

Effect or Anomaly? Replicating the Bilbao

Museum architecture since its Eurocentric beginnings during the 18th century has been a reflection not only of monumentality, but also of the culture in which museums were built. Their exterior, interior, and public content were consciously designed to directly reflect the culture of the period. Modern museum architecture of the past sixty years has taken a drastic leap forward. It attempts to use its presence to comment on and invigorate current culture by placing new additions or buildings for museums as tools for revitalization within economically and socially struggling urban communities.

The Guggenheim Bilbao, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Pompidou-Metz, will function as case studies of the “Bilbao Effect”, being broadly compared in terms of their “urban regeneration plans” and overall societal impact (Baniotopoulou, 2001). The “Bilbao Effect” refers to intentional architecture meant to positively change the surrounding culture. I will make recommendations about the plausibility of this phenomenon being successful in the Greater Lansing region based upon the factors of economics, tourism, and culture of the region in comparison to the successes and failures of the selected case studies.

The Guggenheim-Bilbao built in Spain was designed by Pritzker Prize winner, and first “star-architect” Frank Gehry (Fig. 1), and has become the most notable and successful museum to create a revitalized area of culture in a section of the city of Bilbao deemed completely void of societal prosperity (Baniotopoulou, 2001). The Bilbao is the poster child for other cities hoping to mimic its success in their own plans of urban renewal recognizing the “potential of the cultural sector for economic development” (Baniotopoulou, 2001).

Beginning in the latter half of the 19th century, Bilbao was known to be a center of industrialism with “growing industries of steel, shipbuilding, and chemicals” creating a thriving economy (Baniotopoulou, 2001). Under the rule of Francisco Franco, most of these industries avoided exportation creating a purely domestic economy easy to control (Kurlansky, 1999). In 1975, when the industrial companies in the region began to fold, Bilbao’s population was left to suffer with unemployment steadily rising to a high of twenty-five percent (Kurlansky, 1999).

Through the creation and implementation of the Strategic Plan for the Revitalization of the Metropolitan Bilbao in 1993, the main objective became changing the city’s economics and quality of life through the utilization of architecture (Baniotopoulou, 2001). Gehry, along with other architects like Santiago Calatrava and Norm Foster, were commissioned to build new structures in the city as part of this urban renewal plan. Developments included a reconstruction of the airport, creation of a new subway system, and of course the new museum of art; all meant to “serve as a powerful cultural nexus” for the residents of Bilbao, and for the visitors that would be coming from around the world (Sirefman, 1999).

The art museum has become the most notable construction to have been executed in Bilbao due largely in part to having a world-renowned star-architect and being a subsidiary of one of the largest museum brands. “The impact of the museum is not just confined to the individual’s experience of cultural exchange inside but extends to the institution’s urbanistic reach,” melding the neighborhood with the building itself (Sirefman, 1999). It is the creation

of the museum as a tourist attraction that has spurred the need for and development of shops, restaurants, and hotels creating a surge of financial growth in Bilbao (Sirefman, 1999).

There are those who argue that while “art was simply the agent for the economic regeneration” of the city, it did not truly benefit individuals quality of life, instead imposing its own elitist perception of cultural identity upon the region due to the serialized “Guggenheim” name (Baniotopoulou, 2001). While quality of life is an abstract concept that cannot be universally defined, the quantitative data regarding economic impact speaks for itself. During its first year of operation, the Guggenheim Bilbao saw over 1.3 million visitors (Plaza, The Return on Investment of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2006), and has continued to bring in an average of 1 million visitors per year since, making it one of the most visited art museums in the world (Bilbao, 2018).

Several museums have established new additions and buildings in recent years in hopes to emulate the Bilbao Effect in other struggling urban cities across the globe. Many of these cities have “anchored their master plans for new cultural districts with museums,” hoping to revitalize their cities as well as their donations and visitorship (Sirefman, 1999). The Milwaukee Art Museum and The Pompidou Metz are just a few museums that represent the broad range of architectural transformation in the hopes of revitalization.

The Milwaukee Art Museum’s attempted Bilbao Effect, a new addition to their existing structure, is a “spectacular building that has nothing to do with the display of art and everything to do with getting crowds to come to the museum” (McClellan, 2008). Originating as a subdued piece of architecture, the initial building created by architect Eero Saarinen in the modernist style of architecture leans heavily on the traditional museum

architecture form. “Built on a landfill and separated from downtown Milwaukee by distance as well as grade” it left the museum in an area void of tourists (Kent, 2005).

Unable to support the growing need for educational programs in art that was desired by the people of Milwaukee, the art museum looked to building an addition that would incorporate the museum administration’s needs while also encouraging new and existing visitors from within Milwaukee and outside the area to come (Kent, 2005). In March 1996, the design was shown to the public and fundraising began with the goal to raise \$35 million by the end of the year. The museum’s professional staff were stunned by the fact that the donations exceeded the asking price. The museum took this display of public support as a sign that its 160,000 visitors annually, and the city as a whole were behind this new advancement and cultural renaissance (Kent, 2005).

Constructed of three distinct elements, the *brise soleil*, the pedestrian bridge, and the pavilion named Windhover Hall, the Quadracci Pavilion makes for an awe-inspiring piece of architecture (Fig. 2). While the *brise soleil* creates a sense of drama as it opens and closes to allow control of incoming light, and the pavilion a space to hold events, the additional 43,000 square feet of space adds little to the exhibition space, which had been the main goal of the museum’s addition (Van Uffelen, 2010). Unfortunately, the Milwaukee Art Museum suffered financially after the publicized excitement of the new addition. The museum’s estimated cost rose from \$38 million in 1997 to \$122 million by the time it opened in 2001 “causing many of the board members to chastise themselves, believing themselves failures in overseeing of the project” (Murphy, 2013). These overruns meant little money was available to create an endowment to help operate and maintain the new building, and

resulted in numerous cuts in the curatorial staff and left the museum to struggle financially (Murphy, 2013).

In terms of visitorship, the museum's attempt did see an annual increase of about double its usual guests, however, this did not initially make up for increased debt incurred (Taylor, 2007). After losing their Executive Director just three months after the Calatrava addition opened, it took several years for the museum to balance its budget and reap a profit (Taylor, 2007). Currently, the museum boasts around 350,000 guests each year according to their annual reports from the past several years; about a 118% increase (Museum, 2015).

It appears that the tremendous concern to recreate the "Bilbao-effect" in order to revitalize the lakeshore can be perceived as greatly overshadowing any attention that should have been paid to the development of the people already inhabiting the Milwaukee area. This "lack of consideration of local and regional identity" quite possibly could have led to the Calatrava addition being a failure (Plaza & Haarich, 2009).

However, it seems as though the overall economic impact has been overall positive for the region with "a schematic form of the Calatrava design [featuring] prominently in the campaign that markets the Milwaukee renaissance to tourists, conventions, young professionals, and potential business interests" (Cherbo & Stewart, 2008). Quantitative data supports these "claims for the positive impact of the museum addition are supported by the perceptible increase in local pride, the national and international name recognition of this midwestern city, and the 20% rise in downtown residential living since completion" (Cherbo & Stewart, 2008).

The Pompidou Metz is another example of a prestigious museum brand lending its name for the purpose of urban revitalization. Developed in the city of Metz and opened in 2010, the Pompidou extension is located only an hour and a half north east of Paris, and is just the latest iteration of museums developing urban satellite buildings (Glancey, 2010). The Pompidou Metz “forms the centerpiece of the city’s amphitheater quarter, a district formerly given over to industry,” as was the inception of the original Pompidou museum (Glancey, 2010). Before its opening Metz “had very little for tourist to see”, and instead was known simply as “the site of a large military base” (Walt, 2010). As with most urban sprawls, Metz historically had been reliant on the manufacturing industry, and since its closure, has seen little economic growth (Walt, 2010). City officials were the ones to introduce and prompt what appears to be the Bilbao Effect, paying “\$58 million of the museum’s total cost of \$91 million” (Walt, 2010).

However, the Pompidou Metz differs in its approach as its conception was to “improve the image and cultural activities offered in a disadvantaged region” rather than to simply build onto the empire of the Pompidou name as many have accused of the Guggenheim’s numerous international satellites (Krauss, 2012). No lavish well-known star-architect lending their name to the project, but a request for proposals was utilized to hire a designer (Walt, 2010). Designed by architects Shigeru Ban and Jean de Gastines the building is “a large hexagonal structure with three galleries” run organically beneath the almost net-like exterior meant to mimic a Chinese bamboo hat (Pompidou-Metz, 2018).

Though the experimental contemporary architecture is still ever present, the Pompidou Metz is actively aware of the attempts and failures of other cities trying to word-

for-word mimic the Bilbao Effect. “Every time someone tries to copy Bilbao, they fail,” says the Executive Director Lauren Le Bon.

Instead the Pompidou Metz is focusing on utilizing its parent museums enormous collection of nearly 65,000 works, of art free of charge, as the attractor of tourism (Walt, 2010). This is a stark difference when compared to the Bilbao who “has to pay important fees to the Guggenheim foundation” whenever they wish to borrow a work of art (Baudelle, 2014). This alone gives the Pompidou Metz much more flexibility to curate shows with the city’s inhabitants and desired tourists in mind.

The overall success has been more than anticipated with attendance exceeding expectations and reaching “900,000 people in the first year”, with nearly “100,000 people from the former coalfield indicating a real ownership [from] both local and regional public” (Baudelle, 2014). Being less than a decade old, it is hard to truly state the “long term impact of the project both on urban regeneration and on local and regional economic restructuring” (Baudelle, 2014). However, it seems as though the museum has found a great balance between the Bilbao method, and community inclusion to create a real visitor impact—whether it will stand the test of decades to come is still to be seen.

In turning attention to the Greater Lansing region, it is hard to ignore the attempt of revitalization made through the development of the Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum (Fig. 4). Created to replace the Kresge Art Museum housed in the Art, Art History, and Design building on campus, Michigan State University looked to create a separate building to exhibit a more contemporary collection, and to draw visitors and culture to the East Lansing, Michigan area after an endowment of \$21 million was made by Eli and Edythe Broad.

Opened in November 2012 and designed by star-architect and Pritzker Prize winner Zaha Hadid, the 46,000 square foot building's innovative exterior is reflected through its interior space as well (Biemiller, 2013). The galleries are not traditional boxes, but, rather, have angled walls of varying degrees, highlighted by a dramatic staircase. The color palette of the museum is muted, with the exterior being assembled of pleats of metal, while the interior uses the natural color of the poured concrete walls as its focal point, accented by high polished black surfaces and light wood. These architectural selections are not by accident, but are purposely chosen to create a sense of innovation, of newness and a youthfulness that would attract a university-age student as well as families.

Blending the desires of the donors, Eli and Edythe Broad, known for their love of contemporary art and the Michigan State University board members, the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum opened with an impressive flash, attracting nearly 50,000 visitors from around the world in the first two months (Biemiller, 2013). It was estimated that the museum could make a "\$5 million to \$6 million impact on East Lansing" in increased visitor traffic leading to spending within restaurants, shops, and hotels (Biemiller, 2013). This influence upon the culture of East Lansing, has incorporated the wants of the museum staff, of the donors, creating a cultural epicenter in a place not always renowned for its love of art and culture. Anticipating an influx of visitors, the Greater Lansing Convention and Visitors Bureau created a second tourism office located on Grand River Avenue directly across from the museum.

According to the Anderson Economic Group's study of potential visitorship, the Broad was projected to attract "anywhere between 125,000 and 150,000 visitors annually"

but has unfortunately fell quite short with attendance instead hovering around 50% of its estimated impact (Gabbara, 2017). The museum's inaugural Executive Director, Michael Rush, led the Broad's mission of contemporary art for the first three years of operation. Rush noted that "his task [of] making a contemporary art museum work in an area where contemporary art is not very well known or not much experienced" was an up-hill battle (Gabbara, 2017). With his passing in 2015 due to pancreatic cancer, the museum was left to hire a new Executive Director; enter Marc-Olivier Wahler.

Wahler has ushered in a new era for the broad, and begun to heal some of the wounds created when the expansive Kresge collection was relegated to permanent storage with the creation of the Broad's Art Lab. The Art Lab services as a satellite, with a focus on more historical collection items and the "opportunity to make different types of art and participate in activities" (Prvulov, 2018). Housed in a space along the city's downtown strip, it furthers the Broad Museums connection with the community. However, it is unclear if it will increase visitorship to reach the museum's proposed attendance as ArtLab opened in the spring of 2017 (Prvulov, 2018).

In considering these case studies and the attempt of the Broad Art Museum, I feel as though for the Bilbao Effect to be successful in the Greater Lansing region we still have work to do. There are a few commonalities that can be deduced from these case studies that successful Bilbao-influenced sites have beyond the buildings themselves: incorporation of public and political opinion, an existing appreciation of the arts, and a standout collection. The Greater Lansing region needs improvement in all three areas.

If perhaps the Broad Art Museum had incorporated more of the city and its people into the process, I think it would make it overall more successful. As with the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Broad should shine as a tourist attraction for the Greater Lansing region, not just for MSU. While the Tourism Office adding a location to downtown East Lansing seems right on track, not including other business, tourism attractions, restaurants, etc. in the overall marketing of the museum could contribute to its lack of attendance.

Additionally, I think the Broad's overall collection again has played a role in the unsuccessful revitalization attempt in a two-fold manner. To start, in comparison with the selected case studies, the Greater Lansing area is not a natural consumer of the arts. The growth of our own creative sector has been difficult given Lansing's blue-collar origins. While many of the case studies also come from an industrial background, they overall, seem to already have a connection to the arts community: whether it be an existing site with a collection full of well-known artworks and a solid audience base, or the cities themselves being a fusion of modern and classical architecture.

For the Greater Lansing region, we are lacking in both. This is not to say that the inherited Kresge collection nor any artworks loaned from the Broads themselves are not of value; they simply do not hold notoriety by the general public. While the Kresge collection contains pieces from Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol to name a few, they are not the publicized masterpieces reproduced repeatedly which a non-art going person would recognize. We also are missing any architectural gems that would nestle in with the Broad. Most of the historic buildings in the area have either been demolished, left to fall in disrepair, or are so far removed from the natural flow of tourism that they are not a draw.

The Broad also does not have a parent institution from which it can borrow name recognition or infamous works of art, as is the case with the Bilbao and the Metz. The power that a collection has in attracting an audience is undeniable. For example, when the exhibition of Princess Diana's personal items came to the Grand Rapids Art Museum, the exhibition alone drew more than "97,600 visitors, helping to attract over 318,000 visits" in total (Kaczmarczyk, 2012). Compared to their general visitorship of 265,000, this was a significant up-tick in attendance and revenue (Kaczmarczyk, 2012). Unfortunately, the Broad has yet to have an exhibition with this much pomp-and-circumstance.

The biggest hinderance that all sites attempting to replicate the Bilbao Effect, including the Broad, have in common is a severe lack of understanding regarding the culture of these urban communities. While investigating my chosen case studies, it became evident early on that while there is plenty of information regarding the revitalization plans and architectural elements of these locations, stories of the people and their contemporary culture are missing. My attempts to research more about the people and their daily lives pre- and post-Bilbao came back with no quantitative data and no narrative.

Having an anthropologist work alongside these municipalities and museums might just be the missing key to truly understanding the Bilbao Effect. Having an anthropologist create an ethnography about the urban community before construction, might give museums, architects, and the government a better understanding of what their people want and need. Following up during and after the Bilbao Effect being executed, would show the real effect this phenomenon is having on urban communities.

This opportunity would allow for real data to be recorded, and the stories of these urban communities to be heard, and would answer numerous questions I had while doing my research. Are these new developments causing gentrification? Are the existing populations seeing the financial benefit of the Bilbao Effect? What was the quality of life before and after? In my opinion, these questions need to be answered in order to truly say how effective these revitalization plans are and if they can be effectively replicated. I believe that anthropology provides the best tools to do so.

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Figures

Figure 1: Guggenheim Bilbao Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

Image courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum (<https://www.guggenheim.org/about-us>).

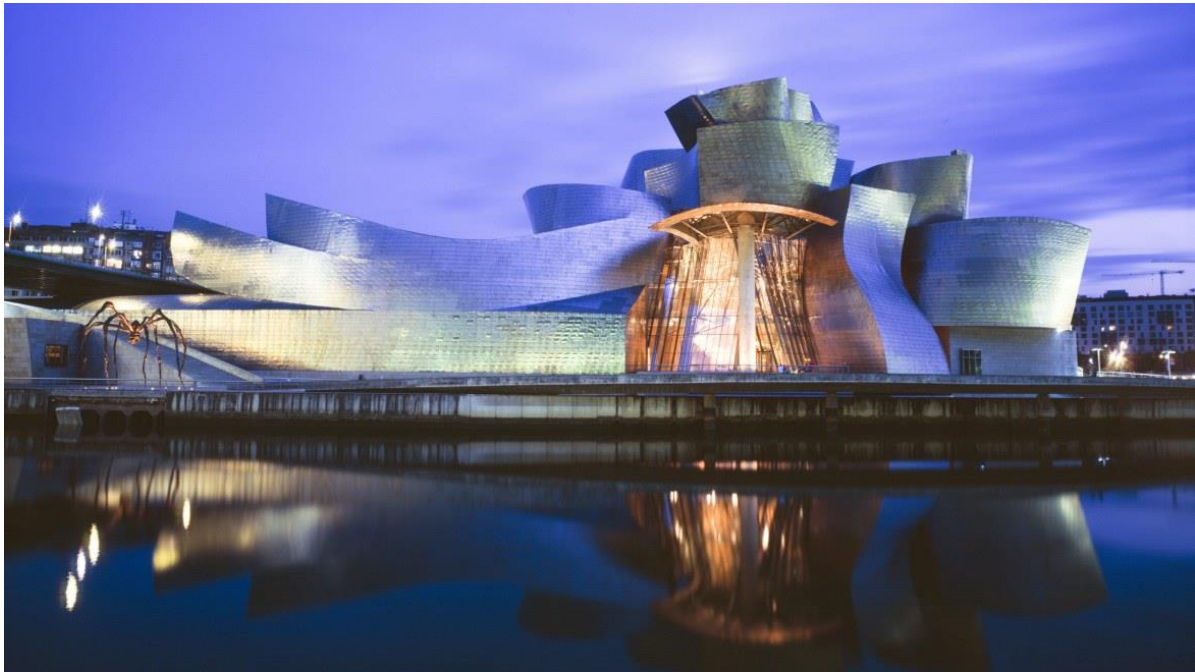


Figure 2: Milwaukee Art Museum Quadracci Pavilion in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Image courtesy of the Milwaukee Art Museum (<https://mam.org/info/details/quadracci.php>)



Figure 3: The Pompidou-Metz in Metz, France

Image Courtesy of the Centre Pompidou-Metz (<https://www.centrepompidou-metz.fr/en/welcome>)



Figure 4: The Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum in East Lansing, Michigan

Image Courtesy of the Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum

(<https://broadmuseum.msu.edu/about>)

