At the end of the twentieth century, however, Bilbao's circumstances mirrored those of many other European cities historically reliant on the muscle of industry. The decline of shipbuilding and manufacturing has left large tracts of dereliction, some conspicuously close to the city centre. In 1981 a strategic plan was drawn up to revitalise metropolitan Bilbao, with the aim of precipitating the city into the post-industrial age. Drawing on the experience of Barcelona (another marginalised regional centre which has vigorously and successfully remodelled itself), the plan embraces a range of measures, including modernising transport links, strengthening cultural amenities, promoting training initiatives and general improvements to the urban environment. So far, a new metro system (with stations by Foster and Partners, Arup, 1989) has been built, linking the city centre with the suburbs. A graceful new pedestrian bridge designed by Santiago Calatrava spans the Nervión, and a conference and performing arts centre by the Madrid-based partnership of Soriano and Palacios is currently under construction downstream from the Guggenheim. All these major projects are seen as salient indicators of the latest phase in Bilbao's dynamic evolution.

That the Guggenheim came to Spain at all is due to a fortuitous interplay of cultural aspirations and politics. Initial plans to locate the new European outpost in Saarburg fell through because of the demands placed on the city following the collapse of Communism. To the bemusement of the art world, Bilbao proved a willing substitute partner in a delicate transatlantic mating ritual. But the site originally proposed by the city for the new museum—a redundant wine and oil warehouse in the Ensanche—plainly did not suit the scale of the Guggenheim Foundation's ambitions. Instead, a much larger and more prominent site on the edge of the Nervión was selected, the location apparently chosen upon by Guggenheim director Thomas Krens during a morning jog.

In June 1989, just three architects—Gehry, Coop, Himat Blau and Arata Isozaki—were invited to compete for the project. Each was given three weeks and one site visit to produce a proposal. Coop Himat Blau's design was a curiously muted amalgamation of translucent cuboids; Isozaki opted for a series of sinuous, free-flowing volumes. The chosen short-list: starkly distilled both geographical and architectural diversity (Old World, New World and Pacific Rim). After a breathlessly brief competition, Gehry's New World exuberance won the day.

The Guggenheim Foundation is acutely aware of the power of a building to define an