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RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

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The Regeneration of Bilbao:
A Paradigm for Cities in the 21st Century

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The Regeneration of Bilbao: A paradigm for cities in the 21st Century

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In reading the mission and the vision of the Home Renaissance Foundation, and comparing it to our own vision and mission, I found two major points of contact which I will try to expand upon here. The first is the orientation towards the well-being of individuals and community, which is present in both of our institutions' missions. The second is the stress on the content beyond the physical structures, whether it is the home in relation to the house or, as in our case, the museum in relation to the building. In any case, the stress is on the soft versus the hard, and this I think is present in both of our missions. Let me talk about how we confront these two aspects at the museum.

First of all, I will discuss the importance we give to orienting our activities towards the well-being of the community we are in. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao was born conceptually seventeen years ago with a mission that stated goals that clearly went beyond the goals strictly related to a museum. It was, therefore, basically considered as a new cultural institution that aimed to develop and fulfil goals that were clearly beyond our mission as a cultural institution. It was perceived as part of an effort to help the city transform itself. In a way it was an example of how culture could be used as a tool for development. It is very politically incorrect, but this museum was definitely not born out of any consultation. It was certainly a democratic project, it was voted by the different legislative assemblies of the institutions that were supporting the project, but it was not the result of a consultation process in the way that has been discussed elsewhere during this conference. I am absolutely sure that the museum as it is would not have been possible if we had been carrying out a consultation process. I think that a point that is important to stress at this point is that the museum was not an isolated project. On the contrary, it was a project that was part of a much broader strategy and part of the effort of a city to transform itself.

What is important to understand, however, is that this was part of a broader strategy by the city that started before the museum and that has continued growing after the museum opened. The main goal of the strategy was to try to transform a city that was in a very dire economic situation at the end of the 80s because many of its main economic sectors were based in heavy industry which was undergoing a deep recession. The city was in a process of decline and, most importantly, it was suffering from a crisis of identity. It was not clear what the city wanted to be. Every piece of news at that time seemed to be bad news. This vision, then, was a proactive effort to change the city and to try to make it a better city at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In that move towards becoming a small regional metropolis, it was considered essential to have, as well as many other things, major cultural institutions that would speak not only to the local audience, but to a more diverse audience. That was the terrain in which the seed of the museum was planted. I think it is important to understand that when the seed of the museum was planted, it was planted not just to develop a cultural institution, but an institution that could help the city achieve these other goals. Goals related to economic revitalisation, to urban transformation of an area of the city (which we looked at earlier: this part of the river which had been mostly used for industrial and port-related

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activities throughout the centuries) that the city was trying to recover urban and community use. The museum was the first project happening in that big transformation and which has now been developing.

The museum was the first step in that whole process of transformation. There is always a risk involved with change. There is a tendency, both in community and personal levels, of risk aversion. There is a Spanish proverb that says something like 'it is better to have a bad unknown past than an unknown good future.' That is good for both personal approaches as well as for community approaches. By showing that a risky change can be positive, I think the museum has produced, in a very positive way, a recovery of the self-esteem and the confidence of the community. This initial change has made it a lot easier to carry out the other projects that were waiting in the pipeline but could not be developed because there was not enough political or social will-power to move them forward. Some of the effects I have been talking about are measurable and we like to measure them because of the opposition we faced twenty years ago. We are very aware that seventeen years ago, when we were starting to discuss this project, the media and many political parties that were not in the governing institutions, were completely against the project. The main reason for that was that the sheer fact of saying that culture can be an effective investment and an effective measure for change was considered to be completely irrelevant and idealistic. At that time, culture was always considered to be an expense and never an investment. That is why we are very keen to measure the effects that this specific cultural investment has produced.

One of the examples is a proxy of how the museum has helped the city change its image to the outside world. We are all aware that we live in a world that is, first of all, global, and secondly, feeding on images. The fact that a city can associate itself with an image that is known globally has an important value. This is just a proxy, but we measure what the economic value of the news related to the museum appearing in only seven different countries is. The seven countries are Spain, America, France, Germany, Italy, Great Britain and Portugal, which happen to be our visitors' seven most common countries of origins. The average economic value of that news in any given year is around 35M euros. That is what we would have to spend to have our name or our information published as publicity which, also, has a much lower level of credibility than news. Another way to measure the impact more specifically in terms of how effectively the museum has an impact on the economic activity is by measuring the additional expenditure that happens around the museum as a result of the museum's activity. The average figure for these eleven years is 243M Euros of additional economic activity which would not have taken place if these visitors coming from outside the Basque Country had not spent their money in shops, restaurants, hotels and such in Bilbao. That is another way to look at it in the sense of how this effectively affects the economic situation.

Naturally, this museum, like any museum, could not be an effective institution, and certainly not an effective tool for transformation, if it did not have strong community support. We have over 16,000 individual members who pay their dues every year to support our museum. To give you a comparative example, the Prado, which is the most important museum in Spain, has less than half of that number. Taking into account Bilbao's population, which is about one million in the metropolitan area, this is a very high number. I think that in comparative European terms there are only two other museums in Europe, the Louvre and the Tate, that have a larger size of membership. We also have corporate support made up of about 150 corporations, many of which are local. Most of them, of

course, have a local base or activity that supports our operations and that allows our operation to fund ¼ of the total needed every year itself. In order to make this institution sustainable, it is critical that 25-30% of our budget comes from subsidies and the rest is raised through the museum – through the visitors and through our corporate support which, again, shows the community support for the museum. We have about one million visitors every year, 2/3 of which come from outside Spain. 80-90% of visitors come from outside the Basque country. This museum, then, was conceived to be defined not by geography, but by quality. Our audience, therefore, is wider than the local population. In fact, as the figures demonstrate, we have an international audience. The combination of volume and origin makes it possible to fulfil some of the goals I mentioned above. The economic and media effect would not be so great if the audience were not as big or as varied as it is. I will conclude this thought by restating that the museum was not born just as a cultural institution, and that it tries to go beyond that by being a tool for the community.

The second issue, which I think is very relevant in this case, is the stress on content beyond physicality. I think the idea is very well summed up by the title of the conference: From House to Home. The museum and the Foundation share this same concept, although, obviously, in the museum's case it is not as 'from house to home', but as 'from building to museum.' In the material I read a rather brilliant sentence by Winston Churchill: 'we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.' I think that this is mostly true, but in our case when we tried to shape the building, specifically the museum, we tried to shape the building in the ways that would serve the purpose that it was being built for. In a way, we were trying to anticipate the functionality of the building, despite the fact that the building itself, from an architectural point of view, is a work of art. There are three aspects that I would like to stress about this. The first is that the architectural distinction of the museum did not happen by chance. We wanted the museum to be an iconic architectural masterpiece, not only because we thought it would give additional value to the city in its transformation or because we thought the museum's image would be the best visual identity card for it, but mainly to provide unique spaces that would present the best environment for people to share the experience of being in touch with art. We believe it is very important that once the visitor is in the building, the museum is visitor-friendly in the sense of being exposed to art. It is not only about what type of art you are seeing, but how the artist has chosen to present it and what tools you have to confront it as well. It is also about your state of mind when you go there. The museum's spaces look for that and look to provide that unique experience. This needs to be stressed because it is important to understand that looking for the soft aspects and the users' view should not detract from the importance of architecture in itself. Architecture is an art and when you have good architecture, as is the case with the museum, both qualities are combined. One plus one is more than two.

One way that we use these unique spaces is by having a very diverse and dynamic approach to the uses. We try to make the best of this space by not having specific spaces reserved for a specific work of art or part of a collection. On the contrary, the galleries can be used in different configurations depending on the exhibition. This allows us to provide the best space for the type of art we are showing. What we try to do to make the space relevant for both the community and the audience is to have a very dynamic approach to our programme. We believe that museums in the twenty-first century have to be dynamic institutions. They cannot just be a mausoleums people visit once to see the art on the walls. We do not limit this approach to dynamism to the permanent

collection, which we change each year – we change the types of work we show belonging to the museum in Bilbao as well as other works that are part of the other Guggenheim collections all over the world. The dynamic approach is also applied to a programme of temporary exhibitions that are developed to provide an incentive for repeated visits. In the eleven years the museum has been open there have been about a hundred temporary exhibitions. The image below should help you get an idea of this. The three levels of the museum are shown with different presentations of the permanent collection in blue and special exhibitions in other colours. What can be observed from these images is the rhythm of change which I think is important for the museum's relevance. In these eleven years we have had about 100 different changeovers. We have had over 40 different special exhibitions and over 50 different presentations of the permanent collection. That means that there is a major change in the museum once every six weeks. That is an incentive for you to come back. Being asked whether you have been to the museum should not produce a definitive 'yes, I have been' answer. That type of answer should not apply. Rather, the museum should be seen like a cinema where you keep coming back periodically to see new things because there are always different things on show.

Another aspect the museum takes very seriously is its educational mission. We believe that the museum is a multi-purpose project, and of those purposes education is a priority. We understand that the museum is mostly an educational institution and as such, its main goal is to bridge the visual art with the community. For this reason we place a very strong emphasis on educational programmes. Almost 5,000 people come to the museum every year not only as a visitor, but to take part in one or more of our educational programmes as well. This is a very high percentage. About half of the total number of visitors that come to the museum take part in one of these programmes. There are three audiences we develop our educational programmes for. One, of course, is school children and young people. We have a number of programmes aimed at them. Many of these programmes are carried out in connection with formal education and with the department of education. Again, this is an activity that is not only directed at our local Bilbao audience; about half of the total number of children and schoolteachers that come into the museum for an educational programme come from outside the Basque country. Just to give you an idea, about a fifth of the total are French. This means that the programmes we develop must not only be appealing to the age group but multilingual as well. We have educational programmes in six languages so that we can cater to all our audiences. One of these programmes, called 'Learning Through Art' uses art not so much to educate about art itself, but to educate about other subjects on their curriculum. We engage artists, teachers, and educational staff from the museum to develop programmes every year that are an aid to other subjects of the curriculum, such as mathematics, physics, the environment, etc. The end result of that programme is an exhibition in the museum. This is probably the exhibition the staff at the museum enjoys developing most. It is proving to be a great tool, not only for its goal, but also in order to enhance children's abilities. Normally these are programmes that we try to conduct in educational centres where there are students who have some sort of learning difficulties or family difficulties.

The second audience is formed of teachers. We place a lot of emphasis on dealing with teachers. I will not go into much detail on this topic, but we have developed a web-based programme called 'Wiki-docentes' which is essentially a Wikipedia page where teachers create a

community and interchange knowledge and personal experience. It is basically building up as a content forum.

Finally, the third audience are adults. We try to use the museum to engage in activities that are interdisciplinary and might touch upon dance, theatre, music or film. We are a pioneering museum in developing the volunteering system in Spain. We have a group of over 50 volunteers that help with the museum's outreach programmes. The volunteers help carry the voice of the museum outside the physical areas of the museum. They carry out activities with older people and with disabled people. They develop the activities off-site and then provide them with their own visits.

I will end on that note. I hope I have been able to stress at least these two aspects in which our museum and the Home Renaissance Foundation have a shared vision in terms of how both institutions try to go beyond their strict goals in order to enhance the welfare of their community and the content beyond the physical space of our buildings.