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PURSUITS & RETREATS

ARCHITECTURE

The Bilbao Effect

Public competitions for architectural commissions don't necessarily produce the best buildings

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In 1955 Le Corbusier built the [chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut](#) in Ronchamp, a remote site in the Jura Mountains near the Swiss border. The building had curved, roughly plastered concrete walls and a swelling roof that resembled a nun's wimple. These sculptural features challenged the functionalist dogma—to a large extent devised by the architect himself—of the white-shoebox International Style. After Ronchamp modern architecture was never quite the same.

Frank O. Gehry's [Bilbao Guggenheim](#) is equally iconoclastic. With its ballooning shapes and titanium swirls, its colliding forms and unusual spaces, it has been described variously as a "postrationalist vision," an "inter-galactic spaceship," and a "titanium artichoke." There is a major difference, however, between the museum and the chapel. When I went to Ronchamp, in 1964, there were few other visitors. Most, judging by their cameras and sketchbooks, were architectural—not religious—pilgrims, students like myself. Corbu, as we called him, was one of the most important architects in the world. Yet his was hardly a household name; most Americans, pressed to identify a contemporary architect, would probably have named Frank Lloyd Wright, who had been dead for five years. People did go out of their way to visit buildings, but they were usually ancient works of art like [Chartres Cathedral](#), or historical monuments like the [Tower of London](#). Buildings by modern architects were objects of veneration for students, but they were not paid much attention by the public.

Today's public definitely knows about the Bilbao Guggenheim; since its opening, in 1997, it has attracted almost five million visitors. According to the *Financial Times*, in its first three years the museum has helped to generate about \$500 million in economic activity and about \$100 million in new taxes. On seeing the titanium artichoke, other cities have been saying, "We want one of those."

Seattle got off the mark early. In 1996, before the Bilbao Guggenheim was even complete, Paul Allen, a co-founder of Microsoft and a Jimi Hendrix fan, commissioned Gehry to design a rock-and-roll museum and performance venue in Seattle called the [Experience Music Project](#). Gehry delivered a striking building whose bulbous shapes are variously covered in shimmering gold, silver, and purple stainless steel, and in red and blue aluminum shingles. These forms resemble the fragments of a giant, multicolored, broken guitar after a particularly violent rock concert.

Two years after the Bilbao Guggenheim opened, the Corcoran Gallery of Art announced that Gehry

would build [a large addition](#) to its century-old building in Washington, D.C. The new design is a composition of sail-like metallic forms. Construction is slated to begin in late 2003, probably before the groundbreaking for Gehry's other major museum project: a forty-story-high [Guggenheim on the East River](#) in Lower Manhattan, with yet more titanium swirls. A Guggenheim museum in New York City designed by Frank Gehry would no doubt attract millions of visitors. But will people really flock to New Orleans to see the Grammy Hall of Fame—a recently announced project that, according to its backers, "will have the 'wow factor' not found at the Experience Music Project"? Will the [new addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum](#), by the Spanish architect [Santiago Calatrava](#), which features a giant kinetic sunshade resembling a flapping pair of pterodactyl wings, bring in throngs? Will Toronto, soon to have a [dramatic addition](#) to its Royal Ontario Museum designed by Daniel Libeskind (whose [Jewish Museum in Berlin](#) attracted 350,000 visitors in two years before it even had any exhibits), be the new Bilbao? Maybe, maybe not. A year and a half after the opening of the Experience Music Project attendance was down by more than a third, leading to a layoff of 124 employees. This may be partly because of September 11, but it is worth noting that during the same period the number of visitors to the local art museum increased by more than a third.

Whatever effect the Bilbao phenomenon will have on the way that tourists choose their destinations, it has already had a major influence on the way that clients, especially museums, choose their architects. In 1967, when the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., was planning [an addition to its building](#), it solicited portfolios from a dozen prominent architects, and after narrowing the list down to four (Kevin Roche, Philip Johnson, Louis I. Kahn, and I. M. Pei), museum officials visited the finalists' buildings as well as their offices. Only *after* the choice was made did the winner—Pei—get down to work on a design. Three years ago, when the Corcoran went looking for an architect, it, too, had a short list: Gehry, Libeskind, and Calatrava. Where Gehry billows, Libeskind zigs and zags. The Jewish Museum, his first major building, resembles a fragmented Star of David. This seemed to many a stroke of genius when the building was completed, in 1999, but it turns out that Libeskind is simply partial to spiky, agitated forms. His winning design for an [extension to the Denver Art Museum](#) was described by *The New York Times* as a "dramatic glass-and-titanium jumble of rectangles and triangles." Calatrava's stylishly engineered structures, in contrast, resemble sun-bleached skeletons; they are "techno-Gothic," according to one commentator.

Rather than merely ponder the previous work of the three architects, the Corcoran commissioned each one to prepare a specific design. This kind of select competition, now the preferred way for choosing the architects of high-profile buildings, resembles a beauty pageant. With great fanfare a list of invited architects is announced. Their proposals are often exhibited, and sometimes the architects themselves give public presentations. The ranks of the competitors are winnowed. The anticipation is an important part of the publicity surrounding the proposed new building. When the Los Angeles County Museum of Art planned [a major renovation and expansion](#), it invited five noteworthy architects to submit designs, including the ubiquitous Libeskind; Steven Holl, who was recently called "America's best architect" by *Time* magazine; and Thom Mayne, an avant-garde architect based in Los Angeles. Their proposals were eliminated in the first round of judging, leaving those of the Frenchman Jean Nouvel, whose best-known building is probably the Arab World Institute, in Paris, and Rem Koolhaas, a globe-trotting Dutch architect. Finally Koolhaas, who recently won a competition to design Seattle's new public library, was declared the winner.

I have no objection to architects' duking it out, and I think it's great that architecture is attracting so much attention. But I am skeptical that designing in the full glare of public competitions encourages architects to produce better buildings. The charged atmosphere promotes flamboyance rather than careful thought, and favors the glib and obvious over the subtle and nuanced. Architects have always

entered competitions, but they have usually seasoned their talents first by doing commissioned work. Libeskind, Nouvel, Koolhaas, and other young architects of today have built their reputations almost entirely by participating in competitions; a friend of mine calls them "competition show dogs." And show dogs are rarefied creatures, often refined and styled to the point of caricature.

Some years ago, in *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour differentiated between buildings whose architectural image was chiefly the result of surface ornament applied to structures shaped by their functions and buildings whose image was the result of unusual forms. They called the former "decorated sheds" and the latter "ducks," a reference to a roadside stand on Long Island that sold poultry and was shaped like a duck. Italian Renaissance palazzi, for example, which are essentially straightforward buildings with exquisitely ornamented exteriors and interiors, are decorated sheds; Gothic cathedrals, with their flying buttresses, pinnacles, and steeples, are ducks. The point was less that one approach was better than the other—*Learning From Las Vegas* allowed that "both kinds of architecture are valid"—than that, historically speaking, ducks are few and far between. Venturi and his co-authors argued that clients are better served by decorated sheds than by dramatically modeled buildings, no matter how exciting. After all, it is the former approach that has produced some of our most memorable public buildings—[Philadelphia's Academy of Music](#), New York's Metropolitan Museum, and the [Boston Public Library](#).

Yet ducks are clearly in season, and Venturi himself has suffered the consequences of this trend. Some years ago his firm was commissioned to design a new concert hall for Philadelphia. The resulting proposal was a sensible building with an attractive performance space but a relatively modest exterior. However, as more and more cities announced plans for trophy buildings, the concert-hall backers decided that a decorated shed simply would not do. They dismissed the Venturi firm, increased the budget from \$60 million to \$265 million, and hired the New York-based Rafael Viñoly, who delivered the requisite "wow factor": an immense glass vault.

Viñoly's concert hall, known as the [Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts](#), illustrates another aspect of the Bilbao effect. Show-dog architecture, especially in a signature style, is unlikely to pay much attention to its surroundings. Venturi's design was carefully inserted into its site on Broad Street, and its conservative exterior suited Quakerish Philadelphia, his home town. Viñoly's glass vault, however impressive its drama, is an alien presence. The devaluing of context is even more flagrant in international competitions, in which architects are expected to add major civic monuments to cities they may have visited only once or twice.

One of the greatest American architects of the twentieth century was Louis I. Kahn. His best work, such as the [Kimbell Art Museum](#), in Fort Worth; the [Salk Institute](#), in La Jolla; and the [Yale Center for British Art](#), was always directly commissioned. Although Kahn entered numerous competitions, he won only one, and in his later career he avoided competitions altogether. They did not suit him, because he developed his designs slowly, refining them in the process; his early sketches bear little resemblance to his finished buildings. Moreover, the qualities that made his architecture so good were poorly communicated in drawings and models. The buildings had to be experienced whole.

Kahn's spiritual successor is the Japanese architect [Tadao Ando](#), whose accomplished designs earned him the 1995 Pritzker Prize. His first public building in the United States, the [Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts](#), in St. Louis, opened last year. Ando is a minimalist whose modest buildings depend on modulated natural light falling on simple materials—particularly concrete, which in his hands acquires a silky, sensuous texture. The forms of his buildings are uncomplicated; this is not eye-popping architecture. Benjamin Forgey, the architecture critic of *The Washington Post*, wrote of the

Pulitzer Foundation, "It is almost dumbfounding in the United States to find an art museum whose interiors possess both the austerity and serenity of a Zen garden."

Emily Rauh Pulitzer, the president of the foundation, has said that the choice of Ando was based purely on aesthetics. Undoubtedly other architects were considered, but no design competition was involved. The question was who should be the architect, and the design came later. Indeed, the site of the museum was not yet final when Ando was commissioned. (His building, despite being abstract and minimalist in appearance, responds to its urban context very well.) To a degree that is not well understood, remarkable architecture is almost always the result of a dialogue between architect and client. Cut loose from this sort of creative conversation, few architects do their best work. The British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens once said, "There will never be great architects or architecture without great patrons." From the architect's point of view, the ideal project is not one with a magnanimous absent client. It is one with a magnanimous *thoughtful* client. In the Pulitzer Foundation, Ando had a thoughtful client; and he worked with Richard Serra and Ellsworth Kelly, two of the three artists whose works make up the permanent collection of this tiny museum. "My goal was to take to the limit the relationship between the works of art and the volume of the building's space," Ando has said.

The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts is a small building that was not meant to attract a vast public. Yet it would be nice to think that the building signals at least an alternative, if not an end, to the Bilbao effect. The chief aim of architecture should not be to entertain, titillate, or shock viewers. After the third example of swirling titanium and colliding prisms, the effect begins to wear thin. Le Corbusier understood this, which is why he did not repeat the sculptural effects of Ronchamp in other buildings. Once was enough. Beauty, along with function and structure, has of course always been a concern of architects. But true architectural beauty has a particular nature: calm and considered, standing to one side of fast and furious fashion. After all, buildings are built for the ages. They are not one-night stands, like blockbuster movies or blockbuster art shows. That's why architecture should be conservative in its instincts. The "wow factor" may excite the visitor and the journalist, but it is a shaky foundation on which to build lasting value. Great architecture carries many messages, about society and individuals, about our values and our dreams. It should have more to say to us than "Look at me."

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