

FRANK GEHRY

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



Frank Gehry. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Bilbao, Spain, 1997

- 1) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2104. p. 1126

The Toronto-born, California-based Frank O. Gehry (b. 1929) creates unstable and Deconstructivist building masses and curved winglike shapes that extend far beyond the building's mass. One of his most spectacular designs is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. In the 1990s, the designing of art museums became more and more spectacular as they increasingly came to define the visual landscape of cities. Gehry developed his asymmetrical design using a CATIA CAD program that enabled him to create a powerfully organic, sculptural structure.

- 2) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2104. p. 1126

The complex steel skeleton is covered by a thin skin of silvery titanium that shimmers gold or silver depending on the time of day and the weather conditions. From the north the building resembles a living organism, while from other angles it looks like a giant ship, a reference to the industry on which Bilbao has traditionally depended, thereby identifying the museum

with the city. Despite the sculptural beauty of the museum, however, the interior of the notoriously difficult space in which to display art, a characteristic this building shares with Frank Lloyd Wright's spiraling design of the New York Guggenheim, a notable forebear of Gehry's explorations of the bold sculptural potential of architecture.

- 3) Tyrnauer, Matt. "Architecture in the Age of Gehry." *Vanity Fair*. Aug 2010 Source: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/08/architecture-survey-201008>

With Bilbao, Gehry presented a long-awaited solution to one of the most vexing problems in architecture at the end of the 20th century. Modernism, especially when deployed in urban settings on a grand scale, was largely loathed by the general public and eventually dropped by the design establishment. The cold, alienating, concrete-glass-and-steel environments imposed on many major cities were finally judged to have destroyed more user-friendly urban plans in the name of "slum clearing" or futuristic redevelopment. Postmodernism, a movement emphasizing a return to decoration, historical references, and fewer desolate urban plazas, which reached its height in the 1980s, seems in hindsight like a frail fig leaf attempting to cover up the sins of what had gone before.

- 4) Tyrnauer, Matt. "Architecture in the Age of Gehry." *Vanity Fair*. Aug 2010 Source: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/08/architecture-survey-201008>

Bilbao—today one of the top tourist destinations in Europe—was such a backwater in the 1990s that, according to Gehry, the 265,000-square-foot museum, beside the Nervión River, went up almost unnoticed by the press. That only contributed to the drop-dead impact it created with its unveiling. "I like to work under the radar as much as I can. It's been harder since I've gotten notorious," says Gehry. The first photos of the near-complete structure, which resembles a gargantuan bouquet of writhing silver fish, rendered a seismic shift in the global art culture.

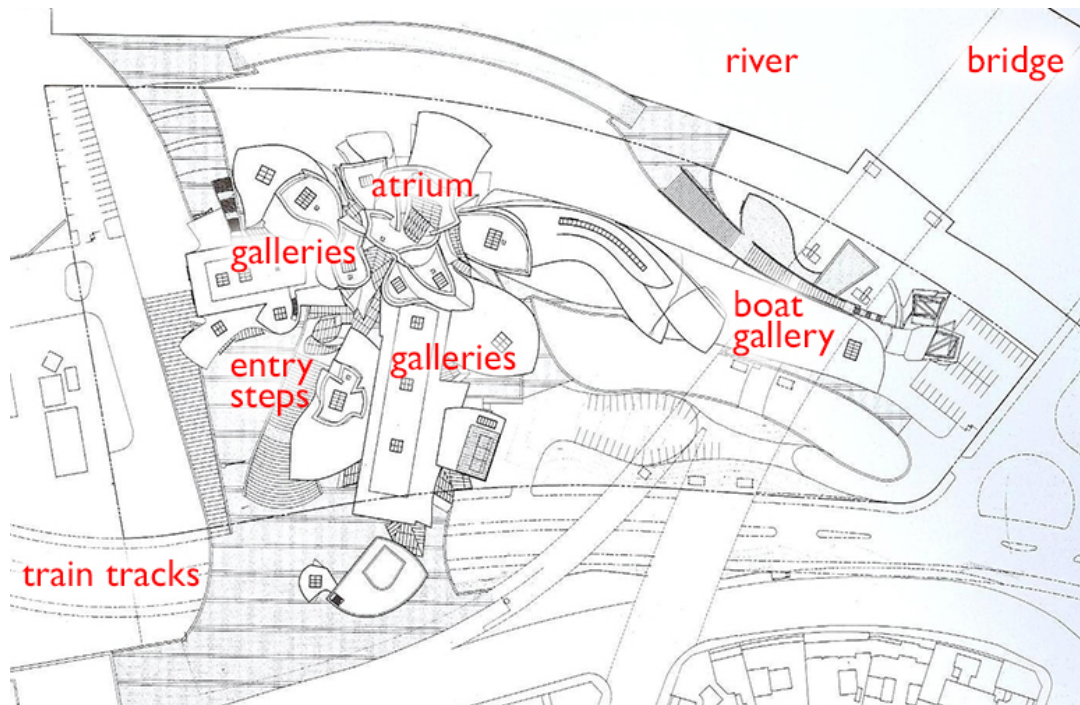
- 5) Source: <http://www.archdaily.com/422470/ad-classics-the-guggenheim-museum-bilbao-frank-gehry/>

The socio-economic impact of the museum has been astounding. During the first three years of operation, almost 4 million tourists visited the museum—generating about 500 million in

profit. Furthermore, the money visitors spent on hotels, restaurants, shops and transport collected over 100 million in taxes, which more than offset the cost of the building. However, the promise of the “Bilbao Effect” also “sparked a building boom in “statement” architecture across the globe, one which proved imprudent in the wake of the recent economic crisis. Nevertheless, the Museum remains an iconic structure renowned for its complexity and form.

6) Tyrnauer, Matt. “Architecture in the Age of Gehry.” *Vanity Fair*. Aug 2010 Source: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/08/architecture-survey-201008>

“Overall, the kind of language I’ve developed, which culminated in Bilbao, comes from a reaction to Postmodernism. I was desperate not to go there,” Gehry explains, in his refreshingly plainspoken style. “I was looking for a way to deal with the humanizing qualities of decoration without doing it. I got angry with it—all the historical stuff, the pastiche. I said to myself, If you have to go backward, why not go back 300 million years before man, to fish? And that’s when I started with this fish shtick, as I think of it, and started drawing the damn things, and I realized that they were architectural, conveying motion even when they were not moving. I don’t like to portray it to other people as a complicated intellectual endeavor. Most architects avoid double curves, as I did, because we didn’t have a language for translation into a building that was viable and economical. I think the study of fish allowed me to create a kind of personal language.”



- 7) Dr. Matthew A. Postal, "Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Bilbao," in Smarthistory, November 21, 2015, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/frank-gehry-guggenheim-bilbao/>

The Guggenheim Bilbao was also part of an ambitious urban renewal program conceived by the Basque regional government. An aging port and industrial center, the city had entered a period of significant economic decline during the 1980s. Various well-known architects were invited to design new structures, including Santiago Calatrava from Spain and Norman Foster from England. Though initial discussions focused on converting an existing industrial structure into an art museum, Krens convinced local officials to provide a more central and flexible location, a site on the banks of the Nervion River.

- 8) Dr. Matthew A. Postal, "Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Bilbao," in Smarthistory, November 21, 2015, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/frank-gehry-guggenheim-bilbao/>

A personal aesthetic Gehry, who started his career in the 1960s, developed a personal aesthetic gradually, discovering exhilarating ways to shatter and re-assemble architectural forms. As most architects do, he began with the structure's most basic program. After determining the size and shape of the interiors, he melded the forms together, arranging them into a lively sculptural whole.

Though his earlier work, sometimes categorized as Deconstructivism, featured everyday building materials like chain link, corrugated metal and plywood, by the late 1980s Gehry had refined his vision, using more costly surfaces to produce unexpectedly sensuous designs. Aided by sophisticated computer software, his most daring projects evoke aspects of the Italian Baroque style. Like the drapery folds that animate some pieces of 17th century figurative sculpture, Gehry's more striking works juxtapose elements that bend, ripple and unfurl.



- 9) Dr. Matthew A. Postal, "Frank Gehry, Guggenheim Bilbao," in Smarthistory, November 21, 2015, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/frank-gehry-guggenheim-bilbao/>

The central atrium serves as a circulation hub and orientation gallery, providing access to approximately 20 galleries on three levels. While the sequence of "classic" galleries are predictably rectangular, other exhibition spaces have surprising shapes, with angled or curving walls and occasional balconies. Particularly memorable is the so-called "boat gallery." Though Gehry compares the shape to a fish (a reoccurring motif in his work), this enormous column-free space (above) extends more than 400 feet along the river-front promenade and beneath the adjoining bridge. Ideal for large works of sculpture, this vast space contains an installation by Richard Serra.

- 10)** DeWitte, Debra J., Ralph M. Larmann, and Kathryn Shields. *Gateways to Art*, 3rd ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018. p. 70

Bilbao was once a center for shipbuilding, and the undulating surfaces of Gehry's creation suggest ships and ship construction. Gehry's design uses contrasts in geometric and organic form. Historically, architectural design has relied on geometric form. Organic forms, by comparison, are more difficult to visualize and plan in advance; curved and irregular structures are difficult to survey, measure, plumb, and level. But Gehry used computer programs originally invented for aerospace design to plan buildings that contradict our preconceived ideas about architecture as geometric form. Most of the walls of the Guggenheim Museum consist of irregular, curving, organic forms that rise and fall unpredictably. The undulating surfaces give a sense of movement and life to the structure. This could make some visitors feel disoriented, but Gehry counters this at critical junctures by using strongly geometric form. At the entrance, for instance, the reassurance of geometric form encourages even the most apprehensive visitor to enter the building.

- 11)** DeWitte, Debra J., Ralph M. Larmann, and Kathryn Shields. *Gateways to Art*, 3rd ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018. pp. 70-1

Gehry employs both sculptural relief and in-the-round forms. The surfaces of the organic portion of the building are covered with titanium tiles. The subtle changes to the surfaces of the material resemble an abstract bas-relief. But the entire building is also like a sculpture in the round that the viewer can stroll around to appreciate the unexpected juts and curves.

Gehry's museum has reshaped its location. The interior space, designed to meet the changing needs of art and artists in the future, can also be extended or reduced, creating interesting exhibition opportunities. The complex shapes of the building extend out into space like a huge boat, emphasizing its relationship to the nearby River Nervion. When it was first constructed, the building stood in stark contrast to the surrounding urban landscape. It was designed to offer an optimistic vision in what was at that time a deteriorating industrial district.