

Susan Bennett

Everyday Resistance

At a time when neoliberal capital markets are breathtakingly robust and expect, as Amin Ash and Nigel Thrift trenchantly capture, ‘the “financialization” of everything’ (2013: 190), there has been a felt urgency in making artistic work that resists.¹ The turn to a socially oriented participatory art has been a vital and common strategy to this purpose and, as Claire Bishop puts it, ‘Participatory projects in the social field therefore seem to operate with a twofold gesture of opposition and amelioration’ (2012: 12). At the same time, scholarly studies of contemporary performance have privileged this kind of work and celebrated its political potential with the conviction, or at least hope, that it might somehow challenge dominant ideology and promote social change. There has been much less field interest in artistic enterprise that produces commercial success although local and regional economies have, in many places in the world, been vigorously encouraging the development of the so-called ‘creative industries’ supported by the construction, often, of expensive and extensive new cultural infrastructure. This is an urban ‘improvement’ model that had its genesis in what Andrew McClellan and very many others have called ‘the Bilbao effect’ (2008: 90–92): a description of the new economic activity and significant global recognition generated by the opening, in 1997, of the Guggenheim art museum in the eponymous northern Spanish city.

In this essay, I am interested, then, in a different kind of participatory performance—one that is occasioned by art but relies on everyday interactions that go far beyond the presence of what Leslie Sklair and Jason Struna have called an ‘icon project’ (2013: 754). To this end, I examine more generally how urban redevelopment, and particularly the provision of new cultural infrastructure, changed the social, political and economic landscape of Bilbao and how the city’s population has expressed its experience of, and resistance to, ‘the Bilbao effect.’ I am concerned not so much with the effects of a single spectacular building, but, crucially, with how human interaction with Bilbao’s theatricalised architectural landscape allows place to be ‘made and remade on a daily basis’ (Cresswell 1999: 39). Thus, rather than comprehend ‘the Bilbao effect’ as no more than a commodified experience typical to neoliberalism, I am interested in the participatory and processual human performances that it has occasioned. To contextualise the conditions of the city today, then, it is useful to start with a brief account of relevant history.²

For much of its past, Bilbao had been an important and wealthy city with its most prominent successes in the heyday of European industrialism, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then, Bilbao was an economic powerhouse because of local iron and steel production, as well as through its significance as a transportation hub, and as a financial centre undergirding their industrial sector. Indeed, Bilbao started the twentieth century as a primary engine of Spain’s economy, boosted by the opening of the Euskalduna shipyards in 1900, a business that became by

mid-century one of the largest in Europe. Of course, the subsequent decline and fall of much of the continent's industrial base has been well documented, and Bilbao's experience of this in the second half of the last century was both typical and exceptional. Typical since the failure of the city's chief industries (culminating in the closure in 1988 of the once-dominant shipyards) not only left high unemployment among the city's population but massive and widespread environmental degradation. The River Nervión, that runs through the centre of Bilbao and out into the Bay of Biscay, and on which the shipbuilding and port industries had been located, was, by the end of the 1980s, declared ecologically dead.³ The River had suffered aquatic hypoxia—a phenomenon where the oxygen levels are so low that no water life can survive. Compounded with these commonplace effects of deindustrialisation were more exceptional conditions since Bilbao had a reputation as a centre of insurgence related to the Basque Nationalist and Separatist movement known as 'ETA.' While the organisation's most violent acts were bombings in Madrid and Barcelona, the density of its activities in Basque Country through the 1980s and early 1990s meant that Bilbao was thought of as a city characterised by frequent murders, robberies, blackmail and extortion. Thus, if the end of the nineteenth century had, for the Spanish city, been a time of extraordinary wealth with the prospect of consistent growth, the end of the twentieth century looked set to be quite the opposite.

But, as we know, this is not how Bilbao's twentieth century ended and 'the Bilbao effect' bears no taint of this fraught and negative identity that had existed even into the mid-1990s. Through the actions of imaginative, progressive and perhaps desperate local governments, Bilbao renewed, revitalised and rebranded. The widely recognised agent for this momentous change was Guggenheim Museum, opened in 1997, designed by global superstar architect Frank Gehry and established under the imprimatur of the iconic New York original. The project, while relying on the parent museum for its content and curation, was locally financed: the City of Bilbao furnished part of the now disused port site for the new building, the Basque regional government provided \$154 million for construction costs, and 80 private companies made contributions to its completion. As Anna Klingmann has observed, 'Since the museum opened, it has attracted more visitors each year than the population of the city. The unusual architecture of the building was expected to attract 500,000 visitors to Bilbao the first year; instead, it brought 1.36 million (and \$160 million in revenue) ... [B]y the year 2000, the Basque regional government had more than recouped its investment' (2010: 238–39).

If much of the critical response to the Guggenheim has been positive—verging, really, on fandom—the museum has, too, had its critics who feel that Gehry's building does not respect the site on which it is built but rather has had the effect of erasing the specificity and historicity of locale so as to claim its international relevance and impact. Shelley Hornstein, for example, suggests 'the museum, as architectural tourist icon, transforms from conveying a sense of an imagined community and national anchor ... to a site of transnational identification' (2011: 11). What Hornstein implies here is that Guggenheim does not belong to Bilbao but functions instead as a globally significant property whose purpose is to perform attractiveness for a tourism market. In her assessment: 'Gehry's architecture contrasts diametrically with local materials and style... . [T]he contrast only helps to frame the museum's international status and its intellectual, aesthetic and contemporary connections to the new map of culture, the itinerary of the tourist destined for the exploration of culture and the enduring modernist push to always invent *the new*' (2011: 112, emphasis in original). If we are to accept Hornstein's and others' criticisms, we might say, then, that the Guggenheim performs itself as a distinctive theatre that refuses the stage on which it appears. But, I want to argue here that this critique ignores the complexity and texture of Bilbao's urban planning and development, insisting instead on the Guggenheim's monolithic importance refracted through the lens of the New York institution and connected to other 'world class'

museums. Moreover, these kinds of concerns focus almost solely on tourist visitors, an audience that comes from elsewhere to see the spectacle that the Guggenheim Bilbao apparently realises. To animate what I am calling here 'everyday resistance,' I think it important to engage the wider cityscape and its quotidian uses.

The Guggenheim is too often studied in isolation, then, as if it were Bilbao's sole cultural attraction rather than part of a larger city ambition that was—and is—driven by a commitment to the local population (in short, the voters). After all, Frank Gehry was not the only 'star' architect brought in by the participating governments to revitalise Bilbao's fortunes and, furthermore, other projects were more obviously targeted at improving local quality of life. The same year as the inauguration of the Guggenheim (1997) also saw the completion of a Santiago Calatrava-designed bridge, 'Zubizuri' (Euskara [Basque] for white bridge) that spans the River Nervión close to the Guggenheim. Calatrava had a few years earlier designed the city's new airport but 'Zubizuri' was an urban game changer. It effectively linked the residential side of the city to what had once been the industrial side, but which was now a newly animated cultural destination. It also encouraged pedestrian activity and engagement. In short, it brought Bilbao's population into an emergent play space, the revitalised river district. Another preeminent architect, Norman Foster, had completed the city's new metro system in 1995, two interconnecting lines running either side of the river, and the subway system complemented a Basque regional government project 'Euskotren,' a street-level green-power tram system, that linked the city's suburbs with the core area. The tram network includes stops along the river site.

Only two years after the opening of the Guggenheim, the Euskalduna Conference Centre, Opera House and Concert Hall, designed by Spanish architects Federico Soriano and Dolores Palacios and built in a dock of the former shipyard of the same name, was inaugurated. In 2003, the Centre added a Maritime Museum, paying homage to the history of labour on this very site. Euskalduna is also linked to the residential district by a bridge that offers pedestrian and cycle lanes. Evidently, the 'new' Bilbao (that would emerge as an exemplary post-industrial international destination) was always planned to be much more than Gehry's signature building, with key elements of this development in place even before the museum broke ground. The city's goal for such an ambitious regeneration agenda was to bring people to the waterfront from near (the residential communities across the river as well as the city's suburban fringe) and far (regionally, nationally, and, indeed, internationally). Increased human activity in the city core might have been stimulated by the cultural bait of the museum, but it was necessarily bolstered by other development designed to improve employment opportunities and population mobility as its first order. Certainly the additions of a new airport, a tramway and a subway system contribute to both facets as well as facilitate tourist travel. Good transportation is one of the key amenity factors underpinning any city's liveability and it was a strategy that respected Bilbao's long history as a leader in the provision of transportation connectivity.

For a pedestrian, the walk from the rehabilitated Euskalduna shipyard site to Zubizuri is just two kilometres, now made all the more theatrical with the Guggenheim's additions of site-specific installations created by some of the world's most sought-after and successful contemporary artists—Jeff Koons's *Tulips*, Anish Kapoor's *Tall Tree and the Eye*, Louise Bourgeois's *Maman* and the museum's signature guard dog, *Puppy* (another Jeff Koons). The last of these—a towering structure of steel, soil and plants—references both the gardens that extend along the waterfront as a kind of punctuation between elements of built infrastructure and what the Guggenheim itself describes as 'the most saccharine of iconography—flowers and puppies—in a monument to the sentimental.'⁴ *Puppy* has the effect of turning the wildly expressive architecture of Gehry's building into a much more domestic object, a dog kennel, and Koons's sculpture has become a



Fig 1. Jeff Koons's *Puppy*, Guggenheim Bilbao. Photo Susan Bennett.

popular meeting place. Indeed, the waterfront is a spectacle not just for a tourist audience, but one that acknowledges, and depends on, the active participation of Bilbao's residents in contexts that span both work and play.

Many of the various architectural additions pay homage to the city's heritage and the jobs that earlier generations occupied; today those jobs are concentrated in the tourism services sector, it is true, but with a respectful recognition of what has gone before. Certainly, the Guggenheim is never shy to take credit for the transformation of city employment: its annual report (2012) claims to impact the local economy through the creation of more than 6300 direct and indirect positions, €334 million in direct expenditure and €45.3 million in tax revenue for the Basque treasury (2012: 34). This demonstration of art's economic instrumentalisation is exactly what other cities have so admired in the 'Bilbao effect.' There are, however, valid criticisms to be made of the Guggenheim Museum's impact on the local art community. While principles of curation have included a commitment to represent artists from the Basque region, standards for assessment and acquisition are almost certainly those derived and valued by the New York parent. In other words, if the Guggenheim Bilbao is to collect what they consider to be the best of art practice since 1950 and to include works by local and regional artists, it will choose that work according to its own 'international'—which is to say, American—standards. How do their choices, and perhaps more importantly their exclusions or blind spots, impact the development of art in the region, the commercial and other marketplaces for visual and other arts, and the creation and continuation of for-profit and not-for-profit gallery space? To begin to answer this question, I turn now to another city building—situated in the business district and explicitly targeted at local use.

Alhóndiga, a disused wine warehouse occupying a full city block, built originally in 1909 and under threat of demolition since the 1970s, was declared a 'Public Property of Cultural Interest' by the Basque Government in 1999. To ensure its preservation, French designer Philippe Starck was commissioned to re-imagine the building as a cultural and leisure complex. The repurposed warehouse was opened in 2010 and contains a wide variety of community-oriented amenities: a multi-screen cinema (usually with art house film programming), gallery spaces, a gym, a media-lending library, restaurants and a cafeteria, shops, and an upper-level swimming pool and rooftop terrace. Notwithstanding its own 'star' design credentials, Alhóndiga is not part of the cluster of cultural infrastructure in proximity to the river and directed at tourist visitors, but is situated in a more traditional neighbourhood (Plaza Arriquirar). It is a venue that inspires routine use and local engagement. The title of my essay derives from an exhibition held at Alhóndiga (2012–13) called *Everyday Architecture*, curated by Anatxu Zabalbeascoa and shown in four adjacent gallery spaces.

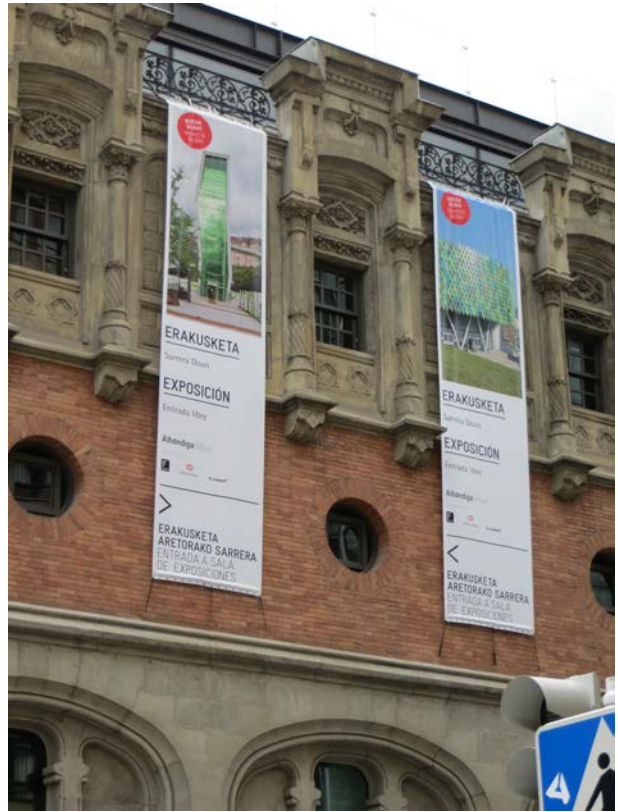


Fig 2. Alhóndiga. Photo Susan Bennett.

Two of the gallery rooms displayed Bilbao's past and two were devoted to contemporary work. In other words, the exhibition expressly acknowledged the importance of the past to today's experience of the city and explicitly illustrated the fact that architecture is always part of everyday life. Five films about Bilbao—the earliest from 1927 (showing the then iconic sites of the modern industrial city) and the last from the late 1970s (demonstrating the urban 'problems' of the time)—and a collection of photographs from private and public collections served to archive the place it was 'before the Guggenheim' and to show how people lived there. One of the contemporary rooms screened Iñigo Salaberria's video installation *Metro Bilbao*, a work that explored the perceived silence of subway travellers as an 'auditive' illusion. The other contained 30 photographs by local artist Iñigo Bujedo Aguirre, interrogating the city's recent architectural transformation by showing this infrastructure as no more than a backdrop to people's everyday activities—sitting under a tree, sunbathing, cycling to work, staging a wedding photo, and playing soccer. This was a Bilbao of people not buildings, active not static, diverse not singular. Together, the photographs and videos, past and present, reveal the history and experience of place as primarily affective.

Here I want to quote at length from the exhibition notes, as they explicitly illustrated for me a theatricalised cityscape that is not necessarily overdetermined by what Sklair and Struna have called the iconic modalities of transnational capitalism (2013). Contradistinctively, as the art work and curation comprising *Everyday Architecture* collectively insisted, place is realised through performances of human relationships that animate public space:

Architecture triumphs in its everyday use. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness about a city that has been able to grow beyond the building which, converted into a monument, has brought it back to life. The public's reconquest shows that, above politicians, managers, architects, real estate companies, it is the people who make the city vibrate, those with no authority, who eventually have their say. Those who inject life into their most direct environment. Without the use people make of it, architecture becomes a mausoleum. Bilbao's outlying and central districts, however, show how the city's famous transformation surpasses the reputation of its international museum and holds its own in the Street. ... [A]rchitecture is going through a period of transformation. While architects have traditionally protested about the lack of understanding, the distortion and even the deformation their proposals are subjected to by the public at large, Bilbao is showing how this process can be reverted. Here, the measure of architecture is everyday life. The city has transformed itself, and so has everyday life.⁵

The 'Bilbao effect,' then, derives not (or, at least, not just) from the presence of a world-class museum, or even from its collection of spectacularly beautiful architecture. The city satisfies criteria for distinctive brand identity by the deliberate practices of an extended theatricality: local and visitor populations who, in their shifting and divergent patterns of place engagement and use, realise a place of performative potential. The art of *Everyday Architecture* is its archive, a record of place as what Cresswell describes as 'a fundamental way of being in the world' (2008: 50).

Bilbao has, of course, been the recipient of a long list of international awards for its remarkable transformation: among them are the European Prize for Regional and Urban Regeneration, the European Union Prize for Cultural Management, the European Healthy City Award and, in 2010, the inaugural World City Prize. From this perspective, Sklair and Struna argue that 'the icon project is increasingly a global reality' (2013: 754) and the wealth of interest shown by cities and governments in satellite branches of the world's leading museums would appear to give credit to this claim. A museum can be an icon, a landmark (Hornstein) or a marketing tool (Klingmann), certainly, but rather than contrive to make a building all that matters, it is surely more productive to consider its everyday architecture—the performances and experiences built environment makes possible and for whom. A participatory performance of place is not, then, the displacement of 'political struggles from the streets to the galleries' that Jodi Dean has so roundly critiqued, where audiences pay or donate 'to feel radical' (2012: 13), but something more akin to the sense of collectivity to which she aspires. Bilbao has become a city that celebrates the pleasures of the everyday and it is in this context that we might better parse the 'Bilbao effect' as a profoundly local project.

To rephrase the Bilbao artists, to make a city 'hold its own on the street' is not always about the architectural wow factor or even its economic impacts; instead, it imagines a liveability that revels in human encounter with space and place. The Bilbao Guggenheim is, at most, emblematic of the city's scene. And, of course, a Guggenheim is clearly not for everyone and not for everywhere—as another form of resistance, in 2014 in Helsinki, has illustrated. In protest against the planned museum in Finland's capital city, Tiina Erkintalo (executive director of Checkpoint Helsinki, a commissioning body for contemporary art) marvelled: 'Not only would we use public money at a time of economic hardship and cuts in arts spending to finance the Americans, but we would then have to pay the Guggenheim a substantial annual sum each year to lease their "brand"' (quoted in Glancey, 2014). Yet a chorus of critical voices in the Finnish art world has not dissuaded the city of Helsinki. It has launched a design competition for the Guggenheim project that suggests a civic commitment to their own icon project.⁶ Should the museum design be approved in 2015, what Helsinki most usefully might learn from Bilbao is a lesson in everyday life.

Notes

1. Though Amin and Thrift do not cite him, they are echoing David Harvey who makes a similar point in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005: 33).
2. The Bilbao tourism website provides a useful introduction to the city's history: <http://www.bilbaoturismo.net/BilbaoTurismo/en/hitos>
3. See the essay by Javier Franco et al for a case study of the Bilbao estuary rehabilitation: http://wwwz.ifremer.fr/biarritz_2011/content/download/57631/800567/file/Franco_Javier.pdf
4. <http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/en/works/puppy-3/>
5. This text is taken from a brochure available at the *Everyday Architecture* exhibition and was also displayed on gallery walls. This information was available in Euskara, Spanish and English. It is also available online here: http://www.alhondigabilbao.com/en/detalle-evento/-/journal_content/56_INSTANCE_aIV5/10140/639489
6. For further information about a failed first design competition and the one announced in 2014, see Glancey.

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SUSAN BENNETT (sbennett@ucalgary.ca) is University Professor and Professor of English at the University of Calgary in Canada. Her recent publications include *Performing Environments: Site-Specificity in Medieval and Early Modern England* (co-edited with Mary Polito, Palgrave 2014), *Shakespeare Beyond English* (co-edited with Christie Carson, Cambridge University Press 2013) and *Theatre & Museums* (Palgrave 2013). She is currently working on a project that examines the role of cultural infrastructure in urban planning and the development of city branding.