

GUGGENHEIM IN THE LAND OF THE BASQUES: REPERCUSSIONS AND PARADOXES

GUGGENHEIM EN EL PAÍS DE LOS VASCOS: EFECTOS Y PARADOJAS

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Abstract³

Much has been discussed about Bilbao's transformation and the impact that the Guggenheim Museum may have had in the process. However, the repercussions—and unexpected paradoxes—felt by other museums in the Basque Country have rarely been discussed.

The aim of this paper is to explore and assess the aforementioned process, its goals, the controversies it aroused, the political agendas and debates emerging around it and the impact of the Guggenheim Museum on other museums in the Basque Country. Specialized bibliography, official documents and media publications have been consulted in order to describe such a controversial, widely criticized and even vilified venture which eventually would set a landmark in the world of museums and cultural resource management.

Keywords

Guggenheim; achievements; criticism; debate; museums; Basque Country

Resumen

Se ha hablado en muchas ocasiones de la transformación de Bilbao y de la influencia del Museo Guggenheim en dicho cambio. Pero en contadas ocasiones se ha analizado el efecto –o los efectos paradójicos– que su aparición tuvo para el resto de los museos del País Vasco.

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Es lo que se pretende en este texto. La descripción y valoración del proceso, los logros obtenidos, las polémicas y críticas generadas, los debates políticos y parlamentarios y el efecto en el resto de los museos del País Vasco, son algunos de los temas planteados. Para ello se recurre a bibliografía especializada, documentación oficial y seguimiento periodístico de una aventura polémica, criticada e incluso denostada que, sin embargo, marca un antes y un después en el mundo de los museos y de la gestión patrimonial.

Palabras clave

Guggenheim; efectos; críticas; debates; museos; País Vasco

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WHO COULD HAVE TOLD the patriarch of the Guggenheims that his descendants (or the managers of the foundation named after him) would need to come to grips with the oddities of the peculiar Basque funding structure—and their Treasury system! Indeed, thanks to this scheme in the late twentieth century the rulers of such a tiny country⁴ undertook a bold venture which would cause misgivings from the onset. But the endeavour succeeded: in October 1997 the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum opened as the culmination of a complex, singular and controversial process which eventually became a cultural reference⁵.

From the beginning, the creation of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum features peculiar traits that differentiate it from any other museum undertakings. For some time the Foundation Solomon R. Guggenheim had sought to bring to fruition the idea of its director—Thomas Krens—to create a network of «affiliate» museums in order to circulate the artworks housed at the New York Museum and to generate cash to support the foundation's museum-business policy⁶.

The Basque Country, particularly Bilbao, had been seriously hit by the impact of the 1980's economic crisis. The situation was desperate: poverty, rampant unemployment and a disheartened population stuck in a dead-end with no hope of returning to the path of modernity and welfare.

The two aforementioned factors, so disparate, coincided and resulted in an unprecedented operation whose outcome could hardly have been predicted. The Basque institutions—the Basque Government and Bizkaia's *Diputación Foral*—and the New York foundation met, negotiated and after a series of ludicrous events⁷,

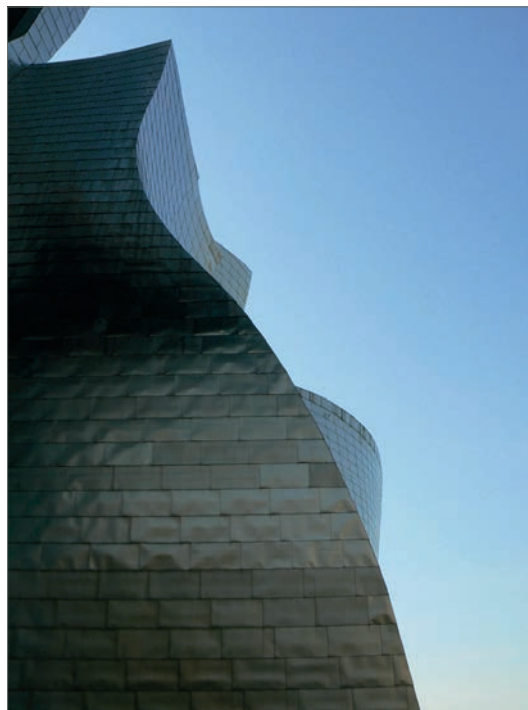


FIGURE 1. GUGGENHEIM BILBAO MUSEUM. Photograph taken by the authors

4. This paper refers to the Basque Country as the Autonomous Region of the Basque Country made up of the provinces of Álava/Araba, Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia. In terms of language and culture, the Basque universe could also encompass Navarra and three French provinces: Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea and Zuberoa, in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques department.

5. A summary of the chronological unfolding of the events was published in the newspaper *Berria* in an article titled «Zena, dena eta behar lukeenaren labirintoa. Bilboko Guggenheim museoa 20 urte. Kronologia» on 5 November 2017. <https://www.berria.eus/paperekoa/2991/032/001/2017-11-05/museoa-zena-dena-eta-behar-lukeenaren-labirintoa.htm> [Accessed 04/01/2022].

6. At the time there was talk of negotiations with other cities: Vienna, Salzburg, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Moscow, etc. Two other initiatives that did come about were the Deutsche Guggenheim, in Berlin, which operated from 1997 to 2013 at the Deutsche Bank premises [on line] <https://www.guggenheim.org/finding-aids/collection/a0054> [Accessed on 10/12/2021] and from 2001 to 2008, the Guggenheim Hermitage, located in the Casino Venetian in Las Vegas, USA. http://www.guggenheimlasvegas.org/building_herm.html [Accessed 20/12/2021].

7. Particularly noteworthy are the books by Zulaika, Joseba: *Crónica de una seducción. El museo Guggenheim Bilbao*. Madrid, Ed. Nerea, 1997; and by Otazu, Alfonso de: *Testigo de Descargo*. Editorial: Zurbano Confidential, 2021, especially part II titled «La idea de una noche de viento sur: el Guggenheim Bilbao (1989-1991)», pp. 63-258. It can be consulted on www.testigodedescargo.com

the project was set in motion with the Management Agreement signed in 1994 by the Foundation Solomon R. Guggenheim and the Basque authorities.

It turned out to be a match made in heaven. New York wanted to expand the Guggenheim universe. Cash is what the Basques needed. Faced with the conundrum of having to invest vast amounts of money in order to revert the course of hopelessness, the resolve was to spend. At least this is what everybody thought, used as we were (and continue to be, unfortunately) to viewing any money spent on funding almost any kind of cultural activity as an expense with no apparent profit. All the more so in the case of museums, more often than not boring mammoth buildings to feel proud of and then bypass.

So money was spent. Liberally: the Basque authorities paid the foundation 20 million dollars in two installments in 1992 and 1993 for the use of the collection and for services to be provided over the ensuing twenty years. At this point, something started to change regarding this kind of undertaking: one might begin to think that perhaps what had been spent actually involved an investment that could yield returns. What kind? That remained to be seen, though some scholars had already defended the suitability of this approach⁸.

Feasibility studies were conducted, an architect of renown⁹ was chosen—or rather foisted on by the foundation—who came up with a peculiar design¹⁰ punctually delivered within budget¹¹. The building and its set up cost 151,641,346 € (25,231,000,000 pesetas) according to the report published in 2001 by the Basque Board of Public Accounts¹². That sum, added to the funds paid to the Foundation Solomon Guggenheim and the purchase of artworks resulted in over 166 million euros.

The architecture matched other new infrastructures and buildings¹³ created with the purpose of regenerating the city of Bilbao. These consisted mainly of the comprehensive cleaning of the river Nervión—even recovering fishing¹⁴—; a plan for the underground network designed by Norman Foster who claimed it had been

8. See, for instance, Monreal, Luis; Torre, Marta de la: *Museums: An Investment for Development*. Paris, ICOM, 1982, and Myerscough, John: *The Economic Importance of Arts in Britain*. London, Policy Studies Institute, 1989. More recently, Crossick, Geoffrey; Kaszynska, Patrycja: *Understanding the value of arts & culture*. Swindon, Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2016.

9. Gehry, Frank O.: *Museo Guggenheim Bilbao*. Tokyo, A.D.A Edita, 1998.

10. Frias, María Antonia: *Arquitectura y percepción: el museo Guggenheim de Bilbao*. Pamplona, Universidad de Navarra, 2001.

11. Frank Gehry professed that «One thing that nobody knows is that my buildings come in on time and on budget», and also that all the artists he knew loved the Bilbao museum but that all the museum directors hated it. See Finkel, Jori: «Museum directors hated Bilbao», *The Art Newspaper*, 10 October 2014 <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Museum-directors-hated-Bilbao/35731>. [Accessed 12/10/2014], which could bring about the question (we will not delve into it here) of the troublesome relation between museologists and architects. The Guggenheim Museum also challenged the tradition of providing a container that dutifully respected its contents: the architect was given carte blanche to create the building unaware of what it would eventually be housing.

12. Tribunal Vasco De Cuentas Públicas: *Museo Guggenheim Bilbao: Proceso de construcción y puesta en funcionamiento*, 2001. <https://tvcp.eus/informes/> [Accessed 11/01/2022].

13. Zulaika, Joseba: *Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa: museums, architecture, and city renewal*. Reno, University of Nevada, Center for Basque Studies, 2003.

14. Diputación Foral De Bizkaia: *La pesca fluvial en Bizkaia*. 2021. Departamento de Sostenibilidad y Medio Natural, Bilbao, 2021.

«an almost religious experience»¹⁵; the new airport located in Loiu and the Uribitarte Bridge, next to the museum, both of them designed by Santiago Calatrava—and the source of fierce criticism and lawsuits; the Conference Centre (Federico Soriano and Dolores Palacios) and the Abandoibarra housing estate (Cesar Pelli).

A Board was created. The appointed managing director did not have a background in art or culture, instead he was an experienced businessman. He continues to run the Board though his relevance in the general scheme of things increased in 2008 when he was appointed General Manager of Global Strategy at the New York Foundation. Finally, museum activities started with the creation of its own collection, staff recruitment and a schedule of events including exhibitions, workshops, tuition sessions, etc.

As Juan Luis Laskurain—Treasury Counsellor of the *Diputación Foral* of Bizkaia—claimed, the final goal was not to enlighten the population of Bilbao but to reset the city at a particularly challenging moment in time¹⁶. The museum was meant to become the reference and centre-piece of the city's regeneration project to get back on the path of prosperity after a traumatic period of industrial restructuring, unemployment, labour unrest, violence, drug abuse and poverty¹⁷.

Besides, the museum was to fill a gap in the cultural scene of the Basque Country: a far-reaching centre of contemporary art of international renown was needed. Contemporary artworks were housed at some of the museums in the area but none of them were of any consequence beyond national borders.

The motivations and circumstances behind the choice of the Guggenheim trademark are complex and seem to be the result of the aforementioned convergence of interests rather than an actual will of the Basque authorities to create a museum¹⁸. Should that have been the case the Alhóndiga building, whose transformation project had been designed by Jorge de Oteiza and Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza¹⁹, could have been chosen. (FIGURE 2). Or the Museum of Fine Arts, a prestigious institution housing some contemporary artworks, could have been expanded²⁰ though the kind of expenditure needed to purchase top international artworks seemed totally unfeasible.

15. Agencia Efe: «Norman Foster: 'En Bilbao tuve una experiencia casi religiosa», *El Correo*, 27 de septiembre de 2014. <https://www.elcorreo.com/bizkaia/201409/27/norman-foster-nada-compara-20140927001844.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> [Accessed 05/09/2021].

16. Seisdedos, Iker: «Efecto Guggenheim: así se hizo», *El País*, 14 December 2014. http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2014/12/13/actualidad/1418491974_521247.html [Accessed 20/12/2021]

17. Esteban Galarza, Marisol: *Bilbao, luces y sombras del titanio. El proceso de regeneración del Bilbao metropolitano*. Bilbao, Universidad del País Vasco, 2000; Zallo, Ramón: «Industrias culturales y territorios creativos. Los límites de la transversalidad», in Bustamante Ramírez, Enrique (coord.): *Las industrias creativas: amenazas sobre la cultura digital*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 2001, pp. 153-190; Juaristi, Joseba: «El Patrimonio histórico industrial y la revitalización urbana y económica de Bilbao», *Boletín del Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico*, 42, 2003, pp. 79-87; Vidarte, Juan Ignacio: «Nuevas infraestructuras culturales como factor de renovación urbanística, revitalización social y regeneración económica. El Museo Guggenheim Bilbao», *Museo, Revista de la APME*, 12 (2007), 99-108.

18. Martínez De Alberiz Ezpeleta, Iñaki, «La política cultural en el País Vasco», *Revista de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociológicas*, 11 (3), 2012, pp. 149-171.

19. Rementería Arnaiz, Iskander: *Oteiza y el Centro Cultural Alhóndiga de Bilbao. Una interpretación estética*. Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, 2017.

20. It did expand between 1998 and 2001. <https://www.museobilbao.com/historia.php> [Accessed 07/01/2022]. Plus another extension is underway by Norman Foster and Luis M.^a Uriarte.



FIGURE 2. ALHÓNDIGA BUILDING. Source: Bilbao Ría 2000, <https://www.bilbaoria2000.org/actuaciones/otras-actuaciones/azkuna-zentroa-alhondiga/>

From a current point of view it seems hardly coincidental that the genesis of the Museum concurred with the so-called globalization process²¹. A process which in the field we are dealing with materialized in the opening of franchised museums—or branches of consolidated ones—in places with no remarkable cultural facilities or to complement a constantly expanding cultural scene in cases where such facilities already existed.

The city of Málaga is a good instance: the Museum Carmen Thyssen (inaugurated in 2011), the Collection of the Russian Museum of Saint Petersburg (2015), the Pompidou Centre (2015)²². And particularly remarkable is the ambitious Saadiyat project («The Island of Happiness») in Abu Dhabi, where the Guggenheim (Frank Gehry) and the Louvre (Jean Nouvel) franchises coexist with the Zayed National Museum (Norman Foster) and the Performing Arts Centre (Zaha Hadid) in a sort of universal museum melting pot encompassing culture, tourism and business²³.

The process cannot be understood unless we take into account the new approach to museums as publicity stunts hitherto limited to the world of marketing in business and unheard of in any cultural or educational enterprises. The museum of Bilbao

21. Prösler, Martin: «Museums and Globalization», in Macdonald, S.; Fyfe, G., *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*. Cambridge, Blackwell, 1996, pp. 21-44.

22. A comprehensive analysis of the case of Málaga can be found in Ruiz Gómez, Lorea Ariadna: *Contextos museológicos iberoamericanos entre dos cambios de siglo* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Madrid, Universidad Complutense, 2021, particularly annex 15, pp. 580-609.

23. For a synthesis see Palacios, M.^a Dolores: «Saadiyata: La isla de los Museos», *AXA, revista de arte y arquitectura*, vol. 8, 2016. <https://revistas.uax.es/index.php/axa/article/view/1189> [Accessed 12/12/2021].

became (or was turned into) a massive public phenomenon even before it opened, when it was just a project: opinions, items of news, debates, rumors, analyses, guesses, supports, trenchant criticisms, interviews, expectations, etc., filled books, newspapers, scholarly papers and radio and television broadcasts. Such massive exposure also brought about extensive public-relations strategies implemented by political parties, institutions and private companies²⁴.

In the 1980's and 90's the Basque Country had an international reputation of conflict, violence and terrorism²⁵ which did not agree with the image rendered by the Spanish political transition process nor the high standard of living of Basque society²⁶. The new museum and Bilbao's urban regeneration process could contribute to challenging the aforementioned stereotype and prove that beyond the sinister image of violence there existed an underlying will for work, progress, imagination and expectations²⁷.

Thus the outward exposure was two-fold. Within, it raised awareness of what Bilbao and the Basque Country could achieve: to overcome difficulties no matter how insurmountable they appeared. Outside, the museum became the titanium-covered icon of what has been called the *Guggenheim effect*: a global legend of urban regeneration with a cultural impact seldom replicated and much coveted worldwide²⁸.

Its outward exposure remains. The museum continues to be on everyone's lips in the media as an endlessly topical subject either because of an exhibition, the shooting of a film or advertisement, a celebrity's visit, a social event or simply the change of Puppy's floral apparel (Jeff Koons' celebrated dog placed in front of the museum).

The museum has become the star of Bilbao's daily life and of the imagery of its inhabitants. A symbol²⁹. The emblem of the city which is the cultural capital of the Basque Country—in terms of facilities and events—its financial center and despite not being its administrative capital it is, as one may gather, the place where top

24. Esteban, Iñaki: *El efecto Guggenheim. Del espacio basura al ornamento*. Barcelona, Anagrama, 2007, p. 23.

25. «At that time, the Basque Country was known in the U.S.A basically for the crisis and terrorism», stated Juan Luis Laskurain (Seisdedos, 2014, *op. cit.*).

26. De la Granja, José Luis; De Pablo, Santiago; Rubio Pobes, Coro: *Breve historia de Euskadi. De los fueros a nuestros días*. Madrid, Debate, 2020.

27. On the eve of the inauguration of the museum, however, a gang who seemingly planned an attack were involved in a shooting incident which resulted in the death of a local police officer (Igea, Octavio: «El día que ETA asesinó en el Guggenheim», *El Correo*, 13 October 2017. <https://www.elcorreo.com/politica/etaasesino-guggenheim-20171013221246-nt.html> [Accessed 10/01/ 2021]).

28. One of the projects which made it the furthest was carried out in Helsinki (Carvajal, Doreen «Helsinki Divided on Plan for a Guggenheim Satellite», *The New York Times*, 14 July 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/15/arts/design/helsinki-divided-on-plan-for-a-guggenheim-satellite.html?ref=design&r=0>, [Accessed 15/07/2014], for which the site was chosen and public competition was announced to select the architect in charge. Eventually, the project was dropped in 2016 as the authorities refused to meet the high cost of the venture (Colpisa / afp (Agencias) «Helsinki rechaza el Guggenheim por ser demasiado costoso», *El Diario Vasco*, 1 December 2016 www.diariovasco.com/culturas/201612/01/helsinki-rechaza-instalacion-museo-20161201101640-rc.html, [Accessed 02/12/2016]). Mr Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London at the time, also toyed with the reconversion of an area of the city which would be regenerated with a Guggenheim museum as the beacon of the entire operation. Other projects in Vilnius, Guadalajara, Taichung and Rio de Janeiro also failed to come to fruition. Bailey, Martin: «Mayor of London courts Guggenheim», *The Art Newspaper*, 27 February 2014.

29. Concerning the museum as a figure and a symbol see, for instance, Calvo Serraller, Francisco: «El fin de los museos de arte contemporáneo», in Tusell Gómez, Javier: *Los museos y la conservación del Patrimonio*, Madrid, Fundación BBVA y A. Machado Libros, 2001, pp. 31-38; or Poulot, Dominique: *Musée et muséologie*. Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

political decisions are taken as all the political parties have their headquarters there and it is also the seat of the *Euskadi Buru Batzar* (the ruling board, a sort of central committee) of the Basque Nationalist Party³⁰.

The list of exhibitions attests to the impact the museum has had in bringing formerly inaccessible artworks and collections to the locals. And not only contemporary artworks: from Chinese, baroque and Aztec art to the Thread Routes, the Art of the Motorcycle, fashion designer Armani or the Roaring Twenties³¹. Plus a wide range of activities: guided tours, educational programs, museum membership, congresses, conferences, gatherings, gala dinner parties, fashion shows, etc., plus adjacent facilities which include a bookshop, a souvenir shop and, above all, a bar and a restaurant.

All of the above contributed to attracting strikingly high numbers of visitors, especially tourists³². The initially modest estimations were soon beaten by over one million visitors per year, registered on at least six occasions, making the museum managers consider a possible extension. It even reached a point when, in the words of the museum director in 2018, they had to close on several occasions due to an overload of visits which prevented a quality, enjoyable experience³³. Some simple graphics clarify the figures:

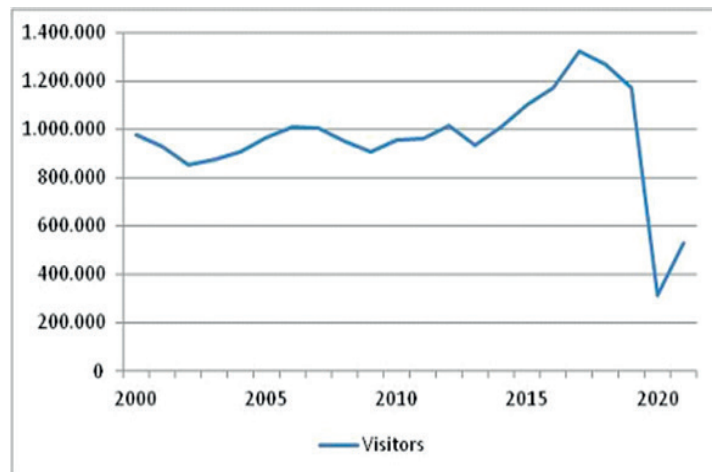


TABLE 1. NUMBER OF VISITORS. Elaborated by the authors. Source: <https://prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/categoria/notas-de-prensa/>

30. Díaz Balerdi, Iñaki: *Archipiélagos imaginarios. Museos de la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco*. Donostia, Ed. Nerea, 2010, p. 48.

31. List of past exhibitions per year in: <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/exposiciones>

32. Franklin, Adrian: «Journeys to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao: towards a revised Bilbao effect», *Annals of Tourism Research*, 59, 2016, pp. 79-92; Aurrekoetxea, Aitor: «Guggenheim Bilbao: el impacto de lo nuevo. Luces y algunas sombras de una transformación asombrosa», *Revista Internacional de Estudios Vascos*, 63, 1-2, 2018, pp. 197-212.

33. «One does not do it in order to avoid the frustration of those who came to see the museum, many of them locked out. But one wonders if the decision is right» he claimed (Esteban, Iñaki: «Hay que plantearse la ampliación del Guggenheim», *El Diario Vasco*, 7 January 2018.

<http://www.diariovasco.com/culturas/llegado-hora-darle-20180107002020-ntvo.html>. [Accessed 07/01/ 2018].

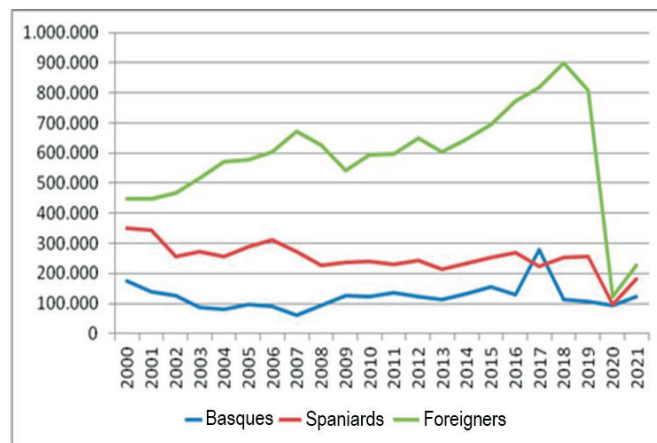


TABLE 2. VISITORS' GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN. Elaborated by the authors. Source: <https://prensa.Guggenheim-bilbao.Eus/categoria/notas-de-prensa/>

Three observations can be made in this respect: firstly, the prevalence of foreign visitors, which would fill the dreams of any tourist planner as they yield returns also in terms of transport, accommodation, leisure, shopping, etc.—which applies to visitors from outside the Basque Country and nearby areas.

Secondly, the dramatic drop in the number of visitors as a consequence of the pandemic is still afflicting the museum. Graphs show decreases in global numbers in the year to 2009—recall the world's economic crisis sparked the previous year by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, etc.—which appear to be gradually rising but do not clearly improve until 2014, yet nothing comparable to the surge occurring by the end of 2019.

Thirdly, the peak of 2017 in the number of visitors from the region is due to the fact that 970,000 free tickets were offered to the inhabitants of Bizkaia (just over 1,100,000 people) to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the opening of the museum. Eventually 114,000 tickets were used which may be considered a success, in the words of the director, taking into account the limited period of time—one month—that the offer lasted³⁴. Or it could be seen as a disappointing response since just around 12% of the eligible recipients took an interest in the offer. It remains to be seen what happens in 2022³⁵.

The number of visitors contribute, amongst other factors, to other top figures: proceeds, the favorite of the authorities to validate the aptness and success of the enterprise. Nonetheless, should this be the most relevant benchmark to assess a museum initiative? If, as stated above, only 12% of the free tickets were used, we could ponder whether genuine interest in the museum exists amongst the

34. Esteban, Iñaki: *Idem*.

35. Esteban, Iñaki: «El Guggenheim ofrecerá entradas gratis a los vascos por su 25 aniversario», *Diario Vasco*, 4 February 2022 <https://www.diariovasco.com/culturas/guggenheim-ofrecera-entradas-202204155402-nt.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.diariovasco.com%2F> [Accessed 04/02/2022].

inhabitants of the province. After all, who do museums serve? Tourists? Or the local population?

The debate could be endless. As are many other controversies surrounding the museum. From the start. Even its inauguration (fifteen days of formal events with limited access leading to its opening to the public on 19 October 1997) was preceded by hard bargaining with the government of Spain to have Picasso's *Guernica* transferred to the Basque Country, which did not happen³⁶.

Practically nothing escaped criticism, either in the form of technical remarks or of fierce political confrontation. Some of the most recurrent reproaches questioned its megalomaniac approach, the fact that a genuine financial operation was disguised as a cultural venture³⁷, its cost—which absorbed funds for other cultural spheres leaving aside more modest projects (and artists) yet more deeply rooted in the Basque Country scenario—the fact that it is a franchise³⁸—and that decisions affecting Bilbao could be taken in New York—and its opacity both in terms of plans of action and the apparent lack of a specific project or purchase policy³⁹.

The tight control of the museum image has also been challenged because in some cases some kind of censorship applies against any disparity with the wishes of the institution. The obsessive prohibition on taking photos inside—though in some rooms it is now allowed—or the fact that the image of Gehry's building is a registered trademark—which has nonetheless been used and even mocked⁴⁰—attest to the above. Several instances of censorship have existed though particularly momentous—reported in international media—was the demand to remove the huge vinyl banner hung on a building in central Bilbao, created by Paul McCarthy and Mike Bouchet, depicting Gehry's building turned into a warship entitled «Powered A-Hole Spanish Donkey Sport Dick Drink Donkey Dong Dongs Sunscreen Model». The museum argued that it was actually a publicity billboard that discredited the institution⁴¹ (FIGURE 3).

36. Jarque, Fietta: «El Reina Sofía no prestará el 'Guernica' ni al Guggenheim de Bilbao ni a ningún otro museo», *El País*, 14 May 1997 https://elpais.com/diario/1997/05/14/cultura/863560801_850215.html?event_log=oklogin [Accessed 14/01/2022].

37. «From the start, a business spirit prevails—product: culture; goal: business», claimed Onandia, Mikel: «Indar erakustaldiaren ajeak», *Berria*, 4 November 2014, http://www.berria.eus/paperekoa/1878/033/002/2014-11-04/indar_erakustaldiaren_ajeak.htm [Accessed 01/11/2014].

38. Cámara, Ery: «El museo franquiciado: un instrumento de colonización cultural» in Guasch, Anna M.^a; Zulaika, Joseba (coords.): *Aprendiendo del Guggenheim Bilbao*. Madrid, Akal, 2007, pp. 213-222. Zugaza Miranda, Miguel: «Los museos de Bilbao: una experiencia entre el centro y la periferia», *Los museos y la conservación del Patrimonio*. Madrid, Fundación BBVA y A. Machado Libros, 2001, pp. 117-127; Anger Cécile: «L'expansion internationale des musées: entre diffusion du soft power et valorisation économique du patrimoine culturel», *Revue scientifique en sciences de l'information et de la communication*, 3 (supplément A), 2021 pp. 13-28.

39. A good summary or synthesis with references to Joseba Zulaika (imbalance between Nueva York and Bilbao), Haizea Barcenilla (excessive secrecy in terms of financing, presence of Basque artists in the exhibitions—with no repercussions outside Bilbao—artistic exchange masked by economic success), Ismael Manterola (lack of own production, lack of an art director) and Miren Jaio (lack of autonomy, unclear purchase policy) can be found in: «Titanioa bihurtzen duen papera», *Berria*, <https://www.berria.eus/paperekoa/1962/040/001/2014-06-08/titanioa-bihurtzen-duen-papera.htm> [Accessed 3/06/2022].

40. Lorente, J. Pedro: *Arte público y museos en distritos culturales*. Gijón, Trea, 2018, p. 213.

41. Gnocchio, Benjamin: «Guggenheim Bilbao Censors «Offensive» Paul McCarthy and Mike Bouchet Public Artwork», *Artnet News*, 10 de abril de 2014, <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/guggenheim-bilbao-censors-offensive-paul-mccarthy-and-mike-bouchet-public-artwork-9644> [Accessed 12/04/2014]; Jardonnet, Emmanuelle:



FIGURE 3. ARTWORK BY PAUL MCCARTHY AND MIKE BOUCHET ON A BUILDING IN CENTRAL BILBAO. Artnet News. Source: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/guggenheim-bilbao-censors-offensive-paul-mccarthy-and-mike-bouchet-public-artwork-9644>

The outcome of the management approach⁴² resulting in the questionable model of an art institution⁴³ removed from the citizens⁴⁴ has also been challenged. This management was contested after embezzlement was detected in the accounts in 2008⁴⁵, plus some political parties denounced the lack of information concerning payments made to the New York foundation or the terms of the renewal signed in 2014 to extend the agreement with the American institution for a further twenty

«Le Guggenheim de Bilbao n'aime pas les métaphores guerrières», *Le Monde*, 23 April 2014, http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2014/04/23/le-guggenheim-de-bilbao-n-aime-pas-les-metaphores-guerrieres_4405826_3246.html [Accessed 24/04/2014]; Rojas, Laurie: «Billboard work taken down after Guggenheim Bilbao complains», *The Art Newspaper*, 11 April 2014.

42. Precisely one of the most defended approaches of the museum and the foundation. As the managing director of Guggenheim Bilbao claimed: «[the] three main aspects of the museum [are]: its contents, its container and its management model» (Vidarte, Juan Ignacio: (2002) «Our relationship with New York always contributes to, never detracts from our endeavour». *Descubrir el arte*, 46, January 2002, pp. 34-36.

43. Museums risk becoming theme parks capable of attracting thousands when culture is understood as leisure without engaging in an alternative project of creation of a plural public space, stated Zulaika, Joseba: «El caso Guggenheim de Bilbao». Conference *La línea de sombra. Políticas institucionales e industrias culturales en el Estado español desde la Transición*. Arteleku, San Sebastián, conference 10 January 2003.

44. «In terms of creativity, the Guggenheim contributed little more than Richard Serra and Frank Gehry's work; everything was done with their backs turned on the city and the art community», said Txomin Badiola at the museum in a debate about urban transformation promoted by culture. Seisdedos, Iker: «El Guggenheim que incita», *El País*, 6 March 2014. http://ccaa.elpais.com/ccaa/2014/03/06/paisvasco/1394141511_413772.html [Accessed 17/01/2022].

45. Cinco Días: «Desfalco en el Guggenheim de Bilbao», *Cinco Días*, 16 April 2008 https://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2008/04/16/empresas/1208512763_850215.html [Accessed 20/12/ 2021].

years⁴⁶. Moreover, the Basque Public Treasury Office Report for the year 2001 contains six pages of breaches to the legality and anomalies noticed at the outset of the museum operations⁴⁷, and the same happened in 2007 concerning the purchase of artworks and the activities of the Foundation of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum⁴⁸.



FIGURE 4. URDAIBAI RESERVE. Source: Merrutxu Lodge

Such criticisms and denunciations obviously had a reflection in political fora. Up until May 2009 many of the above-mentioned were tackled in Basque parliamentary debates. The opposition would ask, question, criticize or discuss while the governing Basque Nationalist Party replied and defended the operation.

Things changed with the 9th legislature, from mid 2009 to late 2012, when the Socialist Party of Euskadi-Euskadiko Ezkerra became the ruling party. They considered that the agreements of 1994 and the management of the museum had remained in the hands of the Foundation and that the role of the Basque institutions had basically consisted of «paying the bill»⁴⁹, that Basque art and artists had hardly any presence in the museum activities and that the institution remained distant from the local population. The opposition, especially the Basque Nationalist Party,

46. Iglesias, Leyre: «Críticas de ‘oscurantismo’ en torno al Guggenheim», *El Mundo*, 5 December 2014, <http://www.elmundo.es/pais-vasco/2014/12/05/548172c7268e3ef6708b456d.html> [Accessed 06/12/2014].

47. Tribunal Vasco De Cuentas Públicas: *Op. cit.*, 2001: pp. 34-39.

48. Tribunal Vasco De Cuentas Públicas: *Op. cit.*, 2007: pp. 20-21.

49. See the speech delivered by the Deputy counsellor for Culture, Youth and Sport of the Basque Government at the «Simposio internacional de arquitectura y museos: nuevas tendencias. Brasilia 50 años», September 2010: Rivera, Antonio: «Guggenheim Bilbao: Un modelo no repetido» https://www.academia.edu/12832583/Guggenheim_Bilbao_Un_modelo_no_repetido [Accessed 17/01/2022].

accused the government on several occasions of questioning the Guggenheim trademark and of undermining its image. Besides, the suitability of the plans for a museum extension in the Urdaibai biosphere reserve—a project questioned by the government itself—was railed against. After a series of arguments it was dropped by the *Diputación Foral de Bizkaia*⁵⁰.

During that legislature a committee was appointed to survey and assess the museum prior to the renewal in 2014 of the agreement between the Basque institutions and the New York foundation. As a result, a report was published in June 2012 with 19 guidelines including recommendations such as: (1) replacing the franchise model by parity collaboration (2) fostering further local/global interaction, (3) urging the Foundation Solomon R. Guggenheim to commit to the circulation of its artworks, (4) securing greater presence for Basque art in the museum and its exhibitions, (5) exploring the possibility of separating the management of the museum from the Strategy Management of the Foundation Solomon R. Guggenheim, (6) and finally, appointing an art director⁵¹.



FIGURE 5. PERFORMANCE BY THE CLEANING STAFF OF THE GUGGENHEIM. Monika del Valle / Foku, <https://www.naiz.eus/eu/info/noticia/20210701/limpiadoras-del-guggeheim-denuncian-la-precariedad-que-viven-mediante-una-performance>

After the local elections of October 2012 the government of the region was taken over by the Basque Nationalist Party. They were in charge of negotiating the renewal agreement with the American foundation. On 3 December 2014 the new agreement

50. Larrauri, Eva: «Bandera blanca en el Guggenheim», *El País*, 28 November 2010. https://elpais.com/diario/2010/11/28/paisvasco/1290976799_850215.html [Accessed 31/12/2021].

51. Boletín Oficial del Parlamento Vasco of 29 June 2012, n. 172 www.legebiltzarra.eus/portal/es_ES/web/eusko-legebiltzarra/actividad/boletin-busqueda# [Accessed 26/01/2022].

was signed by the Museum and six days later endorsed by the Foundation Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York.

In-house conflict also existed. Perhaps the most vocal concerned the protests of the museum educators (2016) and cleaning staff (2021)—the latter mostly women, ending on 23 March 2022 (FIGURE 5) after most of their demands were met⁵²—, which expose the outsourcing issue⁵³. Whereas labour conflict has had little repercussion in Bilbao, these episodes are closely linked to repeated protests in Venice and New York over the working conditions of the personnel who are building the new branch of the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi⁵⁴.

Eventually, especially after the second half of 2014—when the contract was renewed—and after the agreement reached between the ruling Basque Nationalist Party and the Socialist Party of Euskadi-Euskadiko Ezkerra in 2016, things seemed to calm down. Criticism still exists (anything is liable to be criticised in museums) but the institution has settled and the Guggenheim is perceived as part of day-to-day life in the ever-changing city of Bilbao⁵⁵.

From a broader viewpoint transformation is less evident in terms of the effect the Guggenheim Museum has had on other museums in the Basque Country. As aforementioned, it had a massive impact on the city of Bilbao⁵⁶ and could also extend to the surrounding territory of Bizkaia should the plans to expand the museum in Urdaibai be carried out. The renewal of the agreement signed in 2014 already contemplated the possibility of discontinuous expansion. In 2017 the director of the museum declared that the idea of expanding was being considered⁵⁷, it was included in the strategy plan for 2018-2020⁵⁸ and figured in the European Union Next Generation funding project to stimulate the economy in the aftermath of Covid19⁵⁹. The Basque Government deemed the project appropriate though a «long way ahead»⁶⁰ as many of its aspects needed to be reviewed to make it eligible for

52. Ormazabal, Mikel: «El triunfo de las limpiadoras del Guggenheim tras 285 días de huelga: ‘Hemos ganado en dignidad’», *El País*, 25 March 2022 <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2022-03-25/el-triunfo-de-las-limpiadoras-del-guggenheim-tras-285-dias-de-huelga-hemos-ganado-en-dignidad.html> [Accessed 23/03/2022].

53. Concerning outsourcing see, for instance, Vozmediano, Elena: «Obra y servicio. El empleo cultural», *El Cultural* (El Mundo), 24 March 2015, www.elcultural.com/blogs/y-tu-que-lo-veas/2015/03/obra-y-servicio-el-empleocultural [Accessed 20/07/2015].

54. Ryzik, Melena: «Guggenheim Closes for the Afternoon as Workers’ Advocates Escalate Protests», *The New York Times*, 1 May 2015. <https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/01/on-may-day-protesters-at-the-guggenheim-vow-to-occupy-the-space/index.html> [Accessed 30/06/2022].

55. Leonardo Aurtenetxe, Jon Joseba: «El efecto Bilbao. La expresión de una excepción o un camino a imitar», *OBETS. Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 13 (extra 1), 2018, pp. 317-354. <https://rua.ua.es/dspace/handle/10045/82953>

56. Though its managers admit that no collaboration strategy exists with the city’s art network—Bilbao Arte, Bilbao la Vieja, etc. (Esteban, 2018: *op. cit.*)

57. Astiz, Iñigo: «Museo tradicional ei eskatzen zaiena betetzen dugu, baina garatu beharra dugu», *Berria*, 23 April 2017.

<https://www.berria.eus/paperekoa/1761/032/001/2017-04-23/museo-traditionalei-eskatzen-zaiena-betetzen-dugu-baina-garatu-beharra-dugu.htm> [Accessed 25/04/2017].

58. «Guggenheim Bilbao retoma el proyecto de su ampliación en la zona de Gernika», *Deia*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.deia.eus/bizkaia/2018/03/13/guggenheim-bilbao-retoma-proyecto-ampliacion/635294.html> [Accessed 23/01/2022].

59. Gobierno Vasco: *Euskadi Next. Programa Vasca de Recuperación y Resiliencia 2021-2026*, December 2020. <https://www.euskadi.eus/gobierno-vasco/-/documentacion/ayudas-euskadi-next-2021-2026/>. [Accessed 23/01/2022].

60. Press conference of the Basque Government spokesperson. «Lakua ha anunciado su intención de ampliar el Guggenheim con dos nuevas sedes en Urdaibai», *Naiz*, 8 June 2021, <https://www.naiz.eus/es/info/>

European funding. And whereas the Diputación Foral de Bizkaia seemed keener on the idea as its president claimed that the operation would be completed with or without European funding⁶¹, by the end of 2021 a decision concerning European funding was still pending⁶².

But beyond Bizkaia, what reverberations could be felt in the rest of the region? Perhaps the creation of the Guggenheim Museum underlies the updating of some nearby museum institutions, though this would be mere speculation and hard to demonstrate.

The aftershock of the Guggenheim plausibly influenced the renovation of the Museum of Fine Arts in Bilbao⁶³—regardless of the role and ability of its management team to sway the determination of the pertinent authorities.



FIGURE 6. MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS. BILBAO. Photograph taken by the authors

noticia/20210608/lakua-ha-anunciado-su-intencion-de-ampliar-el-guggenheim-con-dos-nuevas-sedes-en-urdaibai. [Accessed 23/01/2022].

61. Bizkaia Parliamentary Report 30 June 2021, https://jggbizkaia.eus/home2/actividad/historicos_pleno.asp [Accessed 15/01/2022].

62. Redondo, Maite: «Museos que crecen en 2022», *Deia*, 29 December 2021 <https://www.deia.eus/cultura/2021/12/29/museos-crecen-2022/1178632.html> [Accessed 23/01/2022].

63. Viar, Javier: «El Guggenheim, un socio para las artes: una visión desde el Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao», in Guasch, Anna M.^a; Zulaika, Joseba (coords.): *Aprendiendo del Guggenheim Bilbao*. Madrid, Akal, 2007, pp. 101-116.

The Bilbao model could also be linked to the inauguration of Artium⁶⁴ in April 2002 in Vitoria-Gasteiz—where an excellent collection of Spanish contemporary art already existed in its Museum of Fine Arts. The opening was the result of a long-term demand for a specific display and exhibition venue which had constantly gone unheeded by the *Diputación Foral de Álava* and the Basque Government.



FIGURE 7. ARTIUM. VITORIA-GASTEIZ. Photograph taken by the authors

The same could apply to the extension of the oldest museum in the Basque Country, San Telmo Museum in Donostia-San Sebastián—greatly transformed both in terms of architecture (Nieto and Sobejano) and exhibition strategy—which reopened in 2011 after four years of work, and to the renovation of the old Tobacco factory in the same city to accommodate a centre of contemporary culture (FIGURE 8).

These are but meagre instances in a Community with over one-hundred museums⁶⁵, though the consolidation of the Bilbao museum probably reinforced a sort of mantra—profoundly felt by municipal political leaders and rulers—whereby having a museum meant receiving growing numbers of tourists and generating income⁶⁶. Clearly, this mantra was hardly ever true yet different museum facilities sprouted around the region. It could even be noticed that some sort of province

64. VV.AA.: *El edificio Artium Eraikina*. Vitoria-Gasteiz, Diputación Foral de Álava, 2007.

65. Only 48 of them are listed in the Museum Registry of the Basque Government. <https://www.euskadi.eus/registro-de-museos-y-colecciones-de-euskadi/web01-azmuszen/es/>. [Accessed 15/12/2021].

66. Moix, Llätzer: *Arquitectura milagrosa. Hazañas de los arquitectos estrella en la España del Guggenheim*. Barcelona, Anagrama, 2010.

inequality, quite usual in the area, was claimed on occasions (if it was done in Bilbao, why can't we do it here?)⁶⁷, though this would be a different matter beyond the subject of analysis here.



FIGURE 8. SAN TELMO MUSEUM. DONOSTIA-SAN SEBASTIÁN. Photograph taken by the authors

Moreover, as stated earlier, the irruption of the Guggenheim Museum involved a shift in the consideration of museums as an investment, rather than an expense. Indeed, but mainly in this particular case. On the contrary, most of the museums in the country are generally viewed as a source of expense a few months after their inauguration. A kind of bottomless pit to be filled with public funding provided by the corresponding office because they have no choice, by virtue of some sort of institutional mandate. Plus a paradox operates: seeming as it did that a museum in Bilbao could be somehow economically feasible, profitability became an essential condition for any new project to meet the authorisation of the corresponding office.

«Cultural» or «educational» benefits (memory preservation, feelings of belonging, didactic values, cultural repercussion, etc.) no longer suffice to support the suitability of a cultural infrastructure. Instead, figures, statistics, numbers,

67. A telling example: a recently uttered lament of the Association for the Defence of Cultural Heritage during protests over the conversion into tourist apartments of the Fine Arts building in Donostia, the oldest cinema in Spain and one of Europe's top venues: «If this cinema was located in Bilbao, public funds would have been invested to restore and use it as a cultural venue», *Diario Vasco*: «Protesta en Donostia contra el «derribo» del Bellas Artes», 31 October 2021.

<https://www.diariovasco.com/san-sebastian/protesta-donostia-reforma-bellas-artes-20211030124200-nt.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> [Accessed 02/11/2021].

sound accounts and, if possible, profitability seem to be the only criteria followed by those who can decide on what to spend (or invest?) the taxpayers' money. Tough budgeting will therefore continue to apply.

The part played by the Guggenheim Bilbao in the globalizing frenzy has not met its match in other museums either. These continue to keep a low profile, consisting mostly of small, local institutions of provincial scope with no repercussion beyond their area of action. No sign of spectacular stunts to attract crowds of people. Furthermore, their local repercussion ought to be analysed since most of them remain isolated, unknown and distant facilities even to their own neighbours: beyond the figures provided by the museums themselves the lack of reliable research into the number of visitors hints at this hypothesis. Perhaps the non-existence of the aforementioned analysis is telling enough.

Whereas a far-reaching broadcasting strategy constitutes one of the features of the Bilbao museum, communication, external repercussion and broadcasting are widely disregarded by other museums in the region. If Guggenheim Bilbao set a landmark in collective imagery and became an emblem of the city⁶⁸, does something similar happen elsewhere in the Basque Country? To what extent do citizens feel attached to other museum facilities? Are the latter sensible endeavours considered as part of the community⁶⁹? How many of our fellow-citizens visit other museums in the area?

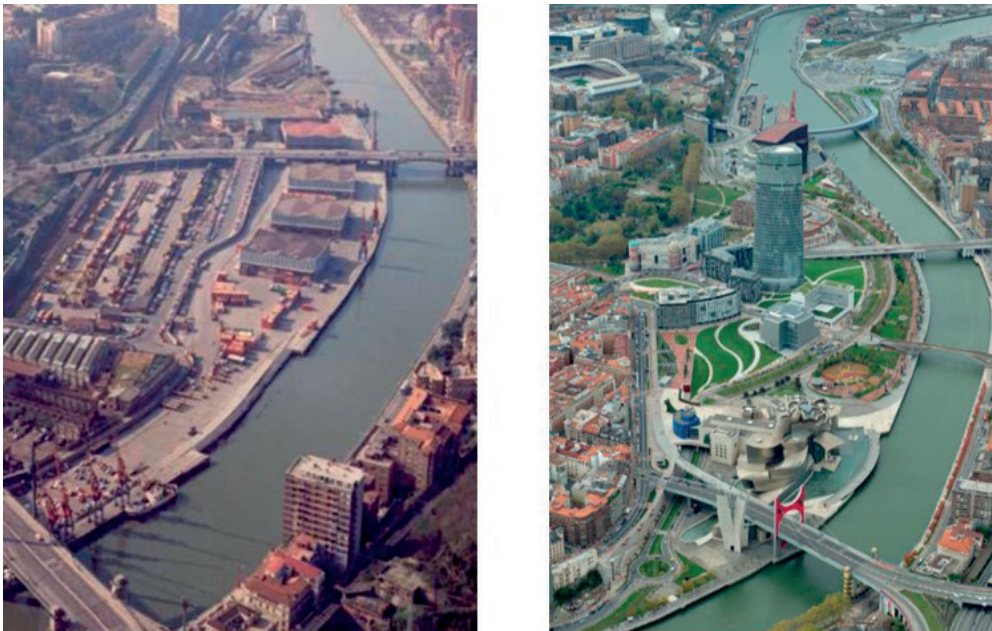


FIGURE 9. BEFORE AND AFTER IN ABANDOIBARRA. Source: Bilbao Ría 2000. <https://www.bilbaoria2000.org/actuaciones/abandoibarra/>

68. An emblem that as the director of Bilbao's Consonni space, María Mur Dean, claimed joins two others (the Virgin of Begoña and Athletic of Bilbao) to create a triad that may not be criticized (Astiz, Iñigo: «Titanioa...», *op. cit.*).

69. Questions asked by Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly; Rochberg-Halton, Eugene: *The Meaning of Things*. Londres, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Eppur, vanno al Guggenheim (and yet they go to the Guggenheim), as Galileo would say⁷⁰. And they see a transformed place.

That formerly dim and dreary scenario—polluted with toxic emissions from old factories at the heart of the city—which Bertolt Brecht surprisingly described in his poem *Der Bilbao-Song* as one of the best places to see the moon from Bill's ballroom⁷¹ has become a brighter place—weather permitting—where the river, once a foul wound of ruthless industrialization, acts now as the artery for recovering and renovating the urban landscape.

Renovation based on the concept of spectacular actions, much to current liking, consisting of singular architecture and exciting activities. After the recovery process Bilbao plays a major part worldwide⁷², beyond the museum scene and boasts an amazing number of visitors—be them merely transient, random and limited to the passive ephemeral observation of the surface of the exhibits.

Perhaps we should ponder whether this is the best possible model in terms of genuine pedagogy of contemporary art—so lacking in centres where contact between artworks and museum-goers goes beyond mere visual appreciation. What does seem true is that the once controversial and often derided project eventually succeeded in reaching its main goals: image and boost to the economy. The rest is debatable, rights and wrongs, pros and cons, lights and shadows, as almost anything in the world of museums is.

70. *Eppur si muove* (and yet it moves), Galileo is said to have uttered after abjuring his ideas on the cosmos before the Inquisition court.

71. «That old Bilbao moon / where love was still worthwhile...» said the song. See Echevarrieta, Alberto L.: «Bertolt Brecht immortalizó 'La canción de Bilbao'», *Bilbao*, 1988, <https://www.bilbao.eus/bld/handle/123456789/26211>, [Accessed 17/01/2022]. Also Noblogueenelpaso: «La Canción de Bilbao: Una joya con una curiosa historia», *Bilbao para novatos / Bilbao for newbies*, 18 January 2015, <https://bilbaonewbies.wordpress.com/2015/01/18/cancion-de-bilbao/> [Accessed 18/01/2022]. The song, with music by Kurt Weill, though not very popular in Bilbao has plenty of versions by: Chet Atkins, Marianne Faithfull, Berni Leighton, Ute Lemper, Lotte Lenya, Patti LuPone, Christopher Lloyd, Gisela May, Yves Montand (arrangements by Boris Vian), Catherine Sauvage, Andy Williams and local artists El Consorcio, Asier Etxeandia, Oskorri —translated into Euskera by Natxo de Felipe—etc. (all of them available on YouTube).

72. Perhaps as Unamuno saw it when he stated that «the entire world is a greater Bilbao» (Unamuno, Miguel de: *Rimas de dentro*. Valladolid, Tipografía Cuesta, 1923. (3rd poem. Untitled).

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