



Alejandro Mercado-Celis*

Urban Renewal and Cultures, Strategies and Challenges

Urban renewal through large-scale cultural projects has become prominent as an effective strategy for revitalizing urban areas in decline. These projects, known as culture-led regeneration strategies, seek not only to improve physical infrastructure, but also to renew cities' social and economic fabric. As cities around the world face challenges stemming from deindustrialization, globalization, and migration, culture-led urban regeneration strategies have emerged as a viable response for restoring urban identity and fostering sustainable development.

In recent years, various academics have furnished us with perspectives and case studies showing how cultural strategies have been implemented in different cities, analyzing the factors that determine their success and the challenges inherent in their practice. Among these contributions is the unfolding The Alamo project in down-

town San Antonio, Texas. It seeks to preserve a four-hundred-year-old church and barrack, recover the original site of the mission and battlefield footprint, and create a world-class Visitors Center and Museum. The estimated investment is calculated at US\$400 million.

One of the most important challenges facing culture-led urban renewal projects is how to measure their success, although several studies do exist on the topic. Graeme Evans underlines the difficulty of measuring their impact. Even though cities have undertaken this kind of project to improve the quality of life and their economies, evidence of their effectiveness continues to be limited. Evans argues that current methods for evaluating these impacts are often weak, leaving significant gaps in the understanding of their real benefits and long-term efficacy.¹

From another perspective, Tao Yu's study about these projects in China identifies twenty-five essential factors for their effective management, including the creation of cultural value, the integration of cultural development with

* Alejandro is a researcher at CISAN, UNAM; you can contact him at amercado@unam.mx.

The Alamo Plan is illustrative of how culture-led urban regeneration can be used to preserve and revitalize historic sites at the same time that the urban space is reconfigured to improve visitors' experiences. However, to maximize its success, it will be fundamental to ensure an implementation that respects both the historic heritage and the needs and expectations of the local community.

urban planning, and the adoption of sustainable development principles. Yu emphasizes the importance of government policies and culture-led regeneration strategies, the efforts of interested parties, financial support, and technical solutions. The combination of these elements has shown itself to be fundamental for the successful transformation of Chinese cities, showing that careful planning and lining up sustainability objectives can make the difference in the results.²

One of the most emblematic, ambitious culture-led urban regeneration projects is the construction of Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum. Michael Keating and Monika de Frantz's study about this capital offers a comparative perspective on how cultural strategies can produce both successes and failures.³ The museum's construction is a significant example of how a cultural project can transform a city's global image. However, the authors warn of the risks of reproducing this model in other contexts without taking into consideration local specificities. Cultural regeneration can spark social and economic conflicts, especially when the interests of an elite are given the priority over those of the general public. This case underlines the importance of balancing economic revitalization with public participation and social cohesion to avoid the negative results that can emerge from an approach too centered on economic growth.

The Guggenheim Museum is an outstanding paradigm for urban revitalization and the creation of an architectural icon, designed by Frank Gehry to foster a new regional economy due to its significant economic, social, and cultural impact on the city and the surrounding region. According to a 2022 article published in *The Guardian*,⁴ since its opening, the museum has attracted almost twenty-five million visitors and generated €6.5 billion for

the Basque Country. This has transformed Bilbao from an industrial city into a famed tourist and cultural destination. More than twenty-five years after its inauguration, the museum's impact demonstrates that investment in cultural infrastructure—and particularly iconic architecture—can be the catalyst for urban regeneration, create opportunities for diversifying the local economy, and improve a city's international image. However, it should be pointed out that, despite the museum's being the detonator of a series of local dynamics, the success should not be attributed exclusively to it: different local actors, such as the government, businesspeople, and civic and cultural associations have played a crucial role in ensuring that this impact be lasting and multifaceted.

Elsewhere, South Korea hosts some of the world's most ambitious culture-led projects. Kyu Hon Hwang has studied how they can help cities in decline rediscover and strengthen their urban identity. The impetus toward a solid urban identity through culture not only revitalizes the local economy, but also strengthens feelings of belonging to the community.

Hwang proposes a five-phase process for implementing cultural regeneration. This includes a diagnosis of the urban process, understanding local social characteristics, creating a data base, applying custom-tailored techniques, and continual feedback among users, planners, and managers.⁵ Cases such as South Korea show how cultural regeneration can be an effective means for revitalizing both physical space and a sense of community.

Nevertheless, critical views of this model do exist, such as that of Malcolm Miles, who questions the rhetoric around cultural projects as a driving force behind urban development. While he recognizes the success of initiatives like the Guggenheim or London's Tate Modern, he sheds doubt on the viability of replicating these strategies in other contexts. The dissident voices that have emerged from academia are evidence that cultural policies do not always lead to the desired results. Miles suggests alternative approaches that do not depend exclusively on culture as the driving force of development, recognizing the limitations and risks involved in excessive dependence on creative industries for urban regeneration.⁶

Another relevant aspect of this kind of strategy is governance. Christina Lidegaard examines different models for implementing cultural districts in Copenhagen.⁷ The city's deindustrialization left parts of its port unused,



Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum.

thus creating an opportunity to develop new cultural districts. Lidegaard argues that a focus on governance that combines top-down methods with bottom-up initiatives is more effective for guaranteeing financial viability and keeping creative control in the hands of cultural workers and firms. The hybrid model she proposes could help prevent gentrification and generate better conditions for cultural projects to be implemented in a way that benefits the local community instead of simply attracting visitors and external investments.

Culture-led urban regeneration is a complex, multi-faceted strategy that can significantly benefit cities and urban districts. However, their success depends to a great extent on their adaptation to local needs and characteristics, effective resource management, and active community participation. Although cultural projects have the potential for transforming urban areas and revitalizing local economies, they also pose significant challenges, including measuring their impacts and handling social, cultural, and economic conflicts that may arise. As more cities seek to implement urban-cultural regeneration strategies, it will be fundamental to learn from past experiences and adapt practices to local contexts to maximize benefits and minimize risks.

The Alamo Plan mentioned above is an ambitious effort to renovate cultural infrastructure that will have

effects on its urban surroundings. The strategies used can be analyzed in the light of previous studies about culture-led urban regeneration, underlining its strengths and potential areas for improvement.

The plan places considerable emphasis on preserving the original structures such as the Alamo Church and the Long Barrack, which are the only remaining buildings from the 1836 Battle of the Alamo. This approach is consistent with the importance of cultural value management pointed out in Tao Yu's study, which identifies the integration of cultural development with urban planning as central to the success of cultural regeneration projects. Using advanced conservation techniques, such as humidity and temperature monitoring to prevent the degradation of buildings, shows a commitment to the long-term preservation of historic patrimony.

Regarding the recovery of the urban space and cultural identity, it should be mentioned that one of the Alamo Plan's key strategies is the "re-appropriation" of the Mission and battleground's original site, which includes the re-configuration of the streets and public spaces to better reflect its history. This approach is reminiscent of the discussions around the culture-led regeneration such as that seen in Bilbao, where the urban revitalization through a cultural project reconfigured the city's identity and its perception worldwide. However, as in the case of Bilbao,



A conceptual rendering of the lobby of the Alamo Visitor Center and Museum.

a risk does exist that these urban changes could unleash tensions between the preservation of the heritage and the city's contemporary needs regarding its multicultural, identity dimension.

Regarding the visitors' experience and community participation, the design of the new Visitors Center and Museum is another central component of the Alamo Plan, oriented to improve the educational, tourist experience. The consultation with historians and museum experts for designing the exhibits ensures that the narrative presented will be comprehensive and respectful of history. However, as Lidegaard and Miles suggest in their studies about governance and cultural development, it is key that these efforts include a participatory approach involving the local community to avoid gentrification and guarantee that the benefits of the regeneration are distributed equitably.

Despite its many strengths, the Alamo Plan faces challenges common to all large-scale cultural regeneration projects. For example, the degree to which the project can really "restore the dignity" of the site and at the same time deal with the contradictions inherent in its historic meaning will be a key factor in evaluating its long-term success. In addition, as the studies by Evans and Keating and Frantz have pointed out, measuring the social and economic impact of these products is often complicated. The risk does exist that the benefits expected will not materialize as predicted.

The Alamo Plan is illustrative of how culture-led urban regeneration can be used to preserve and revitalize

historic sites at the same time that the urban space is reconfigured to improve visitors' experiences. However, to maximize its success, it will be fundamental to ensure an implementation that respects both the historic heritage and the needs and expectations of the local community, particularly the Mexican-American community, in San Antonio. Only a balanced approach that combines cultural preservation, community participation, and the adaptation to today's realities will guarantee that the memory of the Alamo continue to be relevant for future generations. ■■

Notes

- 1 Graeme Evans, "Measure for Measure: Evaluating the Evidence of Culture's Contribution to Regeneration," *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, nos. 5-6 (2005), pp. 959-983.
- 2 T. Yu, Q. Tang, Y. Wu, Y. Wang, and Z. Wu, "What Determines the Success of Culture-Led Regeneration Projects in China?" *Sustainability*, vol. 11, no. 18 (2019).
- 3 M. Keating and M. de Frantz, "Culture-led Strategies for Urban Regeneration: A Comparative Perspective on Bilbao," *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2004), pp. 187-194.
- 4 "Guggenheim Effect: How the Museum Helped Transform Bilbao," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/31/guggenheim-effect-how-the-museum-helped-transform-bilbao>. [Editor's Note.]
- 5 K. H. Hwang, "Finding Urban Identity through Culture-led Urban Regeneration," *Journal of Urban Management*, vol. 3, nos. 1-2 (2014), pp. 67-85.
- 6 M. Miles, "Interruptions: Testing the Rhetoric of Culturally Led Urban Development," *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, nos. 5-6 (2005), pp. 889-911.
- 7 C. Lidegaard, M. Nuccio, and T. Bille, "Fostering and Planning Urban Regeneration: The Governance of Cultural Districts in Copenhagen," *European Planning Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2017), pp. 1-19.