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ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

# SPANISH CULTURE AS REFLECTED IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT OF SPANISH CITIES

TERRENCE L. UBER

COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN  
KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

DIANE R. UBER

DEPARTMENT OF SPANISH  
THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER

Dr. Terrence L. Uber  
College of Architecture and Environmental Design  
Kent State University

Dr. Diane R. Uber  
Department of Spanish  
The College of Wooster

## **SPANISH CULTURE as REFLECTED in the BUILT ENVIRONMENT of SPANISH CITIES**

Architecture is a major component of culture. The public and private spaces we use reflect our needs, both functional and aesthetic. An understanding of the relationship between landscape and buildings in a city context can lead to a better understanding of the culture of those who use the spaces. This paper presents results of research in Madrid, Spain. Through observational research and analysis, we examine how individuals and groups of people function and interact in various public settings.

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Terrence L. Uber  
College of Architecture and Environmental Design  
Kent State University

Diane R. Uber  
Department of Spanish  
The College of Wooster

Architecture is a major component of what we think of as culture. The public and private spaces we use reflect our needs, both functional and aesthetic. An understanding of the relationship between the landscape and the buildings in a city context can lead to a better understanding of the culture of those who use the spaces.

The field of design and human behavior, as explored by Edward T. Hall in his book *The Hidden Dimension*, provides the stimulus for this paper. People use space in various ways, and it is culturally dependent. The field of proxemics examines the interrelated observations and theories of people's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture. People from different cultures often speak different languages, and also inhabit different sensory worlds. Not only does personal distance vary among cultures, but social distance and public distance also vary. Cities and towns in the Spanish-speaking world generally have a central, public square, or plaza. The cathedral or a prominent church is generally located along one side of the plaza. In addition, many homes have a central courtyard, as do public spaces like museums. The concept of the plaza has been transferred to the museums and municipal buildings in Spain.

As explained in the literature and website of the Museo Reina Sofía: "By creating a public square – as set forth in the building code of the new buildings and the southwest façade of the current Museum – a space within the city and for the city was created." These building codes have formalized the traditional forms of the urban landscape as a requirement for new development.

This paper presents detailed results of research in Spain, visiting public spaces and museums in Madrid. Through observational research and analysis of digital photographs, we examine how individuals and groups of people (couples, families, friends, tour groups, etc.) function and interact in various public settings. The researchers also visited Barcelona and

Bilbao to visit public spaces, museums, churches and cathedrals. However, due to the fact that this study expanded beyond the original scope of work, this paper focuses on Madrid, with brief overviews of Barcelona and Bilbao.

### PUBLIC SPACES IN MADRID

Madrid's public squares (the Plaza Mayor, the Puerta del Sol) and parks (the Parque del Retiro) figured into the itinerary, as well as the enormous flea market, the Rastro. The Puerta del Sol (Fig. 1 – See Image Appendix for all Figures) is the traditional hub of the city, its subway system and its government. It experiences heavy use by residents of the city, as well as by tourists on a daily basis. It is in use from early morning until late night hours. Streets radiate outward from Sol in spokes, providing access to retail stores, restaurants and sidewalk cafes. As primarily pedestrian walkways, these streets provide ample space for outside dining (Fig. 2), and the addition of sunshades during summer months provide relief from the sun for shoppers on the adjoining streets (Fig. 3).

In close proximity to the Puerta del Sol is the Plaza Mayor (Fig. 4), the site of restaurants and shops on the street level and residential apartments on higher floors. Restaurants expand into popular sidewalk cafes. Street entertainers in costume provide diversions for the hordes of tourists. The Plaza Mayor is also used for festivities such as public orchestra concerts.

The flea market, the Rastro, is held on Sundays (Fig. 5). It begins south of the Plaza Mayor and the Puerta del Sol, and snakes down to the Ronda de Toledo, a major street several blocks to the south. Clothing, handicrafts, artwork, antique furniture, hardware and kitchenware are among the new and used items for sale to the multitudes of people, both residents and visitors.

The Parque del Retiro, a large park to the east of the Prado Museum, is the most popular park in Madrid (Fig. 6). It is heavily used by local residents on weekends. In addition to monuments, formal gardens and large natural areas, the park also contains a lake (Fig. 7), and two palaces [the Crystal Palace (Fig. 8) and the Palacio de Velázquez], now used as museums for temporary exhibits. The park is used by families; singles and couples; young and old.

The Plaza de Oriente (Fig. 9) provides a public passage and retreat between the opera house (the Teatro Real) and the Royal Palace. This park is often used by local residents, as well as by tourists. The Plaza de Armería (Fig. 10) is the gathering place for those waiting to visit the Royal Place and/or Madrid's cathedral, the Catedral de la Almudena, and, consequently is used mostly by tourists.

The Plaza de Olavide (Fig. 11) is a more typical plaza in a residential neighborhood to the north, away from the tourist areas. While the streets converge in a spoke pattern, traffic is rerouted underneath the plaza. This enables unimpeded pedestrian movement, playgrounds for children, and sidewalk cafes where conversation is not disturbed by vehicular traffic noise. This type of urban landscape enables multi-generational families and large groups of friends to congregate within a short distance from their residences.

This is one major component of the culture of Spanish-speaking countries: the presence of outdoor cafes and/or plazas not only in downtown areas, but also in residential neighborhoods. Madrid's mild climate enables use of sidewalk cafes year-round. For this reason, many establishments have a very small area to serve food and beverages indoors. Even in January on unusually cold days (temperatures around 40°-50° Fahrenheit), people eat and drink at outdoor cafes while wearing parkas and gloves.

One example of an upscale café on a major thoroughfare near important cultural, government and financial institutions is the Gran Café de Gijón (Fig. 12). People of different generations gather there (couples, friends). As in the Plaza de Olavide, Madrid residents utilize this café in a similar manner, meeting with friends or family for coffee, drinks, food, and conversation. This appeared to attract a more mature clientele, sometimes comprised of two older generations of a family, but generally not accompanied by children.

### MUSEUMS IN MADRID

In Madrid, the researchers visited three museums: the Museo del Prado, the Museo Reina Sofía, and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. The Prado collection is classical art by the great masters. The Reina Sofía focuses on modern, contemporary Spanish art, and the Thyssen-Bornemisza contains a private collection of classical and modern works. All three museums are housed in classical structures with modern additions and incorporate some type of courtyard for people to gather. The galleries of most museums in these Spanish cities are organized as in the United States, with occasional benches. Exterior gardens, courtyards or patios, however, are different. People sit on the benches to rest, talk, or to wait for companions.

Another focus with the museums was to explore the relationship between the exterior and interior architecture and to relate those with the art exhibits. We identified three stages of exploration:

- the physical siting
- the architecture of the buildings
- the interiors of the buildings and the interface with the exterior, and the relationship between the artifacts shown and the interior spatial arrangement of them.

#### Prado Museum

The Prado Museum (Fig. 13) is comprised of a late 18<sup>th</sup> century classical building and a new building which faces the east façade of the original Prado, with connecting spaces at or below ground level. With respect for the classical structure, the intervening space to the new building has been landscaped with formal parterre gardens and walkways. The entrance to the museum through the new structure is underneath the gardens (Fig. 14), while the new structure with its streamlined, contemporary façade is offset across the walkways. The museum is located along the Paseo del Prado, a tree-lined boulevard, which gives the museum the appearance of a park-like setting. In addition, there is a large open space in front of the museum entrances through which visitors to the museum pass, but it is not designed to function as a typical courtyard for rest and relaxation. Limited seating – on steps and low walls – and lack of shade do not encourage stopping on hot summer days.

The galleries of the original building contain the majority of the Prado's permanent collection of classical art, including works by Titian, Goya, Velázquez and El Greco. These galleries are typical of many museums, with a central core and galleries lining the sides of the building. One can view the galleries in sequence, traveling from one gallery directly into the next, in an arrangement known as an *enfilade*, or it is possible to enter and exit individual galleries from the central core in many instances. The enfilade arrangement aligns the interior doorways from one gallery to the next in a straight line, permitting passage through the edge of each individual gallery space without entering more completely into that space. The galleries retain the classical design elements from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and walls are painted in deep shades of color. Observations of patrons showed that a small number of visitors would enter and observe all artwork displayed in each room; while more would enter a gallery, scan the room, and if nothing of particular note attracted them, they would proceed to the next gallery.

Galleries

which contained the most famous works of art obviously drew larger numbers of visitors who lingered longer.

The new building (Fig. 15) contains spaces for a restaurant and café, museum shop, and temporary exhibitions (Floors 0 and 1). Located on the top floor (2) is a permanent installation of the 17th century cloister of the adjacent San Jerónimo church which contains a light well which directs light to the temporary exhibition spaces below. The galleries of the new building contain exhibition space which is more open and the galleries contain little architectural detailing. Unlike the original galleries, these spaces were not in straight lines along the perimeter, but were more irregular in form, while still presenting a sequential approach to viewing the exhibit. Because of their use as space for temporary exhibits, it was assumed that the interior spaces would be reconfigured depending on the needs of the material to be exhibited. At the time of our observations, the spaces were relatively open and maintained a typical gallery configuration with limited seating in the center of the space. The darker colors on the walls complemented the rich colors of the art being exhibited. Observers in the temporary exhibitions appeared to be more methodical and thorough in their observations of the artwork on display. More conversations about the artwork were apparent as people lingered in front of each piece.

### Reina Sofia Museum

The Reina Sofia Museum, which first opened in 1986 as the Reina Sofia Art Center, is a relatively new organization which focuses on modern, contemporary Spanish art. The museum structure is comprised of a hospital building (Fig. 16), which was started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and restored for its present use beginning in 1980, and a modern structure (Fig. 17) by architect Jean Nouvel which opened in 2005. The positioning of the two buildings provides for two (2) public spaces—the large, open plaza outside the main entrance to the museum and a semi-enclosed



courtyard between the original and new structures. In addition, there is an interior courtyard accessible only from within the original building and an open-air terrace on the top floor of the new building.

The exterior of the original structure has been preserved but modified with the addition of two transparent glass elevator towers to provide vertical circulation on the exterior of the building. The transparent form of these towers does not detract from the historical façade facing the open plaza and allowed the interior spaces to remain intact. A second elevator bank is located at the rear of the original structure where it is joined by the new building. The open plaza in front of the museum (Fig. 18) entrance was constructed with parking underground. It is faced by structures containing cafes, retail, office and residential space. The plaza is multi-level and open with no trees or plantings. During the observation period, this space was primarily used as a pedestrian walkway for those entering the Reina Sofia or those passing through to other parts of the city. The semi-enclosed courtyard (Fig. 19) between the original and new buildings was also observed to be primarily a passage through, rather than around the structure, for those who did not have a connection with the museum. This courtyard is almost entirely under cover of the roofline of the new building and with its positioning as a semi-interior space, it is not readily visible from the street.

The interior courtyard of the original building (Fig. 20) is accessible for visitors and is open to the sky. With sculpture from the museum's collections and fountains, trees provide shade for benches along the gravel pathways and there is an arcaded stone walkway, which is along the perimeter. This is one of two (2) bar terraces where museum visitors can relax and enjoy refreshments and conversation within the museum. On the top floor of the new building the second bar terrace (Fig. 21) is an open-air lounge under roof, which serves refreshments and

provides panoramic views of Madrid. These spaces are only accessible through admission to the museum and operate with limited hours. In both the interior courtyard and the open-air lounge, visitors to the museum used these areas to rest and enjoy refreshments from the bar service. During the observations, with temperatures in the 90's Fahrenheit, neither place was crowded, although there appeared to be a continual turnover of visitors. A third bar terrace adjacent to the museum is open evenings to late night and is accessible to the general public.

The galleries in the Reina Sofia follow the modernist tradition of large, well-lit spaces of white walls, minimal architectural detailing, and very limited seating in a few select areas. The interior spaces appear to have been reconfigured to modern standards with doorways centered in walls in many galleries, as opposed to the enfilade arrangement of the Prado. Its collection is most noted for *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso's depiction of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War (1937). *Guernica* occupies one long, narrow room allowing visitors to view at a relatively close distance, but which limits the number of people who can view it at a given time. The artist's preparatory studies and sketches that led up to the immense painting, as well as post-script drawings of portions of the painting, such as the Weeping Woman and the Mother with Dead Child, are displayed in the rooms surrounding the painting. See Plan 1 below.



Plan 1 - Floor Plan of Galleries displaying Picasso's *Guernica*

#### Reina Sofia Museum - Madrid

Visitors speaking many different languages view the entire display, sometimes explaining elements of the work to each other. Couples, families, parents with young children, or individuals reading the printed information can all interact with the exhibit as desired. In an adjoining room, a film on the Spanish Civil War is shown repeatedly. Flyers are available on *Guernica* and the Paris Exposition, which provided the stimulus for Picasso to include an electric light bulb in the painting, as a symbol of technical progress.

Nearby are photographs of the painting of Picasso's lover, *Dora Maar au Chat*. These photographs show one of the best examples of documentation of the progress of a work of art, together with the sketches and preparatory studies. Thus, visitors can learn about the process of art, as well as the product.

### Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum is also comprised of two structures, the Palacio Villahermosa dating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with major renovations in 1990 and a new building which has been recently completed. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum as a cultural institution is also relatively new. It was created in 1988 and the museum opened its doors in 1992. The museum contains the private collection of Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, which was acquired by the Spanish government in 1993, and the collection of Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza which has been on deposit at the Museum since 2004. The collections contain European artwork dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

For the reconfiguration of the Thyssen-Bornemisza, the original form of the Palacio Villahermosa was maintained, but the main entrance for the museum (Fig. 22) was transferred from the street façade to the rear of the building, facing an open garden. With the development of the new building (Fig. 23), using parts of two existing structures, the garden was transformed into an entry courtyard (Fig. 24), which provides some shade and seating for those visiting the museum. It is not a large space and functions more as a transition passage from the street to the museum entrance.

The galleries in the rooms of the Palacio Villahermosa and the new building follow the traditional layout with movement between rooms utilizing a modified enfilade arrangement, incorporating a wide hallway along the exterior window wall. In the larger galleries, there were also doors between adjoining galleries at the rear of the spaces. In the area that was presumably a long gallery in the original structure, a series of partial height walls divide the long space into a series of alcoves for display of artwork by movement or time period. All of the galleries were designed without historical architectural detailing and provide a clean-line contemporary

background for the artwork. In the main galleries, illuminated ceilings provide an even distribution of diffused lighting. In the smaller galleries and passages, spot lighting and skylights provide additional illumination. The walls throughout the galleries are painted in tones of apricot/terra cotta colors, which provide warmth in the spaces where natural daylight does not penetrate. As in the other museums, there was limited seating in the galleries in the form of benches in the galleries.

Unlike the Reina Sofia Museum with *Guernica*, and Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (among others) at the Prado, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum does not have one specific piece or pieces of artwork as a focus in their permanent collection. When observing the actions of visitors in the galleries, there was no gallery or specific piece of artwork to draw a larger number of visitors. They tended to act as traditional museum visitors, surveying a gallery and approaching pieces that attracted their attention. Others would do a perimeter walk of the gallery, occasionally stopping to ponder a painting.

These three museums – Prado, Reina Sofia and Thyssen-Bornemisza – form what is called the “Golden Triangle of Art” in Madrid. While each is housed in complexes that combined historic structures with recent new buildings, the additions have been done in a manner sympathetic to the historic structures. They have public spaces outside the entrance for the public to gather, while the Reina Sofia also has a courtyard and bar terraces accessible through the interior of the museum. The museums not only attract multitudes of international visitors to Madrid, they also serve the local population with both their artwork collections and the surrounding public spaces.

## BARCELONA

Barcelona is a city with its own sense of style, which is reflected in the buildings and public spaces of virtually every street. An analysis of the relationship between the landscape and the buildings in a city context can lead to a better understanding of the culture of the city. In Barcelona, the authors visited several Antoni Gaudí-designed spaces: the Church of the Holy Family (Iglesia de la Sagrada Familia), Parc Güell, Casa Batlló, and Casa Milá (La Pedrera).

The Church of the Holy Family (Fig. 25) was designed as a place of worship but has become a focal point of culture in Barcelona, drawing international tourists and locals to observe, explore and wonder at the creative use of materials and space. Its setting within the city has become decidedly urban, but the park across from the main entrance and one on the opposite side fit with the Spanish concept of development to include gathering spaces.

Parc Güell (Figs. 26 and 27) was to be a public area for a housing development within a park-like setting, which never materialized. Although it is located on a very steep hill, it does still function as a gathering place for people of all age groups and for families. There is a large open plaza-like area which overlooks the city and numerous walkways with areas to rest from the climb, sit and converse, or meditate in the open air. Elaborate structures serve as land marks throughout the park.

Casa Batlló (Fig. 28) is one of the Gaudí-designed apartment buildings which permit tours in part of the structure to illustrate the original home design. Casa Batlló, along with Casa Milá, still function as apartment buildings while showcasing the organic forms which have become synonymous with Gaudí and Barcelona.

Public spaces and museums are found throughout Barcelona. Montjuïc is a section of Barcelona which contains multiple museums and public spaces, in addition to being the site of

the 1992 Olympics. The entrance to Montjuïc (Fig. 29) features a broad boulevard and wide sidewalks lined with fountains. As one ascends the hill, there are open plazas, fountains and staircases which provide many areas for rest and relaxation. Montjuïc is home to the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona (Fig. 30), the Fundació Joan Miró, the Pueblo Español and the Caixa Forum. The design of each institution includes public spaces, interior and exterior, for people to meet, converse and relax. The Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona (Fig. 31) is located in another section of Barcelona. The contemporary structure flanks one side of the Plaza de los Ángeles opposite the Convent dels Àngels, a historic structure which has been reinvented as a cultural center. The interface of the structures is seen in Fig. 32 – a view of the plaza and convent from inside the museum.

### BILBAO

Bilbao, Spain's fourth largest city, was a steel industry river town which has undergone a major transformation in the last 15-20 years. Bilbao's main attraction is the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim museum (Fig. 33) which is an example of modern international architecture. Placed on the riverfront where industry used to dominate, the entrance (Fig. 34) is reached by descending a long stairway from the street above to the level of the river below. With the momentum created by the Guggenheim, the riverfront (Fig. 35) has been revitalized for residential use, business and relaxation. The inclusion of parks, café and fountains (Fig. 36) provide public spaces for both visitors and residents to enjoy.

The different sections of Bilbao provide a unique look at the development of a Spanish city through centuries. The Casco Viejo (Fig. 37) is the medieval area of Bilbao, while Plaza Moyua (Fig. 38) was originally planned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and renovated several times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The narrow streets of Casco Viejo, with their ground-level storefronts and cafes

with residential units above, provide an intimate setting for locals to meet on sidewalk cafes. The Plaza Moyua, with its large central plaza, serves as a hub for transportation, business and hotels for both local residents and visitors.

In addition to the Guggenheim Museum, two buildings/complexes have redefined the riverfront in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Iberdrola Tower (Fig. 39) by César Pelli, Architect, is a 40-story structure which dominates the western landscape of the city. With two adjacent residential structures, the modern tower maintains the interface of living and working seen in traditional Spanish cities. Close to the river, there is easy access to the river-side promenades, parks and cafes for workers and residents.

The Isozaki Atea building complex (Fig. 40), positioned along the river between the Guggenheim Museum and Casco Viejo, was designed to respect the scale of surrounding buildings by balancing two tall, glass towers with lower (6-8 story) brick and stone structures. The complex also incorporates facades which were preserved from earlier structures. Residents have easy walking access to retail and business establishments in the center of the city, in addition to the river side parks.

While the city of Bilbao has undergone a major transformation from an industrial river town to a modern city, the development has maintained the cultural tradition of combining residential, work and public spaces in the central urban areas.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has presented detailed results of research in Spain from visits to public spaces and museums in Madrid, with brief overviews of Barcelona and Bilbao. Through observational research and analysis of digital photographs, we have examined how Spanish culture is reflected



in the architecture and streetscapes, and discovered how new structures have been incorporated into the urban fabric, while respecting the traditional heritage.

#### NOTE

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**SPANISH CULTURE as REFLECTED in the BUILT ENVIRONMENT  
of SPANISH CITIES**

IMAGE APPENDIX - MADRID



Figure 1 Puerta del Sol



Figure 2 Puerta del Sol



Figure 3 Puerta del Sol



Figure 4 Plaza Mayor

IMAGE APPENDIX - MADRID



Figure 5 El Rastro



Figure 6 Entrance to Retiro Park



Figure 7 Retiro Park Lake and Monument



Figure 8 Retiro Park - Crystal Palace

IMAGE APPENDIX - MADRID

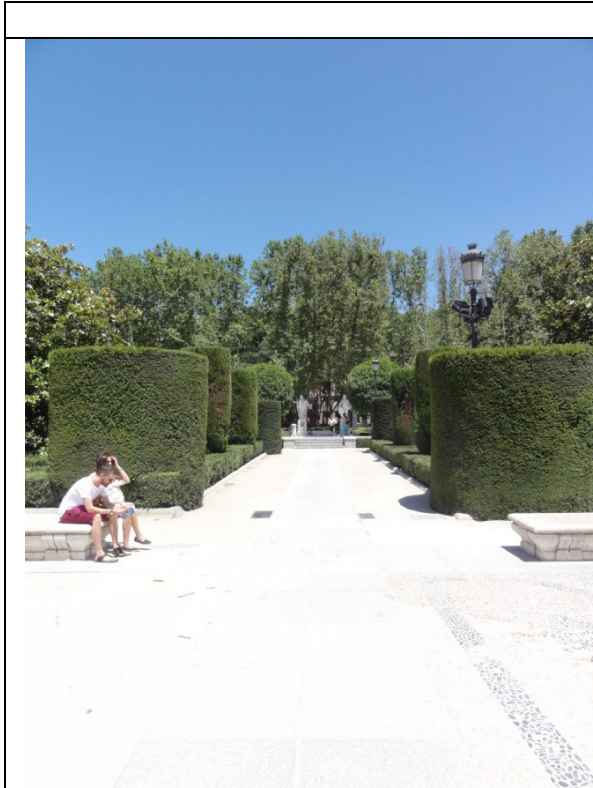


Figure 9 Plaza de Oriente



Figure 10 Plaza de Armería



Figure 11 Plaza de Olavide

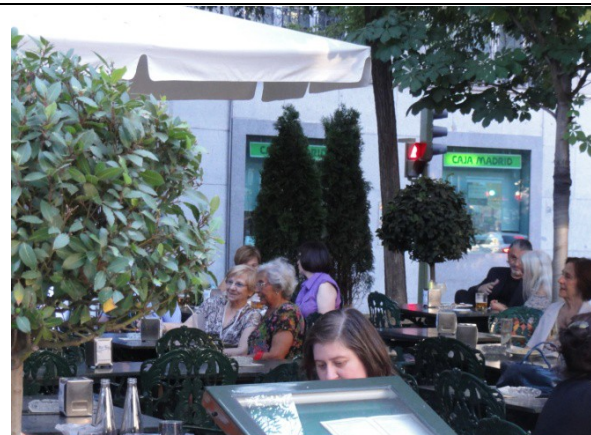


Figure 12 Gran Café de Gijón

IMAGE APPENDIX - MADRID



Figure 13 El Museo del Prado



Figure 14 El Museo del Prado - Entrance



Figure 15 El Museo del Prado



Figure 16 Reina Sofia Museum

IMAGE APPENDIX - MADRID



Figure 17 Reina Sofia Museum  
Nouvel Building



Figure 18 Reina Sofia Museum  
Exterior Courtyard

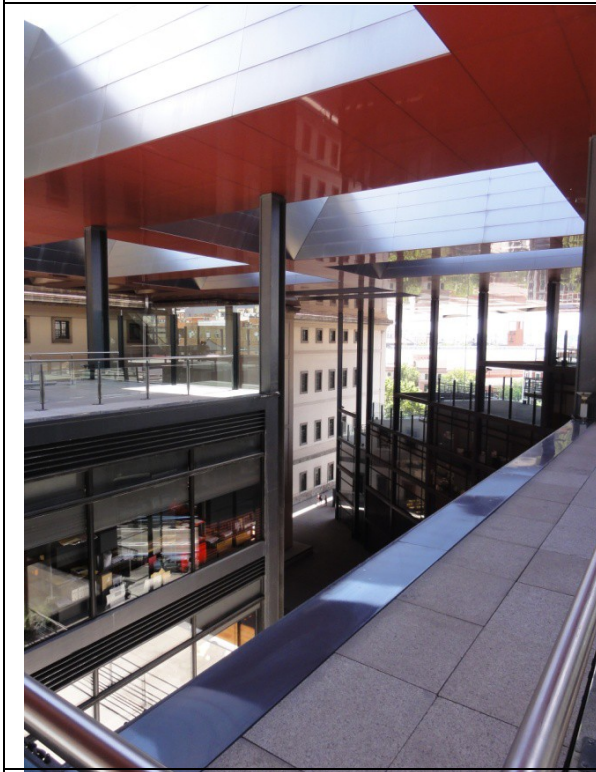


Figure 19 Reina Sofia Museum  
View of Interior Courtyard



Figure 20 Reina Sofia Museum  
Interior Courtyard

IMAGE APPENDIX



Figure 21 Reina Sofia Museum – Madrid  
Open-Air Terrace



Figure 22 Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum  
Entrance Façade



Figure 23 Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum  
New Building Addition



Fig. 24 Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum  
Entrance Courtyard

## IMAGE APPENDIX - BARCELONA



Figure 25 Iglesia de la Sagrada Familia  
Antoni Gaudí



Figure 26 Park Güell – Antoni Gaudí



Figure 27 Park Güell – Antoni Gaudí



Fig. 28 Casa Batlló – Attic - Antoni Gaudí



IMAGE APPENDIX - BARCELONA



Figure 29 View from Montjuïc



Figure 30 Montjuïc  
Museo Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo



Figure 31 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo  
de Barcelona



Fig. 32 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo  
de Barcelona  
View of Courtyard from Interior

IMAGE APPENDIX -BILBAO



Figure 33 Guggenheim Museum



Figure 34 Guggenheim Entrance



Figure 35 Riverfront



Fig. 36 Park bordering the Guggenheim

## IMAGE APPENDIX -BILBAO



Figure 37 Casco Viejo  
Medieval Streetscape



Figure 38 Plaza Moyua  
19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century City Center



Figure 39 Iberdrola Tower  
by César Pelli, Architect

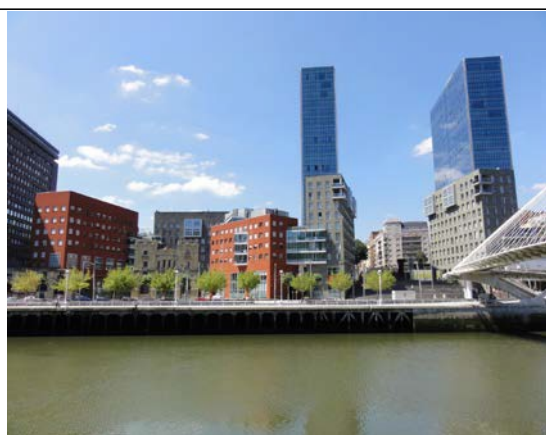


Fig. 40 Isozaki Atea Building Complex  
by Arata Isozaki, Architect