

ARTICLE

Reviewing the “Bilbao effect” inside and beyond the Guggenheim: Its coming of age in sprawling cultural landscapes

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Abstract

Invented by journalists, the “Bilbao effect” label has no clear meaning, but it undoubtedly refers to outwardly radiating waves of influence beyond the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Its architecture and urban impact, with trickle down economic returns, has drawn international attention and many emulators. Its museological novelties have inspired great changes in Spanish museums and in Basque cultural policies. However, the external effect of this institution beyond its headquarters should be tracked most particularly along the Abandoibarra district, which is now a thriving curatorial landscape, typifying an outdoors version of Svetlana Alpers's “museum effect.” Are we experiencing a paradigm shift? Outliving all sort of setbacks, the epitome of postmodern museums remains faithful to itself and new kinds of cultural clusters are being promoted beyond it. The current climate crisis has called into question previous assumptions of success based on massive international tourism, which is perhaps unsustainable. But the cultural district of Bilbao is booming and expanding down the Nervión river.

KEYWORDS

25 years, art cluster, Bilbao, cultural districts, effect, Guggenheim, modern/contemporary art, museums

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inauguration in 1997, and even before, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao has been a media phenomenon. At only 5 years of age, it had more than a hundred million references in the international press, which by the end of its first decade amounted to over 10,000 articles, more than 60% corresponding to journals published outside Spain, with a remarkable coverage from New York newspapers, which have always had a beady eye on it (Del Cerro, 2006: 102–103; Plaza et al., 2021: 60–61). The mass media acclaimed its “effect,” a keyword ubiquitous in the ever-growing academic bibliography, including notable books specifically devoted to this museum, its architecture and urban impact (Esteban, 2000, 2007; Faires, 2007; Frías Sagardoy, 2001; Guasch & Zulaika, 2005; Merino González, 2003; Tellitu et al., 1997; Zulaika, 1997, 2003). A general consensus assumed by these studies acknowledges that the urban renaissance of the Basque city was the result of multiple investments, not a “miracle” generated by the museum, which simply landed as the seductive icing on the cake. So it is not surprising that other cities have not succeeded in their attempts to emulate the “Bilbao effect,” fervently invoked with no clear idea of its meaning (Bernard, 2015: 36; Del Cerro Santamaría, 2020; Wouters, 2022). Strictly speaking, that designation should be used to refer to what the museum has certainly generated: public attention. From the beginning it has been in the crosshairs of many people, including the terrorist organization ETA, which committed a bloody attack on the eve of the inauguration.¹ Possibly no other museum has ever provoked so many reactions, enthusiastic or hostile, which are still stirring the waters. The bulging accounts of visitors and their economic return fueled a joyous triumphalism for decades, reversed by the 2020 pandemic. In times of climate crisis previous assumptions of museums' prosperity based on massive international tourism seem perhaps unsustainable from socio-environmental points of view. Are we experiencing a paradigm shift?

FROM ECONOMIC TURNOVERS TO CULTURAL BILBAINE APPRAISALS

Measuring the “effect” of the Guggenheim in Bilbao with economic return figures was as perverse as evaluating the achievements of a hospital not by its health services, but according to the restaurants, hotels or other businesses flourishing nearby. In the urban reality of the new millennium the time was ripe for setting more appropriate academic criteria. That claim even found its way among economists. Professor Beatriz Plaza Inchausti, a very influential author in this field, signed groundbreaking articles that propose reconsidering the “Bilbao effect” from the local art scene point of view (Plaza, 2007; see also Plaza et al., 2009).² She offered data and positive assessments about increasing cultural consumption in the city and the region, with the ensuing benefit of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Bilbao and other museums, or even in commercial art galleries, some of which have moved closer to Abandoibarra.

This new name given to the Nervión waterfront area formerly called *Campa de los Ingleses*, which used to be the British cemetery before the proliferation of shipyards, railways, and warehouses, designates with a sonorous Basque label a cosmopolitan district, where the dazzling world-famous museum is surrounded by cultural amenities and other establishments whose architecture and interior design have been commissioned from architects and creators across the universe (Vidarte, 2007). But precisely this sumptuous gentrification has alienated native artists and their closest venues, which concentrate mostly in the old town, the “Bilbao la Vieja” neighborhood or further cultural outskirts, well studied by Oihane Sánchez Duro, the author of a doctoral thesis on contemporary art practices in the Basque Country, who has demonstrated the rather scarce connections of the Bilbao art system with the Guggenheim (Sánchez Duro, 2018).

The dissonance dates back to the first arrangements for the North American institution in Bilbao, when the strongest opposition came from some Basque artists, led above all by sculptor Jorge Oteiza (Arruti, 2004). Little by little, the museum team, headed by Bilbao-born director Juan Ignacio Vidarte, smoothed things over with the most prominent authors through acquisitions and solo shows starring Cristina Iglesias in 1998, Eduardo Chillida in 1999, Oteiza in 2004, Pello Irazu in 2017, and Esther Ferrer in 2018. Collective exhibitions of Basque art also have marked singular events, such as the tenth anniversary, but only 9% of the exhibitions programmed till 2022 included some representation of Basque artists, whose artworks account for 28.22% in the museum collection catalog (Caso, 2022). Furthermore, emerging local artists were the target of a competition held in 2012 to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the museum, where their projects ended up being displayed in the museum on the “Muro Guggenheim Bilbao,” a wall by the exit. Thus works by Basque artists have been intermittently showcased at the Guggenheim as part of occasional initiatives, looking for more community legitimation (Moya Valgañón, 2015). This has been sustained by a program of travel grants to New York for young artists born in and/or residents of the autonomous Basque region, the results of which have been displayed in a collective exhibition arranged for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the institution in summer 2022.

Alas, on the other hand, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has not yet established either professional dealings with local art galleries and exhibition centers or sustained collaborations with other Basque museums, apart from joint-ticket promotions with some of the closest venues, often advertised as a “Museum Triangle”: The BilbaoCard allows joint entrance to the Maritime Museum of the Bilbao Estuary, inaugurated in 2003 on the site of the Euskalduna shipyards, while the Artean Voucher pairs admission with the Guggenheim and the neighboring Museum of Fine Arts.³ The latter has certainly experienced a notable impulse and expansion in the last 25 years by practicing a vigilant benchmarking of the rival, among other things, to claim more funds and public support, also generously received by the San Telmo Museum in San Sebastian, the Artium Museum of Contemporary Art in Vitoria-Gasteiz, or other institutions of the Basque museum network (Arrieta Urtizbera et al., 2017). They always keep an eye on the star player, whose focus of attention is, on the other hand, always oriented toward New York.

This has fueled reproaches of colonialism, aired from the beginning by Basque grassroots musical, literary and artistic associations, whose subventions were drained to irrigate the parched finances of a highbrow foreign institution that, according to nationalist zealots, would make Bilbao a bridgehead of US cultural dominance (McNeill, 2000). It has not quite been the case but, to disappoint early supporters' initial expectations, New York is still retaining most of the Guggenheim collection stored, while the first alleged reason for expanding in multiple parts of the globe was to supposedly gain more visibility for its rich hoard of masterpieces. In fact its art treasures have barely rotated out of the metropolis after the inaugural exhibition, *The Guggenheim Museums and the Art of this Century*, a selection of 300 pieces spanning from modern avant-garde works by Picasso, Miró, Matisse, or Chagall to Pop Art, and finishing with examples by living artists. Instead, top-down orders constantly came from the New York headquarters, especially from 2005 to 2008, under the overall personal command of Thomas Krens, who treated the Guggenheim satellites as mere subsidiary branches.

Since its inception, the principle of authority and the assumption that control is exercised from above seems to have always been particularly embedded in the idiosyncrasies of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, conceived as a result of top-secret negotiations between power elites on both sides of the Atlantic, without consulting citizens. On the occasion of the museum's tenth anniversary, journalist Elena Vozmediano compellingly deplored constant schizophrenia between propaganda and secrecy in press kits, where detailed figures of numerical results could be found, whereas everything that refers to curatorial management would remain in the mist (Vozmediano, 2008: 6). According to her, millions of euros have been squandered

in art commissions or purchases based on more mercantile than curatorial criteria. Only those artists already consecrated and well placed in the market seem to interest the museum collection as a guarantee of investment, especially when they sign big expensive pieces, even if not necessarily great works of art. If there is an acquisition policy, it has not been publicized.

This reproach could also be applied to programming, because everything is remotely controlled from the highest levels to schedule mainly blockbuster exhibitions that attract sponsorships and large numbers of visitors. This is not a bad thing in itself, although some critics have rendered their garments in anger from seeing a “temple of art” converted into a showroom for motorcycles, Armani suits or other products of our consumer society (Werner, 2005: 37). Others think that the Guggenheim has paved the way for the development of audiences in Bilbao by audaciously expanding its field of action to all kinds of arts and artifacts, yet missed the opportunity to make the public think about what art is (Moxey, 2005). No museological debate was launched on the occasion of crowd-pulling shows that marked milestones in the history of the Guggenheim in both Bilbao and New York, whose contents were not proper of a supposed museum of modern and contemporary art: five thousand years of Chinese art, eight centuries of Russian art, the Aztec empire, Michelangelo, Rubens, etc. (Figure 1). Perhaps it was another extravagance of the time of Thomas Krens, while those who have succeeded him at the helm seem to maintain a more orthodox course in accordance with the mission declared in the strategic plan.⁴ The problem is that, under the influence of the Guggenheim, local politicians and society at large have become used to measure the success of the Basque network of art venues by counting their visitors, and not necessarily valuing artistic originality or new findings; as a result, experimental artists' run spaces or other innovative venues have languished (Barcenilla, 2022).

Generally, some forms of authoritarian snobbery are deeply embedded in museums of modern and contemporary art, including the Guggenheim, whose reported superciliousness has



FIGURE 1 The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in 2002, when the Rubens exhibition was on show.

been compared to the way some religious hierarchies prescribe from above their precepts to faithful believers (Baniotopoulou, 2001: 11). Yet there are persuasive spaces for reflection interspersed in each exhibition, and even in the corridors between the rooms used for the permanent collection, with interpretive texts that challenge us with interrogations. A consolidated stratagem of critical museology imported from America, where many museums began in the late 1980s introducing sitting rooms for visitors to rest and read the catalog or other books related to the display (Staniszewski, 1995: 171–180); now it is common practice followed not only in Bilbao but in many museums across Spain. Current museological tendencies toward participatory approaches have also been introduced, albeit not always wholeheartedly. For example, while preparing the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the museum, its visitors were asked to decide which art intervention would adorn the La Salve bridge. They were given a choice among the three respective models created by Daniel Buren, Liam Gillick, and Jenny Holzer. Buren's *Arc Rouge*, whose white and red colors are those of the Bilbao football club, won that popular poll. But it actually only counted as one vote in the final decision, made by a majority of ballots reserved for representatives of political authorities and Guggenheim bosses, who always had the upper hand as the three contestants had been personally preselected by Thomas Krens in 2006: “pure democratic illusion” according to Iñaki Esteban (2007: 138).

Yet over the years, the Guggenheim Bilbao team has been gaining autonomy and influence, mainly because it has a specific budget and its own collection, supported by funds from Basque public authorities, plus fees paid by the numerous friends and visitors to the museum that, in times of bonanza, ensured no less than 70% self-financing. Today fewer tickets are sold than in the initial years, when there were around one million annual visits, a figure that slowly dropped when the pull of the novelty ended. Nevertheless, international tourists still continue to come in good numbers and, no less importantly, there are already more than 21,000 members of the Association of the Museum's Friends, the third largest in Europe after those of the Louvre and the Tate Gallery. Another positive indicator, most revealing of social support for the museum, is the loyalty of its corporate members; some 150 companies whose patronage is crucial for all kinds of museum activities, with which they are associated because it brings them prestige and profitable publicity, apart from obtaining free passes for their staff. It is not something very common in Spain, but rather a successful sociological importation of the *modus operandi* of North American private museums, such as those of the Guggenheim Foundation, which are very skilled at commodifying their glamour.⁵ However, not only the elites in the Basque socio-economic metropolis have always favored this public-private/Basque-American museum, which has gained strong public backing in the territory, especially among citizens of Bilbao and its conurbation, who are mostly very proud of their “Guggy,” even if they do not visit it often (Arrieta Urtizberea & Díaz Balerdi, 2022). It has become a revered local icon, the most popular place to pose for photographs, cherished not only by tourists, but also by local citizens during wedding celebrations or other family events.

Many of them would be shocked if they were aware of the museum doggedness to control its image in the public sphere. In democratic countries, photos of monuments located on public roads can be freely taken and published, yet the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has copyright registration over its building. It is true that permission is kindly granted when asked and legal action is rarely taken otherwise. However, there have been notorious incidents, such as the threat of a lawsuit in 2000 against artist Fausto Grossi for the macaroni shaped as Gehry's edifice that he offered in his store “Pasta y Pizza Grossi,” where he used to hold art exhibitions in a space for on-site tastings.⁶ Paradoxically, no objection has ever been made to the shops where tourists can buy Bilbao souvenirs featuring the iconic museum, which did protest in this case of the food packaging with the amphibological inscription *cuestión de pasta*—a question of pasta/money. More openly critical was the 2014 art installation by Mike Bouchet and Paul McCarthy, who caricatured the museum—so often described as an urban regeneration “flagship”—by depicting it as a gunboat on a large billboard located on Bilbao's main street.

Apparently, the parallelism referred to the almost warlike tactics of American brands and franchises for their planetary expansion under the late-capitalist hegemony established after World War II, especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain: both artists were disparaging political-commercial globalization in the exhibition arranged at the time by the Portikus art gallery in Frankfurt. But the advertisement with that satirical drawing in the business epicenter of Bilbao upset the Guggenheim, which successfully demanded its removal by alleging that its image was protected by the Intellectual Property law. This was met with reservations among experts in the arts sector, mostly in favor of leaving artists a free hand to make reinterpretations or a parody of art works and institutions within the cultural framework of postmodern appropriation practices (Genocchio, 2014; Lus Arana et al., 2014).

CURATORIAL RECONSIDERATIONS, INSIDE AND BEYOND THE GUGGENHEIM IN BILBAO

Ironic satires of museums have become the specialty of the so-called “institutional critique,” an art genre with eminent practitioners like Andrea Fraser who, in 2001, made a performance recorded with hidden cameras in the atrium of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and infringed its image restrictions, which were initially very strict indoors. Like an industrial factory jealous of engineering espionage, the museum prohibited taking photos inside, although this veto has been somewhat relaxed recently, at least in common transit areas, and since 2022 even in the galleries displaying art, unless otherwise indicated. This impediment would be justified for temporary exhibitions, whose lenders often reserve the right of reproduction. Apart from those cases, it seems a practice contrary to prevalent museum policies, increasingly in favor of engaging participative experiences: in this and many other issues the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA) has set a countermodel to the Bilbao Guggenheim (Sansi, 2012). Aware of the relevance that selfies are gaining today in cultural consumption practices, especially by young audiences, and their enormous utility for dissemination on social networks, most institutions worldwide allow their collections to be photographed without using a flash, tripod, or stick (Appiotti, 2022). Unfortunately, the Spanish tendency is different since the Guggenheim ban on photography has been followed by other museums, such as the Prado although *Las Meninas* are regularly used as backdrops by VIPs posing for graphic journalists. This seems unfair in the eyes of common people and perturbs the work of museology scholars: we usually take photos of displays or didactic resources for our research files, but it is becoming ever more complicated in Spain under the influence of the “Bilbao effect” on museum rules.

The film featuring Andrea Fraser, in a short green dress and high heels, erotically rubbing a limestone pillar, was a pun on Frank Gehry's stories about the building and the sensuous way it was described by the official audio guide.⁷ The video has been acquired by the MACBA and other museums of contemporary art, some of which do not provide such interpretation recordings, that are freely offered in several languages by all Guggenheim venues. The good point is that Fraser's satire has made more people aware of the existence of this audio guide of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, which offers specific versions for children, blind people or other special publics: in Spain this has been a novel educational tool, now widely adopted. Another positive influence of the “Bilbao effect” on Spanish museums has been the zeal for communication strategies through the combination of art with all sorts of activities, including musical programs.⁸ Silence would reign at the modern *white cube*, but postmodernity made a norm for art venues to span all kinds of media; to the point that, since 2014, the Bilbao Guggenheim has a specific room called *Film&Video* reserved for experimental cinema and audiovisual creations—not Andrea Fraser's, for the

time being. It is thus worth mentioning the ever-widening breadth of art fields and media covered by this museum.

At 25 years of age, and after gaining experience, juvenile demarches have given way to quite an open-minded mature institution. Its museographic discourse was saluted as typically post-modern for encouraging *flâneries* with no narrative thread (Klonk, 2009: 206). By finding their own routes, tourists would “flow” from entrance to exit, exemplifying the *Muséologie de passage*, an international trend that would reach its apogee at the Musée du Quai Branly, inaugurated in 2006 (Mairesse, 2015: 366–369). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, museums all over the world imposed one-way itineraries and eliminated benches. Nowadays in the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, however, there are again plenty of crossroads and seats, so that visitors can decide where to go or when to stop for pauses. Most particularly we are tempted to spend a lot of time and money in the gift shop or the restaurant, both above the usual standards: they have a special charm, with their blend of Basque culture and cosmopolitanism, lengthening the visit and increasing incomes, which is trying to be emulated by other Spanish museums.

Self-aware of being a role model for others and a focus of attention worldwide, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao cultivates its well-established reputation, nurtured by its Subdirectorate for Marketing and Communication: a *rara avis* for art management in Spain, where some followers have lately appeared in the museum sector (Walias Rivera, 2022). Outliving terrorism, embezzlement scandals, workers' strikes, or other troubles, its dazzling aura has endured. Architecture experts keep writing enthusiastically about Gehry's masterpiece, a landmark of postmodernism, even though not all authors place it, as Victoria Newhouse did, “among the most evocative forms ever made,” adding that “they offer an architectural context for art equivalent to what many artists and critics have demanded for centuries” (Newhouse, 2006: 254). In fact, rather than artists and critics, its most enthusiastic fans have revealed to be political authorities, eager to “put their respective cities on the map” (Evans, 2003). They all covet a building that would draw world attention, a longing erroneously identified by many journalists—and Wikipedia—as the “Bilbao effect,” despite the fact that Guggenheim-mania has often produced, by counter-reaction, “anti-Bilbao” architectural projects (Marshall, 2012: 45; McClellan, 2008: 98). All in all, more than a fertile struggle of creativity, there has been global competition for grand projects by a few “starchitects” generously commissioned to reform pre-existing constructions or to design new ones, so long as they provide iconic buildings (Curtis, 2013; Moix, 2010; Notario Sánchez, 2022).

Other forms of visual conspicuousness have been more slowly recognized as being characteristic of postmodern museums, where optic and haptic links with the urban fabric have become *de rigueur* (Layuno Rosas, 2003: 292). Inside the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, its exhibition galleries are white cubes with no windows, but impressive views can be seen from the central atrium and other transit spaces. Contemplating Bilbao from the Guggenheim can be a revealing experience for many “pilgrims.” Religious parallelisms can also apply to some uses of the museum balcony, recalling the rituals of sanctification ceremonies in the Vatican square, as the northern terrace overlooking the river is used for iconic masterpieces from the collection, displayed to be viewed and photographed by museum-goers and passers-by. Jeff Koons' colorful *Tulips* were given pride of place there until November 2022, when they were replaced by two sculptures by Eduardo Chillida, *Consejo al espacio V [Advice to space 5]* and *Abrazo XI [Hug 9]* (Figure 2). These totems enshrined under canopy can be looked up from the riverside promenade, culminating the sight of other pieces from the museum collection outdoors, including Jenny Holzer's *Like Beauty in Flames*, a work of augmented reality visible since 2021 through an application for mobile phones that offers three different experiences depending on where and how you see it: inside the museum and outside it, using QR codes in marked spots, or anywhere else, through the institutional website.⁹ Such communication

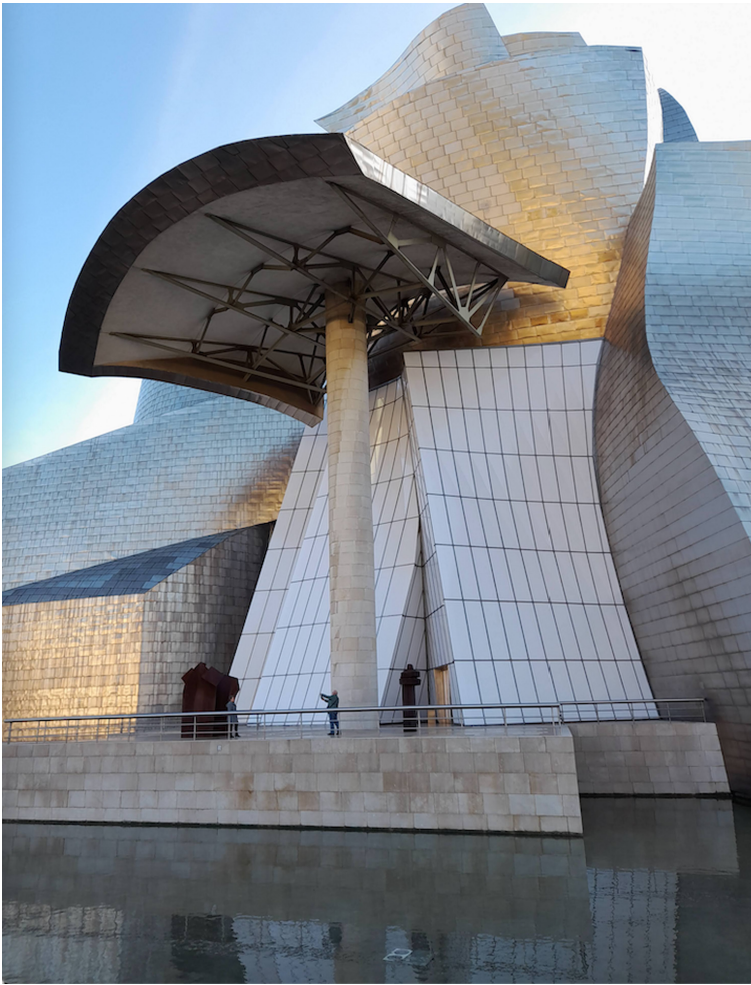


FIGURE 2 The riverside façade, with the panoramic terrace featuring two monumental pieces by Chillida.

strategies taking art beyond museum walls have become widespread, not only via temporary art interventions, but also by means of permanent installations of art in public places.

In fact, the culmination of this trend has been a return to classic statues in squares and streets in front of museums. That sculptural tradition had reached momentum at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries with the monuments of great artists erected in front of the entrances to the Prado, the Louvre, the Tate, and other art galleries. But modernist architects preferred to surround their buildings with green areas and abstract sculptures by Calder, Miró, Moore, etc. Then, at the turn of the millennium, monumental figures have come back to museums doors; for instance, in front of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao with very famous examples such as *Puppy*, the gigantic dog-shaped floral sculpture by Jeff Koons, and *Maman*, the colossal spider by Louise Bourgeois.¹⁰ Both are frequent photocalls, inspiring all sort of merchandising in souvenir shops and stalls, even for people who do not go inside the museum (Figure 3). Not everyone is prepared to pay the entrance price, which at the box office costs €15 (half price for students or pensioners). Thus, a considerable number of persons in Bilbao only sees the Guggenheim from the outside. Therefore, it is an excellent idea to put outdoors great works from the permanent collection, including some other eye-catching



FIGURE 3 Small spiders on sale at souvenir stalls with *Maman*, by Louise Bourgeois, in background.

examples like the *Wish Tree for Bilbao* by Yoko Ono, the stainless steel sculpture *Tall Tree & The Eye* by Anis Kapoor, or a large intervention entitled *Fog Sculpture* by Fujiko Nakaya, consisting of burners activated at dusk (López-Remiro, 2009). A well-received strategy that is mimicked all over the world, sometimes using very similar pieces: indeed, further versions of the spider by Louise Bourgeois have been purchased by different museums and some have also placed them by the entrance emulating the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; for example, 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 (Lorente, 2019).

It seems important to point out here that all pieces from the Guggenheim Bilbao collection located outdoors do have identifying museum labels and further information is provided via QR codes.¹¹ This is becoming a very common cultural policy in our times, when many museums are transforming their urban environment into a cultural district. Abandoibarra has been acknowledged in this sense as role model even in remote cities! Following this Bilbao precedent, in 2002 the Plaza Fernando Botero in downtown Medellín was adorned with 23 bronze sculptures that, like the avenue of sphinxes outside the Karnak and Luxor temples, lead passers-by to the Museum of Antioquia, which has been interpreted as a Colombian response

to Bilbao (Barrios, 2009; Hernández Martínez, 2002). Likewise, the Denver Art Museum, after its expansion by Daniel Libeskind in 2000–2006, created a great plaza with large postmodern sculptures because the director had been at the Guggenheim Bilbao inauguration and wished to mimic the strategy so that people could enjoy the art of their time without having to pay or go inside (Lindsay, 2013). Countless museums have spurred similar commissions, but nothing compares to Bilbao, whose municipal corporation and other political instances have joined forces with private sponsors to create the so-called Paseo de la Memoria, which spreads 3 km along the estuary with the Guggenheim in the middle: it was landmarked in 2002 with sculptures by Anthony Caro, Chillida, Dalí, Garraza, Lüpertz, Rückriem, Tücker, and Zugasti, whose names and their artwork titles are written in the respective museum-like labels. Such para-museal badges are producing a “museum effect,” transforming in people’s perception urban equipment into recognizable art and heritage. Many more examples have multiplied by the riverside, including the monument commissioned to Dora Salazar in 2020 by the Council of the Biscay Province, as the identification plate on the ground indicates (Figure 4). Four figures of 2.5 m high in corten steel pay homage to the women workers who, for little wages, used to pull ropes to tow the barges in the nineteenth century. On the opposite river bank there are other monuments to local nurses or to rural Basque sports, etc. Furthermore, in 2013 the City Council launched with public and private cultural agents “Bilbao Art District” to promote an abundant presence of the arts in this area, from institutional venues to commercial art galleries, but by placing particular emphasis on enhancing public spaces with artists’ interventions and cultural festivals (Pintado, 2013). Such spread of art interventions and cultural establishments in the neighborhood has also been highly valued abroad.¹²

Thus Bilbao is epitomizing the latest curatorial policies that promote museums “situated” in their neighborhoods by fostering synergies and cooperative networks in cultural clusters (Grincheva, 2020). Following suit, the Guggenheim-Abu Dhabi, designed by Frank Gehry in an architectural style very similar to that of Bilbao, is also serving as a model. If it took many years to turn Basque the Guggenheim in Bilbao, in the United Arab Emirates local identity has been promoted from the beginning. As in Bilbao, the Guggenheim Foundation started by appointing a local committee of experts there to advise on the acquisition of its own collection and to propose exhibitions. Their purchases have opted for a marked specialization in contemporary art from the Middle East after 1965, combined with signature pieces by blue-chip Western artists (Ersoy, 2010; McClellan, 2012). Nonetheless, the main lesson learned from Bilbao is the importance of nurturing art and curatorship not only inside the Guggenheim but also beyond its walls; let us hope the cultural district of Saadiyat lives up to its name—which in Arabic means happiness.

FINAL REMARKS: A NEW VERSION OF THE “MUSEUM EFFECT?”

The main “effect” of the Guggenheim Bilbao has been its unremitting worldwide fame, mostly based on architectural and urban economic achievements. But after 25 years it has become a museological role-model, spreading influential effects beyond its headquarters. Particularly along the district of Abandoibarra, which is now a cultural landscape exemplifying an outdoors version of the “museum effect.” This expression was coined by Svetlana Alpers referring to the conceptual transformation of objects that, deprived of their original function and context, are perceived in the museum only as works of art (Alpers, 1991: 25–32). Implicit in her notion of the “museum effect” was the separation of the museum from the world outside it; then Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett used this expression primarily for outdoors examples in her book *Destination Culture*, arguing that “the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 51).



FIGURE 4 *Towropes pullers*, by Dara Salazar with museum-like label, producing a “museum effect” on the Bilbao waterfront.

Jeffrey K. Smith elaborated this further, celebrating the effect of cultural venues as civilization catalysts (Smith, 2014). This is also what the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has generated on the banks of the Nervión, a dense art ecosystem around a museum cluster spreading art and curatorial outreach. Perhaps a coherent corollary of this outward attitude could be to advertise the surrounding museums and art venues. But the greatest proof of generosity would be to let streetwalkers promenade without paying through the Guggenheim ground floor, to see some monumental pieces of its permanent collection. Most especially Jenny Holzer's *Installation for Bilbao* or *The Matter of Time* by Richard Serra because both works derive from public art interventions.¹³ Not too far away, the Botín Center of Santander, a private institution that has been open since 2017, grants a free pass to all citizens born or living in Cantabria, and allows all people to cross the public walkways traversing the building, designed by Renzo Piano, with spectacular panoramas over the city and the sea. By multiplying atriums, passages, walkways, or viewpoints to connect with their surroundings, some close emulators of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao already seem about to surpass the model. Indeed, in many cities along the Bay of Biscay glamorous architectural containers of

blockbuster exhibitions are encompassed in dense art districts and encourage the fertilization of creative clusters (Gómez et al., 2022).

This is also the way forward in Bilbao. Next to Abandoibarra, down the Nervión estuary, there used to be a degraded industrial landscape, which is now following a plan commissioned from architect Zaha Hadid to shape the “creative island” of Zorrotzaurre, which will combine luxury/social housing with business and cultural facilities, as well as areas for citizen leisure. The municipal corporation and other political instances have joined forces with private sponsors, but this time more emphasis is placed on grassroots participation. After 25 years of top-down urban regeneration, the development of this district proudly proceeds differently with the involvement of local communities and the creative sector. Moreover, the ongoing plans for a future Guggenheim to be opened on the Urdaibai coast are endeavoring a research center for artists and scholars so as to constitute an ambitious cultural landscape in this biosphere reserve. In times of crisis, such territorial projects are providing plenty to talk about, with heated favorable or contrary opinions. It remains to be seen what the future holds for them. Beyond the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, its “effect” continues in many ways.

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The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Dialnet at <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/>.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ But a year later they announced the end of their violent acts. According to museologist Selma Reuben Holo, who has made very accurate political appraisals in her book on museums in Spain, it is possible that the most radical Basques were impelled to emulate the peace agreements in Northern Ireland feeling under the scrutiny of world public opinion, enthusiastic about the new museum, which could be considered a symbol of liberal democracy (Holo, 1999: 157–8).
- ² There have been many studies in charge of demonstrating the phenomenal regeneration of Bilbao and the Basque Country with heated academic debates in which Prof. Plaza, argued the uniqueness of this case in disagreement with María V. Gómez and Sara González. Their essays and more than a hundred specialized publications are collected, with a link to their respective PDF, on the web site *Scholars on Bilbao* <http://scholars-on-bilbao.info/index.php>.
- ³ This marketing strategy has been emulated in Madrid, with the Paseo del Arte Pass, which allows visitors to enter the Prado National Museum, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum and the Reina Sofia National Art Center Museum (MNCARS). The Barcelona Articket is a combined pass for six museums of the Catalan capital.
- ⁴ Mission statement: To collect, preserve and research modern and contemporary art, and to present it from multiple perspectives in the context of the History of Art, addressing a broad, diverse audience so as to contribute to the knowledge and enjoyment of art and the values that it represents, in a unique architectural landmark, as an essential part of the Guggenheim network, and a symbol of the vitality of the Basque Country. <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/about-the-museum/strategic-plan>.
- ⁵ In turn, the image of refinement associated with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, whose elegant hostesses wear couturier-designed uniforms, was the precedent for the well-dressed room attendants of a grandiose museum, also signed by Frank Gehry, opened by the Louis Vuitton Foundation in 2014, whose friends pay much higher membership fees: after all, Paris is the world capital of luxury!

- ⁶ This pizzeria, founded in 1993, doubled as an artist-run space, for exhibitions and tastings in situ in the vein of the “relational aesthetics” then hailed by Bourriaud. Since 2000 it has been operating as a take away in a smaller venue, but it still announces art events on its website.
- ⁷ Andrea Fraser: *Little Frank and His Carp* (2001): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3u5YV4RHA4>.
- ⁸ Following the precedent of background music set in 1939 by Hila Rebay at the New York Guggenheim, since 2008 the Bilbao hosts, one Friday a month, “Art After Dark,” a nightly program of music and art so that exhibitions can be visited from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. to the beat set in the atrium by famous DJs. On the other hand, each Summer, and once a week, the “Art&Music” program allows people to have a drink with snacks on the terrace of the Museum while listening to live jazz concerts. Sound arts and music are intrinsically integrated in the museum activities (Hervás Muñoz, 2022).
- ⁹ The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao had profited before from potential uses of the titanium skin as an interface for art spectacles. In 2017, the commemorations of its twentieth anniversary culminated with the show entitled *Reflections*, a celebratory video-mapping with intertwined memories of the museum and the city. Even more noteworthy in this regard was the art intervention by Jenny Holzer *For Bilbao*, consisting of texts in Basque, Spanish and English projected onto the façade during her solo exhibition in 2019 (Lorente & Gómez, 2021: 76–77).
- ¹⁰ Before coming to Bilbao, both examples had traveled the world, and the installation of the enormous fox terrier in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, and the display of the great spider in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London, are particularly noteworthy here because both locations prefigured their current location at the Guggenheim Bilbao doors.
- ¹¹ They are steppingstones for curatorial work successfully expanding outward, with a remarkable “museum effect” on other artworks in public places nearby, with their respective identifying labels (Lorente & Juan, 2023).
- ¹² An excellent book on London's Tate Modern, whose achievements were reviewed with abundant allusions to Bilbao, valued cultural spread over economic returns (Gayford et al., 2005).
- ¹³ The conceptual installation by Jenny Holzer consists of nine vertical panels of double-sided light-emitting diodes with letters evoking aphorisms in Basque, Spanish and English that come from a poetic composition on AIDS previously used by the artist for another projection installed in an outdoor space in Florence. *The Matter of Time*, the sinuous steel plates with which Richard Serra partitioned the biggest gallery inside the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, cannot be understood without the precedent of his controversial *Tilted Arc* in New York's Federal Plaza. The same applies to his monumental sculpture *Equal-Parallel: Guernica-Bengasi* in room 102 at Madrid's MNCARS, which people can enter without paying.

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