

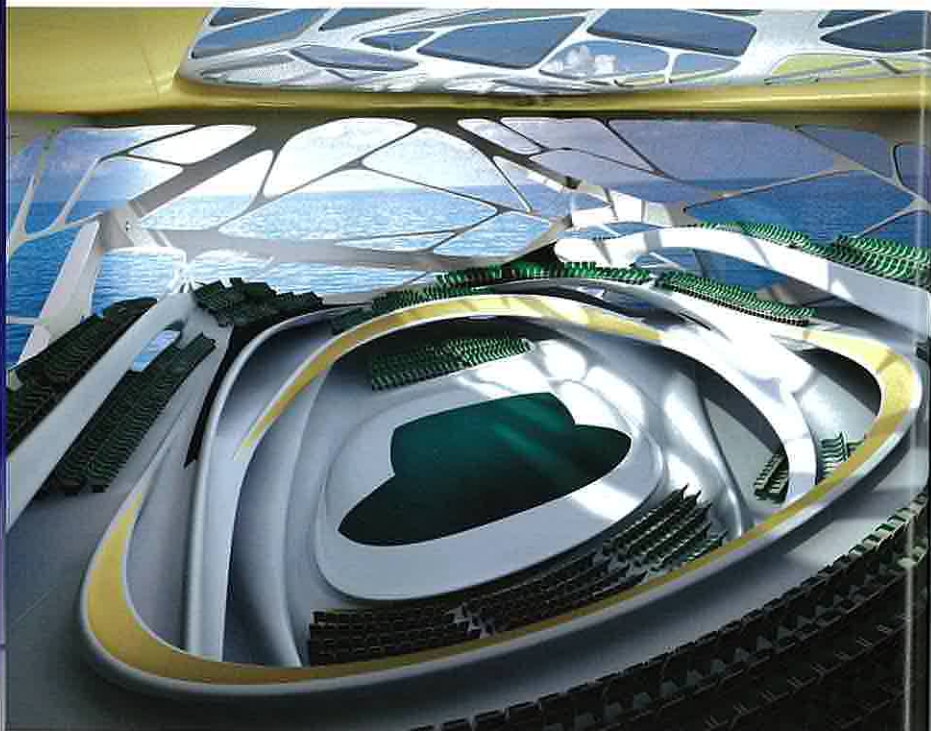
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A MUSEUM SPACE HALF THE SIZE OF MANHATTAN

DESIGN DREAM ISLAND

TOP ARCHITECTS ZAHA HADID, TADAO ANDO, FRANK GEHRY AND JEAN NOUVEL WERE ENGAGED TO BUILD THE LARGEST, MOST SPECTACULAR MUSEUM SPACE IN HISTORY. AN ISLAND WITH FOUR MUSEUMS, INCLUDING OFFSHOOTS OF THE GUGENHEIM AND THE LOUVRE, WILL BE REALIZED IN ABU DHABI.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: GABRIEL SPOFFORD / TCS



Thomas Krens, the Director of the Guggenheim Museum, has some difficult times behind him. He was hired to create a 'global Guggenheim', but only the large-scale plan for Bilbao was fully realised, and has since become an icon. The Guggenheim Berlin was only partially executed, and locations such as Mexico, Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo never made it beyond the drawing-board stage. But now this imposing man, nearly two metres in height, is once again making his voice heard.

The blueprints are drawn, contracts signed – what happens now?

It's supposed to happen as quickly as possible, but should not be rushed. The biggest problem is that Saadiyat Island itself – which lies directly next to the city [Abu Dhabi – is, well, an island. An entire infrastructure being created: streets, bridges and everything that goes with it. This is happening, however, under

the condition that the access roads will be in place only for the construction phase, the final routing will be different. On completion, there should be four sectors: a cultural centre, a nature reserve, a tourism centre and golf courses. We are constructing an eight-lane highway that leads to the island, which will of course remain in place permanently. But even this isn't so easy, since land has to be filled in and much of the machinery is floating on pontoons to access the site.

How big is the island?
About half the size of Manhattan (laughs). Enormous.

What is your job on this project?
We were hired in the summer of 2005 to design the master plan for Abu Dhabi. So you were responsible for choosing Frank Gehry, Tadao Ando, Jean Nouvel and Zaha

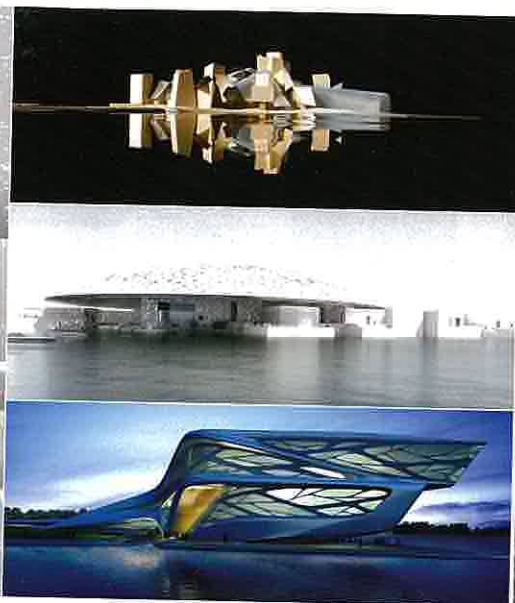
Hadid as executive architects? Yes.

What qualifies you, as a museum director, for such a job?

Through our experience in Bilbao, and with the co-operation of Frank Gehry, we have proven that we are capable of creating not only a museum, but a magnet for audiences from around the world. Before the Guggenheim came to Bilbao, it was a small, sleepy – if pretty – Spanish city. Now, because of the Guggenheim, a million people visit every year. The city received a landmark that has made it known throughout the world.

A landmark that will become somewhat devalued if Frank Gehry builds another museum in Abu Dhabi. Why did you take him on board again?
When we had the initial discussions with those

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involved in Abu Dhabi, it very quickly became clear that it was their unconditional wish to have Frank Gehry on board. I can't simply disregard the client's wishes. In this case the client is the Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed, and his heart has been won over by Gehry's style. Should I tell him that it's not a good idea? Also, I like working with Frank. We have a saying in America – never change a winning team.

As a rule, you're not shy about making a bold impression. On the invitation for the Affinités exhibition at the Guggenheim, you are perched like a statue atop a box in which the artist sits.
(Laughs) That wasn't my idea – and I don't think it's such a great one either. It was still the best option, though – the photographer had even more ridiculous suggestions. But it demonstrates my willingness to compromise

and confirms that I'm open to offbeat things. Besides, what chance do I have in negotiating with an artist?

You still head up one of the most important museums in the world – don't artists automatically respect you?

That would be nice. But I don't think that truly moving art is created when an artist buys into hierarchies.

Does the same also go for architects?

That's a difficult question. Architects can't just be individualists. Artists have the opportunity of creating their works completely in solitude. But an architect has to be, on the one hand, a team player and, on the other, a kind of 'alpha wolf'. But they must also have the ability to visualise the clients' needs and to take them into consideration. So, taking all of these aspects into consideration makes architecture

almost more complex than art.

And all of the appointed architects for Abu Dhabi fulfil these requirements? Each in his or her own way.

A very diplomatic answer, Frank Gehry is seen as a ruffian, Tadao Ando as an equaliser, Zaha Hadid tends to be a diva.
You have to understand that these people have all done something extraordinary. These individuals, their work and their exploits are in the public eye, and all of their actions are scrutinised. Even the most insignificant deed is stylised and turned into a drama. But besides their extraordinary gifts, they're just normal people, with everyday strengths and weaknesses.

The only German affiliate of the Guggenheim is in Berlin. But it's tiny in comparison, not



only to New York, but to the new building in Abu Dhabi. What's the attraction of exhibiting in such a small space?

It's a space for experimenting, a place that's changeable, adaptable and can be rediscovered again and again. The Guggenheim in New York, by Frank Lloyd Wright, is an icon in itself as a building, as is the Guggenheim Bilbao, and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will surely be the same. The Deutsche Guggenheim deviates from this pattern, but it's a setting for mounting more intimate and controversial exhibitions. It's a laboratory of sorts.

How will you exhibit in Abu Dhabi? Has the selection of works to be shown already been made?

There are 25,000 square metres that have to be filled, and that's 40% more space than we have in Bilbao. It'll take some time until everything is programmed and, at this point, we're still in the very early phase. The discussion is also about the clash of various cultures, about a geographical location, which creates prerequisites to realising such a project. It's simply not America or Europe. One of the challenges is to create a site in Abu Dhabi that sets its values for contemporary art on the world map.

One of the regional factors that you must take into consideration is religion, which, unlike what we experience in this country, is also a means of censoring art. Do you worry about exhibiting representation of breasts, for example, being inconceivable in an Islamic environment?

I'm often asked this, of course, and for me there are several reasons why contemporary art can and should be shown in Abu Dhabi. We're also creating a platform for local artists, who are rarely in the international spotlight at the moment. The Guggenheim, for example, has one of the largest collections of works by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and among these are pieces that we don't show publicly as they're so sexually aggressive that

Islamic country. And with a Jewish architect, Frank Gehry! It's not the first time that we've run into controversy. In Bilbao, for example, the ETA opposed the Guggenheim – they even attacked the museum shortly before the opening. Today, it is already forgotten.

Do you have any favourite designs? (Laughs) I'd be lying if I said that Frank Gehry's design didn't impress me. He made a two-ton model that is on view in the exhibition in the area. But I've also been very enthusiastic about

"I SEE NO PROBLEM IN OPENING A MUSEUM FOR CONTEMPORARY ART IN AN ISLAMIC COUNTRY. WOULD IT BE BETTER NOT TO DO SO AND NOT TO PROVIDE ANY FORUM AT ALL FOR THE ARTISTS?"

they would be an affront to many viewers' sensibilities. Is there a reason for showing them? I don't think so!

But doesn't artistic freedom override this? Can't I decide, as a viewer, whether or not I want to confront myself with a work? Isn't there something like a cultural taboo? What about the artist who wants to exhibit racist work? Or villifies Jews in Germany? Or one who deals with child pornography? Should a museum be obliged to exhibit everything just for the sake of artistic freedom?

Still, there is the question of censorship – and to what extent it's implemented and used... In the Western world, censorship has an unbelievably sensational connotation. But there are areas upon which one prefers not to infringe, because there are conventions within society to simply not deal with these at any price. I see no problem in opening a museum for contemporary art in an Islamic country. Would it be better not to do so and not to provide any forum at all for the artists?

But isn't it a kind of statement when an institution like the Guggenheim, which is still representative of the Western world, yields to taboos (that are, for us, still unimaginable) that are dictated by a religion that is, at least at the present time, perceived as being very aggressive?

You can read that in another way: an American museum – with the emphasis on American – with Jewish roots is the driving force in developing a hub for contemporary art in an

Zaha Hadid, and I'm delighted that she is also involved in the project.

You've even planned the Guggenheim in Japan with her.

Yes, but at the moment we can concentrate on only one project, and one of such dimensions that don't arise very often. You only have to imagine the Louvre leaving France, in bits! That was actually the greatest distinction the project received.

So you'll be busy commuting between New York and Abu Dhabi in the next few years. Does this mean the end of the Guggenheim Motorcycle Club? You're the driving force behind that.

I hope we can still go on our motorcycle tours. We – that's Frank Gehry, the actor Laurence Fishburne, Lauren Hutton, Jeremy Irons and a few others – have criss-crossed America...

...and Russia, where the Bolshoi Ballet put on a private performance for the bikers. Right! *Swan Lake*. That was an incredible experience. We also spent a good amount of time in the Hermitage in St Petersburg.

You're a big BMW fan. (Right again. About two years ago, when my son was younger, we took a trip through Manhattan together. He sat in front of me on the tank of the motorcycle.

It looks as though you like to live dangerously. It only seems that way. And I'm perfectly capable of taking calculated risks. ■



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