Abstract

The architecture of civic centers provides a space for the construction of cultural lineage. Given Lewis and Miller’s definition of the function of cultural policy, to identify, foster, and provide a “sense of belonging” through cultural industries, the architecture of culture should create a context based in community. However, the contemporary intention of state and private sponsors to fund cultural venues as commodities changes the space where culture is generated to that of a ready-made icon meant to draw tourist dollars. Consideration into the assumption that the conversion of the cultural icon to commodity serves the community in which it is located focuses here on the work of architect Frank O. Gehry. An assessment of Gehry’s designs, from the economic accomplishment of the Guggenheim, Bilbao to the subsequent rise of international corporate support, follows with a critique of Gehry buildings that serve as “successful” civic logos while ignoring and supplanting the existing culture of the places in which they are located. In 1967, Michel Foucault stated, “I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space...”. Perhaps the “anxiety of space” Foucault speaks of is rooted in the loss of a sense of place that bonds architecture to culture. Exported cultural icons, not tied to the space in which they land, keep us as a society, floating in Foucault’s sea of anxiety. The proposed conclusion is that perhaps the cure for this particular civic anxiousness lies in a space designed to produce a “sense of belonging.”
According to Justin Lewis and Toby Miller in the introduction to *Critical Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader*, the function of cultural policy is to identify, provide, and foster a "sense of belonging" through our cultural industries. Lewis and Miller maintain that:

"Cultural citizenship concerns the maintenance and development of cultural lineage via education, custom, language, religion, and the acknowledgment of difference in and by the mainstream." Lewis and Miller argue that culture arises from a commonality between citizens and the cultivation of this sense of unity takes place in the institutions of culture. Museums, universities, libraries, and other civic centers constitute and construct cultural lineage with the purpose of revealing the meaning of social being. Cultural institutions provide the locations for the production of culture through the design of these spaces, for as Kenneth Frampton states in the *Architectural Review*: "Architecture as opposed to any other art form is irredeemably mixed up with the life-world. In this respect it is as much a context for culture and life as it is a cultural expression in and of itself." Architecture becomes tied to culture in that cultural centers are built with the purpose of providing a space for cultural production. However, this innate purpose of architecture, to serve the "life-world," is in danger in contemporary cultural centers. A divergence from architecture with the purpose of cultural production and a turn toward a cultural economy model, based on advertising and celebrity, promotes the creation of

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2 Lewis and Miller, 1.
culture as commodity rather than as a vehicle for public unity leading to “a sense of belonging.” The production of architecture with the purpose of generating revenue instead of cultural expression is not a new one, however, the problem facing the spaces of culture today, as acknowledged by Lewis and Miller, is specifically a divergence from "collective action or public advocacy," and a turn to "individual acts of consumption." The problem is a loss of community.

The city of Paris, the "City of Light," can be seen as a blueprint for culture as commodity. At the end of the eighteenth century in Washington D.C., as "the economic system struggled to define itself and Americans through the language of consumption," the advocates of the City Beautiful movement turned to beautification to hide their slums. The hope was the Beaux-Arts style would sweep social ills away, raise American cities "to cultural parity with their European competitors through the use of the European Beaux-Arts idiom," and most importantly "bring the upper classes back to...work and spend money in the areas." This is an historical example of a cultural space, Paris, France, used by designers for the generation of revenue. L'Enfant designed the plan for the city of Washington D.C. in 1791 using the Baroque City Beautiful style of France in an attempt to emulate such locations as the Palace of Versailles and the Champs-Élysées. The commissioners of the plans for Washington D.C. spoke of Paris as a "well-

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4 Lewis and Miller, 1.
5 Lewis and Miller, 2.
6 Lewis and Miller, 1.
8 Rose, "The City Beautiful Movement."
10 Rose, "The City Beautiful Movement."
 articulated city-a work of civic art."¹¹ The designers of Buenos Aires also modeled the city's main street after the Champs-Élysées and the Obelisco, a 223-foot spire that looms over Buenos Aires' "Champs-Élysées," known as Avenida 9 de Julio, like a smaller Eiffel Tower.¹² Even the design of Chicago's Grant Park is in the French Classical style and features two symmetrical rose gardens fashioned after Versailles.¹³ The reason to represent the locations of Paris and move this specific European style of architecture out of context functions to reproduce Paris' worth economically as "cultural capital."¹⁴

The Guggenheim, Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, represents a prime example of contemporary cultural capital. The Guggenheim website describes the museum as a "New Urban Center," created so that "People coming from the Calle Iparaguierre, one of the main streets bisecting the center of Bilbao diagonally, are led directly to the main entrance," this brings, "the city right to the doors of the building."¹⁵ The Feasibility Study, carried out for the Guggenheim, suggested that the building would create, "significant positive economic impact on the region," based on the assumption that, "the international reputation of the Guggenheim Foundation and its collections, in conjunction with the extraordinary qualities of the architectural design of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, would increase tourism and stimulate spending."¹⁶ The Museum was built not to represent the culture of the Basque people, but to create symbolic economically driven culture to

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¹¹ Rose, "The 1901 Plan for Washington D.C."
jump-start a failing economy in the Basque capital. And it worked. The total direct visitor expenditures in the first two years after the museum opened its doors was estimated at $450 million, five times the initial investment in the museum. An analysis, "Impact of the activities of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao on the Basque Country" conducted in 1999 by the museum itself, showed that 1,360,000 visitors paid to enter its front doors the first year with over 79% of visitors to the city of Bilbao pay a visit exclusively to see the museum. And the museum's success didn't stop there.

The Guggenheim, Bilbao—which represents Frank Gehry's aesthetic, now referred to as "Gehry's signature sculpted metal," or "Gehry's signature curves"—has become a formula for a signature civic icon. Currently there are twenty-four cities in nine countries of the world that have one or more buildings designed by Frank Gehry. In most press releases Gehry is presented as, "one of the world's greatest living architects," and he creates designs that are, "eye-popping and fun." He is so well thought of that the original design for Seattle's Experience Music Project was approved on the spot, even though Gehry himself said it needed modifications. Cities have shown such faith that his brand of culture sells that his projects are built without questioning their relevance to the particular place.

And corporations love to fund Gehry projects. In the 1970's his innovative use of common materials, like chain link and corrugated cardboard, were shaped into

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17 Baniotopoulou, 7.
18 Baniotopoulou, 7.
23 Lampert-Greaux, 14.
architecturally beautiful, useful, and potentially cheap furniture. However, after becoming the Pritzker Laureate in 1989, "the world's most prestigious architectural award," his works have inflated to a much grander scale as his architectural projects become almost exclusively corporate. The Guggenheim Foundation built Bilbao, DG Bank paid Gehry to design their headquarters in Berlin, the Pritzker Foundation funded his band shell in Millennium Park, and billionaire Paul Allen of Microsoft commissioned Seattle's Experience Music Project. Perhaps his most sinister corporate sponsor has been Enron, who as the primary corporate sponsor for Gehry's Guggenheim retrospective, stated in the catalogue that they "share Mr. Gehry's on-going search for the moment of truth."

The truth is that Gehry's name recognition and signature style function as brand equity that sells to corporations and governments alike. Not all critics and civil authorities failed to recognize the dangers of Gehry's designs. Hal Foster, in his article "Why all the Hoopla?," claims that Gehry, "tends to ingratiate architecture, on the model of the advert, to a public projected as a mass consumer"; this technique is what Foster says changed Gehry from an LA architect to an international designer. According to Foster, Gehry's fame rose not as a producer of architecture for the promotion of culture, but as an architect that delivers a building that serves as a logo. In light of Foster's insight

30 Mark Rappolt, 27.
31 Foster, 23.
it is interesting to note that in Bilbao, Gehry's museum appears on the first sign into the city; the Guggenheim is the first website to appear on a "google" search of the city's name; the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau refers to Millennium Park as a new reason to see Chicago "as one of the most culturally sophisticated and diverse cities in the world," with it's "centerpiece" being the Frank Gehry designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion; and DG Bank uses the Gehry designed Berlin headquarters as a symbol of banking innovation on its English home page. In other words, Gehry's architectural imprint stamps cultural logos in every town where they reside as well as on the world-wide-web.

Gehry's logos, interpreted using Barthes' semiotic terminology from *Mythologies*, construct reality on the connotative level. Barthes writes that the naturalization of signs derives cultural "myths" that are not real, generalized truths that represent the interests of the entire society. A Gehry building project’s signs that are turned into the "Myth" of culture, for example the city of Chicago, promotes the myth that: "The Millennium Park project has become one of the most important millennium projects in the world," because "world-renowned artists" designed the park. The signs are selling culture, as if the buildings themselves are celebrities. In "Celebrity and Power," P. David Marshall states that the "celebrity-function" is as important as Foucault's "author-function" because of the celebrity "power to organize the legitimate and illegitimate domains of the personal and individual within the social." In light of Marshall's argument, Gehry's buildings function as celebrities in that they tell society worldwide what is a legitimate cultural icon. In our

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32 "The new, don't miss-it Millennium Park"
35 "The new, don't miss-it Millennium Park"
36 Marshall, 55.
culture, Celebrity is often used to sell commodities. When Robert Shook, the Theatre Consultant for the Pritzker Pavilion, said, "it became a major project once Gehry got involved," the Chicago band shell became a commoditized cultural icon. Again it's interesting to note that Hollywood celebrities have even legitimized Gehry's status as one of their own: Frasier expressed his distaste for the Guggenheim, Bilbao; Mariah Carey dances around the Guggenheim lawn for a music video advertising the new James Bond film; and in a Lexus commercial the silver Lexus is parked in front of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, a silver similar to the building's, and an actor declares: "I like to look at things of beauty," as he stands between the museum and the sedan. In advertising, the Guggenheim, Bilbao, sells culture as a celebrity might sell hair dye.

Sut Jhally states, in his article “Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse,” that advertising exaggerates the social value of the product by converting "the buying and selling of goods into rituals," in a magical and fetishistic manner to increase consumption of the product. The ritual of culture for Jhally is that of storytelling: "culture is the place and space where a society tells stories about itself, where values are articulated and expressed, where notions of good and evil, of morality and immorality, are defined." This is where the danger lies in Gehry's buildings; they are telling stories

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37 Ellen Lampert-Greaux, 14.
39 Templar
40 Michael Sorkin, "Brand Aid" Harvard Design Magazine Number 17, Fall 2002/Winter 2003, 3.
42 Jhally
about society in the same manner as commercials. A Gehry edifice narrates, as Jhally avows, that: "commodities will make us happy."\textsuperscript{43} Further dangers behind Gehry's cultural venues lie in the fact that they symbolically eclipse the culture that already exists. For example, the catalogue for the Gehry Retrospective, held at the Guggenheim in New York, claims that "the greatest strength of Gehry's architecture lies in its response to existing conditions."\textsuperscript{44} However Gehry's architecture seems to push all existing conditions out of the audience's minds. As Hal Foster explains, the scale of Gehry's Guggenheim is not designed for a present audience member standing in front.\textsuperscript{45} The allusion to a ship or the guitar in the Experience Music Project cannot be seen except from a great height, distance, or in a photograph. Does this mean that Gehry's buildings are designed for those who only see them in media reproduction? It is possible to believe this may be true, as Robert Shook stated, in an interview during the opening days of the Pritzker Pavilion: "In the eyes of most Chicago residents and tourists, the Pritzker Pavilion is an artistic and architectural icon they are attracted to. Then they discover it's great for music as well."\textsuperscript{46} So Gehry buildings are more about Gehry than the art produced inside; the audience is in danger of remembering only the spectacle of Gehry's signature style. As Hal Foster articulates, "these museums trump the art: they use its great scale...as a pretext to inflate the museum itself into a gigantic spectacle-space that can swallow any art, let alone any viewer, whole."\textsuperscript{47}

An example of architecture built for the presentation of art is first Guggenheim

\textsuperscript{43} Jhally
\textsuperscript{44} Foster, 24.
\textsuperscript{45} Foster, 25.
\textsuperscript{46} Lampert-Greaux, 14.
\textsuperscript{47} Foster, 25.
Museum built by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1959. The original was also considered sculptural:

...[Wright's] great swansong, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of New York, is a gift of pure architecture—or rather of sculpture. It is a continuous spatial helix, a circular ramp that expands as it coils vertiginously around an unobstructed well of space capped by a flat-ribbed glass dome. A seamless construct, the building evoked for Wright 'the quiet unbroken wave'...

The sculptural style for the building was programmatic; Wright meant for the audience to associate the building design with how they will view the art inside. In contrast Gehry's design for the second Guggenheim in 1997 was expressly, as stated in the Feasibility Study commissioned by the city of Bilbao, to create a "marshalling point and a magnet for investment." Gehry's design was intended to visually stimulate and function as an emblem for the city of Bilbao. Not only do the planners speak differently of the two Guggenheims, but the two Guggenheim architects describe very differently their intentions for the design of the two buildings.

Frank Lloyd Wright spoke of the interior of his Guggenheim as: "Entering into the spirit of this interior, you will discover the best possible atmosphere in which to show fine paintings or listen to music. It is this atmosphere that seems to me most lacking in our art galleries, museums, music halls and theaters." Wright calls for the need for a museum to function as inspiration for the creation of culture. In contrast, Frank O. Gehry talks about wanting to make "more complex shapes," and praises his computer aided design system: "...That's how we controlled the costs at Bilbao, and how we can do all

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49 Kostof, 740.
50 Baniotopououlo, 5.
those curves now. Consequently we have a lot of freedom. I can play with shapes. So, Wright speaks of the function of his Guggenheim's interior space and how it promotes the viewer's experience, while Gehry speaks of the cost and the exterior of the building's spectacular nature. Gehry's purpose as a designer was to raise money for the city of Bilbao through culture as commodity and his success has always been in keeping the costs down and raising the amount of eye-catching curves.

The success of Bilbao has lead cities worldwide to search for their piece of this cultural commodity. A German architecture magazine, *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen*, states that, "Frank Gehry's Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles can already be seen to have close links with the Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain." The magazine wonders if the similarities in design will lead to a recreation, of what they call the "Bibao effect," in downtown Los Angeles. The next danger with the "Gehry effect," remains that the architecture of Gehry buildings of culture could be located in any community, in any city, anywhere in the world. Why does a "fish" building belong in the Olympic Village of Barcelona? Why are the curves in the DG bank not the curves in the Guggenheim, Bilbao? If the Pritzker Pavilion design was rejected by Chicago couldn't Denver, Phoenix, or Atlanta pick it up as a cultural icon? The fact that the design is being thought of as spectacle of, what Hal Foster calls, ready-made cultural iconography constitutes a problem of Gehry's architectural purpose. In 1999 Kenneth Frampton discussed the

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54 Domeisen, 2.
55 Foster, 25.
dangers of architecture with this problem of purpose in an article published in the Architectural Review, *Seven Points for the New Millennium*:

The crisis of the architectural academy is at least in some measure a reflection of the crisis facing the profession: the more the practice of architecture becomes removed from the needs of society as a whole, the more it tends to become an overly aestheticized discourse that addresses itself exclusively to the spectacular preoccupations of an arriviste class. Inside architectural schools, this discourse is often served by a mystifying theoretical status, drawn largely from other disciplines, and removed from basic conditions and needs of environmental design. As Vittorio Gregotti pointed out some time ago, architectural practice requires the presence of societal need and sociological debate and constraint in order to exist at all.\(^{56}\)

The architectural need that Frampton points out represents a return to the focus on societal need.

In 1967, in a lecture entitled "Of other Spaces," Michel Foucault said "...I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space..."\(^{57}\) Perhaps, the anxiety stems from the commodification of culture that results in the inter-changeability of spaces. Cultural identities are lost in the exportation of cultural spaces. Art as advertising can be bought, but does not replace a sense of unity among a community. In these anxious times, *our* times, we have a need for roots and for knowing where we are in the world. A Frank Gehry design does not provide the sense of place that bonds architecture to culture. Exported cultural icons are not tied to the space it which they land, but instead keep us as a society, floating in Foucault's sea of anxiety. Then perhaps, the cure for this anxiousness lies in “a sense of belonging.”\(^{58}\)


\(^{58}\) Lewis and Miller, 2.
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