

A POWERHOUSE OF GLOBAL CULTURE

THE GUGGENHEIM ABU DHABI AND FRANK GEHRY.

Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates in the Arabian Gulf, has embarked on a phenomenal project. In 2012, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will be unveiled to the world. Canadian-born architect Frank Gehry, whose innovative design for the Guggenheim Bilbao helped transform the Basque city into a vibrant cultural centre, has been tasked with recreating the “Bilbao effect” in the emirate. At 30,000 square metres, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will be larger than any of the existing Guggenheim museums, and is the cornerstone of a major cultural initiative on Saadiyat Island. Part of a plan to position the emirate as a leading global cultural destination, the new museum will display its own major collection of contemporary art and exhibit works from the Guggenheim Foundation’s permanent collections. Together, the Guggenheim collections form one of the most important holdings of modern art in the world.

Abu Dhabi is largely known as a city of wealth and luxury, but not culture. Observers say the development of a world-class art museum like the Guggenheim may serve to defuse critics, who have complained that Abu Dhabi lacks the cultural amenities of the world’s great cities. But Abu Dhabi’s profile has started to rise. “[This] signing represents the determination of the Abu Dhabi government to create a world-class cultural destination for its residents and visitors,” said Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

“The Middle East is one of the world’s most important emerging regions, in

terms of contemporary culture,” says Guggenheim Foundation Director Thomas Krens. “It will have an enormously beneficial impact on how creativity is viewed in this part of the world.”

Established by philanthropist Solomon R. Guggenheim in 1937, the foundation draws more than 2.5 million visitors per year to its flagship museum in New York and galleries in Las Vegas, Berlin, Bilbao and Venice. Several of the buildings are known as much, if not more, for their architecture as their collections. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York revolutionized the idea of what museums could be. And even with the challenge from Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao, it remains the benchmark against which new gallery buildings are judged. Richard Gluckman’s Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin and the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum Las Vegas, designed by Rem Koolhaas, are also architectural gems.

The Guggenheim hopes to repeat its success with the Guggenheim Bilbao, which opened in 1997. The iconic building has become a case study for the economic and social impact of culture. Guggenheim Bilbao has revitalized Bilbao’s image and has become one of Europe’s most popular new sites; 80 per cent of its visitors come from outside Spain.

Just as Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao established a new level of design excellence, with its audacity of vision and distinctive titanium-sheathed curves, his Abu Dhabi brief sets out to push the boundaries of architecture once again, and set the

benchmark for museum design in the 21st century. Gehry recognizes that the design will need to complement the surrounding environment: “We must understand the culture ... the character of the landscape, which is extraordinary. It requires inventing an architecture that applies here.”

One of the main concerns is just how the foundation, with its birthplace in the heartland of Western contemporary art, is going to understand the cultural and traditional sensibilities of the Middle East and the Arab world. The Abu Dhabi announcement came at a time when the Guggenheim Museum New York was hosting “Zaha Hadid: Thirty Years in Architecture”, the largest-ever retrospective on the work of the Iraqi-born architect. While the international network has presented several fascinating exhibitions on issues related to regional cultural practice, artists from the Middle East and the Arab world are absent from its permanent collection.

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will soon affirm the global identity of Abu Dhabi, and position the emirate as a progressive cultural capital. The museum will prove to be a great source of learning and a rich platform for dialogue and debate when it opens in 2012. This groundbreaking project will bring the art of the Middle East to a truly international audience through its affiliation with the exclusive Guggenheim Foundation network of museums, which spans the globe. It will set a standard for global culture that will resonate for decades.

PAUL ROSS



Photo courtesy of the CN Tower.

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