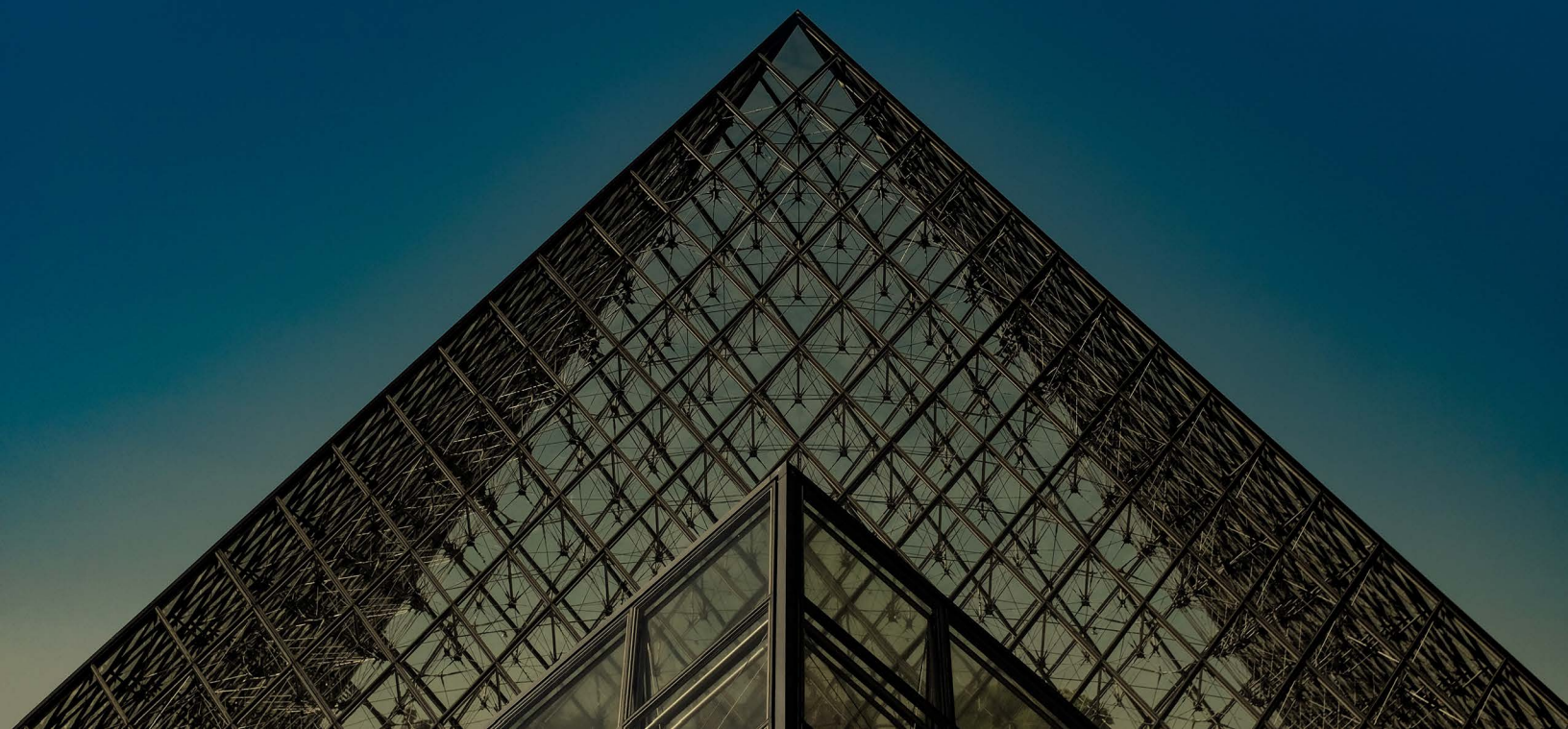




# the museum review

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 1 2020

[WWW.THEMUSEUMREVIEW.ORG](http://WWW.THEMUSEUMREVIEW.ORG)  
ISSN 2574-0296



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## The Museum Review

[www.TheMuseumReview.org](http://www.TheMuseumReview.org)

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP  
5558 S. Kimbark Ave., Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637  
[www.RogersPublishing.org](http://www.RogersPublishing.org)

Cover photo: Louvre Museum, Unicorn Cloud.  
Image by: Zoltan Tasi.

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# Museum architecture as a work of art: Frank Gehry's Museum of Pop Culture and Guggenheim Bilbao Museum

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**Keywords** Museum architecture; museum effect; Frank Gehry; MoPOP; Guggenheim Bilbao

**Abstract** This essay focuses on two museums designed by architect Frank Gehry, the Museum of Pop Culture (2000) and the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum (1997), placing them in conversation with art historical and museological concepts like Svetlana Alpers' "museum effect." This paper traces a brief history of the two museums, and investigates the ways that a museum's architecture, whether operating exclusively on the level of formalism or resonating with sociopolitical themes, has come to be viewed a work of art in itself.

**About the Author** Justin Ross Muchnick is an art historian whose work has appeared in a variety of scholarly and popular publications, including the *Journal of American Culture*, *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, and *Design Observer*.

*This article was published on October 16, 2020 at [www.TheMuseumReview.org](http://www.TheMuseumReview.org)*

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## Introduction

In 2000, a new museum opened in Seattle. The Experience Museum Project, which would later be renamed the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP), provided a space for the public display of Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen's extensive memorabilia collection. More importantly, it provided the city of Seattle with a striking addition to its cityscape: a strange and sprawling work of museum architecture designed by (st)architect, Frank Gehry.

Three years earlier, in 1997, Gehry had garnered international acclaim for another work of museum architecture, which remains to this day his most celebrated and iconic achievement. With its swooping titanium curves, the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum (Spain), an ambitious satellite project of the New York-based Guggenheim Foundation, helped to turn a languishing, post-industrial port city into a must-visit art world attraction.

This essay considers the cases of these two Gehry-designed museums, placing Seattle's MoPOP in conversation with its better known Spanish relative. By tracing the history and context of each museum, this paper seeks to highlight how differences in the museums' respective origins, missions, and collections inform the way that viewers relate and respond to the buildings' architecture. In doing so, this article argues that each museum can be treated, in and of itself, as a work of art.

## The Museum of Pop Culture

In the shadow of Seattle's Space Needle stands a bulging building that glistens in the sunlight. Viewed head-on, it consists of three distinct stainless-steel structures. Those on the right and left, one electric blue and the other metallic silver, cascade down in billowing sheets with

smooth, sinuous undulations. The structure in the center, a deep purple, is stiffer and more static, a shiny cylinder rising up from the concrete below. A walk around the building reveals three more irregular structures—a brown, a red, and a gold, topped with a greenish garnish of wavy pate-glass strands—appended behind the first three structures.

This architectural oddity is Seattle's Museum of Pop Culture, designed by Frank Gehry and completed in 2000 with the financial backing of Paul Allen, a Seattle native. Over the years, Gehry's unique building has garnered its fair share of vehement detractors: *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, for instance, minced no words in describing it as "something that crawled out of the sea, rolled over and died."<sup>1</sup> Whether or not the MoPOP is as hideous as Muschamp claims, the building exemplifies the centrality of the architect-as-artist within the modern-day institution of the museum.

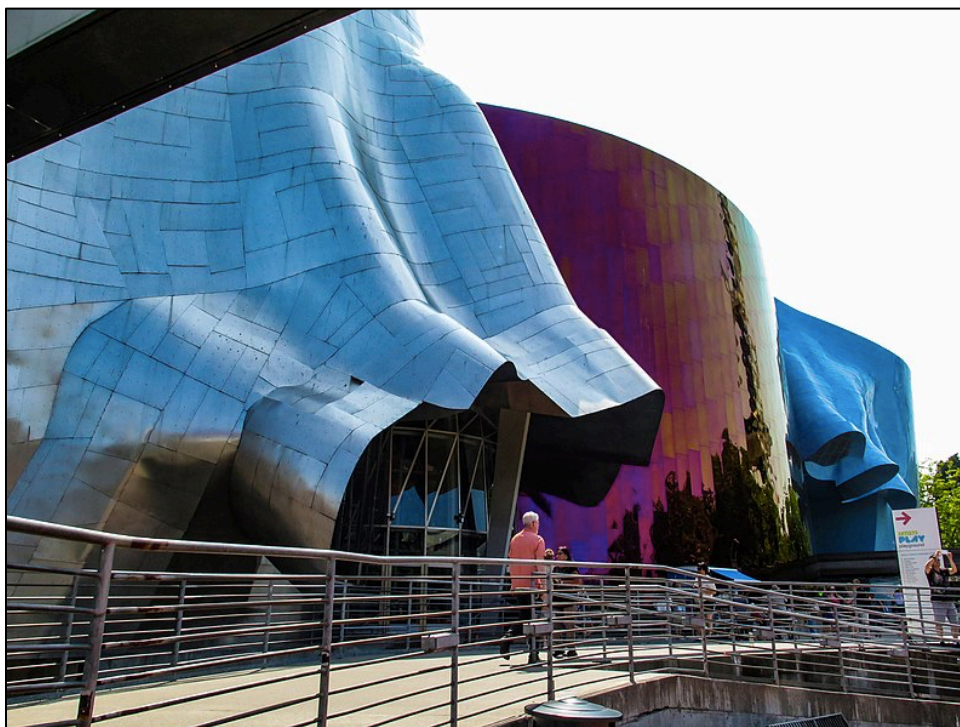


Figure 1. Frank Gehry, Museum of Pop Culture. Seattle.

When people discuss the MoPOP, they are immediately drawn to the architectural form of the building itself. Scholars often reference Gehry's inspiration for the building's design; architect Lee H. Skolnick, for example, explains that Gehry "developed [the building's form] by smashing up electric guitars and then rearranging them until an optimal composition was found."<sup>2</sup> Chris Bruce, an art historian and former MoPOP curator, takes this analysis one step further, pinning down the influences behind the building's component parts: "the gold section was inspired by a Les Paul 'Gold Top' guitar, the blue from a Fender Thunderbird guitar, the red from old vans that bands would tour in, the purple reflective surface from Jimi Hendrix's famous song 'Purple Haze.'"<sup>3</sup>



These accounts of Gehry's inspiration are often accompanied by descriptive visual analyses. Bruce refers to the building as "an organic, up-and-down, roller-coaster ride of a structure" that combines "movement" with "a certain weight and gravity."<sup>4</sup> Architecture critic Witold Rybczynski highlights its color and materiality, characterizing Gehry's creation as "a striking building whose bulbous shapes are variously covered in shimmering gold, silver, and purple stainless steel, and in red and blue aluminum shingles."<sup>5</sup> Russell Reising, a scholar of American culture, even draws a comparison to the Western painterly canon, finding the building's "metallic and painted surfaces Rubenesque in their voluptuous contours."<sup>6</sup>

The MoPOP, in essence, receives the kind of treatment that once might have been traditionally reserved for the objects within a museum, rather than the museum itself. The museum building is regarded as a work of art, with attention paid to Gehry's artistic process and his resulting creation's visual characteristics. Even those without a scholarly art historical vocabulary treat the MoPOP similarly to how they would treat a work of art. One road-tripper, with a quip that would sound familiar to the tourists flocking to the Louvre Museum's Denon Wing to snap a photograph of the *Mona Lisa*, notes of the MoPOP that "it makes [for] an interesting photo."<sup>7</sup>

### **The MoPOP as "post-museum"**

The MoPOP as a building is more important than any single object in the museum's collection. The collection itself is de-emphasized, a marketing approach that has been central to this museum from the outset. Paul Allen, a longtime rock music fan, got the idea for a museum in his hometown of Seattle after amassing a private collection of Jimi Hendrix memorabilia, starting with the 1991 purchase of one of Hendrix's flamboyant felt hats from a Christie's auction.<sup>8</sup> Soon, Allen owned enough Hendrix-related ephemera that Allen considered opening a Jimi Hendrix museum in Seattle, the birthplace of the legendary musician. After conversing with his sister, Jody Allen Patton, Allen realized that such a museum would appeal only to a narrow niche of Hendrix devotees. At Patton's suggestion, Allen broadened the theme to American popular music.

To ensure that the MoPOP collection was not too reliant on Allen's Hendrix collection, Allen decided to adopt a newer style of museum-building, one that Bruce explains "questioned the old sanctity of the artifact in favor of compelling narratives and delivery systems."<sup>9</sup> Allen's artifacts would form the backbone of the collection, but the collection would no longer form the backbone of the museum. Hendrix's hat and historic guitars still found their way into vitrines, but they shared the space with other attractions, including a museum-scale rock arena called the "Sky Church" complete with what was at the time the world's largest indoor LED screen;<sup>10</sup> an interactive "Museum Experience Guide" multimedia device with video clips, narration, and exclusive interviews;<sup>11</sup> and a motion simulator called "Artist's Journey," which was shut down in 2003 due to its steep maintenance costs.<sup>12</sup>

Some critics view this curatorial approach as Disneyfication, but for Allen and the museum's leadership, the "museum" aspect of this new enterprise was downplayed from the beginning. Notably, Allen originally chose to call this venture the Experience Music Project (EMP), and the name remained in place from 2000 until 2016, when the museum was renamed the Museum of Popular Culture to reflect how the institution's focus had expanded from music to an omnibus assortment of music, films, science fiction, video games, sports, and other forms of

popular culture.<sup>13</sup> Though the MoPOP is now marketed as a “museum,” it was originally branded as a “project” that visitors could “experience.” The significance of this name transcends semantics, as Bruce argues that the name “Experience Music Project” aligns Allen’s venture less with traditional museum values, and more with what Bruce terms the “post-museum,” a space that privileges active sensory immersion over passive contemplative edification.<sup>14</sup> Whether it is called the EMP or the MoPOP, the building is not a place that visitors come only to view “projects” or objects. Rather, MoPOP itself is a “project” where visitors can participate by “rocking out” in the Sky Church or interfacing with a Museum Experience Guide.

### **The MoPOP and the “museum effect”**

If the entirety of the MoPOP space is itself a project, then Gehry’s prominent building is the project’s core element. Unlike the physical structure of other traditional art, science, or history museums, the MoPOP building is the architecturalized manifestation of the project itself – or even an art object itself.

Art historian Svetlana Alpers describes the “museum effect” as the peculiar way that the space of a museum tends to “isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own.”<sup>15</sup> Alpers demonstrates how even objects that may not traditionally be considered art, like a giant crab that fascinated her when she saw it in a vitrine at Harvard University’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, succumb to the museum effect. In the case of the MoPOP, the museum building succumbs to the museum effect, offering itself for attentive looking. Visitors can get lost in looking closely at Gehry’s architecture in the same way that Alpers can get lost in looking closely at the giant crab. Where Alpers can take in all the details of the crab’s “huge claws, bulging eyes, feelers, raised bumps of shell, knobby joints, hairs that extended out around them,”<sup>16</sup> the MoPOP’s guests can take in all the details of the billowing steel, the regular rivets, the glint of sunlight, the contours of the building’s protuberances. Even if people are put off by Gehry’s creation, their derision may register so forcefully *because* they have evaluated the building through Alpers’ process of “attentive looking,” because they have invested the requisite time and focus to view the MoPOP as one would view a work of art - or an object transformed into a work of art when situated in a museum gallery. After all, Muschamp did refer to the MoPOP building as “something that crawled out of the sea, rolled over and died,” a sentiment that would not be out of place in describing the giant crab that Alpers saw at the Museum of Comparative Zoology.



Figure 2. Anish Kapoor, Cloud Gate (2006). Chicago.

In this light, including the word “project” in the museum’s original name seems apt, as the museum’s architecture functions as a colossal public art project. The MoPOP is like an enlarged version of the gestural, sculptural works of art that are located in many major cities: Alexander Calder’s *Saurien* in front of the IBM Building in New York City; Anish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate* in Chicago’s Millennium Park. These iconic works of art beckon to passers-by, demanding attention and close looking much like the MoPOP does to those walking through Seattle Center en route to the Space Needle.

### **The Guggenheim Bilbao Museum**

If the MoPOP building can be summed up in a phrase, it is one coined by *New York Times* architecture critic Michael Kimmelman: “the museum as work of art.”<sup>17</sup> This term, however, was originally deployed to describe another Frank Gehry-designed museum that cemented the Canadian-born American architect as a global superstar. In 1997, Gehry’s most famous building, the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, located in Bilbao, Spain, opened to the public, prompting tourists and architecture aficionados to visit the Basque capital. Anthropologist Roger Sansi, recalling swarms of early visitors, notes that “there was a sense of emergency in this rush to see the building,” which was “hailed as the first building of the twenty-first century, a world marvel, the masterpiece of Frank Gehry.”<sup>18</sup>

The Guggenheim Bilbao Museum began as an enormous and risky investment by the Basque government to help revitalize the industrial port city that had fallen on difficult economic times.<sup>19</sup> By the beginning of the 1990s, Bilbao’s civic officials had exhausted traditional economic options and were searching for a creative solution to their city’s financial struggles. In 1991, they struck an unconventional deal with Thomas Krens, the controversial and expansionist director of the Guggenheim Foundation at the time, to build a satellite Guggenheim Museum on the bank of the River Nervión. The Basques would cover most of the costs, including \$100 million for construction, \$50 million for an acquisitions fund, and \$20 million for a one-time licensing fee to the Guggenheim. In return, the Guggenheim Foundation would provide its expertise, its reputation, and its collection. The Guggenheim would manage

the museum, stage major temporary exhibitions, and populate the Bilbao museum with work from the collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.<sup>20</sup>

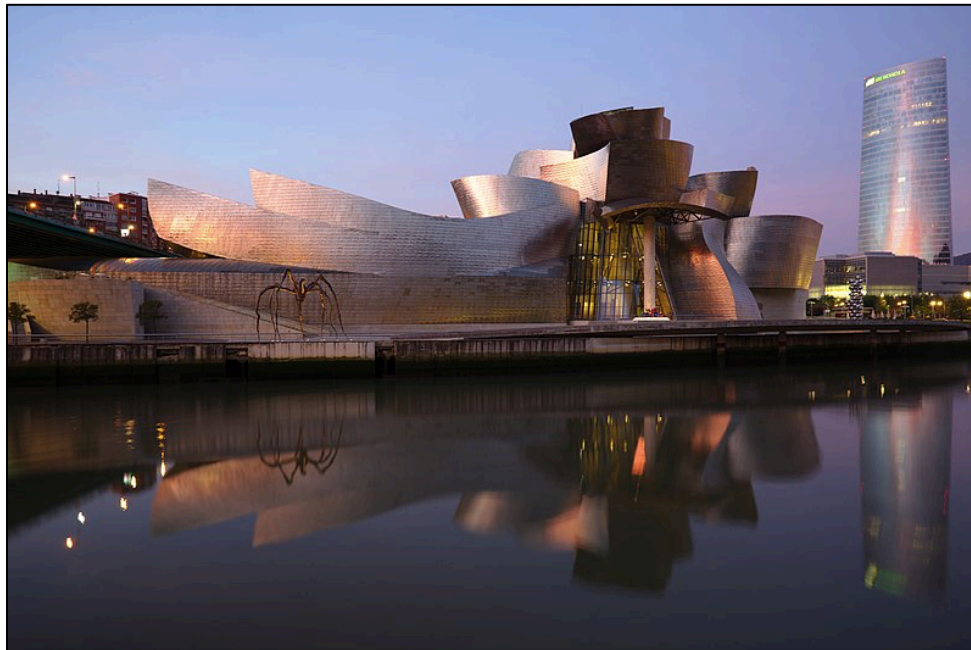


Figure 3. Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Bilbao Museum. Bilbao, Spain.

Though Krens was criticized for using his institution's clout to offload many financial responsibilities of this risky endeavor onto a city already in financial straits,<sup>21</sup> the Basques' gamble paid off immediately, with the museum's extraordinary positive impact on the city coming to be known as "the Bilbao effect." The languishing Bilbao economy made a dramatic turnaround: according to the *Financial Times*, in the Guggenheim Bilbao's first decade of operation, the museum helped to generate an additional €2.2 billion in tourism revenue for the city.<sup>22</sup> Krens and others have also suggested that the museum had a considerable social and economic effect, pointing to a link between the museum's presence and the sharp decline in terrorist violence in a city long regarded as a hotspot for radical Basque separatist action.<sup>23</sup>

The veracity of the Bilbao effect is not unchallenged. Architecture critic Edwin Heathcote, among others, contends that Bilbao's revitalization at the turn of the millennium was due less to the Guggenheim and more to a complex pattern of across-the-board investments in transportation, infrastructure, culture, and public spaces.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, regardless of the extent to which the Guggenheim museum can take credit for Bilbao's economic revival, one thing is widely agreed upon about the Bilbao museum: its architecture is a remarkable achievement, regarded as Gehry's masterpiece.

### **Gehry's creation as an art object**

Many have struggled to determine what Gehry's Guggenheim resembles. An article from the January 1998 edition of *Spin* magazine collates some descriptors from the first months of the museum's existence: "'a bird'; 'a plane'; 'Superman'; 'a ship'; 'a Spanish galleon'; 'a fantastic dream ship'; 'an artichoke'; 'a titanium artichoke'; 'a rose'; 'a miracle of the rose'; 'a sheep in



wolf's clothing.”<sup>25</sup> Anthropologist Joseba Zulaika argues that the museum’s “visual language invites metaphor because no concrete description captures the entire object. Image after image, metaphor after metaphor, reminiscence after reminiscence, overlay each other and leave with each viewer a different, but always indelible impression.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, scholars readily admit that words cannot do the museum justice. Beyond Roger Sansi, who points to “the irregular, fluid, inapprehensible form of the building,”<sup>27</sup> art historian Stanislaus von Moos sees Gehry’s masterpiece as “a series of organic or expressive spatial forms that can no longer be defined in terms of traditional concepts.”<sup>28</sup> Architecture critic Julie lovine, emphasizes that “it purposefully defies all easy descriptions.”<sup>29</sup>

The most fitting description of this protean, dynamic, kinetic, glimmering, composite building is precisely what Kimmelman calls it in his 1997 review: a work of art. The Guggenheim Bilbao is an object that people look closely at, visually wrestle with, attempt to find the words for, and often admit is ineffable. The museum itself is on display. Whatever is hung on the museum’s walls inside is almost inconsequential, a position bolstered by Kimmelman’s observation that the museum’s interior space is so gargantuan and cavernous that it dwarfs the largest works of art, relegating paintings by modern and contemporary artists to “Lilliputian” status.<sup>30</sup> The so-called Bilbao effect took hold even before works of art were installed in the galleries, as interested travelers flocked to Bilbao to see the construction being completed in the months leading up to the grand opening, undeterred that they would not see any works of art at the museum site besides Gehry’s.<sup>31</sup>

The view of the museum remains more iconic, memorable, and powerful for many visitors than any view *inside* the museum. The best-known work of art in the Guggenheim Bilbao’s collection is Jeff Koons’ colossal topiary sculpture entitled *Puppy* (1992), situated in the outdoor sculpture park in front of the museum entrance. In some ways, *Puppy* and the Guggenheim building might be cousins of a sort, for Kimmelman refers to Gehry’s museum as a work of “architectural sculpture.”<sup>32</sup> In this light, the Guggenheim’s primary function is not as a museum but rather as the most illustrious member of its own sculpture park.

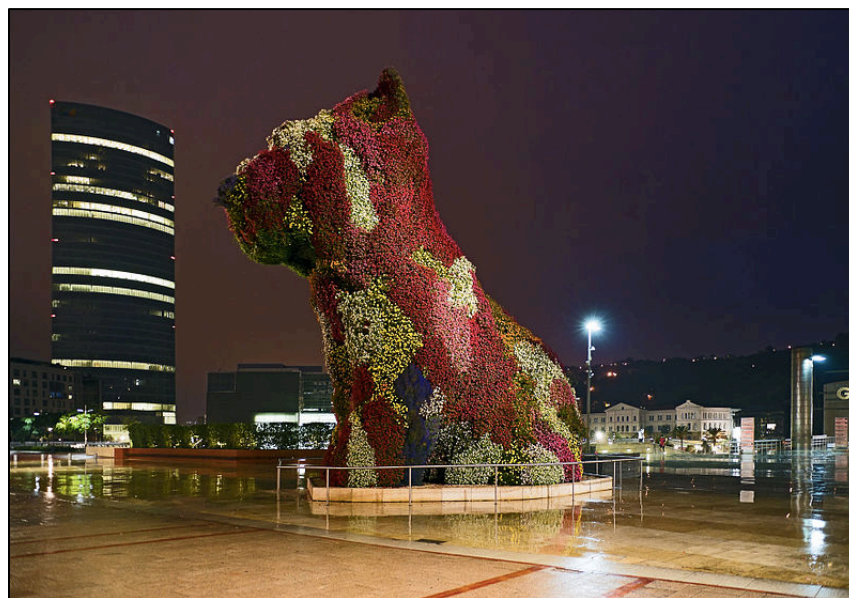


Figure 4. Jeff Koons, *Puppy* (1992). Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain.

## The Guggenheim Bilbao in a global context

Architectural historian Victoria Newhouse explains that the Guggenheim Bilbao fits into “[Thomas] Krens’ global concept” of museum-building.<sup>33</sup> That is, Krens, who once described the Guggenheim Foundation as “one museum comprised of discontinuous museum spaces,”<sup>34</sup> saw the Guggenheim Bilbao as one of many eventual destinations in a worldwide network of synergistic Guggenheims. Though Krens was not entirely successful in achieving this vision—the Guggenheim Las Vegas has closed and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is delayed,<sup>35</sup> and planned projects in cities including Rio de Janeiro and Helsinki fizzled for various reasons over the past two decades<sup>36</sup>—the idea of a global Guggenheim nexus was feasible because of the multinational and interconnected character of the art world.

Art critic Sabine Vogel describes the 1990s, when Krens negotiated the Guggenheim Bilbao, as the beginning of a “biennial boom,” in which major, must-attend events began proliferating beyond traditionally recognized art cities.<sup>37</sup> The Guggenheim’s “global concept,” epitomized by the Guggenheim Bilbao, played into the spirit of the biennial boom, creating an art-world event out of a work of architecture. Indeed, Roger Sansi<sup>38</sup> seizes on this point, referring to the Guggenheim Bilbao as “not just a building, but an event.”<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the Guggenheim Bilbao shares similarities with an event like Manifesta, the “European Nomadic Biennial,” which sells itself as “purposely [striving] to keep its distance from what are often seen as the dominant centers of artistic production, instead seeking fresh and fertile terrain for the mapping of a new cultural topography.”<sup>40</sup> Since its first edition in Rotterdam in 1996, Manifesta has been held in cities including Ljubljana, Murcia, Limburg, and Palermo, bringing art attendees to locales beyond traditional museum and art fair cities like London, Basel, and Venice.<sup>41</sup> Gehry’s Guggenheim adds Bilbao, a city as historically unacclaimed for the arts as Ljubljana or Murcia, to the list of must-visit places for modern and contemporary art enthusiasts.

Unlike Manifesta, which prides itself on “explor[ing] the psychological and geographical territory of Europe” by “paying attention to the specific qualities and idiosyncrasies of a given location,”<sup>42</sup> the Guggenheim Bilbao does the opposite, subsuming the city of Bilbao into the sweep of global contemporaneity. Sansi argues that, in the context of Krens’ machinations, “Bilbao itself was almost an excuse: the building was not making reference to the city[;] on the contrary,” it was everything that the city was not.<sup>43</sup> Though Newhouse sees Gehry’s architecture as referential to distinctive attributes of Bilbao’s landscape—“the curvilinear shapes . . . evoke the flora of the lush Basque countryside”; “the titanium cladding recalls the city’s steel factories”; “limestone from the southeast of Spain echoes the university buildings across the river”<sup>44</sup> — Sansi would likely dismiss these as mere symbolic parallels and visual rhymes.<sup>45</sup> Ideologically, according to Sansi, the gleaming glitz of the Guggenheim is completely antithetical to the ethos of a “shabby, post-industrial town” that “has never been known for its beauty.”<sup>46</sup>

The Guggenheim Bilbao Museum’s relationship to the global art world would not sit well with Slovenian curator, Igor Zabel, who co-coordinated Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana in 2000. As one of the overarching themes of his edition of Manifesta, Zabel asked “which [types of] borders [in contemporary society] should be questioned or erased, [and] which [should be] reinforced and defended.” Zabel argued that this was not just a hot-button issue for the global population, but also a question that “gains specific value in Slovenia for [the country’s] cultural

as well as geopolitical situation” as “the first Yugoslav republic to declare independence in 1991.”<sup>47</sup> This edition of Manifesta had to take place in Ljubljana because if held in any other city, the biennial would not have gained the “specific value” of interrogating those themes in a spatially resonant location. At the Guggenheim Bilbao, however, this level of site-specificity and spatial resonance does not come close to being attained. In fact, Krens actively campaigned *against* the inclusion of work by local Basque artists in the museum’s collection,<sup>48</sup> a position that has since been reversed, but one that nevertheless signifies that the Guggenheim Bilbao is not a Bilbaine museum but rather a museum that happens to be located in Bilbao. The Guggenheim Bilbao could and would be opened in any international city and function effectively as a branch of a global museum conglomerate. The Guggenheim Bilbao thus represents a paradox: it is a *sui generis* work of art, and yet it is meant to be emulated and recreated elsewhere around the globe under the Guggenheim Foundation brand.

Urban geographer Donald McNeill offers insight into this issue, reading the Guggenheim Bilbao as the city’s attempt to conform with the sociopolitical culture of global modernity, to shake free of its reputation as a backwards city “mired in pre-modern ethnic bloodshed” associated with Basque separatist activity.<sup>49</sup> In other words, even as the Guggenheim Bilbao’s architecture would make it stand out, both from established conceptions of Bilbao’s industrial character and among hyper-modern buildings of global metropolises, its existence would make Bilbao fit in with the rest of the modern Western world.

The Guggenheim Bilbao is a highly complex and multivalent work of art that opens up conversations on the mechanics of the multinational art world and the diffuse undifferentiation of global modernity. It is not a work of art, then, that can be considered solely from an aesthetic perspective: despite the architecture’s primarily formal allure, it is difficult to spend much time with the Guggenheim Bilbao without thinking beyond formalism, and turning to the entangled sociopolitical issues that the building represents and embodies. Though it is Alpers’ museum effect that allowed the Bilbao effect to take hold in the first place, the difficult questions raised by the Bilbao effect pull some of the focus away from the visual pleasures<sup>50</sup> of the museum effect.

### **The formalist museum**

As a thought experiment, imagine an art gallery enormous enough to house the Guggenheim Bilbao, so that this architectural sculpture could sit in a museum of its own. Would Gehry’s building be at home in a white cube gallery? Brian O’Doherty, who coined the term “white cube” in 1976, suggests that one of the primary functions of the white cube is to efface and conceal any sociopolitical interpretations of the works of art on display, rendering them objects of purely aesthetic contemplation.<sup>51</sup> Since the Guggenheim Bilbao is charged with sociopolitical energy that the white cube attempts to hide, any white cube housing the Guggenheim Bilbao would be filled with an uncomfortable dissonance. On the other hand, Gehry’s MoPOP building would work well in a white cube gallery. Notably, most days of the year, the MoPOP is enclosed within a natural variant of the white cube: Seattle’s rainy, overcast days commonly create a “gray cube” as a backdrop for the museum,<sup>52</sup> an appropriate way to view this particular “museum as work of art.”

In contrast to the Guggenheim Bilbao, the MoPOP's most contentious issues remain primarily aesthetic. Is Gehry's polychromatic creation aesthetically pleasing? A 2010 *Seattle Times* story commemorating the museum's ten-year anniversary acknowledges that, even after a decade of existence, "billionaire Paul Allen's Experience Music Project [as it was then called] still generates controversy."<sup>53</sup> Rather than discussing gentrification, the allocation of public resources, or the role of the philanthropist, the article focuses exclusively on the aesthetics of the MoPOP's architecture. "Everyone agrees that the rock museum's design is unique and its construction is a technical marvel," the story continues, "but there's little agreement about whether it's beautiful or ugly."<sup>54</sup>

The MoPOP has prompted countless reviews, editorials, blog posts, and contentious comments section interactions that hinge on this particular issue. On occasion, other controversies arise, including whether Allen could have directed his funds toward a better cause,<sup>55</sup> or whether it is appropriate for the museum to display Michael Jackson's jewel-encrusted glove in light of allegations of the performer's history of child sexual abuse.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately these issues are publicly discussed with relatively little fanfare. The debate about the aesthetic appeal of Gehry's building, however, continues into its third decade. Muschamp's oft-quoted remark designating the MoPOP as "something that crawled out of the sea" is merely the most famous salvo in this longstanding dispute. A Yelp reviewer describes the building as "an epitome of an eyesore."<sup>57</sup> A journalist "like[s] how the building feels unattached to the surrounding landscape and completely out of place."<sup>58</sup> A blogger from Brooklyn complains that "Gehry's forms [look like] crumpled tin foil," yet characterizes viewing the MoPOP as an interesting intellectual experience, commenting positively on how "it's challenging to walk around the building and try to wrap your mind around its shape."<sup>59</sup>

The assertions on either side of this discussion recall formalist questions about what a given work of art is doing, and whether that work is successful in its charge. The responses to Gehry's building even sound like the formalist art criticism of Clement Greenberg. In a 1948 review of a Pollock exhibition, for instance, Greenberg praises the abstract expressionist's work for its "style, harmony, and the inevitability of its logic,"<sup>60</sup> formal qualities that many who dislike the MoPOP critique the museum for lacking. When Greenberg refers to Pollock's use of aluminum paint as "producing an oily over-ripeness that begins to be disturbing,"<sup>61</sup> he provides the type of description that might also have run through the dissatisfied Yelp reviewer's mind when he called Gehry's aluminum-clad museum "an epitome of an eyesore." When Greenberg mentions that Pollock's "new work offers a puzzle to all those not sincerely in touch with contemporary painting,"<sup>62</sup> one wonders whether that Brooklyn-based blogger might also consider this period of Pollock's painterly output an edifying challenge to "try to wrap your mind around." When Greenberg preempts potential Pollock naysayers by saying, "I already hear: 'wallpaper patterns,' 'the picture does not finish inside the canvas,' 'raw, uncultivated emotion,' and so on, and so on,"<sup>63</sup> his language is reminiscent of select phrases leveled against the MoPOP by its critics: "sheet-metal fever dream,"<sup>64</sup> "gaudy and lacking real architectural discipline,"<sup>65</sup> "irresponsible and irreverent,"<sup>66</sup> etc.

### **Museum architecture and its discontents**

In her incisive 2013 book *Radical Museology*, Claire Bishop acknowledges "the triumph of 'starchitecture,'" whereby "the museum's external wrapper has become more important than its contents."<sup>67</sup> She sees this present state of museums as fulfilling the pessimistic



predictions of Rosalind Krauss, who in 1990 was already noticing that the museum was beginning to feel like “an oddly emptied yet grandiloquent space of which the museum itself—as a building—is somehow the object.”<sup>68</sup> The prevailing stance in academic circles, in Krauss’ time and in Bishop’s, has been to bemoan the rise of sensational museum architecture, as with sensationalism more generally, as vapid, banal, pandering to the lowest common denominator. Bishop accuses the contemporary museum of being concerned primarily with its surface-level “*image*: the new, the cool, the photogenic, the well-designed.”<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Rybczynski condemns the competition-oriented culture that has spawned this type of museum architecture for “promot[ing] flamboyance rather than careful thought, and favor[ing] the glib and obvious over the subtle and nuanced.”<sup>70</sup> It is not a difficult task to trace these complaints back to Debord’s notion of the Spectacle or even, particularly in Rybczynski’s case, to another Greenbergian insight, namely his thoughts on kitsch.

It is not only, as Bishop through Krauss points out, that museums have mostly devolved into “populist temple[s] of leisure and entertainment,” or that the primacy of the “architectural container” impedes our ability to have “a profound encounter with the work of art.”<sup>71</sup> Focusing solely on these negative qualities is to neglect what has been gained from the increased prominence of museum architecture, whatever is or is not displayed in a particular way, catering to varied sensibilities, within the “external wrapper.” Artists are now creating work in a large-scale medium: the medium of the museum. These museum-sized artworks, with which viewers are capable of having “a profound encounter,” can be as evocative and multifarious as any other work of art. Museum buildings themselves can resonate with sociopolitical themes as does the Guggenheim Bilbao, or operate exclusively on the level of formalism as does the MoPOP. Similar to great works of art, they, too, are shaped by and respond to their times.

## List of figures

Figure 1. Frank Gehry, Museum of Pop Culture. Seattle.

Figure 2. Anish Kapoor, Cloud Gate (2006). Chicago.

Figure 3. Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Bilbao Museum. Bilbao, Spain.

Figure 4. Jeff Koons, Puppy (1992). Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain.

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## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Bruce, "Spectacle and Democracy: Experience Music Project as a Post-Museum," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 135.

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<sup>7</sup> Philip May, *From High Tech to High Plains: An Englishman's RV Journey across America to Discover Himself and His Family* (self-pub, 2010), 242.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce, 133.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 138.

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<sup>15</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press), 27.

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<sup>33</sup> Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, 259.

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<sup>36</sup> Hannah McGivern, “In Pictures: Six Global Guggenheim Museums That Never Happened,” *Art Newspaper*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/gallery/six-global-guggenheim-museums-that-never-happened>.

<sup>37</sup> Sabine B. Vogel, *Biennials: Art on a Global Scale* (Vienna: Springer, 2010), 74.

<sup>38</sup> Sansi, as mentioned previously, also describes the “sense of emergency in this rush” to see Gehry’s masterpiece—a sense of emergency not unlike what one finds navigating through crowded pavilions at a major biennial.

<sup>39</sup> Sansi, 220.

<sup>40</sup> “About the Biennial,” Manifesta, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://manifesta.org/biennials/about-the-biennials/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Sansi, 221.

<sup>44</sup> Newhouse, 245.

<sup>45</sup> The types of visual rhymes, it is worth noting, that form the bedrock of formal analysis of works of art!

<sup>46</sup> Sansi, 221.

<sup>47</sup> Igor Zabel, “Manifesta 3,” *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (2000): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2000.10791978>.

<sup>48</sup> Sansi, 221.

<sup>49</sup> Donald McNeill, *The Global Architect: Firms, Fame, and Urban Form* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 86.

<sup>50</sup> In a completely non-Mulveyan sense!

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<sup>51</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, Lapis Press, [1976] 1986), 15.

<sup>52</sup> I am borrowing this wonderful phrase, “gray cube,” from psychologists Andreas Gartus and Helmut Leder, who use it to a somewhat a different effect in their fascinating empirical study of viewers’ reactions to modern art and graffiti art in museum and street contexts.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Seven, “After 10 Years, Experience Music Project Is Still Perplexing,” *Seattle Times*, June 5, 2010, <https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/after-10-years-experience-music-project-is-still-perplexing/>.

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<sup>61</sup> Greenberg, 60.

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<sup>64</sup> Amanda Castleman, “MoPop [sic],” AFAR, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.afar.com/places/museum-of-pop-culture-seattle>.

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<sup>68</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," *October* 54 (Autumn 1990): 4, JSTOR.

<sup>69</sup> Bishop, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Rybczynski, "The Bilbao Effect."

<sup>71</sup> Bishop, 5.