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The New New Thing

Quirky and futuristic buildings are the latest must-see stops on the tourist trail. But can other cities repeat the magic of Bilbao?

By LAUREN GOLDSTEIN

Call it the Bilbao effect. The new Frank O. Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Spain has drawn such rave reviews, such large crowds and such an influx of money into what was a depressed seaport that cities all over the world are plumping for their own cutting-edge architecture — never mind hoping for a little of the reflected prestige that goes with a headline-making success.

"I think the public is definitely more interested in design nowadays," says noted Italian architect Renzo Piano. Not only are they interested, they are willing to travel out of their way to experience it. "Design is an integral part of attracting and entertaining visitors," says Joseph McInerney, head of the Bangkok-based Pacific Asia Travel Association. "There is a type of tourist who will always flock to the newest hippest places — including cultural facilities, restaurants and hotels."

In the 18th century Bilbao was one of the world's major industrial centers, home to Spain's shipbuilding, mining and steel industries. It's still one of Spain's largest ports, but growing competition from Eastern Europe and Asia led to a decline in jobs. In the 1990s the debt-ridden local government funded a major renovation of the city center, with new parks, a new conference center and a state-of-the-art subway system designed by British architect Norman Foster. But the city's salvation came not in the form of a new subway, but in the twisting titanium shape of Gehry's building.

"It was a huge gamble," says Elvira Etxebarria, director of the Bilbao Office of Tourism and Conventions. "At first people were skeptical and complained at the enormous costs, but from the first day it has been a tremendous success." More than a million visitors come each year to see the museum. An estimated 80% of all visitors to Bilbao are either drawn there by the museum

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or add an extra day onto business trips in order to see it. In its first year, the museum was responsible for adding an estimated $160 million to the economy. Already 16 cruise ships have put Bilbao on their itineraries and a new dock is being built to accommodate more. Still, city officials worldwide want to know: Is the Bilbao Effect an exception or the rule?

The "build it and they will come" philosophy is hardly a new one. Decades before the spirits-of-baseball-past in the movie Field of Dreams uttered those words to Kevin Costner — urging him to turn his Iowa cornfield into a ball park — town planners were green-lighting avant-garde monuments in the hope of attracting crowds. Gustave Eiffel built his tower of iron girders as the centerpiece of the Paris International Exposition in 1899. What was then the world's tallest building was soundly denounced as an aesthetic disaster. It was supposed to come down after 20 years, but 100 years later it is the city's signature and France's most popular paying attraction — with 6 million visitors annually.

In cities like London and Paris, which are already on every would-be globetrotter's list, a modern face-lift to a perennial favorite can be enough to draw tourists. When the I.M. Pei glass pyramid entrance to the Louvre opened in 1989, visits nearly doubled. "The Louvre shows how new architecture and a modern reorganization can give a new lease of life to classic sites," says Christian Mantei, general director of the Paris Office of Tourism and Congresses.

From 1990 to 1998, over 5 million people went to the Louvre annually, arguably making it the most-visited museum in the world — with resulting crowds. When the queue of people waiting to get in starts snaking around the courtyard's fountains, staff are sent out to tell visitors that other entrances are now open. But "they're not interested," says Patricia Mounier, a Louvre spokeswoman. "For tourists, visiting the Louvre means going in through the pyramid. It's part of the deal, the first work they see."

The Centre Pompidou is as much a draw as the exhibits inside. Its exterior periscope-style air vents, ducting in primary colors and tubular escalator zigzagging up the façade shocked the establishment when it opened in 1977.

"Thirty years ago, when we designed the Centre Pompidou, museums were dusty places. No one thought museums could be lively. That change was pushed through by planners and politicians," says Piano, one of the center's two original architects. "Since

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then, tastes have caught up."

Now the trip up the escalator is a must-do on tourist itineraries. The center became so battered by its popularity that it required a two-year renovation, completed in January. Keeping such a modern icon fresh and updated is a continuing challenge. Crowning the $82 million refurbishment is the trendiest restaurant in Paris — Le Georges — run by the Costes brothers of chic Hotel Costes fame.

The restaurant primarily attracts an urbane group of diners (many of whom are French) who come to the restaurant more to be seen than to see the exhibits on the floors below. Mantei notes that a new type of tourist is drawn to such hot spots. "They're young, active and typically double-income, no kids," he says. "They come to experience a city. That makes it essential to have new cultural attractions."

According to Mantei these mainly city dwellers are the fastest-growing segment of the tourist market and they offer some key advantages: no kids means they travel year round, they come back often, they explore areas off the beaten track and they spend money there. Their search for something new adds pressure to come up with designs that stand out. "The style of a site makes a huge difference," says Montei.

Hotelier Ian Schrager made his name serving just such a jet-setting clientele at his chic hotels in New York, Miami and Los Angeles. Schrager has recently ventured into Europe with two hotels in London — St Martins Lane and Sanderson — that feature Philippe Starck's quirky design aesthetic. Long a draw for its cutting-edge fashion, art and design, London this year added a new attraction to the cool-Britannia lineup. The $196 million Tate Modern art museum, a redesigned power station on the south side of the Thames, drew over 2 million visitors in the first 100 days, astounding managers who were expecting 2 million in the first year.

Redesigning a power plant is one thing, rebuilding a city to world-class status is another. Shanghai, China's largest city, has spent vast sums erecting Pudong, a gleaming new high-rise commercial center. But to regain its pre-war reputation for sophistication it is also lavishing cash on its cultural side.

A local architect designed the $70 million Shanghai Museum, whose state-of-the-art facilities show off Chinese artifacts dating back 5,000 years. "It's a modern take on a traditional Chinese shape and style," says American lawyer Titi Liu of the building's urn-like appearance. "But the new interpretation brings in a lot of air and light." The crowd-pleaser, however, is the $150 million Grand Theater on the other side of People's Square. Designed by Jean-Marie Charpentier, the rooftop arc and glass body make it a stand-out. Over a million people have come to performances since the theater opened in October 1998.

Now that it is once again Germany's capital, Berlin is perhaps most self-consciously using its new buildings to rebrand itself in the eyes of the world. Its message: the new Germany is democratic, open and international in spirit. Tourists are responding. Visitors increased some 17% between 1998 and 1999. "Architecture is suddenly considered a trademark," says Thomas Michael Krüger of Ticket B tourist agency, which specializes in architecture tours, "and every city wants its Foster or Gehry."

Potsdamer Platz has become a monument to the works of many of the world's greatest living architects: Gehry and Piano both have buildings there, as well as Helmut Jahn from Chicago, Richard Rogers from London, Arata Isozaki from Tokyo and José Rafael Moneo from Madrid among others.

The most popular new site, especially for Germans, is the clear glass dome that Foster added to the Reichstag to replace the original structure destroyed in World War II. The light transforms the building — both physically and metaphorically — and hour-long waits are common. "I think the real attraction is that it has become an open building," said Michael Cullen, an architectural historian. "If you took away the dome, the attraction would, however, be gone." Since April 1999, 3 million visitors have gone up the dome.

The numbers are irresistible. Take Berlin's jump in tourists, add a dash of Bilbao's financial success and town planners in smaller cities are hoping that their architectural efforts will also prove a draw.

In 1992 Valencia, Spain's third-largest city, attracted 73,400 tourists a year. City fathers, feeling overshadowed by the success of Barcelona's Olympics and Seville's Expo, hoped to raise that number — and the city's profile — with several ambitious buildings. Perhaps the most impressive is the City of Arts and Sciences (Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias) — a futuristic complex that will combine facilities for science, arts and marine life exhibitions. Designed by two Spanish-born architects, Santiago Calatrava and Felix Candela, the $200 million project is still incomplete. Opened two years ago, the Hemisferic (which houses a planetarium and Imax cinema) is already one of Spain's most popular cultural destinations, attracting over 1 million visitors. "We thought the numbers would drop after the first year when the novelty had worn off," says director Antonio Camarasa, "but they still keep on arriving."

In Rome, novelty is a dirty word. The government just spent more than $500 million renovating hundreds of crumbling historic structures. Tourist throngs continue to ogle the Sistine Chapel, clamber around the Coliseum and toss coins in the Trevi Fountain. "Traditionally in Rome the new has been seen as the destruction of the old — and hence resisted," says Giuseppe Roma, a former town planner. "There has never been much sense that modern culture should add something to the existing heritage."

Yet even the Eternal City is not entirely immune to international trends. This spring Rome got its first hip hotel. Designed by architect Tommaso Ziffer, Hotel de Russie is already attracting the jet-setting glitterati. Leonardo DiCaprio and Cameron Diaz have stayed, the bar is regularly packed and, to Ziffer's surprise, chic Romans are coming to dine at the hotel's restaurant. "It's not at all in the local character to eat at a hotel," he says.

More surprising, Rome is getting its first major modern work — an $85 million auditorium designed by Centre Pompidou architect Piano. It's grudging recognition that a provocative building might draw tourists to Flaminio, a seldom visited area north of the city. Due to be completed in 2002, the auditorium's three halls, made of wood, are designed to resemble mandolins. It will be, according to Fulvio Irace, a professor of the history of architecture at Milan Politecnico, "one of the most important architectural works in Italy in the last hundred years. It is avant-garde, it is elegant and it is very important for Rome."

Also inspired by a musical instrument — in this case a pile of guitar parts — is the Experience Music Project in Seattle, Gehry's first public building in the U.S. since Bilbao. But its stacked, swoopy design is exactly the point. "It really speaks to its time and place," says Jeffrey Ochsner, chairman of the University of Washington architecture department. The place, of course, is the home of Boeing and Microsoft, and this is the age of the Internet revolution. Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, a Jimi Hendrix devotee, funded the $100 million building and the music fans are, indeed, coming. In its first four months 250,000 enthusiasts shelled out $20 each to check out the interactive exhibits inside.

Yet installing a fitting exhibit and guessing the right time and place is always a gamble. Look at the failure of the unfocused, overly expensive, overly hyped London Dome. Even Seattle's EMP has been compared — unfavorably — to a dead fish and a collapsed soufflé. As M. Eiffel found out a century ago, one person's cutting-edge art can be another person's eyesore.

With reporting by Helen Gibson/London, Wendy Kan/Shanghai, Nicholas Le Quesne/Paris, Martin Penner/Rome, Mike Roarke/Seattle and Regine Wosnitza/Berlin

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