



# performing cultures

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## Cultural Focus in Action: Architecture and Urban Space

Art is Action. And so is Architecture. Not only when a *Performance* is held in it, as in the recent International Encounters organised by the Spanish Ministry of Culture<sup>1</sup>, but in the everyday life of any building. It is often said that a building is like the mould of “frozen” or “petrified” life as a reference to its actual immobility. It is as if the package of life had come to a halt at a given moment, as if in the enchantment of a fantastic tale. But if any building allows, directs, or stimulates the life in movement that it will stage, when the building is a work of art, because of its aesthetics it does so with a greater intensity, even going as far as representing it or symbolising it. In public buildings this action already begins in the urban space that surrounds it, especially if the building is extended in some way to facilitate the transition from the exterior to the interior and vice versa.

This occurs in the three buildings that have been studied. It has been said that in the restricted tender that was won by Frank Gehry for the Bilbao Guggenheim, it was his proposal that paid most attention to the place; J. Fiona Ragheb affirms that in contrast to the other entries “he was particularly sensitive about the surrounding area<sup>2</sup>. In effect, as well as carefully locating the volumes and entrances of the building, he carries out a full display of resources, lakes, ramps, and stairways around it, to the point of practically surrounding the raised bridge that crosses the site. Rafael Moneo has studied the theme of place in detail, writing about it in an academic manner<sup>3</sup> and delimiting his position, which can be observed in the explanations that he gives of many of his projects<sup>4</sup>; although it is true that his specific proposal does not always result in the same action (precisely because the places are different). As for the Kursaal building in San Sebastian, the project of which was the result of another restricted tender and which appealed owing to its relationship with the city, he characterised it as follows: “When singular geographic conditions demand an intuitive architectural response”<sup>5</sup>. That intui-

tion leads him to resolve many functions with a neutral base, opening up this base to the city, with the aim of leaving clean on the podium the cubic shapes of the auditoriums, which turn their back on the city to make their way towards the neighbouring hills and open out towards the sea. Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza, who was commissioned the task of designing the Museum for the work of his friend and collaborator, the sculptor Jorge Oteiza, solved the problem of the place caused by the sloping location of the artist's home and workshop in a village near Pamplona (Alzuza). The determinant of assuming those popular constructions in the Museum promoted by the Foundation that the artist had created also led it to defend them, protecting them with the new modern construction by means of staggered terraces.

The three buildings are noticeably contemporary<sup>6</sup>. Despite this however they can be considered from a different stylistic point of view, as they range from a certain deconstructivism finished in titanium to a certain brutalism of bare darkened concrete via a certain minimalism in translucent glass. All however share the attention to the relationship established by the building with the place and the important part that this plays in the project process. In the cases presented neither is the building indifferent to the place, as in early Modern Architecture, nor is it absolutely conditioned or determined by it, as is claimed by a certain contemporary sector, and as was already announced by the Christopher Alexander design method. If it is established that the problems to be resolved are those determining the project, it can be inferred that once these are defined the object or building is also defined. Any design problem is initiated, Alexander affirmed with reference to illustrious authors such as L. Moholy-Nagy or Walter Gropius, with an effort to achieve an adjustment between the shape in question and its context<sup>7</sup>. However, here the intelligent capturing of the values of the site, appreciating the possibility of exploiting them, emphasising them, and completing them, and of ignoring or neutralising other less favourable characteristics, must as Moneo points out depend on the skill of the architect's profession and (we can add) also implies an assessment of what is human, of what is definite, which is expressed in the proposed relationship of what is public with what is private.

This is because the question of place, the recognised importance of the place, is connected to the specific spatial definition of the architectural solution adopted. It is clear that the space of early Modern Architecture was abstract (a simple and univocal geometrical definition) in the same way as its form. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, after the most crucial period of Modernity, architecture has largely recovered its figuration (partly formal but above all spatial). But can a space be figurative? In my opinion architectural space is all the more figurative the more it accepts and emphasises the various definitions of the

physical space, which have been denominated on other occasions “sense-spaces” (with its qualities of pressure, lighting and colour, sound, temperature, etc.). Its perception and definition range from what is directly or indirectly sensitive to what is representative and intellectual.

In this way a complex spatial structure is distinguished in architecture, because the definitions of each space corresponding to a physical factor do not coincide although there is a relationship between them. It is a less pure space, less capturable in a single instant than the abstract space; but it has a greater sensory richness and is more capable of assuming different meanings: a space richer in associations that involves more the person and his/her action. The action (*Aesthetics in action* is the topic of the congress) projected by these more figurative spaces is greater than that of more abstract spaces. The three buildings studied here in their contact with their surrounding areas (and which they have received and ultimately defined to a large extent) are particularly active because they are more figurative in the spatial sense.

As a result of this their definition is properly spatial-temporal and not unchanging; even in many cases counting on the intervention and significant perception of the variations that occur in the weather; they change during the day and again during the night. These are varied aspects that are perceived by all the senses and that lead to responses with certain forms of behaviour, encouraged by the imagination to which they appeal. Now we feel that these three buildings would not be so striking if they were at different locations; but neither would they be if the architect had omitted this feature in his project. Corresponding to the precision of the places, which is different in each one of them, the three buildings have different formalisations, but all of them are dynamic rather than static. They belong to expressive aesthetics rather than rational ones. For this reason they rouse one to action: the user interacts with those shapes and spaces.

At the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum the surroundings are particularly complex, being defined not only on a floor but also in three dimensions, given the difference in height between the urban street that borders it on one side and the estuary that runs almost parallel to it. Beneath this street run the tracks of a railway that served that industrial area, and which is left accessible by the project. This is complemented by the huge bridge known as the Puente de la Salve that crosses part of the site with its fast and heavy traffic. The architect responds to the dynamic character of these tracks with equally dynamic connections on a pedestrian scale, linking routes and reflecting flows in lakes that appear to extend the estuary itself. These are not only added elements, such as stairways and ramps that leave and surround the building to allow multiple viewpoints of the same; it is rather that the building is dynamic in itself and



has extensions that interest these urban elements. Its open tower that stands on the other side of the bridge engages in dialogue with the room *fish* that crawls beneath it; and with its skylights that rise above the bridge towards the tower with a virtually closed link. The multiple access possibilities equip various visual routes of the building itself, which is sufficiently complex to be of interest from all sides. People move around out of pure aesthetic pleasure to contemplate the building and its surrounding area, and also to look towards where the building is looking. The aesthetics of the building attract them to activate its users and those passing nearby.

The dynamic spatial definition achieved refers to gravity and the effort of overcoming it; to the fast passing of the cars and the slower movement of the ships; to the vision of the bodies and their reflections in deconstructed glass and in titanium; to light and colour qualities that mingle with the sounds of the city, humidity and thermals. It is a variable perception extended in time, in which the person becomes involved not only physically but is also transported to reflection by imagination and the various associations that awake before these organic forms that are linked to natural or urban elements. The visitor tends to return and check the variations that the atmospheric elements produce in titanium and in glass. Sometimes these are stimulated with fireworks or light and vapour shows.

Many studies have been carried out in relation to the tourist attraction of the building-museum and how this has contributed towards the economic relaunch of the city. In an immediate manner by encouraging consumption in nearby establishments, and in a wider manner as part of international tourist routes, this attraction extends to the whole city which is thus culturally revalued by the so-called "Guggenheim effect" that other cities have attempted to reproduce. This phenomenon, which cannot be examined here, is also that of *Aesthetics-in-action*, as without the aesthetic attractiveness which makes the building a work of art, a spectacular one in this case because it also appeals to the senses of the layman, the effect would not have occurred.

At the Kursaal, as Moneo affirms, "The architecture acts as a tool for recognizing and revealing the site's presence"<sup>8</sup>. In other words, he physically accepts the space that interests him around it (the geographical space: the mouth of the River Urumea and the long seafront) as it really is, without leaving it aside; on the contrary he encourages it. In accordance with this the auditoriums turn their back on the city, engaging in a dialogue with the hills (on the one hand the Ulía and on the other the Urgull) and with the sea at a scale that is measured with them, starting off already high, on a wide podium finished in dark slate that cuts off the site. The prefabricated concrete elements in which a series of rough slates

have been incrustated to constitute this enclosure are according to the architect a reference to the works of Richard Long, in another manner of approaching figuration. It will reserve the essential union of the building with the city, to the design of the podium, on the street, in the Avenida de la Zurriola; locating in it the cafeteria and the shops, and what he calls the *covered plaza* that gives joint access to the various functions of the Kursaal (auditoriums, exhibition or conference halls, the delegates' dining hall, the ticket office, the stairway to the garage, etc.). In the rainy climate of the city a covered plaza will always be a crowded place in which to take refuge. But the podium is not drilled; the building affirms in it its unity, not allowing access to the beach or affording sea views except by surrounding it, until it is possible to rise from the promenade to the roof of the podium itself. With this the user or visitor acquires a total perception of the building from all points of view. To these can be added the most distant or global ones that geography again allows: from the edge of the Paseo Nuevo and from the sea, from where its widest significance can be better understood.

But there is something more, Moneo says: "The site is where the specific object – the building- acquires its identity and finds its dimension, its unique, unrepeatable condition."<sup>9</sup> . Having an identity is standing out, personalising, a case of something that cannot be anywhere else, that, despite its simplicity is not at all abstract; something that with its specific references can even be considered in line with figuration; something that one can engage in dialogue. Even the most abstract auditoriums refer to two stranded rocks, and they are translucent glass cubes that withstand the attack of the sea breeze and the storms, being inclined (invigorated according to Moneo following Oteiza) by the attraction they feel towards the respective hills. Their size and orientation are different; they may associate themselves with lanterns or telescopes that invite perhaps the viewer or the immediate town centre to see the sea through it. And they are sealed in parallel strips on a slight slope (they are almost horizontal) of concave curved glass. They are also said to be flexible in the wind, avoiding being perforated also by the shape and the force of the waves breaking at their feet. In this way they show the atmospheric variations, the varying nuances of natural light; and of the artificial light lodged between the two glass faces of the wall, which at night takes on a yellowish tone that unifies the two volumes or traces a colour symphony required by circumstances. This precept has also been contemplated in the glass culture that the expressionist Paul Scheerbarth<sup>10</sup> defined in detail for the future. This plus of expressivity, which is received from the most immediate minimalistic rationality of the project, is therefore affirmed.

The place in which the Oteiza Museum is set is defined not only by the slope on which can be found a village of stone houses crowned by a church but also

by strong physical and historical pre-existences. Alzuza was the place chosen by the sculptor to live and work during the last stage of his life. He recorded in writing: "I did the right thing in isolating myself here; I came to reflect and to work in silence, to wait in silence."<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that he wanted the remains of his wife Itziar to rest next to the church, later together with his own (a mere month before the inauguration of the Museum). He designed himself the united crosses that bore their names and dates and erected them in advance. His house and workshop (traditional constructions of the village) have been added to the new construction (Oteiza wanted the door to his house to be the entrance to the Museum) in such a way as to be visible adjacent to the same, and with the architect having given them a patio of their own to individualise them up to a point. The vicinity of the new building also includes the small popular construction used by the Foundation as an archive at some time in the past. These determinants of the place may perhaps have been the initial catalyst for the design of the staggered terraces with which the architect has protected the buildings mentioned and the new Museum, giving them unity and adapting them to the slope of the terrain, anticipating the parking areas and the ample access that the new functions require.

This irregular series of terraces in sharp and obtuse angles, finished in slate, holds within itself the idea (and very often the reality) of movement, of action: by approximation and intertwining, as an invitation; or for some even as a walled defense. Sometimes with access from the outside, sometimes from the inside of the museum, they stand out from the darkened red concrete of the main cubic section of the Museum, and because of their dark colour combine with the expressive skylights in the roof and other black plate details to be found there. They are not abstract but rather specific, an integral part of the land. While Oteiza was alive this place was already an attraction for the most intimate and intrepid admirers of his teaching and work. Today that same attraction remains open to all because of the reminiscences of the place and because of his work, enhanced with the aesthetic quality with which it is shown in the new architectural ensemble. Oíza also wanted to stress that the nave and main section of the Museum recalls or newly figures the hangar in the half-light where Oteiza worked on his creation of many years previously in Aránzazu where both collaborated. Evidence of this is provided by the so-called sculptural group that marks the entrance to the Museum and reproduces the central sculptures of the frieze of the apostles from the façade of this Basilica: Peter and Paul in confidence or perhaps fraternal correction. A sculpture of a certain abstraction that manages to retain its figuration, and which together with the remainder of the ensemble allows a close interpretation of the person in fully contemporary language.

Now that we have to finish, as common conclusions we can emphasise that the three works considered:

A. Generate urban life around the building. Part of that life is linked to their function, but part is also simply stimulated by its contemplation owing to the aesthetic attraction that is given to the place.

B. Extend the aesthetics of the building to the vicinity, with the core of the building taking on a more important role that imposes itself on what is pre-existing.

C. The resources they use grant a base from which the building arises in a more natural manner, minimising the sharp contrast that the building may provide in a medium of different aesthetics.

D. Avoid the erecting of other constructions near the building to invade it; in other words they create an area of respect to surround it.

E. Develop in this manner a space around it that has an impact on the city centre, a desirable situation that cannot occur in other buildings with only a limited site.

F. As a consequence they interact with urban life in a wider sense. They have to do with the real mobility, or even the imaginary mobility, of peoples, cars, and even ships. Their aesthetics are not only to be contemplated at a distance from a single viewpoint, but rather to be explored, surrounded; aesthetics that call you to approach and enter. Experiences that are not only visual but also tactile, sound, real, or imaginary, in short vital and stimulating.

## Endnotes

1. IV Encuentro Internacional El Arte es Acción. Performance & Arquitectura, November, 2011, old Edificio de Tabacalera de Madrid and Auditorio del Ministerio de Cultura.
2. J. Fiona Ragheb, "Museo Guggenheim Bilbao. Bilbao 1991-7", *Frank Ghery Arquitecto*, ed J. Fiona Ragheb, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Nueva York y FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, Bilbao, 2001, p. 161 ("tuvo especial sensibilidad con el entorno").
3. Rafael Moneo, "[inmovilidad substancial] El Murmullo del Lugar", *Rafael Moneo. El Croquis*, 20+64+98, 2004, pp. 634-641. Based in Rafael Moneo, *The Murmur of the Site*, ANYWHERE Conference, 9 June, 1992 in Yufuin, Japón. Spanish version, Rafael Moneo, *CIRCO* 1995, 24.
4. Rafael Moneo, *Rafael Moneo: Apuntes sobre 21 Obras*, Gustavo Gili, English version, *Rafael Moneo: Remarks on 21 Works*, New York: The Monacelli Press (Random House, Inc.), 2010.

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5. Ibid., p. 375.
6. Guggenheim's project was selected in 1991 and the museum was opened in 1997. Kur-saal's project was selected in 1990 and its building finished in 1999. Oteiza Museum's first design study drawings were sketched in 1992, its basic project worked between 1995 and 1997, and built between 1998 and 2003.
7. Christopher Alexander, *Notes on the synthesis of form*, Harvard University Press, 1966. Spanish version, *Ensayo sobre la síntesis de la Forma*, Ed. Infinito, 1969.
8. Moneo, *Remarks on 21 Works*, p. 381.
9. Moneo, *Remarks on 21 Works*, p. 377.
10. Paul Scheerbart, *Glasarchitektur & Glashausbriefe*, Verlag Klaus G. Renner, München, 1986. Spanish version, *La arquitectura de cristal*, colección Arquitecturas 37. Colegio Oficial de Aparejadores y Arquitectos Técnicos de Murcia, 1998.
11. Oteiza (Alzuza, February 1975), "Línea de defensa en Altzuza", Josep Quetglas, Guillermo Zuaznabar, Fernando Marzá, *Oiza, Oteiza. Babes.lerroa Altzuzan jarria. Línea de defensa en Alzuza*, ed. Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya, Barcelona, 2004, p. 81.