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# **Museums as Urban Catalysts: The Role of Urban Design in Flagship Cultural Development**

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## **Abstract**

A long-held urban redevelopment strategy has been the investment in flagship cultural projects-- large-scale, iconic museums and arts centers that are intended to enhance the city image while catalyzing private sector investment and attracting tourists to the surrounding area. This article concentrates on an aspect of the flagship cultural strategy that has received surprisingly little focused attention-- the role that urban design and context play in realizing project outcomes. The analysis concentrates on two established flagship museums in Los Angeles and San Jose, California. The research demonstrates that certain urban design characteristics can negatively affect the ability of a project to attract visitors and generate commercial activity. At the same time, however, factors beyond the local context may be an overriding factor in project outcomes thus calling into question the concept of cultural catalyst.

## **Introduction**

Many local governments are paying increased attention to the arts as a vital component of central city redevelopment. One of the most prevalent strategies in this regard has been to invest in flagship museums and art centers. These iconic, multi-use, and often large-scale facilities are typically located in the central city and housed in buildings designed by world-renowned architects, which in some cases are attractions over and above the art inside. Municipalities support flagship cultural development in the belief that such projects will enhance the city image while catalyzing private sector investment and attracting tourists to their surrounding area. Although such projects have earlier origins (e.g. Lincoln Center in New York or the Pompidou Center in Paris), they have mushroomed in the decade since the opening of the Guggenheim Bilbao.

It is plausible, however, that in most instances the ability of the flagship cultural strategy to stimulate development depends not only on spectacular architecture, but also on the local context and urban design surrounding the building itself. Unfortunately, most literature on flagship cultural development either overlooks such factors in the catalytic process-- essentially the ability of a building to ignite and sustain a chain reaction of incremental activity in the surrounding area (Attoe and Longa, 1989; Sternberg, 2002)-- or treats urban design in a singular fashion, isolated from broader socio-economic factors.

This article will explore how urban design and context affect the catalytic ability of flagship cultural institutions and assess the overall significance of these factors in relation to regional social and economic issues. Following an overview of the research on museums and urban revitalization, I highlight two case studies of established flagship cultural projects in Los Angeles and San Jose, California. Drawing on interviews with city officials, cultural facility

staff, neighborhood organizations, and members of the local arts community as well as documentary sources, each case examines the relationship between urban design, local economic development, and the institutional needs of the cultural facilities themselves. The research shows that certain urban design characteristics can negatively affect the ability of a project to attract visitors and generate commercial activity. At the same time, however, factors beyond the local context may be an overriding factor in project outcomes necessitating a reevaluation of the catalytic process.

### **Museums and Urban Revitalization**

Over the last three decades, museums and other cultural institutions have undergone dramatic transformations both internally and in their perceived role in our economic and social life. One of the most prominent and well-documented of these changes is the emphasis on creating an entertainment experience alongside traditional roles of archiving and collecting, preservation, and public edification. In their collective bid to attract more visitors and generate revenue, museums continue to build larger, signature buildings, welcome corporate sponsorship, establish branch facilities, and provide more opportunities for consumption through blockbuster events, cafés, stores, and merchandising (Frey, 1998; Hamnett and Shoal, 2003; Van Aalst and Boogaarts, 2003; Wu, 2002).

Many cities have encouraged and funded such initiatives, perceiving mainstream cultural institutions to be an ideal means of attracting visitors to new redevelopment projects and functioning as catalysts for economic development while enhancing the city image (Strom, 1999, 2002; Zukin, 1995). In the recent past, the shared interests of cities and cultural institutions have produced two notable growth spurts in the production and expansion of cultural facilities. The first building boom occurred in the 1980's spurred in part by the 1977 opening of the Centre

Pompidou in Paris, which demonstrated the popular success of a multi-functional and relatively informal and eclectic cultural destination. Two decades later, Frank Gehry's unique design for the Guggenheim Bilbao ushered in a new wave of museum construction. Widely commented on in both the popular press and academic literature, the museum has been heralded as "one of the most transformative symbols of city place-making of the last decade" for its ability to reengineer the image of the former industrial city and attract tourists from around the globe (Baily, 2002; Evans, 2002, p. 432; Plaza, 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2001). Hoping to generate their own "Bilbao effect," cities ranging from Milwaukee to Abu Dhabi are investing millions in high-profile cultural complexes in which architecture, entertainment, and consumption take center stage (Gordon, 2004; Riding, 2007). None, however, have yet to actually enjoy the Guggenheim's success.<sup>1</sup>

The changing priorities and challenges of contemporary cultural institutions have been well-documented in architectural terms, but the focus has primarily been on the relationship between container and content (Davis, 1990; Montaner, 1990; Newhouse, 1998; Ritchie, 1994; Zeiger, 2005). The work reveals how changes in museum design and function have accompanied their rise as catalytic projects and the associated pressure on museums to maintain their larger, more spectacular buildings, store their expanded collections, and market their blockbuster exhibitions. However, the focus on the building itself provides little towards understanding how the catalytic ability of cultural buildings is actually affected by their immediate context.

Most research that does take physical design and context into account tends to focus on the larger cultural district rather than on the specific relationship between a flagship building and its surroundings (McCarthy, 2006; Montgomery, 2003; Van Aalst and Boogaarts, 2003;

Wansborough and Mageean, 2000). For these researchers, successful culture-led redevelopment relies upon the distinct character or identity of a district, creating a lively and well-defined public realm, and the existence of a critical mass of cultural facilities within a diverse mix of land uses and building types. Much of this work looks to classic urban design theory (e.g. Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, and William Whyte) to prescribe the ideal physical characteristics for culture-led redevelopment. As suggested above, Jacob's four essential conditions to generate and maintain "city diversity"-- namely, a mix of primary uses and the need for small blocks, aged buildings, and a density of activity-- is a key inspiration (Jacobs, 1961).

Of particular interest here, is Jacobs' description of the catalytic process that occurs when primary uses-- land uses that produce significant human and economic activity such as major employment and residential buildings-- stimulate a demand for secondary uses-- for example, retail, restaurants, or even art galleries. To illustrate this process, Jacobs discusses how Carnegie Hall in New York City functions as a catalytic project (or what she calls a "primer"). By generating a significant amount of nighttime activity, she finds that the concert hall acts as an anchor for "secondary diversity," in this case, many smaller performing arts studios, restaurants, and residential buildings that attract musicians and artists-- even despite its physical "handicap" of being situated at the end of long blocks (Jacobs, 1961, p. 167).

In this vein, Attoe and Longa (1989) concentrate specifically on the impact of "catalytic architecture" on its immediate context. Their concept broadly seeks to capture the ways in which a single building or project can incrementally generate new activity as well as influence the subsequent development of a place. Drawing on this work, Sternberg (2002) specifically focuses on the urban design of "cultural catalysts" and proposes guidelines to determine if a cultural facility is positioned to meet its catalytic potential. His work suggests that those cultural

facilities that are designed within close proximity and maintain direct linkages to commercial establishments, are located near public transit and parking facilities, and pay attention to pedestrian traffic and crowd flow will be most successful.

While this literature provides useful insights into the physical qualities that enable some cultural redevelopment projects to catalyze commercial development and engender a lively public realm, the work generally overlooks some key issues. First, all encompassing urban design prescriptions do not necessarily take into account the possibility that cultural institutions possess varying needs and often cater to divergent audiences depending on their location, context, and mission. As such, no one set of design requirements will likely be suitable in all times and places. Second, although the research is helpful in understanding the relationship between the flagship building and the urban design context, many cultural institutions are not located in an area specifically defined as a cultural district and so may face different challenges. Finally, and most crucially, the focus on catalytic architecture and design tends to ignore influences external to the immediate physical environment including, for example, competition from neighboring commercial or arts districts, the effects of economic recession, or aspects of a city's specific social and economic geography. Such factors may supersede or at least alter the impacts of "good" design and, therefore, need to be considered in the analysis.

### **Case Overview and Analysis**

This article explores the impacts of urban design and context on the catalytic ability of flagship cultural institutions through two case studies of contemporary art museums-- the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles and the San Jose Museum of Art (SJMA) in San Jose, California. The museums were chosen because they possess many features common to flagship cultural projects. Each museum was designed by a well-known architecture



firm and funded largely through a redevelopment agency. The primary goal for both agencies was to create a high-profile project that would improve the image of its surrounding downtown area and, in turn, catalyze commercial activity and attract visitors there. At the same time, the sites exhibit contrasting urban design characteristics. Although both museums are near a variety of land uses including other notable cultural facilities, MOCA is situated among towering high-rise buildings in the urban renewal-era redevelopment project Bunker Hill. In contrast, SJMA is located in the heart of the city's low-rise, pedestrian-scale downtown redevelopment area, Paseo de San Antonio, and faces onto Cesar Chavez Park, the city's central public space. Furthermore, while each case is located in California, the research takes place in cities with varied histories, political climates, and arts communities, which result in different challenges and priorities for the museums. The point of this work, therefore, is not to identify general propositions that guide the outcomes of the flagship cultural strategy in all times and places. Rather, by recognizing the specificity of each case, I seek to show how the catalytic role of these flagship cultural institutions is shaped by their particular locale and offer lessons that local governments may find useful in pursuing their own cultural strategies.

*Bunker Hill and the Museum of Contemporary Art: Isolated at the Center*

MOCA opened in December 1986 within the city's oldest and largest redevelopment area, Bunker Hill. Funded through the Community Redevelopment Agency's (CRA) public art fund and designed by Arata Isozaki, MOCA's 100,000 square foot museum houses a 5,000 piece collection and includes galleries, an auditorium, library, café, and store. Isozaki's postmodern adaptation of neo-classical museum design hinges on basic geometric forms such as pyramidal skylights, cubed openings, and a barrel vault archway (Fig. 1). Despite developer restrictions that limited the building's height and footprint, the distinctive yet unobtrusive building is a

quintessential symbol of high culture (Berelowitz, 1991).

[Figure 1 about here]

Prior to MOCA's opening, the 133-acre Bunker Hill project had successfully reoriented the financial and corporate hub of Los Angeles, but as a classic example of 1960's-style urban renewal, had not been able to create the vital, civic urban center that the CRA had envisioned (Fig. 2). As many have noted, the superblocks of Bunker Hill created a "new" and exclusive downtown that is physically and socially insulated from the "old" downtown reserved for the poor (Davis, 1990; Loukaitou-Sideris and Sansbury, 1995/96). Perhaps most emblematic of this division is the Bonaventure Hotel, Fredric Jameson's (1991) iconic symbol of "late capitalism," which he infamously describes as providing a self-contained and inward-facing world that totally ignores the city outside.

In an attempt to correct these problems, the Agency set out to develop California Plaza-- an 11.3 acre, \$1.4 million project-- which in addition to MOCA today contains the Colburn School of Music, an outdoor performance space (Water Court), and multiple high-rise buildings with office, hotel, and residential uses (Fig. 3). Also located within Bunker Hill is the Los Angeles Music Center, which contains the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Ahmanson Theater, Taper Forum, and, most recently, the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall.<sup>2</sup> Other downtown art spaces include MOCA's sister facility, the Geffen Contemporary, and three separate arts districts (the Arts District, Gallery Row, and Chinatown).

[Figures 2 and 3 about here]

The CRA envisioned MOCA as the physical and symbolic centerpiece of its project to catalyze economic revitalization in the heart of the downtown business district. Both the Redevelopment Agency and museum board promised that this grand cultural attraction would

transform Bunker Hill into a major destination point by providing “a distinctive image and identity to the overall development which should enhance its appeal to prospective tenants, especially commercial galleries, bookshops, theaters, and restaurants” (Community Redevelopment Agency, 1979; Norris, 1979, p. 3). As Donald Cosgrove, former CRA Deputy Administrator, explains, “the common thinking at the CRA was that the right cultural facilities would bring the commercial facilities that might want to be associated with them. We were particularly thinking about attracting people in the evening as well because we were trying to combat the concept of downtown shutting down at 5:30, and to try to make downtown more of a regional center.”<sup>3</sup>

As the first museum in the city dedicated entirely to the exhibition of contemporary art, MOCA provided a necessary icon to elevate the image of Los Angeles as an arts destination nationwide, if not internationally. Upon its opening, the *New York Times* hailed the museum as “one of the finest facilities for contemporary art in the world” (Brenson, 1986) and declared that it “confirmed a major shift of energy in the world of art to Los Angeles” (Goldberger, 1986).

However, in terms of MOCA’s ability to catalyze local development, international prestige has not been sufficient to conquer the physical and perceptual barriers associated with its location within Bunker Hill and downtown. MOCA’s director for most its existence, Richard Koshalek, conveys the seemingly pervasive view at the museum that

too much expectation was put on MOCA to change downtown LA...MOCA didn’t really succeed downtown. It still hasn’t, if you want to be truly honest about it. Has it generated a lot of international attention? Yes. Is it recognized around the world? Yes. Has it done exhibitions that have toured the world and people know about MOCA just as they know about MOMA [New York]? Yes. But has it generated the kind of street life, the kind of energy downtown that you’d expect it to? No, not at all. Is it struggling for attendance? Every single day of its life.<sup>4</sup>

MOCA’s poor performance as a cultural catalyst begins with its California Plaza location. The

project design communicates a corporate-centric, fortress mentality that, rather than offering a vital public space, is emblematic of Bunker Hill's brand of modernism and antithetical to the design prescriptions of Jacobs (1961) and others described above. A unified, self-contained superblock of office, hotel, and residential towers, each component of California Plaza faces onto a set of discrete and fragmented plazas at the interior of the project (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998). As the California Plaza site plan (Fig. 3) shows, the only ground-level street access to these officially public spaces-- and MOCA-- is from Grand Avenue. Primary access to California Plaza is instead provided through the project's underground parking structures. The resulting dual level street system enables visitors to conveniently park their vehicles and access the privatized public spaces above without having to leave the complex. However, this organization literally creates an island in which California Plaza's upper elevation floats above the surrounding downtown spaces and thereby severs any pedestrian linkages and perceptual connection beyond the project boundaries. As a result of this isolation, not only does MOCA fail to provide an inviting nucleus for the project, but the museum itself is handicapped in attracting visitors and functioning as a cultural catalyst.

While the CRA intended MOCA as the centerpiece of California Plaza, the project design prohibits secondary commercial activity that is compatible with the museum. Most of the available retail and restaurant sites in California Plaza are located away from the museum around Water Court or in the base of the office towers and high-rise Omni hotel. Virtually none of these spaces are within direct sight of the museum or Grand Avenue. As multiple CRA staff attest, not only have the smaller-scale restaurant and retail spaces been difficult to rent, but also they are primarily geared toward lunchtime office workers and, as such, are closed on weekends when the museum receives most of its visitors.<sup>5</sup> This design, coupled with California Plaza's corporate

aesthetic and rents that are not affordable for many small-scale arts-related businesses, has essentially prohibited the kind of development that the museum board and CRA dreamed MOCA would attract.

In addition, Bunker Hill continues to lack other primary cultural activities that could produce synergetic effects with the contemporary art museum and in turn attract visitors and catalyze development. Although the Music Center is nearby and Grand Performances at Water Court is within California Plaza itself, there is little cooperative effort.<sup>6</sup> For example, despite the co-presence of MOCA and Grand Performances, MOCA staff report that the two entities share no common objectives, overlapping audience, or event programming. Many of Grand Performances' events are world music concerts that entertain the lunch-time crowds in the surrounding office towers. Rather than seeking a common link between audiences either through the type or timing of events, the two remain completely unrelated. Moreover, due in part to MOCA's isolated location and the defining identity of the project as an office complex, MOCA has failed to establish and maintain any connection with the existing downtown arts districts.

These extant problems were in part designed in by the California Plaza developers who fought vigorously to confine the museum's physical presence so as to reduce any potentially competitive revenue generating activities and to ensure that the museum did not block the views of the surrounding condominiums. As a result, the MOCA building adheres to design restrictions including a 40 foot height limit, sunken entryway, and basement-level café. This ultimately produced a building that is physically diminutive in relation to the surrounding Bunker Hill towers and difficult for many to access (Figs. 4-5).<sup>7</sup> Jack Wiant, who has been with MOCA since its opening at California Plaza, explains that "[the developers] wanted the museum building to be as low, inconspicuous, and out of the way as possible... This has given us some

challenges. First of all, most people can't find the entrance. You'd be surprised what a problem that is for us. We have the vast majority of people who come to MOCA, can't find the entrance, and when they do, they are [displeased with] us...Right off the bat we have lost them.”<sup>8</sup>

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

Attention to design and location are particularly important for museums because they are typically informal destinations. According to MOCA staff, with the exception of special exhibitions, not only do the vast majority of their visitors purchase tickets on the day they attend, but also the bulk of the museum's audience travels from outside the downtown area.<sup>9</sup> However, given the architectural restrictions and the California Plaza context, MOCA does not seem to possess the aura of a major destination and, consequently, has difficulty attracting visitors downtown for the sole purpose of attending the museum. As former Director of Development at MOCA Ericka Clark adds, MOCA's location contributed to this problem: “it was very hard to get people there. It was a constant issue, not MOCA's, but the negotiation of the city streets and the perception that downtown is inaccessible.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, given the spontaneity of museum-going, most people will combine their trip with other activities. As such, MOCA's ability to draw an audience is paradoxically dependent on the proximity of the smaller-scale restaurants, retail, or art spaces that it was meant to catalyze. MOCA staff laments that because the museum attracts most of its visitors on weekends and because many of the arts and associated commercial activities in the city have not developed in Bunker Hill or much of downtown, for most of the museum's existence, it has been an isolated phenomenon struggling to attract visitors.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Downtown Redevelopment and the San Jose Museum of Art: Recentering Silicon Valley?*

The San Jose Museum of Art (SJMA) was formed in 1969 in the former main public library and post office building in the city's then languishing downtown. The museum more than

tripled in size to 78,000 square feet through a 1991 expansion (designed by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill) and, in 1997, the original historic building underwent renovation (Fig. 6). The rebuilding efforts, largely funded by the San Jose Redevelopment Agency, enabled the museum to increase its exhibition space and open a café, store, research library, and education center. SJMA stands out as one of the city's primary flagship cultural projects not only for its prominent location and structure, but also for its programming. SJMA came into the national art spotlight when in 1994 it began an eight year relationship with the Whitney Museum to house a series of exhibitions of work from the New York museum's permanent collection. Further, in 2001, the museum enacted a policy of free admission that has significantly diversified and increased its annual attendance (San Jose Museum of Art, 2001). Museum staff view these milestones as helping the institution to better meet its mission of "fostering an awareness, appreciation, and understanding of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art in the diverse audiences of the Bay Area."<sup>12</sup>

[Figure 6 about here]

Like many US cities in the 1960's and 1970's, downtown San Jose saw much of its commercial activity flee to rapidly expanding suburban communities. In the succeeding decades, the Redevelopment Agency funneled over \$1 billion in tax increment revenue from its flourishing tech-based office parks into a series of downtown revitalization projects. The goal of this venture was to establish a "civic context for private development" (Claiborne, 2004, p. 5)-- comprised of new cultural and entertainment facilities, parks, and other public improvements-- to trigger "a cycle of economic growth that serves to reverse the decades of decline and blight" (San Jose Redevelopment Agency, 2005, p. 3).<sup>13</sup> In the process, the SJRA created a de facto district of flagship cultural facilities around downtown's central open space, Cesar Chavez Park,

and the adjacent Paseo de San Antonio (Fig. 7-9). Here, the Agency contributed major funding and key building sites for the San Jose Museum of Art, the Tech Museum of Innovation, and The San Jose Repertory Theater. These regional attractions anchor the surrounding hotels, convention, and retail space also funded by the Redevelopment Agency. Just south of this area lies the arts and entertainment district known as “SoFA,” the South First Area. A former red-light district, SoFA is home primarily to smaller-scale nonprofit art spaces, bars, and restaurants, which co-exist with a few remaining auto garages and discount retail stores.

[Figures 7-9 about here]

As SJRA Downtown Coordinator Dennis Korabiak explains, the Agency felt that cultural facilities would help to catalyze commercial development and attract tourists: “San Jose is not widely known as a tourist attraction so we were trying to bring in these facilities...to help fill in that gap. You bring in the cultural facilities and suddenly you now have hotels that are more viable. Then you have restaurants and other facilities. They interact with each other so the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>14</sup> In particular, the Agency felt that the cultural projects could provide the necessary catalyst to revive the downtown economy by forming a distinctive urban experience that would attract visitors from suburban enclaves like Mountain View and Palo Alto and even more established places such as San Francisco and Monterey.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the Agency hoped that prominent cultural facilities like SJMA could establish a competitive regional niche by cultivating an image of San Jose as the “unique creative and cultural center of Silicon Valley” (City of San Jose, 2003, p. 4, 5).

Unlike MOCA, SJMA and its sister institutions benefit from a downtown location consciously designed by the Redevelopment Agency that fits the prescriptions of contemporary urbanism and the design specifications set out by Sternberg (2002) for cultural catalysts



described above. For example, the Agency stipulated that all new commercial buildings downtown must be built to the property line, oriented to the street grid, and contain street-facing entrances (Aidala and Skevos, 2003). Other major efforts include maintaining the preexisting street grid and developing new public spaces such as Cesar Chavez Park and the Mediterranean-themed Paseo de San Antonio (see Fig. 9). The Agency created the latter by converting San Antonio street to a pedestrian-friendly promenade lined with retail and restaurant spaces. The Paseo is anchored at one end by SJMA and the five-star Fairmont Hotel (both of which also face onto Cesar Chavez Park). The other end is anchored by the Rep Theater, the downtown transit mall (bus, shuttle, and light rail access), and San Jose State University. Tenants on the Paseo primarily include chain retail and restaurants such as Starbucks, McCormick and Schmidt's Seafood, and Johnny Rockets, many of which received generous subsidies from the Agency to locate downtown.

Despite the accessible and walkable mixed-use design context and the museum's relative success at building a regional audience, neither SJMA nor the collective presence of the flagship cultural facilities has been able to significantly catalyze private sector development as planned. Redevelopment officials readily admit that the presence of cultural and entertainment amenities in a carefully designed space has not been sufficient to override the factors that impede downtown development.<sup>16</sup> This is due to a number of issues.

First, as cultural catalysts, flagship museums are forced to vie regionally and, in some cases, internationally, both with other cultural institutions and even other shopping and entertainment venues. In this regard, downtown San Jose has yet to reach the point at which it can compete with cultural offerings throughout the region. With nearby cities that have a more established reputation for arts and culture, most notably San Francisco, San Jose's cultural

development initiative is at a severe disadvantage. Furthermore, San Jose is a city not well known as a tourist destination, let alone a cultural destination, and yet its downtown cultural flagships must compete not only with San Francisco, but also with the range of tourist attractions available in the greater Bay Area.

Additionally, as a regional catalyst, that in theory provides a cosmopolitan experience unique to the Santa Clara Valley, the flagship projects are called upon to attract people away from shopping centers in neighboring cities such as Palo Alto and Los Gatos as well as San Jose retail complexes. Although the Agency wove them into a cultural district setting that offers the opportunity to shop and dine, the cultured shopping experience in an outdoor mall setting is available elsewhere. Just a few miles away, the highly successful Santana Row offers visitors most of the amenities found downtown without the worry of being exposed to homelessness or lack of parking. This themed shopping center describes itself as “a vibrant community of luxurious apartments, distinctive condominiums, exciting shops, pampering spas, and a full-service hotel...Our pedestrian-friendly streets have a European flair, complete with fountains, a farmers’ market, and concerts and other special events in the open air.”<sup>17</sup> The point here is not to offer another critique of such “lifestyle centers” and themed shopping spaces as being staged, branded, and inauthentic (Sorkin, 1992). Rather, the purpose is to emphasize that the arts are not necessarily a prime catalyst of cultural consumption, and when consumption is a main objective, cultural institutions stand side by side European stage sets designed to keep people entertained and shopping longer (Hannigan, 1998). When the objective is shopping, many people seem to prefer strolling along a re-creation of a Parisian neighborhood over the opportunity to view exhibits at SJMA such as Sandow Birk’s interpretation of *Dante’s Inferno* (featuring Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York as hell, purgatory, and paradise respectively) or *Vital*

*Signs*, a photographic exhibition of scenes from hospitals and doctors' offices-- even if they too are located in a walkable, Mediterranean-style environment.

This sort of competition arises because, in many instances, when a cultural institution is treated as a development catalyst, its role is interpreted as creating an experience or setting for cultural consumption. Ignoring the inherent problems with such an approach, this goal cannot be satisfied by design alone. Even in a pedestrian-oriented space with good transit linkages, the cultural institutions still have to attract people to the area in the first place. Moreover, while cultural flagships may offer a means to compete for potential shoppers, in reality these facilities may actually depend on the shoppers rather than act as a magnet for them. In fact, Daniel Keegan, SJMA's director, regrets that Santana Row was not built downtown and openly admits that he feels such a development is necessary for the survival of the museum itself.<sup>18</sup> In effect, the downtown context actually impedes SJMA from attracting visitors. This is manifest in relation to the informal nature of museum-going. For example, according to SJMA's 2005 visitor survey, just 35% attended the museum specifically to see an exhibition, while 48% attended spontaneously because they were "just passing by." Although free admission plays a role in this ratio, it does highlight the dependence of flagship buildings on their location. A large portion of the SJMA audience is derived from people who are downtown for reasons other than attending the museum and, therefore, the slow commercial development and the lack of smaller-scale businesses that cater to a similar audience seem to hinder museum attendance.

In fact, downtown's carefully planned built environment and coordinated aesthetics may be a factor in downtown's slow regional competitiveness and the poor performance of the cultural catalysts in this regard. While architecturally and programmatically SJMA, the Rep, and the Tech function as downtown icons, they are ultimately situated in a derivative outdoor mall.

Although the SJRA felt that cultural facilities would establish a niche to stand out amongst competing locations by providing an urban entertainment experience unavailable in neighboring cities and malls, the Agency's highly programmed design seems to have created not a civic context, but a "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1978) that many feel is incongruous to differentiating the area from competing suburban locations. Critics charge that the Redevelopment Agency has pursued a top-down style of planning that has created a highly regulated and sterile downtown, and feel that the many smaller, less flashy and independent stores, ethnic businesses, and even strip clubs displaced by redevelopment is cause for downtown's lackluster revival.<sup>19</sup> As *San Jose Mercury News* architecture critic Alan Hess asks,

So how has it all worked? Walk around downtown San Jose and the deliberate effort to unify is evident. The placement of most major buildings reinforces a walkable core. Cultural buildings are found on premium sites. The web of plazas, paseos, parks and sidewalks is well conceived and executed. Landscaping, street furniture, and paving are all consciously designed and well planned...But in so doing, it crushed the seeds of a true urban population. The *taquerias*, Vietnamese pho restaurants, western clothing stores, wedding-gown emporia, and other mom-and-pop retail outlets of its historic core were businesses that could have formed the foundation for a lively, unique public realm. But these were run out of town, or out of business (Hess, 2003, p. 21, 24).

In short, while the SJRA provided all the components of contemporary downtown urbanism, including cultural attractions, which it viewed as central amenities for potential residents bored with suburbia and in search of an "urban lifestyle," the anticipated sociability and diversity is missing (Figs. 10-11).

[Figures 10 and 11 about here]

In relation to this, in terms of art attendance, the SJRA context is not compatible with the prevailing conceptions of what many think a cultural district or arts space is supposed to look like. Many people have come to assume that art should be consumed in historically varied, dense, and sometimes messy built environments not unlike that endorsed by Jane Jacobs and her adherents (e.g. gentrified places like SoHo) or within the walls of a spectacular temple of art

(such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art or even MOCA). Paseo de San Antonio offers neither. While the area meets many of Jacobs' conditions for generating secondary diversity and Sternberg's criteria for cultural catalysts, this potential is tempered by the fact that the Paseo and downtown San Jose are intended to provide a safe and familiar urban experience based on the assumed expectations of those who live in the upscale tract homes of the surrounding Santa Clara Valley.

As a consequence, the downtown context is largely incompatible with arts development. Although SJMA and the other cultural facilities are oriented in such a way as to feed the neighboring commercial spaces and hotel, the bland Mediterranean theme of the Paseo and its commercial spaces do not seem aesthetically or technically conducive to many of the commercial establishments (such as art galleries or art supply stores) that would benefit from a location near a contemporary art museum or performing arts theater. As a result, SJMA does not help the area establish the regional niche as the Redevelopment Agency intended. While these may be aesthetically pleasing locations, they are not practical in terms of creating opportunities for expanding arts development. Small-scale art spaces do, however, exist just south of the Chavez Park area in SoFA. In effect, the major institutions are grouped in an area that although physically proximate, is mentally and visually distinct from the smaller and more eclectic arts organizations and entertainment venues there. Consequently, rather than each building on the presence of the other, the flagship cultural facilities and the smaller art spaces such as the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, MACLA, and Anno Domini, remain isolated. Further, these institutions report no catalytic activity in SoFA due to their larger neighbors nor any compulsion to move closer to them.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Particularly since the opening of the Guggenheim Bilbao, media reports have touted spectacular cultural facilities as instant catalysts of central city revitalization. In contrast, these case studies of well-established museums offer a more realistic assessment of the “build it and they will come” strategy. Foremost, the cases highlight the important role that both urban design and the local and regional context play in the ability of a flagship cultural project to alter place images and function as a catalyst for economic development. Whereas MOCA’s home among the office towers of Bunker Hill demonstrates the problems of an insulated and inaccessible design, SJMA’s struggle downtown highlights that cities must additionally consider the regional context in which the cultural catalyst operates. Although neither project has met its redevelopment objectives, the cases nonetheless offer important lessons in consideration of the catalytic process and provide a glimpse of two potential scenarios for cities hoping to mimic the “Bilbao effect.” Whereas MOCA is a quintessential flagship cultural project with its high-profile architecture and internationally renowned collection and exhibitions, SJMA furnishes an example of a more modest, regional destination similar to what most cities might expect from a flagship project.

A key issue in both cases is that, because the cultural projects do not actually generate new arts and commercial activity in and of themselves, the catalytic power of a flagship cultural project depends on both the presence of compatible activities interested in relocating adjacent to a museum and an adequate space to house them. Although Los Angeles is home to a very large arts community that might be attracted to a museum location, MOCA’s home in California Plaza isolates the museum from other commercial spaces in the project, which are nonetheless inappropriate and unaffordable for many of the smaller commercial galleries, restaurants, and other services that a flagship museum might anchor.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the disconnected location

ensures that physical links with the other downtown arts districts would be difficult to establish and maintain. Similarly, in terms of tourism, the museum's below-ground gallery entrance and restaurant and poor connection to the street, place MOCA at a disadvantage in attracting spontaneous visits.

SJMA faces the same problem for a different reason. While downtown San Jose largely fits the design criteria for cultural catalysts outlined by Sternberg (2002), the museum faces stiff regional competition in terms of retail and tourism and contains a much smaller arts community than Los Angeles. Consequently, while the existing built environment could contain compatible commercial activities and provide visitors multiple reasons to visit downtown, regional considerations, such as competition from surrounding retail centers, mitigate the likelihood that a contemporary art museum amongst other cultural facilities will attract commercial and tourism development away from other places. This situation is compounded by SJMA's location in Paseo de San Antonio, which is indistinguishable from shopping settings throughout the region.

Although the Guggenheim Bilbao seems to have created a competitive advantage for that city, these case studies show that the flagship cultural strategy may not be easily replicated and, as a result, highlight the danger of singling out Bilbao as a model. As Ceballos (2004, p. 185) points out, "in order for the experience to be transferable it has to be codified in such a way that it becomes simplified and stripped of its contextual references." Extending from this, the apparent success of the "Bilbao effect" essentially calls for places to import cultural capital on a project by project basis rather than coordinating existing assets rooted in local arts communities. Yet, in both Los Angeles and San Jose, the flagship museums are dependant on, rather than determine, the development of their surrounding context. By failing to draw new retail, restaurants, and art galleries, the museums reveal the mutual dependence that exists between the

cultural catalyst and these “secondary” activities. This analysis, therefore, not only contradicts the “Bilbao effect,” but also calls into question the concept of cultural catalyst by highlighting the importance of situating flagship cultural projects in areas where a symbiosis with compatible small-scale activity can be established or strengthened rather than assuming they will simply ignite development.

Although the case studies indicate no step-by-step formula for success, they do suggest that cities should consider the flagship cultural project as a means of building on existing arts-based activity rather than creating it in its own right. For example, rather than expanding the old City library for SJMA, the San Jose Redevelopment Agency might have found a new site for the museum in SoFA. This could have helped to establish a stronger center for the city’s small and sprawling arts community, generated a higher volume of foot traffic for the existing smaller nonprofit and commercial galleries, and provided cultural tourists with multiple reasons to go downtown. SJMA would retain an accessible and pedestrian friendly location, but one that did not require it to exist in and compete directly with regional shopping destinations. While no such opportunity exists in Bunker Hill-- MOCA was built with funds extracted from the California Plaza public art fund-- the building and its immediate surroundings could be redesigned in consideration of some of the urban design issues that handicap its location. For instance, the museum could be oriented to open onto Grand Avenue by bringing its main entrance and café to a more physically and visually accessible location at street level. In addition, MOCA could explore programs that would expand its presence beyond its confining physical location by sponsoring temporary art installations throughout downtown or even the city at large. Although each institution is hampered by characteristics of its design and location, potential exists to overcome these physical and mental barriers through a rethinking of the



catalytic process as one of symbiosis with the surrounding spaces and activities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Annual Report (2005), the museum attracted 965,000 visitors in 2005 and generated 1.36 billion euros since its 1997 opening.

<sup>2</sup> Hoping to generate a “Disney effect,” plans are currently under way for the Grand Avenue Project, the latest large-scale, mixed-use complex intended to recenter the city around Bunker Hill.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Donald Cosgrove, former Deputy Administrator, Community Redevelopment Agency, Pasadena, CA, 24 February and 10 March, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Richard Koshalek, former Director, Museum of Contemporary Art, Pasadena, CA, 15 March, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, Cosgrove; Spivak.

<sup>6</sup> A 12-screen cineplex and the Bella Lewitzky Dance Gallery were initially planned for California Plaza, but never built (Community Redevelopment Agency, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Cosgrove; Helfeld; Koshalek; Interview with Randy Murphy, Director of Administration, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 18 February, 2005; Interview with Jack Wiant, Chief Financial Officer, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 18 February, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Wiant. Additionally, as Cosgrove notes, “it got down to such nitty-gritty as the developer saying that the museum café could have no more than 75 seats and could not have hot food” (Interview, Cosgrove).

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Murphy; Wiant.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ericka Clark, former Director of Development, Museum of Contemporary Art, Pasadena, CA, 15 March, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Clark; Koshalek; Murphy; Wiant.

<sup>12</sup> *San Jose Museum of Art*. Retrieved 20 March, 2006 from <http://www.sjmusart.org/>.

Telephone interview with Josi Callan, former Director, San Jose Museum of Art, 5 October, 2005; Interview with Daniel Keegan, Director, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, 13 October, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Dennis Korabiak, Downtown Coordinator, San Jose Redevelopment Agency, San Jose, 6 October, 2005; Interview with Harry Mavrogenes, Executive Director, San Jose Redevelopment Agency, San Jose, 6 October, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Korabiak

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Mavrogenes.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Mavrogenes; Korabiak.

<sup>17</sup> *Santana Row*. Retrieved 1 April, 2006 from [www.santanarow.com](http://www.santanarow.com).

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Keegan.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Knies; Interview with Lorraine Wallace Rowe, President, Coalition for Redevelopment Reform, 6 October, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Tamara Alvarado, Executive Director, Movimiento de Arte Y Cultura Latino Americana, San Jose, 13 October, 2005. Interview with Cherri Lakey and Brian Eder, owners, Anno Domini and producers, Phantom Galleries, San Jose, 13 October, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Although proponents of downtown development tout the recent opening on Bunker Hill of the Disney Concert Hall and Our Lady of the Angeles Cathedral (designed by Rafael Muneo) as

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sparking a downtown renaissance, these flagship buildings have yet to attract this type of activity.

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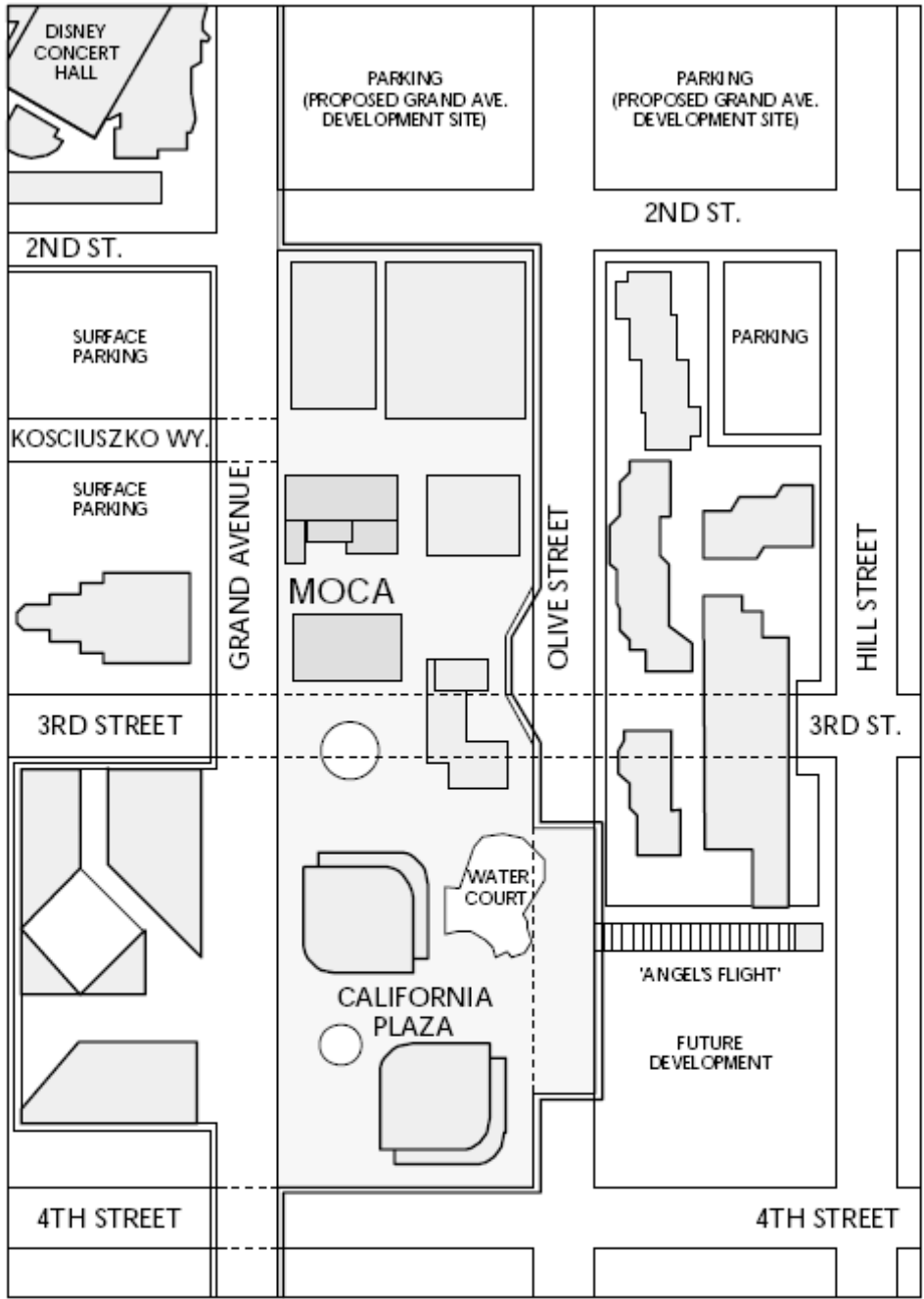
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Figure 1: The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)



Figure 2: Bunker Hill



**LEGEND**

----- SUBGRADE THOROUGHFARE

▭ BOUNDARIES OF UPPER ELEVATION

Figure 3: California Plaza Site Plan, by Danielle Langston. Used by permission: Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles



Figure 4: Entrance to MOCA galleries and café



Figure 5: MOCA: The Inaccessible Flagship Museum





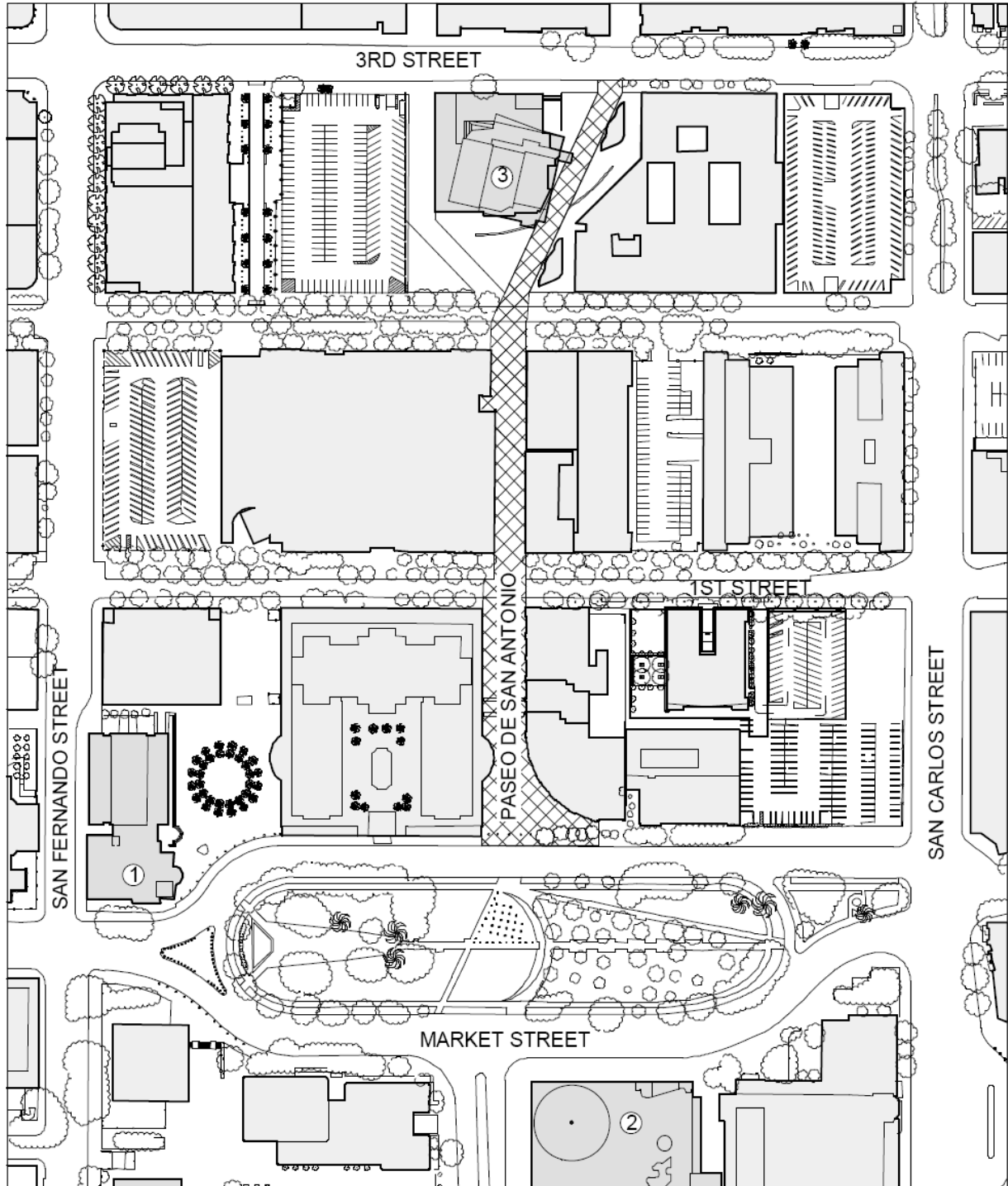
Figure 6: San Jose Museum of Art



Figure 7: Cesar Chavez Park (Tech Museum in background)



Figure 8: Paseo de San Antonio



- ① SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART
- ② THE TECH MUSEUM
- ③ SAN JOSE REPERTORY THEATER

Figure 9: Downtown San Jose Site Plan (showing Cesar Chavez Park and Paseo de San Antonio)



Figure 10: A typical weekday morning at Cesar Chavez Park



Figure 11: Late afternoon at San Jose Museum of Art