Art gallery, Bilbao, Spain
Architect
Frank O. Gehry & Associates

Despite the wilful complexity and apparent formal chaos, the plan is really quite simple. Twenty-one galleries of varying size and configuration are arranged in three storeys around the dramatic, pivotal atrium, so that progress around the building is logical and circuitous, by means of a frequently uncomfortably vertiginous network of walkways, stairs and glazed lifts. The vast, often highly sculptural spaces offer provocative creative opportunities for both artists and curators.

The largest of the galleries is a 130m long volume in the form of an upturned hull that extends eastwards towards and under the Puente de la Salve, where it nuzzles a signpost tower that rises above the bridge like a limestone exclamation mark. With its specially reinforced floor, this 'boat gallery' houses a collection of massive Pop and Post-minimalist installations and paintings, among them Richard Serra's monumental 'Snake' a site-specific work consisting of two sinuous, rusted planes of steel 31m long and 4m high.

The smallest gallery is an intimate alcove containing exquisite works on paper by Giacometti, Arshile Gorky and Ellsworth Kelly. On the first and second floors, calm enfilades of conventional orthogonal spaces are variously devoted to the European Avant-Garde and American Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps the most poignant part of the building is the gallery where Picasso's 'Guernica' was supposed to hang; sadly, the painting still languishes in Madrid and instead Sol LeWitt has customised the walls with a jovial mural.

The galleries combine artificial light sources with natural, overhead light. For the permanent collection galleries on the lowest level, this is collected by lightwells rising through the floors above. Generally, the art works benefit greatly from the generosity of the spaces; Anselm Kiefer, for example has a huge, dedicated gallery, which does appropriate justice to his frenzied, ossified paintings, but whether English enfant terrible Damien Hirst deserves a nook of his own (at the north-east corner of the atrium on the second floor) is debatable.

However, these are issues of programming and curatorialship; the building seems sufficiently accommodating and flexible to assimilate the most perplexing (and invariably large-scale) vacuities of contemporary art. Through its extraordinary formal vigour and material presence, it succeeds in squaring up to both its context and the ambitious mandate of its client, while clearly sustaining a logic and life of its own. The international art world has a new dot on its map and Bilbao has a new Atlantic star. CATHERINE SLESSOR

Photographs
All photographs by Paul Raftery except Dennis Gilbert/VIEW: 1, 3, 6, 7, 11, 15 and Christian Richers: 15, 17, 18, 21