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THE MEANING OF A CONTEMPORARY ICONIC BUILDING IN THE PERCEPTION OF THE CITY

ZNACZENIE WSPÓŁCZESNEGO BUDYNKU-İKONY W POSTRZEGANIU MIASTA

Abstract

The manuscript deals with iconic building in the context of urban revitalisations that have been carried out in many cities around the world, following the Bilbao model. The selected examples of cities presented in the paperwork represent centres that have sought to emulate the ‘Bilbao effect’ and carry out urban regeneration on the scale of the Spanish city. The manuscript examines the conditions that may be conducive to replicating the Bilbao effect. The paperwork is based on an analysis and critique of written material on the subject. The analysis has led to the conclusion that contemporary iconic buildings are not the main elements that shape the city and create its image.

Keywords: Bilbao effect, contemporary city, iconic building

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy budynku-ikony w kontekście rewitalizacji urbanistycznych przeprowadzanych w wielu miastach świata na wzór Bilbao. Przedstawione w pracy wybrane przykłady miast reprezentują ośrodki, które naśladując „efekt Bilbao”, chciały przeprowadzić rewitalizację na skalę hiszpańskiego miasta. W artykule rozważono warunki mogące sprzyjać powtórzeniu efektu Bilbao. Praca ta oparta jest na analizie i krytyce materiałów pisemnych związanych z tematem. Przeprowadzona analiza pozwoliła stwierdzić, że współczesne budynki-ikony nie są głównymi elementami kształtującymi miasto i tworzącymi jego wizerunek.

Słowa kluczowe: efekt Bilbao, współczesne miasto, budynek-ikona

1. INTRODUCTION

Cities are constantly changing, evolving like living organisms. Globalisation, the ability to work remotely, advanced transport and the absence of language barriers have led to a significant increase in population migration in recent decades. More and more people change their place of residence several times during their lifetime. Moreover, the main driver of development is not industry but modern technology. Cities that can offer their inhabitants a better standard of living, higher wages, better education or a rich cultural life attract new residents and can thus develop further. Conversely, centres that are less attractive gradually become depopulated. Today, the number of inhabitants indicates the competitiveness

of a city in terms of investment¹. The desire to attract investors and tourists leads to the search for solutions to improve living standards and promote cities. To do this, city managers often look to investments made in other places that have proved beneficial. Today, the success of such changes is measured by the influx of investors and the popularity of a place as a tourist destination. At the same time, it is important to note that today's tourist destinations are no longer just associated with beautiful landscapes, weather or historical monuments. After the revitalisation of Bilbao, we can observe an increased tourist interest in contemporary architecture, with interesting museums and exhibition spaces attracting visitors from all over the world. The revitalisation of Bilbao has undoubtedly been a success. With its recognisable architectural designs, as well as significant urban and social changes, the city has become an important destination on the European map. It should be remembered, however, that Bilbao underwent its transformation in the 1990s and its economic situation was the result of the global oil crisis of the 1970s. The post-industrial city was in a critical situation in many respects: economically, socially and politically. The revitalisation was based on the expansion of the transport infrastructure, the construction of new housing estates and the creation of recognisable cultural institutions that would become a symbol of the city. Of course, it is the Guggenheim Museum that has become a landmark of the city and a symbol of the revitalisation that has taken place, although it is not the foundation of the city's revitalisation². It should not be forgotten, however, that in addition to the above, the city's major transformation has included the revitalisation of the historic centre and the suburbs. The revitalisation has changed the perception of Bilbao from a port and industrial city to one of the world's cultural centres. It should also not be overlooked that Bilbao has an excellent geographical location, which is often not matched by cities trying to replicate its success. Spain is one of the world's most popular tourist destinations. Of the 85 million tourists who visit the country each year, around one million visit the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

2. ICONIC BUILDING AS PART OF THE BILBAO EFFECT

Whether a building becomes iconic depends largely on 'the circulation of visual images combined with an embodied, performed set of tourist practices on the part of architects, architecture critics and journalists'³. In other words, the presence of iconic architecture in the media encourages tourists to discover it. Since the aim of local authorities is to achieve a quick publicity effect, the resulting iconic buildings are often extravagant, and architectural fantasy and extravagance are often placed above the functionality of the design. Museums that are themselves sculptures (both externally and internally) can in some cases discourage visitors from using their exhibition space, as they distract from the exhibits. Fancy interiors often prevent a work of art from being perceived in the way the author intended. Visitors may be more attracted to the building than to the works of art inside. As

¹ D. Sudjic, *Język miast*, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków 2017, p. 31.

² G. del Cerro Santamaría, *Complexity and Transdisciplinarity: The Case of Iconic Urban Megaprojects*, "Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science" 2020, no. 11, p. 23, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dca5/f79bfe9744b6581cf82c5026abaefb53d091.pdf> (access: 9.06.2023).

³ D. McNeill, *The Global Architect: Firms, Fame and Urban Form*, Routledge, New York 2009, p. 82.

a result, the museum building, in its function as ‘packaging’, distracts the visitor from the exhibits it contains⁴. However, this aspect does not seem to have been taken into account by decision-makers in the construction of new exhibition facilities. What is desired is the strongest and quickest possible publicity effect, rather than the long-term impact of the museum on the cultural development of the city. Architects are encouraged to make their buildings surprising, even shocking. But in the age of rapid information exchange, architecture no longer shocks as it once did. It is not necessary to travel to see photos and videos of an unfinished project on the Internet. The material is available quickly, in abundance and in very good quality. Moreover, the number of interesting buildings is so great that the average tourist cannot and does not need to visit them all. In the end, the iconic buildings that should shape the development of an entire city or district remain interesting and characteristic points on their maps. They rarely become a symbol of a city – as the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Statue of Liberty or the Sydney Opera House once were. Such symbols tend to be old landmarks, associated with history and events that are important to a city. This is not the rule, of course. The situation is different in new cities or in centres undergoing major development, such as Dubai or Abu Dhabi.

Many cities are trying to replicate the Bilbao effect. It is worth pointing out that this type of regeneration also has its weaknesses, and that the impact of iconic buildings on the urban fabric can be detrimental in some respects. It often leads to the gentrification (to a greater or lesser extent) of the area around the new iconic building, which becomes an important element in the fabric of the city. The success of Bilbao’s revitalisation was not only due to the construction of a number of significant and distinctive buildings, such as the Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry, or the designs of Norman Foster and Santiago Calatrava. The basis of this revitalisation was first and foremost the skilful use of the socio-economic context and the implementation of an overall revitalisation strategy. Revitalisation was designed for a specific city and its needs. Unfortunately, in an attempt to replicate the ‘Bilbao effect’, other cities are focusing more on the construction of significant and architecturally interesting buildings, underestimating other important elements of Bilbao’s revitalisation. Megaprojects are designed to attract investors and tourists, and to increase property values in their area. At the same time, they change the character and residential structure of entire neighbourhoods. These significant buildings, usually designed by so-called ‘starchitects’, are usually museums, galleries or places that promote the development of science. They allow cities to promote themselves as centres of art and culture, attracting wealthy investors and tourists. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that the construction of cultural megaprojects designed to change the perception of cities and influence their development did not begin in Bilbao. There are many earlier developments, such as the Parc de la Villette centre in Paris, designed by Bernard Tschumi, which formed the core of the neighbourhood’s revitalisation. Bilbao became a unique case because of the multifaceted nature of the revitalisation, which influenced the speed of its success. Following the success of Bilbao’s revitalisation, many cities tried to replicate it by building their own mega-projects. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation museums were often among these. For this reason, the ‘Bilbao effect’ is often referred to as the ‘Guggenheim effect’. However, this is not an

⁴ A.M. Guash, J. Zulaika (eds.), *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, Center for Basque Studies, Reno 2005, https://scholarworks.unr.edu/bitstream/handle/11714/119/learning_guggenheim-web.pdf, p. 16 (access: 9.06.2023).

adequate name for the totality of the changes that have taken place in the Spanish city, which together have contributed to the ultimate success of its revitalisation.

3. EXAMPLES OF BILBAO MODEL CITIES

According to a study by the University of Chicago, 725 new art institutions were built in America alone between 1994 and 2008. Following Bilbao's success, many cities around the world sought to replicate it by investing billions of dollars in museum facilities. As a result of this boom, the last two decades have seen a proliferation of iconic museum buildings. Megaprojects attract visitors with their imaginative form, but they have not brought cities success on the scale of Bilbao. This is not only true for major cities such as Paris, New York or London. Smaller cities – including Biloxi, Mississippi, and Roanoke, Virginia – have also tried to replicate the Bilbao effect. According to Professor Joanna Woronkowicz of the University of Chicago, who co-authored the study, “all the people behind these buildings had something in common: they had read Richard Florida and absorbed his message. Building a large, eye-catching museum was not an act of hubris; it was a civic duty”⁵. The Bilbao effect has been criticised around the world for, among other things, the impact of globalisation on local art. The starchitects designing their iconic buildings have not been able to influence local development on the scale of Bilbao. Some developments have even failed, such as Frank Gehry's Experience Music Project in Seattle (renamed the Museum of Pop Culture). Visitor numbers fell by a third within a year and a half of its opening. The Guggenheim Museum in Las Vegas was closed due to lack of commercial success. Helsinki, on the other hand, abandoned the concept of the 2015 competition after much controversy and opposition from citizens. Bilbao's success was not repeated by the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art, one of the largest art museums in the American Midwest. In 2006, it was expanded with the Frederic C. Hamilton, designed by the Daniel Libeskind studio and Davis Partnership Architects. The metal-clad, geometric form of the DAM extension was to become for Denver what the Guggenheim Museum is for Bilbao. The influence of Gehry's building on that of Frederic C. Hamilton is undeniable. In addition to their bold sculptural forms, both museums feature titanium cladding. The Denver museum was intended to contribute to the development of the Golden Triangle district, and Libeskind's project was also linked to changes in local urban planning. In terms of urban design, the Hamilton building best met the designers' objectives. It has become an important element in the design of the urban space, and its form allows the different elements of the urban landscape to come together in its surroundings. The DAM expansion was promoted as a symbol of local innovation. However, like many other cities, Denver has not seen a significant increase in interest in the neighbourhood. Moreover, the gentrification effect sought by city officials was only partially successful. A neglected area of the city was supposed to be transformed into a leisure destination for affluent people. This assumption was not fully realised, and property prices in the DAM area did not rise significantly. In the end, the Hamilton Building at the DAM did not transform Denver into a world-class tourist destination.

The Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi is under construction and its opening, originally scheduled for 2017, has been significantly delayed. It is another

⁵ N. Hune-Brown, *Is This the End of Starchitecture?* [in:] Azure, 18.08.2017, <https://www.azuremagazine.com/article/is-this-the-end-of-starchitecture/> (access: 27.06.2023).

example of a museum sculpture designed to influence the development of the city. It is being built on the artificial island of Saadiyat, which was created specifically for this purpose. Nearby is the Louvre Abu Dhabi, designed by Jean Nouvel. Several other cultural buildings are planned. Delays have been caused by construction problems (the volume of the building is twice as large as the Bilbao museum and is just as sculptural), social problems (employment and labour standards for workers), cultural problems (religious censorship of contemporary art, which is considered too liberal) and environmental problems (the change in terrain caused by the construction of the museum is affecting the flow of the sea around the area)⁶. The local Arab community does not seem to be sufficiently receptive to contemporary art. On the other hand, the major changes made to the area around the development have led to significant pollution of the surrounding waters. As in other cities that have attempted to replicate the success of Bilbao, there has been a lack of thorough social and site analysis in Abu Dhabi. It is uncertain whether the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi will be completed. The project appears to have been scaled up, with the museum expected to be around 30,000 m². This is a much larger exhibition space than the one in Bilbao and seems to be much larger than the demand. The changes taking place in Abu Dhabi are often referred to as ‘Dubaiisation’. It is a process reminiscent of the ‘Bilbao effect’ and an equally frequent inspiration for cities seeking their way forward. Abu Dhabi is trying to promote its brand by combining the recognition of the Guggenheim with the dynamism and scale of Dubai.

Ordos in Inner Mongolia has also tried to influence the development of the city by building a museum as a symbol of social change⁷. An interesting bionic project by the MAD studio was completed in 2011. The Chinese city has grown thanks to oil and gas discoveries. The central authorities decided to create a metropolis and populate it with villagers. Ordos is known for its very small population – often referred to as a ghost town. The small population contributes to the low number of museum visitors. The lack of an extensive art collection and exhibition plans means that the facility is not as popular as the city’s administrators had envisioned. In the end, simply investing in a spectacular cultural facility without other related activities has not brought much publicity to the city.

Polish cities have also followed Bilbao’s example in their efforts to change their image. One of the most interesting is the example of Strefa Kultury in Katowice – an area of Katowice that represents the entertainment and cultural side of the post-industrial city⁸. In the case of Katowice, it is more appropriate to compare not individual realisations of iconic buildings, but the entire cultural zone with Abandoibarra (Bilbao’s Misata area), the so-called ‘area of opportunity’, which is the central axis of the city’s regeneration. In many ways, Katowice can be seen as the Polish equivalent of Bilbao. Both cities were centres of mining regions and were linked by similar demographics and post-industrial character during the transition period. They

⁶ D. Batty, *Guggenheim delay raises big question: Is Abu Dhabi ready for modern art?* [in:] *The Guardian*, 17.04.2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/17/abu-dhabi-guggenheim-delay-question> (access: 14.06.2023).

⁷ G. del Cerro Santamaría, *Complexity*, *op. cit.*

⁸ This example was discussed extensively in the article: J. Orzechowska-Waśławska, *Efekt Bilbao w Polsce? Katowicka Strefa Kultury jak Abandoibarra, czyli baskijskość i śląskość w procesie rewitalizacji*, “Kultura Współczesna. Teoria. Interpretacje. Praktyka” 2017, no. 5, pp. 108–123, https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmetal.element.ojs-doi-10_26112_kw_2017_98_08?q=bwmetal.element.ojs-issn-1230-4808-year-2017-volume-98-issue-5;7&qt=CHILDREN-STATELESS (access: 23.05.2023).

are also representative of regions with a similar history and national importance. Dr Joanna Orzechowska-Wačławska compared the two cases of revitalisation, stressing that in the case of Katowice it was too early to say whether it had succeeded on the scale of Bilbao. However, unlike many other examples, Katowice is transforming its image without relying solely on a single cultural institution. This approach to revitalisation is likely to be successful in the long term. The flagship transformation projects in Katowice are the building of the National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra (NOSPR) and the Silesian Museum. The difference between the two cases is that the Spanish Abandoibarra is embedded in the city in a multifaceted way (communicatively, socially and in terms of use). The cultural zone, on the other hand, has a more monofunctional character and worse communication links with the city (poor public transport).

The examples of many cities that have attempted to replicate Bilbao's success show that success is not guaranteed by simply replicating exactly what worked in Bilbao. In most cases, there has been a reduction in poverty and an improvement in the living standards of residents. Unfortunately, the poorest people are most often displaced from the areas affected by change. Often, the lack of sufficient interest from visitors means that the cities themselves have to maintain new cultural centres that they do not really need. Furthermore, the significant impact (both positive and negative) of new iconic buildings on existing cultural facilities in cities has not been recognised. So is it possible to replicate the Bilbao effect? Is it not just a myth? It is certainly a myth to believe that the construction of a significant iconic building designed by a starchitect is the way to replicate the success of a Spanish city. Each location needs to be analysed in depth, not only from an urban, but also from a social, economic and cultural point of view. Globalisation puts pressure on city managers to increase their marketing efforts in order to create a brand for their city. Only a strong individual image will guarantee differentiation in the global village and thus the possibility of marketing success. At the same time, despite increasing globalisation, the world's cities still retain their distinctive character, which is mainly influenced by social and cultural differences. It is often the neglect of local communities that is responsible for the failure of regeneration. Antonio Monestiroli, in his book "Tryglif i metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o architekturze", refers to Camillo Sitte's 1889 treatise: "Written more than 100 years ago, it contains an important objective: to build the city as a place of representation of our culture, a place in whose forms we recognise our identity"⁹. Of course, this treatise was based on an analysis of the historical city, which is very different from the modern city. However, when we analyse today's cities, we see how important it is to preserve the spirit of place. Perhaps this is another reason why it is so difficult to replicate Bilbao's success. The changes introduced in the Spanish city were designed for the specific city, community and situation at the time. The same solutions cannot be expected to have such a spectacular effect in cities as different as Bilbao. In the case of megaprojects, which usually lead to the gentrification of neighbourhoods, we can observe the dissatisfaction of residents who are forced to relocate. Any development strategy should therefore be based on an individual case study. As in Spain (where the Guggenheim Museum represents around 2% of the city's economy), in other cases a single iconic building cannot be expected to bear the burden of revitalising a larger area. The strategy of building cultural megaprojects has also failed because of their quantity. When the Guggenheim Museum was built in Bilbao, there were not many buildings of a similar scale and surprising form. The museum benefited from the effect of novelty and surprise. This innovative

⁹ A. Monestiroli, *Tryglif i metopa. Dziewięć wykładów o architekturze*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2009, p. 63.

approach to revitalisation was also well publicised. Numerous studies, both academic and popular, were produced. At a time when many large cities have their spectacular museums, this is no longer a distinguishing feature. This is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to repeat Bilbao's success. Even with the same resources, the element of surprise, of novelty, which is what attracted the crowds in the first place, will always be missing. Dr Gerardo del Cerro Santamaria summed this up well in his article:

Twenty-three years after the opening of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in 1997, the Bilbao effect has faded, and the exaggerated claims of the era of urban icons are no longer valid. When it seems that every city can boast a spectacular museum, the strategy of building cultural megaprojects is yielding diminishing returns. (...) We need to work towards other approaches and models where the traditionally overlooked synergies between research-based evidence, governance and urban management for holistic sustainability become a priority area for urban and regional decision-makers to address¹⁰.

We are living in a time when cities are looking for newer solutions than the construction of an urban icon in order to stand out. Dubai is emulating Bilbao, but on a larger scale and not relying on a single building. It has become a kind of Bilbao for the Arab world. The idea of developing and building Dubai's brand was not only based on iconic projects to stand out from the rest of the world in terms of scale. The urban aspect is also an important element. Dubai has set its sights on architecture as well as large-scale urbanism. The city is characterised by a saturation of spectacular buildings. For the most part, these are detached from the history of the place and the socio-cultural context, which raises questions about the validity of this approach in the long term. The architecture of the buildings themselves attempts to relate to Arab culture. The urban planning and scale of the city, on the other hand, are more indicative of an embrace of Western culture and social life. Certainly, Dubai's development strategy sets it apart from other cities.

Similarly, Masdar is a flagship sustainable city. The range of green solutions used and the level of automation are unparalleled in any other city. The idea of a zero-energy city was innovative and exciting. Although it is still under construction, the Arab city has already gained a lot of popularity. It is being followed by other city concepts based on renewable energy sources. These include The Line, a 170-kilometre linear city, and Foster+Partners' South Sabah Al-Ahmad project. In addition to modern technologies and renewable energy sources, the South Sabah Al-Ahmad project is notable for its reference to traditional Kuwaiti urban planning solutions. Perhaps this approach to contemporary urban planning, which does not break with tradition but is embedded in the culture and traditions of the place, will prove to be the best solution in the long term.

4. CONCLUSION

The search for new approaches to revitalisation should not overlook careful research and analysis, taking into account the individuality of each city, its social structure, culture and

¹⁰ G. del Cerro Santamaria, *Iconic architecture and the end of the Bilbao Effect: Bilbao, Denver, Abu Dhabi*, "The Museum Review" 2020, vol. 5, no. 1, https://themuseumreviewjournal.wordpress.com/2020/09/22/tmr_vol5no1_delcerrosantamaria/ (access: 17.06.2023).

economy. New revitalisation approaches and models should also combine research with effective urban management. Architecture without its users remains dead, and even the most apparently interesting solutions will not have the desired effect if there is no interaction between architecture and the people for whom it was created. Iconic architecture has at some point become the mainstream of urban regeneration. If we look at cities that have based their development on iconic buildings, we see that these buildings are not able to influence the development of the city on their own. The modern iconic building is not the main element that shapes the city and creates its image. We are also seeing a change in the development trends of cities. In the past, it was economic development that influenced urban development. Today, the quality of the urban environment is increasingly driving economic development. Increasing globalisation is affecting the lack of connection between architecture and urban planning and the place, its culture and tradition. As a result, iconic buildings often remain a prominent landmark on the city map without having a significant impact on urban development.

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