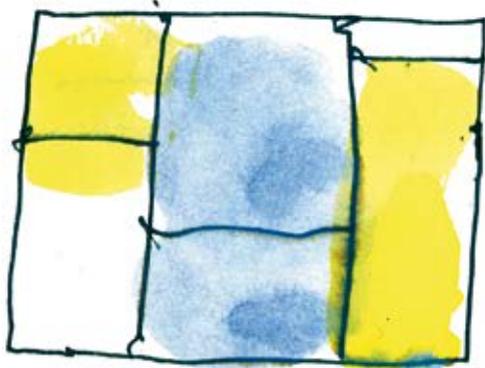


Llàtzer Moix

The iconic architecture craze

The decades-long era of iconic architecture is over. Yet while it lasted, it put the spotlight on a profession that often goes unnoticed. Architecture now has a greater social presence even though the craze for iconic buildings has added nothing in the way of knowledge. Everyone is willing to give his two pennyworth on food, fashion or football. However, few can appreciate the qualities of a building. Nevertheless, buildings and architecture frame our lives whether in our homes or in the streets. Any citizen could do without arts such as literature, dance and music. One can reach a ripe old age without ever having gone to the theatre. Architecture, by contrast, is inescapable even though attention has often focused on its most formal and/or superficial aspects.

Although iconic architecture has been in the limelight for years, it is now fading fast. The craze in Spain for iconic architecture took a quantum leap with the success of Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum. For this reason, this is perhaps a good point to begin. Its extraordinary success lay in the happy coincidence of three factors: the Basque Government, the Guggenheim Foundation and the architect, Frank Gehry. When they struck a deal in 1990, all three were going through a rough patch and were keen to stage a comeback. Bilbao posed a big problem for the Basque Government. The city's century-old steel industry was fast becoming obsolete. No less than 30% of Bilbao's population was unemployed and terrorism and drugs were ripping the



city's social fabric apart. The city needed to be re-invented. The Guggenheim Foundation had been trying for years to set up a European museum and believed the time had come to make the most of its New York reserves. However, finding a foreign partner was hard, not least because of the big investment needed to build a museum to exhibit the Guggenheim's art works. Then there was Frank Gehry, who –while famed as an avant-garde American architect– was pushing the age of retirement and had yet to design a major building that would do his reputation justice.

These three parties had the good fortune to embark on a project with a common purpose. The Basque Government agreed to all the American demands and invested no less than 23,000

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million pesetas (roughly €138 m). The Guggenheim Foundation was now willing to take a bet on Bilbao –a dreary industrial city– after being spurned by both Salzburg and Venice –two cities that were much more attractive tourist and cultural destinations. Frank Gehry threw caution to the winds and let his imagination fly. The project –despite gloomy

predictions and opposition from most Basques– was to prove a runaway success. The most optimistic forecasts were that the Guggenheim would get half a million visitors a year. It opened in 1997 and in 1998 it got 1.4 million visitors. According to official figures, the project paid for itself in just two years. The museum has clearly benefited the city, turning Bilbao into a world-class tourist destination overnight. Bilbao became a benchmark for others – especially other Spanish cities– eager to put themselves on the map, attract tourists and boost the local economy. All that was needed, it seemed, was a special building design by a star architect. This analysis, as we shall see, was wrong. What worked in Bilbao would not necessarily work elsewhere –especially if one of the players involved fumbled the ball.

Before looking at the Spanish cities that bet most heavily on urban transformation, one should note that while 1997 was a key date, it was by no means the first. The urge felt by many cities to resort to architecture to change themselves for the better goes back ages. However, one does not have to go back as far as Ancient Egypt and the pyramids to appreciate this. 1992 was another key date in Spain. The country's Socialist Government was keen to embark on a big exercise in international PR. Spain had changed and it was time to tell the world. Barcelona did it through the Olympic Games and all the urban planning and building schemes that accompanied them. Seville did it through Expo'92. Madrid jumped on to the bandwagon by becoming European Cultural Capital –an event that was more in the nature of a show than an exercise in urban planning. Even so, it put the city in a good light internationally. These three cities gained the impression (whether well- or ill-founded) that they were building the future. However, other Spanish cities came to believe they were missing the bus and from around 1992, began dreaming up urban schemes of all kinds but that all had one thing in common: using big-name architects to come up with "magical" projects.

Of all Spain's cities, Valencia is the one that showed the most dogged commitment to iconic architecture –or more accurately, an iconic architect (Calatrava)– in paving a golden path to the future. The Valencian Government at the time was headed by the Socialist Party under Joan Lerma. He was inspired by Paris's *Parc de la Villette*, which was halfway between a park and science museum. This was what lay behind Valencia's *Ciutat de les Arts i les Ciències*

(The City of Arts and Sciences). Santiago Calatrava, then a promising young Valencian architect based in Zurich, was roped in to the project. The park landscaping of the old bed of the River Turia –the project for which had been awarded to the architect Ricardo Bofill a little earlier– was soon eclipsed as all efforts focused on building the City of Arts and Sciences. In 1995, the Popular Party won the elections by a landslide and it seemed the whole project would be scrapped. But Calatrava’s gift of the gab saved the day. The incoming government not only gave the go-ahead to the scheme but also changed and expanded various aspects of it.

Valencia now had a new face to show the world but it came at a hefty price –close on €1,300 m and the whole scheme racks up losses year in, year out. The system for “managing” the project beggared imagination. The Valencian Government simply rubber-stamped Calatrava’s proposals and frittered away public funds in the process.

In Santiago de Compostela, events took a similar turn. Manuel Fraga¹, who, among other things, was President of Galicia for 16 years, wanted a mammoth architectural complex to raise Santiago’s profile. The project was dubbed *Cidade da Cultura* (City of Culture) and was to comprise six large buildings, including a library, a media library and theatre. The project was talked about in the nineteen eighties, work was begun in the nineties and although it was planned for completion in 1993, at the time of writing (Autumn 2010), only two of the six buildings are close to opening. The remaining four are billed for completion in 2017 and should the schedule slip again, it may yet be finished in time for 2021, which happens to be a Holy Compostelan Year².

Santiago’s case is a textbook example of how public projects commissioned from star architects should not be managed. No preliminary studies were made to discover the cultural needs of Santiago de Compostela and its hinterland before forging ahead with the project. The American architect Peter Eisenman was chosen, even though his project went over the budget by €24 m. Furthermore, Eisenman wilfully chose to break the competition rules, coming up with a much larger project. Clearly, the jury members share the blame. The aberrant behaviour of such juries in Spain would fill volumes. Things were not helped by the Galician Government’s airy-fairy notions of a “City of Culture”, in which the scheme’s functions were not defined. Eisenman systematically delayed submission of his executive projects to the point where Spanish architects were finally taken on to do the job instead. Not surprisingly, the budget began to rocket. The competition set a budget of €108 m and this has now risen to €500 m. No doubt costs will continue to soar to €600 m or well beyond. Santiago has a snowball’s chances in hell of emulating Bilbao’s success.

In Zaragoza’s case, events unfolded differently, but their outcome was just as disastrous. The city decided to host an Exposition in 2008 and use the event to build a new architectural complex to symbolise the city. This was understandable –Zaragoza’s Baroque Basilica is perhaps not the building that best identifies the city with the globalised, digital 21st century world. One solution would have been to have treated the Exposition as a whole. However, Aragon’s public

■ ¹ Translator’s note: Born of peasant stock and trained in Law, Fraga joined the Falange (Fascist Movement) and entered politics in 1945, siding with the military regime that had overthrown Spain’s constitutional government six years earlier. He held ministerial rank during the dictatorship and approved the execution of dissidents. On Franco’s death, he made a timely move into the “reformist” camp, only to return to form when appointed Minister of The Interior. In that post, his repressive policies led directly to

police killings of strikers in Vittoria-Gazteiz (1996). He was one of the founders of Spain’s highly conservative Popular Party. Between 1991 and 2005, he was President of his native Galicia, a province he treated as his personal fief.

² Translator’s note: This is when Saint James’ Day (the 25th of June) falls on a Sunday, which occurs in a cycle whose intervals are 6-5-6-11 years. The last Compostelan Holy Year was 2010 and the next will come at the end of the aforementioned cycle (2010+11 = 2021).

authorities preferred to concentrate on a single iconic building to put the message across. The building chosen was a pavilion-cum-bridge over the River, which was to link the *Delicias* High-Speed Train station with the "Expo" site. This time round, the architectural completion rules

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prevailed over the iconic potential of the work. The design proposed by the Anglo-Iraqi architect won, even though the jury drew attention to the problems that might arise in terms of schedule, costs and the work's impact on the river's flow regime. However, Hadid's design won simply because it was the most spectacular. Throughout the building work, the Expo directors were to pay a price for this choice. In this case, the inauguration could not be put off – such events open on a given day, come hell or high water. This meant double shifts and extra safety measures, which pushed up the budget for the works – some €80 m, a sizeable sum for a bridge and a pavilion (even if it was 260 metres long). The project was extremely complex, both during the pile-driving stage (with piles sunk 75 metres down) and the structural design stage, given Hadid's capricious choice of geometry. In this case too, a Spanish engineering company had to be taken on to manage the executive project and span the River Ebro with a bridge. There are many things one can say about this project, few of them good. For example, the only central pillar in the bridge is oval in shape and –remarkably– is set so that it is broad on to the river flow. It is as if one were to try to build a vessel to sail beam on to the sea rather than ahead or astern. Ships' hulls taper to stem and stern for an obvious reason –to offer less water resistance. The setting of the bridge pillar so that its broadest side stemmed the flow clearly defied common sense. Such things happen when one undertakes iconic projects in a tearing hurry. The result is technical headaches and soaring costs. A year after the 2008 "Expo", the bridge is closed, its access points are daubed with graffiti and new uses for the site are just so much pie in the sky.

This two-decade-long weakness for iconic architecture in Spain not only affected cities that wanted to put themselves on the map. It also spread to cities that already had their own architectural character and were even envied for it.

Barcelona is a case in point. The city generally gets urban planning right but throughout this period it discovered how to do things wrong. Three examples are given below of just how badly it could foul up.

Barcelona was keen to add Herzog & De Meuron to its collection of "big names" in architecture and commissioned a building from the Swiss architects. The project was for the Forum Building (for Barcelona's 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures). As we all know, the building

■ ³ Translator's note: The project offered moments of high farce: the building leaks (threatening a priceless exhibition of terracotta figures from the Han tombs); the lack of proper air-conditioning (in sweltering summer-

time Barcelona!); the failed roof pond (which quickly filled with algae and had to be scrapped), and so on.

⁴ Translator's note: The tower has been popularly dubbed *El Supositori* [The Suppository].

ended up as a thin triangle, despite the fact that the Basle-based architects won the public competition with a square building 60 metres on each side. The Quality Committee slated the cube as an eyesore. The authorities, instead of awarding the project to the runner-up, asked Herzog & De Meuron to work up another project, this time for a triangular building³. A second example is the competition to expand Barcelona F.C.'s *Camp Nou* ground, where the dice were heavily weighted in Lord Foster's favour. The third example is the *Torre Agbar*⁴, a gherkin-shaped skyscraper designed by Jean Nouvel, for which the client accepted prices per square metre far higher than those common for new office buildings. This was the price of commissioning a "star", who opted for circular floors that made office layout that much harder. Even worse, the skyscraper's concrete façade has few openings and thus virtually no views of the outside. These drawbacks seem to be forgotten when a client –public or private– is bent on a "prestige" project.

Mankind will have to learn to live with less and it needs an architecture that makes this possible

A city does not have to be big to have big architectural ambitions. Hospitalet de Llobregat, long treated as a dumping ground for Barcelona's problems, bet on "star" architecture in its *Plaça d'Europa* (Europe Square) area in order to attract investment and create jobs. Andorra's projects fared worse than Hospitalet's. Andorra attracted a star architect through a competition that provided bonuses for architects who were Pritzker Prize-winners –in other words, part of a tiny circle of some thirty people worldwide. Just to make sure, Andorra called Frank Gehry, the man who saved Bilbao's bacon with the Guggenheim, to ask him to throw his name into the hat. Everything seemed to be going swimmingly but when a new government came in, the cosy relation between the architect and the Principality came to a rancorous, highly-publicised end and all the projects were scrapped.

Iconic architecture in Spain had died a natural death. When all cities could show off attention-grabbing architectural baubles, it no longer made any sense to buy new ones in an effort to attract tourism, investment and to get ahead of the herd. Even so, it was the economic crisis, not common sense, that put paid to the craze. Public treasuries are empty and institutions no longer have the money to spend on fripperies. The projects that typified boom-time Spain now seem out of place. Perhaps some of the megalomaniac public managers who spent taxpayers' money like water and the architects who happily churned out ever more spectacular buildings will now pause for thought. The present recession offers new horizons, especially for young architects who grasp the need to meet economic, environmental, energy and social challenges. Mankind will have to learn to live with less and it needs an architecture that makes this possible. Among other things, there is a burning need for an architecture that provides dwellings for new family units, immigrants, young people and those on the move. Perhaps the formalist approach to architecture will wane but architects will have no excuse for boring of their work. Rather, they will have to meet new needs that urgently require answers II

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