



Bilbao Effects and Narrative Defects.

A critical reappraisal of an Urban Rethoric

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Résumé :

The realization of the Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is probably one of the most recurrent success stories regarding the role of contemporary architecture in promoting urban regeneration, economic development and city branding. In the last fifteen years it has been referred to as a model for regeneration by many authors and, more importantly, it is still an ubiquitous narrative among urban decision makers. This paper analyses the most diffused and simplistic representations of this story. Secondly, it contextualizes the realization of the museum in the broader process of transformation of the city, explicating public and private investment mechanisms in urban regeneration. Thirdly it deconstructs this narrative showing the inconsistencies between the narration and actual processes of urban regeneration and local development. The reconsideration of this narrative regarding spectacular architecture leads one to notice that representing architectural aesthetics and cultural facilities as a determinant factor in regeneration does not respond to actual urban processes (in terms of actors' motivation, public relevance and desirability of the effects), but, nonetheless, it has been the means for diffusing beliefs and behaviors among decision makers providing certain types of actor with apparently favorable conditions and inducing potential perverse and paradoxical urban effects.

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Abstract:

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Introduction: The archistarship that landed in Bilbao and elsewhere

"The Bilbao Effect" became a popular term after Frank Gehry built the Guggenheim Museum in Spain, transforming the poor industrial port city of Bilbao into a must-see tourist destination. Its success spurred other cities into hiring famous architects and giving them carte blanche to design even more spectacular buildings in hopes that the formula could be repeated. In Mr. Safdie's play ***The Bilbao Effect*** -- the second play of a planned trilogy focusing on contemporary architecture -- Erhardt Shlaminger is a world famous architect who faces censure by the American Institute of Architects, following accusations that his urban redevelopment project for Staten Island has led to a woman's suicide. The play tackles controversial urban design issues that New Yorkers have recently encountered in Brooklyn as a result of the hotly-debated plans to redevelop the Atlantic Yards into an architecture-star mega-development. *The Bilbao Effect* explores whether architecture has become more of an art than a profession, and at what point the ethics of one field violate the principles of the other"

(retrieved from the official website of the New York Branch of the American Institute of Architects, on May 2nd, 2010, <http://cfa.aiany.org/index.php?section=calendar&evtid=1579>)

Above is the synopsis and advertisement for Oren Safdie's play hosted by the Center for Architecture in New York City starting May 16, 2010. Of course this is only one of the visible tips of the iceberg: a narrative that during the last fifteen years has been affecting large and medium-size cities around the world and that encountered some criticisms in architectural and urban studies debates.

The description of this urban transformation process by experts in the field of architecture and urban design is sometimes as simplistic as a theatrical representation: as did many other cities in post-industrial decline of the 1990s, Bilbao regenerated the waterfront by localizing high quality functions among which a new museum. At that time the Guggenheim Foundation was searching for new satellite facilities in order to enhance the appreciation of its underutilized collection. The local Basque government provided the land and more than one hundred million Euros. The choice of Gehry's striking aesthetic was functional to the renaissance of the city. In the words of an architectural critique:

"The rust belt city [...] needed a postcard image comparable to the Eiffel Tower and the Sydney Opera House to symbolize its emergence as a player on the chessboard of a united Europe and

globalized economy. It needed a monument. One building and \$110 million later, Bilbao is now a contender as a world-class city, and many of the world's second- and third-tier city have called Mr. Gehry's office, hoping for a comparable Cinderella transformation " (Giovannini, 2001, 1).

The deconstructivist aesthetic of the museum and the technical innovations in design and implementation have been celebrated worldwide (among others see Jencks, 2002), although some limitations have been noted by art curators. Often, this museum has been interpreted as an urban scale piece of design, an artwork or a monument, probably also because of the nearby Puppy, by Jeff Koons (whose aesthetic levers sizing and de-contextualizing objects), or because this museum is placed in a very visible site surrounded by the Nervion river, reflecting the building with postcard-like effects. Furthermore, the name of the architect was important. The vice-mayor of the city stated: "good architecture is not enough anymore: to seduce we need names" (cited in Gonzales, 2006, 847). These are part of the reasons why the Guggenheim became more of an icon for the city and for its renaissance, a brand, rather than just a museum (Klingman, 2007).

IMAGE 1 ABOUT HERE – Guggenheim Museum (by Michele Nastasi)

This is one of the most recurrent success stories regarding the role of spectacular contemporary architecture in promoting urban regeneration and economic growth, in city branding and competitiveness boosting. Some authors refer to it as a doubtless success in urban regeneration (Masbougi, 2001), more importantly decision makers have substantially been trying to imitate and adapt this narration in many contexts. Important authors in the architecture and planning debate already recognized and thoroughly discussed how mainstream contemporary urbanism is influenced by transnational trends and the circulation of ideas (King, 2004). One impressive result in contemporary cities is the homogeneity of architectural outcomes in the context of radically different cultural, aesthetic, urban, political, economic, social and institutional features (Muñoz, 2008) and the fact that homogeneity is not merely due to a generic process of globalization, but also to the production and circulation of specific types of actors, metaphors and narratives regarding the urban impact of spectacular architecture and their connection to common financial and political mechanisms (Evans, 2001; Gospodini, 2002; Ockman, 2004; Sklair, 2005; Alves, 2007). In this sense, the role of the star architect in contemporary urban policy making concentrates more and more on the designing of urban visions and architectural icons, using his artistic aura for driving political consensus (Easterling 2005).

Planning theorists have been debating the importance of the creation of narratives and storytelling (among others: Ferraro, 1990; Fisher and Forester, 1993; Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2004; Forester 2009). In social sciences narratives are meant to help groups and organizations make sense out of certain sets of events and, when it comes to urban planning, also to explain how and why certain processes evolve and affect the transformation of the city (Czarniawska, 2002). They are retained to be capable of creating publics, mobilizing social actors, framing policies and, to a different extent, of driving planning action. They are implicit vehicles of principles and values that are part of larger discourses and that tend to frame actual

decisions in urban policy making. The importance of legitimization and accreditation of stories has been discussed (Sandercock, 2003), as well as the importance of place in urban narratives. For example, drawing on the case of cultural urban branding in Aalborg, Jansen (2007) undertakes this effort and shows how actual urban planning practices are influenced by the existence, the construction and opposition of narratives, generally with little reference to place and space as relevant elements. Also the relationship between narrative and action has attracted the attention of planning theorists (see for example the works of Thorgmorton).

If not carefully questioned, contextualized and rebalanced (Soja, 2003), one narration can evidently become part of transnational ideologies of planning (Harvey, 1985 and 2002). But one problem in current academic planning debate is that the theory produced to explain the relevance of narrative in urban transformation has become more and more sophisticated despite the fact that very simplistic representations circulate and tend to conform actual urban policy making, which evidently is mainly driven by professionals rather than planning theorists (for example, regarding entrepreneurial cities or regions see among others Jessop, 1999; regarding urban competitiveness strategies see among others Beauregard and Pierre, 2000; regarding the urban implications of the creative class theory see among others Ponzini and Rossi, 2010).

Many “wannabe” cities have been facing significant problems and failures in trying to replicate the Bilbao story and in promoting spectacular cultural facilities all over the world. For example in the USA: the additions to the St. Louis Art Museum, the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Columbus Museum of Art were recently delayed, the expansion of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive were abandoned. Also, in more stable urban contexts, the Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center and the renovation of the New York Public Library’s main Fifth Avenue branch were put into question [1]. Taking into consideration Central and Eastern Europe, one can see a massive amount of recently opened or about to be opened museums being discussed as the means for regenerating buildings and urban areas, triggering development, attracting tourists and strengthening the local and national identity: the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum designed by Zaha Hadid in Vilnius, the Museum of Contemporary Art designed by Rem Koolhaas in Riga, Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti in Zagreb, MNAC in Bucharest, KUMU in Tallinn, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, LUMU in Budapest and others (Pierantoni and Tali, forthcoming).

Goals and motivations of similar programs are varied but generally have not been thoroughly discussed in public since they could easily be cloaked in the Bilbao narrative, linking the creation of a new spectacular cultural facility to socially harmonious urban and economic effects. This paper systematically questions the ‘Bilbao effect’ narrative since it seems quite necessary to explain the reasons and eventual inconsistencies, the advantages induced to different types of actors by the worldwide circulation of such an urban narrative, although this might require a little excess of a researcher’s zeal!

This paper analyses the most diffused and simplistic representations of the Bilbao story, including the various and inconsistent economic impact forecasting and evaluations and the wrap-ups by architects, urban designers and aesthetic critics. Secondly, it contextualizes the realization of the museum in the

broader process of transformation of the city. The description is used for making public and private investment mechanisms in urban regeneration explicit, and for highlighting the paradoxical and perverse impacts of this and similar development projects. Thirdly it deconstructs this global narrative showing the inconsistencies between the narration and actual processes of urban regeneration and local development. On many occasions decision-makers have refused this rhetoric or experienced problems and failures. Several cases depicting the Guggenheim Foundation networking and trying to start Bilbao-like processes in Taiwan, Mexico, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere are critically considered.

The deconstruction of the powerful narrative of spectacular architecture leads one to notice that representing branded and aesthetically striking pieces of architecture as a determinant factor in regeneration does not respond to actual urban processes, but, nonetheless, it has been the means for spreading beliefs and behaviours among decision makers and provided certain actors with apparently favourable conditions. In the conclusion, a set of considerations leads to the reappraisal of this urban rhetoric and to ask for more sound justification and legitimization in similar urban decisions.

The dominant rhetoric of the Bilbao effect and its critics

The evaluations of the project of the Guggenheim Museum and its impact over urban regeneration and economic development in Bilbao are countless. The paper will not propose a systematic review nor will it try to settle the argumentations. The different evaluations proposed by promoters and commentators will be considered as they made this representation credible on the global stage, despite several inconsistencies (Evans, 2003).

The director of the Guggenheim Foundation, Thomas Krens, proposed an estimation of the first three years of activity of the Museum: 1.385 million visitors and a 220 million dollar impact over the local economy (Krens, 2000). Similarly, another architectural critic suggested an increase in economic activities that are complementary to the cultural supply of about 70 million dollars (Jenks, 2005). In the exhibition dedicated to another Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, in the Arab Emirates, an extensive evaluation of the effects of the Bilbao project in the 1998-2006 period was proposed, revealing an attendance of 9.2 million visitors, inducing a direct expenditure of 2.16 billion dollars, a GDP contribution of over 2 billion, and tax revenue for the Basque Government of 342 million. Following this evaluation the museum generated 4.355 jobs per year and a return on investment higher than 12% [2].

The international urban research debate proposed more modest figures, especially regarding the medium term effects. After a surprising start in terms of visitors, a contraction was witnessed in 2001 (760 thousand), going back up to almost one million per year (Plaza, 2006). The return on investment is 10,9%, making a net present value unrealistic until 2015 (Plaza, 2006). Despite the fact that the museum project was promoted in terms of urban competitiveness, the actual economic effect prevalently touches the tourism-related sectors (Vicario and Martinez Monje, 2003), furthermore the jobs induced are not over one thousand units (Plaza, 2007), considered that impact in collateral activities is difficult to assess.

On the one hand, architects and critics proposed a simple bottom line:

“[...] it was the implications of the ‘Bilbao Effect’ that were obvious to the media and to every aspiring metropolis. If a city can get the right architect at the right creative moment of his career, and take the economic and cultural risk, it can make double the initial investment in about three years. It can also change the fortunes of a declining industrial region. To put it crudely, the tertiary economy of the culture industry is a way out of Modernist decline: Post-modernize or sink!” (Jenks, 2005, 19).

On the other, more careful observers and critics in the architectural debate have been more or less consciously fuelling the Bilbao effect rhetoric. For example, Saunders suggested that this Guggenheim “cannot be thought of apart from its intended role in promoting the economic revitalization of Bilbao and its magnetic power for tourist money” (Saunders, 2005, viii). Similarly in urban studies, the following case was made: “We are in a position to assert that Bilbao is an outstanding test case for the impact of a single internationally famous facility, considering that Bilbao was not previously known for its tourism potential, in a context that otherwise does not lend itself to large flows of tourism” (Plaza, 2000, 264), even if more cautious revisions regarding the context were made (Plaza, 2006; Plaza and Haarich, 2009) and finally explaining that similar regeneration processes occur on the condition that the city becomes a massive tourist destination (although some may question that tourist attraction was a goal of the cultural investment), it experiences economic diversification, integration in the redevelopment zones’ market and overall increases productivity (Plaza, 2008), conditions that generally seem to depend on private and public investments that have little or no relationship to the creation of a spectacular museum but refer to more general economic and urban development processes.

These messages putting the iconic building at centre stage and associating it with the auric image of this star architect were interpreted by key actors in global, large and medium size cities around the world - whether being part of advanced tertiary markets or willing to rescue a post-industrial declining situation - as a way to start the engines of the urban growth machine and of the entertainment machine. As mentioned above and below, in recent years, many urban policymakers expected iconic and spectacular interventions to play a key role in regenerating an underused area, in connecting to new global flows of tourism, in increasing media visibility and the growth of innovative and creative economic sectors. These expectations could be partially motivated by banalizing linear and apparently causal representations. They are a vehicle for the idea that project formats and their impacts can be transferred from one place to another without referring not only to macroeconomic factors, but also to infrastructure and accessibility [3], to physical and environmental conditions, to the institutional setting, and to the political and social problems that can arise in the urban realm (Gonzalez, 2006).

Regeneration in Bilbao 1990-2010: an actual urban process

The director of the Guggenheim Foundation, admitted that the realization of the Museum was in fact a process, that is much more complex than usual representations, depending on contingent events and that it would not be possible to draw general lessons (Krens, 2000). One could doubt this was a suggestion for giving higher consideration to the urban realm. Nonetheless, the case of Bilbao cannot be simply represented as the success of a single blockbuster intervention and the comprehension of a broader process of urban transformation is required in order to evaluate the actual relevance of the museum and its representation.

Bilbao is a relatively dense medium-size city of about 350,000 inhabitants. Several heavy industrial sites were located along the banks of the Nervion River in the middle of the last century, attracting population in the subsequent decades. With the end of the Franco regime, the Basque region obtained a high level of autonomy from the central government in political and fiscal matters. The crisis in industrial production in the 1980s, however, led to high unemployment rates, population loss, and the abandonment of polluted industrial sites (Ploeger, 2007). In the beginning of the 1990s, Spain developed significant experimentations in urban renewal and regeneration. Barcelona witnessed a significant transformation, not only due to 1992 Olympics. The experiences of Madrid, 1992 European Capital of Culture, and Seville were considered as best practices, together with other internationally renowned cities that tried to recover from post-industrial decline, such as Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Glasgow.

The Basque provincial and local governments took part in new development initiatives for the city of Bilbao, for example through the Strategic Plan for revitalization of Bilbao's metropolitan region (1991), and structure and land-use regulation plans (1994). The main vision proposed was of a city at the centre of a post-industrial metropolitan region in the European Atlantic axis. The innovative key concepts focused on image building and urban marketing, regeneration of former industrial areas and real estate appreciation in partnership with the private sector (Rodriguez and Martinez, 2001; Gomez and Gonzalez, 2001).

The partnership with the private sector assumed many forms and fostered networks in different ways. For example Bilbao Metropoli-30 links numerous actors and concentrates on the joint promotion of the image of the city and in fostering the urban debate (Rodriguez, 2002). Bilbao Ria 2000, an urban development corporation that played a crucial role in the revitalization of the city, was created in 1992 with the support of the Basque government, the City and the Province, the port authority, two railway companies and the city of Barakaldo with the mission of promoting investments for derelict areas and urban infrastructures. Bilbao Ria 2000 is financially sustained also thanks to redevelopment operations (that can be summarized as follows: land assembly by its shareholders, land-use rezoning by the public authorities and subsequent design, accessibility improvement, development and selling) inducing high returns to be potentially reinvested in other operations of public interest to be defined by shareholders in given target areas. This organization made the necessary legal, political and economic resources converge for large scale developments that changed the face of Bilbao (Ploeger, 2007).

Also due to Basque financial autonomy, the public sector had been promoting a massive set of infrastructural investments throughout the 1990s, sometimes involving world famous architects. Norman Foster designed the subway system running along the two river banks, completed in 1995. In the subsequent years the regional and local government in partnership with Bilbao Ria 2000 developed a tramway, while a new airport supported by the national government and designed by Santiago Calatrava was inaugurated in 2000. High-speed trains, the subway and local transportation had the new multi-modal station of Abando, where a commercial and a residential development were built. The expansion of the port is currently ongoing. In less than a decade the Spanish Ministry of Development coordinated more than 100 billion Euros and the Ministry of Environment another 19 billion (Plaza, 2008). Also, a number of structural investments were promoted for the de-pollution of abandoned industrial sites and water, for promoting employment and economic diversification, also thanks to the European funds of Resider and Renaval, plus the one for Objective 2 regions of about 4,5 billion Euros during the 1994-2006 period (see: Ploeger, 2007).

Urban development was promoted through large-scale projects including infrastructures and public facilities, but also hotels, residential buildings and malls. The development project for the Abandoibarra area that includes the museum touched an ex-port public area of 350,000 square meters along the river. Cesar Pelli's initial master plan concentrated on the localization of advanced tertiary functions. Because of the tepid response in the market, the only office tower being that of the energy corporation Iberdrola, the area was then surrounded with about eight hundred luxury apartments buildings, commercial and touristic functions (for a detailed analysis see: Rodriguez et al, 2001). Generally, the transformation of this area has been important not only for the creation of the Guggenheim urban icon (a 166 million euro public investment), but also for the physical and functional regeneration of this area and its accessibility, that helped the creation of the nearby Euskalduna conference and music centre (a 72 million euro private investment).

IMAGE 2 ABOUT HERE – Guggenheim Museum and Iberdrola Tower (by Michele Nastasi)

As summarized by Gonzalez, the public representation of this transformation legitimizing entrepreneurial approaches to urban governance was the following:

“Local press, politicians and public opinion all seem to be enthusiastic about this new future for Bilbao, now more linked to the service sector and tourism than traditional heavy industry. Local and regional politicians, inebriated by the success of the Guggenheim, are using new practices and discourse better suited to a much more entrepreneurial, pro-active and risk-taking approach”
(Gonzalez 2004, 177).

There are other urban areas that have been at the centre of real estate interests and regeneration processes. After a 184 million euro investment, Bilbao Ria 2000 extended its range of action to the adjacent Zorrozaure in order to capture positive side effects. Recently the master plan conceived by another archistar, Zaha Hadid, including residential facilities for 15 thousand residents and further office space. The smaller area redesigned by Arata Isozaki to host seven towers (about three hundred housing units) will take

the place of the former customs area in Uriarte. Both the functions and the height of the facilities involved in the intervention has been possible by the changes in land use regulation and standards granted to the developer.

IMAGE 3 ABOUT HERE – Atea Project & Volantin Bridge (by Michele Nastasi)

International economic and real estate indicators have registered significant increases in the 1997-2001 period. Spain has witnessed a 78% value increase in real estate between 1997 and 2002, while in the Bilbao area, a 104% increase made the city one of the most expensive areas in the country (Vicario and Martinez Monje, 2003). Furthermore, the dramatic increase in the Abandoibarra area affected the surroundings (Mulaert et al, 2002). These and other tendencies allowed local authorities not only to counterbalance the demographic trends, but moreover to attract the higher strata of population in previously abandoned or problematic areas.

The effects of this transformation process on the real estate market and the mechanisms of the circulation and accumulation of wealth in Bilbao, brought the local government to search for new areas which could undergo similar transformations. For example Bilbao Ria 2000 started the renewal of the La Veija neighbourhoods, raising the concerns of observers and scholars for the probable gentrification, appreciation effects and of potential social polarization in Bilbao (Vicario and Martinez Monje, 2003).

IMAGE 4 ABOUT HERE – City View (by Michele Nastasi)

McGuggenheim: global museums and franchise urban development projects?

The dominant narrative of the Bilbao effect and the expectations attached to iconic buildings and star architects' interventions landing indifferently in one or another city can be stigmatized in the Guggenheim Foundation's projects around the world. The question here is not how this sort of global process is culturally indifferent to the locale (as correctly noted by McNeill, 2000 and Ockman, 2004), but that these projects reveal that the narrations do not always correspond to the reality of locating cultural facilities in actual urban contexts.

The director of the Guggenheim Foundation claimed that, after the Bilbao experience, he received about sixty proposals for participation in urban development projects in the world (Guggenheim Foundation, 2000). Among these contacts one seems to be promising. Also due to the economic and political conditions of the context, Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, bought a package deal including a Gehry-designed museum adopting an aesthetic that is similar to Bilbao's masterpiece, to be combined with a Louvre Museum designed by Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid's Performing Arts Centre, Tadao Ando's Maritime Museum, and Norman Foster's Sheikh Zayed National Museum in what will be the Cultural District of Saadiyat Island (literally: the "Island of Happiness").

On the contrary, a number of hypotheses and experimentations in this delocalization season faced failures that lead to further reconsider the description of the Bilbao story. Rem Koolhaas designed the Las Vegas Guggenheim for the Venetian Casino. A few months after the inauguration the museum closed. One might probably notice that the high concurrency in entertainment and the pace of attraction substitution in Las Vegas had an influence, but there is no doubt about this negative experimentation. In New York City a 950 million dollar intervention was planned for a new Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum on the East River, including a library and educational facilities, a theater and other public spaces. The plan slowed down, probably affected by post 9/11 adverse conditions, and it was finally cancelled. In Rio de Janeiro, Thomas Krens developed a preliminary scheme for the Brazilian Guggenheim Museum to be located in a partially underwater facility designed by Jean Nouvel. The project was stopped by harsh criticism mentioning the already existing local Museum of Modern Art, designed by Afonso Eduardo Reidy, and dramatic and unsolved economic and social problems. The city of Taichung, Taiwan, envisioned a new Guggenheim designed by Zaha Hadid in order to attract cultural tourism. Local conditions, among which the absence of an international airport, pushed the local government to cancel the project (Sudjic, 2005; Martinez, 2006). A preliminary hypothesis was taking form in Guadalajara, Mexico. After a feasibility study, the Mexican studio Enrique Norten/Ten Arquitectos was preferred to international teams of Jean Nouvel or Asymptote to develop the concept (Klingman, 2007). This project was cancelled as well.

After years of expansion promoted by the director Thomas Krens (notably the opening of smaller museums in Soho in 1992 and in Berlin, and enhancing Peggy Guggenheim's activities in Venice), that was assimilated to a global franchising (McNeil, 2000), the Guggenheim is now in less favourable conditions and has nominated Richard Armstrong as a more sober director [4], focusing more on the management of existing museums than promoting further delocalization projects.

IMAGE 5 ABOUT HERE – El Puppy! (by Michele Nastasi)

Bilbao effects and narrative defects

On the basis of the analysis of the Bilbao transformation process, it is clear that the high expectations addressed by policymakers to spectacular architecture often are not met and subsequent urban effects can be unbalanced and sometimes paradoxical. In this sense, a better understanding of this urban issue is relevant to architectural debate and to urban and cultural policymaking as well. Obviously there are different ways of describing the process of regeneration and urban transformation in Bilbao, but they are not equivalent and they do not have similar bases and motivations.

Representing architectural aesthetics as a determinant factor in regeneration does not respond to actual urban processes, but, nonetheless, it has been the means for diffusing beliefs and behaviours among decision makers and provided certain actors with apparently favourable conditions. Among them, the

architect has questionably become more and more an artist who is supposedly capable of starting urban development processes. For his capacity of catalyzing political consensus and media attention regarding one operation, higher fees are generally accepted by real estate developers and politicians (Julier, 2005; McNeill, 2006), creating an exclusive and less competitive niche in the international architectural market (Sklair, 2005; McNeill, 2009; Kloosterman, forthcoming). Along similar lines art curators and cultural institutions can expand their domain, reputation and business. The role of architects' has been relevant not only in building a new iconic image for Bilbao but also in spatially conceiving development projects, shaping infrastructures and localizing functions in response to real estate and other markets pressures, and it would be unrealistic and unappreciative to generally limit it to the symbolic dimension.

Only recently Thomas Krens publicly recognized the fact that "the new Guggenheim became a cultural symbol, but it was based on the foundation of a larger system" (Koolhaas, 2007, 334). Some urban scholars have partially retreated their positions too. For example, Plaza curiously concluded a paper titled "On Some Challenges and Conditions for the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao to Be an Effective Economic Re-activator" by saying: "Last, but not least, and as a result of all the above, it is inaccurate to define the Bilbao case as a culturally led regeneration process. On the contrary, Bilbao is an integral part of a larger coherent public policy targeted at productivity and diversity, with a strong cultural component." (Plaza 2008, 514). More sound explanations may vary, also depending on the perspective (among others see: Evans, 2001; Mulaert et al. 2002; Del Cerro 2007; Ploeger, 2007), but it is important to make clear once again that the narrative of the 'Bilbao effect' is inadequate and, despite the fact it can provide some actors with concrete advantages, it can induce perverse and paradoxical urban effects.

More specifically, in Bilbao the preoccupation with competitiveness has sometimes been translated into large scale development projects from which only a limited part of the local population takes advantage. In many cases the presence of signature architects and the location of special functions justified variations in the planning procedures (e.g. land-use regulation, height limitations) and the concentration of enormous public investments that provided feasible conditions for real estate appreciation to take place (Moulert et al, 2002). In the case of Bilbao the public sector assumed most of the risk fostering speculative interventions by Bilbao Ria 2000, whose political accountability seemed limited to some scholars (Rodriguez et al, 2001), and, similarly to many western cities, the provision of collective goods and services have been fuelled by rent and tended to rely on the functioning of unequal urban growth and entertainment machines (Fainstein, 2009).

It is now evident that this narration has been punctually refused in some international contexts, as it was described with reference to the Guggenheim projects. Cities did not accept to duplicate a ready-made competitiveness boosting recipe on the basis of simple decision makers' common sense or for political or social distributive problems that such projects could induce (Beauregard and Pierre, 2000). Nonetheless, the aggregate paradoxical and perverse impacts over the urban realm have not been considered by many decision makers who fostered the mushrooming of signature cultural facilities and urban development projects. In this sense it seems important to add some final considerations.

Even if one believes that tourism fluxes depend on the localization of one spectacular cultural facility, it would be crucial to note that the creation of more or less homologous pieces of design in different cities will reduce the flux in a given place (as argued by Plaza, 2000). It is however evident that the above and other global fluxes depend on a wider set of local conditions. Furthermore and more generally, the multiplication of similarly aesthetically striking artefacts all over the world had and will have the paradoxical effect of internationally homogenizing the urban landscape, while individual cities expected to distinguish themselves by hiring one star architect (Muñoz, 2008).

Even if one leaves aside the fact that investing in expensive facilities may distract funding or increase future costs of cultural management and offers, the discussion regarding the creation of exceptional pieces of architecture in the context of urban transformation should, at least, pay more attention to the material, political and symbolic interests promoting it, their stated and vested goals, their modes of action (Jansen, 2007; Ponzini, 2009) and the incremental composition of the specific urban landscape, including notable artefacts and different urban fabrics, as well as infrastructures and open spaces and their social meaning in the many forms of contemporary living (Palermo and Ponzini, 2010).

Notes

1. As documented by D. Carroll Joynes in the preliminary presentation of research outcomes regarding fifty cultural building projects completed from 1994 to 2008 in the USA, one can note a significant exclusion of demand side estimates prior to the investment for cultural facilities. See: "In the Arts, Bigger Buildings May Not Be Better", New York Times online, December 11, 2009. See also: <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/research/###infrastructure>, retrieved on January 12, 2010.

2. Information taken from the exhibition "Saadiyat Cultural District Exhibition. Welcome to the Future" at the Emirate Palace, Abu Dhabi, March 17, 2009.

3. The touristic flux seems to be lowered also by the reduction of international airline connections. Sudjic (2005) gives the example of the suppression of British Airlines flights from London.

4. For a comment on the choice and interviews see: "Guggenheim Chooses a Curator, Not a Showman", New York Times online, September 23, 2008.

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