



Article

ARCHITECTURE, URBAN PLANNING AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: BILBAO AS A CASE STUDY

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The emergence of a collective identity, a complex social and psychological process, may be linked to a specific place and a particular urban layout. Architecture demarcates interior and exterior spaces that not only frame our relationships but can also generate a mirror image of the internal world. The authors examine relevant contributions from the sparse psychoanalytic literature on this subject, to support their hypothesis that changes to a city's landscape, design, or architecture, when wholeheartedly embraced by its citizens, can serve to forge a new collective identity that helps to deal with absence, pain, and loss. They present the city of Bilbao, Spain, as a case study. This once thriving industrial city had collapsed into economic ruin, rife with social conflict, but since the 1990s, in an urban renewal, has emerged as a unique tourist destination. It has become a modern art and cultural center, symbolized by its most famous piece of contemporary architecture.

KEY WORDS: urban planning; collective identity; group processes; architecture

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The city of Bilbao, Spain, has undergone a remarkable transformation: from a dilapidated post-industrial area to an appealing destination for international tourism. The symbol of this great change is a unique building that, for some, represents the real catalyzing force behind this huge shift. As the reader may have guessed, we are referring to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao designed by Frank Gehry, which opened in 1997. Alongside it stand a collection of exceptional buildings designed by the *crème de la crème* of international architecture. Because this style of urban planning has been

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associated with a certain economic upturn for Bilbao, cities in other parts of the world have attempted to replicate it, thus far, unsuccessfully. The reaction of the inhabitants of Bilbao has been fascinating: embracing the change with apparent enthusiasm and somehow adopting this strange museum that possesses a beauty totally alien to the city's historically conservative standards and even houses a strident collection of starkly unfamiliar contemporary art. How is it possible to explain our community's fervor for this construction and its designer, now forever the city's patron saint? Why do people, far from being fans of the avant-garde, subscribe *en masse* to be friends of the Guggenheim Museum, making it Spain's second most publicly supported museum after El Prado? We are trying to reflect here on the process which possibly has something to do with the complex phenomena of individual and collective identities and their development.

Individual identity is formed by complex lifelong processes. According to Kernberg (2006), the specific set of meaningful interactions that each person experiences are fundamental elements within it. Each emotionally relevant event leaves its mark on our internal world, forming a framework comprised of affects, as well as self- and object- representations that define our internal structure. When we speak of collective identities or large groups, we include the presence of a group ideal, or an identity *tent* as described by Volkan (2013). The collective strives to represent itself in a certain way, which includes idealized and feared visions of relationships with other groups. Most notably within the group are the tasks assigned to the collective by a previous generation. These tasks that may have been handed down many generations before, even centuries ago and are expressed both at the global level of the large group (what many in the group more or less see as their apparent destiny) and at a personal level, when we consider tasks that are passed on to the next generation within each family, processes that are all developed unconsciously. Only in times of crisis, when the overall structure of the group falters, do these processes usually become public, presenting themselves as fully conscious goals and explicit recommendations of behavior and direction. There will have to be leaders of the group, blessed with a special charisma, to take charge of declaring these tasks, explaining them, following what Bion (1961) identified in his famous "basic assumptions" when he described group processes.

The city has always generated contradictory points of view. Some have seen it as quintessentially humane (Aristotle, 350 BCE); for others (Rousseau, 1763) it is a place of roguery and degeneracy. In the ancient myth of Romulus and Remus (Paterculus, ca. 19 B.C.–ca. 30 A.D.), Romulus symbolically creates the city by ploughing a square furrow in the ground, thus enclosing a space. Remus, by crossing that line, meets his death. This founding myth of the city of Rome could be seen as a symbolic description

of the city as an enclosed space, which offers protection, and the deadly, dangerous consequences of rejecting it. The city is a place that protects its borders from blood and fire. It emerges from the countryside and has no wish to return. In some respects, the relationship between city and countryside is similar to the one between humanity and nature: an eternal struggle between the fragile creativity that accompanies the human abode and the muted power of natural forces.

Most of us live in cities. Every day, we brush up against thousands of people, most of whom would provide us with a warm embrace but suffocating protection. This collection of buildings in which we live also defines a set of interior and exterior spaces and establishes rules for navigating them. It is a transitional territory in the Winnicottian (1953) sense of the term. Robert Langan (2000, p. 70) describes it precisely: "...architecture is an exploration of the permeability of the boundary between inside and outside. A building establishes in the physical world an inside, an outside, and the possibilities of exchange between them." By producing interior and exterior environments, the buildings of a city bring about the appearance of potential spaces, places where internal and external realities overlap and where theatre — in other words creativity — becomes possible (Jemstedt, 2000; Schinaia, 2014; Rachmani, 2019). These are spaces where each of us can experience a sense of engagement bonding (Angel, 2000). Henri Lefebvre, a French Marxist philosopher and one of the key figures in the May 1968 revolts, describes how each society builds its own space suitable for itself (Lefebvre, 1974). Therefore, each social group can be examined based on the way its members generate and live in their spaces.

When a city is the setting for our memories, it becomes part of our identity. There is a clear sense of belonging to a city, to a street or square, to a physical environment that surrounds us, cares for us and/or oppresses us. Admittedly, we can live in places we do not hold dear. This can often be accompanied by a perpetual longing, a *saudade*, that expresses the pain of separation and distance.

A city and its structures may give rise to certain group behavior. Social phenomena are linked to urban settings. This is the case with roundabouts (Weizman, 2019), which have repeatedly become the epicenters of popular movements (Korea, Egypt, Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, etc.). Occasionally, an authoritarian regime will make the strange, albeit logical, decision to remove roundabouts and replace them with simple crossroads to discourage the cooperative and freedom-seeking social behavior that roundabouts seem to foster. Roundabouts, in addition to aiding the flow of traffic, require cooperation and self-control. These structures only work if drivers are aware of their rights and duties and put them into practice in a coordinated fashion.

Between the years 1926 and 1928, Ludwig Wittgenstein, with the help of his architect friend, Paul Engelmann, spent two years designing and building a villa for his elder sister. At the time, the great Viennese philosopher was trying to follow the recommendation of Kant, who viewed philosophy as architecture (see Wijdeveld, 1994; Jeffries, 2020). The big philosophical question, “how to live?” requires many responses and within different spheres. Architecture and urban planning attempt to answer some of these. Consequently, designing and building a house becomes a philosophical task.³

Undoubtedly, the way in which we feel connected to a city and how far we perceive it as part of ourselves can be linked to that big question and that search for answers. It is obviously not by chance that another of the clearly controversial giants of contemporary philosophy, Martin Heidegger, is sometimes referred to as “the house builder” (Eilenberger, 2019, p. 292). He states, “we are because we dwell” (Schinaia, 2014, p. 62). Ortega y Gasset reverses the order and sees dwelling as a consequence of man’s capacity to build, adapting the world for his well-being (Ortega y Gasset, 1952). Heidegger links being and time. Being precedes the entity and it is time that provides meaning. The city concept is linked to time. Cities oblige their inhabitants to confront life and death (Bollas, 2000), because those who inhabit built structures will be outlived by the places they inhabit. Monuments are especially ambiguous constructions on the temporal level; they represent a backdrop for the living within a space for death itself.

For as long as it continues to exist, the only “eternal” city will be Rome. The rest are finite, temporary, and constantly changing encampments that are set up and taken down. Identifying ourselves with the city where we live involves merging with it over time. The city is the stage of our life; the place of memories that create our identity. Bollas (2000) states that the way we plan and live our built environments reflects unconscious forms of thinking realized through architecture, therefore, a city’s constructions and urban planning (or lack of such) might reflect the unconscious dispositions of the group that inhabits it.⁴

A young woman with a neurotic structure, a professional in international trade tells how she had spent years looking for “her place,” a city that felt truly hers, similar to those comfortable and perhaps worn clothes that we wear like a second skin. She had lived and worked in various European cities. She had advanced professionally and held a position of some responsibility. She had never suffered particularly negative experiences in any one place, yet despite making friends in various locations, she had failed to establish a romantic relationship in any of them. Each time she returned to her hometown and visited with the few relatives she had, she also attended a therapy session. During one of these she informed her

therapist that she had finally found “her city.” It was Lisbon, a place where she had never lived before, whose language she did not know and where she had yet to make friends or find a partner. Nonetheless, she expressed her certainty of belonging; a wholesome, joyful belonging. She described a quasi-personal bond between her and the city. As with all bonds, it involved a fantasy about the other, ascribing subtle ambiances to Lisbon’s streets and squares that could give one spot a welcoming feel whereas another might be harsh, like the mood swings of someone with whom we were connected.

Rodman (2005) states how the architectural structure of certain cities enables the appearance of the individual’s “true self” (p. 58). In any case, the process of building this identity link to a city is complex and not yet well understood. What are the paths that lead to establishing this often-intense link? Is the city merely a stage for our encounters? Or do we truly form a special bond with the walls, the paving stones, the tarmac? Does the city breathe and do we breathe with it? Maurice Merleau-Ponty answers this question in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1957): “...Not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, ... I have around me roads, ... streets, churches, implements.... Each of these objects bears as an imprint the mark of the human action it serves. Each one spreads round it an atmosphere of humanity....” (p. 359).

There is the figure, perhaps more literary than real, of the saunterer, the *flâneur* (Hessel, 2015). Traditionally, he is a well-to-do gentleman who strolls around the city observing it. He loses himself in the street atmosphere, taking on a discreet, ethereal presence. He observes people, their meetings, the places where these occur, the life of the buildings and their street corners. He observes not with the aloofness of the anthropologist but rather with the courtesy of someone who wishes to blend in with the ebb and flow of a thousand public encounters. The *flâneur* observes but is never observed. We could say that he seeks to inhale the spirit of the city, that feature of the encounter that makes this setting different from so many others. His is a gaze elated by the explosion of emotions and encounters that form the city. But what of the *flâneuse*? Some authors, such as Ana M. Iglesia Pagnotto (2019), do explore her presence. In our opinion, the female saunterer approaches her exploratory jaunt in a different way. She does not manage to conceal herself as effectively as her male counterpart. The *flâneuse* is required to be seen. Rather than blending in with her environment until she becomes invisible, she can even take on a rebellious, contentious air. “Look at me as I look at you,” she tells us. Nonetheless, this game of exchanged glances may eventually change, so she too acquires that shadowlike quality that moves along the street. We should not forget that both he and she become thinking subjects, par excellence. Each observes,

absorbs, compares, examines, questions, clarifies... and continues to observe.

In an outstanding film by Peter Greenaway (1982), “The Draughtsman’s Contract” a 17th century English nobleman hires a draughtsman to spend time at his country residence to draw it from different vantage points. The artist sets about the task, drawing what he sees, everything he sees, increasingly angering his patron. The drawings reveal aspects of the property, and its inhabitants, their secrets and hidden intentions, that the owner would prefer not to be seen and even not to see. Eventually, the patron’s displeasure becomes so intense that he decides to send his minions to blind the artist.

An environment may contain secrets that a true *flâneur* knows how to observe and interpret. It is highly tempting to view the analyst as a *flâneur* who observes what is happening around him in detail and with the utmost interest. The contemporary writer, Annie Lamott, recently said: “My mind is a neighborhood I try not to go into alone” (Personal communication, April 6, 2020). The *flâneuresque* analyst accompanies the patient on this journey, arousing both fear and attraction.

Undoubtedly, the living place also determines the type of gaze that is invited by the observed. A fast-paced, intensely stimulating city life nurtures what Walter Benjamin called “deep enlightenment” (Eilenberger, 2019). Watching implies curiosity, aggression, possession, envy and, we could say, gratitude for the gift of other people’s lives. The gaze links objects and the world to us.

Around 1870, “iron fever” reached the Biscayan Mountains and Bilbao abandoned its sole function as a port and fell into terrible, dirty, and disorderly chaos that defined it until recently. Its chaos was full of dynamism and vigor; giant dirty factories that spewed out waste into the estuary, while at the sound of a siren, thousands of workers went back to their slums, clustered on the slopes of the surrounding mountains. Travelling the road that separated the city from the sea at night was a vision of hell. Flares rising in the air accompanied by dense smoke, made it possible to imagine the molten steel spilling into giant ladles. Tall ships, like buildings, slipped slowly through the dirty waters of the estuary and tidal river of Bilbao, exposing their proud bellies in expectation of the rising sea. That was our city and those of us who lived there fully identified with it, and were proud of the creative power that we imagined we saw all around us. It was a hundred years of chaotic development that generated a peculiar collective self-esteem, expressed as a strong belief that from our small city, which brought together immigrants from all over impoverished Spain, it was possible to compete with the world.

The devastating manufacturing crisis of the 1980s led to the closure of almost all factories and the retirement and layoffs of a multitude of workers. The creative chaos was transformed into a post-apocalyptic scenario, in which the bare bones of the empty factories reminded us of a lost past. It took twenty years after the disaster, thanks to fortunate circumstances on the one hand and the vision of a few wise politicians on the other, for the city of Bilbao to be born anew. Transformed. The ruins of this post-industrial hell began to give way to new leisure spaces, architectural signature projects and walkways along the banks of the estuary, now full of smiling kayakers, live fish, and cormorants. This transformation is undoubtedly represented by a symbol, a building known to all that reflects the dramatic change of the city: the spectacular Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, designed by renowned architect, Frank Gehry.

The relationship of the people of Bilbao with the Guggenheim Museum and their new city fascinates us and may help us reflect upon the strange bonds that are struck between ourselves and our environment, between humans and the places they inhabit. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao complex is in itself an attempt to control the chaos of the previous human city. It suggests movement towards a cleaner, more orderly and more welcoming city. As an artificially manufactured city, it might circumvent the creative turmoil associated with the confusion encountered in a metropolitan area. Dirt and violence are left behind giving way to a possibly sterile and sterilizing “what if” scenario to emerge in the distance.

Architecture provides the environment in which we live and love. We humans are not satisfied with what nature offers us, so we build our huts and our palaces to live in, there is a mutual influence of environs and people and vice versa (Wenkart, 1970, p. 146). Homes are the small worlds that we inhabit and groups of homes make up our larger world. My home is a private space where the tough, rugged, natural world stays outside. I feel safe, protected, inside my home and when walking through my city. I know where everything can be found, and anyone who might cross my path. In ancient times, danger lay beyond the city walls; today the walls of our homes also keep our enemies at bay. Moreover, size does matter. In the wild, nature is often far too imposing, ferocious, and immense, compared to us tiny humans. Alleyways and dwellings are built in our image and likeness; we are minor gods building abodes where we can feel like lords and masters.

Bilbao has evolved from an actor-observer position, which looks outward, taking possession of what it sees, towards the current position of an object-gaze position. In keeping with the description that Ana M. Iglesias Pagnotto (2019) makes about the classical position of women in art, culture, and society, we might say that the city is now acquiring a more traditionally

feminine characteristic. It is important to recognize that a city like Bilbao built its self-esteem not just by being an observer of what was happening but also as a generator of changes, objects, and links. The city went from economic ruin, having lost its hands (the factories and industries that allowed it to perform on the world stage) — a period during which it was unable to act and became so unseen and unrecognized, to this new post-Guggenheim period in which it is prodigiously seen and recognized.

However, a veil of sadness that masks the pain of loss still exists — the loss of our ability to directly influence the world and our environment. Nowadays, our actions can only be expressed, indirectly, enlisting others who may be attracted by our beauty, to act on our behalf. Those of us who lived through our industrial past, cannot help but feel a certain nostalgia for that other Bilbao, the gateway to hell, unsightly but powerful. The Guggenheim, a new object, is not really new here but rather the transformation of something old and known. More than a meeting, it offers a re-meeting. Iñaki Esteban, studying the so-called “Guggenheim Effect” (Esteban, 2007), states that it was a process from “junkyard” to “ornament.” In our opinion he is mistaken; the estuary and its banks were not merely junkyards but more the scenes of loss and pain. The museum presents a scene of re-meeting representing a beautiful scar that has formed over them. Naturally, the building was erected on a levelled site of an actual junkyard; however, a large freight station had originally occupied the space and provided the surrounding area with jobs and money. Nobody misses that abandoned wasteland, but many remember what used to stand on its site.⁵

A set of pieces from the museum’s permanent collection merit special mention, namely, Richard Serra’s famous sculptures, “Torqued Ellipses” (1996–1999), because they fit in neatly not only with the new museum but also with the city’s history. These pieces are composed of huge, undulating corten steel plates that produce a multiplicity of interior and exterior spaces that truly impress the visitor who ventures inside them. Mattson (2000) emphasizes this ability of Serra’s work to amaze the public by offering them a veritable showcase of spaces and paths that affect their spatio-temporal perceptions. And in a particularly significant way, these large sheets of steel clearly evoke the cladding of large ships, not so long ago under construction in the nearby shipyard. Thus, the artist’s message is multiplied in a rich chain of evocative links to memories for anyone who sees and enters these pieces, but especially for the townspeople, who can appreciate the nuances possibly invisible to outsiders. As if by poetic justice, these stunning pieces were created by Serra in a shipyard only to eventually occupy the spacious galleries of a museum built near the ruins of another shipyard.⁶

Freud’s concept of the uncanny [*Das Unheimlich*] (1919) might be used to understand what we are suggesting here. Freud refers to something that

should not be shown, that should never come to light, yet does. Something that evokes the familiar and known, yet at the same time gives it a negative presence that threatens and makes us uneasy. Implicit in this concept is the contrast between what is familiar, or what one is *at home* with [*Heimlich*], and what is radically alien [*Unheimlich*]. We could say that what existed prior to the Guggenheim and the surrounding spaces kindled a feeling of the familiar, connecting us with what we are emotionally bonded to. The subsequent downfall, the post-industrial vacuum, and the ensuing social maelstrom (unemployment, social and generational conflict ...), made us confront all the dread that lay below that benign surface. The redevelopment of Bilbao and the Guggenheim in particular, releases us from the uncanny or ominous aspect of reality and conceals, once more, that which should never have come to light: poverty, disorder, social unrest, crisis, more fear than certainty about our future, and above all, an active, enterprising, capable, energetic, independent community's loss of its self-image. Now, both politically and publicly, we look forward to being recognized and congratulate ourselves whenever we are. We exaggerate our gestures to attract attention and encourage the gaze of others. But it is always a shallow gaze, as it allows us to conceal the uncanny beneath our current reality without reconnecting to that radically dynamic vision of ourselves.

As previously mentioned, Kernberg (2006) proposes a constitution of the internal world based on internalized object relations that include three elements: a representation of the object, another for the self and an affect that links them both. It is tempting to think that the environment, the setting for this link, might represent yet one more element. A setting that acts as a "stain of color" that somehow "tinges" all that is strictly related and which, at the same time, is a repository of projections as it is loaded with history, with the past.

The disappearance of industry discloses an absence which goes far beyond mere physical space, affecting intrapsychic space. The absence of the object underlines the absence of a link to that very object and whatever it may have represented. Green (1993) draws our attention to the difficulty of representing the negative and how this complex task is accompanied by an affective climate of mourning and loss. Mourning for a vital past that no longer exists as well as mourning for truncated future possibilities. Just as a child deprived of maternal affection, due to her mother's depression, identifies with the melancholy of her primary object (the dead mother), so can the group make the imaginary pain of the lost object their own. In the face of ruin, a type of negative group hallucination occurs that allows rejection of that which should be perceived (Green, 1993). The Guggenheim and the new city as a whole could facilitate this complex task by

shrouding a painful absence. Instead of perceiving ruination and what it symbolizes, we find a precious object that replaces it.

Maybe, as Green states, we analysts should act as archivists of the patient's history or, as in this case, as archivists of the collective history, linking current collective perception with elements of the past that are hidden below the surface and that provide a deeper understanding of reality.

Perhaps this is why the population has thrown itself at the museum and all that goes with it, eager for the future and keen to leave painful losses behind. This may be the key to understanding the townsfolk's speedy, massive adoption of the Gehry building. Not only because of the construction's unmistakable artistic value, or because of the thought provoking collection of contemporary art that it houses within its rooms, but primarily because it allows the loss to be metabolized and conceived as a transformation of something missed into something different but also valuable.

NOTES

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2. Aranzazu Fernández-Rivas M.D., Ph.D., Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist, Associate Professor at the Department of Neuroscience, University of the Basque Country, and Section Chief, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, at Basurto University Hospital, Bilbao, Spain. She has developed a special interest in conduct disorders and personality disorders in children and adolescents, specifically in the psychotherapeutic approaches used to treat those patients. Her current research projects focus on the bio-psycho-social aspects of conduct disorders in female adolescents and the identity and gender issues related to them.
3. Jeffries (2020), in his article about the exhibit of the *Wittgenstein House* in Vienna, writes that Wittgenstein, the philosopher, “was no slouch at mechanical design. He originally trained as an engineer and retained a lifelong fascination for mechanical things (he once took great delight in repairing a fellow philosopher’s toilet). He wasn’t just a thinker, but also a doer — something few philosophers have managed. To clinch this point, the [Royal Academy of Art] exhibition includes models of a kite and an aeronautical engine he made while a student in Manchester before the 20th century reached its teens. That engine—it was driven by jets on the tips of the propeller and so exerted no torque on the fuselage—proved revolutionary to the later development of helicopters. Shortly after he finished work

on the house, in 1928, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge University and philosophy, developing a new philosophical vision that deconstructed his earlier work. It remains hugely influential today" (Jeffries, 2020.)

4. In his analysis of architecture, "Bollas (2000) begins by getting at the emotion that the symbolic life and death of environments can expose. Perhaps if Freud had sustained the [Roman] metaphor a bit longer, Bollas posits, 'its dialectic would have worked. For obliterations are indeed part of the unconscious, so much so that depending on how one wished to look at the Rome of one's unconscious life, we could see both the preserved and the destroyed...there will always be two buildings in mind: the obliterated and the existent' (Schinaia, p. 28)." (Rachmani, 2019, p. 638.)
5. "This creative endeavour is most effective [because] it allows us to move between the levels of conscious and unconscious, in the forms of sensory experience, fragmentation, and meaning, without fear of becoming trapped in either, or, alternatively and perhaps most profound, when we can experience all three simultaneously" (Charles, 2001, p. 257).
6. Wenkart (1970) contemplates that "architectural constructs appeal to the mechanics, sculptures appeal to the dynamics of organismic entities." The constructs demand to be looked at. "The connection with the established place helps to develop mutuality, a sense of mutual responsibility. Comfort, beauty, security enjoyed are responded to by care invested in this place" (pp. 151–153).

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