

Fish Tales (Eight Vignettes and One Museum): Frank Gehry's Guggenheim, Bilbao

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Scene I

I remember the cool bright summer day when I first saw a basking shark. It was beached in a rocky cove with its large snout landbound and its tail stretching into the water. Its jaw gaping open, towered above me and the wooden skiff pulled up alongside. I could see rows of fine teeth, not threatening, I thought, a filter feeder, maybe for plankton or krill. Peering into that gaping maw, I could appreciate how Jonah felt.

The water continued to lap gently against the pebbles.

Scene II

The Basques came to Newfoundland as early as the 16th century lured by the abundant fishing and whale hunting on the Grand Banks. There, on the rock overlooking Placentia, close to the fortress, are the graves of those who came and died here, on cold Placentia Bay.

Scene III

I arrived in the darkness, tired from the drive and, after wandering around this city, I stumbled onto a good pension (recommended in the NY Times the reporter wasn't able to get a room when he came), a real find after the two grubby fluorescent lit "hostels" I had walked away from.

Atlantic weather, I thought to myself, chill with a misty fog settling in. I had been warned about Bilbao by the Mediterraneans of Barcelona: grey, dirty, industrial, provincial, they had said. Still, the brochures and photos seemed to contradict this opinion, but then travel brochures and promotional literature always present a well made-up face.

Scene IV

An overcast day and not enough sun for the slides. I walked along the river watching a curving facade follow the bend. Hmm, it negotiates a rising riverbank on one side and the river on the other. Still further, a skeletal white structure swept deftly across the same river. A beauty, a real beauty of a bridge. Calatrava at his best, articulating structure with an understanding of the act of crossing. The glass deck bowed gently downstream as though drawn by the current, reminding me of what it really means to walk on water.

Scene V

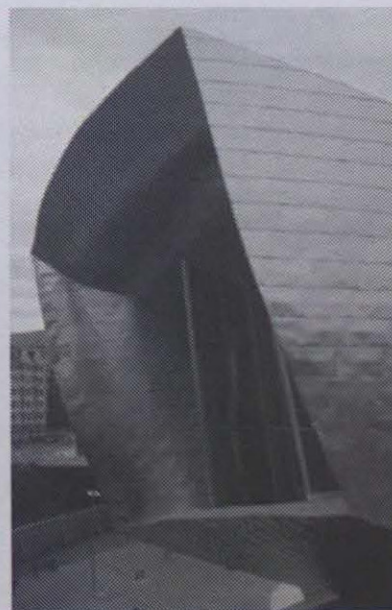
I saw it from across the river under a bright but grey sky. The forms shimmered in the light like silver grey scales of a giant fish flopping on the bank after being pulled out of the water, sculpted by Balla or Boccioni. A futurist dream of frozen motion, muscular, sinuous and light, opaque and reflective; a less literal interpretation of Gehry's fetish animal. I moved further along the river trying to accumulate an impression. I felt vaguely pretentious as I remembered something about the Cubists' multiple simultaneous views. Clever man. It is sculpture with clear references to fish, boats, industrial sheds, the grey of the river, the luffing sails of the fishing fleet and the cold swells of the Atlantic. But of course it is peculiarly individual, the honorable descendant of the Gehry line (the Aerospace Museum, the Vitra museum, the Art Gallery on that other river, the Mississippi in Minneapolis and now, this).

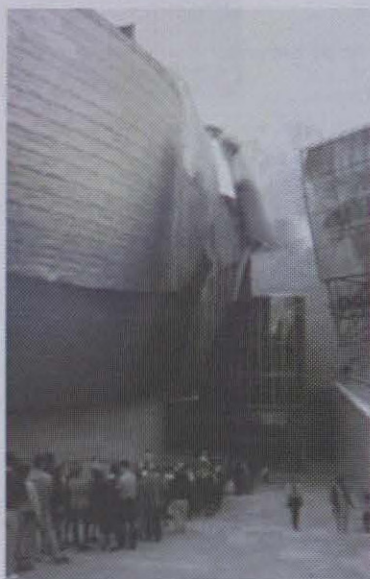
King Juan Carlos and the gallery's director, Thomas Krens, had dubbed it "the greatest building of the twentieth century." Typical hyped superlatives that I thought were more typical of Americans. It always had to be the tallest, the biggest, the longest. I intended to be more circumspect. The twentieth century had provided too many worthy candidates for that title. Le Corbusier was still fresh in my mind and I remembered all too clearly the stupefaction I felt standing in the chapel at La Tourette. There, was brute, raw, spine-tingling power in primal form, a dark rectangular concrete bunker!

I forgave the King and walked on

Scene VI

A marginal plot of land and \$100 million in good hands. The site defined the essence of the "edge condition": reclaimed industrial/railroad land at water's edge with an imposing but regrettable overpass spanning the river at that point. Superbly sited, the gallery, tucks a limb under the overpass while projecting a TV screen skylight to its edge embracing it with a jutting limestone tree trunk on its other side (or is that the fish's tail?). The rest is an exercise in shimmering fluidity along the water. Horizontality predominates, echoing the flow of the water broken by the upward thrust of the of the more transparent atrium. It is useful to continue the analogy of the fish but in a more corporeal sense, exposing its bony skeleton in parts both inside and outside; spiky skeletal





structures hidden or revealed by breaks in the opaque skin.

I crossed the river on the overpass taking stock of what was around me: green hills nestling the winding river, the city of Bilbao, an eclectic collection of nineteenth century monuments from the railway station to the theatre, set in a matrix of modern and vintage housing, *medium grain*, in the urban planner's lexicon, connected defined public spaces and parkland on the riverside promenade. A comfortably bourgeois city—until this!

On the city side, the museum ends the avenue in a burst of metal.

Guernica is 30 kilometers away.

Still, on the city side there is more regularity: rectilinear masonry forms with a plaza leading down into the vertical fissure that is the atrium. It is a geological fault line extending up and down and through the body of the museum to reveal the river on its other side. The atrium centers the typical cluster building configuration so favoured by Mr. Gehry.

There is a large topiary Scottie dogging the edge of the plaza, courtesy of Jeff Koons.

I approached the entrance. I thought about that basking shark and those daring Basque seamen on that icy ocean. I am not quite sure whether I felt like Jonah on the verge of being swallowed or Alice about to discover Wonderland.

Scene VII

Scale problem!

This building was definitely modelled and rigorously controlled in section. It is monumental! My 6'2" frame was dwarfed. Multiple simultaneous views through and through (those Cubists are back!) coexist with sinuous plaster walls swerving sensually and some "oh s-o-o Constructivist" elements.

Alice meets Tatlin.

The "structure" revealed by a freeform cutout skylight suggests the whale being dissected from inside out, its carcass on the grey concrete slab. Serra's commissioned, "Serpentine," three undulating CorTen plates under the opening competes with the overly large shed/hangar it sits in. The only relief in sight is the Robert Morris Labyrinth: tight, tight, dark enclosing space of a maze, barely shoulder width.

There is a consistent weakness. Spaces are overly large for what they contain and the container often competes with or forces the work into unhappy contortions. It is, in a sense, a problem that is

analogous to the curatorial challenge of Wright's spiral in New York. The collection is an embarrassment of riches; a well hung semi-lunar gallery full of Anselm Kiefer is only a fragment of this treasure.

But Alice is increasingly conscious of a fun-house atmosphere creeping up. The distorting mirrors and perceptual tricks of Bruce Nauman's installations only add to this feeling. Has Mr. Gehry spent too much time with Mr. Eisner?

It isn't simply a case of complexity or contradiction. There is an obvious playful quality to this building that recalls Vitruvius's third term, *venustas*, beauty or delight, but the effect is stretched thin to the detriment of that other Vitruvian virtue, *accommodation*. This is an exercise in Architecture as Art. The irregularities of form were 'tectonically' resolved by computer. This is how this building differs from something as audacious as the Sydney Opera House or even the nearby Calatrava bridge—more regular forms, perhaps, but with more tectonic rigour—form and material building constraints intertwined more clearly. The Bilbao Guggenheim may be more paradigmatic of the effect of the computer on the production of architecture. Structural rationality (or rationalisation) follows irrationality of form. Is this the prerogative of the "Architect as Artist"—*Artytekton*, so to speak.

I am being too harsh! I did delight in those vertiginous feelings of spatial torsion and the transparency of fissured space, people moving up, across and through in unexpected trajectories across space with light falling through cracks and openings. There are fine well-scaled spaces, "comfortable" places, the restaurant and coffee bar, filled, of course, with the maestro's bushel basket chairs as well as the book shop and ubiquitous museum boutique, full of things you can find in the other Guggenheim concessions closer to home.



Scene VIII

Sitting outside on the ramp leading to the plaza, now in sun. The green dog was still there. I scratched my head

Jonah had been spit out by the whale, but, alas, poor Alice was still in there.

The Architectural Review: December 1997. Two articles including photos, architectural drawings and opinions. Especially for the piece by Annette LeCuyer on the relation of the computer to building.

Art and Architecture as One by Ada Louise Huxtable in *The Wall Street Journal's* European edition on October 18th, 1997.

The Politics of Building by Paul Goldberger in *The New Yorker*. Interesting for its take on Basque politics and the building commission.

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao 1997. A museum publication, source of the sectional comparison between Wright's and Gehry's buildings.

Suggested Accommodation:

Iturriena Ostatua, Santa Maria Kalea 14, Bilbao 48005.

tel: 416 15 00; fax: 415 89 29

Clean, cheerful, well appointed rooms with new bathrooms. Breakfast supplementary.

Pleasant, helpful, discriminating staff. Gay friendly. 4500 to 5500 pta./day.

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