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Introduction

In the United States 6,000 museums are operating today with more opening every year (Goldberger, 12). At this moment there are at least 33 major museum projects in various stages of design and construction with budgets ranging from ten to hundreds of millions of dollars (Russel, 84). Museums have become the secular cathedrals of our time, and the most common vehicle for progressive architectural expression. They have become symbols of cities cultural and civic values.

All of this activity would logically indicate an explosion in the public's interest in art. While museum attendance has steadily grown with the increased number of museums, the public's attention on new art has waned. A new artist has not captured greater public's imagination since Warhol. In the first half of the century artists like Picasso, Matisse, and Pollack were international figures. The increased boom in museums has little to do with art. Museums have strayed from their intended mission of preserving and displaying art into a tool for economic and corporate interests.

Urban Renewal

Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao museum opened to nearly universal acclaim in 1997. Its sensuous curving forms would be a major influence on subsequent architecture, its influence on urban design has been even greater though. The Guggenheim Bilbao was the most high profile part of an ambitious renewal plan employed by the Basque government. A new subway system and bridges were built, the port was moved and expanded, and a new airport terminal was constructed. The regeneration of Bilbao was solely credited to Gehry's museum and the other efforts were ignored by outsider views. Overnight city and government officials believed complex urban social and economic problems could be solved by building a shiny new museum designed by superstar architects. From Detroit to Manchester major urban redevelopment plans have been developed with museums at the fulcrum. In Liverpool a vibrant shipping industry has

been replaced by a museum of shipping (Salamon). Despite the wildly different sites and conditions many of these urban plans bare striking similarities. In 2003 ten urban renewal projects featured a proposed Frank Gehry building. In the Past Museums and architecture were products of successful economies. The skyscrapers of Manhattan or the inner loop in Chicago were not built to attract business and activity but were built because of them. The theory that museums themselves can turn around troubled areas is a highly contentious one.

The first urban renewal development centered on arts as a catalyst was Lincoln Center in New York City (Treanor) In the late fifties fifteen acres on the upper west side were taken by eminent domain and bulldozed. The ethics of the Lincoln Center project are debatable, as seven thousand working families were forced to move out of their homes. Most agree that Lincoln Center had an immediate impact on economic development. What Lincoln Center had that many cultural projects lack today is established cultural tenants with proven track records and established audiences. Museum have until recently always been built for the purpose of exhibiting existing collections. Today the condition has arisen where art is not the central function to a museum. Bilbao had proven that a museum with a relatively unremarkable collection could still attract large crowds. Today museums are designed and built without collections or established collections. Art has become a secondary function of museums today, as important as the gift shop and the café.

Grow or Die

The majority of big museum commissions have consisted of the expansion of existing institutions. The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the High Museum in Atlanta, and the Portland Art Museum are a few examples of major expansions completed in the past six months alone. The reasons for expansion are invariably contributed to a need for more exhibition space. The true reasons behind the rush for museum expansion lie with less altruistic goals. Museum boards have been infected with the business principle that you either “grow or die”. Museums must remain active in acquisitions to please patrons and trustees. Selling museum owned pieces is rare, as

selling discourages donations, so permanent collections grow every year. Many larger institutions are only able to exhibit 5% of their permanent collection. The Whitney museum which has desperately tried to expand for 25 years is only able to exhibit 2% of its permanent collection (Goldberger, 169).

Expansions have as much if not more to do with the fulfillment of trustees' egos rather than any philanthropic ideals. Museum boards are made up primarily of incredibly wealthy citizens. When new people join the board there is a desire to leave a lasting legacy. The flood of publicity and attention that new buildings bring is often too irresistible for museum boards to ignore. As the opening of museums becomes more commonplace the media payoff is ever diminishing. The opening of the eighty-seven million dollar Walker Art Center addition in Minneapolis by Herzog De Meuron attracted a large amount of local press for the week leading up to its opening. Nationally it was overshadowed by the opening of the De Young Museum in San Francisco designed ironically by Herzog De Meuron.

Expansion by itself is not a negative thing. Increased exhibition space allows for more art to be shown improved curatorial opportunities. The problem with expansion is two-fold. One is that as a museum grows it loses its identity and its purpose. The other problem is a more pragmatic one. As museums grow, so do their costs, to cover those costs museums must find ways to keep attendance high. This can result in a museum catering to the lowest common denominator and causes museums to make more conservative choices. In a way it is similar to the film industry's reliance on blockbusters for economic health.

The Guggenheim is the most extreme example of museum expansion. The Guggenheim has taken a step beyond simple physical expansion into turning the Guggenheim into a world wide brand akin to a high brow version of Disney or Starbucks (Mathur). For most of the museum's history it operated out of the relatively cozy confines of Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic building on the upper east side of Manhattan. Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim's director, who entered the job with extensive business experience but little experience with museums and art, developed the idea of franchising the Guggenheim to develop a world wide presence. Krens has opened branches in Bilbao, Venice, Soho, and Venice, with proposals for branches in Brazil, Asia, and Africa

(Mathur). Part of the reasons behind the franchising of the Guggenheim was their relatively small endowment for an institution of its prominence. MOMA's endowment could cover the museums expenses for close to a decade, while the Guggenheims endowment could only cover the museums expenses for a year at most (Klebnikov). In the grow or die museum culture, the Guggenheim leveraged its main assets, name and permanent collection. The Basque government entered into a business relationship with the Guggenheim where for twenty million dollars they were allowed to use the Guggenheim name and access to the permanent collection. In Las Vegas the Guggenheim developed a financial arrangement with the Venetian hotel in which the hotel fronted a new building designed by OMA and all operating expenses, while again the Guggenheim offered it brand and permanent collection. The Venetian and the Guggenheim would then split the profits down the middle (Ward, 50). While Kerns described the museum as an innovative way to bring art to the masses, critics saw it as cynical moneymaking venture that was not even innovative. Four years earlier Steve Wynn had built galleries to display his collection in hopes of attracting high rollers. His galleries turned into a surprising financial boon to his hotel, drawing 15,000 visitors a day when it first opened (Ward, 50). The Guggenheim Las Vegas turned out to be a financial disaster and closed after only fifteen months (Saltz). The Guggenheim had in five years gone from the unqualified triumph of Bilbao to an institution which many saw as a symbol of everything wrong with the art world.

McGuggenheim brought to you by Burger King

In the United States business and museums have always maintained a close relationship, as opposed to Europe where museums are funded mainly by the state. Private museums are almost exclusively started by the gift of wealthy art enthusiasts in the case of the Guggenheim it was industrialist Solomon Guggenheim, whereas the Getty Museum was created by the oil tycoon John Paul Getty. This relationship worked because the curatorial direction was helmed by professional curators who were unconnected to the patron's business interests. This separation allows for museums to have tax-exempt non-profit status and to retain artistic credibility (Klebinov).

In the current climate, lines have blurred between corporate sponsorship and museums. Museum directors have increasingly close relationships both personal and business. Another worrying trend has been sponsorships that influence exhibition choices.

Barry Munitz is the president of the J. Paul Getty Trust a trust which oversees the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. He is a former businessman and administrator with little background in the art world. A controversy was ignited when he had fragile 17th century drawings moved to a villa for a part, despite the protest of the museums curators. He claimed that the drawings were used to impress prominent art collectors as a way of enticing them to give to the museum. The friends he invited however were Hollywood executives with no art collections to speak of (Kennedy).

A more worrying trend than cronyism is the creeping corporate influence on exhibition. Ford Motor Company displayed a Ford car in front of an exhibition they sponsored at the Corcoran Gallery. The Whitney Museum exhibited a retrospective on the photography of Richard Avedon. It was billed as a critical retrospective of his work. Later it was discovered that many of the exhibitions organizers worked for Richard Avedon's magazine or publisher. Even more troubling was the fact that Avedon paid for the cost of the exhibition himself out of a grant he had received (Economist). Even the American Museum of Natural History has been susceptible to influence of corporate sponsorship. It collaborated with FAO Schwartz on an advertising campaign for 1997 show called "Endangered, Exploring a World at Risk"; FAO Schwartz sold stuffed toy versions of the endangered animals (Mathur). The Smithsonian mounted an exhibition called the "information age" an exhibition on the computer, the exhibition was sponsored by electronics companies.

The Guggenheim has been especially egregious in allowing corporate sponsors to dictate a museum's path. Thomas Krens, a motorcycle enthusiast himself, organized a blockbuster show on the art of the motorcycle. The Museum curators and the public felt the exhibition was out of step with the Museum's mission and reflected the interests of the director a little too closely. The real bone of contention was that the exhibition was funded directly by BMW a manufacturer whose motorcycles were among those exhibited (Saltz). The Guggenheim was at the center of another controversy over an

exhibit on the work of fashion designer Giorgio Armani. The idea of displaying fashion in the rotunda of the Guggenheim was even more controversial than displaying motorcycles. The exhibition itself was criticized for not contextualizing Armani fashion in the field of design, as little process was shown. Instead it was seen as a glitzy shallow advertising campaign for Armani. What truly enraged observers was that the exhibition was sponsored by the fashion magazine *In Style* and that it suspiciously coincided with a fifteen million dollar gift by Giorgio Armani himself (Mathur).

The rising corporate influence is not only a danger to an institution's artistic integrity but it endangers all museums financial stability. If museums ties are too closely intertwined with their corporate sponsors they risk the loss of tax exempt status. With out this tax exempt status donations would dramatically decrease and institutions would face an untenable tax burden (economist).

Conclusion

The American art museum is at a crossroads. With steadily increasing attendances and construction booming it has achieved a new prominence in cities and the public's conscience. The desire for success in an increasingly competitive environment has pushed museums to forget their principles and stray from their original mission. In a culture in which we are increasingly inundated by crass commercialization and corporatism it is vital for museums to remain islands of reprieve. Museums are reflections of a society's values and desires. It is up to the public to demand that institutions return to their core values.

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