ART SPACE RACE

Galleries and museums are proving to be a dynamic testing ground for the future of architecture, **Olivia Barrett** reports

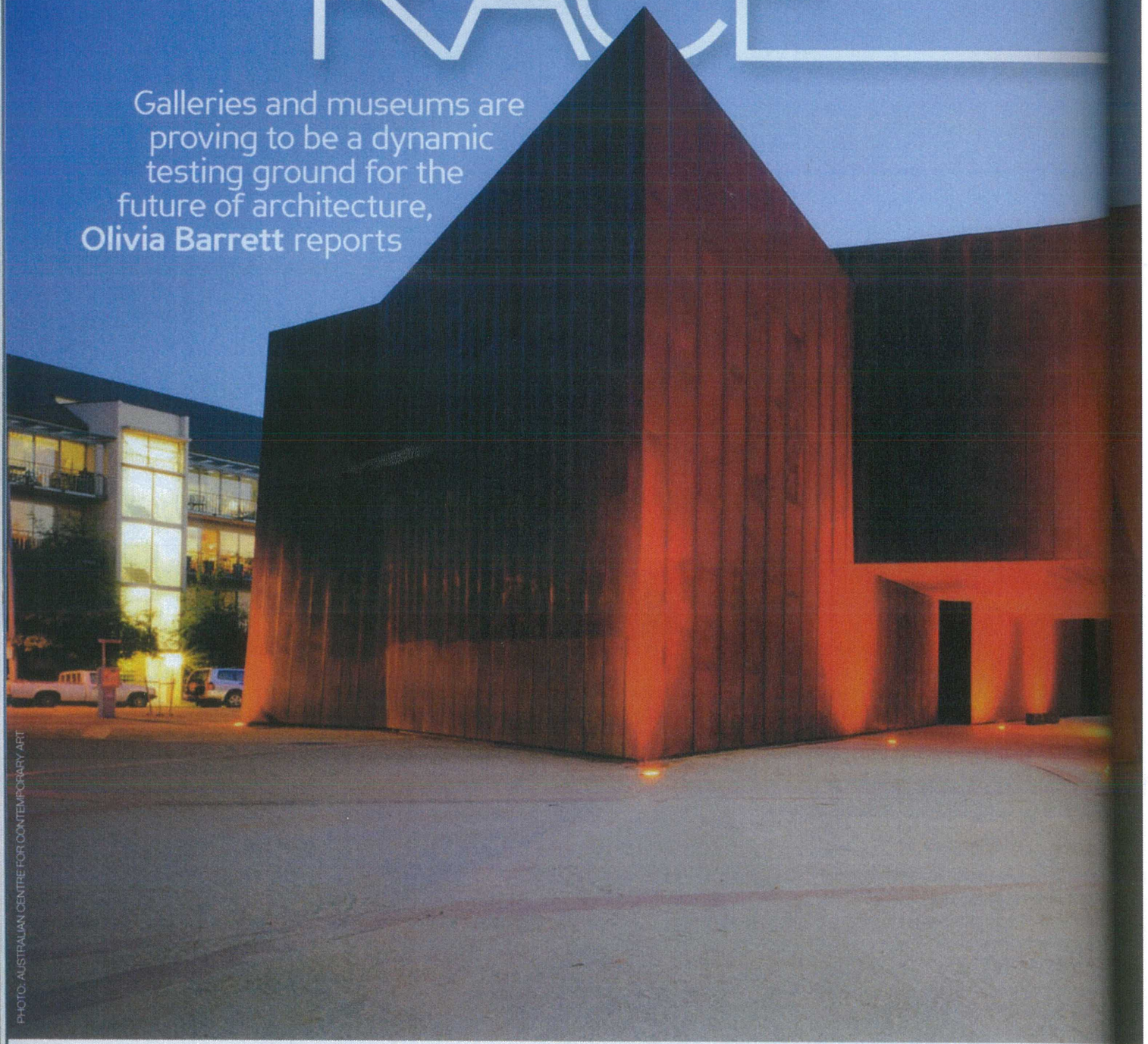

PHOTO: AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

There is a strong, historical relationship between art and the spaces it inhabits. The shared and transient realms of galleries and museums are platforms for art to speak to people and engage with an audience, yet architecture too brings qualities which are emotive, relative, and less tangible than glass and steel. It is worth noting that the internationally acclaimed architect Frank O. Gehry is building the world's largest Guggeinheim Museum in oil-rich Abu Dhabi. Expected to be completed between 2011 and 2012, the 300,000-square-foot art museum on an island will easily dwarf the soaring titanium wings of Guggenheim Bilbao, also designed by Gehry. Buildings which are designed with art in mind are often conceived with a heightened sense of imagination. They are vast, ambitious projects. The government of Abu Dhabi in partnership with the New York-based Guggenheim Foundation is building the museum to become a "world-class cultural destination," said His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, when the agreement was signed in 2006. No wonder the museum is planned as a giant showpiece. With enormous pools of funding from private and public commissions, art galleries offer architects the chance to create spaces that are unique, malleable and creatively driven. Curators are also challenged and inspired by these unpredictable and unique environments, which have moved away from the boxy structures and right angles of the white cube, or the long, lethargic halls of traditional museums. The importance of the building and interior for contemporary art is intensifying, with cities all over the world in the process of creating prodigious structures in which to showcase modern and contemporary art.

So immense has the effect of Gehry's Guggenheim Museum been on the city of Bilbao that such dissemination of cultural and economic prosperity from the construction of a landmark art building has come to be known as the 'Bilbao effect'. The largest city in the Basque area of Northern Spain, Bilbao was traditionally an industrial centre and major seaport, with an economy dependent on steel, aeronautics, energy production and information technology. Its significance as an international cultural centre was negligible until 1997 when Gehry's spectacular, curvilinear monument was unveiled, hugging the bank of the Nervion River. Made of glass, titanium and limestone, this deconstructivist building is composed of fragmented shapes and fluid lines that are meant to appear organic and random. With its light-reflective surface and meandering, curved forms, the Bilbao Guggenheim is now one of the most recognisable buildings in the world and has transformed the city into a prime destination for cultural tourism. Five years after Gehry's

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Guggenheim was erected, *Forbes* estimated the economic impact of the building on the local economy to be in excess of 160 million euros a year, with 82 percent of surveyed visitors having travelled to the city specifically to see the museum. Had the same works of art been arranged in a monotonous building designed by a little-known architect, the effect on the city would not have been so dramatic.

Post-Bilbao, the cultural fabric of global cities is benefiting from increasing investment to create landmark sites for both permanent art collections and commissioned works. Some of the most experimental architecture of the 21st century can be found on these sites, which are geared not towards an individual client's satisfaction but to an entire city's.

One of the most acclaimed architecture firms in the world, Herzog & de Meuron has focused its practice on the expansion of the creative possibilities

Hamilton Building Exterior

features present among other 21st century galleries across the world: the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne is a majestic building that draws from Australia's unique landscape and its youthful cultural identity. Its rust-red surface recalls the country's desert icon Uluru (Ayres Rock), yet the protruding, unconventional shapes project this space deep into the future. ACCA exemplifies how architectural structures are moving away from merely housing art; they now operate in an active exchange with the curators, artists and work. ACCA's curator, Juliana Engberg, professes that the building has "influenced quite a lot of (her) curatorial thinking".

Prior to 2003, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art occupied a small cottage opposite the botanical gardens, an unassuming and affable space that couldn't seem to keep up with new challenges set by the city's burgeoning contemporary art community. In response to this, Wood Marsh architects were selected to create a purpose-built art facility that also houses contemporary dance company Chunky Move.

Engberg reflects on the importance of a dynamic relationship between space and content: "Audiences are seeking deeper engagement with art and want transforming experiences and I am mindful of that when creating the ov programme. I use the building as pa of that emotional delivery. It can be dark, light, immersive, expansive. It' very malleable." Artists are also inspi by the space and many installations a only made possible in such a brilliant environment; for example Nike Savv ATOMIC: Full of Love Full of Wonde used the space to create a dazzling ir of colour with 100,000 floating balls suspended deep within the main gall

On the other side of the world, another angular architectural feat bu from the ground. Daniel Libeskind,

A Constructed World (artist) Increase Your Uncertainty at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

within public buildings, and has to date completed two major art galleries. It is not surprising that they're chosen to re-enliven art environments, as the pair often collaborate with artists and create meeting points that draw together the incessant functionality of architecture with the imagination of art. In April 2008, Beijing's Olympics Birds Nest stadium was completed and opened to the world's gaze. Herzog & de Meuron designed the impressive construct with China's art star Ai Weiwei. (After the celebrations marking the one-year countdown to the games, Ai told Reuters he feels "disgusted" by being implicated in the creation of a monument showing off China's progress: "I've already forgotten about it. I turn down all the demands to have photographs with it. I'm not interested... I would feel ashamed if I just designed something to show some kind of fake image.")

Early in their careers, Herzog and de Meuron worked with Joseph Beuys — and profess to share his interest in re-imagining ordinary objects. Their early minimalist tendencies, however, have been succeeded by an investigation into unusual surfaces and developing unique finishing techniques, which were explored in their 2005 expansion of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Surfaces of Herzog & de Meuron buildings are often more akin to a skin, because of their folding and nuanced textures. The Walker building is encased in square panels of crinkled aluminium mesh that throw off irregular and muffled light.

While ultra contemporary in materials and approach, the Swiss firm did not ignore the section of the building (designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes in 1971) that they were adding to. They make material references to the pre-existing structure through internal use of the brick that composes the majority of Barnes' exterior. In discussing the challenge of working with somebody else's work as a base for the building, Jacques Herzog notes the "hermetic" character of the original building, which they wanted to "open up... without destroying its closed-in charm".

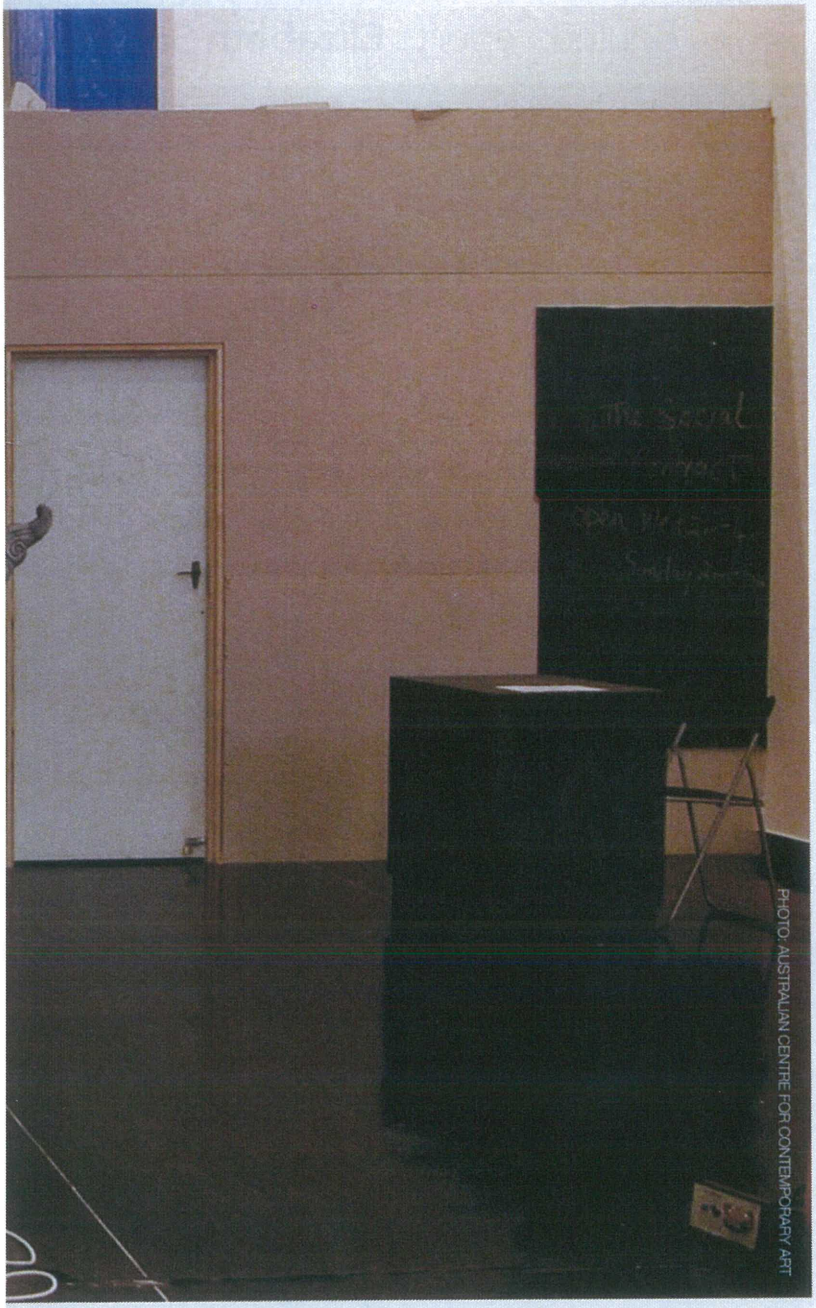
Herzog & de Meuron's use of innovative surfaces and sharp, jutting angles are

PHOTO: DENVER ART MUSEUM

rchitect behind the World Trade edevelopment project, designed getic extension to the Denver eum (DAM), which opened in 2006. Libeskind was inspired pographical setting of Denver, overlooked by the august Rocky ns. He responded to the natural ns of the area by creating a that resembles rocky peaks g from the surface of the earth. er's residents responded warmly new gallery, and again became ients of a public, art-specific ar later when David Adjaye's for Contemporary Art opened in the city in October 2007. Adjaye is a 41-year-old British architect and this is his first public building in America. In stark contrast to Libeskind's DAM, the MCA is a dark grey glass box that reflects Adjaye's innovative approach to reusing materials; for example, the interior skin is made from MonoPan, a translucent woven material made of recycled plastic. MCA executive director and chief curator Cydney Payton notes the unique approach of the design team: "It is a museum without a door, where one enters through a corridor which becomes the transition between the street experience and the museum experience. The effect will be very welcoming, breaking down barriers between our audience and the art."

In a similar act of breaking down prescribed spatial conventions, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa created the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazaw, Japan. The shell of the space is built in the round and the building is without a front or back; the architects say this leaves it "open to be explored from all directions... This approach offers specificity to the gallery spaces yet flexibility for the museum routing with multiple options for division... expansion."

The 21st century has witnessed a surge in art-specific buildings, which stand at the fore of experimental and creatively-directed architecture. The structures that provide a home for art are becoming as responsive to our contemporary condition as the works themselves. Relationships between spaces and objects participate in an ongoing dynamism, enriching the experiences of art audiences while providing a platform for forward-thinking architects to penetrate the future of construction. These galleries and museums provide spaces for art and spaces for people to explore the fecund possibilities of the imagination.



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