

## Architecture, Landscape and Cultural Industry in Spain (1992-2007): The Cultural City (2001 - in Progress)

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**Abstract:** Special interest in the creation of the Cultural City, now in construction in Santiago de Compostela (Spain), motivated a group of Art Historians, Economists and Geographers to consider appropriate architectural and urbanistic models. These models are being applied in relation to the Cultural Industry and its success. In order to find out which model would be the best for this project, we will study other similar Spanish cases in the last fifteen years, and analyse their influences and consequences on the citizens and tourism.

### Introduction

In 1999, the studio of the American architect Peter Eisenman won the public, restricted competition to design a City of Culture for Santiago de Compostela, Spain (Figure 1) with other competitors<sup>1</sup>. The initiative of holding the competition came from the *autonomous* government of Manuel Fraga (and was promoted by the Consellería de Cultura, Comunicación Social y Turismo de la Xunta de Galicia) with the purpose of providing the city with a hub of cultural production, exhibition, dissemination, and consumption.

The interest the proposal excited led a team of Art Historians, Economists, and Geographers of the University of Santiago de Compostela to ponder the environmental, economic, and social models driving this kind of architecture. To assess the impact that new architectural models connected to the culture industry have on landscapes, local populations, and markets, we began by studying the relationships established between architecture and urban landscape as exemplified by some of the

more paradigmatic interventions carried out in Spain over the last fifteen years in the field of museums.

Our aim was to describe and evaluate the aesthetic, economic, and social impact of four leading art centres — institutions of worldwide reference — designed in each case by first-rate architects and holders of the Pritzker Prize (architecture's equivalent to the Nobel Prize): the CGAC (1993) in Santiago de Compostela by Álvaro Siza; the MACBA (1995) in Barcelona by Richard Meier; the Guggenheim (1997) in Bilbao by Frank Gehry, and the newly-finished extension of the Prado Museum (2002-2007) in Madrid by Rafael Moneo. The study of these buildings gave us a set of indicators with which to compare the future results of the City of Culture.

### Architectural intervention in the urban landscape

First of all, it is worth clarifying in theoretical terms what is meant by the study of these



Figure 1. Peter Eisenman: *City of Culture*, Santiago (work in progress, 2007) (photo: Alberto Valle).

interventions in the context of landscape. Landscape is fundamentally an aesthetic concept: in French, Italian, and Spanish, the word began to be used by 16<sup>th</sup> century painters to refer to painted rural scenes of artistic value. Thus, to study the relationship between architecture and landscape means to analyse, primarily, the composition of the intervention. The architect who thinks not only about the interior and the façade of his building but also about its interaction with the surrounding space and the general layout of its location is essentially a landscape architect, whether or not he is working in a rural, urban, or 'rururban' environment.

In any case, all aesthetic decisions have political, social, and economic consequences. As the French geographer Augustin Berque argued, the radical attitudes to landscape of some 20<sup>th</sup> century architects, town planners and gardeners can be reduced to two models: the 'endemic fascist' one,

characterised by a conservative approach to planning that reproduces and venerates established endemic formulae (certain types of groundplans, architectural styles, and layouts), and the 'economic and aesthetic liberalist' one, which pursues global and generic trends and is characterised by a deliberate absence of a plan (the 'non-plan') and of any approach to the environment as a whole, judging this to restrict free cultural and economic development (López Silvestre 2007: 13-35). Many tourist hotspots developed in Spain throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century respond to one or other model. In Lugo, one of Galicia's provincial capitals, stands the Provincial Museum, designed by Manuel Gómez Román in 1957 (Figure 2). An exponent of the conservative 'endemic fascist' model so popular during the Franco years, its style typically played out the vernacular while exploiting a combination of the baroque style of Santiago de Compostela and the



Figure 2. Manuel Gómez Román: *Museum of Lugo*, 1957 (Spain) (author's photo).

aesthetics of the *paño* — the great country pile — as a model of fusion of nature and culture.

Benidorm (Figure 3), on the other hand, on the Costa Blanca of Alicante, is the corollary of a *laissez-faire* attitude to development which some people think has produced interesting results but which, at least as far as the Spanish coast is concerned, has caused unquestionable levels of degradation.

Confronted by these models, Berque maintained that another kind of relationship between human intervention and natural landscape was necessary. Indeed, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the best avant-garde architecture developed in other directions, eschewing not only endemism but liberalism too, both of which always construct landscapes (Berque 1990). There was the avant-garde that drew its principles from the Modern Movement and sought to create new cityscapes without losing from

sight the basic tenets of town planning; and there was another trend within the avant-garde that responded to the cold aesthetics of Modernism by ‘compromising’ with the existing landscape; and lastly, there was the high-tech avant-garde — or *high-kitsch*, as many considered it — which drank from the well of sci-fi futuristic engineering. The interventions carried out in the arena of the culture industry in Spain in recent years have tended to favour one of these models, avoiding the retrogressive nature of endemic fascism and the unsustainable *laissez-faire* of economic liberalism.

### The model of the museum in Spain

Among the interventions most successful in ‘compromising’ with the existing landscape are those that resulted from the ideas



Figure 3. View of Benidorm (Spain) (author's photo).

formulated by a group of architects during the 1970s known as the 'critical regionalist' movement. Ever since the Consortium of Santiago de Compostela was created in the mid 90s, our city's patrimony has been under the protection of the *Plan Urbano de Protección Especial*, whose main priority has been to restore the historic city centre and preserve its image of old by following a historicist approach. But excessive protectionism and massive consumption by tourists have turned the old city into a 'New Cultural History Museum', impeccably embalmed but increasingly uninhabited (Guilbaut 2004: 71-85). To counter this exaggerated aesthetic conservatism and at the same time honour the 'compromise' with the city's historical setting, the authorities turned their attention to the concept of 'critical reconstruction', coined by the architect and town planner Josef Kleihues, which helped the Mayor and fellow architect

Xerardo Estévez to establish a policy for Santiago. And so it was decided that new architectural icons should be inserted into the urban fabric, buildings that would be capable of generating a dynamic image of the city. One such building is the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea (CGAC), designed by Álvaro Siza and completed in 1993 (Figure 4).

The CGAC is a restrained and compact work, perfectly suited to the historical space it occupies. It speaks of the architect's respect for the existing landscape as well as for critical and innovatory craftsmanship. Siza's own words sum up the attitude with which he approached the project of the CGAC and adjoining garden of Bonaval: "When I saw the mysterious stairs and angled façades of the convent of Santo Domingo de Bonaval (...), when I climbed onto the platform-like structures which were hemmed in by half-collapsed



Figure 4. Siza: CGAC, Santiago de Compostela (1993) (author's photo).

walls, and when I walked up towards the cemetery and saw from the top of the hill the oakwood and Santiago's roofs and thousand towers, I was overcome by awe. It was raining and water was trickling from all sides. (...) I was shown valuable documents and old photographs. (...) We discovered granite canals and cleared them of leaves, remains of pipes eaten away by damp, watercourses, shafts, fountains, steps that had long been covered by earth, capitals belonging to the old convent. Then we saw where foundations might be laid and walls built, where bits should be covered, rainproofed, and gaps opened to let in the light" (Blanco 2006: 127).

Saving the differences, worthy of mention as another example of interventions that take into account the importance of place and pre-existing architecture while

remaining critical of radical endemism is the recent reformation of the Prado Museum (2007), work of the Spanish architect Rafael Moneo. Here as in the case of his acclaimed project in Mérida, Moneo has worked with the forms and materials present in the original Prado Museum, designed by Juan de Villanueva in 1785, and in the older, early 16<sup>th</sup> century Iglesia de los Jerónimos. Of course, the lines have been minimalistically purged but the classical front *loggia* of the new cube's main façade, as well as the use of brick, granite, Colmenar stone, glass, and the red Pompeian stucco in the Sala de las Musas, coupled with the preservation of the old Cloister of the Jerónimos are all evidence of the sensibility of an architect who, rather than create a new landscape and break with the old, has preferred to add to the existing one. Moneo's intervention

constitutes a clear example of a regionalist architecture that both purges, synthesises and adapts existing forms and maintains types, materials, proportions and vegetal species.

Among those interventions that seek to create new landscapes are, of course, Gehry's futuristic Guggenheim, patented in Bilbao in 1997, and which, with the help of other initiatives, has succeeded in revitalising an old, run-down area of the Basque city, and Meier's modernist MACBA (Contemporary Art Museum of Barcelona) (Figure 5), 'crystallised' in 1995 — a work whose finest features are a homage to the cold elegance of the International Style. Aesthetically speaking, both buildings were born with their backs to the context, or rather, with the desire to give their contexts a new image, to build a new landscape. As we shall see, this attitude might seem wrong to a conservative urbanist, but is justifiable socially and economically.

With the creation of Meier's building, the troubled neighbourhood of Rabal began to benefit from an urban restoration scheme put in place all over Barcelona between 1982 and 1997 by Pasqual Maragall. The objective was to improve the neighbourhood's image through a series of tailored, publicly-funded interventions that would entice private companies to settle in the area. Indeed, both economically and socially, the appearance of MACBA marked the start of ten years of sustained transformation of an area previously known as the Barrio Chino, or Chinatown. Thanks to this building and to others that have sprung up around it, North Rabal is today humming with tourists and middle-class Barcelonans visiting exhibitions, eating out, browsing in bookshops and even renting flats — something that only a few years ago would have been unthinkable. However, as numerous studies have shown, the portside of Rabal has not managed to



Figure 5. Meier: *MACBA*, Barcelona (1995) (author's photo).

completely shake off marginalisation and its cheap rents have attracted immigrants from all over the world, notably Filipinos and Pakistanis (Alba 2001).

Nowhere is the phenomenon of iconic architecture better exemplified than in the Guggenheim of Bilbao (Figure 6). At the end of the 1980s, the industrialised inlet that is today home to the museum was totally run down. When the Guggenheim opened in 1997, the area recovered economically and aesthetically, thanks entirely to the building's design, which never ceases to draw in the crowds. It is a perfect example of Foster's idea of 'spectacular' architecture: attractive to the tourist and not dependent on content for publicity. It offers an exportable image of Bilbao and acts as a symbol of the city's

collective identity. Indeed, enthusiasm for this new identity symbol has sparked an interest in urbanism in Bilbao. The local authorities have worked to restore disused factories, clean up the inlet's banks, and reform marginalised areas such as Olabeaga, while providing the city with stylish new infrastructures (the metro) and tending to the historical city. It is a good example of how inserting iconic architecture into a degraded urban fabric can revitalise an area aesthetically, economically, and socially (Álvarez 2006: 171-179).

The advent of so-called cultural tourism and the growing need, particularly since the 1990s, to meet the demands created is giving rise to ever more attractive urban infrastructures — so much so that tourists



Figure 6. Gehry: *Guggenheim*, Bilbao (1997) (author's photo).

no longer choose to visit cities purely on the merit of their cultural interest, but instead are lured to them because their capacity to 'fabricate' interest. Aesthetically, there is no question that the four interventions analysed here are of the highest quality. Whether modern, futuristic, or understated and respectful of the existing landscape, none makes the terrible mistakes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century since none has succumbed to the temptation of endemic fascism or economic and aesthetic liberalism. Time gives us the perspective we need to measure the political, economic, and social successes of these interventions. Of the four, the Guggenheim is undoubtedly the most successful economically and socially. After initial misgivings ten years ago, the citizens of Bilbao today generally agree that the areas around the inlet have improved beyond recognition thanks to Gehry's museum. The success of the MACBA, however, is debatable. North Rabal is clearly better now than it was ten years ago, but the same cannot be said of

its southern and western parts. Indeed, the case of Rabal dismounts one of the most widespread hypocrisies affecting modern-day urbanism, which is that regenerating neighbourhoods by tearing down old houses and erecting shiny new museums doesn't solve the problems of the poor and marginalised already living there; it only shifts them to somewhere else. Today, in the space of a few square metres, one sees the middle and upper classes browsing books, eating out, and visiting good exhibitions, while the underclass, composed mostly of immigrants, has neither the time nor the resources to enjoy any of these novelties.

### **The hermeneutic challenge of the City of Culture**

Now that we have studied the four examples we can go back to the case which, as Galicians, concerns us most: the City of Culture, paradigm of the culture industry in Galicia (Figure 7).

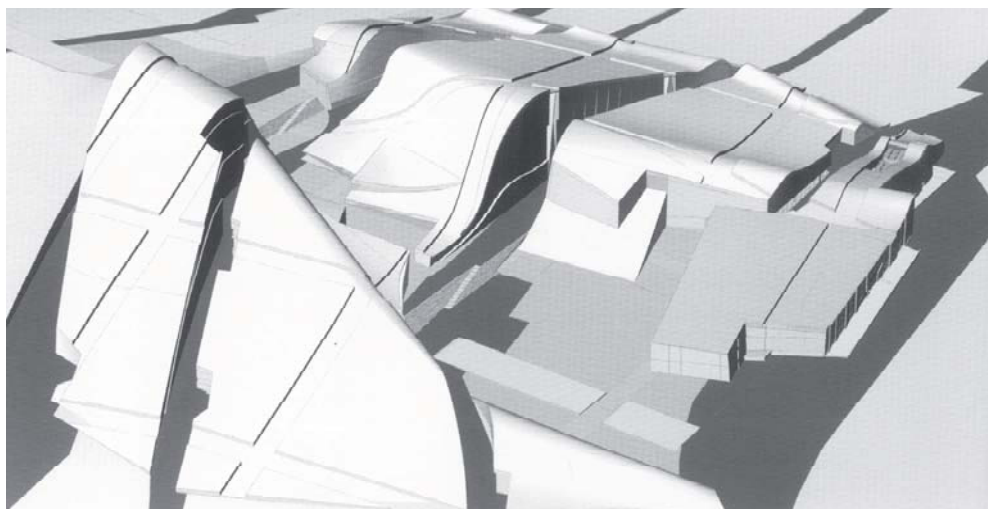


Figure 7. *City of Culture*, Santiago de Compostela, 2007 (photo: Eisenman Architects).



The idea of building a City of Culture in Santiago can be traced back to three historical factors. The first is that one of the particularities of the Spanish administration system is the constitutional existence, since 1981, of a federation of autonomous communities, called the *Estado de las Autonomías* (similar to the German system). Spain is divided into *autonomías*, each of which is run by a separate government whose powers are differentiated from those of the State. In Galicia's case, the tendency was to think of Santiago de Compostela as the capital (as indeed it officially became in 2002) because of its cultural and historical preponderance as well as its location in Galicia's geographical centre. The belief gained ground when the city became home to the headquarters of the Autonomous Administration, and then when Manuel Fraga led the Madrid-based Popular Party to power. (In Galicia the PP has two main currents, both of which are conservative yet clearly differentiated: one

is liberal and the other is regionalist, i.e. folkloric-traditionalist.) This is the second factor. The third was the invention of the Xacobeo plan in 1993 and the revival of the Pilgrim Route of St James that contributed enormously to the revitalisation of Santiago as an international tourist centre. These three factors provide the premise of the project of the City of Culture.

Santiago de Compostela was chosen as the site of the future City of Culture to reinforce its image as Autonomous Capital, still unrecognised at the time, even though Santiago was already offering the best and most varied cultural agenda in Galicia. Furthermore, its contents would find support in the University of Santiago, which has boasted, increasingly since its foundation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the best library, newspaper library and research facilities of the entire Community.

As far as City of Culture's location (Figure 8) in the city was concerned, because of its 700,000 square metres it was decided that it



Figure 8. Area view of Santiago de Compostela and *City of Culture* (photo: Google Earth).

should be built on the outskirts to the east, on a hill called Monte Gaiás, on the other side of the ring road. Indeed, the location was to prove pivotal to Eisenman's project. Guided by a desire to dialogue with the site and respect the shape of the hill, he has carved into the land and inserted a design that replicates the contour of the hill and reconstructs the existing horizon, evoking the granite mounds that are so characteristic of Galicia's orography. The surrounding area will be landscaped some time in the future and include a 'Forest of Galicia', "a recreation of traditional Galician woodland over a surface area of almost 125,000 square metres populated with numerous autochthonous species and equipped with a centre for the interpretation of the social, economic and environmental impact of forests".

In terms of tourism and the community, however, the choice of location will contribute nothing to Santiago's urban fabric since it neither caters for the Pilgrim Route — the origin of Santiago's existence — nor provides for the local population's day-to-day needs as it is so far away. It is responsible, however, for opening up a new area of town in an intermediate zone between the two 'cities' and thus generating economic benefits.

The rules of the architectural competition of 1999 put no limits on the architectural proposals, preferring instead open-ended ideas that could be developed. This meant that the projects submitted were extremely heterogeneous. Eisenman's entry was a 'non-building' in the sense that it deliberately avoided acting as a centre of attraction, as the Guggenheim does. He did not want the building to become a focus of cultural speculation and so articulated his proposal on the dialogue he aspired to establish

between the building and its environment, as we have seen.

Secondly, Eisenman's design reproduced the shape of the 'kernel' of Santiago's old city, on top of which he added that of a scallop shell, the symbol of St James the Apostle. These two motifs were the cornerstones of his design, which would be covered in stone, echoing traditional Galician architecture. While Gehry had no intention of producing a piece of regionalist architecture, as might be expected given the regionalist line that characterised the ruling political party at that time, it is easy to see why the project was selected. Its numerous references to the city's cultural symbols (its characteristic landscape, the autochthonous trees, the layout of the holy city, and the iconographic symbol of the Apostle's scallop) no doubt all played a part in securing the jury's vote (Figure 9).

The City of Culture comprises six independent units: a theatre, a library, a workshop for artistic creation, a 'Museum of Galicia', an IT section, and administrative offices, all of which are connected by an underground tunnel. The plan did not include the two towers (one made of glass, the other of stone) that John Hejduk designed for Belvís Park and which represent a modern re-reading of the Cathedral's bell towers through a critical regionalist prism. The project for Belvís never materialised and upon Hejduk's death, Eisenman decided to include them in the City of Culture. The link with Santiago's historical centre is more evident now that in addition to the reinterpretation of the city's layout we consider the direct reference to its most emblematic icon.

After countless modifications, the organization of content into six units is what we have today. Obviously, neither

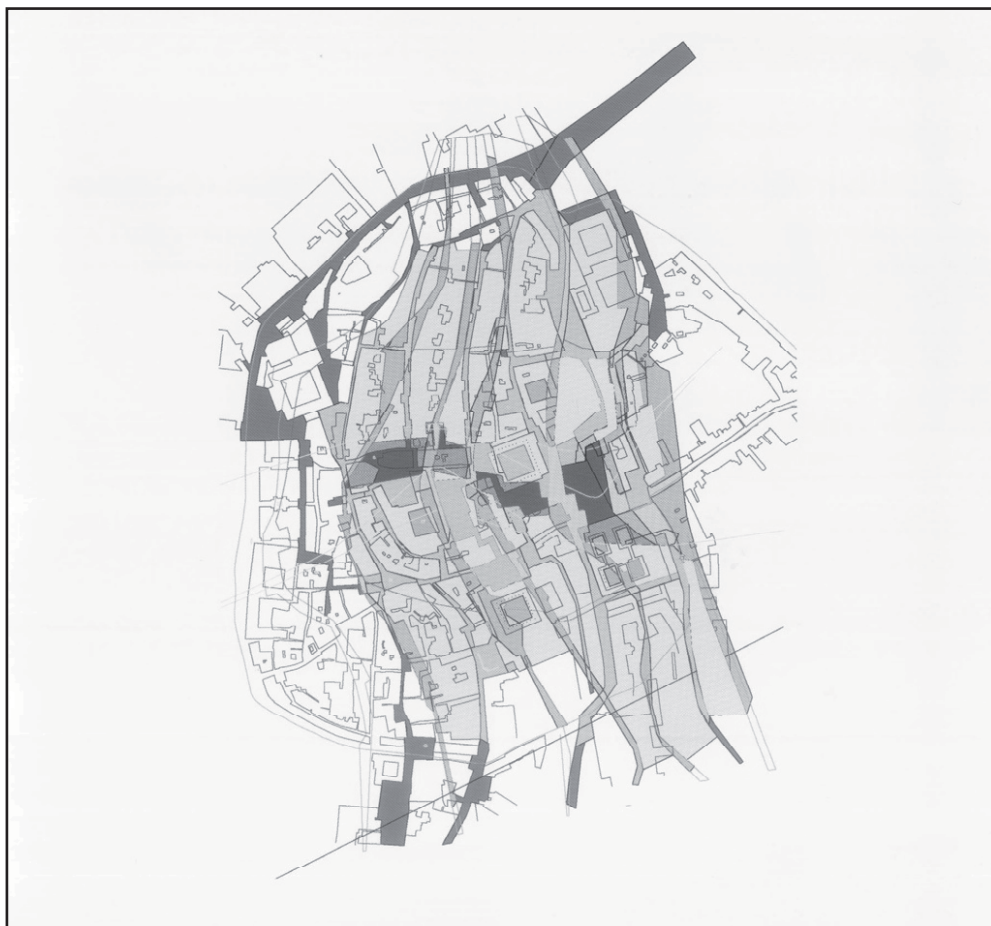


Figure 9. Mainly lines of construction of City of Culture inspired in the mainly roads of the Old City of Santiago de Compostela (photo: Eisenman Architects).

content nor utility was a key consideration at the time of the competition. Indeed, as Eisenman has said in reference to the rules of the competition, the “first requirement was that the design should be open and dynamic, permeable to all sorts of possibilities still to be envisaged. We took this requirement to be a declaration of the project’s main priority. Incredible as it may seem, that is how it was”. The architect’s upbeat tone is not shared by Galicia’s intellectuals, who have never managed to see the City of Culture as anything but a

hideously expensive ‘badge of achievement’, a ‘spectacular shell’ as Norman Foster would put it and, ironically, the very thing that Eisenman sought to steer clear of right from the start. As Serge Guilbaut would say, “it is no more than a neo-liberal strategy designed to cash in on culture and patrimony at the expense of content and spectator participation” (De Llano Neira 2006: 239) — a banalization perfectly reflected in the words of the then regional minister of Culture, Jesús Pérez Varela, who announced that “the aim is to increase even

more the prestige of Galicia in the eyes of the rest of Spain and Europe. The City of Culture will be the powerhouse of Galician cultural development and promotion (...); a meeting point for cutting-edge technology, thought, and creativity while at the same time a framework in which Galicia's rich cultural heritage can be preserved" (VV. AA 1998-2001: 1-2). In other words, a lot of hot air.

## **Economical, social, touristic, and visual analysis of City of Culture**

For this end an initial 137 million Euros were set aside, a sum that grew to today's figure of 400 million Euros — almost three times the budget for the reformation of the Prado Museum (152 millions), almost five times the cost of the Guggenheim in Bilbao (90 millions), and considerably more than both the MACBA and the CGAC (approximately 20 millions each). The investments made to build the MACBA, Guggenheim and CGAC have helped their surrounding areas to expand and regenerate, but in the case of the City of Culture, its location makes it impossible for such development to take place because it is hemmed in by a road, the ring road, and woodland.

From a social perspective, it is interesting to assess the building's impact on the community and surveys are presently being conducted, the results of which are not yet known. Surveys aside, however, we know that the community's response is negative from the newspaper articles we read virtually every day on the subject.

Tourist preferences or yearly visitor numbers show that last year (2006) the Guggenheim received 875,000 visitors; the MACBA, 171,800, the CGAC, 57,600, and the Prado Museum, 2,165,000. Let us draw a link between the cost of building a museum, referred to earlier, and the number of visitors it receives yearly to see whether there is a correlation between the two. The Guggenheim, for example, cost 90 million Euros<sup>2</sup> and received 875,000 visitors last year. So the question is, how many visitors per year would correspond to a cost of 400 million Euros? Some 3,900,000 (Figure 10 and 11). Which leads us on to our next question: does the model of the all-engulfing museum of megalomaniac proportions actually work? It rather seems that the model of the small museum, with its way of revitalising and competing with the art and culture market, is gradually gaining ground.

In the United States small museums, such as the new building housing the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston, are helping to invigorate the art market by shunning the notion of mass culture or museum-spectacle, where art is just another item to be marketed, in favour of a more reasonable consumption of art.

Another problem that needs addressing, in addition to the sheer enormity of the project and its lack of foresight, is its absence of content. To date, we do not know what the functions of each building are. Pérez Varela's idea of showcasing Galician traditional culture doesn't seem to be sufficient grounds for such a vast and costly building. Its lack of purpose has blighted the project from its inception, and this will probably have to be completely

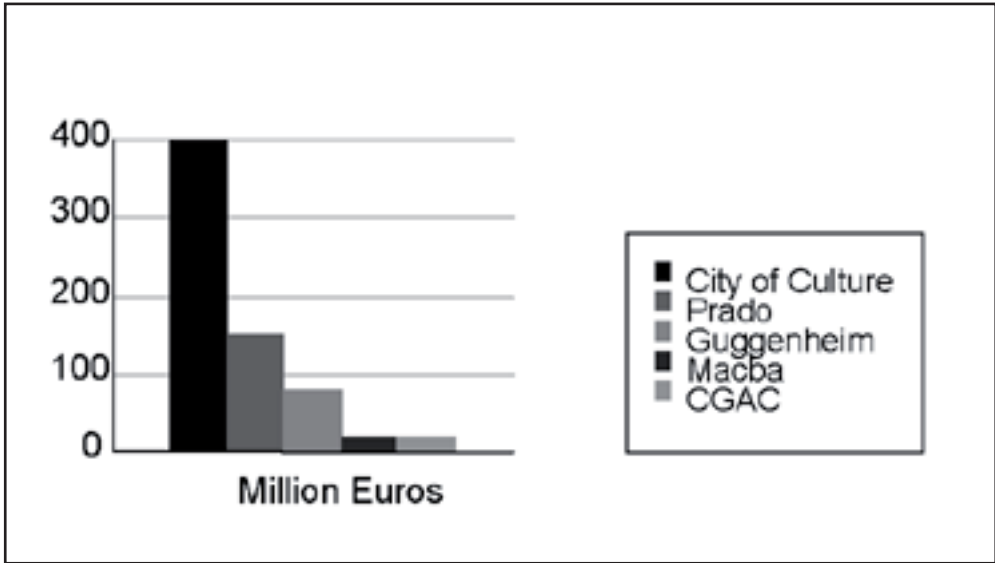


Figure 10. Table comparing the investment.

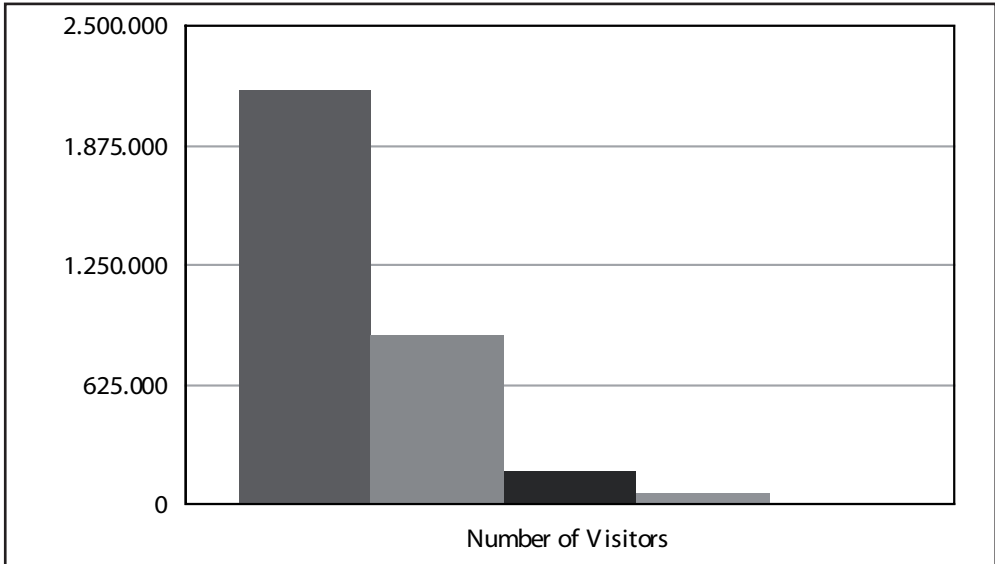


Figure 11. Table comparing the number of visitors.

readdressed if we are to ensure that this colossal economical effort has not been made in vain.

To summarise, from a visual or formal perspective, the City of Culture has no clearly defined aesthetic composition, barring the modern and regionalist trends (like an International Style, Critical Regionalism or futurism options) already analysed, though it does manage to synthesise urbanism and landscape through what is called a 'built environment'. However, its lack of purpose has blighted the project from its inception, and this will probably have to be completely readdressed if we are to ensure that this colossal economical effort has not been made in vain. With this great aesthetic architectural work, Eisenman hopes to achieve the Pritzker Prize.

## Notes

1. Other competitors were such prestigious architects as Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, Jean Nouvel, Dominique Perrault, Steven Holl and Manuel Gallego. Saladini, E., 2006, 166-173.
2. La Opinión (2007). El Guggenheim se desmarca de la polémica por los presupuestos de la Ciudad de la Cultura gallega. [http://www.laopinion.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2949\\_8\\_113057\\_-\\_Cultura-Guggenheim-desmarca-polemica-presupuestos-Ciudad-Cultura-gallega](http://www.laopinion.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2949_8_113057_-_Cultura-Guggenheim-desmarca-polemica-presupuestos-Ciudad-Cultura-gallega).

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