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FROM BILBAO TO CHICAGO: FRANK GEHRY AND THE “BILBAO EFFECT”

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LEWIS UNIVERSITY
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- Nervion River







- Richard Serra's
- "The Matter of Time"



- Anish Kapoor
- Tall Tree & The Eye



Louise Bourgeois

[París, 1911 – Nueva York, 2010]



Ama (Maman), 1999 (2001ean urtua)

Brontzea, altzairu herdoilgaitza eta marmola
Edizioa: 6 aletik 2

Mamá (Maman), 1999 (fundido en 2001)

Bronze, acero inoxidable y mármol
Edición 2/6

Maman, 1999 (cast 2001)

Bronze, marble, and stainless steel
Edition 2/6

Maman, 1999 (fonte de 2001)

Bronze, marbre et acier inoxydable
Édition 2/6

Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa











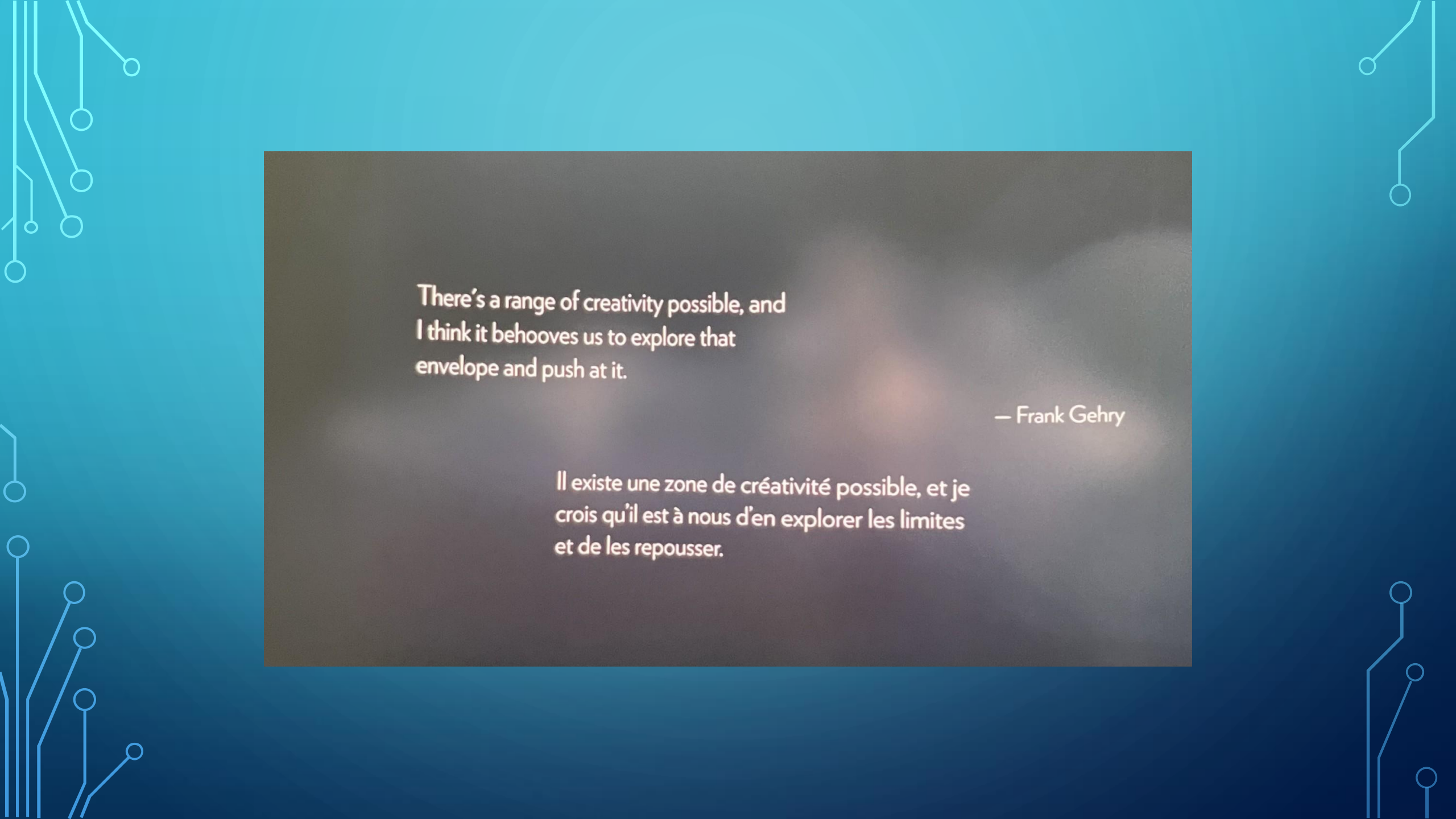


- Lurie Gardens



- Crown Fountain





There's a range of creativity possible, and
I think it behooves us to explore that
envelope and push at it.

— Frank Gehry

Il existe une zone de créativité possible, et je
crois qu'il est à nous d'en explorer les limites
et de les repousser.

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From Bilbao to Chicago: Frank Gehry and the “Bilbao Effect”

This conference presentation addresses the “Bilbao Effect,” which refers to the transformative economic and cultural revitalization of a post-industrial city through the construction of an iconic cultural institution. These structures tend to be built on former industrial sites. “Starchitects,” world renowned architects, are engaged to pull out all the stops to create an emblematic structure that puts the location on the map. Almost 30 years ago, Frank Gehry completed the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997). It put Bilbao on the tourist map.

The ripple effect from Bilbao reached the shores of Lake Michigan and influenced Chicago’s Millennium Park. The heart of this park is Gehry’s J.B. Pritzker Pavilion while Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate, known as “The Bean,” has become Chicago’s most beloved icon. Millennium Park’s initial slogan was: “Art, Music, and Culture.” The park is linked to the Art Institute of Chicago, provided a new home for the Grant Park Music Festival, and has a range of public programming. The passing of Gehry in December 2025 prompted me to visit Bilbao in May 2026. This is an opportunity to contextualize, compare and contrast, and assess.

Questions: What do these projects teach us about public/private partnerships? Why did donors get involved? Was it civic pride and the opportunity to improve the quality of life in cities? Can projects on a grand scale create moments of high influence? For post-industrial cities, how can we assess the spending on infrastructure and the potential for increased employment?

- I. Lived experience – “Cultural Pilgrimage”
 - a. “Have you been to Bilbao?” (1998)
 - b. Audio Tour – as source
 - c. Visiting and reflecting
- II. Art and ways of seeing/being
 - a. Hemingway, Picasso’s bullfight ink drawings, and Gehry
 - b. Artists transforming your world view?
 - c. Cultural pilgrimage – Pyramids, Eiffel Tower, and ...
 - d. Frank Gehry (d. December 5, 2025)
 - e. David Hockney (d. June 11, 2026)
- III. Bilbao Effect – as a point of departure
 - a. Recovery of Industrial Site
 - b. Culture as an economic engine
 - c. Large scale projects
 - d. Tourism - “Heads in beds”

- IV. “Starchitects”
 - a. Frank Gehry
 - b. Zaha Hadid
 - c. Renzo Piano
 - d. Santiago Calatrava

- V. Precedents: LA’s Disney Concert Hall and Chicago’s Grant Park
 - a. Millennium Park
 - b. “Recovered” land
 - c. World’s Fairs as models – Crystal Place – Eiffel Tower – etc.
 - d. Olympics? Theme Parks? Malls? - Beijing’s Nest Stadium and Shanghai’s China Art Museum - “building the spectacular”
 - e. Industrial Arts, Science and Technology - County Fairs
 - f. Lessons from World Cup 2026 (Football Stadiums)
 - g. Looking toward LA Olympics in 2028 and back at LA Olympics 1984 – (Use of university campuses)

- VI. Artists with “Enhancements”
 - a. Jeff Koons “Puppy”
 - b. Fujiko Nakaya Fog Sculpture (F.O.G.) 1998
 - c. Louise Bourgeois Maman (1999)
 - d. Anish Kapoor “The Bean” and “Tall Tree and the Eye” (2009) (Replacing – the Picasso’s Untitled Sculpture in Daley Plaza as icon)
 - e. Jaume Plensa – Crown Fountain – radical reappraisal of a “fountain”
 - f. BP Bridge - Gehry
 - g. Lurie Garden
 - h. Irony – contemporary art is not “popular, yet pop art becomes iconic (Social Media) – I click; therefore I am.

- VII. Measuring Success?
 - a. Tourism and visitors
 - b. Environmental concerns and sustainability
 - c. Boom/Bust cycle (2009) and projects in the pipeline – Dubai – Seattle?

- VIII. Institutional Support “anchor organizations”
 - a. Guggenheim
 - b. Grant Park Music Festival
 - c. Pritzker Pavillion and Disney Concert Hall
 - d. Scale of the project – “make no small plans”
 - e. World’s Columbian Exposition (1893) – were World’s Fairs got taken over by the Olympics?

- IX. “Constellation of Sites”
 - a. Bilbao – 1.3 million visitors (Santander, San Fermin, Pamplona)

- b. Millennium Park – 4 million visitors (Chicago and beyond)
- c. Airport connections and public transportation
- X. Why great artists?
 - a. The expectation for a grand modern statement
 - b. Civic Culture
 - c. Desire for the authentic – “real article”
 - d. Argument for the Humanities
- XI. Art, Music, and Culture done right
 - a. Right partners – public private partnership
 - b. Right location – “constellation of other sites and infrastructure”
 - c. Right environmental ethos
 - d. Humanities and Technology
- XII. Evaluation: Is the building better than what is displayed?
 - a. Bilbao – building is potentially better than the art
 - b. Chicago – music can be better than the pavilion
 - c. (Disney Concert in Los Angeles) – building is an instrument – site is a challenge

Sources:

[The Guggenheim Bilbao, 20 Years Later: How a Museum Transformed a City—and Why the ‘Bilbao Effect’ Has Been Impossible to Replicate](#)

[The Bilbao Effect](#)

[The Fading Away of the Bilbao Effect](#)

[Visual Transformations Within the Space of the City](#)

[The Millennium Park Effect](#)

[Grant Park vs. Millennium Park](#)