

# Day 16 - McKenzie Sullivan

Art tourism is a thriving segment of the tourism industry. For centuries the art sector had been appreciated worldwide, people do hesitate to travel to other countries solely to visit museums and art galleries. The "Guggenheim Effect" is the cultural and economic revitalization of a city as a result of money and interest driven into new cultural attractions like a luxurious art museum.

One example of a relatively successful "Guggenheim Effect" is the Guggenheim Bilbao. Bilbao, the port city of 500,000 in the Basque region of northern Spain was suffering from severe economic trouble in the early 1990s because of the decline of its port. Thus the Bizkaia Provincial Council and the Basque Government presented an economic regeneration model that included creating a one hundred million dollar cultural icon for the city that would create an economic ripple effect from 400,000 visitors a year spending money in hotels, shops, bars and restaurants and regenerating areas near the port that had fallen into neglect.

The vision was very unpopular with many people in Bilbao who claimed the money would be better invested in creating manufacturing jobs.

"The museum was very controversial because in the situation of an economic crisis it was not an obvious thing to do," says Juan Ignacio Vidarte, who played a pivotal role in negotiations from 1992 and is currently director of the museum. "The obvious way to confront it was to put more money into declining industries. There was a lot of political opposition and a high level of scepticism from the public." Nevertheless the government approached the Guggenheim Foundation with its plan in 1991 and construction started in 1994.

The city now the Guggenheim Bilbao, a twisting, titanium-plated masterpiece of curving forms, designed by Frank Gehry, which has been called 'the greatest building of our time' by the famous US architect Philip Johnson. Many people that opposed the original plans are now applauding the museum, which has since had ten million visitors from all over the world.

"There are many buildings that would probably not have been built if this had not happened," said Vidarte. "It has made cities far more aware of the power of architecture and it has provided proof that bravery when it comes to architecture can very successful."

However, the "Guggenheim Effect" only really benefits certain areas. While the newly gentrified or revived areas do attract more tourism much of the revenue benefits only few. The effect does not guarantee an increase in international investment in the area.

In Vicario and Martinez Monje's study, they point out that Bilbao had a great physical regeneration because of the museum. As Guggenheim director Vidarte stated, many buildings and infrastructure came after the Guggenheim; however, the socioeconomic aspects of revitalization have been ignored. The result of the Bilbao Guggenheim was the creation of a consumer center that caters only to the wealthy. Numerous studies have shown that people who include the arts in their travel plans often have higher income levels than other tourists to that locale, have a greater likelihood of staying in local hotel, take longer trips and shop more, therefore driving Bilbao citizens out.

Along with the infrastructure came rising real estate prices, which made the area inaccessible to many citizens.

Instead of addressing the problems of the current inhabitants through social programs, the program will instead focus on the physical problems of the neighborhood and most likely result in the current inhabitants leaving and take their issues elsewhere.

While the international community now has a much more positive of Bilbao due to its new reputation as a center for art and culture, the benefits for the citizens of Bilbao have been less that expected.

The next definite Guggenheim museum to open in 2012 will be on Saadiyat Island, in Abu Dhabi, also designed by Frank Gehry, and the foundation is looking at building new museums in Salzburg, Macau, Hong Kong, Singapore, Beijing, Taiwan, Tokyo, Osaka, Mexico, St Petersburg, as well as a second one in New York. It seems that this socioeconomic neglect will also occur in Abu Dhabi as the city has built an island that caters exclusively to the upper class. I do believe the "Guggenheim Effect" has had a positive impact on Bilbao and will promote tourism and invigorate certain areas of the economy in Abu Dhabi; however, I do not believe the "Guggenheim effect" can be replicated in any city. Each city has its own problems, agendas and disadvantages. The building needs to be in sync with the other elements of the city. If Guggenheims start popping up everywhere they will simply become a franchise brand.

Interview with Bilbao Museum director <http://www.designbuild-network.com/features/feature1506/>

<http://www.guggenheim.org/bilbao>