

THE ALHONDIGA CULTURAL CENTER



Photomontage of the Alhondiga Cultural Center in Bilbao, 1988
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Essay by Patricia Sanz Lacarra and Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno

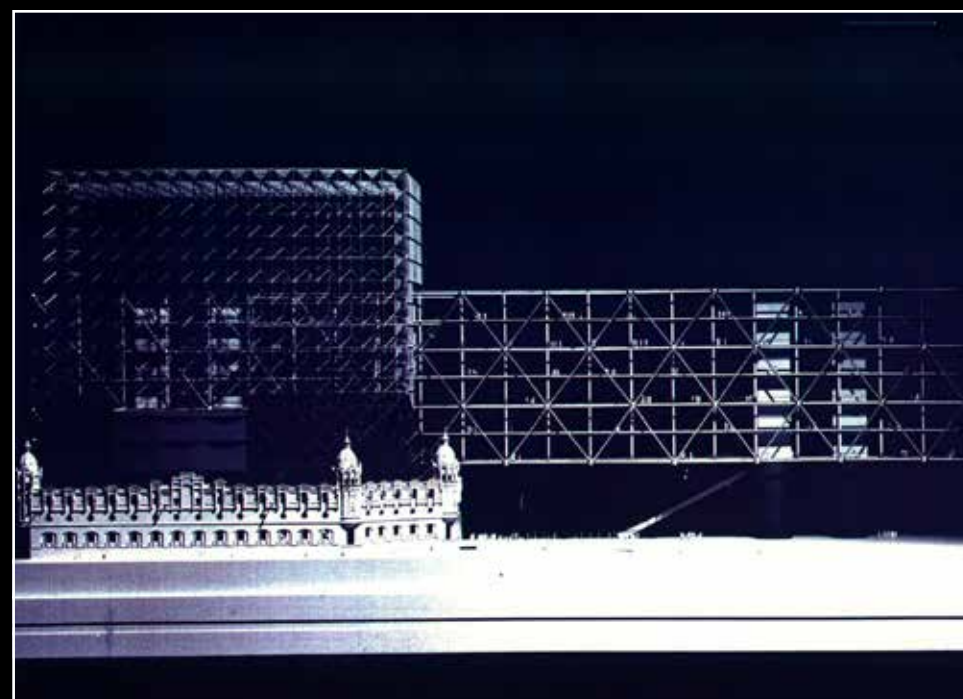
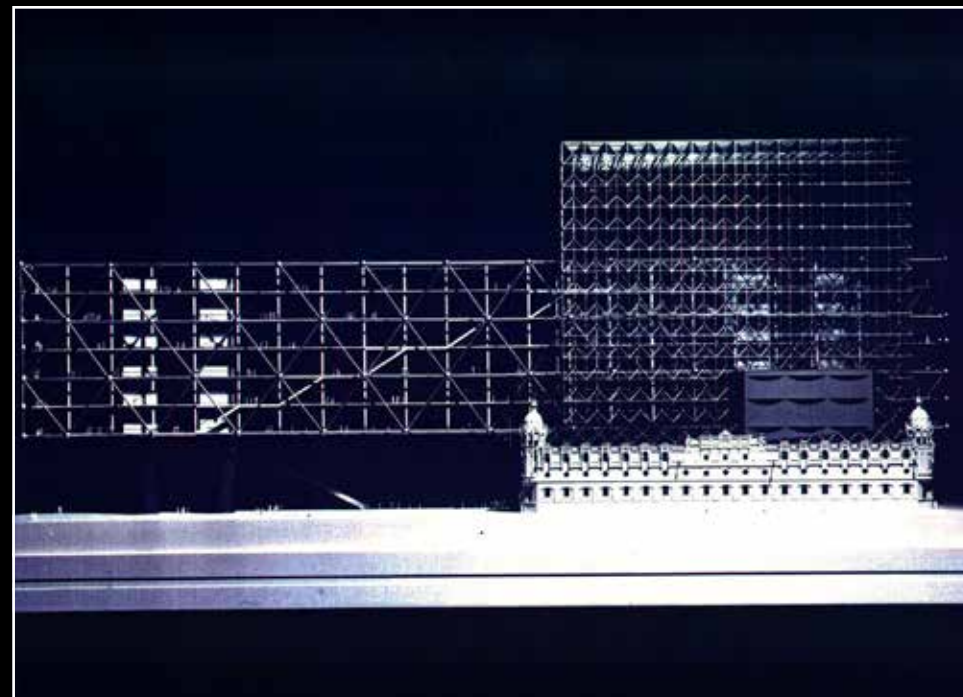
AND OTHER ARCHITECTURAL DREAMS

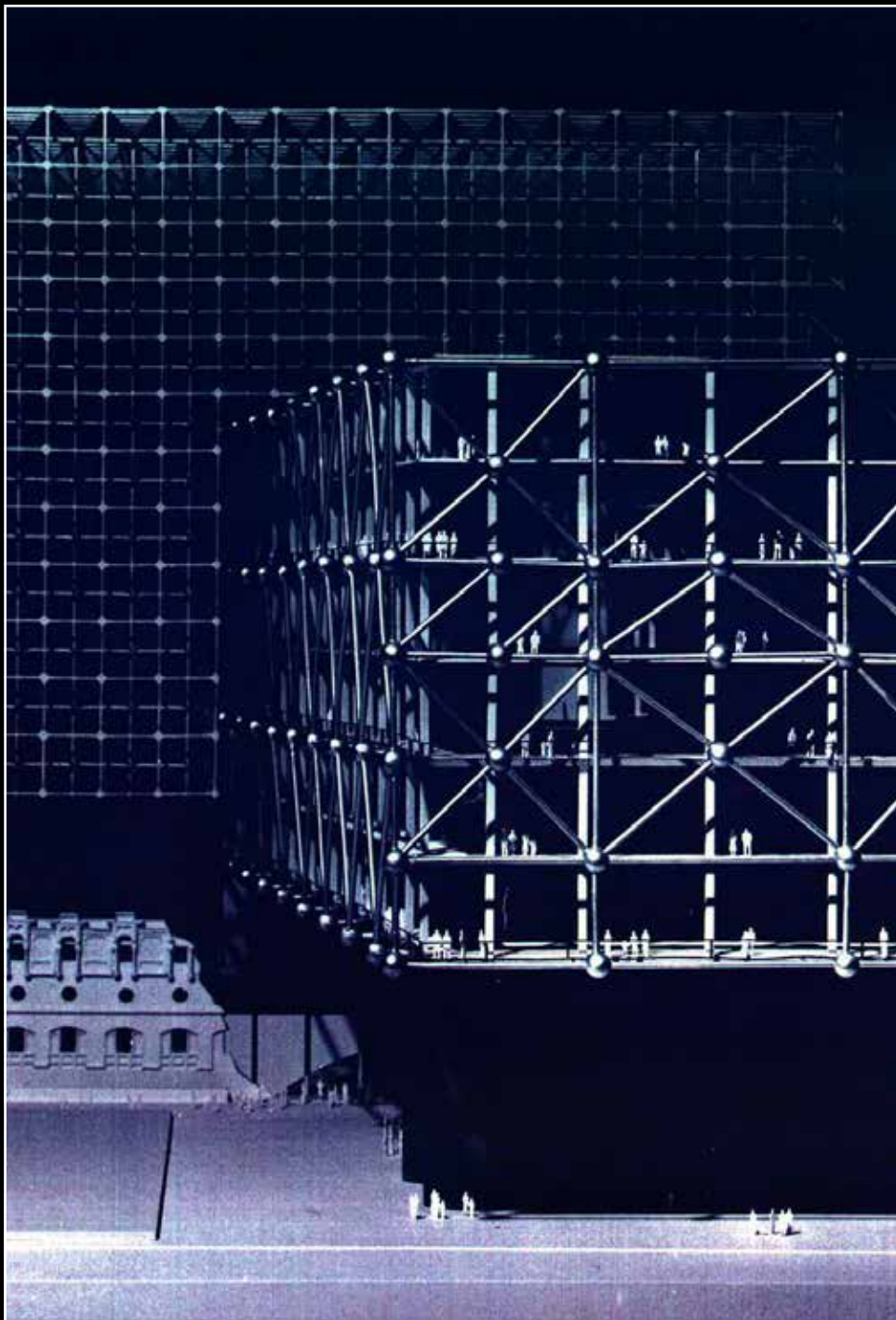
At the end of the 1980s, Jose María Gorordo, Mayor of Bilbao, promoted the remodeling of the old municipal wine warehouse, the Alhóndiga, an important project by the Bilbao-born architect Ricardo Bastida. The 1909 building had been in use until 1977 when it ceased its operations. In order to create a large cultural center that would serve as a model for other Basque cities as well as reactivate the local economy, Gorordo invited two renowned architects, Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza and Juan Daniel Fullaondo, to design a new project. Sculptor Jorge Oteiza, one of the most important artistic references from the Basque Country since the 1950s, joined them. After several architectural proposals and multiple political and media issues, the project never materialized, becoming one of the most emblematic unbuilt projects in the city.¹ Finally, in 2010 the French designer Philippe Starck remodeled the building as a multipurpose civic center.

From the Old Wine Warehouse to the Future Museum of Contemporary Art

In 1988, The Bilbao City Council prepared a technical study about new cultural centers in Europe in order to establish the bases from which to define the characteristics of the desired cultural center in Bilbao. In the report *From the old wine warehouse to the future museum of contemporary art*, the Pompidou Center in Paris, by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, was the main subject of the study. Similar to the Parisian center, the Alhóndiga was located within an established urban fabric. Besides the Bastida building, the brief of the project considered the use of the vacant lot available in the adjoining block next to the Alameda de Urquijo Street. In 1989, the Basque Government designated the Alhóndiga "Public Property of Cultural Interest," which meant that its façades had to remain untouched, but its interior could be demolished or modified.

One of the most sensitive aspects for those in charge of the project was defining the program of the new cultural center. Jorge Oteiza was a thoughtful sculptor who for many years had been trying to create an Institute of Aesthetic Investigations in the Basque Country. The predominant positivism of education in society during the twentieth-century was one of his main concerns. For the Basque sculptor, it was necessary to get past the technological model of education, an education focused exclusively on a pragmatic and utilitarian vision of the world, to develop holistically as a person; to develop of an ethic and aesthetic conscience; to see and feel a richer and more caring world. A way to approach this concern was to demand an aesthetic education. For Oteiza, this should be a fundamental task for every artist. In his renowned saying "¡Me paso a la ciudad!" ("I am focusing on the city!"), there was an implicit idea: to abandon the plastic





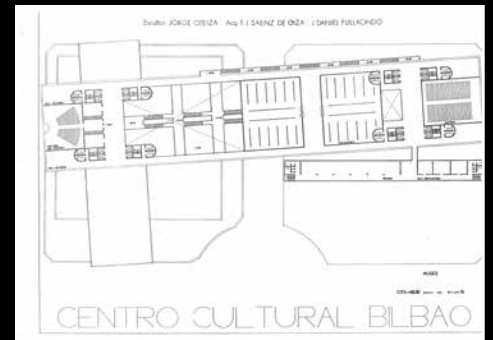
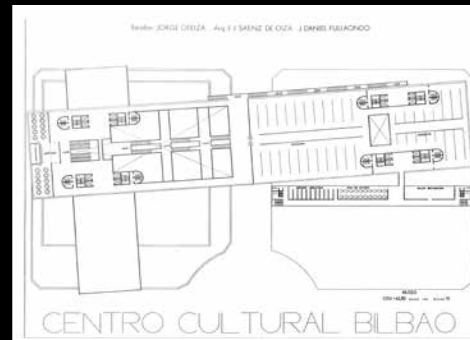
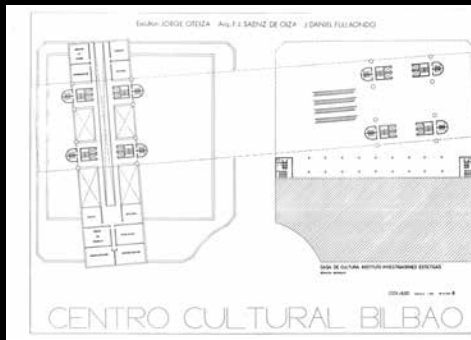
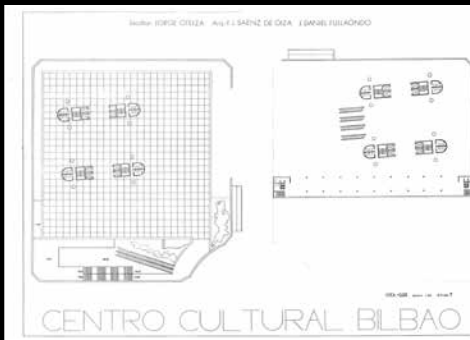
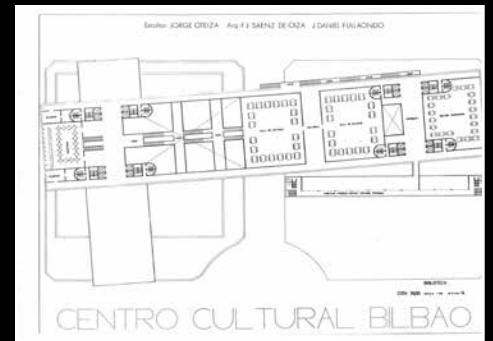
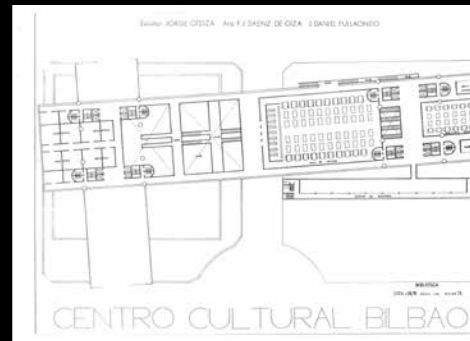
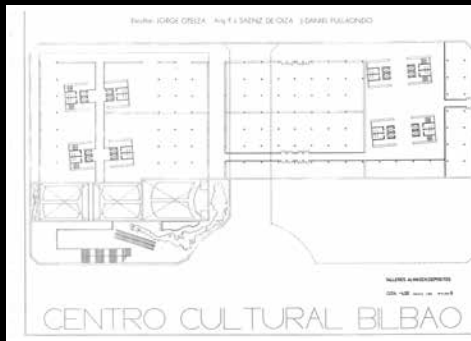
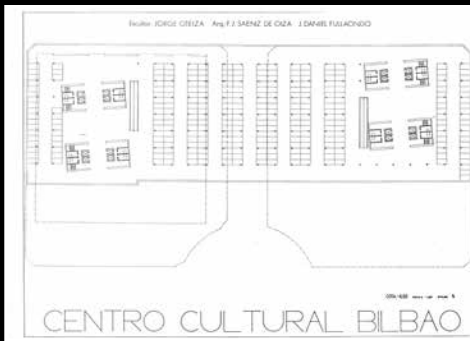
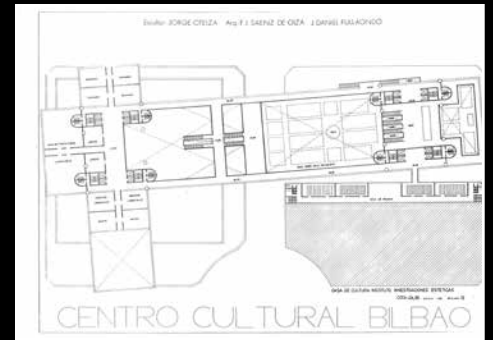
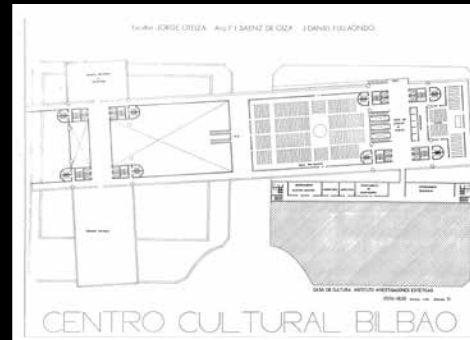
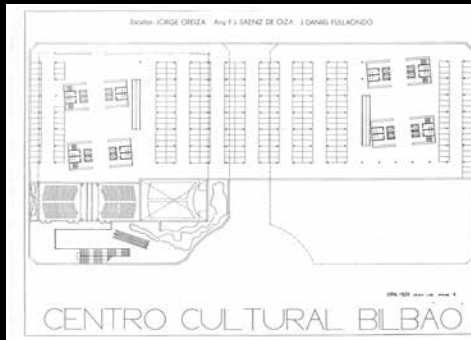
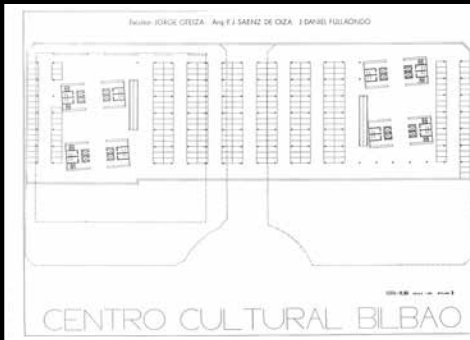
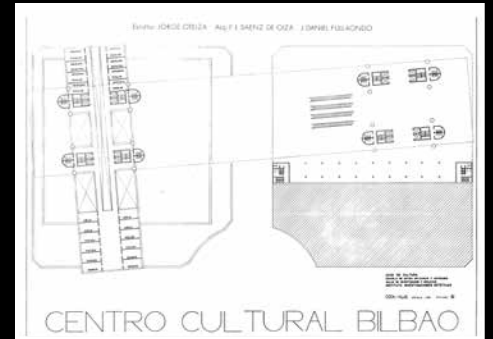
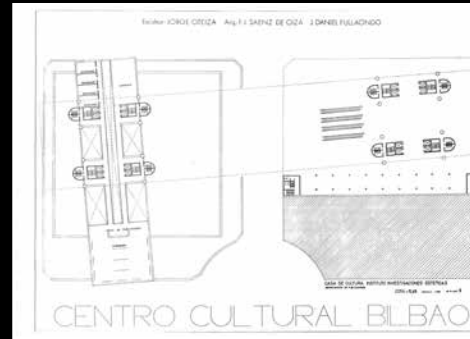
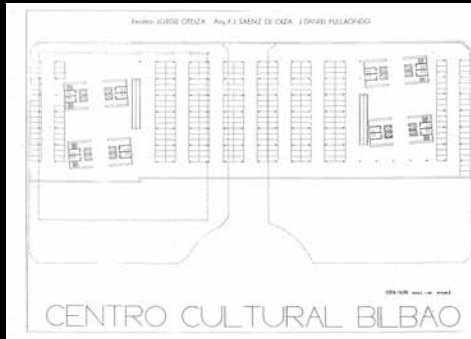
arts to focus on education. The artist has the responsibility of transmitting his or her reality to the society and mainly to children, the “unconscious adult” who, if aesthetically trained, will become a better person.² During his life, Oteiza had tried to launch several educational projects focused on the artistic development of children, such as the Children’s University in Elorrio and the School in Deva.³ His inclusion in the team for the new Alhóndiga along with Oíza and Fullaondo probably was his last opportunity to make his ambition as a plastic arts educator a reality. After multiple meetings and conversations, the new cultural center in Bilbao would include a series of uses whose objective was to develop the plastic arts skills of children as well as adults. The final program included a provincial library, a school of music, a museum of contemporary art, and several rooms and workshops for artistic and plastic arts creation.

During 1989, two proposals were presented publicly in the Bilbao City Council. The first proposal included as one of its main elements a vast plaza covered by a large glass cube measuring 80 meters (262 feet) on each side. Besides the cube, there was a bridge building housing most of the program and constructed with a tridimensional structure inspired by the utopian projects of Yona Friedman. Finally, there was a building crossing under the bridge building and connecting to the interior of the glass cube. This was an unsuccessful proposal, as the height of the span over the Alameda de Urquijo Street was too disruptive of the original fabric of this area of the city.

In the second proposal, the bridge building was removed, maintaining the large transparent cube and protecting an elevated plaza above the old Alhóndiga building. With that solution, the cultural programs were housed in two opaque volumes located

on two sides of the vast glassed plaza. A large set of escalators would connect the plaza with the adjoining lot where there were two modest buildings with a height similar to the neighboring buildings: a small cube in the furthest corner from the Alhóndiga and a long building attached to the dividing wall of the existing building. The focus of the project remained the large glass cube that, inserted in the dense urban fabric of the city, stood out emphatically, almost like a modern cathedral, a landmark in the city. The old Alhóndiga became a large plinth for the new glass-covered plaza that protected its interior space from the inclement weather of Bilbao. That glass cube would become the most recognizable element of the new cultural center, one that would be known as the “Cube of the Alhóndiga.”

The proposal by Oíza, Fullaondo, and Oteiza created a large transparent structure that protected the “living organism” that was the nurturing of the artistic education. That idea was, to a large extent, influenced by the previous architectural work of Oíza and the sculptural work of Oteiza. Architect and sculptor had already collaborated on several projects in the 1950s that shared ideas with the proposal for the Alhóndiga. In the project for a Chapel in the Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James), it was already evident, with an interest in creating a tridimensional transparent structure to protect the sacred space of the chapel.⁴ In this project, the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller and the space frame hangars by Konrad Wachsmann were undeniable references. As in the project for the chapel in the Way of St. James, in the proposal for the Alhóndiga, the tridimensional structure of the Cube has an immense importance. This structural system allowed the creation of vast and unobstructed interior spaces that facilitated the arrangement of the cultural



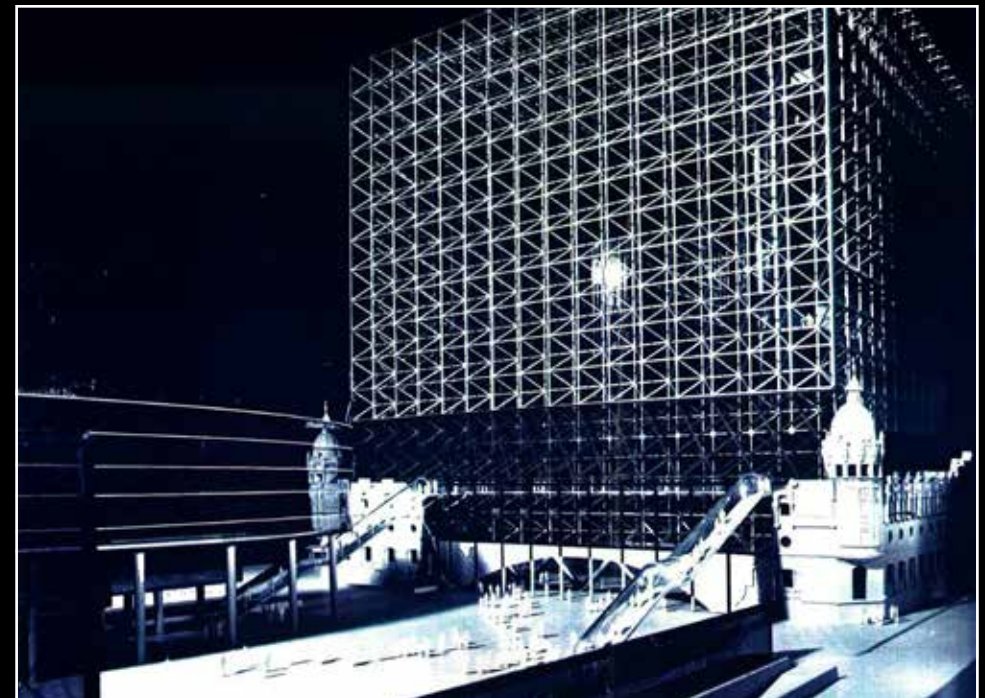
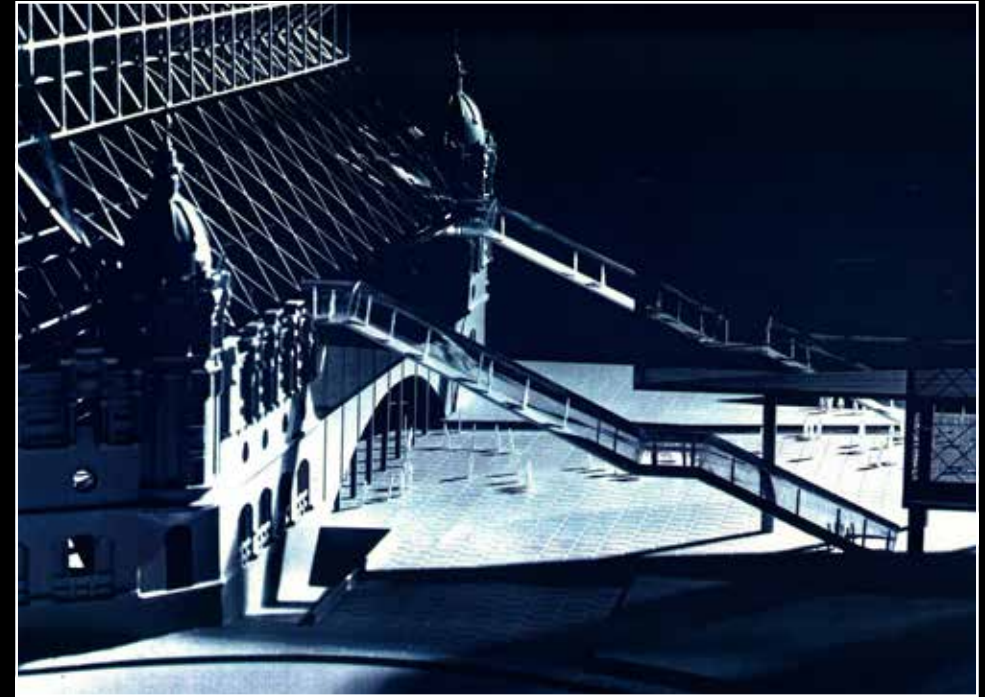
program. Besides these clear precedents, the cubic formalization of the main volume as well as the importance given to freeing its interior space were fully in accordance with the theories of Oteiza written in essays such as “Propósito Experimental” (Experimental Purpose)⁵ and demonstrated in a series of sculptures such as his metaphysic boxes.⁶

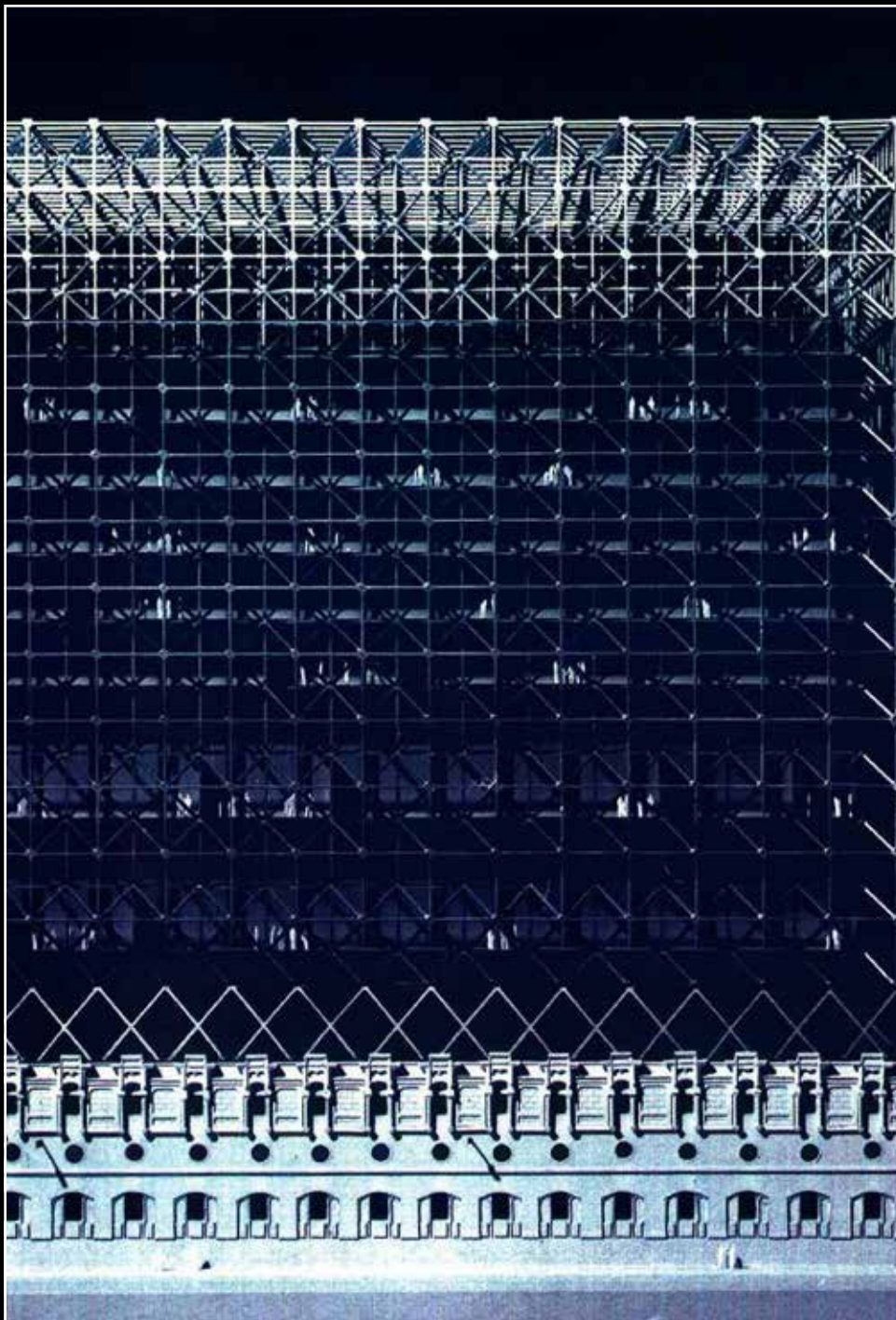
Polemic and Politicization of the Alhóndiga

Beginning at the end of 1988, a constant controversy surrounded the project. The origin of all the discussions and criticisms was political and of different opinions between the Basque Government and the Bilbao City Council. On the one hand, there was controversy surrounding the demolition or preservation of the Alhóndiga. The Mayor of Bilbao did not rule out the idea of demolishing it if it was needed, as its structural capacity was not enough to fully support the new proposed uses. The rest of the political parties and the Heritage Commission opposed this idea and proposed the complete preservation of the building and the adaptation of the proposed program to its structure, as they saw the building as an essential piece in the historic and cultural heritage of Bilbao. On the other hand, some members of the Bilbao City Council did not approve the designs by Oíza, Fullaondo, and Oteiza as they considered that Gorordo was using the project as a political tool and to boost his image. However, those politicians against the Cube of the Alhóndiga did indeed consider it necessary to develop cultural interventions, but they argued that they had to be smaller buildings and dispersed across several neighborhoods in order to void the concentration of culture in a single building. Obviously, the design team rejected this idea

highlighting the benefits that a project of this kind could bring to Bilbao, pointing out the success of the Sydney Opera House or the Pompidou in Paris. During the years when Gorordo was Mayor, the team of Oíza, Fullaondo, and Oteiza would make multiple modifications to the two proposals that had been presented in April and December of 1989 in order to address the restrictions imposed by the Heritage Commission. Despite these efforts, in early 1990 the Commission deemed the project incompatible with the existing building, considering it an attack on the historic property. Because of this ruling, Jorge Oteiza decided to quit the project’s design team. Ultimately, the political differences between all sides forced the cancellation of several projects promoted by the Bilbao City Hall, including the Cube of the Alhóndiga. These discrepancies also led to the resignation of Gorordo as Mayor of Bilbao before the end of his term. It wouldn’t be until 2010 when the new Alhóndiga, now renamed Azkuna Zentroa, opened as a multipurpose civic center featuring leisure and sport areas, cinemas, an exhibition hall, a theatre, an auditorium, restaurants, and shops.

Despite the unsuccessful outcome of the project by Oíza, Fullaondo, and Oteiza, the controversy generated in the media and political realm along with the several projects that had been proposed in the city created an intense debate around the need to build an important cultural center in Bilbao, thus easing the path for future projects. The Cube of the Alhóndiga by Oíza, Fullaondo, and Oteiza was the driving project for the creation of a large cultural center in Bilbao, a goal that would be later achieved thanks to the Guggenheim Foundation, granting the city a place in the history of contemporary architecture.





Alhóndiga Cultural Center, second proposal © AMB-BUA Archivo Municipal de Bilbao Bilboko Udal Artxiboa

Controversy around not preserving the building by Ricardo Bastida

1988

May – Mayor Gorordo and Jorge Oteiza visit the Alhóndiga building.

September – Survey "From old wine warehouse to future museum of contemporary art".

October – Bilbao City Council purchases twelve works of art by Oteiza. Creation of the Aesthetic Research Institute.

1989

January – Bilbao City Council and Oteiza, Fullaondo, and Sáenz de Oíza sign the contract for the realization of the Basic Project.

April – Public presentation of preliminary design of first proposal.

October – Environmental Impact Report.

December – Public presentation of second proposal "78m solution".

1990

January – Alhóndiga is declared an Artistic Monument by the Advisory Board of the Monumental Heritage of the Basque Country. The project is declared incompatible. Oteiza withdraws from the project.

February – Series of conferences "Cultural centers in the revitalization of the city".

July – Presentation of a new proposal.

November – Autonomous elections in the Basque Country.

December – Resignation of Mayor Gorordo.

1991

February – Basque authorities and leaders of the Guggenheim Foundation start negotiating an agreement.

1997

October – Opening of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.

2002

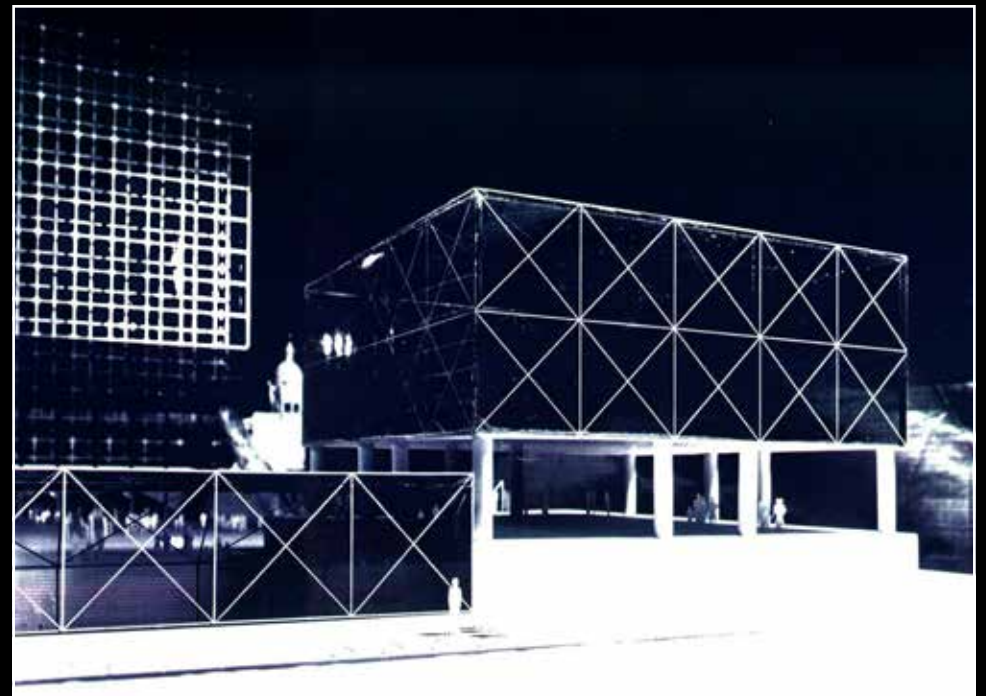
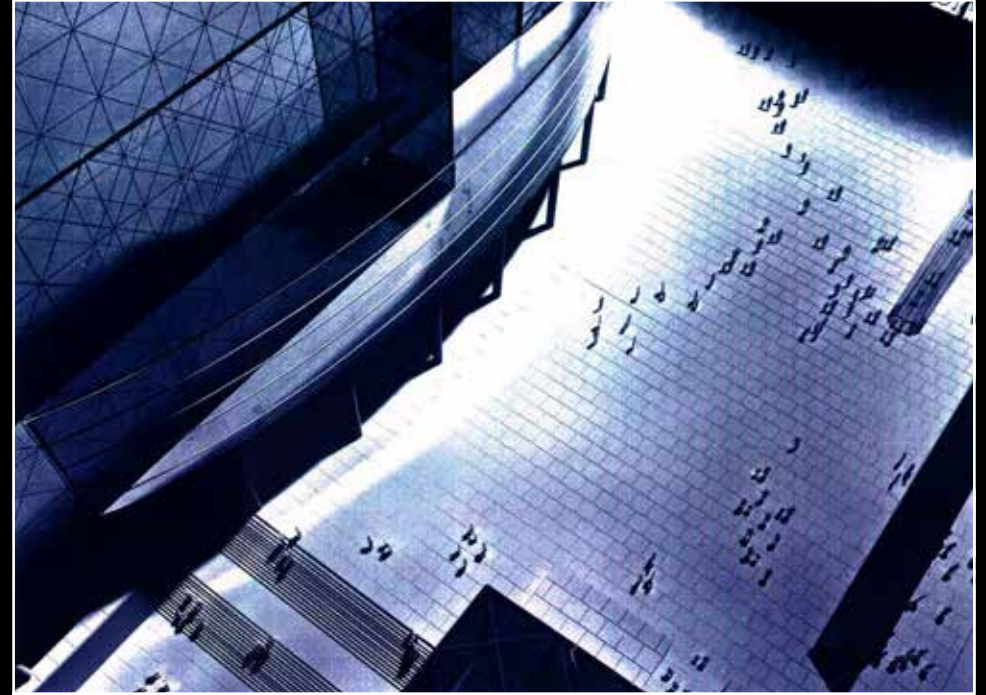
Rehabilitation of the Alhóndiga building commences.

2010

May – Opening of the new leisure and culture center known as Alhóndiga Bilbao.

Endnotes

- 1 Iskandar Rementería, *Proyecto no concluido para la Alhóndiga de Bilbao. Una propuesta sobre la estética objetiva de Jorge Oteiza como método de investigación*, PhD Thesis, Universidad del País Vasco, 2015.
- 2 Iñaki Zuazo Akesolo, "Principio de interioridad y educación estética en Oteiza", in *Oteiza y la crisis de la modernidad* (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2010).
- 3 Miren Vadillo and Leire Makazaga, *Los proyectos educativos de Jorge Oteiza* (Pamplona: Cátedra Jorge Oteiza, 2007).
- 4 Francisco Javier Sáenz Guerra, *Un mito moderno. Una capilla en el Camino de Santiago* (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2007).
- 5 Jorge Oteiza, "Propósito experimental 1956-57", *Forma Nueva-el Inmueble*, n. 14, March 1967, 24-34.
- 6 Pedro Manterola, *La escultura de Jorge Oteiza: una interpretación* (Alzuza: Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2006).



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