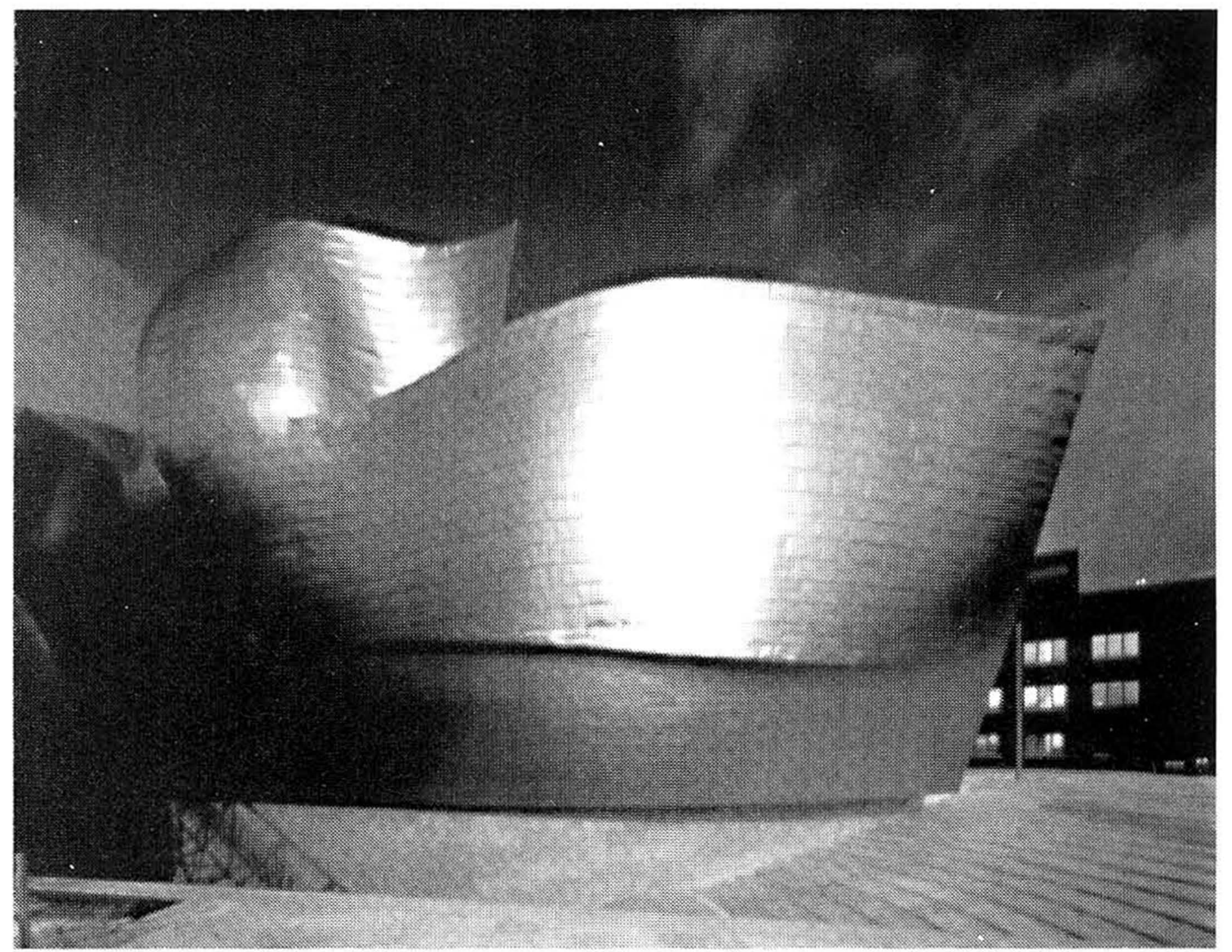


In October 1997, the Basque administration and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation opened the \$100-million Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Designed by Frank O. Gehry and located in the city of Bilbao in Northern Spain, the museum will be devoted to American and European art of the 20th century.

The Guggenheim Museum positions itself within the developing 'renaissance' of the government-sponsored museum building projects. This museum boom began in Paris with the Pompidou Center during the late 1970's and continued, in countries such as Germany, Japan, and the United States, at increasingly larger scales.

Museums originated as palaces of culture, and became in the 20th century the dream, or nightmare, project of every architect. An equivalence can be drawn between modern museums and the cathedrals and temples of earlier epochs. Throughout the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the museum sprang up throughout Europe, primarily housing royal collections. In the nineteenth century, museum architecture, both internationally



Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, July 1997. Photograph by David Heald © S.R.G.F., NY.

Frank O. Gehry

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao



Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, July 1997. Photograph by David Heald © S.R.G.F., NY.

and in the United States, consistently evoked its palatial origins, using arching entries, and noble pillars emphasizing the concept of treasure within the urban environment. It wasn't until after the Second World War that museum architecture began to move away from the prescriptive premises of the past. At that time, the museum became a vehicle for architectural expression and ushered in a new era of unpredictable museum architecture.

A critical division arose between those who saw museum buildings as works of art themselves, carrying visual

significance through the 'signature' of the architect, and those who preferred a more neutral or anonymous architecture of open, flexible spaces. These two attitudes are evident in modern examples; in Le Corbusier's visionary proposal for an interdisciplinary cultural environment in his *Museum of Unlimited Growth*, 1931, and within Frank Lloyd Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, 1946-60. In a letter dated in 1952, Wright noted to his patron Henry Guggenheim, "I want a building to match the advance painting I want to put into it." Other examples including the flat glass box on a steel podium in Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery in West Berlin (1962-68), or Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers's high-tech architecture for the Pompidou Center in Paris (late 70s) come to mind.

Returning to Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and his attitude toward museum design, we find that Gehry, as he did with the Aerospace Museum in Los Angeles, reached for museum forms that explicitly proclaim their 'face-saving' functions. Gehry has designed a series of interconnected building shapes to house galleries, an auditorium, museum services, restaurant, shops, and administrative offices. These different 'buildings' are arranged around a central atrium. Gehry's design reinterprets the French theorist J.N.L. Durand's ideal which combines 'closed' galleries with 'open' courtyards. Gehry's artistic signature is the artifice he creates by

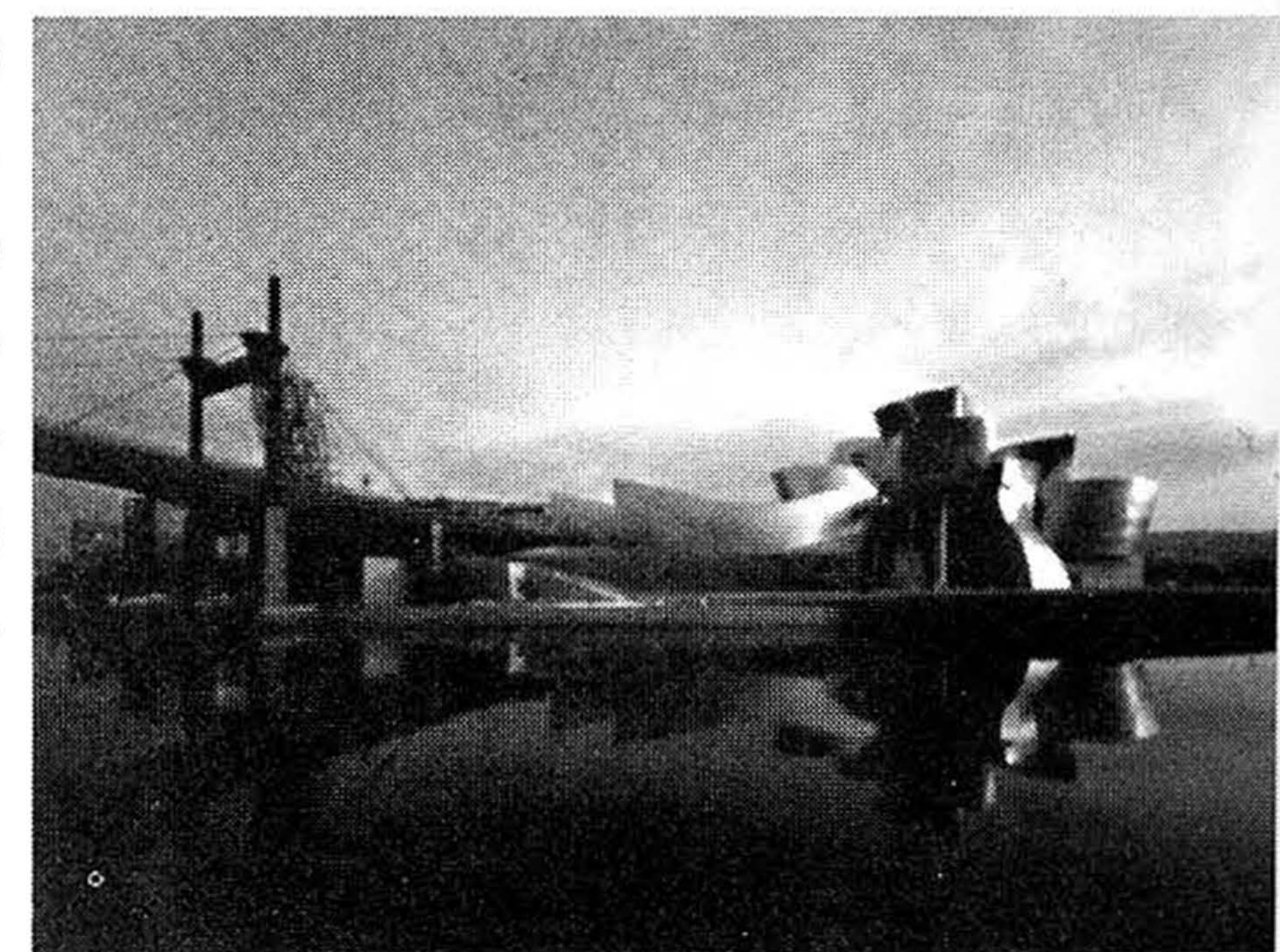
designing a sculptural, metallic roof that, unifies the interconnected buildings into one cohesive architectural composition.

This arrangement of forms creates a strong and dynamic 'sculpture' that denies a resting place to a viewer's eyes. Instead, the viewer remains instantly caught amongst distracting curves, kept captive by a perpetual state of visual motion which is only furthered by the shifting color of the metallic roof. It is clear that this museum will take on an organic life of its own, creating spontaneous centers of activity, and not static mausoleums for meditation. This new museum required a sensitive response from Gehry toward avant-garde art production. Gehry fulfills this request by offering gallery spaces as big as 450 by 80 feet, free of structural columns, to accommodate more unconventional installations, such as Richard Serra's *Snake*, a monumental, 162-ton sculpture.

Although the architecture of this new Guggenheim succeeds in bringing to the viewer a sense of beauty, it raises questions that are a part of a larger concern about museum growth during the past two decades. Gehry's new museum, it seems, in its contribution to world architecture, has not resolved some of the more critical issues of meaning in architecture. As Wright noted to Harry Guggenheim, he sought to design a building, based on *his* personal criteria, that suited the kind of art exhibited within the museum. In Bilbao, it became clear that the Guggenheim Foundation wanted an 'art piece' when they chose the architect/architecture for its 'face,' not its function.

Neither Gehry's Guggenheim Museum nor Wright's worked with the concept of the positive-negative relationship within which the museum acts as negative, and the vanguard works within the museum act as positive. Both buildings insist on standing as works of art in themselves. Neither allows the art inside the museum to be the protagonist in the space. The architecture is the work of art to be visited, the rest is mere coincidence.

— Ana Maria Torres



Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, July 1997. Photograph by David Heald © S.R.G.F., NY.