The Mc-art Museum

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st Century the mega-art museum as a fun palace and theme park has ostensibly replaced the temple, treasure trove or cabinet of curiosities, certainly for some institutions. The Guggenheim’s Bilbao seemingly hybridises Boccioni’s Continuity of Forms in Space and the inside shaft of a washing machine, inviting the spectator to enter the inner workings of a gargantuan sculpture. Similarly the Tate Modern, located in a refurbished power station that once housed giant turbines, humbles the spectator who experiences art akin to experiencing the world in the film, ‘Honey I Shrunk the Kids’. The iconic structure and landmark building has become a tourist magnet that potentially becomes a city’s signature. The notion of the iconic structure is not new. The once derided Eiffel Tower has become synonymous with Paris. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim and Paris’ Pompidou Centre stand as examples of landmark art museum buildings. The significant difference today is scale. The landmark building is one element complemented by the notion of franchising that organizations like the Guggenheim are embracing, in a bid for global exposure and a heightened visible presence.

Instantly recognisable symbols pervade our contemporary landscape. McDonald’s ‘golden arches’ and Nike’s ‘swoosh’ are symbols symptomatic of successful global marketing based on brand recognition and visibility. Relationships predicated on symbols have allowed globalised practices to permeate more quickly (Waters, 1995:124). The food and leisure industry has been transformed by the marketing approaches adopted by such multi-nationals as McDonald’s and Nike. The values of a centralist structure permeate to the peripheries through franchising leading to homogenised practices and a consistency transcending geographical boundaries. However, the central dominance aspect in a global context represents a dystopian view of culture formed around the values of an elite rather than a utopian view that embodies shared aspirations and collective values (Tomlinson, 1996:24).

More recently however, the concept of franchising and global outreach has surfaced in artistic institutions through the expansionary practices of the Guggenheim organisation and the less ambitious, but nevertheless, burgeoning form of the Tate in Britain.

This paper explores the following questions by looking at the Guggenheim structure – Is franchising desirable and/or appropriate to art museums? What does the Guggenheim gain from such activities and what are the benefits to the franchisees and the public? What are the pitfalls for art museums located away from the centre? Is franchising the future?

But first a brief historical view of the Guggenheim. The Guggenheim museum began some sixty years ago when the philanthropist Solomon R. Guggenheim set up a temporary gallery space known as the Museum of a Non-Objective Painting, in a former automobile showroom in 54th Street, New York. After four years at the site Guggenheim
desired an innovative building in which to signify a vision for the future. Through his art advisor, Hilla Rebay the architect Frank Lloyd Wright was approached.

Hilla Rebay’s brief to Wright in 1943 was, ‘I need a fighter, a lover of space, an agitator, a tester and a wise man… I want a temple of spirit, a monument!’ (Drutt, 2001) Wright was a curious choice as he loathed cities which he believed made people behave artificially, and he had little empathy for modern art. (Conti, 1978:165-166) The final site for the building in 5th Avenue was close to New York’s Central Park which was an oasis in a bustling metropolis. Wright set about designing a building based on cylindrical forms which provided stark contrast to the verticality of the surrounding buildings and the horizontal grid of the streetscape. The building opened in 1959 and stands as one of Wright’s finest organic structures; a triumph of individuality.

Critics lamented the spiral form that made viewing of the art work difficult because of the curved internal walls and sloping ramps (Conti, 1978:166; Meyer, 1979:141). Despite such concerns the building achieved two things. One, it became an architectural landmark and a structure to experience and secondly, it attracted notoriety and visibility for the Guggenheim, effectively down playing its limited collection when compared to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) and the Museum of Modern Art. The architectural landmark art museum and the seeming prominence given to the building and less to the art resonates with the Guggenheim’s current practices.

The architectural icon re-emerged in a different guise in October 1997 when Bilbao’s Guggenheim in Spain opened to wide critical acclaim from the American press (Honigsbaum, 2001:13). The buildings wave like forms rendered in shimmering titanium effectively re-routed international flights as visitors flocked to the sculptural building foreclosing on one millenium and potentially setting the agenda for the next (Usher, 2001:13).

The Guggenheim organisation had established international connections early when its sister structure, Venice’s Peggy Guggenheim collection, (she was the niece of Solomon), joined to create the Guggenheim Foundation in 1979. However, the shift from familial connections to a franchising structure began to emerge in the early 1990s when the Basque government approached the Guggenheim to conduct a feasibility study into establishing a gallery at Bilbao.

The Bilbao venture came about as the Basque government sought to replicate Frankfurt’s cultural success in opening 12 new museums in 10 years and the knowledge that 97% of the Guggenheim’s extensive holdings were not on display. In 1991 Cembalet drew attention to rumours concerning the Guggenheim’s McDonald’s type franchising aspirations under the leadership of its new director, Thomas Krens. (Cembalet, 1991:39-40). The officials from the Guggenheim denied that there was any substance to the rumours adding wryly that outside of the Bilbao venture they had been approached by every continent except Antarctica. (Cembalet, 1991:40).

In 2001 the situation has changed with two branches in New York (Fifth Avenue and Soho), branches in Venice, Bilbao and Berlin and plans for a mega-art museum on the East River in Manhattan and a Guggenheim in Rio de Janeiro. New branches in St
Petersburg and Las Vegas are due to open in September, 2001 (Webb, 2001:3). Given this expansion what motivated the Guggenheim to embark on a franchising structure?

The Franchise Structure

Thomas Krens was appointed as director of the Guggenheim in 1988. He had previously been an academic, studied political economy, art and public and private management and is described as bullish, risk-taking and imposing. (Weideger, 1998:43)

The Guggenheim of 1988 was a very different institution to that of today. It was ailing financially and Krens response to the Board was preserve funds if you want to function conservatively or alternatively become proactive and vital through making significant changes. Rather than drawing in he embarked on an expansionary building program raising funds through tax exempt bonds and deaccessioning works from the collection, including paintings by Kandinsky, Chagall and Modigliani to acquire a collection of American minimal art. (Prud’homme, 1992:36) The deaccessioning process was controversial as it involved a replacement of priorities in the collection rather than buying different works by the same artist. This aspect conveyed the impression that the art was seen as a means to financial ends and priorities.

In 1992 Krens franchising vision was unfurled. Krens initial rationale for franchising was based on the reality that only 3% of the galleries collection was on show at any one time. Critics, however saw the spectre of a ‘McGuggenheim’ chain. (Prud’homme, 1992:36) The franchising ethos has the capacity to homogenise practices both in an organisations structural operation as well as what and how it presents its product. Raymond Williams wrote of a ‘selective tradition’ wherein art galleries collection reflected a selection from the culture at a particular time that was perceived by that organisation or its curators (Williams, 1961:66). Franchising potentially goes further creating a ‘selective vision’ where what is seen and how it is presented and packaged becomes homogenised. The architect of the Bilbao Guggenheim, Frank Gehry was commissioned by Krens to design a new Guggenheim headquarters ten times the size of the current space at the end of Wall Street in New York. The $1.2 billion project is described by the architect as a cloud-like titanium structure that floats above the space. (Jackman, 2000:94) Again, the wave-like forms replicate the increasingly familiar Gehry style.

By extending the McDonald’s franchising analogy to the Guggenheim advantages accrue through brand recognition, global presence, business and management efficiencies and hence visibility in the marketplace. The McDonald’s franchise has provided a successful formula in the food retailing industry that has been replicated world-wide. The formula is based on four pillars – efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (Ritzer, 1996). Whilst recognizing the success of the McDonald’s franchising venture, is it appropriate to cultural organizations? Each of these four pillars will be briefly described and their relationship to artistic practices considered.
Efficiency

At the heart of the McDonald’s efficiency ethic is to get food to the customer in the quickest way possible. Roles within a McDonald’s store are clearly defined with workers following set procedures. There are also economies of scale achieved through efficiency as workers are generally not distracted by peripheral issues or concerns.

For a franchised art museum curatorial expertise may defer to a centrally prepared exhibition that has specific guidelines and installation features to be observed. Staff would have clearly defined roles as any transgression would impact poorly on the brand name. Exhibitions therefore would tend to be conservative and not risk taking appealing to populism and or fashion. Audience figures and ratings would assume greater importance in attracting sponsorship, patronage and donated art collections. The Guggenheim’s Art of the Motorcycle and Giorgio Armani exhibitions raise concerns about the museums appeal to populism, fashion and glamour. Krens argues against his critics stating, ‘I am not interested in being just an elitist institution that does not speak to a broad cross-section of the population. People say that the distinctions between fields are shrinking – the workplace and home, for example. These distinctions are also blurring in an art museum. Culture can be educational and entertaining’ (Klebnikov, 2001: 68).

Gallery directors of such large art institutions as the MET see Krens strategies as pandering to commercialism and compromised sponsorship (Klebnikov, 2001: 68). For example, the Armani show was officially sponsored by a Time Warner fashion magazine and Armani provided a $15 million gift to the Guggenheim. In effect, the nature, role and form of an art museum entering into the 21st Century is becoming a contested site through the Guggenheim’s activities. Will investments in art and artists be pushed aside for the financial rewards generated by commercial and fashion interests? Or, will certain artists and artistic practices be fore-grounded as in the case of Charles Saatchi’s promotion of the Sensation exhibition that was packaged and toured, nearly making it to the National Gallery of Australia?

Justifying their existence and Calculability

The rhetoric of the food provided at McDonald’s often emphasises size and scale. The Big Mac and Quarter Pounder give the sense of a large hamburger. Further, there are fixed quantities of ingredients so that a calculation of resources required and the profits to be made can be achieved with a high degree of accuracy.

By appealing to scale and size an art museum can reinforce a sense of importance and pre-eminence. The packaging of an exhibition centrally can be controlled in other franchise locations as, unlike a blockbuster show touring different galleries, the franchisees building is known and its structural components understood. There are also further economies of scale as curatorial, catalogue and paraphernalia costs (scarves, mugs, posters, T-shirts) can be reproduced on a large scale under one institutional
umbrella, thus avoiding catering for individual galleries taking a blockbuster show, as happens currently.

The rhetoric employed by Krens establishes a position that views art as a commodity, museums as an industry and uses terms such as ‘asset management’ and ‘mergers and acquisitions’. (Einreihhofer, 1997:146) Budgetary efficiencies could lead to an inflexible institution based on refined and fixed calculations, leaving the Australian counterpart answerable and dependant on the parents economic imperatives. Could Australian artists, if included in a Guggenheim’s franchise, be the first casualty to de-accessioning if populism and profits outweighed a more broadly representative collection? Or could qualitative decisions on artistic merit be sacrificed to populist shows that attract crowds and sponsorship, such as the much flaunted motorcycle and Armani exhibitions.

Predictability

Despite small concessions to community groups that may change the outward appearance of some McDonald’s stores a consistency of the internal operation (often inspected from Head Office annually and given an efficiency rating) is evident. Whilst, there are small variations in layout there is a consistent look and familiarity evident. Guggenheim bids made by other cities and countries are keen to replicate the municipal success of Bilbao even to the point of some groups contacting Gehry directly in the quest for another of his buildings. (McGuigan, 2000: 105). The concept of the exciting new art museum building has also attracted Gehry-esque inspired clones (McGuigan, 2000:105).

Control

What control does a franchising operation demand? McDonald’s exerts a strong form of control over producers who are given clear guidelines as to growing, harvesting and presenting their produce. Such control guarantees that the McDonald’s food eaten in Adelaide is close to the same as that experienced in Moscow or Berlin.

The form of control applied to art museums could reinforce a Guggenheim style of management. Could artistic fashions promote a view that certain forms or styles of art are acceptable hence de-accessioning of those forms outside that realm could become more prevalent in order to achieve a ‘house style’. What rights would artists have in this context and how much autonomy, if any, would an Australian Guggenheim have?

What does franchising offer the Guggenheim?

Firstly, for central organizations to profit, additional satellites and franchises are sought. The Bilbao Guggenheim cost the Basque’s $100 million for the building, $20 million for the use of the Guggenheim name (franchise fee) and a fund of $50 million for establishing a collection (McNeill,2000: 481). Thus, there is a financial bonus to the Guggenheim as cities and remote locations pay for the privilege and use of the brand name and access to the parent collection. As Krens observes it is cheaper for governments to access the Guggenheim’s holdings than construct their own gallery from scratch (Cembalest, 1992:86).
Secondly, as tax breaks provided by the United States government diminish additional forms of revenue and dispersal of resources can occur through franchising. Funding by European governments is more prevalent in Europe whilst American galleries are more tied to corporate largesse. New York’s Guggenheim receives less than 1% of its funding from government (Cemblast, 1992:86). Its endowment covers one year’s running costs as opposed to the MET’s eleven years (Author unknown a., 2001:1). Thus, a franchising fee can access a broader financial catchment at no risk to the parent.

Thirdly, there are economies of scale to be had wherein a show can be curated centrally and then allowed to tour to a range of destinations using a familiar pattern of presentation, structuring and freighting. Research costs, catalogues and assorted paraphernalia can also be reproduced on a greater scale as costs are recouped through extensive exposure in several locations. Critics of the Bilbao gallery see this aspect as an example of American cultural imperialism wherein public money from the Basque’s coffers was used to buy a gallery, exhibitions and a concept emanating from the United States.

Fourthly, if only 3% of a collection is on display at any one time more of the collection can be circulating if there are more venues available. This argument is the one most consistently applied by Krens. Whilst there is a ring of truth to this argument expansion outside the United States is not necessary and in fact parts of the collection could be put at risk if placed on a continual rotational cycle. Conversely, some of the works from the New York collection may be too fragile to travel thus restricting a foreign governments access to the Guggenheim’s offerings.

Fifthly, the name becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Each new venture foregrounds the name giving wider currency to its importance and prominence. Sponsorship becomes easier as companies want to be associated with a high profile entity. Further, wealthy benefactors and collectors may be more favourably disposed to discharging largesse to a prominent organization rather than a smaller less visible enterprise. Whilst the big get stronger other art galleries may wither.

Sixthly, the host government bears the cost of a building, an operating fee for the franchise and an allowance for a collection. Thus, the financial offsets to the Guggenheim are minimal.

What does the Guggenheim franchising offer the franchisees?

The success of the Bilbao venture, principally through the notoriety of Gehry’s building has encouraged other cities to consider the benefits of cultural tourism and its consequent economic possibilities.

The Bilbao transformation from a politically divided industrial city into a tourist mecca has been significant. Gehry’s building has placed the spotlight on the city assisting in attracting new sponsors to the institution and the city. Association with a global entity
means that the institution and the city has a sustained prominence. Thus there is a ‘value adding’ component inherent in the enterprise.

The franchisee also has access to a well developed art collection that effectively defrays costs to kindred institutions. Prominent architecture also creates a further ‘value adding’ component to the franchisee. The building can assume iconic significance and be widely discussed for its innovative or bold use of new materials. However, as Kimball cautions, audacious architecture can flatter its patrons conveying the impression that they are participating in a daring enterprise. (Kimball, 2001:7) Does the artwork presented inside the building address the future or present more of the same, that is of a similar style and presentation to shows in other art institutions? Are regional concerns facilitated or does the franchise reinforce a centralist cultural hegemony? The evidence presented from Bilbao is not encouraging. Whilst in 1997 the Basques had allocated $50 million dollars to acquire Spanish and Basque works, they tended to spend on international works and there was a fear that they may become a repository for American minimalist works rather than Kandinsky’s. (Cembalest, 1997:64) Further, a curator versed in Spanish, Basque and international art answerable to the government and New York had not been appointed in 1997. The view was that in a global context it was better to be visible and a ‘player’ rather than outside the loop. (Cembalest, 1997:64)

The question to be raised here is – is the price worth paying? An article in Business Week (Author unknown b.,2001:26) discusses the huge spending program by cultural institutions in New York conscious of the accrued economic benefits. Apart from the direct employment within the large institutions there are indirect benefits experienced by hotels, restaurants and transportation services. This same argument is advanced by the Grand Prix Corporation in Melbourne. Whilst, hotels and restaurants may benefit from the influx of tourists to the Formula One event, does that spill over to the general population? Should public funds be allocated to ventures that benefit and subsidise the few under the pretext of the economic benefits to the state?

These same questions apply to cultural institutions that are faced with tangible expressions of relevance predicated on audience turnover. A cautionary note is expressed by the public affairs manager at the National Gallery of Victoria who, whilst acknowledging the prominence given to exhibitions aligned with a large overseas art institutions, notes that franchising may not work everywhere and art institutions would need to be concerned about collections and quality (Webb, 2001:3). Another perspective reinforcing whether the franchising structure is appropriate in all contexts can be drawn from the Bilbao venture. Krens effectively capitalised on the Basques, (one of Spain’s national groups), need for a global strategic alliance in a bid for enhanced power (McNeill, 2000:491). Secondly, Krens reinforced a trend developing in European States wherein reterritorialisation was symbolically occurring in provincial centers (McNeill, 2000:491). These two aspects would not be so prevalent in all locations.

The danger lies in art museums compromised by profit and political power rather than qualitative aesthetic discrimination. Large institutions are therefore not only cognisant of their internal operation but also of their ‘responsibility’ to those indirect groups, such as
hotels and restaurants. The Geelong bid to attract a Guggenheim branch is seen by its adherents (the cities Mayor and CEO and prominent business people) as a means of developing Geelong as an international city therein shifting its vision as dependant on manufacturing and oil refining to that of a cultural tourist destination. (Usher, 2000:5)

Interestingly, the Geelong bidders believed that if their attempts to secure a Guggenheim were unsuccessful they would approach London’s Tate or the Louvre. (Usher, 2000:5)

As McNeill observes however, such moves are not necessarily economically driven, but have political and symbolic overtones that create the impression that the provincial center is a significant global player (McNeill, 2000: 491).

And what of the existing Geelong Art Gallery? Does the gallery benefit by its location near a Guggenheim? Are its holdings seen as quaint and regional when measured against the international exposure accorded a Guggenheim? Does it suffer from competitive pressures that sees dwindling corporate resources given to the ‘prestigious’ Guggenheim? More broadly does a Guggenheim strengthen its cultural stranglehold and prominence due to global outreach, to the detriment of other Australian art museums? An over emphasis on economic development and culture could also siphon much needed monies away from social welfare programs.

The mega-museum is symptomatic of parallel shifts in our cultural fabric. The art museum of today is operating in a world of enhanced entertainment and scale as evidenced in multiplex cinemas, mega-stores selling furniture, electrical goods and hardware, large shopping complexes, multi-use sporting stadiums, thrill packed theme parks, home entertainment centres and computer and video games. Hanigan describes a new phenomena, the post-modern consumer who is: ‘elusive’ a free soul who darts in and out of areas of consumption which are fluid and non-totalising’. (Hanigan, 1998:67)

Developers searching for niche markets and profitable trends have established new retail complexes. A form of ‘value adding’ is embedded in a fantasy city wherein new synergies are forged through a ‘mutual convergence and overlap of four consumer activity systems; shopping, dining, entertainment and education and culture. (Hanigan,1998:89) This convergence has given rise to three new hybrids, ‘shopertainment, eatertainment and edutainment’. (Hanigan, 1996:89) Each of these hybrids has been evident in art museums.

The Nike Company has established a number of stores titled, Niketown which are symptomatic of shopertainment. The focus of such stores is on brand recognition and experiential retailing with the décor resembling a gymnasium or sporting hall of fame. The installation of the Armani exhibition touring the Guggenheim’s is described as similar to seeing the goods in a large shop with television advertisements and the clothes worn by Hollywood identities; the only thing missing are the price tags (Klebnikov, 2001: 68).

Eatertainment venues, exemplified in the Hard Rock Café and Planet Hollywood provide mediated experiences. They represent ‘a combination of amusement park, diner, souvenir stand and museum’. (Hanigan, 1998:94) Merchandising of shirts, coffee mugs, key rings, hats and watches reinforce a sense of tribal belonging and the sampling of the
experience for later rememberance. Blockbuster exhibitions incorporate such aspects. Would a Guggenheim franchise gallery sell merchandise saying ‘Guggenheim’? Such labeling provides free advertising, tribal membership and heightened visibility.

A third convergence, edutainment has been evident in galleries and museums wherein new media, interactivity and multi-art events, such as story-telling or theatre based on characters within a painting have developed. Taped headsets ‘guiding’ the spectators journey around a blockbuster exhibition add to the sensory experience of viewing art. Whilst new technologies have advantages they can also serve to package the experience and generate limited readings of the works thus appealing to Hanigan’s post-modern consumer.

The Bilbao venture reinforces an elite that has tapped into a convergence of consumerist activities. If the gallery attracts so many tourists who are they and what are they seeking? Many visitors placing Bilbao on their itinerary represent a new elite with wealth and mobility described by Becker as ‘romantic nomads’ who travel the world in search of exotic locations in which to experience art (Becker, 1999: 22). Krens has played on the notion of a cultured life style that would attract the glamorous and the well-heeled (Weidinger 1998:43). Taking into account that the building has been designed by an American, that much of the work on display is packaged by an American based organisation and that the Basque’s effectively handed control over to the Guggenheim, the venture exemplifies a separation from a real geographic location to one consolidated through a globally oriented ideology (Rauen, 2001: 287).

A conservative Basque government has effectively stifled opposition as tourists and money pour into the region (Rauen, 2001:287). The Bilbao Guggenheim therefore is the global presence and icing on the cake of a much more substantial redevelopment of the Basque city which began well before the Guggenheim venture materialised. The Guggenheim’s presence signifies that Bilbao is sophisticated and a world player. The bid for a Geelong Guggenheim operates from the same premise believing that the city will grow in symbolic and cultural capital in a global context. However, whilst Australia’s geographic distance from America and Europe adds to the desire by elite groups to become part of the global arena the lukewarm reception of the Guggenheim Board to the Geelong bid is symptomatic of a different set of priorities. The imperatives that accelerated the Bilbao bid in 1992, such as deflection from other Spanish events, namely Seville’s World Exposition and the Barcelona Olympics, at a time when Bilbao was rebuilding itself, are not present. In effect, franchising in this context benefits an elite groups mutual interests rather than the regional cultural interests of the host city. The Guggenheim experience demonstrates that the franchising of culture needs to be examined carefully as the perceived advantages of a global presence may be at considerable cost to regional identity and its constituents.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to flesh out the nature and form of franchising of art museums by exploring the activities of the Guggenheim organization. Comparisons with McDonald’s franchise structure is made as numerous commentators have drawn parallels between the McDonald’s formula and the Guggenheim organization. Franchising has
enormous benefits for the parent organization but the franchisee is subject to various
constraints and compromises. In the context of art museums such a structure is potentially
problematic as enhanced visibility may come at the price of regional relevance, the
nurturing of local culture or to general welfare needs. On the other hand, as in the case of
the Bilbao venture, the franchisee may perceive symbolic and political benefits in a
global franchise arrangement. Either way, such approaches represent a dystopian
perspective towards globalisation.

Hanigan's descriptions of a post-modern consumer and convergent consumer activities
raises interesting questions for art museums in the 21st Century. How can an art museum
compete with the distractions and experiences of activities outside its boundaries? Can
art museums effectively increase their demographics without resorting to gimmickry and
denigration of meaning in the artworks they present? Should art museums exist as
contemplative environments offering a choice from the trappings of a noisy, non-
hierarchical view of culture? Who is shaping the development of new galleries - gallery
personnel, artists, audience demands, collectors, wealthy business people, provincial
developers or commercial interests? Does consolidation through franchising improve the
art experience within a gallery? Does quality suffer?

Whilst there are no easy answers to these questions we are in the midst of a transitional
phase where institutions can establish various forms of global presence. For example, the
internet creates a virtual presence and is one plank in establishing global visibility.
Symbolic and political power can accrue to local players in a global context. However,
the iconic building, reinforced by a franchising regime, may not be to the advantage of
the franchisee or the regional culture in the long term. Global presence is one thing but at
what price, particularly if managed centrally by an all controlling organisation. What is
lost may be more significant than the perceived short term gains. In short, who benefits
most from the franchise in a dystopian environment?
References

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