

Day 16 - Christina Chaplin

The Guggenheim Effect is an ephemeral idea surrounded by vagueness about the fact that cultural installments can bring economic change and something about how branding can impact the social value of venues as large as whole countries bringing prestige and wealth wherever they go. I am wary of this Win-Win notion that seems to surround the opinions of those in support of the Guggenheim Effect. No one change or institution is a panacea for a country, and all purchases come at a price. The Guggenheim Effect is not free, so just how much are nations willing to pay for it?

Bilbao in Spain had reportedly spent over \$200 million on its Guggenheim construction, a work of art in and of itself, which like a work of art is supposed to bring wealth, status, and magnificence to its owner. Yet unlike the modern art market standards, this work cannot be sold so its economic benefits must be seen elsewhere. These arrive in the economic forms of increased tourism, a renewed real-estate market, the rebirth of a cultural sector to draw consumers, and the expected gentrification of less than desirable surrounding areas. With all of these benefits that appear to be lined up behind the Guggenheim, it is no wonder that many cities would go to great lengths to secure this museum for themselves. I wonder then, how many of these prospective cities are aware of the negative side of this purchase? Do any of them suspect that there could be consequences? Do they know that this is only a first step and that many must follow?

In the current art market, branding and prestige have become predominant markers of wealth and status among the cultural consumers and producers. As it happens, the more famous you are, the more trusted you are, the more recognized you are, the more money you make and the bigger impact you have on society. Guggenheim would thus seem like the perfect franchise! It is a large and globally respected institution that has flourished in New York City and indeed in installments all over the world. Yet this branding is not the same as the branding of an artist or an art fair. The Guggenheim has taken it to a whole different level and there could eventually be negative fall out from this. An artist's work is branded because it is made by them. An art fair is branded because people go there to see the best. The Guggenheim is branded for its unique perspective on contemporary art and its respected reputation in the art community. Unfortunately, no artist would ever attempt to clone themselves. By proliferating its physical establishments around the world, the Guggenheim runs the risk of weakening its strong standing as an art community staple. For one, they expose their true motives for money, which is generally frowned upon in the art world. They remove themselves from the roster of pure, art supporting institutions around the globe. Further, they run the risk that the downfall of anyone of the other Guggenheims, a scandal or a misfortune befalling any of the franchises, could dramatically impact the importance and appeal of all of the other museums. When the Guggenheim multiplies itself, it makes itself available to a wider audience, yes. But it also makes the experience of going there less unique, less desirable, and less authentic. The store runs the risk of becoming a glorified McDonalds... a cookie cutter institution which can be found in any city and which loses its main appeal as a foundation of the art scene.

Furthermore, in building the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the government spent a great deal of money. This public money went towards bringing an outside cultural form into the city, and in effect the governance of the city took that money out of the hands of local artisans, workers, and cultural impetus. They potentially stunted the artistic development of an authentic and unique cultural scene. The work that can be seen at the Guggenheim is work that would shown at any other Guggenheim, but what makes a thriving city is a cultural identity of one's own to adhere to and to propagate around the world. All is not immediately lost however. We can see in the article on the gentrification of BLV that new artisans are beginning to move into the area attracted by the low rents in combination with the prime location in the heart of the city. The city is thus supporting this growing bohemia of sorts, hoping to cultivate a bustling and creative sector which seems preferable to the poverty and marginalization which was taking place there before. Yet, like the example of SoHo in the 1990s, some good things can't last. Without a firm and stable grounding for the group, we can predict that in a few years, maybe a decade's time, they will be replaced by a middle-class buyer, an upperclass family, when rent prices rise due to the desirability of the new creative sector. Creativity and local cultural forms like galleries and restaurants elevate the quality of life in an area and thus draw in people willing to pay to live in these areas. When rents go up, however, the original cause of the upturn - the artisans themselves no less - are evicted from their homes and then must relocate elsewhere to start the process over again. The presence of the Guggenheim may have temporarily attracted a cultural epicenter, but there is no doubt that with the city government's support of gentrification the creative population which brought on this change will relocate leaving only middle-class / upperclass citizens to live in a place that could easily be confused with many of today's less unique metropolises.