

The Bilbao Effect: is 'starchitecture' all it's cracked up to be? A history of cities in 50 buildings, day 27

Every struggling post-industrial city has the same idea: hire a star architect (like Frank Gehry) to design a branch of a famous museum (like the Guggenheim), and watch your city blossom with culture. After all, it worked for Bilbao ... didn't it?

Tomasz Kacprzak, chairman of the city council of Łódź, the third-biggest city in Poland, was telling me about the time he met David Lynch.

“We went to his house in California,” Kacprzak said. “He loves Łódź. He wants to build us a cultural centre.” (Lynch’s plan for a 90-acre site comprising a film studio, cinema, gallery, offices and bar in an abandoned power plant in Łódź - the city that also inspired the cult director’s film *Inland Empire* - is expected to open in 2016.)

“Actually,” Kacprzak continued, “Lynch’s house is not great. The interior. It is not modern.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “Retro? Nineties?”

“No,” Kacprzak said. “Eighties. Gehry’s house was much nicer.”

“You went to Frank Gehry’s house, too?”

This was interesting. We were standing in the soaring atrium of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, designed by Gehry. Through the window, in the courtyard, you could make out the back of Jeff Koons’ huge, Edward Scissorhands-style plant sculpture, *Puppy*.

“Yes,” Kacprzak said. “We asked for the Guggenheim in Łódź.”

“You wanted Gehry to design a new museum?”

“No,” Kacprzak said. “The same.” He swept his arm over the pine, glass and steel that curved above our heads.

“You wanted him to build the exact same building?”

“Yes,” Kacprzak said casually. “The same. But we would use it for a concert hall.”

Much is made of the so-called 'Bilbao effect', the idea that attracting a world-class cultural institution - in Bilbao's case, a branch of New York's Guggenheim art museum - will put your city on the map, and in turn attract more investment, brands, tourism and cultural energy. This was the first time, however, that I'd heard someone say they wanted to copy Bilbao's building exactly, swooping metal sheet for swooping metal sheet.

"What did Gehry say?" I asked.

"He said, 'OK - but it will very expensive.'" Kacprzak shrugged. "We are a small city."

So, of course, was Bilbao 18 years ago when it rose to fame almost overnight. The fourth-largest city in Spain had lost its former glory as a manufacturing centre: its factories shuttered, its port decrepit. But after Spain joined the EU in 1986, Basque Country authorities embarked on an ambitious redevelopment programme for their biggest city.

They drafted in expensive architects to design an airport (Santiago Calatrava), a metro system (Norman Foster), and a footbridge (Calatrava again), and in 1991 landed their biggest fish - the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, which decided to bring a new branch of the legendary Guggenheim Museum to the city, and hired star California architect Frank Gehry to build it.

The building was an instant hit. Critics agreed Gehry's deconstructed meringue of sweeping metal, which opened in 1997, was a work of "mercurial brilliance". The collection inside, featuring art by Willem De Kooning, Mark Rothko, Anselm Kiefer and Richard Serra, was world-class. The construction even came in on budget, at \$89m.

What's more, Bilbao now had a landmark. Visitor spending in the city jumped, recouping the building cost within three years. Five years after construction, Bilbao estimated that its economic impact on the local economy was worth €168m, and poured an additional €27m into Basque government tax coffers - the equivalent of adding 4,415 jobs. More than one million people annually now visit the museum, which became the centrepiece of the Bilbao Art District: a cluster composed of the maritime museum, the fine arts museum and the Sala Rekalde art centre.

In 2010, French designer Philippe Starck completed his renovation of a former wine cellar to create the Alhondiga culture and leisure centre (recently rebranded as Azkuna Zentroa). And Zaha Hadid has presented radical plans to redevelop the neglected Zorrozaurre peninsula and turn it into a high-tech residential and cultural island. A struggling city, decimated by the decline of its manufacturing base, had seemingly reinvented itself by - of all things - betting big on culture.

Other post-industrial cities noticed. When I told Kacprzak's story to Maria Fernandez Sabau, a cultural and museum consultant for cities around the world, she sighed.

"Yes, many of my clients say the same thing: give us the Guggenheim," she said. "Often the exact same building! But you can't just copy it."

Don't tell that to Abu Dhabi. Possibly in an attempt to buttress itself against the day the oil runs out, the city is building a museum complex called Saadiyat Island, which will feature branches of not just the Guggenheim (again) but the Louvre as well. In Hong Kong, the West Kowloon Cultural District will be home to M+, a new museum of Chinese contemporary art. There are plans for new cultural hubs centred on museums in Mecca, in Tirana, in Belo Horizonte and in Perth, Australia.

It's the same in the UK: Dundee has drafted in Kengo Kuma to build a new V&A Museum of Design, while Liverpool and Margate have welcomed the Tate Liverpool (designed by James Stirling) and the Turner Contemporary (David Chipperfield). Every city, it seems, wants to create the next Bilbao-Guggenheim-Gehry vortex.

Praise for this model reached its zenith last month, as mayors, cultural attachés and city representatives descended on Bilbao for the UCLG Cities and Culture Conference. Walking the streets with Kacprzak from Łódź, I could see what the delegates liked so much. The city centre is clean. There are lots of expensive retail shops. "El Fosterito", the glass-tube metro entrances designed by Foster, are slick and futuristic. And the people seem disproportionately well-off.

Presiding over it all, like a monolith of gentrification, is the Guggenheim. Yet despite this icon of culture, the city seems strangely quiet. Where are the local galleries, the music, the graffiti, the skateboarders? Spain's difficulties with youth unemployment are well-documented, but I expected more twentysomethings in what is regularly billed as a cultural capital. Does the Guggenheim actually encourage creativity in the city, as advertised, or is it a Disneylandish castle on the hill with a fancy name and an expensive entrance fee for tourists and the well-heeled? Is the Bilbao effect to spread culture, or just to spread money?

"The Guggenheim put our city on the map, no question. But you also can't get anything support here unless it's top-down," says Manu Gómez-Álvarez, an animated man of around 40 wearing earrings and a black hoodie, who is the driving force behind ZAWP, the Zorrozaurre Art Working Progress, a cultural group based on the Bilbao peninsula that Zaha Hadid proposes to completely redevelop.

ZAWP is precisely the kind of cultural organisation that gets praised in megacities like London and New York. It's a decentralised collective of young artists, theatre-makers, musicians and designers, with co-making spaces in the old industrial buildings of Zorrozaurre and a thriving entrepreneurial atmosphere in their colourful, funky headquarters - which also house a bar, a cafe, a gig space and a theatre. Gómez-Álvarez is leading a movement he calls Meanwhile, which aims to use the still-derelict buildings of the peninsula as temporary sites for plays, gigs, artistic interventions or even just cafes. Every proposal, at every turn, gets the same answer back from the authorities: no.

"There's no support for grassroots culture," he says. "We waited 20 years before we got any funding from the government at all." Last year, he says ZAWP finally received a grant - but they still don't get a permanent home in the new Zorrozaurre, and will almost certainly have to move again. It's hard to imagine: ZAWP's premises are huge, stretching through half a dozen buildings and decorated in amazingly elaborate detail. And yet "we are nomads",

says Gomez-Alvarez.

I asked Igor de Quadra, who runs Karraskan Bilbao - a network of more than a dozen theatre groups, venues and creative organisations - what he thought of the Guggenheim's effect. He struggled to frame his words carefully. "It is fine for what it is," he said at last, "but it gets a lot of attention from people who are just passing through. Events like this [UCLG forum] take up a lot of attention, but don't leave much behind for Bilbao culture. Frankly, we don't think about the Guggenheim."

The Guggenheim certainly doesn't claim to be in the business of fostering local culture, nor would you expect it to. The museum has some Basque art and occasionally runs cultural workshops, but it's an international art museum, rather incongruously plonked down in northern Spain. (Extreme Basque nationalists didn't take kindly to its arrival: the week before it opened, ETA killed a police officer in a foiled attempt to bomb the museum.)

There are, of course, Basque cultural organisations in the city, such as Harrobia Bilbao, a performing arts group established in a former church in the Otxarkoaga area in 2011, but their presence feels surprisingly marginal in a city that is supposed to be at the heart of Basque culture.

"In English Canada, culture's nice to have - in French Canada, it's crucial," says Simon Brault, head of the Arts Council of Canada, talking about a similar dynamic between French-speaking Quebec and the rest of the country. Brault helmed what you might call an "anti-Bilbao effect" - a completely different type of culture-led regeneration in another struggling post-industrial city, Montreal.

Brault helped found an open, non-hierarchical cultural network called Culture Montreal, which rather than speaking only to the Guggenheims and cultural superstars of the city, was open to everyday Montrealers - bar owners, teachers, musicians. "An artist just in from Chile would be at the same table as the head of Cirque du Soleil," he says. The aim wasn't to secure funding for massive projects, but to put culture at the heart of the city's regeneration.

It was controversial at first. "The cultural groups thought it was a distraction and that what the culture sector needed was more money," he said. "But within a year, we got what cultural groups had been asking for for 20 years: a seat at the table."

Rather than championing culture only for an elite group of professionals - and asking for money just for the huge institutions - Culture Montreal was better received by city and provincial governments, says Brault. Their goals were less arrogant: to increase cultural access for Montrealers, and to include culture as part of the solution to any civic problems. They achieved this, Brault says, by making everyone feel as though culture was a daily part of everyone's life, not something for a sophisticated few. "There is definitely room for starchitects, but it's always better to tap into local culture rather than buy it from outside. You can't do culture in a city without involving citizens," he said.

So, which is the better way for cities - bottom-up cultural movements or big-ticket snatches? "Of course, there will always be top-down decisions," Brault said. "The key is to

of course, there are always top-down decisions, but the key is to look for a middle ground.”

Hadid’s billion-pound redevelopment of Zorrozaurre will be a test for that middle ground in Bilbao. Will its 6,000 new houses, two new technology centres and park genuinely engage with local culture, or will it simply be a flashy area for rich Spaniards looking for a waterfront property? The Bilbao effect might be famous, but it’s here that it could be truly tested. Those cities around the globe hoping a brand-name museum will save them should be watching carefully.

“The Guggenheim Bilbao was a rare occurrence,” says museum consultant Maria Fernandez Sabau. “There was an incredible confluence of amazing, talented people. You had a museum that was hungry to expand, available land for cheap, a government with money, an architect itching to make a statement, and a city that desperately needed a new reason to exist. You can’t just buy that.”

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