Going Global

As the Guggenheim heads for the Persian Gulf, other museums consider branching out. BY JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

The Guggenheim in the Persian Gulf, the Louvre in the Deep South—does anyone see a pattern here?

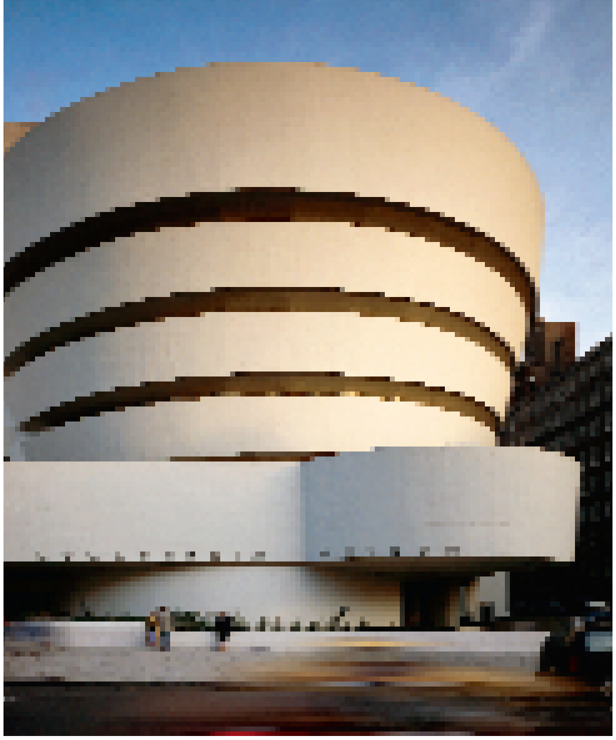
The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi? A few years ago it could have been a snide joke by one of the many critics of the Guggenheim's efforts to build satellite museums around the world—"McGuggenheims" as some derisively called the franchise operations. But the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (GAD) is no joke. This summer, the New York–based museum's parent foundation signed a preliminary agreement to build and manage a modern and contemporary art museum in the capital of the United Arab Emirates. The $400 million project, part of the planned $27 billion development of Saadiyat Island (Arabic for "Island of Happiness"), is slated to open in 2011.

It was hardly surprising that Abu Dhabi's rulers approached the Guggenheim last autumn to discuss cultural programming for the planned resort island. Since unveiling the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain's Basque region in 1997, the Guggenheim has received hundreds of offers to collaborate on similar projects around the world. The Bilbao museum, designed by Frank Gehry, has been recognized as a masterpiece in the history of architecture, and its celebrity status helped turn a relatively unknown port city into a household name. The sheik of Abu Dhabi want to repeat the so-called "Bilbao Effect," and they stipulated that Gehry design their museum as well.

The force behind the Guggenheim's globalization is the foundation's president and chief executive Thomas Krens. When he took over in 1988, the Guggenheim operated museums in New York and Venice. Since then he has added branches in Bilbao (a partnership with the Basque government), Berlin (a joint venture with Deutsche Bank), and Las Vegas (a partnership with the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg hosted by the Venetian casino). Negotiations for others in Salzburg, Rio de Janeiro, Taichung

The atrium in New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (left).

TOP: Thomas Krens, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Sheikh Sultan Bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, chairman of the Abu Dhabi Culture and Heritage Authority and of the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority.



The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The Deutsch Guggenheim in Berlin (below).

and elsewhere foundered in local politics, but proposals remain on the table in Guadalajara (Mexico) and now Abu Dhabi.

Krens says his vision is to make the Guggenheim an agent of international cultural exchange, but there is more than a little ego behind it as well. Critics argue that the excitement of international dealmaking has shortchanged the Guggenheim's home audience by sending the art abroad. Right now, for example, most of the permanent collection is on view not on Fifth Avenue or in Venice, but in Bonn, Germany. Chairman Peter B. Lewis, who had given some $50 million to the museum, resigned last year because he disagreed with Krens' global ambitions. Yet for all the criticism during his tenure, the Guggenheim "brand"—to use the advertising term—has expanded more than any other museum in the world.

Will the franchise model last? I believe it will. If a city today wants to form a museum about the history of art, or even focus solely on modern masters, the problem is there are not enough masterpieces left in private hands to do it. Most of the supply is concentrated in existing museums. Even the deep-pocketed Getty has not been able acquire a comprehensive collection of Old Masters. Yet the demand to create new museums is on the rise as developing communities wish to enhance their quality of life, attract cultural tourists and create emblems of civic pride. As the economies rise in Asia, the Middle East—and soon South America and perhaps one day Africa—leaders will want to found new museums. With the dwindling supply of quality art necessary to fill them, an attractive shortcut is to partner with a museum that already has the art, as well as the personnel and expertise.

There are several reasons established museums will agree to collaborate. Most are able to exhibit only a tiny fraction of their collections. They can save on storage costs, make their names and collections better known, and reach new audiences by building a branch museum. And they can reap a handsome fee, as well. The Guggenheim pioneered this model in Bilbao, but others have been climbing on the branch-museum bandwagon. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts opened a satellite in Nagoya, Japan, in 1999 and took home a sizeable fee for doing so–reportedly $50 million. Despite financial problems and disagreements over the content of the gallery, the museum is slated to run until 2019.

The Whitney Museum of American Art gave the idea a test run in the late 1990s when it leased large portions of its collection to the San Jose Museum of Art over five years. San Jose had only a modest collection and saw the loans as an instant "permanent" collection of sorts. The Whitney even contemplated establishing a branch museum in Miami, but the director who came up with the idea, Max Anderson, resigned before the idea got any traction. Other U.S. museums have been reluctant to follow the Guggenheim's lead, but how long will it be until they too seek to expand across the country or overseas?

Foreign museums are more readily embracing the Krens formula. The Hermitage, for example, has not only the Guggenheim partnership in Las Vegas, but showcases for its collections in London and Amsterdam. The host cities pay the cash-strapped Russian museum a fee and fund the branch museum's operation. In exchange they gain a cultural attraction that more than pays for itself through tourism. Not coincidentally, the Guggenheim has consulted with the Hermitage on converting a nearby building into a modern art wing. The project currently is stalled, but the Krens model appears to have rubbed off on Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky.

French museums have been searching for overseas opportunities. The Pompidou was a contender to build and manage a museum as part of a casino and convention complex in Singapore. The Guggenheim also was vying for the job, and eventually the two formed a partnership; the Singapore government recently awarded the multibillion-dollar project to another developer. The Pompidou also had its hand in a vast mixed-use project in Hong Kong known as the West Kowloon Cultural District, but the government has decided to rethink its plans.

Meanwhile, no less a museum than the Louvre is establishing a branch museum in the culturally deprived northern French city of Lens. A building by Tokyo-based architects SANAA is under way and is expected to open in 2008. The Louvre is even testing the waters for an overseas branch in the United States. This month, the Paris museum sends the first of a series of priceless exhibitions to the recently expanded High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Atlanta sponsors are giving the Louvre a reported $10 million for the favor. In fact, the Louvre has been in discussions with Abu Dhabi to work on a museum that would be part of the same cultural district as the Guggenheim. Details have yet to be confirmed, but the idea that the Louvre is vying to establish a branch in the Middle East proves the point: Far from an aberration of one radical director, the Krens model for museum globalization is clearly on the rise.

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