

Web Sight

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Guggenheim

<http://www.guggenheim.where.next>



New York, Venice, Las Vegas, Berlin and Bilbao: "Guggenheim" seems like the first global museum brand. But after spending an hour exploring the Guggenheim websites and searching elsewhere on the web, I began to wonder.



Each gallery has its own URL and website and, as you can see from the images, there's little commonality of design and branding. To my surprise, I couldn't find what every other brand has: a "master" site for the

brand. There's a page at <http://www.guggenheim.org> but all this does is take you to the individual museum sites - which aren't very informative either. One museum's website describes the New York Guggenheim's site as "yielding its secrets slowly", and it's hard to disagree.

In summer 2001 the Guggenheim announced www.guggenheim.com, "a new online destination for the visual and performing arts". This was to be a commercial venture backed by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, the Hermitage, the Albertina and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, and would, according to Guggenheim's director, Thomas Krens, "provide at one address an unprecedented flow of digital information on all aspects of culture." Two years on, there's no sign of this "masterful integration of culture and technology": www.guggenheim.com just takes you to the www.guggenheim.org home page. However, the foundation is sponsoring an interesting project for preservation of new-media art (www.guggenheim.org/variablemedia)

The Guggenheim websites that do exist contain remarkably little information on the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, its activities and finances. The New York website presents a calm picture. The anodyne press releases announce new exhibitions, new trustees - and, surprisingly often, new Guggenheims.

Few of these get built, however (see table) and for information about their fate - and the state of the Guggenheim empire generally - one has to look elsewhere on the Internet. Here one finds a quite different picture: of

an organisation that is in financial difficulty (staff cuts, budget cuts, branch closures), has divisions at the top, and is still trying hard to expand.

A Wall Street Journal piece describes the Guggenheim as "skating on financial thin ice". Disagreement between the foundation's chairman (and donor of more than \$60m) Peter B. Lewis and Thomas Krens became public when plans for a second New York museum were cancelled last year: Mr Lewis said the plans "had first used yesterday's reserves and then used tomorrow's optimism". An article on The Observer's website speaks of Mr Krens's "increasingly fantastic schemes for new outposts", and "the Enronisation of the Guggenheim" (the latter quote being ascribed to an unnamed "critic").

"Enronisation" seems the wrong term to me. Certainly I wouldn't want to suggest that Mr Krens has ever contemplated anything unlawful. "Virginisation" is a better word: spreading the name while minimising the exposure. Time Magazine described the business plan for the stalled Rio de Janeiro Guggenheim as "a work of art in its own right", and Richard Branson might be proud of it. The public sector provides the site and the capital (\$130m to \$250m depending who you ask), owns the building, and carries the construction and operational risks. The Guggenheim lends - or rather hires - its name, but otherwise its role is one familiar to Locum - lead consultant for the project, with a reported fee of \$4.18m for the development phase alone.

Meanwhile, the next project has already been announced, in Taichung, a city of about 1m people and home of the Taiwan Museum of Art. Rio always seemed an unlikely place to repeat the success of Bilbao: it's already a world city and tourist destination, and the court action that has at least temporarily halted the project was no surprise. Taichung



Image courtesy of Britain On View

may be a better bet: the Guggenheim would be part of a new destination including opera house and civic centre, and the Guggenheim name could both strengthen established gallery-going in Taiwan and be a major draw for tourists from Japan and, eventually, the Chinese mainland.

If built, the Rio museum will be partly underwater. Zaha Hadid's £360m design for Taichung has entire galleries moving on air cushions and hydraulic rams. Looking forward

to 2010, the Wall Street Journal described "the Guggenheim Museum Antarctica", built of ice and displaying the last 10 artworks from the Guggenheim collection, "the rest having been gradually sold off to cover debt service and other costs associated with the museum's 18-year expansion programme". Fantastic schemes indeed - but in which sense of the word?

Less notable Guggenheims

Edinburgh : Proposed gallery in Leith.

Guggenheim Las Vegas : Opened 2001, closed 2003 (the Guggenheim Hermitage gallery, also in Las Vegas, continues).

Guggenheim Museum New York (Lower Manhattan) : Announced in 2000, cancelled following the dot.com crash and 9/11.

Guggenheim Museum Taichung (Taiwan) : Announced July 2003; feasibility and economic appraisal due for completion in August.

Guggenheim.com : Announced in June 2001.

Museo Guggenheim Venezia d'Arte Contemporanea : Additional to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, to be housed in the Punta della Dogana. Announced 1999; no sign of current progress.

Rio de Janeiro : On hold pending court challenges to the public sector funding package.

St Petersburg : Proposed partnership with the Hermitage.

Salvador or Recife (Brazil) : Under consideration at same time as the Rio gallery was being projected.

Salzburg : Proposed.

SoHo, New York : Opened 1992, closed 2002.

Tokyo and Osaka : Four proposed joint ventures with commercial partners since 1991.

Sources include: <http://www.haberarts.com/museums.htm>

<http://www.forbes.com/global/2001/0108/032.html>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/2631847.stm>

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,865928,00.html>

<http://www.nymuseums.com/lm02113t.htm>

<http://www.taiwanheadlines.gov.tw/20030716/20030716s3.html>

<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/article.asp?idart=11255>

http://www.guggenheim.org/press_releases/guggenheim_com.html

<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/printout/0,13155,901030630-460189,00.html>

<http://opinionjournal.com/la/?id=110003486> (Wall Street Journal)

