

Day 16 - June Shin

http://www.guggenheim.org/images/content/foundation/gugg_foundation_map_120810.jpg

The Guggenheim effect shows how a cultural, artistic project can lead to a regeneration of a previously derelict city. This name comes from the Guggenheim Foundation's international expansion and the socio-cultural impacts it brought to the regions. Starting with its merging with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice in the 1970s, it has embarked on grand projects such as the Guggenheim Bilbao, the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Each of these museums has distinctive architecture -- a Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry; the Louvre Abu Dhabi designed by Jean Nouvel; a performing arts center by Zaha Hadid; the Zayed National Museum designed by Norman Foster; and a Maritime Museum by the Japanese master Tadao Ando(Aspden) -- and celebrated art collection. By establishing these hallmarks around the world, Guggenheim has sought and continues to seek international recognition as a "pioneer and touchstone for all cultural institutions" (Guggenheim).

The international collaboration on Abu Dhabi seeks to turn the entire district on Saadiyat Island into "a center for global culture, drawing local, regional, and international visitors with unique exhibitions, permanent collections, productions, and performances" (Guggenheim). The key institutions in the cultural district are: Zayed National Museum, Louvre Abu Dhabi, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Performing Arts Center, and Maritime Museum. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi aims to focus on the "interconnected dynamics of local, regional, and international art centers as well as their diverse historical contexts and sources of creative inspiration" by celebrating the identity specific to the not only the culture of Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates but also the entire Middle (Guggenheim). However, the implications of a cultural project like Guggenheim Abu Dhabi are more profound than success as merely a tourist attraction. Many of the benefits that the city gains from having Guggenheim are indirect. Apart from the millions of visitors who will help support an economy that is almost entirely dependent on oil revenue, restaurants, golf clubs, luxury resort, beach accommodations, and others do great service to the city by providing jobs and generating income (Aspden). The ultimate goal is the city's regeneration.

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Saadiyat Island

http://www.guggenheim.org/images/content/Affiliates/abu-dhabi/master-plan-district_490.jpg

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Cultural District, Saadiyat Island

<http://www.dubai-information-site.com/image-files/saadiyat-island.jpg>

However, the Guggenheim effect can also be negative. In the case of Bilbao, one of the problems that surfaced was the luxury housing that "Many will see...from the outside ...[and] Only a few will enjoy...from the inside" (Vicario 2388). This forced old residents to move out to re-settle where housing was more affordable. The initiative that purportedly tried to raise the quality of life in the city just replaced the poor residents with the wealthy ones. In the case of Abu Dhabi, Human Rights Watch reported the abuse of migrant workers from South that was part of the making of the new Saadiyat Island (Aspden). The Sultan said that "a museum is a device for developing civic society," but when people are being maltreated, a civic society seems like a long way. Moreover, the first exhibitions held in Abu Dhabi City only attracted about 75 people a day (Aspden). The number must rise as more people become accustomed to arts and culture, but I can't help but suspect that the same, accentuated "social exclusion and polarization" seen in Bilbao may happen to Abu Dhabi.

Something else that seems to worry people, especially art connoisseurs, is the practice of museum franchising and the conflict of interests between the public good and private interest. Some speculate that museums are perhaps too eager to expand that they face the risk of neglecting their mission as world-class museums (Chayka). *Time Magazine* even came up with the term "McGuggenheim" (Mullin). *The Atlantic* compared the museum to Starbucks and Wal-Mart. Critics of museum franchising argue that, traditionally seen as "educationally-driven non-profit organizations," museums are now becoming money-driven institutions (Mullin). *The Guardian* stated that Guggenheim has become a "global art circus, positioned conceptually somewhere between a casino and a department store" (Mullin). Hopefully the many Guggenheim museums around the globe will indeed serve as a platform for accessing greater audiences and nurturing new art communities instead of ending up as a "vanity project" that has compromised a museum's foremost goal for financial profit and meaningless fame. Despite the opposition, I think that Guggenheim's venture into Abu Dhabi is good in that it may help people think about and view the Middle East in an entirely new way. Aspden asks, "can a region that has become a watchword, in Western circles, for intransigent problems and violence once more become an energizing cultural force?" I believe that, if watched with guidelines to maximize the benefits but also minimize the negative consequences, gentrification through cultural initiative can be advantageous for all.

Works Cited

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