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# Journeys to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao: Towards a revised Bilbao Effect

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ABSTRACT

Many of the world's post-industrial cities have sought to emulate the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao's (GMB) transformation of Bilbao into a city of culture. Yet the Bilbao Effect is a paradox: why is it that despite much replication of its defining features there is still only one Bilbao Effect? This paper steps back from the quick fix policy narrative of the Bilbao Effect to reflect critically on the complex coordinates of the GMB's success as a singular tourism magnet; notably how Bilbao and the Basque Country region played a far bigger role in it than is commonly perceived. It identifies a variety of significant and commensurate cultural tourism developments already in place before the GMB was built, not least the Camino de Santiago de Compostela and San Sebastian, that both augmented and enriched tourism to Bilbao subsequently. It argues that these must now be recognised as a key part of the Bilbao Effect and are of an order and quality not easily transferred to other cities.



## Introduction

The 'Bilbao Effect' narrates a success story of urban regeneration named after the seemingly miraculous and unprecedented success of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (GMB) (Plaza, Silke, & Haarich, 2015; Rogers & Power, 2000). Built on a site of Bilbao's failed shipbuilding industry, it was intended as a flagship for the city's regeneration plan, to move the city away from its rusting heavy industries and machine-age modernism and to restructure it around new service industries, emerging technologies,

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design, culture and aesthetics. The GMB opened in 1997 and hoped against hope to attract 400,000 art tourists a year. This would have enabled them to pay back the total investment in a short timeframe and deliver valuable income to the city and Basque Country economy (Areso, 2007). In fact, they attracted a million visitors in their first year and have maintained that visitation level ever since, meaning that the cost of building the museum ($100m) was repaid in five years (and the overall investment in ten years), and became a major contributor of GDP to the city (adding $33.5m per year to Basque public funds from 2006) (Areso, 2007; Haarich & Plaza, 2013). Significantly, the GMB also boosted global connectivity by placing this second-tier city on the global map of specialised international art-related tourism circuits (Plaza et al., 2015), prompting further investment strategies around the world that linked art museums, art tourism and urban regeneration.

Although Basque Country remains substantially industrial (22% of GDP) the Bilbao Effect became the holy grail for de-industrialised cities seeking reinvention (Financial Times, 2012). Its potent mix of structural change and economic development, urban regeneration with a cultural twist, signature architecture for urban brand renewal, and local–global partnerships in museum development, inspired a huge growth in centrepiece museum projects in the 1990s and 2000s—but few were as successful as Bilbao (Plaza & Haarich, 2013). Indeed, most of these massive investments joined a litany of flops and failures. Among these were the Sheffield National Museum of Popular Music, UK, which collapsed within a year, the Santiago Calatrava's new wing at the Milwaukee Art Museum and the KIASMA Helsinki Museum of Contemporary Art, both of which failed achieve anticipated visitor numbers. Even a Frank Gehry museum commissioned by a wealthy private collector was no guarantee that a new museum would work. Described in 2004 as 'EMPty', visitor numbers almost halved in the first three years of *Experience Music Project* (EMP) in Seattle, another shiny titanium museum built for Microsoft founder and billionaire Paul Allen. In the same period, it cut its workforce from 500 to 200. Opening in 2000 pundits said it would consolidate Seattle's regeneration through the 1990s. It didn't (Barnett, 2004).

In addressing the relative success of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao it can be argued that the Bilbao Effect as urban mythology has relied, in various ways, on three rather dubious constructions.

First, that the staggering economic miracle could be achieved through a 'just add art' recipe—art in the form of the museum as 'aesthetic architecture'; art as a continuous supply of new international modern and contemporary art exhibitions; and art as a substantial flow of *art tourists* (Franklin, 2004).

Second, that if it could be made to work in a worst-case scenario of deindustrialisation and dereliction like Bilbao, *it could work anywhere*.

Third, that any city could build flows of art tourists with little or no prior experience of the hosting of travellers and tourists or the construction/design of cultural tourism.

Beatriz Plaza and her co-writers have written a strong raft of corrective papers addressing the first two of these constructions (Plaza, 2000a; Plaza, 2000b, 2008; Plaza et al., 2015). Plaza, Tironi, and Haarich (2009) arguing that the Bilbao Effect can only be understood in the way it was embedded in a complex network of cultural, economic and political institutions, capacities, dispositions, and practices that spanned the city, the Basque Country region and beyond. So, what follows is intended to address the last of these, though it has important implications for all three.

Many commentators stress how *entirely new* tourism was to Bilbao and how the city and region had hitherto lacked experience of tourism and tourists (Hedgecoe & Whittle, 2012). Beatriz Plaza (2000a, 2000b) wrote that 'the GMB was intended to be the core attraction in a city not known for its touristic attractions'. And, reflecting on the GMB some fifteen years after it opened, Plaza and Haarich (2013) argued that: 'What is surely a "Bilbao effect" is the fact that the new Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art has been able to attract almost one million people each year to an old industrial city where tourism and high-level culture were practically unknown. This achievement alone is a true Bilbao Effect and, as such, difficult to emulate.' There is a great deal of truth to this, but arguably, as I will show, it may not be the *whole* truth.

This same impression was reproduced countless times, perhaps unwittingly, as Bilbao itself came under considerable pressure to construct 'stylised stories for foreign emulation' from wave after wave of so-called 'policy transfer tourists'—delegations from other cities and governments that ran to an average of 58 per year through the 2000s—all of them keen to learn how to perform a Bilbao Effect for themselves (Gonzalez, 2011). These stories were narrowly crafted around Bilbao's all-important