

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

But Is It a Museum?

Frank O. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain has been called an architectural masterpiece: a "miracle." It draws nearly a million visitors a year, 60% from outside Spain. Other cities have tried to engineer a similar "Bilbao effect."

For the Basque Country Administration (BCA; the owners), this museum of contemporary art is part of a vast economic revitalization plan. Spain's post-Franco constitution of 1978 granted the Basque region considerable autonomy. The Basques invested not only \$100 million in the Museum, but some \$1.5 billion citywide. World-famous architects have remodeled the airport, designed a new subway system, built a conference and performing arts center, and undertaken a huge riverfront redevelopment project.

For the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, too, the Bilbao museum is part of a larger plan. The Foundation has been "franchising" the Guggenheim experience beyond its Frank Lloyd Wright flagship building in New York. To effectively "license" the Bilbao Guggenheim to the BCA, the Foundation collected a multimillion-dollar fee. It also supplies artworks, and permanently co-manages the museum. Other Guggenheims have been established in Venice, Berlin, even Las Vegas.

The colliding collage-like volumes of Gehry's "Bilbao" have several sources of inspiration. In the imaginary background is Frank Lloyd Wright's celebrated building. But the Bilbao's titanium panels and expanses of glass reflect local sky and water and the surrounding city. Local history also seems to be "reflected": a terraced quarry or open mine pit. Iron mining and ore exports fueled the area's economy during the Industrial Revolution. The titanium-clad and curved walls also suggest the hulls of the ships that helped make the port prosperous. There are waves and sails. There are also fins and scales: fish were important not only to the local populace, but to Frank Gehry (b. 1929), too. He incorporates fish motifs into much of his architecture.

The Bilbao is an example of the effective use of both titanium panels and computer modeling. Gehry applied textural effects to massive titanium