

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Guggenheim: A Rhetorical Turn In Architecture



## *1. Introduction*

This essay represents a preliminary report on ongoing conversations between Michael Lorimer and myself over the connections between architecture and rhetoric. Michael not only teaches architecture but he is also a practicing architect. He has designed churches, hospitals,

homes and office buildings, and added an extension to the local art museum. In order to indicate the tenor of our exchanges, let me offer a transcript of a recent dialogue we had at Michael's home over a cup of tea.

"There is for me," I began, "a profound difference between structures designed for religious organizations and those designed for domestic or commercial purposes. Commercial buildings find their foundations in the bottom line, while Catholic and Protestant Churches as well as Taoist and Buddhist temples, by way of contrast, have as one of their purposes the inspiration and instruction of the faithful. We recognize this difference in our experience of sacred in contrast to secular space."

Ponderous, I admit, but it reflected my honest experience and a modest amount of thinking on the subject. Michael is a good listener, but he had an odd look on his face. When I had finished, he leaned back from the table and, without even a hint of irony, responded. "There is," he said, no real difference, from an architectural point of view, between secular and religious structures. Both take as their goal the manipulation of people. What you refer to as "the sacred" and assume a difference in the response of those who enter such spaces has much to do with structure. Is the purpose to fill people with awe or to engender a sense of community? Is it to move them, in procession, from one point to another or to have them gather together as a family? A reverential attitude arises out of certain kinds of structures and is blunted by others. Your attitude about "sacred space" is evidence that the structure achieved its desired effect. He saw that I was puzzled, so he went on to explain this in architectural terms:

Department stores, churches, and casinos all try to divorce you from the outside.

None of them has clear glass windows. Airports and fast-food restaurants, on the other hand, try to move you quickly from point A to point B, from inside the structure to outside the structure. Harsh lighting, uninviting colors, noise, a clear vision of the out-of-doors announces their purpose and accounts for the response, seemingly voluntary, of flyers and customers. This all made sense to me, but I asked him if he thought that reflected what architects he knew generally thought or how they are trained in the universities or if this represented his peculiar take on the subject.

The above is a reasonably accurate transcription, as I took notes on it during and immediately after the exchange. I report it less because I think it conveys something profound, though it certainly did for me, but because it highlights a way of knowing that precedes recorded history and continues to inform the production, reading, and interpretation of books and articles. It is a way of knowing that operates in villages and towns, developed and developing countries, among the rich and poor, those who possess word processors and those who have never heard of them. I report it because academic writing, by its very nature conceals this process, substituting in its place a product, a text flattening out everything into soundless marks on a page or, in the case of this conference, represents presentations filled, one hopes, with lively exchanges afterward into a chapter in these "conference proceedings."

It is important to mark this product-process confusion for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to avoid the silliness that comes from a gradual disengagement from the world of affairs into a quasi-monastic retreat into books, libraries, and web-sites. Leaving off this little polemic in favor of earthy, here and now dialogue, I return to the topic of the new Guggenheim, a rhetorical turn in architecture, and the degree to which Michael's understanding of architects and architecture, which is remarkably friendly to rhetoric, is somehow representative.

## *2. The Rhetorical Function of Contemporary Museums*

This last question weighed upon me: how much weight to place on Michael's analysis. Understand me here. I value his insights and find them profound, but what I wanted to avoid was assuming this his rhetoric-friendly analysis was widespread in the profession. In researching the New Guggenheim, Michael came across an article about museums in, *World Architecture*:

Museums are attracting more visitors than ever before, and although the building

boom in Europe is over, in many countries, especially in North America, architects are benefiting from opportunities for new galleries and museums to satisfy the demand. The key to their success is tourism, and the accompanying ticket and merchandise sales (Cost 1997: 106).

Apart from the importance of profits in understanding museums is the emphasis on building them to attract audiences. What this refers to is an effort to attract audiences able and willing to spend money (which is to say that somewhere near the heart of the museum industry is a conscious and quite concrete effort to create a structure that will accomplish this task). It is not too great a stretch here, given the various kind of museums that one might build – children's, science, high-tech, rock and roll, sports halls of fame, as well as art – that those who design these structures must give some thought to the available means of persuading audiences to enter into their enclosed, semi-sacred spaces.

### *3. Rhetoric in Relation to "Great" Architecture in the Past*

I wondered about the extent to which this kind of analysis, linking building with money, audiences, and politics, worked in relation to "sacred spaces" in the past. The great cathedrals, for example, and the early more academically oriented museums. Michael had recently lectured the faculty and graduate students at UC Berkeley on two seemingly disparate tracks of his work: (a) the use of computers in design (he had in fact recommended CATIA – a software used to design aircraft – to Gehry's firm as appropriate to his approach to architectural design, and it was this software which enabled the successful realization of the Guggenheim), and (b) the restoration of historic structures.

On the extent to which the practical, consciously manipulative was present in early architecture, Michael was not certain. This was so in part because it was a question of conscious intent and in part because, as he remarked, his graduate education had focused on modernist theories of building and on form and material to the exclusion of socio-political and economic issues related to pushing projects and securing commissions.

For twenty years, I had kept a three volume paperback edition of primary documents on art and architecture edited by Elizabeth G. Holt. They stood on my shelves as potential reference works, something someday I might consult. One evening I glanced through them. Michael had told me about the great architect, Abbot Suger, who had built the first Gothic Cathedral at the abbey of St.-Denis in the twelfth century. Happily Professor Holt had included a selection from Suger's

memoirs. In English and not in the original Latin, of course, and nearly a thousand years later, his words were nevertheless haunting. They spoke of the purpose of renovation and they fixed on the need to persuade. But persuade in the context not of the here and now of a mundane world but a world toward which the great Gothic Cathedrals pointed as they fluted upward toward the heavens.

Its an odd language, at least to those of us who have backed away from Christianity (or were never there in the first place) and do not feel the need to read theology, but it is a language that locates architecture in relation to potential audiences and desired effect. Suger's copper-gilt inscription on the gilded bronze doors he had cast talks about the effect he was seeking:

Whoever thou art, if thou seekest to extol the glory of these doors,  
Marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship of the work  
Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work  
Should brighten the minds, so that they may travel, through the true lights,  
To the True Light where Christ is the true door.

In what manner it be inherent in this world the gold door defines:

The dull mind rises to truth through that which is material

And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion.

On the lintel over the doors, the abbot's words continue to establish the distance we here and now stand from in trying to fathom the role of architect there and then:

Receive, O stern Judge, the prayers of Thy Suger;

Grant that I be mercifully numbered among Thy own sheep.

As a lamb of God, the architect builds to brighten the minds of the faithful, enabling them to see in the wondrously crafted doors to the Church a deeper and more profound meaning, the earthly doors becoming a metaphor for Christ the true door through which one must pass in order to be received into heaven. The doors are gilded, so that the dull mind might be resurrected, so that those obsessed by the wealth of this world might encounter a richer and more rewarding truth.

The same reasoning guides Suger's discussion of the altar:

Into this panel, which stands in front of his most sacred body, we have put, according to our estimate, about forty-two marks of gold; [further] a multifarious wealth of precious gems, hyacinths, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and topazes, and also an array of different large pearls - [a wealth] as great as we had never

anticipated to find (Suger 1957 [orig. eleventh century]: 25).

It does not require much of a leap to see how attractive such a display might be for pilgrims and the visible precedent it sets for making sizable donations. The size of the donation being related both to the nature of the indulgence sought and to what was previously given and to how much this or that abbey or Cathedral might, through its magnificence, command.

I called our friend, Professor Hohmann and asked him how Suger might have responded to our equation of St.-Denis with rhetoric. That the clergy should be resolute and effective in propagating the faith would have struck him as natural enough, but he (Suger) would have thought of rhetoric and architecture as correlative arts, related to be sure, but not to be confused. One had to do with persuasive speech, the other with transforming stone, glass, wood and metal into buildings. Michael, on the other hand, thought that the ethos of the period did not distinguish between manifestations of the divine, cosmic order be they spoken, written or built of stone. Later I happened on a collection of essays by the classicist, Harry Caplan. In an essay on medieval preaching, he commented on the carvings of dame rhetoric to be found on various churches and cathedrals throughout Europe.

Michael and I had also talked about museums. I wondered when they had been invented and what had been their purpose. Again I consulted my little reference work and here happened across one Alexander Lenoir who, in 1791, had been charged in the aftermath of the French revolution with organizing a depot for art objects acquired from the Church. The paintings went to the Louvre, while the medieval and renaissance sculpture, church furnishings, and stained glass went into the Musée des Monuments Français. *The Oxford Companion to Art* tells us that he arranged in the cloister and gardens at a convent in Paris some 500 examples of French art that included the finest French work of the Middle Ages now known to us.

Lenoir in his memoirs speaks with pride about his efforts at recovering the royal vaults from the Abbey of St.-Denis which had been burned to the ground during the civil war. After the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of the monarchy, Lenoir was made Administrator of Monuments at St. Denis. In 1816, the Museum was suppressed and most of the exhibits divided between the Louvre and the École des Beaux-Arts or returned to the monasteries and families from which they had been taken. Lenoir's schemes of classification, however, arranging art

according to historical periods (Carolingian, Merovingian, etc.), and his genealogical approach (arranging art work chronologically in an effort to show its rise and decline, as one moved from one room to another) influences art museums up to the present day.

Neither Michael nor I had ever heard of Lenoir. But what was not relevant to our thinking was his argument about the importance of his Musée in 1803. Here he strikes a distinctly pragmatic note: A museum in its institution ought . . . to have two objects in view: the one political, the other that of public instruction. In a political point of view, it should be established with sufficient splendor and magnificence to strike the eye and attract the curious from every quarter of the globe, who would consider it as their duty to be munificent amongst a people friendly to the arts . . . (Lenoir 1966 [orig. nineteenth century]: 281). I think what this meant, in the context of the Napoleonic wars and France's efforts to cement alliances against the English and their allies with France and throughout the world, was that the Musée was ideologically important. Evidence of a superior culture, it could inspire in others a willingness to tender support.

Michael read through my little pass at drawing Suger and Lenoir, St.-Denis and the Musée into our conversation. I thought it thin, not anything that I knew much about beyond reading a couple of selections in an anthology, but both of us found it suggestive. Churches and museums are not simply given, structures we happen onto, enter into, and talk about with our friends. In the here and now of constructing such buildings, we may speak of purpose, design, and effect on specific audiences – the faithful, Christians, revolutionaries, nationalists, potential allies, etc.

A few days later, Michael called. He said that he had a book on the first known architectural design for a building anywhere in the world, the plan of St. Gall drawn up in the eighth century. He brought this book over which turned out to be a three-volume set authored by Horn and Born and published by UC Press. Huge books, they looked as though they contained newspapers. Michael explained that, since its discovery in the eighteenth century, generations of scholars have argued over the plan. It had apparent inconsistencies having to do with a shift between the measurements provided in the text and the actual scale of the drawing. The monastery it so painstakingly laid out seemed never to have been built. Horn and Born, he said, proved quite conclusively that the inconsistencies were actually the result of monastic upheaval of the time, a conflict between two orders with radically different views on the nature and function of monastic life in relation to

the individual and society.

I looked at those books he had dumped down on my table, they were enormous, and asked him if he had ever read them. Many times he said, though not in the last few years. It turns out he had purchased them while still in college and that for him they represented a kind of retreat from day to day cares and confusions. I looked through them briefly. They are a triumph of scholarship and also, as Michael pointed out, an entry into monastic politics and the purposes served by buildings great or small.

#### *4. The Rhetoric of the New Guggenheim*

Fortified in the belief that a link between rhetoric and architecture could be shown historically, that it was a fact of contemporary life, at least as Michael understood it and current writing in architectural journals talked about it, and that it was, to coin a phrase, intellectually sweet, we continued assembling documents having to do with Bilbao. Michael cut out articles from journals he subscribed to about the new museum. Both of us did computer searches for information relative not only to the museum but also to Basque nationalists, the history of Bilbao, etc. What follows leaves off the autobiographical approach, organizing our conversations in a way that reveals the utility of a method of analysis which a colleague of ours, and my wife, Professor Wen Shu Lee calls “rhetorical contextualization” (see her essay in this volume).

Instead on fixing on rhetoric as a particular object, carefully differentiated from other objects, rhetorical contextualization seeks to recover the socio-historical dimension of any cultural artifact. Understanding it as “speech,” an artifact recovers the notion of speaker or author and with it intent or purpose. As a text, it invites interpretation and does so, as speech necessarily does, in relation to audiences. A critical take on rhetorical contextualization inquires into who did not and does not get to speak, what did not a does not get said, who does and who does not count as the appropriate audience/s.

Rhetorical contextualization situates and transforms an artifact into a relational thing, placing it in relation to what it affirms and what it negates, it also provides for an uplifting vertical move, what Wen Shu calls “inter-rhetoricity.” Inter-rhetoricity contrasts with “inter-textuality” through its efforts to recover both the text and the speakers and audiences in trying to understand historical events as well as efforts to talk about them and then to talk about such talk. Inter-textuality encounters “texts” that range from artifacts to everything that can be talked about and places them in hypothetical space. Inter-rhetoricity encounters texts

ranging from the ridiculous to the sublime, but insists on establishing some human scale in trying to get at their meaning and significance.

Considering the new Guggenheim as speech raises issues that might be lost in paeans to great art (or architecture) and the assumption that great art is both timeless and placeless. Why did the Guggenheim foundation decide to build a museum at Bilbao? This is a group of people. They have names. We know that Thomas Kerns, the Guggenheim's new director, approached people in Venice and Vienna about building a new museum and was turned down.

Why were the Basques in Bilbao interested in building a museum there? So much so that they were willing to provide \$100,000,000.00 for that purpose and, at the same time, relinquish their right to pass on the structure being built? Karen Stein, writing in *Architectural Record*, hazards an answer. In 1991, she writes, members of the Basque regional government concluded that an international institution of contemporary art would bring them cultural prestige and a steady stream of tourism and more importantly tourism dollars to their state capital, Bilbao (Stein 1997: 75). Why were the elites in Spain willing to allow this project to go forward, and it should be remembered that the King of Spain was there to inaugurate the building when it opened. And what was the architect, Frank Gehry, trying to do with this vast, shiny, titanium skinned effort?

On the other hand, we do not know the view of the Church in this matter or, more to the point, Basque nationalists for whom the modernist, late modernist, or postmodern design – an internationalist and decidedly non-Basque in its inspiration and associations – must be considered a political and cultural affront? What were the views of the citizens of Bilbao about the structure or about having such a museum built there?

From questions about the speaker/creators or collaborators and those who were left out and not part of the collaboration, we turn to questions about the speech/text? What is it? An art museum! But what sort? One that, in its structure, dominates, at least in its publicity and certainly in its visual impact in relation to what surrounds it, anything and everything it houses. A post-modern or late-modernist structure housing modern art, the labels are breath-taking and must not be allowed to conceal what this text does not contain. Little that is Spanish and virtually nothing Basque, save for *Guernica*, the painting by Picasso depicting the execution of Basques by Spanish fascists, members of Franco's invading army. A painting promised by Spain (a loan from the museum in Madrid) but which has not yet arrived. When and if it does, it seems unlikely that its connection with

Spanish fascism or Basque nationalism will be heavily featured. And if mentioned, it will more than likely be overwhelmed, since it will be surrounded by concentric circles or resolutely non-representational art whose political content, fresh perhaps at one time or another, has bled back into a dark and spreading aesthetic pool of priceless art.

Nothing there will call attention to the more recent executions by Spanish agents or the bombings and executions conducted by Basque guerrillas. Nothing there will focus on the connection between Guggenheim senior whose moneys derived from mining and from breaking up unions in the Western United States. Nothing will indicate that the Guggenheims are Jewish and that Spain expelled its Jews during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella or that Spanish fascists during the 1940s, including General Franco, came close to bringing Spain into the war on the side of Germany (Churchill authorized the expenditure of what amounts to a bribe of \$100,000,000.00 to keep Spain from entering the war on the side of the Axis powers).

Little or nothing will be said about the origins of the structure itself. The fact that Gehry visited the proposed site and demanded that it be changed and that, after the change, the Guggenheim announced a design competition, inviting an Austrian and a Japanese architect, neither of whom were known for designing museums, to apply and gave them three weeks to submit a plan. Gehry, who had months to prepare, not surprisingly won the "competition." The other designs were never shown. The fact that someone in Gehry's firm, trying to determine what skin to drape over a traditional post and lintel structure, noted that the price of titanium had taken a huge dip, owing to Russia's need to raise capital quickly. These facts - the fixed "competition," the mundane approach to structure, and the opportunistic use of titanium - will not be inscribed in copper and gilt on the museum doors. Neither will the fact that well-known builders of museums, Richard Meier for example the designer of the new Getty museum, orient their work around providing adequate space and natural lighting for the objects on display or that they and others of their guild have noted that the Guggenheim is ridiculously ill-designed in this regard with its little sky lights and windows high above.

##### *5. Architectural Criticism and Rhetoric*

But then the function of the structure is only secondarily about housing art. Its primary function is, as with other new museums, to attract tourists and tourist dollars. This explains something else that will not be talked about inside the

museum: The intricate PR campaign (flying in “architectural critics” from newspapers and TV networks and the like to attend the grand opening to be wined and dined for a week at no expense to themselves with an eye to encouraging them to write “dispassionate, objective, neutral” reports of the event) designed prior to the opening. Herbert Muschamp, architecture critic for the *New York Times*, met Gehry in Bilbao for a preview of the museum: “Do you want to see the building?” he asks, when we meet at my hotel. What a card” (Muschamp 1997: 58). Muschamp’s title is “The Miracle in Bilbao.” “If you want to look into the heart of American art today,” he writes, “you are going to need a passport. You will have to pack your bags, leave the USA and find your way to Bilbao, a small rusty city in the north east corner of Spain” (Muschamp 1997: 54).

The puffery is remarkable. Sue Peters wrote a feature story in the *San Francisco Examiner Magazine*, entitled “Basque-ing in Glory”:

There are no Jeff Koons’ “Puppy” Chia Pets for sale yet, nor even an faux titanium mini-museum key chains. This is a good sign that this city in Northern Spain isn’t rushing to exploit its new tourist attraction. But it may soon have to face the fact that it is home to one of the most significant modern buildings of this century, and if you build it – even in a little-known post – industrial town in the heart of Basque country – people will come.

What kind of people will come? They won’t be just the art critics: Already, school groups from nearby France, retirees from San Francisco and New York, and local families are making the pilgrimage to the new Guggenheim Museum, whose brilliant architecture defies description – and even photography [a considerable claim given the spread of photos ranging from the front of the magazine and five more in the article (Peters 1998: 58). We will get back to this in examining the audiences for the Guggenheim, but we want to hang onto the extent and success of the PR campaign to reach these audiences.

Since neither of us (the authors of this essay) watch TV, we will have to trust our theoretical instincts in predicting massive campaigns covering the opening on CBS, ABC, and NBC “news” and various cable channels. Magazines like *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *US News* also, not surprisingly, featured this event. The “text” of the Guggenheim was being designed even as the structure was being built and, from the standpoint of buying advertising time, it was a multi-million dollar campaign befitting the introduction of a new line of cologne.

Who are the speakers, the players, and who are not? Already, given who the

speaker/agents are in the process, members of the Guggenheim foundation, the Basque and Spanish elites, Kerns (the director of the Guggenheim), Gehry himself, we can map out various speaker audience relationships. Kerns, for example, had to put together a coalition that included members of the above groups who determined whether or not funds would be gathered and dispersed to build something, a museum before Gehry ever got involved. If Kerns could not persuade key decision makers in these groups of the viability of his ideas and later Gehry's "design," the structure would never have made it off the page or out of the computer.

The Guggenheim elite persuaded the Basque elite that building a museum was somehow in their interests to the point of ponying up a hundred million dollars (or was it the Basque elite, armed with a hundred million dollars, persuaded the Guggenheim elite that it should plant its museum in a depressed, rust-belt city in a war zone). What this line of questioning suggests is that we begin envisioning dialogue, negotiation, persuasion as central to the process of design and construction. It further suggests that, with a coalition in place, the money raised, and the building under construction becomes, in our thinking if not in our speech, reified, a "given." It becomes an "art museum", instead of a project whose purpose has to do with attracting tourists, to take only one example.

Once the coalition of decision makers in these various groups is in place and Gehry has been engaged, another audience looms intimately related to whatever shared sense of purpose guides coalition deliberations and collaborative activities. This is the aggregate of PR machinery existing in various countries operating in different media that have the potential of reaching the audiences of potential tourists whose travel plans and willingness to spend is part of the object. Who was responsible for targeting the opinion leaders in the media interested in promoting the arts and more specifically the arts envisioned by the Guggenheim project we do not know. But there is no doubt, surveying the broad based, favorable, and efficacious response from newspapers, magazines, and TV, that somewhere someone or some group was responsible for designing and implementing a campaign.

The strategies employed in this campaign and in the "stories" planted and inspired by this campaign to persuade viewers and readers to place themselves imaginatively in Bilbao, to examine their travel funds to realize this vision, to take the steps necessary to actualize the visit, this constitutes suasion of various speakers in relation to different audiences. Among them wealthy retirees, faculty

and students, culture vultures, women's tours, etc. which, by PR consultants, may be broken down demographically according to age, income, education, nationality, gender, etc. and according to technology.

Another venue for reaching the target audiences, one combining money and travel, lies in the internet. The Guggenheim has a home-page and so does one of the Basque groups, though not the separatists. The Guggenheim page makes no mention of Basques when it celebrates the museum at Bilbao, and the Basque page makes no mention of the Guggenheim and its cultural implications for the Basque people or its economic consequences for the region. Internet surfers, unaware of the politics of web-pages and the importance of what is included and excluded, may be tempted to take in the prose, the pictures, and a succession of informational windows a-critically which is to say equate what is given with what is real or what ought to be or necessarily is.

The audiences who are not included in these calculations are, among others, the poor, those who do not care about "high culture," travel, or talk about the arts. Certain groups of Basques, the separatists for example, may be ignored at one level only to play a role at another as an audience which needs to be neutralized. The agreement to make *Guernica* the centerpiece of the museum may be understood as a message sent to an audience in a position to oppose or disrupt the project and another audience whose willingness to be taxed to create this museum must also, at some point, be taken into consideration.

## 6. Conclusion

At the theoretical level, we are content with displaying the potential for pressing certain questions associated with the rhetorical tradition, questions having to do with speaker, message, and audiences (who are the players, and who are not; what is said, and what is not said). Through rhetorical contextualization even the most esoteric text can be dislodged from a hypothetical world of ideas to particulate in the systems that work to create such texts. Through it, the text recovers its place in history. Put another way, no text can be detached from speakers on the one hand or audiences on the other and a critical response to this re-engagement obliges us to identify those who are or have been systematically left out in the production and interpretation of such artifacts.

At a practical level, in relation to the practice of architecture in our time, rhetorical contextualization marks systems in various communities that prevent citizens from participating in or deliberating over the structure of the most important structures in their communities. Yes, there is a text, in the more

expansive meaning of the term, but it is a text created by and attended to by people with names. To admit this and to seek out those names (and the people so named) scales down the talk to the truly human, human beings in the here and now of trying to make sense of the world in which they find themselves. Put another way, we have tried to scale down our own talk, step out from behind our professional vocabularies and our disciplinary boundaries to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves.

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