



HIGH RISING : AN AERIAL VIEW

Spinning on his axis on the domed gallery roof, Rodney Graham's Erasmus as weathervane overlooks an East London skyline dominated by building cranes, rising towers and a glittering gherkin. There is something to be said for Erasmus' peculiar and particular vision — looking backwards and forwards, spinning at altitude — but it is not necessary to hoist ourselves skyward to appreciate that the expansion of the Whitechapel Gallery occurs not in isolation, but within the context of a transforming cityscape and an architectural vernacular increasingly allied to spectacle and wonder.

Whitechapel Gallery, described by Nikolaus Pevsner at its half-century point as an 'epoch-making building', is in its expanded form now illustrative of another epochal moment; one defined by an unparalleled growth in the number and diversity of art museums, by the augmentation of existing sites, a global increase in museum visitors and a new prominence within cultural discourse. As the sensibility and activities of the museum penetrate everyday culture and experience — from the veneration of flea markets and retro fashions to the memoir boom ('self-musealization' now transmitted via blog, Facebook update and Twitter), the museum has become, in the formulation of Andreas Huyssen, the 'key paradigm of contemporary cultural activities'.²

As if to emphasise this new authority, in the dozen years since the unveiling of the great Gehry Guggenheim, the art museum has also given rise to a condition — oft diagnosed, much discussed — known as 'The Bilbao Effect'.

The Bilbao effect is what local politicians and those in the regeneration business hope to gain for their towns when investing in an exciting new arts building. It all began more than a decade ago when Frank Gehry's stunning, titanium-clad Guggenheim museum was declared open by King Juan Carlos even as ETA tried to blow him, and Jeff Koons' Puppy (the museum's mascot), off the face of the Basque city.³

Of course the Wow-factor⁴ intrinsic to these architectural icons predates Gehry's 'titanium artichoke' but, in combination with the global franchising of the Guggenheim brand, Bilbao has become a byword for financial and cultural regeneration by means of a flagship building project. The dictum 'Expand or Perish', attributed to Thomas Krens in his former role as Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation,⁵ has been adopted with gusto, if mixed results. While the closure of the two Rem Koolhaas-designed Guggenheim outposts in Las Vegas leaves the Sin City strip with only one art museum;⁶ on an island named Happiness off the Arabian Gulf — Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi — the museum makers are breaking ground. In a stunning instance of Bilbao-Effect-gone-bonkers, the world's biggest Guggenheim, courtesy again of Gehry, will share marina space with an outpost of the Louvre, designed by Jean Nouvel, a performing arts centre by Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando's Maritime Museum and the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, by Foster + Partners.

The Whitechapel Gallery might be located on an island — but it is neither *ex novo*, nor particularly cheery. Thank goodness for that. Looking, like Erasmus, both backwards and forwards, we will remember that a belief in the ameliorative potential of the art museum is not, like so many Guggenheim franchises, bulbous extrusions and globetrotting starchitects, a phenomenon that can be ascribed to 'The Bilbao Effect', but was rather present at the very foundation of the Whitechapel Art Palace in 1901. In the dark heart of 'outcast London', the Whitechapel was founded upon Ruskinian ideals, which identified the gallery as a catalyst for urban and social transformation. Just as Bilbao has become an, albeit contested, icon of what architecture and art can achieve for a post-industrial ruin, Whitechapel Gallery arose as an act of Late-Victorian social reform. Its target: the newly enfranchised working class of East London, who might be spiritually and socially elevated by their exposure to the transcendent beauty of art.

Transformation is, moreover, inscribed at the very core of a gallery whose awesome reputation stems not from a collection of permanent works, but rather from a shifting series of exhibitions and a remarkable role call of historic firsts. Thus liberated from the art museum's characteristically platonic emphasis on the eternal, the atemporal and the fixed, Whitechapel Gallery finds true echo in the frenetic, fantastic East End, and its ever-mobile, vivid, shifting populace.

Rises in the East is the first publication to chart the history of the Whitechapel Gallery through its phases of construction and expansion. In essays by Stephen Escritt and William Mann, the gallery is examined as both an outstanding example of Arts and Crafts architecture and as the site of an innovative extension, executed by leading architectural firm Robbrecht en Daem Architecten. The practical and ideological considerations of the expansion are further teased out in a conversation between architect Paul Robbrecht, artist advisor Rachel Whiteread and design critic Alice Rawsthorn. Presented alongside a visual record of the construction process, archival material and a new programme of 'Social Sculpture', *Rises in the East* reveals the gallery's numerous stages of transformation.

Surveying a century of museum design shaped, at one extremity, by the whiplash curves of Art Nouveau and, at its opposite, by Gehry's titanium extrusions, is to foreground the centrality of ornamentation and of spectacle. By contrast, the expanded Whitechapel Gallery, in its refusal of sculptural iconicity, in its subtle efficacy, might just represent, in Hal Foster's phrase, 'a new moment in the art-architecture rapport'.⁷ Spectacular, show-pony architecture has been eschewed in favour of democratic design — the original façades of the now conjoined gallery and library buildings are maintained, as is the gallery's direct relationship to Whitechapel High Street, over which Erasmus — a beacon of learning, a symbol of enlightenment humanism — spins and spins.

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notes

1. Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952, 421
2. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, Routledge, 1995, 14
3. Jonathan Glancey, 'Margate should resist the Bilbao Effect', *Guardian*, 25 July 2008
4. Gehry, as reported in *Time*, tells a story about a German client who came to him after seeing an earlier building in Switzerland: 'He said to me, "That one was Wow! Now give us Wow! Wow! Wow!"', Richard Lacayo, 'The Frank Gehry Experience', *Time*, 18 June 2000
5. Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika, 'Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim: The Museum as a Cultural Tool', *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim*, Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2005, 16
6. The closure of the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum in 2008 was preceded by the suspension, in 2003, of the 63,700 square-foot Guggenheim Las Vegas
7. Hal Foster, 'Architecture-Eye', *Artforum*, vol. 45, February 2007, 249



photographs Patrick Lears

