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museus de arte contemporânea em Espanha*

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# Following the wake of the Guggenheim Bilbao? Architectural trends in contemporary art museums in Spain

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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## Introduction

- 1 Museum architecture at the end of the twentieth century was described as the new *parergon*, a Greek concept recovered in philosophical writings by Immanuel Kant and Jacques Derrida for ornaments or frames that captivate attention, but traditionally used by art historians to refer to the fascinating monsters and other marginal figures representing the confines of civilization on ancient maps (Recht 1998, 42). Roland Recht considered most prototypical of this kind of eye-catching artistic framing the Abteiberg Museum in Mönchengladbach. Doubtlessly, however, the best example would be the Guggenheim Bilbao, a splendid building often overshadowing its contents. It had immediate impact on world architecture, especially in Spain and particularly for contemporary art museums, whose growth has been determined by our territorial politics (Lomba 2001). Since the late 1980s, when cultural responsibilities were transferred to the different regional governments outside Madrid, museum

construction soared, and its momentum was reached with the inauguration of the Guggenheim in 1997 (Layuno 2002). That date marked the height of postmodern ostentation, but also a reaction of reflux towards serenity, in both Spanish and international architecture by assuming that it was not possible to go any further in spectacularity terms, and it was time for a return to order: 'the desire to emulate Gehry's Spanish miracle looks increasingly like the exception' (Litt 2005, n.p.). This trend was exacerbated by the global economic crisis of 2008, which was particularly harsh and persistent in Spain, a country of very sober architects, according to the introductory pages of the influential book entitled *New Museums in Spain*, quoting Oriol Bohigas' reflections on the persistence of our peculiar rationalism, plus some words from Kenneth Frampton describing the tendency of Spanish architecture to appear 'extremely laconic, or even decidedly anti-spectacular' (Englert 2010, 11). Indeed, the overall trend in our museums since 1997 could be summed up as a preference for a more restrained and sustainable architecture by renouncing flashy aesthetics. Yet, such austerity may be more fatalistic than genuine: like the severe pose quixotically adopted in past centuries by impoverished hidalgos.

## A traditional option: musealised historic architectures

- 2 In the mid-twentieth century, the new museums of modern and contemporary art had identified themselves stylistically with the Modern Movement, but the crisis of modernity called into question this canon without consecrating another, so that those who felt insecure in the face of the diverse languages of architectural Postmodernism often opted to reuse past constructions (Montaner 2003, 10; Layuno 2004, 189-190). In fact, this was a museum tradition as old in Europe as the history of public museums: countless palatial or religious buildings, emblematic of the *Ancien Régime*, had been opened to the public as containers of national collections. In nineteenth-century Spain, the disentailed monasteries had been the commonest sites for our museums of art and antiquities, but also in the twentieth century, following the footsteps of the most avant-garde Italian museographers, we exalted the striking contrasts that result from housing modern art in a historical setting, such as the Baluarte de San Juan in Ibiza or the Casas Colgadas in Cuenca. For this reason, it was not at all strange that the old Alhóndiga in Bilbao was the first location considered for the Guggenheim and, although the final decision was to commission a new project from a starchitect, conversions continued to be the common rule for later museum foundations in this city and the rest of Spain, same as in Portugal (Barranha 2022, 115). This even applied to the new contemporary art museums, inaugurated at the height of the 'Bilbao effect'.
- 3 One of the main examples would be the Andalusian Centre for Contemporary Art in the Carthusian monastery in Seville, after complex restoration firstly for the Spanish Pavilion of the 1992 World Fair and then to convert it into a museum which, with the difficulties inherent to this remote architectural and urban setting, eventually began to operate in 1998 (Escobar and Roldán 2010). In Cuenca the same year, the Antonio Pérez Foundation opened in a sixteenth-century Renaissance convent of Carmelite nuns donated by the Provincial Council. Four years later, the Patio Herreriano Museum was inaugurated in Valladolid, housed in one of the two cloisters of the former monastery of San Benito el Real, a historic setting now dialoguing with contemporary art (Torrente 2002, 28-30) (fig. 1). Such 'dialogues' would reverberate in 2002 within

another enclosure, impeccably rehabilitated (according to Vidal 2003): the old prison of Vigo, one of those panopticons studied by Foucault, who would have loved visiting the radial galleries and perimeter of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MARCO). No less impressive is the old city wall of Palma de Mallorca, whose municipal corporation installed there in 2003 the Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani, with an architectural project that is respectful and particularly successful, although it initially received harsh criticism for its mixed public-private management (Olmo 2003, 89). More unnoticed, at least in museological publications, have been other projects outside big cities, such as the Ángel Miguel de Arce López Museum in Sasamón (Burgos), which has been operating since 2000 in the former hospital for pilgrims of the Order of the Templars. Same could be said of the Museum of Contemporary Art run by the Florencio de la Fuente Foundation established in 2013 in Huete (Cuenca), where the collection shares the former convent of La Merced with other museums and municipal facilities (Pérez García 2018). It should not be confused with the Florencio de la Fuente Museum of Contemporary Art in the city of Requena (Valencia), accommodated since 2005 in very picturesque headquarters, a complex of perched houses almost comparable to the famous Casas Colgadas in Cuenca.



Fig. 1 – Valladolid. Museo Patio Herreriano

Photo: Jesús Pedro Lorente

- 4 Less challenging are the conversions of historic buildings originally conceived for masses of people, such as the military barracks of Dehesa de Montenmedio in Véjer de la Frontera (Cádiz), the centre of operations since 2001 of the Fundación Montenmedio Contemporánea (NMAC Foundation), dedicated to contemporary art and its relations with nature (Campo 2014). Or the wholesale market in Málaga converted in 2003 in the municipal Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), whose private management was politically contested (Palomares 2004, 80), so much so that in 2024 the City Council decided to assume direct control. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Villanueva de los Infantes

(Ciudad Real) has been less controversial. It has been installed since 2011 on the top floor of its central market, built in the 1960s with prestressed concrete trusses, whose collection of contemporary Spanish art, dating from 1950 to the present-day, was deposited there by businessman Julián Castilla, the owner of Viajes Himalaya. Such a public-private partnership can be found also in urban cases, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art of Mataró, discreetly accommodating since 2010 selected exhibitions of the private Bassat collection in a former industrial building designed by Gaudí.

- 5 Private museums in private homes have also fallen below the radar of public attention and published opinion, especially in rustic areas. Some such cases are the Pedralba 2000 Museum of Contemporary Art, opened in a large house in that Valencian small town by art merchant Vicente García Cervera, or the little-known Museum of Contemporary Art Castilla-La Mancha founded by artist Fernando Picornell on the ground floor of a residential building in Hellín (Albacete) in 2004. The same year, the Mayte Spínola Museum of Contemporary Art in Marmolejo (Jaén) was created by the eponymous artist, and has been housed since 2010 in a brand new building constructed within the courtyard of the old olive mill of the so-called 'Casa del Médico Perales', a secluded setting – out of the Spanish art system, despite the support of Baroness Thyssen and other influential friends (Sáez-Angulo 2007).
- 6 Even in Barcelona, rich socialites can assume a low profile in grand buildings that are seemingly humble country houses. For example, the Fran Daurel Museum, whose vast galleries and the impressive contemporary art collection of the eponymous foundation, created by businessman Francisco Daurella, can be enjoyed by those visiting the Poble Espanyol since 2001 – complemented by an open-air sculpture garden that was added in 2004. Most are casual tourists who wander around Montjuïc, where the nearby CaixaForum, inside the former Casaramona factory, has housed since 2002 temporary exhibitions and rotating excerpts from the wonderful contemporary art collection of La Caixa Foundation (it could well be called a museum: Martín 2003, 308).
- 7 Also in Barcelona, changing displays feature at the European Museum of Modern Art that specialises in figurative art from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first century, and privately owned by the Foundation of Arts and Artists and located in the Palau Gomis since 2011, which is a short distance from the Picasso Museum. Nearby in the Cervelló palace on Moncada Street, the Modern Contemporary Museum (MOCO) was opened in 2021, another private museum of international contemporary art owned by gallery owners/collectors Lionel and Kim Logchies, like their other locations in Amsterdam and London, but it remains to be seen whether the huge success here as a tourist business will have a comparable impact on Barcelona's art scene.
- 8 Furthermore, it is worth mentioning other private initiatives that have converted old buildings into contemporary art centres in Cuenca, Toledo or Valencia, but they are beyond our study field because they do not define themselves as museums, despite having their own collection.
- 9 A case aside is the foundation created by pharmaceutical magnate Antoni Vila Casas, to whom the Generalitat awarded the Sant Jordi Cross and the National Prize for Cultural Heritage for his merits as both a collector of contemporary Catalan art and a rescuer of historic buildings. He firstly tried this dual endeavour with the rehabilitation of the modernist building Casa Felip in Barcelona as the headquarters of the Vila Casas Foundation in 1998. In the same year he opened a small museum in a large house in Pals (Gerona), which was short-lived because two years later he opened the Museu Art 2000

in the Palau Solterra in Torroella de Montgrí (Gerona), also in the Empordà, which now houses the photography collection. In 2002 he converted the warehouses of a modernist building in Barcelona into the Espai Volart, a temporary exhibition hall. Then in 2004 he rehabilitated an old cork factory in Palafrugell (Gerona), Can Mario, a museum with its collection of contemporary sculpture. Eventually, to create a museum for his eye's apple, to be housed in a huge collection of contemporary Catalan painting, Can Framis, an old nineteenth-century textile factory in Poblenou district of Barcelona, earmarked for a new Audiovisual Campus according to the 2001 municipal plans. Thanks to pressure from local residents in 2006, the owner company, Layetana Desarrollos Inmobiliarios S.L., agreed with the Barcelona City Council to implement a renovation plan by architect Jordi Badia to preserve and reuse part of the industrial building as office space, which was subsequently replaced with the Museum of Contemporary Painting of the Fundació Vila Casas that commissioned the project to Jordi Badia himself. He has repeatedly shown pride in having saved the brick chimney and some old walls in the renovation undertaken together with his partner Jordi Framis of the BAAS team, but above all for the gardens and urban development designed following a consultation process with the neighbourhood from 2007 to 2010 (Badia 2010), which culminated in monumental sculptures by Jaume Plensa and Xavier Mascaró donated by the Fundació Vila Casas, which have beautified the surroundings (Oliveira 2018) (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – Barcelona. Fundació Vila Casas – Can Framis

Photo: Jesús Pedro Lorente

- 10 It is quite exemplary in every sense, and also because it is a typical case of the greatest flexibility in our criteria for restoration, seeing that the Spanish legal framework in the protection of industrial heritage is rather lax and merely preserves a few elements, eclipsed by powerful architectures erected in the wake of the worldwide fascination with hosting contemporary art in factories, silos, sheds or industrial warehouses.

Originally these were control enclosures – only those who worked there had access – surrounded by walls and fences to prevent the curious from entering; now they are opened to the public, usually enhancing their constructive vocabulary to emphasise symbolic resignification (Lorente 1999). This is also what architects María José Aranguren and José González Gallegos did – justifying with beautiful medical metaphors their daring intervention – on the ‘skeleton’ of a Madrid beer factory owned by the Madrid City Council, which they completely renovated between 2006 and 2010 to house the ABC Museum of Drawing and Illustration around a large atrium and an open-air patio, which they conceived as a ‘tense void’ by contrasting the old factory walls with its shiny metal architecture (Aranguren and González 2011). The eye-catching design of this metallic skin is based on a spatial dihedral whose triangular gaps would later be replicated on the façades of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA Museum) in Miami, in 2013-2017. However, the urban and social context there is very different from the heart of Madrid, where the architectural duality between the factory’s modest brick and their glittering postmodern intervention would also end up symbolising the double fate of this cultural venue. The ABC Museum could not remain active for many years, and it reopened in 2023 by sharing most of the building with a municipal civic centre. Once again, it is a hybrid public-private management model that is always controversial in Spain, even in our post-Guggenheim era! Now social protests are mounting against the installation of the second headquarters of the Basque-American museum in old shipyards and in an ex-factory, which are the two locations considered for its future expansion in Urdaibai. It angers defenders from the public sector, who are joining forces with those who protect architectural and natural heritage. Perhaps stricter conservationist criteria for old industrial buildings will be claimed in the future.

- 11 A different kind of architectural intervention on existing buildings deserve a couple of extra paragraphs, to reconsider museum ‘extensions’. Although this term is used by the board of trustees of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao for its intended new headquarters in Murueta and Gernika, it is commoner to reserve such a designation for museum buildings to which contiguous extensions have been added. Some are so large that they have attained great prominence in visitors’ eyes and in specialised bibliography. They have even deserved a doctoral dissertation solely about this universal phenomenon, which has gained momentum at the turn of the millennium (Herrero 2019). Some Spanish examples are noteworthy and confirm the absence of established intervention criteria: everything depends on the prominence coveted by architects and their commissioners, exactly the same as we have seen with the rehabilitation of other historic buildings. As a matter of fact, in the expansion of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía by Jean Nouvel, gaining more space was just as important as adding to an austere neoclassical hospital a renewed image for the twenty-first century with the glamour of a grand project signed by an international starchitect (fig. 3). Nouvel was careful not to exceed the height of the previous building because, according to his statements, he always seeks to establish respectful poetic or artistic relationships with the setting (in Moix 2022, 268). Yet right from the beginning, his project, approved in 1999, was heavily criticised for its troubled connection with the context. When it was inaugurated in 2005, the most regretted problem was noise from the street that, by reverberating off the roof, was particularly annoying on the terrace, and sometimes even in exhibition spaces or staff offices. Then the architect would never miss an

opportunity to air his reproaches to the Madrid City Council for not fulfilling its promise to bury adjacent traffic.



Fig. 3 – Madrid. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS)

Photo: Jesús Pedro Lorente

- 12 The subsequent macroeconomic crisis aborted this and many other investments by forcing expenditure to be resized below the pretensions of great cosmopolitan architects on the crest of the wave... Rather like deep-sea divers is how Juan Carlos Sancho and Sol Madrideo describe themselves. They designed the extension of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Alicante (MACA) carried out between 2002 and 2010 from the historic headquarters in the Casa Asegurada, a severe seventeenth century building opposite the very baroque doorways of the Basilica Santa María. The museum now occupies the entire block and its remodelling has been done quite discreetly by surprising us inside with a spectacular glass roof that pays homage to the geometric style of the founder, Op Art artist Eusebio Sempere.
- 13 His friend Pablo Serrano also promoted the founding of a museum of contemporary art in Saragossa where, since 1994, the Aragón Government is reusing the industrial warehouses originally built for the workshops of the provincial hospice, but slightly adapted as the Pablo Serrano Museum by local architect José Manuel Pérez Latorre. Out of respect for his intellectual rights as the author of that museum container, which had quickly become too small, its extension was commissioned to Pérez Latorre himself, who carried out a controversial increment in height between 2008 and 2013, which for some is excessively aggressive, but for others has turned the Aragonese Institute of Contemporary Art and Culture into an outstanding architectural milestone of postmodern deconstructivism (Marcén 2013, 745; 758) (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – Zaragoza. IIACC Pablo Serrano

Photo: Jesús Pedro Lorente

- 14 Barcelona has, on the other hand, opted for a totally different approach for Richard Meier's Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), dating from 1990-95, since the competition for its extension was won in 2021 by the Barcelona studio Harquitectes and the Swiss team Christ & Gantenbein, with a respectful proposal that aims, above all, to be integrated with both the square and surrounding buildings.

## New architectures for contemporary art museums

- 15 The apogee of the architectural euphoria reached with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain was certified for posterity in the catalogue of an exhibition organised in 2006 by New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA): *On-Site: New Architecture in Spain*. Its curator, Terence Riley (2006, 12-15), placed the start of the process in the 1990s and identified the shift towards cultural tourism as a common catalyst. Yet many of the projects he highlighted were never built. The bursting of the financial and real-estate bubble, along with the ensuing global crisis in 2008, gave way to another reality candidly described by Emilio Tuñón: 'fue un exceso esa obsesión por llenar todos los pueblos y ciudades de guggenheims' [the obsession with filling all towns and cities with Guggenheims was excessive] (in Massad 2023, n.p.). In Tuñón's opinion, we should take a chance on silent and anti-iconic architecture, even if the results are not the glamorous buildings that we can find in architectural journals.
- 16 Paradoxically, the first great example of this anti-Guggenheim reaction was promoted by the Basque authorities after the protests of those who reproached them for impoverishing public venues to give millions of euros to a private American foundation. During the inauguration in 2002 of the new building erected for Artium Museoa, the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Basque Country in Vitoria-Gasteiz, its author, José Luis Catón, described himself as a local lad who had grown up in a

neighbouring house. As an architect for the Álava Provincial Council, he had been presenting successive projects since 1985 to house their outstanding collection of contemporary art and he had finally been commissioned to house it in a 'low-profile' building by taking advantage of the site where the construction of the bus station and a shopping centre had been halted because the real-estate developer was bankrupt. Only the three-storey structure of an underground car park had been excavated, which inspired him to create a very deep and silent museum, like the wine cellars of Rioja Alavesa (Díaz 2009, 271). On the surface, the two volumes that emerge are somewhat atypical: on the one hand, a white concrete block rises above the lobby, with two large lateral visors of the same material and a perpendicular crest like a skylight; on the other side of the square, another block houses offices, a large documentation centre, glazed towards the square, and a hall for temporary exhibitions. Yet the most applauded aspect of this project has been the fact that it has freed up space on the street level for a public plaza to revitalise the city following the nearby precedent of Abandoibarra in Bilbao, a challenge that was taken on by Artium's first director, Javier González de Durana, one of the most influential backers in Bilbao of the creation of the Guggenheim.

- 17 A more conspicuous landmark, from both architectural and urban points of view, would be the Museum of Contemporary Art of Castile and Leon (MUSAC), built between 2001 and 2004 by Luis Moreno Mansilla and Emilio Tuñón, who assured that they never wanted to create iconic architecture, but buildings with character. They were given free hand, since the museum was erected in the outskirts of Leon, according to Tuñón's statements (in Massad 2023). The distinctiveness of this edifice is due to, above all, the multicoloured glass façades, which are a tribute to the stained-glass windows of Leon cathedral, while zigzag lines would be a reference to the river Duero. Despite such intense chromaticism and dynamism, the overall effect is an example of Spanish austerity according to Klaus Englert: 'What initially seems to be a whimsical approach is, in fact, based on a rigorous system' (Englert 2010, 108). Particularly the interior, made of exposed concrete, is pure 'Iberian brutalism' in the words of Tuñón, who considers it the essence of Spanish architecture, unlike the trends tracked by Central European, American or Asian architects (in Pérez and Pereda 2018, 40-50). Mansilla and Tuñón have described the repeated geometric plot of full and empty cubic spaces, linked in a zigzag, as homage to the mosque of Córdoba (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 – León. MUSAC – Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León  
Photo: Javier Gómez

- 18 Both architects are disciples of Rafael Moneo, who has often proclaimed that he would like to emulate that magical space in Córdoba, but, in his own words, his greatest concern is to adapt to each specific place, its history and its landscape. That is why he is very proud of the Centre for Art and Nature (CDAN) in Huesca, designed and built between 1998 and 2005 to house the Beulas-Sarrate collection, donated by the artist and his wife. It is always compared to the Mallos de Riglos, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, due to the building's curvilinear fluidity. Organic curves had already been the key to the success of Sáenz de Oiza and Utzon, the two master's with whom Moneo had collaborated as a young man, who also was a devout admirer of Alvar Aalto (according to his statements to Armenteras 2007, 28). Although the CDAN is surrounded by vineyards, it is the exact opposite of the jumble of colours, lines and textures of the Marqués de Riscal Winery and Hotel, built by Frank Gehry in 2006 in Laguardia, next to the foothills of the Alavesa Mountains.
- 19 Nevertheless, adhesion to classic essences, in counterreaction to Gehry's deconstructivism, is not only a patriotic predilection. It has also been supported by a German corporation commissioning for its headquarters on the outskirts of Logroño a very functional glass building, which has housed the Würth Museum since 2007. This transparent box, with two solid lateral blocks for administrative functions, was commissioned from architect Enric Henri, a member of the Master Ingeniería y Arquitectura studio, and executed by Ingeniería Torrella. The glass pieces covering two façades and the roof are held in place by stylised staples called *Garra*, one of which is exhibited indoors as a sculptural work, designed by Joaquín Sierra from Ingeniería Torrella (fig. 6) The exterior also features vertical red stylistic lines that are the signature of this team of engineers, who collaborated with Dom Arquitectura, also from Barcelona, in the design of the garden with its ponds, walkways and aromatic plants as

a setting for the open-air exhibition of an important sculpture collection. In fact, only these open-air pieces and other site-specific installations inside are permanent because most contents are always temporary exhibitions programmed from the head office abroad. Being a museum outpost of an international private foundation, the comparisons made to the not-too-far-away Guggenheim Bilbao were inevitable, and even more so when a staff member from that museum, Silvia Lindner, became Würth's director (Lindner 2009).



Fig. 6 – Agoncillo. Museo Würth, Agoncillo. *Garra* (staples anchoring the glass cover), exhibited in the museum as a sculptural work.

Photo: Paula Jaulín

- 20 Similarly, the aforementioned Javier González de Durana became the first director of TEA, Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, built in Santa Cruz de Tenerife from 1999 to 2008 by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, who are not exactly followers of Gehry. Herzog, the more loquacious of the two, has acknowledged how much Aldo Rossi stimulated them with his lessons on historicism, but they chose to follow another more conceptual and experimental path (in Moix 2022, 178). They are not in favour of conspicuous buildings, but of integrating them into the urban space. This is no doubt the main virtue of their Tenerife Espacio de las Artes (TEA) in Tenerife, which can be accessed from several sides to enable communication between two sectors of the city. It is the same effect they achieved by raising the Forum 2004 in Barcelona or the CaixaForum Madrid in 2001-2008 to create public squares underneath. In their TEA building, the façade of exposed concrete is randomly perforated by many small rectangular openings to create an abstract pattern allegedly inspired by photos of sea surfaces. The overall effect is comparable to the compositions of certain paintings by Swiss abstract painter Helmut Federle, of whom Herzog and de Meuron have sometimes expressed admiration (Moneo 2004, 364).

- 21 The Regional Madrid Government was also seeking a simple concept of modernity when it opened a Museum of Contemporary Art in Móstoles in 2008. Its building, the work of Celia Vinuesa for the basic architectural project, and of Pablo Pérez-Urruti, responsible of the execution project, left almost no traces of an old traditional house, whose memory would later be claimed by the institution. As its name suggests, the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) is, above all, a container for art exhibitions. Over time however, it has formed its own museum collection and idiosyncrasy. Originally it was a merely flexible space, making a clean slate, but since 2016 Andrés Jaque's studio, the Office for Political Innovation, has been carrying out specific architectural interventions in the form of localised acupuncture exercises to seek a metamorphosis from the museal icon imposed by rhetoric of power to the ideals of memory and interaction claimed by current museology. Perhaps this is why remembrances of the destroyed Casona are now emphasised, even if only symbolically (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 – Móstoles. Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (Museo CA2M)

Photo: Jesús Pedro Lorente

- 22 Slightly further south of Madrid is the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Infanta Elena, in Tomelloso, a geography in the antipodes of starchitects. A long-established International Painting Competition held by the winery and olive oil mill Virgen de las Viñas has generated a collection whose musealisation was commissioned in 2001 to the local company Construcciones José Antonio Rebato S.L. The new museum building, opened in 2011, is a Minimalist black and white cube with a reinforced concrete structure placing the public entrance through a filtered glass façade on one of the short sides. It constitutes a modest 'architecture of proximity' that suits the corporate image of the agricultural products produced by the commissioning food cooperative.
- 23 Local identity is, on the other hand, a recurring leitmotif for Fuensanta Nieto and Enrique Sobejano, who between 2005 and 2013, completed one of their most celebrated

new works in Córdoba, the Centro de Creación Contemporánea de Andalucía (C3A). As staunch neo-modernists, they dared to question the supposed effectiveness and flexibility of the neutral and universal white cube so as to claim a building closely linked with its emplacement and its Islamic past, which is evident in not only the geometric pattern of the façade, but also in the character of an ‘art factory’, with workshops connected to the exhibition halls like a souk designed for the confluence of audiences and functions (Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos 2023, 16) (fig. 8). Another detail that reinforces local identity links is the presence in front of the main entrance of an olive tree planted by conceptual artist Yoko Ono, which is growing with no need of the meticulous care required by her previously commissioned olive tree at the Guggenheim Bilbao.



Fig. 8 – Córdoba. Centro de Creación Contemporánea de Andalucía (C3A)

Photo: Jesús Pedro Lorente

- 24 Many more trees and grass, in concurrence with those of the Campa de los Ingleses Park in Bilbao, surround the austere Museum of the University of Navarre in Pamplona, built by Rafael Moneo between 2008 and 2014 to house the donation of María Josefa Huarte’s collection and the legacy of photographer José Ortiz Echagüe. Located at the end of the Opus Dei campus closest to the city, the building is, thus, cautiously dimensioned on a scale halfway between the public and the private realms. Asymmetries are the main features of the interstitial spaces, while galleries indoors outline a rigorous rectangular geometry, only broken by the horizontal slats that introduce natural light through alabaster panels, already tested by Moneo in previous works like the Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró (Moneo 2016, 183).
- 25 Such restraint can sometimes be excessive. When the Málaga City Council signed a 5-year agreement with the Parisian Centre Pompidou in 2013 to have a local branch, many were suspicious of its future endurance. Thus, two architects of the city's Urban Planning Department, Javier Pérez de la Fuente and Juan Antonio Marín Malavé,

designed a modest container, with barely 6,300 m<sup>2</sup> of exhibition space that was quite discreetly developed: in the basement are the exhibition spaces and the auditorium, while the service areas and the public access are on level 0. The only thing that stands out on the outside is a large cubic skylight made of steel and glass, popularly known as 'El Cubo' [The Cube]. To confer it more visibility, the most famous representative of geometric Minimalist art, Daniel Buren, who had already coloured the Puente de la Salve in Bilbao on behalf of the Guggenheim, created the *Incubé* installation in 2015, which two years later was purchased by the City Council to ensure its continuity because it had become a prominent visual landmark on the city landscape and an icon of the Centre Pompidou Málaga (fig. 9). Thanks to it, this museum does not go unnoticed by anyone; furthermore, its strategic location at the confluence of a crossroads between Muelle 1 and Muelle 2 of Málaga Port, the destination of so many cruise ships, also helps its success with visitors.

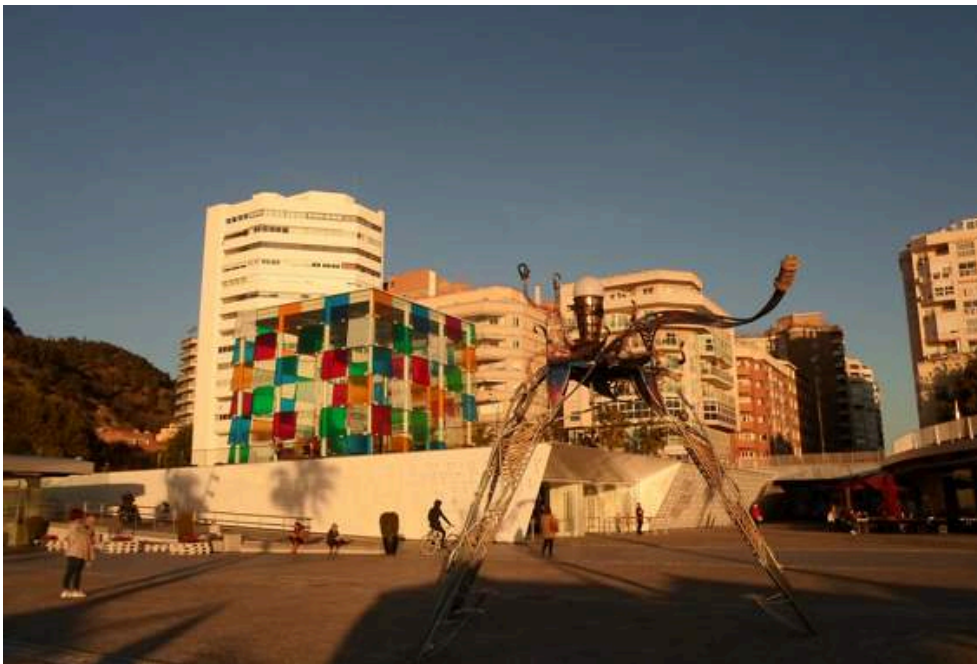


Fig. 9 – Málaga. Centre Pompidou Málaga

Photo: Jesús Pedro Lorente

- 26 Getaways far from sun and beach tourist attractions, also dream of using art and culture as levers of development in inland Spain. Extremadura, which already had a contemporary art museum founded by Wolf Vostell, has managed to seduce another German, Helga de Alvear, a successful Madrid gallery owner, to open a public-private managed museum that has no shortage of parallelisms with the Guggenheim Bilbao, starting with the monumental tree sculpture by Ugo Rondinone. The serene white building handed over in 2019 to the authorities by Mansilla and Tuñón is supposed to be a second phase of what was 14 years earlier their adaptation of a neo-Gothic house from the beginning of the twentieth century known as Casa Grande (fig. 10). Yet we do not consider this case in the previous section as an example of rehabilitation or extension because the new building has its own entity. The most unique exterior elements, called 'lattice pillars' by engineering team GOGAITE, are white concrete pillars that crown the façade, like a crest, and are attached, in rows and on several floors, to the other walls. The resource would evoke an introspective architecture,

conceived to look from the inside out, something that Tuñón had very much in mind among the traditional invariants of the Spanish architecture defined by Chueca Goitia (in Pérez and Pereda 2018, 40). It could also be compared to the brick cladding extension by Moneo for the Museo Nacional del Prado in the Jerónimos Cloister. Ultimately, the decision to use the museum's rooftop as a connecting thoroughfare between the historic city centre and the modern urban expansion is now an international trend following postmodern precedents, from the extension of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart to Bilbao's 'Guggy' (Lorente and Gómez 2023, 132-135).



Fig. 10 – Cáceres. Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Helga de Alvear  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

## Final considerations

- 27 The architecture of the Guggenheim Bilbao is so unique that it engenders many reactions, but the way forward is non-existent, according to Luis Fernández-Galiano (2018, 332). Without doubt, the expressionist character cultivated by Frank Gehry has influenced our latest contemporary art museums with the pretension of being something more than mere art containers, but to strike as artistic works in themselves. Even in lean times, and with budgetary restraints and growing environmental awareness, the claim of architecture as one of the fine arts returns as a monomania. Every architect is said to be a more or less frustrated visual artist, as evinced by the 'sculptural' models exposed by Frank Gehry, always so closely linked with the art world and a friend of artists, such as Richard Serra, Claes Oldenburg or Coosje van Bruggen. Another case is Jean Nouvel, who also likes to define himself as a visual artist, faithful to his youthful dream of being a painter (in Moix 2022, 266), whereas Jacques Herzog proudly tells that he began his career exhibiting sculptures and works on paper (in Moix 2022, 167). The same could be stated about Spanish architects, many of whom

have learned from Gehry to present very ‘sculptural’ models, and even collages, like those of José Manuel Pérez Latorre or Moneo himself. The latter has often rejected iconography and personal gestures: he considers himself the antithesis of Gehry (Moneo 2004, 364). His disciple Emilio Tuñón repeatedly states that architecture has a polytechnic part and also a Beaux-Arts side because he likes to paint, but it was his late partner, Luis Moreno Mansilla, who brought a more lyrical personality to the team (in Massad 2023). Such inevitable duality, like Ying/Yang, differently affects architects’ teams by splitting roles when they work as a duo, like Sancho-Madrirdejos, the authors of the extension of the MACA in Alicante, because Juan Carlos Sancho is very fond of plastic references, above all to Chillida, to explain his way of understanding architecture. Both Fuensanta Nieto and Enrique Sobejano are also very good friends of artists, but it is her who boasts about having commissioned interventions to beautify their façades, as in the extension of the San Telmo Museum in San Sebastián. Even prominent Spanish antagonists of Gehry cultivate this artistic facet, including Moneo, of course. Yet the most notable case may be Pablo Pérez-Urruti, who carried out Celia Vinuesa’s project for the CA2M in Móstoles: he has a website presenting himself as a sculptor and painter, but not as an architect.

- 28 This artistic profile in our recent architecture has been clearly evident in a major retrospective exhibition, shown in Madrid from the end of 2023 to the beginning of 2024, whose subtitle was: *Maquetas de Arquitectura desde la Transición a Nuestros Días* [Architectural models from the Transition to the present]. Significantly, the main title of this ‘sculptural’ exhibition curated by Moisés Puente at the Casa de la Arquitectura was: *La Construcción de un País* [The construction of a country]. It was patriotically in tune with a very common reaction among our architects and theorists against the Guggenheim in Bilbao as the epitome of global starchitects, who are eating away work opportunities for local practices. Curiously, it is Rafael Moneo, one of our most universal architects, who has become the leader of such criticism, championing a return to links with the *genius loci* and with our cultural identities. Now rhetorical iconicity and emblematic architecture give way to the social and cultural context, to the people... Really? Or more in theoretical discourses than in common practice? It happens as with the shift of the museological focus from collections to socialisation processes, unanimously preached, but not always implemented. Perhaps as, a conclusion, we could conjecture whether the most polarised of all architectural dichotomies in twenty-first century Spain could have been the contrast between our post-Guggenheim discourses and practices.

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## ABSTRACTS

The aim of this article is to offer a panorama of the trends in the architecture of contemporary art museums built in Spain since 1997. Based on previous bibliography – paying particular attention to statements by architects –, we summarise our review in contrasting dichotomies. The first, and apparently the most basic, would oppose the rehabilitation of preexisting buildings to new constructions, but the delimitation between both fronts is not always clear. Neither is obvious to us the oft-touted bipolarity between the stardom of the iconic building that imposes itself on the surroundings, whose greatest exponent would be the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, *versus* a new architecture of more social and sustainable proximity, and less burdensome. Perhaps in times of low tide the underlying currents of ideas in the theoretical discourses of our architects and scholars have resurfaced. However, in our final considerations we argue that the influence of Frank Gehry's 'sculptural' masterpiece continues to mark our museums, despite the commoner positioning, in words and deeds, for a return to previous traditions.

O objetivo deste artigo é oferecer um panorama das tendências na arquitetura dos museus de arte contemporânea construídos em Espanha desde 1997. Com base na bibliografia existente – com particular atenção para os testemunhos dos arquitetos –, sintetizamos a nossa análise a partir de dicotomias contrastantes. A primeira, e aparentemente a mais elementar, opõe a reabilitação de edifícios preexistentes à construção de novos, embora a delimitação entre ambas as abordagens nem sempre seja clara. Tampouco nos parece evidente a frequentemente proclamada bipolaridade entre o protagonismo do edifício icónico que se impõe ao seu entorno – cujo expoente máximo seria o Museo Guggenheim de Bilbao – e uma nova arquitetura de proximidade, de carácter mais social, sustentável e menos onerosa. Talvez, em tempos de maré baixa, venham à tona as correntes de pensamento subjacentes nos discursos teóricos dos nossos arquitetos e académicos. Contudo, nas considerações finais, argumentamos que a influência da obra-prima 'escultórica' de Frank Gehry continua a marcar os nossos museus, apesar da postura, tanto em palavras como em práticas, mais comumente favorável a um retorno a tradições anteriores.

## INDEX

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**Palavras-chave:** arquitetura de museus – Espanha, Guggenheim Bilbao, museus de arte, museus de arte contemporânea, tendências arquitetónicas – museus

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