

The Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao. Photography: Wikimedia Commons

# BETWEEN A WHITE CUBE, BLACK BOX, AND WAREHOUSE: CONSTRUCTING SPACES FOR CONTEMPORARY ART THROUGHOUT THE RECENT MUSEUM BUILDING BOOM

*ENTRE UN CUBO BLANCO, UNA CAJA NEGRA Y UN ALMACÉN: CONSTRUYENDO ESPACIOS PARA EL ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO EN EL CONTEXTO DEL RECIENTE AUGE DE LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE MUSEOS*

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**Abstract** Since the 1990s, museum buildings and the art housed inside them have undergone dramatic changes. Once canonical structures, they have evolved to more suitably contain new art forms and reflect the expanding and dynamic purposes of the museum. Museum architecture constructs the meanings and values of institutions as its primary and most tangible symbol. It commands a specific approach for display rhetoric and dictates the ways users and curators make use of space. What is the relationship between the latest museum building boom and contemporary art? What specific architectural strategies are employed by museums and architects to suit contemporary art? This paper examines the recent trends in museum construction in order to explore the ways in which new museums have reshaped the museum experience and dialogue between users and contemporary art.

**Keywords** Museum architecture, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, contemporary art, white cube, black box, postmodern architecture.

**Resumen** Desde la década de 1990 los edificios de los museos y el arte alojado en ellos han sufrido cambios dramáticos. Las estructuras canónicas han evolucionado para contener de manera más adecuada nuevas formas de arte y reflejar los propósitos dinámicos y en expansión del museo. La arquitectura del museo manifiesta los significados y valores de la propia institución como su símbolo principal y más tangible, presenta un enfoque específico para mostrar la retórica y dicta las formas en que los usuarios y los curadores hacen uso del espacio. ¿Cuál es la relación entre el último auge de la construcción de museos y el arte contemporáneo? ¿Qué estrategias arquitectónicas específicas emplean los museos y arquitectos para adaptarse al arte contemporáneo? Este artículo examina las tendencias recientes en la construcción de museos para explorar las formas en que los nuevos espacios han reformulado la experiencia y el diálogo entre los usuarios y el arte contemporáneo.

**Palabras clave** Arquitectura de museo, Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, arte contemporáneo, cubo blanco, caja negra, arquitectura posmoderna.

‘If you build it, they will come,’ at least while the novelty persists (Saval, 2015). Since the 1990s, museum buildings and the display methodologies of their collections have undergone dramatic changes. From Western constructs that stylistically adhered to the canon of classical Greco-Roman architecture, museum buildings have aesthetically evolved to more suitably contain the art on display within their walls, and to better reflect the ever-expanding purpose of the museum itself. The post-1990s museum building boom is characterized by closer relationships among curators, community stakeholders, and architects, and a clearer conceptualization of the role of the museum in the twenty-first century. This research is an exploration of the museum building boom of the early 2000s and a hypothesis for the way modern and contemporary art is displayed and mediated within these new gallery spaces with architecture as its frame. Museum architecture is the symbolic vehicle for the way a society positions its cultural self, and its significance lies in how they facilitate the museum experience, reflect on globalization and post-Cold War political realities, connect visitors with contemporary art and with each other, but also with wayfinding and the production and distribution of knowledge.

Activities unrelated to the museum’s traditional *raison d’être* of caring for, collecting, and studying artifacts —public programming, education courses and tours, film screenings, parties and happenings, artist performances and demonstrations, discussions and symposia— have significantly evolved over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Museums are expected to be much more than temples where the material culture of past civilizations is statically stored and exhibited. The word ‘museum’ has become diluted to the point where it may even refer to a place without any objects at all, or where

the only conceivable purpose of the space is the promulgation and consumption of Instagram photographs (see Museum of Ice Cream). Some curators maintain the notion that innovation in the field can only take place once abandoning museums altogether and seeking alternative spaces for display.

This paper traces its origins to one museum building in particular, the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (GMB). Built in 1997 by architect Frank Gehry, the GMB prompted a museum construction frenzy that continued even throughout the global financial crisis (beginning in 2008). Aptly labeled the «Bilbao effect», the astounding socio-economic stimulation to a formerly depressed Basque Country was arguably catapulted by this iconic museum building. In its first three years of operation, the GMB was visited by around four million tourists, generating much-needed financial prosperity for the city. The success of the GMB was attributed to its distinct architectural style, and soon after, cities across the globe wished to appropriate its promise of prompting economic and social revival. Several publications on the history of museum architecture were vital to this research, including primary sources that chronologically track the progression of museum architecture stylistically. This study will differ from those in that it is written from the perspective of a museologist, and not an architect. This paper addresses innovations in museum display spaces through visual analyses and in terms of their spaces for the display and mediation of contemporary art.

Changes to museum architecture erected after the GMB in 1997 can be attributed to changes in contemporary art. The late 80s culminated in the transition from modern and postmodern art to what is now referred to as contemporary art due to various cultural and political shifts: the year 1989 marked the end



Richard Serra, *The Matter of Time*, 2005. Installation of seven sculptures, weatherproof steel, varying dimensions. Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, GBM1996-2005. © 2018 Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photography: Guggenheim Museum

of the Cold War, the rise of the World Wide Web, and a more globalized art world, which continues today at a rapid pace. It was a year of transition punctuated by the momentous uprising of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square. It was also the year of the United States government's conservative attack on artistic expression as witnessed by scandalous censorship efforts and cancellations of so-called controversial exhibitions (the most publicized example was the cancelling of the Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery in June of that year) by the National Endowment for the Arts. Subsequently, the year 1994 witnessed the end of apartheid in South Africa and the creation of the North American Free Trade

Agreement. This period also witnessed the first formal curatorial program founded at the École du Magasin in 1987, followed by Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies in 1990 and the Royal College of Art's Curating Contemporary Art course in 1992. These shifts prompted certain changes in contemporary art, and I argue that these shifts also signaled changes to museum architecture constructed in the consecutive years.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to corroborate the findings of this research with first-hand information from insiders working in the field, I developed a questionnaire to provide a cross section

of the phenomenon as seen through the direct experiences of museum professionals. A survey was sent electronically to sixty-eight international institutions, targeting those which are vessels for the display and mediation of contemporary art and are hosted within buildings constructed after the GMB. As only nine results were recorded at the time of writing, I suspect that the responses were limited due to a possible reluctance by museums to divulge their internal protocols. Though the data set is limited, the collected evidence offers striking insights into the ways in which contemporary art has transformed museum architecture.

The purpose of the survey was to gather data regarding the ways in which museums constructed during the post-GMB museum building boom have either resulted in well-suited frames for, or complete architectural hindrances to contemporary art display. The survey respondents represented institutions that solely display and collect modern and contemporary art, with 66.7%, against those museums that offer a broader range of collections at 33.3%. Seven out of nine respondents work in museums located in Western Europe. A majority of the museums surveyed are government entities, at 77.8%, with only a fraction fiscally supported through private funding, illustrating the importance of community stakeholders at a decision-making level. A remarkable majority of the respondents work in the director's office; whether the respondents were in fact the director or not remains dubious, and this aspect of the survey was deliberately developed to retain subject anonymity. This offers more informed research into the design processes for their post-GMB architecture, since three responses to the question «Who made the decision to construct the new building?» indicated the institution's director. The director was listed in four responses to

the question, «Who internally was responsible for planning and managing the project?» meaning that there was some institutional oversight approximately 50% of the time. This detail has implications pertaining to the final iterations of museum design. If the director is involved in the design process only 50% of the time, it appears then that architects are generally given free range to make tangible their creative visions with little institutional strategic guidance.<sup>1</sup> This aspect is troubling considering that so many architectural gestures become misaligned when the building is finally replenished with objects and people.

The most revealing sections of the survey concern questions surrounding the overarching rationale for building and the implications architecture has upon contemporary art and curatorial practice. The question «What were the key reasons for undertaking the project?» revealed a multiplicity of answers. Reasoning ranged from problems related to the following: (1) «the need of dedicated spaces for collection display», (2) «lack of space», (3) «urban development», and (4) to «improve public access» From these wide-ranging issues, it can be inferred that there is no single underlying predicament to be solved with new architecture. Interestingly, five respondents indicated that their old buildings no longer suited their collections, either lamenting a lack of storage or display spaces, with one asserting that their «old building [was] not suited for contemporary art and events».

The question, «How has the architecture affected the art on display?», though the phrasing was a bit leading, implying that one did indeed impact the other, rendered significant answers. One respondent

<sup>1</sup> This argument is based on the results of the questionnaire and may not apply 100% of this time. It should also be noted that the actual role of the museum director differs across institutions, but for the purpose of this analysis, the director is the individual tasked with running the museum in varying capacities.



White cube installation methodology in the exhibition Jackson Pollock, April 5–June 4, 1967.  
Photography: The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographic Archive

asserted that there was, «No negative effect –development was based on creating enhanced spaces appropriate to a range of contemporary art forms and materials– architecture [was] based on [the] principle of enhancing [the] presentation of and access to art, not to draw attention to [the] architecture itself». Although this respondent claimed that the architecture had no negative impact upon the display of their collection, based on the feedback, it appears that the architectural program was designed with the collection already in mind. This design strategy, then, must have been implemented at the planning's outset. In some instances, art informed the architecture, as one respondent noted, «The museum architecture was partly shaped by contemporary art [...] the exhibition spaces from floor 2 to 8 are black boxes, which combine different types of objects and to create transcultural and transhistorical presentations. In our exhibitions we collaborate with contemporary artists which have meaningful work in relation

to the themes. We also engage artists to create new work».

Flexibility was a common factor in determining whether respondents considered their respective new structures successful. One in particular articulated the answers to the question from the preceding paragraph: «the building is a contemporary architecture designed by Mario Botta expressly for [the] display [of] contemporary art. Its modular rooms allow the realization of various types of exhibition projects even if sometimes it is necessary to relate with large spaces». This vital component was further expressed in an answer to the question, «What specific challenges does the new architecture have on the display of contemporary art?». The respondent shared a few reflections: «if we should do it (build) now again, I think it should be easy to change the exhibitions. So more flexible walls, flexible light». Regarding the possibilities for curatorial practice within these new spaces, a resounding 100% of the respondents answered

affirmatively to the question: «Are curators free to experiment with different ways of exhibiting in the spaces?» Perhaps this was the luck of the draw, yet one respondent gave the following feedback: «I would like to argue for thoughtful interactions between contemporary art and the museum's collections. I think it's (the architecture) very superficial and [does] not allow for a lot of meaning when contemporary art is just integrated in a new museum building, as [a] show element».

The conclusions proffered by this questionnaire support my hypotheses concerning post-GMB museum architecture in relation to contemporary art display. The critiques regarding the lack of flexibility of some of these newer spaces reveal a lack of communication between directors, architects, and curators. The criticisms emerging from the survey are insightful for colleagues working in museums and especially for those in institutions that are considering building an additional wing or designing anew to not repeat the problems faced by some museums constructed during the post-GMB building boom.

### **The Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao: An Impetus for Change**

This section is an analysis of the catalyst for the latest museum building burst: the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (GMB). Beginning with the completion of the GMB in 1997, the art world witnessed a construction frenzy. This iconic museum building in the Deconstructivist style by Frank Gehry propelled astounding socio-economic stimulation to a depressed Basque Country and this development was granted the moniker, the «Bilbao effect» (Rybczynski, 2002): This analysis does not focus on the exterior architecture —facades have been written about at length by architecture and

art critics— but instead evaluates the interior spaces where art is displayed and within which humans move.

This section explores the development of the Bilbao satellite of the Guggenheim Corporation and the increasing internationality of contemporary art. The Guggenheim brand, under the leadership of its CEO, Thomas Krens, was the first museum to expand its reach to such a degree that it eschewed the traditional American non-profit business model, to which museums traditionally subscribe, and instead adapted corporate strategies into its financial infrastructure (Greenberg, Ferguson, Nairne, 1996: 357).<sup>2</sup> These bold operational changes positioned the Guggenheim brand as instantly recognizable and reputable: a Guggenheim can potentially transform any city into an international art center.

According to the GMB's website, the building boasts 260,000 square feet, of which 120,000 are dedicated exhibition spaces (Guggenheim Bilbao, 2017). Its facade features a series of highly aestheticized and architectonic undulating layers comprised of titanium that suggest a fortress or military ship. The audacious and spectacular design by Gehry has been criticized for its attention-grabbing features (Foster, 2002: 37). The GMB website also states that the «museum is located in a newly developed area of the city, leaving its industrial past behind» (Guggenheim Bilbao, 2017). Yet should museums be constructed without any connection to its location's past? Should local communities be involved in the planning process? This statement would indicate that the GMB building is *not* site-specific despite the good intentions of its architect.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon of arts institutions operating like for-profit ventures began in the 1970s in New York as blue-chip galleries opened satellite locations in art centers around this world.

<sup>3</sup> A counter argument to this notion would be the building's subtle allusion to a boat design positioned in a port city. However, there are many port cities; perhaps this building would equally suit Miami or Genoa.

The argument that the building detracts viewers attention from the art is a well-worn one. The primary disputation concerns problems created by the architecture for contemporary art display. Gehry, however, disagrees, stating that his architecture actually complements its locality: «I spent a lot of time making the building relate to the 19th century street module and then it was on the river, with the history of the river, the sea, the boats coming up the channel. It was a boat» (Moore, 2017). The building is touted as the tangible symbol of Bilbao.<sup>4</sup> Through its form, ambition, and audacity to incite economic growth, the GMB extends beyond its mission by proving that a state of the art museum, through rigorous exhibitions and public programming, can reinvigorate its community. Visitors to the institution witness these ideals before even entering the building: works of art by such blue-chip artists as Louise Bourgeois, Eduardo Chillida, Yves Klein, Jeff Koons, and Fujiko Nakaya grace its exterior, punctuated by Daniel Buren's site-specific sculpture, *Arcos rojos / Arku gorriak* (2007), situated on the La Salve Bridge. These outdoor works signify that the GMB's collection and presence extends beyond its walls and injects itself into the city of Bilbao.

### Inside the GMB Galleries

While the GMB facade is a work of art in its own right, the interior is equally intriguing. The atrium features curvilinear walls comprised of overarching glass that floods the space with natural light around which three levels of exhibition space connect via walkways, staircases, and a series of elevators. The scale renders the space as ideal to house works of art that appear in large and non-traditional

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4 And, I argue, the GMB has indeed become the new symbol of the city of Bilbao and that the museum has become synonymous with Bilbao. I also assert that Bilbao would not be an international household name if it weren't for Gehry's iconic building.

formats. This is the case for many works of contemporary art, as exemplified by Richard Serra's large-scale installation, *The Matter of Time* (2005), for which an entire gallery was deliberately constructed (Hughes, 2005).<sup>5</sup>

The museum is also equipped with a gift shop, cafe, theater, two restaurants, and a detached office building. This constellation of projected spaces conforms to Thomas Krens's notion that a successful museum has five requirements, which he calls «five rides», alluding to amusement parks, which include «great architecture, a great permanent collection, strong temporary exhibits, shopping, and good food» (Rawsthorn, 2010). I argue that, in addition to these features, a museum needs to be a safe community space for dialogue, social engagement, and an active laboratory in which to test new ideas. Art critics, architects, and curators have asserted that interior architecture plays a significant role in contemporary art display (Marshall, 2005).<sup>6</sup> Furthering this notion, architect Renzo Piano asserted, «you can't just build neutral white spaces. They kill works of art just as much as hyperactive spaces that make the building a piece of self-indulgence» (Mack, 1999: 8). He argues for balance of design that seeks neutrality instead of hyperactive architectural forms. According to the GMB's website, its galleries offer:

...such variety [that] has demonstrated its enormous versatility in the expert hands of cu-

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5 Serra's installation is massive. The gallery it occupies is the biggest in the museum, at around 430 feet long by 80 feet wide. Paintings hung in it before, and they usually looked diminished by Gehry's architecture, sometimes to the point of silliness or near-invisibility. But Serra's work dominates Gehry's space like a rhinoceros in a parlor. (There's said to be considerable animosity between the two men; if that's so, one certainly knows, in this case, who the winner is).

6 This idea is especially echoed by Christopher R. Marshall: «This issue, then, of how galleries are to regain the pejorative space of museums while also continuing to maintain their own divergent emphasis on the [...] artwork is one that continues to drive their thinking. Museums have [...] been highly attentive to recent developments in contemporary art and gallery design».

rators and exhibition designers who have found the ideal atmosphere to present both large format works in contemporary mediums and smaller or more intimate shows (Guggenheim Bilbao, 2017).

Yet do the galleries conform to specific curatorial visions when exhibitions that include works of art of various scale and other spatial requirements are implemented?<sup>7</sup>

In examining the architectural plans of the museum's three floors, it appears that, excluding its expressive atrium, the galleries are actually quite conventional. Apart from the voluminous «fish gallery» designed to solely exhibit Serra's large-scale sculpture, the other display spaces can be characterized as a series of conventional squares. The banality of the galleries adds a new hypothesis to the research: that the white cube persists as the predominant museum display strategy for contemporary art, a shocking revelation, since the GMB was touted by scholars as the most revolutionary museum at the time of its construction. This notion is echoed by architect Philip Johnson in a crude declaration: «It is the greatest building of our time [...] when a building is as good as that one, fuck the art» (Filler, 2007: 2). The GMB galleries pose difficulties for the curatorial presentation of art, and by extension, and more importantly, its users (Foster, 2002: 37).<sup>8</sup> Through a redefinition of the role of curator in the 1990s, new curatorial models demanded new institutions (Roberts, 2009/2010). Around the time when the GMB was under construction, art museums were becoming recognized as charged spaces that bestow certain value systems through their display and interpretation of objects. This tenet is outwardly signified by its architecture. Therefore, the repositioning of the role of curator in the 1990s also contributed to the museum

7 A quick glance through archival photographs of various rotating exhibitions that have taken place at the museum demonstrates that the galleries were designed to showcase large scale works of art.

8 Critic Hal Foster asserts that signature museum architecture can transform the museum into «a gigantic spectacle-space that can swallow any art, let alone any viewer, whole».

architecture boom that flourished throughout the 2000s, and this redefinition prompted the uses of these new spaces for innovative projects. Although this notion exceeds the scope of this discussion, it is an interesting idea to explore further. Curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist has argued:

At a time when cooperation between museums and different exhibitions is more and more economically-driven, with a flurry of traveling shows, packed, shipped and available for rent, there has never been a more pressing need to turn our attention towards non-profit-making, art-oriented hook-ups (Ulrich, 2001).<sup>9</sup>

These «hook-ups» need a space. A building is a permanent legacy in the power structure of cultural mediation; therefore, beginning in the 90s, museums underwent a physical metamorphosis to reflect new forms of visual culture and curatorial processes. New structures reconsidered time and speed, as interiors were used in different ways to sustain new models for artist residencies and collaborations. The fluidity of spaces for new purposes changed the public's behavior, including the amount of time spent at an event.<sup>10</sup> In a post-globalized world, time has become a space and new museums were constructed to manipulate one's use of the time and space of its architecture (Harvey, 1990).<sup>11</sup> Time is also important when researching how long visitors spend looking at a particular work of art, and curators develop displays and write didactics to offer more opportunities for active learning and to encourage slow and prolonged looking.

9 He was critical of the recent museum architecture boom: «the most fitting expression of the passage of museums into the concept of mass culture has been achieved through the fusion of architectural design and the museum's collection whereby the collection and architecture become one fully realized Gesamtkunstwerk and understood as such».

10 This paradigm shift was first palpable in Piano's building for the Centre Georges Pompidou and this was first instance where a large institution implemented a feature that characterized alternative gallery and Kunsthalle spaces.

11 This notion has been termed the «time-space compression» by social theorist David Harvey to define the temporal and spatial shrinkage of global society.



Centre Georges Pompidou. Photography: Wikimedia Commons

### The «Bilbao Effect»

Critics have granted nomenclature the «Bilbao effect» to the immense economic revival that the city of Bilbao experienced after construction of the GMB. The term signifies the notion that ambitious museum architecture, especially for museums of modern and contemporary art, can potentially ameliorate a city in decline. This phenomenon was unprecedented before the GMB. The spectacle and extravagance of the GMB building furthers the Guggenheim brand to a new internationality, a model which lends itself to replication as witnessed by the Louvre satellite in Abu Dhabi (opened 2017) (Pollack, 2006). This propensity for arts institutions to fiercely brand and expand its tentacles has been criticized by some museologists (Moore, 2017);<sup>12</sup> the GMB has been dubbed another

<sup>12</sup> The use of spectacle was also the basis of the most sustained critique of the generally lauded Guggenheim, that its powerful look makes it a poor setting for art. For the critic Hal Foster, speaking in Sydney Pollack's film *Sketches of Frank Gehry*, the building trumps the art it is supposed to serve: «he's given his clients too much of what they want, a sublime space that overwhelms the viewer, a spectacular image that can circulate through the media and around the world as brand».

«McGuggenheim», comparing the latest installment of the Guggenheim brand to the ubiquitous McDonald's international fast-food franchise (The Globe and Mail, 2001). Perhaps the circumstances were unique to Bilbao, though the aggressive building of the cultural center of Abu Dhabi certainly serves as an interesting extension of the «Bilbao effect», albeit on a much grander scale.

The «Bilbao effect» enigma was fiercely challenged by critic Edwin Heathcote in his juxtaposition between what transpired at Bilbao and other instances where signature buildings have contributed to its city's prestige (Heathcote, 2017). He argued that although critics look to the GMB as a unique situation, this museum was not the first instance in which architecture was a catalyst for reviving a declining city. Heathcote noted that renovations to earlier buildings contributed to the construction of a body politic. Other examples include the Centre Georges Pompidou and the recent opening of the aforementioned Louvre Abu Dhabi as examples of buildings shaping profoundly communities. Heathcote's

argument questions why scholars persist with the nomenclature, «Bilbao effect?» What about «Pompidou effect?»

In the post-GMB era, contemporary art curators are left with a conundrum: how can architecture be more thoughtfully integrated into the experience of viewing art when museum trustees increasingly demand a signature building? Twenty years after the GMB, the debate surrounding the implications of bold architecture upon contemporary art display needs to be reignited to understand the ramifications.

### History of Spaces for Contemporary Art

In his seminal treatise of 1986, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Brian O'Doherty articulated the preferred methodology of display for modern art. He outlined specific models, from light that should emanate from the ceiling to the hardwood polished floors, to which curators must adhere in order to craft a «neutral» atmosphere for modern art. He compared the «white cube» to a tomb in the seemingly immortal quality it bestows upon works of art. In other words, the galleries of museums that display modern art architecturally transcend time and space, thus visitors are imbued with a sense of the eternal as they progress through sparse and windowless galleries, barring the outside world, where time seems to stand still. His conclusions regarding the paradigm shift of modern art display throughout the 1980s, are relevant today, since the GMB still employs the white cube strategy to frame contemporary art. The myth of the white cube's neutrality still persists. I argue, however, that neutrality is a construct, and though the white cube may have seemed like the best solution when first conceptualized, it is impossible to manufacture an entirely blank space in which to show art. Since the white cube is not neutral, but rather, a constructed space imbued with its own aura as any other, I ask: have architects and curators

developed new display strategies throughout the post-GMB museum building boom?

Examining the history of display spaces for contemporary art is important to this research, since analyzing current interior museum spaces will prove challenging without thoroughly deconstructing the spatial precedents considered by architects and curators. These include traditional spaces such as museums, *Kunsthallen*, *Kunstvereine*, and commercial galleries, as well as such alternative spaces as private collectors' homes, pop-up galleries, and artist collectives. Beginning with the advent of Modernism in the 1920s and the spaces realized to house new forms of art, this section traces the trajectory of the spaces constructed to frame modern art for viewers, many of whom were non-specialists. How were early interior spaces dedicated to contemporary art envisioned? I also explore examples of the fledgling spaces designed to display contemporary art and argue that they have informed the structure of museum galleries conceived after the GMB.

The advent of modern art and its ancillary forms such as Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Futurism, and Pop-Art in the early decades of the twentieth century were catalysts for the construction of new gallery spaces. Indeed, as art dealer Karsten Schubert asserted:

The post-war period was the age of invisible museum architecture... museum building during the post-war years was marked by a conscious reversal of the classicism and monumentality of the past which had become unacceptable as a result of both Fascist and Stalinist abuse (Schubert, 2000).

These new museum buildings constructed in Western Europe utilized glass paneling on their façades to introduce natural light into the galleries, signifying a new era of transparency following the fascist preference

towards neoclassicism. Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie<sup>13</sup> exemplified this concerted effort to bury fascist aesthetics, and symbolically, their doctrine, bringing to the fore a new era of art museum architectural aesthetic.

Art institutions in Europe throughout the 1960s witnessed a dramatic juxtaposition of neoclassical exteriors with renovated and ultra-modern interiors.<sup>14</sup> While American

contemporary art galleries in New York, then the epicenter for the production, exhibition, and consumption of modern art, set up shop in downtown commercial spaces, European museums were retrofitted to suit modern art. These refurbishings extended beyond the application of a fresh coat of stark-white paint to gallery walls; it entailed stripping and polishing the (typically wooden) floors, installing bright overhead lighting, and discarding all seating so that viewers could better absorb the enormity of much of the work on view. This unobstructed close-looking encouraged by these spaces removed any sense of site-specificity or recognition of the passage of time, as homogeneous galleries blended into one another without much distinction. The only discernible realization of site-specificity occurred only after exiting the galleries, as noted by theorist Reesa

13 This museum is undergoing extension renovations by the architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron at the time of writing. It is interesting, and perhaps not surprising, that a plethora of museums constructed during the mid-twentieth century have since added wings, expanded, or have been completely rebuilt during the most recent museum building boom.

14 Harald Szeemann's curation of his seminal exhibition, «When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head» (1969), while he was director of the Kunsthalle Bern exemplified this propensity of the 1960s in Europe where a classical building exterior is shaken up by radical art forms and display methodology inside its galleries.



Centre Georges Pompidou from inside. Photography: Wikimedia Commons



Neue Nationalgalerie by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Photography: Wikimedia Commons

Greenberg, «if interiors were remodeled, the exteriors remained the same» (Greenberg, 1996). Neoclassical facades of many of these institutions sharply contrasted with the chaotic interiors of their galleries, which exemplified disunity between exterior and interior architecture. This dual identity of European institutions in which modern art was displayed during this period prompted some curators to reexamine the types of spaces best suited for the display of new art forms. In the following decades, museum galleries became more homogenized, perhaps due to a more globalized art market.

Spaces for contemporary art increasingly gravitated towards the buildings constructed throughout the post-GMB museum building boom. As there was discord in museum architecture, the question regarding how to marry exterior and interior so that the two better coexisted seemed to be happening in the field, as evidenced by the subsequent dramatic experimentations in architectural forms. This strategy culminated in the avant-garde architecture of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers.

With its exoskeletal multicolored piping and deconstructed aesthetic, the Pompidou (completed in 1977) stylistically challenged the traditional neoclassical style of museum buildings that preceded it. The museum was revolutionary in its merging of galleries for modern art with dedicated spaces for a library, performances, dining, and shopping. It was likened to an entertainment venue, and, for the first time, the museum as destination was communicated through its spectacular architecture an approach later appropriated by the GMB.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite its colorful avant-garde exterior, the Pompidou's galleries were left completely unadorned. This tactic rendered the galleries more malleable so that curators can better manipulate the spaces, ensuring that the walls do not interfere with the art.<sup>16</sup> A counter argument to this strategy is the fact

<sup>15</sup> This stratagem became a pattern throughout the 1980s in both Europe and the United States, as the advent of the «blockbuster» exhibition carried promises of drawing large crowds and therefore increased profits.

<sup>16</sup> The architects deliberately stripped the museum facade of ornamentation, leaving its features exposed, with minimal architectural gestures in the galleries. This design conveys visually the holding of space for curators, artists, and works of art to have prominence.

that the postmodern usage of vast windows, a holdover from the modern period, is actually a hindrance, as the large formats of some modern art pieces require equally immense walls upon which to hang. The makeshift nature of the Pompidou galleries reflected the need for more expansive walls where none were available, and curators needed to improvise. They did so by installing temporary white walls within open gallery spaces, thus creating a plethora of white cubes within a much larger white cube. This begets the question, also indirectly asked by Greenberg: is there a more efficient method of integrating contemporary art with interior museum spaces?

### The «Duchamp Effect»

A conceptual artist before his time, Marcel Duchamp pioneered the notion of art being about ideas above all else, including its aesthetic properties. His practice privileged the concept as the most important aspect of the work, as with conceptual art, all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand; the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea is the machine that makes the art. Duchamp was also a curator who had a profound impact on the evolution of contemporary art through his manipulation of display spaces. This artist /curator practice of exhibition-making was experimental, changing both the rhetoric of space and modes of audience participation. Duchamp's installation of the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* (1942) involved the use of string that encapsulated the viewer in such a way that made moving about the gallery nearly impossible. His work can be understood as a commentary of the status of display spaces and its importance for public viewing. Duchamp was therefore the founding figure in this shift of curatorial practice from caring and mediating to an artistic act through his manipulation of the spatial environment, which in turn,



Marcel Duchamp, *Sixteen Miles of String*, 1942. © 2005 Succession Marcel Duchamp ARS, NY/ADAGP Paris. Photography: Philadelphia Museum of Art: Marcel Duchamp Archive, Gift of Jacqueline, Peter and Paul Matisse in memory of their Mother Alexina Duchamp

crystallized a changing attitude toward curating modern art.

Just as the «Bilbao effect» can be applied to economic changes prompted by the expressionist architectural styles assumed by post-GMB museums, I argue that a «Duchamp Effect» can describe the curatorial turn that later culminated in the 1990s. The shift from curating being synonymous with keeping and caring really began with Duchamp's practice of using art to reconfigure spaces of display. He pioneered institutional critique through his realization of Surrealist art spaces and the critical dialogue he inspired between museum and artist/curator.

Through this analysis of dedicated spaces for modern art, it's apparent that artists were the antecedent agents that advocated for institutional change. From Duchamp's whimsical display of his mass-produced porcelain urinal ready-made, *Fountain* (1917), a radical work placed on a pedestal and showcased in a traditional museum setting, through large-scale works produced by artists in the twenty-first century, the reshaping of gallery spaces will continue to evolve as does the art. *Fountain* was rejected for display by the

Society of Independent Artists, and yet the work is a catalyst for the ongoing debate about what constitutes art. Before Duchamp, the museum was the sole authoritative machine that dictated what art was and how it should be displayed; Duchamp dismantled this hegemonic structure through championing the artist and his avant-garde curatorial practice.

This brief history of the types of the display spaces for modern and contemporary art is vital to understand the reasoning behind the architectural decisions on which post-GMB museum building boom spaces were based. From structures that exemplified a disjointedness between exterior and interior to buildings that sought greater symbiosis between the two, this history leads to the formation of post-GMB museum spaces.

### Gallery Spaces in the Twenty-First Century

As demographics and social demands are constantly in flux, psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which champions self-actualization, is a relevant concept for twenty-first century museums (Maslow, 1943). His philosophy contends that self-actualization can be attained only after basic human needs are fulfilled, thus allowing greater aspirations such as creative expression and pursuit of knowledge to manifest. Museum architecture and the curators working within its walls play host to the comfort level and social inclusivity for their visitors. Through design features such as signage to facilitate wayfinding, lighting, and didactic label typography and font sizes, museum interiors and curatorial practice coalesce to construct conducive spaces for lifelong learning. Beyond framing encounters, museum architecture should be designed in such a way that it facilitates self-guided learning by not distracting from its contents. At a higher level, museum architecture should respond to changes within the institution

through its framing of art, conversation, ideas, and human history.

Through analyzing museum spaces for contemporary art, culminating in the post-GMB museum building boom, the most prevalent strategy for contemporary art display remains the white cube. The original hypothesis theorized that post-GMB museum spaces must have realized new concepts for the curatorial presentation of contemporary art. Instead, much to my surprise, the white cube strategy endures as the preferred spatial configuration for contemporary art display. The only caveat is the development and inclusion of black box spaces and large warehouse-like open galleries. The black box display mechanism, tracing its origins to the 1990s, is the ideal space in which to showcase film and video art while warehouse galleries function to support works of art that appear in enormous formats. These three intermeshing types of museum spaces comprise the triad of the «canon» of contemporary art display. This revelation further demonstrates that as art forms radically change over time, the spaces in which they're displayed do not.

What can be inferred from these findings? That perhaps a new interior gallery design solution does not yet exist, or, that architects have relied on the successes of this design approach and have yet to fathom an alternative solution. Or, it could signify greater problems in the field of art history in its lack of creating new generalities and narratives of discourse. It seems as though the more gesticular and radical exteriors of post-GMB museums are, the more conventional their interiors. I initially hypothesized that post-GMB museum architecture was the physical manifestation of myriad problems of the museum institution. Points of contention throughout its history included spaces that were too cramped to contain ever-expanding collections to outdated facilities that did not



Installation view of the exhibition, *The 1960's: Painting and Sculpture from the MoMA Collection*. June 28, 1967–September 24, 1967. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN834.5. Photograph by James Mathews

offer the types of spaces required of a museum in the twenty-first century. It seems that the band-aid approach of either reskinning the exterior to buildings at the cost of the interiors or building anew prevailed.

Curator Nicolas Bourriaud's treatise, (Bourriaud, 1998), connected a number of artists working in the 1990s whose practice concerned people and their relationship to art. He asserted that «art is a state of encounter» and meeting points between object, user, and space bestowed new meaning upon the art, arguing that a work is only activated through use. This paper asked, «how can museum spaces facilitate these types of encounters?» The main theme is the argument that museums constructed during the post-GMB museum building boom have reshaped the

experience between people and contemporary art. Museum architecture is the symbolic vehicle through which a society's intellectual, cultural, social, and political expressions are made tangible. Those successful architectural programs have constructively (re)activated the potential of architecture to advance beyond the limitations of their designs. Their significance lies in how they facilitate the museum experience, reflect on art objects, and connect visitors with art but also with wayfinding, socializing, activism, and the production and distribution of knowledge.

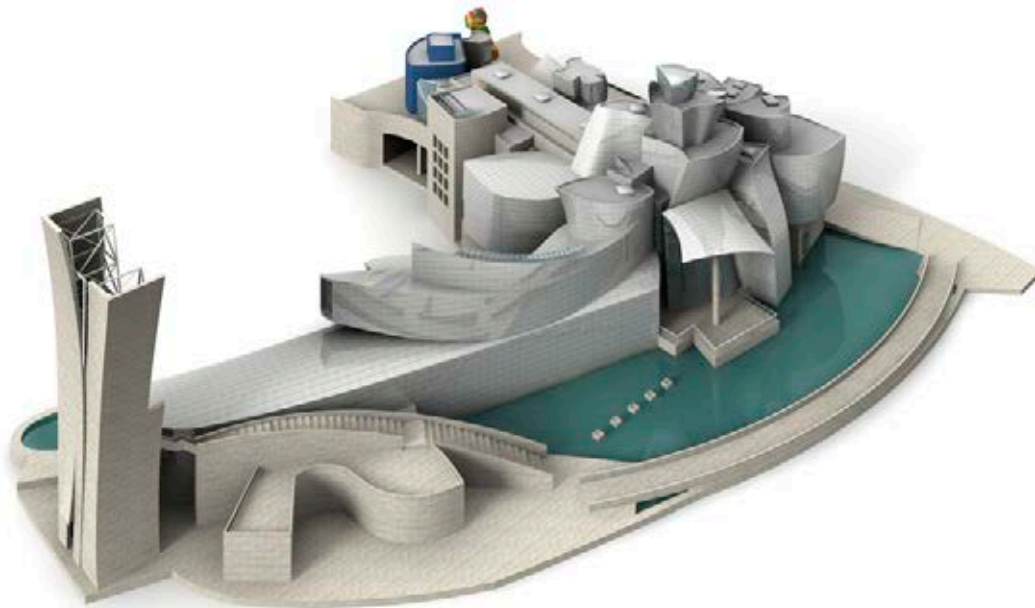
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