architectural devices and thereby promote uniformity and convergence.²⁶ Architectural critic Diane Ghirardi has linked the worldwide rise of large-scale cultural centres to specific economic factors: the high market value of art, for example, new types and sources of financing, tax laws, and the ebb and flow of international tourism.²⁷ These factors, she suggests (echoing Fredric Jameson),²⁸ are reflected in architectural features that recall shopping malls and theme parks. This is obliquely reinforced by Charles Jencks, a close friend of Frank Gehry and one of the museum's most ardent admirers. In his view, the building's allure derives precisely from its ecstatic celebration of architecture for architecture's sake, from the predominance of narcissistic pleasure in its impact. The ecstatic or disoriented state Jencks describes, in which spectators' rational judgement is momentarily suspended, has affinities with the excitation which (as Beatriz Sarlo notes) is conjured up through mirrors and false perspectives in the design of shopping malls.²⁹ That is, a certain economic rationality, expressed in the architectural environment, actively encourages consumer irrationality and aligns what is widely represented as one of the world's finest cultural centres with commercial centres.

It is against this background that Zulaika wonders whether the museum's conception was informed by an understanding of culture as sensitive to the laws of the market – as Thomas Krens insists – or at the service of the market. For Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza the case is clear enough: the cultural dimension of the Bilbao Guggenheim is 'un mero engranaje de un estética comercial cuyo objetivo es sencillamente vender más y hacer más negocio'.³⁰ Zulaika levels his own more nuanced criticism at 'la cosificación intrínseca del arte como mercancía' found in Krens's pronouncements 'y su enmascaramiento con un discurso trascendente'.³¹ The discourse in question is that of the free market, extended uncritically to culture – 'es ridículo mencionar intereses nacionalistas en temas que tienen que ver con el libre intercambio de la cultura'³² – in terms designed, once again, to weaken important aspects of the building's association with its locale. That certain actors are manifestly more 'libre' than others is a truism of such 'intercambio'; although this need not mean in practice that weaker parties are simply prey to the stronger. For example, Oteiza and other local producers argue, rightly, that regional cultural policy has been skewed as funds that might have supported new artistic projects have been diverted to the museum; yet they too have unquestionably

- 25 Juan de Garay, http://www.juandegaray.org.ar/fvbjg/docs/Efecto_economico_del_Museo_Guggenheim, accessed 12 September 2003.
- 26 Gómez and González, op. cit., p.899. Gómez and González, *ibid.*
- 27 Diane Ghirardi, *Architecture after Modernism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- 28 Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *New Left Review*, 146 (July/August 1984), pp. 53-92.
- 29 Beatriz Sarlo, *Escenas de la vida posmoderna*, Buenos Aires: Ariel, 1994, pp. 13-23.
- 30 Cited in Zulaika, op. cit., p. 275.
- 31 Zulaika, op. cit., p. 301.
- 32 Cited in Zulaika, op. cit., p. 222.

- 33 Baudrillard, cited in Zulaika, op. cit., p. 72.
- 34 Zulaika, op. cit., p. 71.
- 35 Zulaika, op. cit., p. 73.
- 36 Zulaika, op. cit. pp. 69, 71.
- 37 Zulaika, op. cit. p. 169.

benefited, albeit incidentally, from the new visibility and new audiences it has attracted. Here and elsewhere, what weakens the challenges levelled by many of its critics against the museum is their failure fully to acknowledge its successes (however ambivalent) and its seductions.

The last seduction, and the last challenge, to be discussed here are the ones that, more than any other, mesmerize Joseba Zulaika. They are the ones that, in his account, underpin the negotiating strategy of the Guggenheim Foundation's director through the initial stages of the museum's conception and construction. Zulaika places the terms in a postmodern frame in order to formulate his own nuanced and idiosyncratic assessment of the limits and possibilities of local responses to globalizing cultural and economic forces. Zulaika derives his definitions of seduction and challenge from French cultural critic Jean Baudrillard, for whom:

[el] desafío [consiste en] llevar al otro al terreno de tu propia fuerza [...] con el objeto de una sobrepuja ilimitada, mientras que la estrategia de la seducción consiste en llevar al otro al terreno de tu propia debilidad [...]. Debilidad calculada, debilidad incalculable: reto al otro o dejarse atrapar.³³

As glossed by Zulaika, seduction denotes a weakness exploited tactically: 'estoy aquí si es que me quieres llevar'.³⁴ Challenges, by contrast, are issued from a position of assumed strength: 'voy a llevarte a mi terreno porque te puedo'.³⁵ Seduction for Baudrillard is equated with an absence of profundity, and an emptying out of truth and power, qualities that echo in now-familiar critiques of the Bilbao Guggenheim as glittering, alien and artificial. But outside of postmodern theoretical speculations and polarizations power is less easily evacuated. Around the time negotiations for the project began, a certain economic and cultural globalization – including the growth of cultural tourism – were making international diversification increasingly desirable and increasingly difficult for the Foundation. This climate demanded particular qualities of its lead negotiator, whom Zulaika compares with Don Juan: '[Krens no es] un frío calculador maquiavélico [sino] un jugador [...] que no teme a la apuesta y que para ello [...] tiene dos pelotas de bronce'.³⁶ As noted, however, this Don Juan had seen his potency decline at home as a result of financial pressures and increasing competition; a series of foreign suitors had rejected his advances before the Basque approach. When Krens characterizes himself as not only 'un seductor profesional' but as 'la mayor puta del mundo', therefore, he shrewdly makes no reference to the outcomes of his suits.³⁷

But despite this personalization, in which Zulaika colludes, the desire Krens seeks to produce in his collaborators is not for himself but for his project; and this makes him not a suitor, nor even a 'puta', but a procurer – for which there are other, less desirable, Spanish precedents. In ways that recall traditional Basque self-representations more than Zulaika's Don Juan model, this procurer is himself initially seduced by the Basque negotiators:

a Krens le encantó que los vascos que le recibieron, todo ellos hombres, por supuesto, adoptasen la forma masculina de la seducción, que se creyeran dueños de los riesgos y destinos de su pueblo, que manifestaran la postura desafiante de reto y valentía.³⁸

Yet as Zulaika's study draws to a close the distinction between 'la seducción[,] [que] representa el dominio del universo simbólico' and 'el poder[,] [que] representa [...] el dominio del universo real' is increasingly foregrounded.³⁹ And, as he finally concedes, 'cuando [la seducción] es impuesta ya no hay seducción'.⁴⁰ From the globalizing perspective that energizes Krens and his Foundation, all territory is in principle home ground and all negotiation strategic, rather than tactical. But possessing 'dos pelotas de bronce' speaks more of Krens's boldness, his readiness to take risks, than of his power to seduce or challenge. Seduced by the energy and finance that Basque negotiators were ready to invest in the project he colluded in its presentation as '[el] reto [...] históric[o]' that the Basque Country needed. From their two very different perspectives the museum was, above all, a challenge to a traditional, rooted, understanding of Basque history and culture in the name of a more seductive and globally resonant vision of the future: a future in which cultural objectives shade into economic ones.

Six years after its opening, the seductions and challenges of the museum are less hotly contested but still finely balanced, with all but its most glib advocates acknowledging some ambivalence about the outcome of that wager. For many residents the Bilbao Guggenheim remains 'un garaje demasiado lujoso, para coches que poca gente entiende', yet one which, in the words of the city's Director of Tourism has nevertheless been able to produce 'un efecto en la percepción que los propios bilbaínos/as y vascos/as teníamos sobre Bilbao, haciendo que los ciudadanos/as se sientan orgullosas de su ciudad'.⁴¹ In the unofficial and less resolutely upbeat assessment of another resident, this 'buque insignia de la política que pretende hacer de Bilbo una ciudad de servicios [sin embargo] sirve para que los vasquitos dejemos de mirarnos el ombligo y nos proyectemos al mundo, dando otra impresión'.⁴²

38 Zulaika, op. cit. p. 73.

39 Baudrillard, cited in Zulaika, op. cit., p. 80.

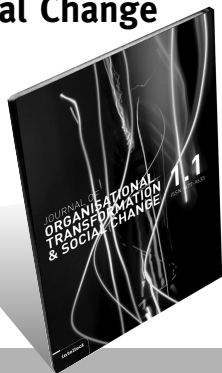
40 Zulaika, op. cit., p. 239.

41 Gorka Esnal, at <http://geocities.com/colosseum/arena/8926/opinion.htm>, accessed 12 September 2003. Rodríguez Larrauri, op. cit., p. 1.

42 Oscar Maras, at <http://geocities.com/colosseum/arena/8926/opinion.htm>, accessed 12 September 2003.

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ISSN 1368-2679

3 nos/vol (Vol. 7, 2004)

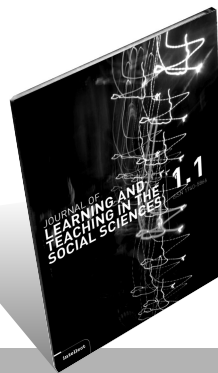
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ISSN 1740-5866

3 nos/vol (Vol. 1, 2004)

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