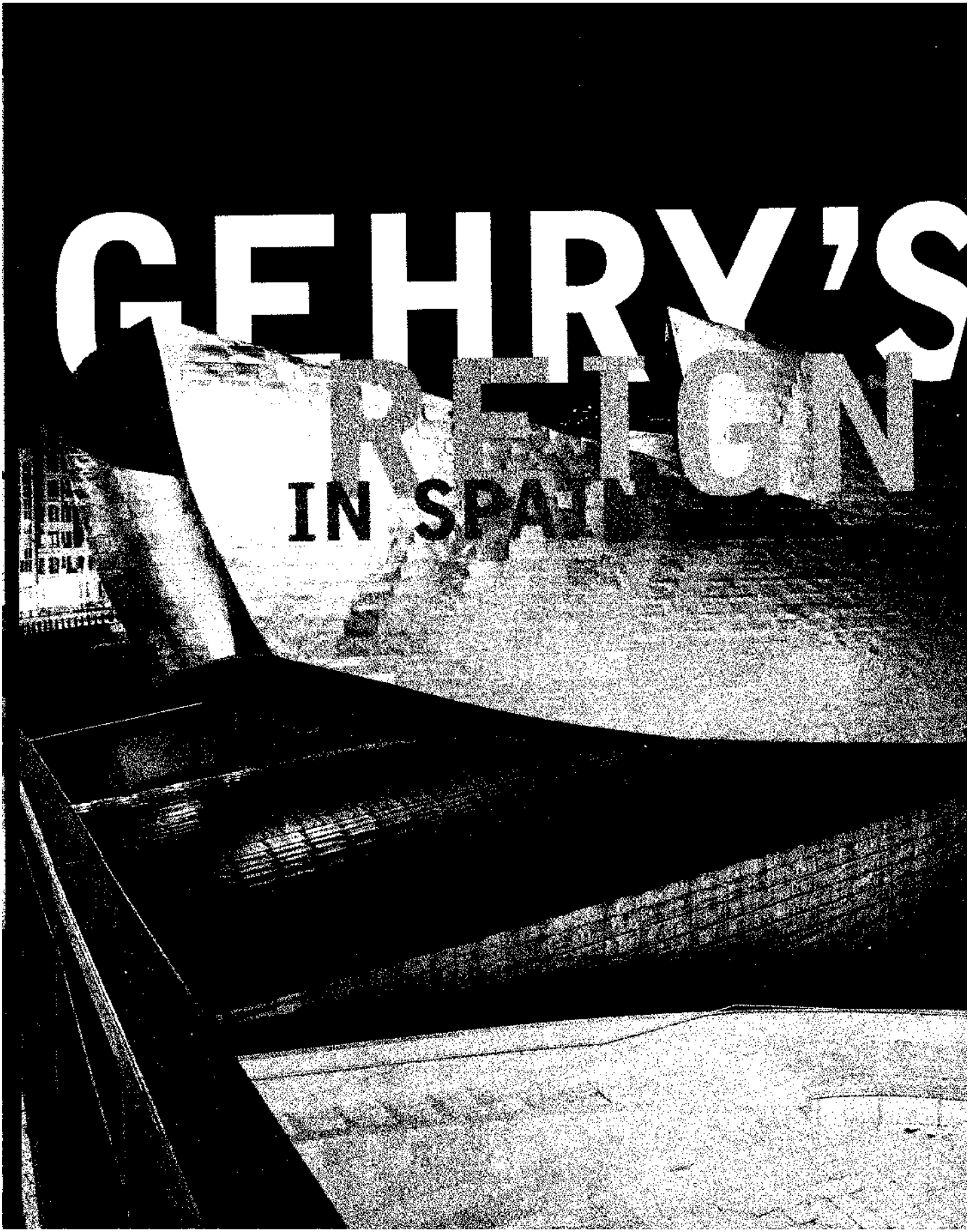
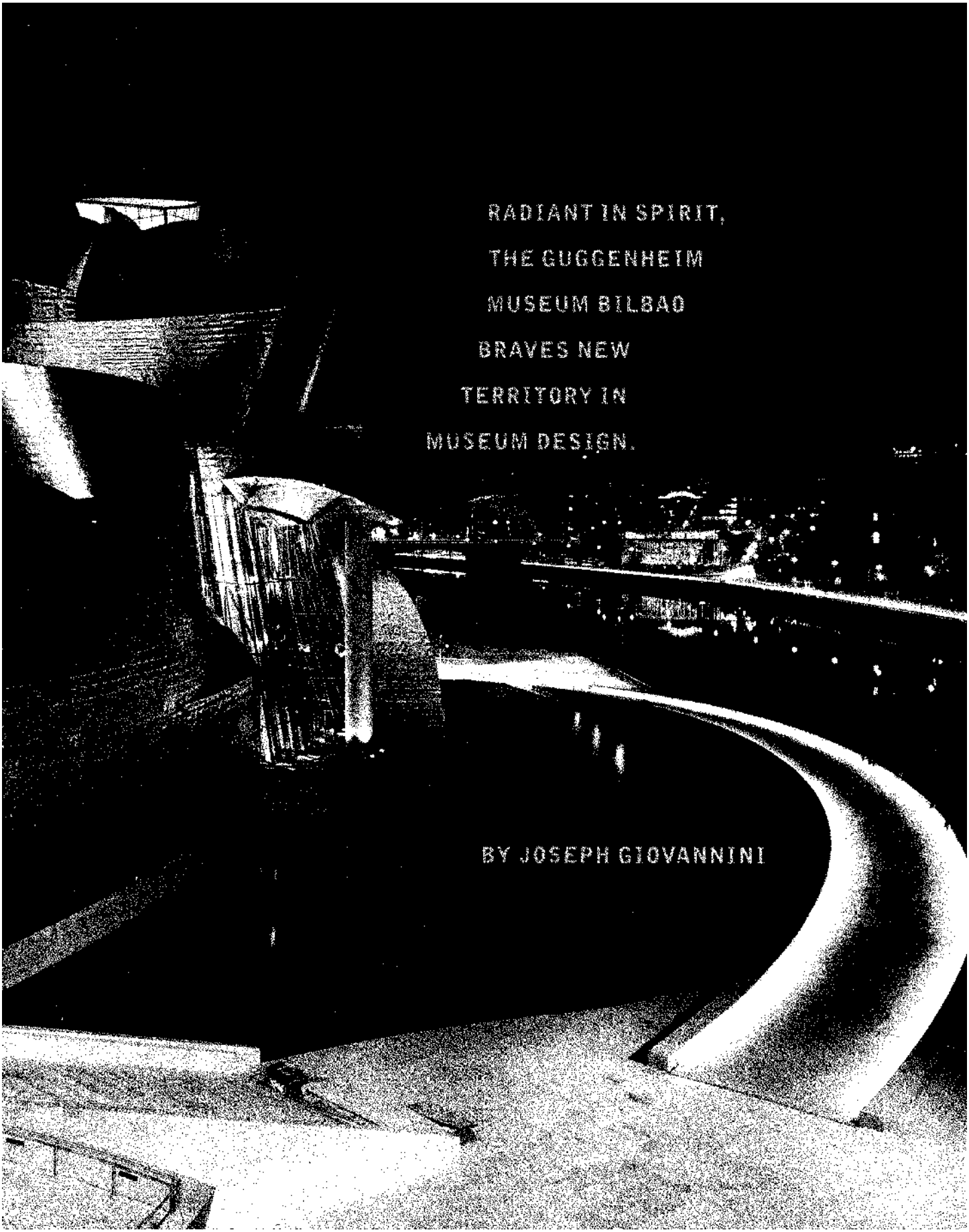
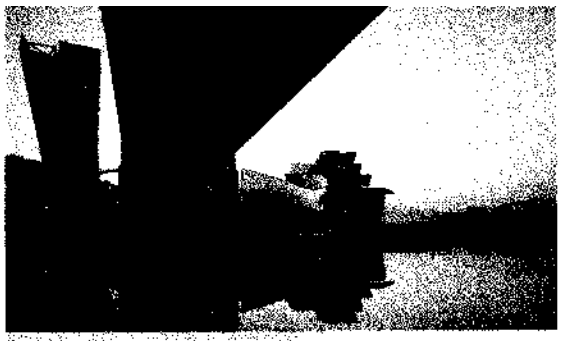

GEHRY'S
IN SPAIN



RADIANT IN SPIRIT, THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM BILBAO BRAVES NEW TERRITORY IN MUSEUM DESIGN.

BY JOSEPH GIOVANNINI



Squint on a blustery day from the bridge crossing the Nervión River in Bilbao, Spain, and the water, mountains, clouds, and the new Guggenheim blur into a majestic tableau of earthly and aerial turbulence. Down to the curves of its thoracic cages, Frank Gehry's museum belongs to a family of nonlinear phenomena scientists call complex.

As though in a state of transition between solid and liquid, the volatile facade allies more with the magnificence of a larger, more complex natural order than the tidy architectural mien of this proper Basque capital. Churning surfaces play off each other in ever-revolving relationships, climaxing in a stormy spray of titanium at the edge of order and disorder. The twisting walls and roofs, meeting at edges that form hypnotically undulant lines, captivate the eye and draw the body into their swim. You give into the motion and surrender to the flow of a changed gravitational state. It speaks to your inner ear.

In 1987, Gehry built the Fishdance restaurant leaping by the side of an elevated highway in Kobe, Japan, and a decade later in Bilbao, he simply multiplied the single fish and lopped off the heads and tails to orchestrate a school of abstract piscine shapes bounding by the side of another bridge in another country. The museum rests on a stone base, but the real plinth is the reflecting pool adjacent to the Nervión from which the forms surge.

On the site of a former shipyard, the architect builds on Bilbao's strengths while creating a postindustrial, postrationalist vision: The language of biomorphic curves eschews the Modernist assumption of simplicity based on standardized parts and repetitive assembly-line fabrication.

The aerospace computer Gehry used to develop his handmade models of billowing sheets of paper taped together liberated him from industrial standardization—without incurring punishing construction costs. The computer that has made clouds, waves, and mountains scientifically intelligible, and chaos science possible, is the same instrument that made Gehry's tumult practicable. The building exemplifies the shift from mechanics to the electronics of our postindustrial age.

Not since Frank Lloyd Wright's Wasmuth portfolio has an architect sent such an American message across the Atlantic. In Bilbao, Gehry has pursued notions of freedom and openness rather than architectural precedent and doctrine. In a Wrightian tradition that includes Bruce Goff and Paul Rudolph, the Los Angeles architect has exported to overbred Europe what author Tom Wolfe has dubbed "hog-stomping" American vitality. Gehry tilts to wildness rather than to propriety and rules.

Gehry maintains that artists admonish him not to design Milquetoast museums: "They want their work to hang in a building that's important. They tell me to make the galleries workable, but to give the building hell."

This symphonic composition, facing the Nervión like a postcard waiting to happen, is the vision that has mesmerized photographers, but their voluntary captivity leaves other views unseen, and even repressed. There are weaker facades, including those that reveal an inner architectural

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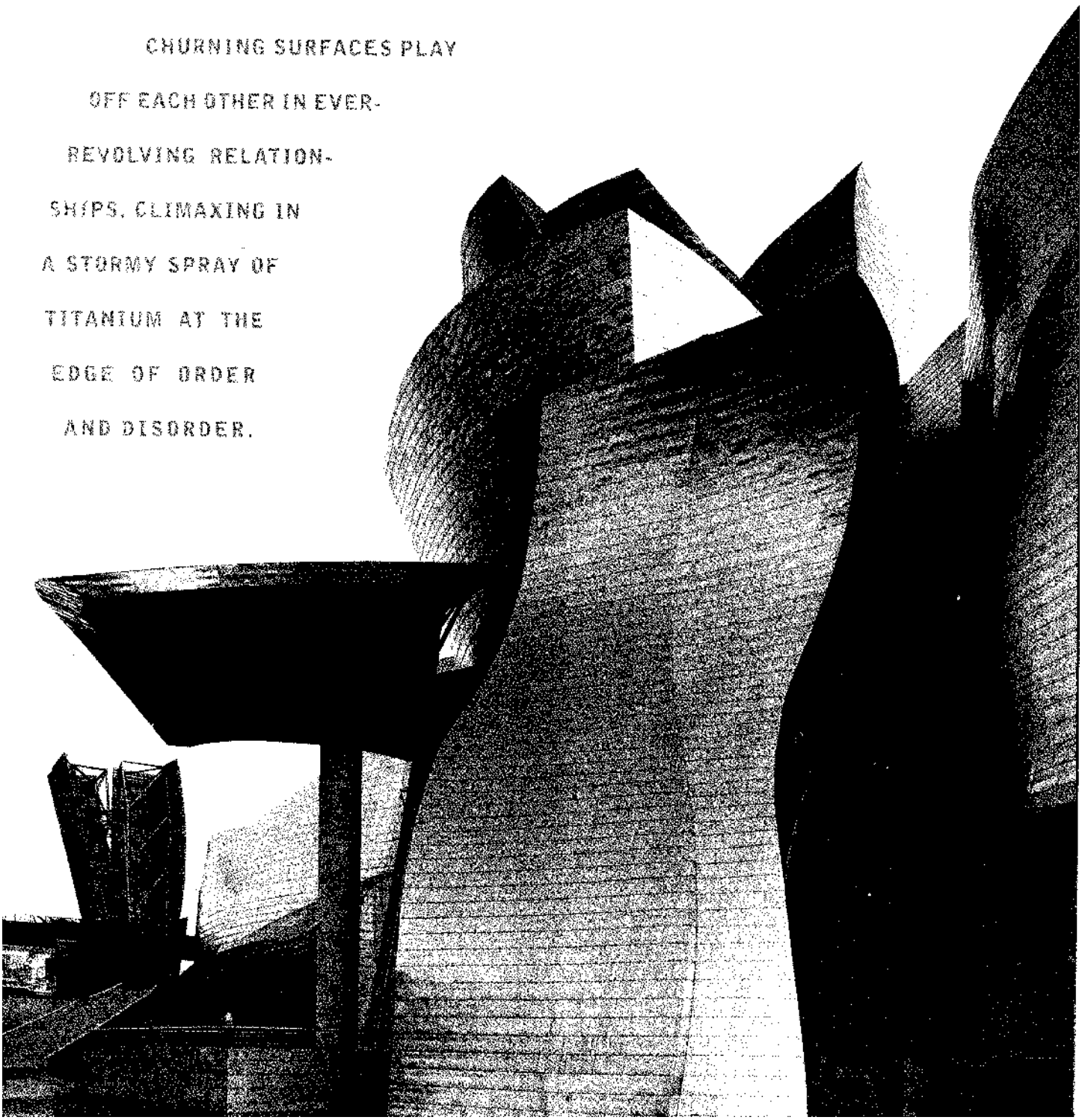
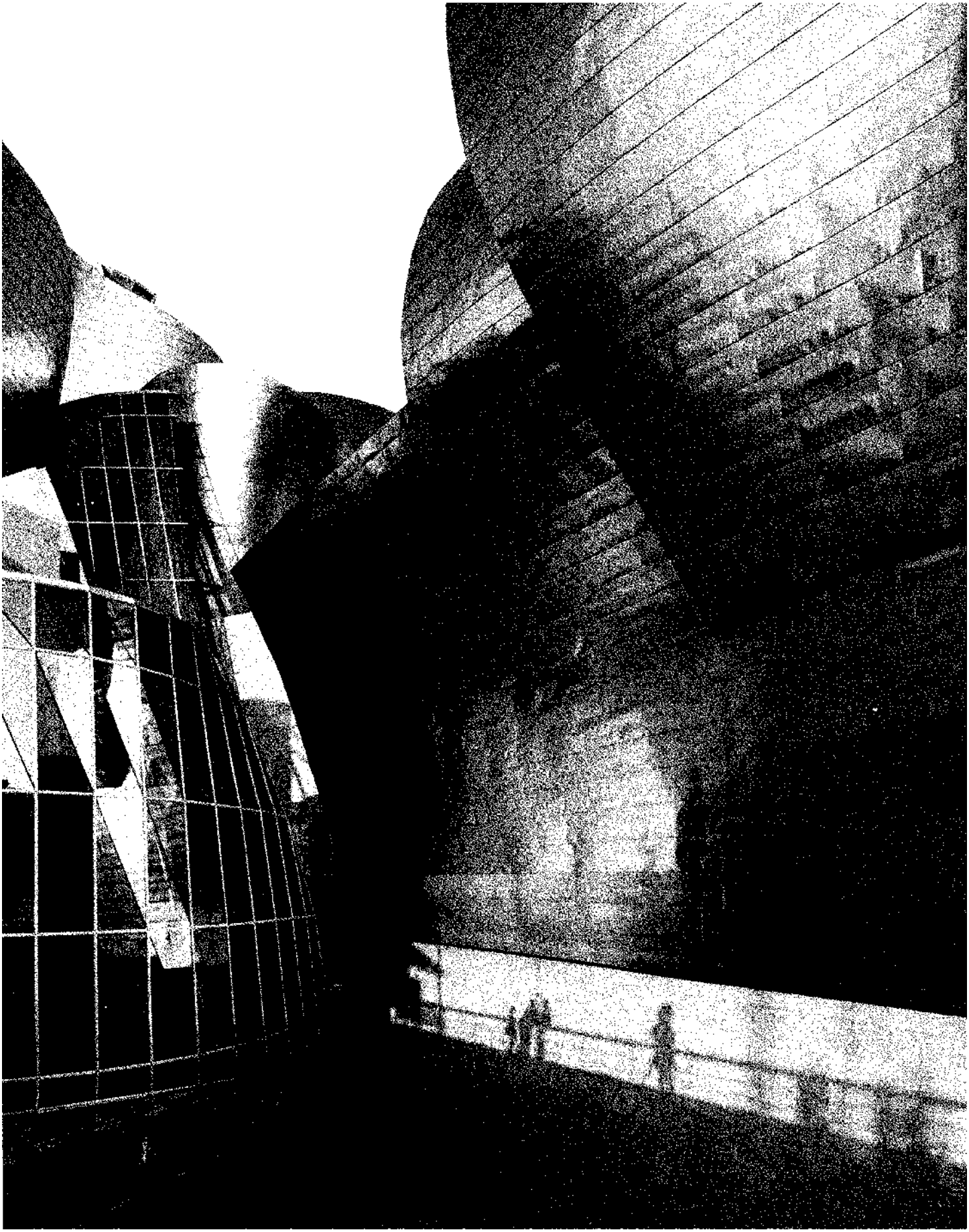
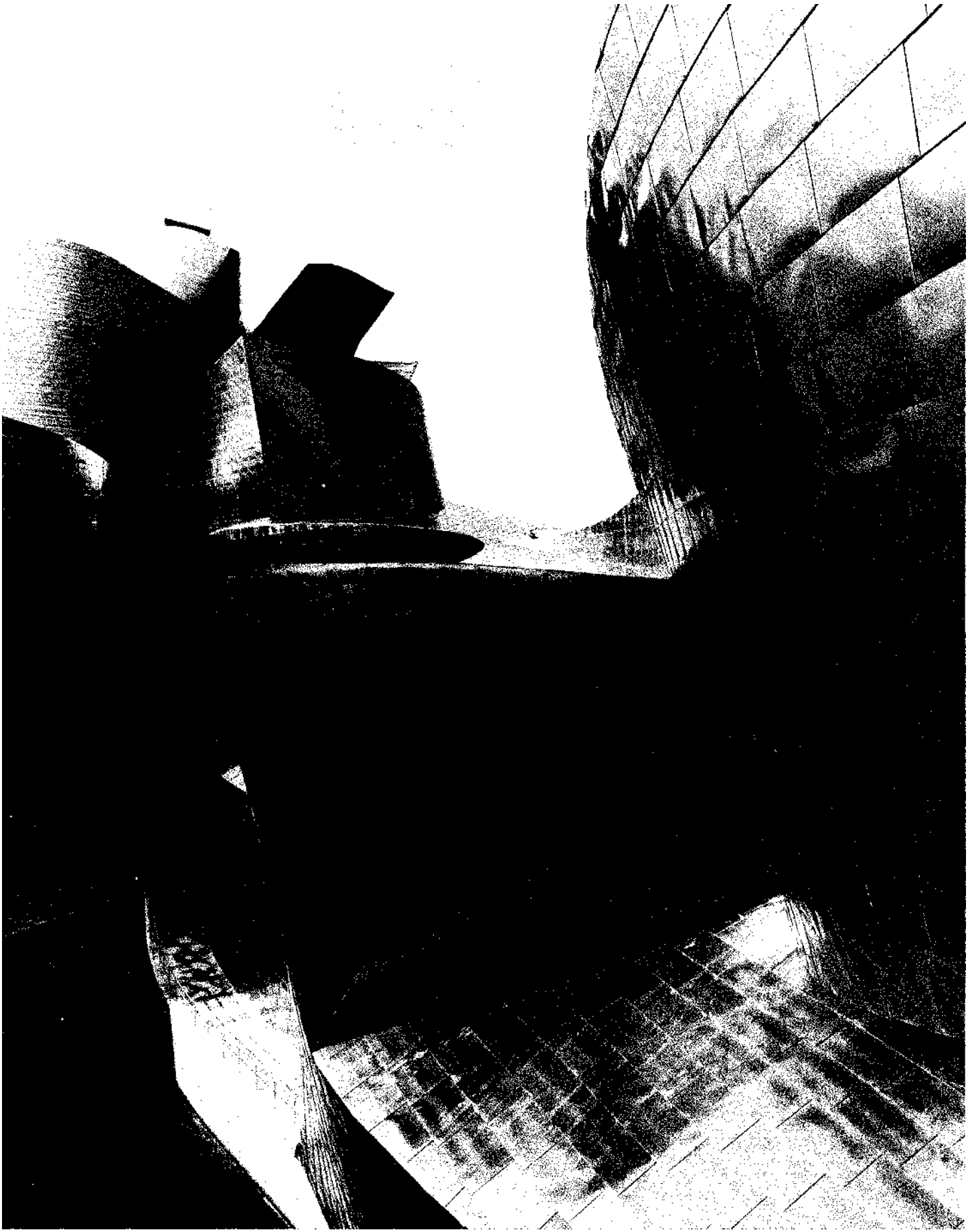
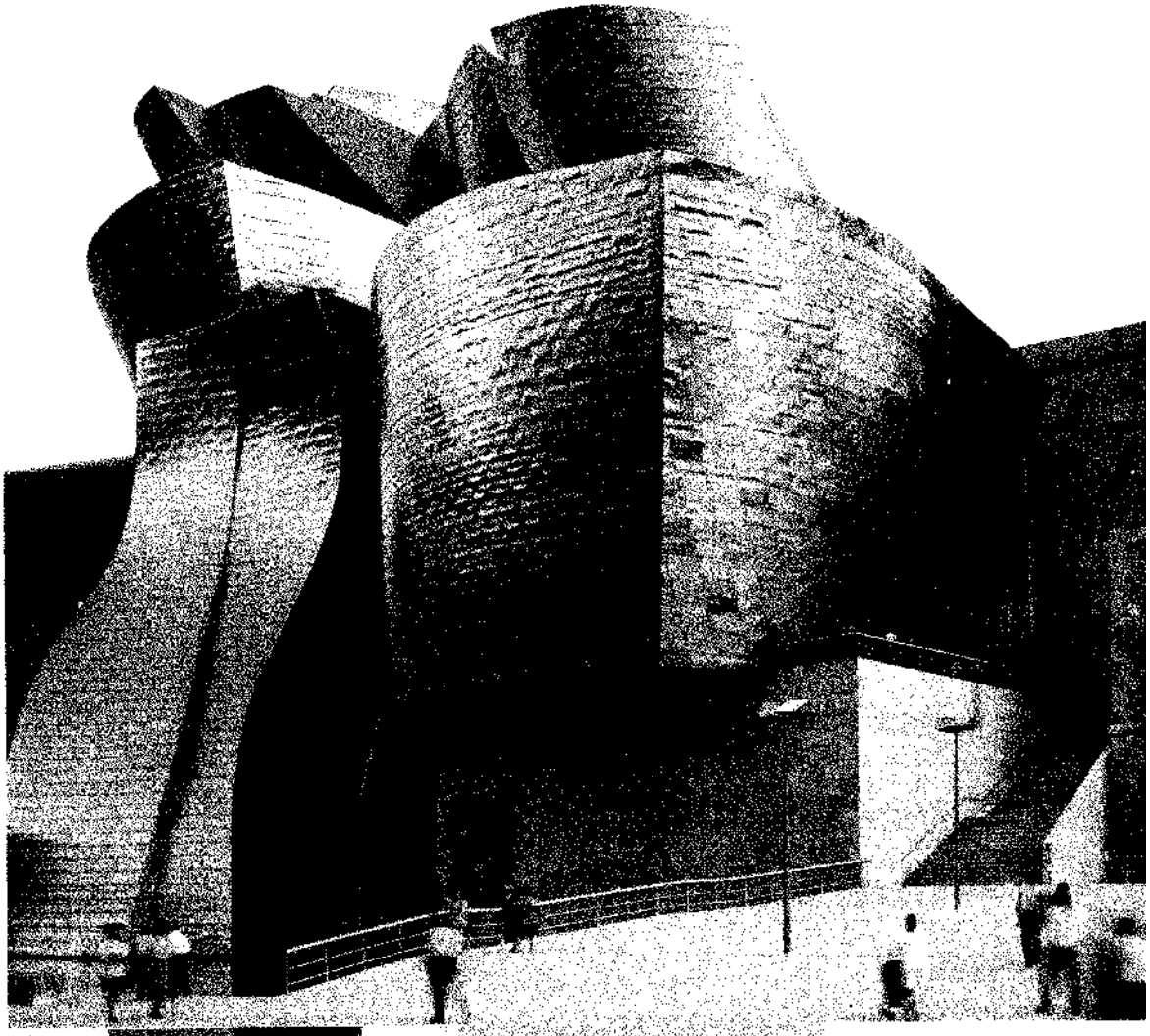
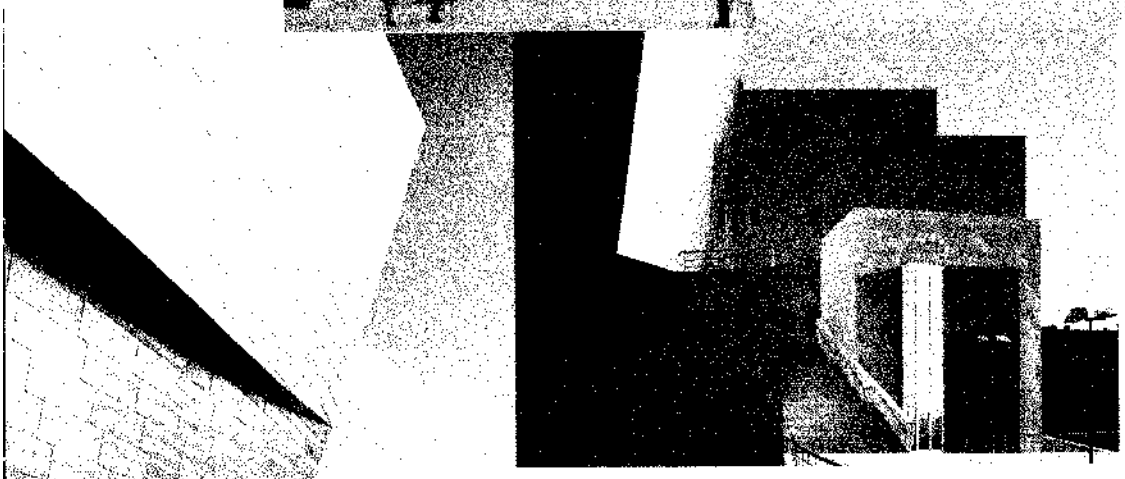










struggle Gehry never quite resolves.

Viewed from the container yards, the west facade around the entrance displays an uncomfortable transition from the eruptive titanium curves to boxy structures that trail off into a loose assembly of buildings leading back to the city, including a blue administration building with punctured windows. Other boxy, windowless forms are nearly engulfed by the dynamic titanium shapes, and their visual relationship is uneasy, revealing a rift between interior program and exterior form.

Many of Gehry's buildings are loft structures with dramatic fronts. The facades of the Chiat/Day office building in Venice, California (1991), and the Frederick R. Weisman Museum in Minneapolis (1994), for example, do not penetrate deeply into the buildings but dazzle as surface rhetoric. Gehry sculpts buildings from the outside, and despite designs Robert Venturi might call ducks, they are largely decorated sheds.

In the Guggenheim Bilbao, when Gehry looked at the interior, it was primarily at the atrium where Director Thomas Krens wanted Gehry to match the aplomb of the atrium in Wright's Fifth Avenue museum. Gehry responded with a soaring expressionistic space—part Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*, part Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*—with flaring pillars, webbed fenestration, glass elevators, and trapeze catwalks, continuous forms that make you feel like you are falling down while looking up. Its banks of glass catch all available light, often projecting it like paintings onto curved walls that elasticize the shadow patterns.

The always-moving exterior shapes, however, influence surprisingly few interiors beyond the atrium—only a half-dozen of the 19 principal galleries express the exterior shapes inside, and several of those spaces are compromised as places for viewing art. This is no small disappointment because Gehry comes so close in this commission to proving that there is an alternative to the white museum box.

Gehry's pact with the Guggenheim was to create two kinds of galleries—classical galleries for early Modernist works and more freely formed galleries for contemporary pieces and site-specific installations. He threw in a half-dozen orthogonal galleries and a handful of "found" spaces, which serve as incidental wayside chapels ringing the atrium. The boxy forms glimpsed from the west hold the six classical galleries on two floors—orthogonal spaces axially sequenced en suite.

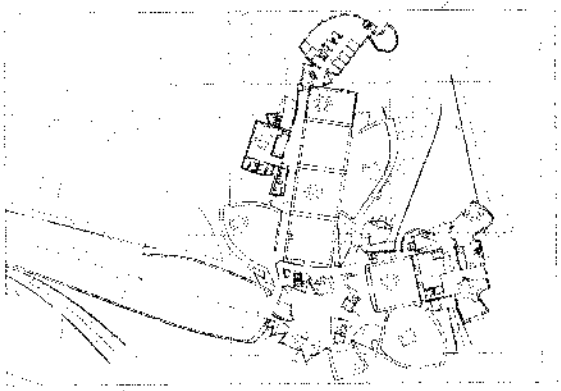
In the classical wing, Gehry cleverly subdivides each of the three third-floor galleries with tall lightwells that pour natural light from skylights down to the second floor. The walls of the lightwells effectively define narrow perimeter spaces. These doughnut galleries create an intimacy rare in this huge museum. Paintings by Wassily Kandinsky and Joan Miró read beautifully in serene spaces that glow with natural light diffused by blond floors and white walls. The galleries display a lightness of being.

But the same galleries could have been built 50 years ago. And they have nothing to do with the outside forms, except that Gehry's roiling exterior hides them. Likewise, the atrium serves as an interior facade camouflaging the conventional galleries.

Gehry has operated by a cherished Andy Warhol principle: The artist figured that if he dyed his wig platinum, people would notice the color rather than the wig. The building is deceptive because it remains fundamentally a facade building, and the facades, inside and out, remain the dominant impression. Though the classical galleries work well, they forge no new territory, and even represent a regressive step given the fact that Wright's Guggenheim, for all its curatorial difficulties, represents a braver position.

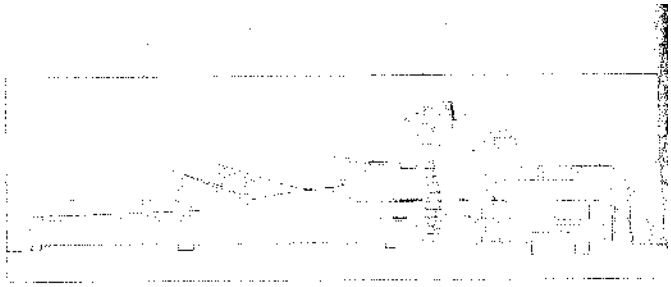
Fourth-floor plan

Third-floor plan



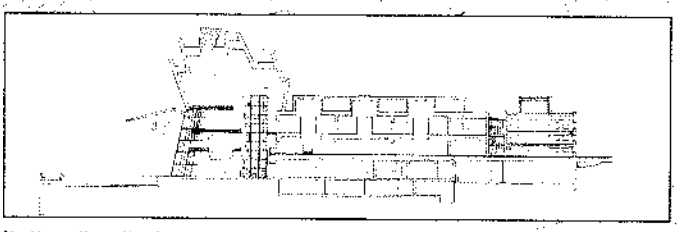
Second-floor plan

First-floor plan

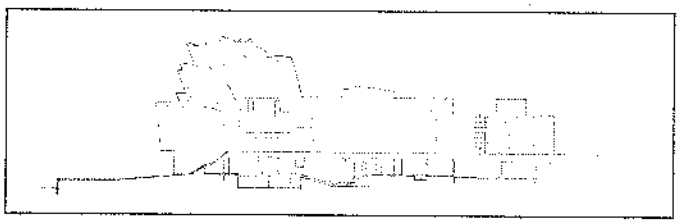


East-west section through boat gallery and atrium

1. lobby
2. auditorium
3. atrium
4. gallery
5. library
6. conservation
7. staff lounge
8. bookstore
9. café
10. restaurant
11. administrative
12. mechanical



North-south section through atrium and classical galleries



North-south section through auditorium and café

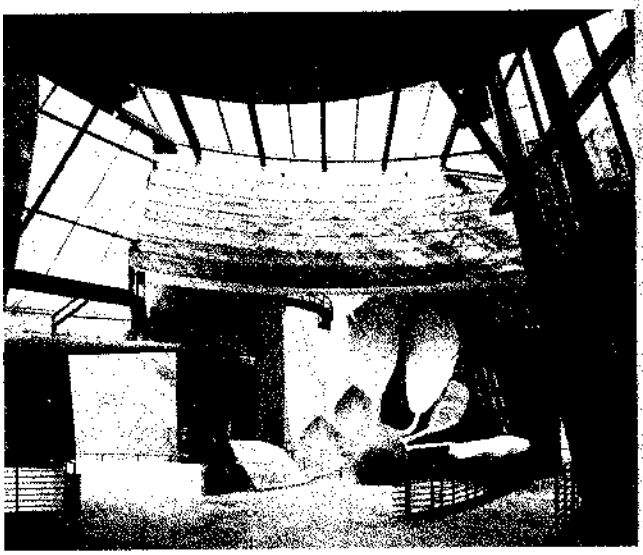
Because Gehry's riverside pyrotechnics primarily crest over the atrium, there are only six galleries under the great curving light scoops. Various problems—none having to do with curvilinearity—diminish the impact of half of these curved galleries.

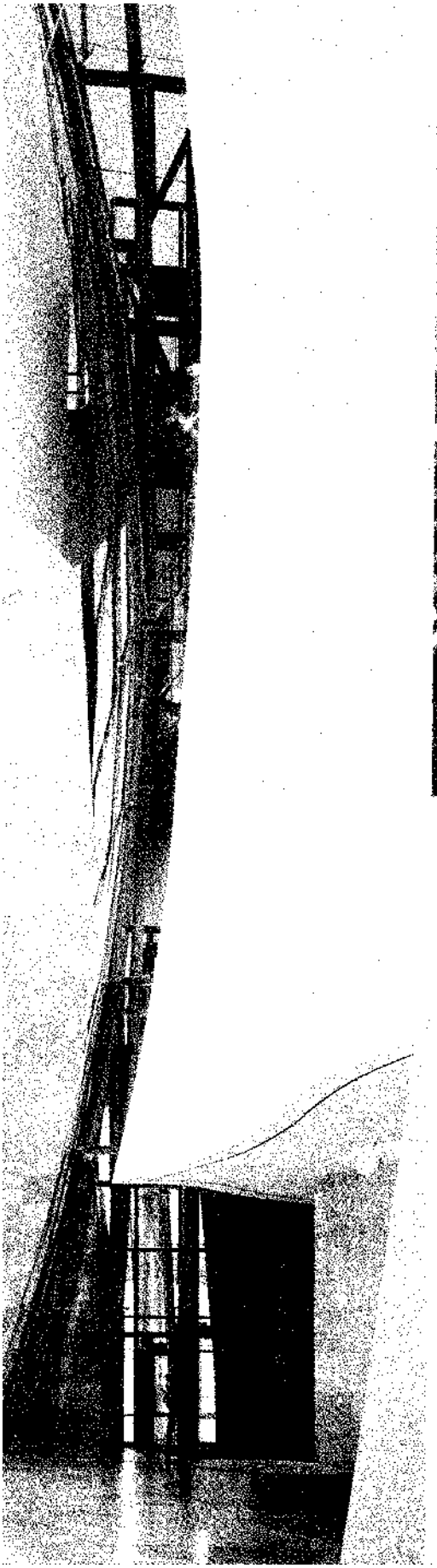
In the prowlike Sol LeWitt room on the second floor, heavy scaffolding for lights intrudes on the painting and spoils the artist's illusionism. In the American painting gallery on the second floor, the ceiling is too low for the size of the room and weighs on the space, bringing a gaggle of light fixtures into the line of sight.

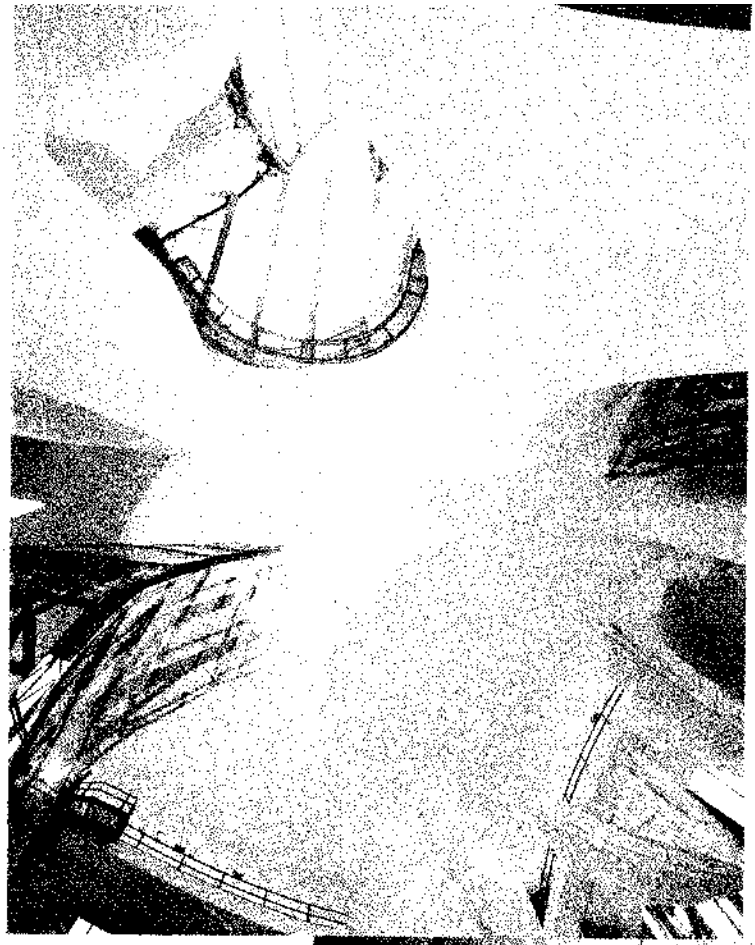
But the anguishing disappointment is the Anselm Kiefer gallery, a boatlike shape attached to the flank of the classical galleries. The problem here is a failure of nerve (though not Gehry's). With an inclined perimeter wall that leans out, up, and away in an ascendent spatial gesture seeking light, this curved volume might have been the test chamber for an alternative to the white box. But someone straightened it up: A high vertical wall erected in front of the leaning perimeter now assassinates the yearning movement. Evidently, the worry was how to hang a painting against a curve. (The answer is one that the Guggenheim in New York already knows: Simply devise a support bracket or freestanding wall that holds the entire painting out from the curve so that the space dissociates wall and painting, rendering the topological problem moot.)

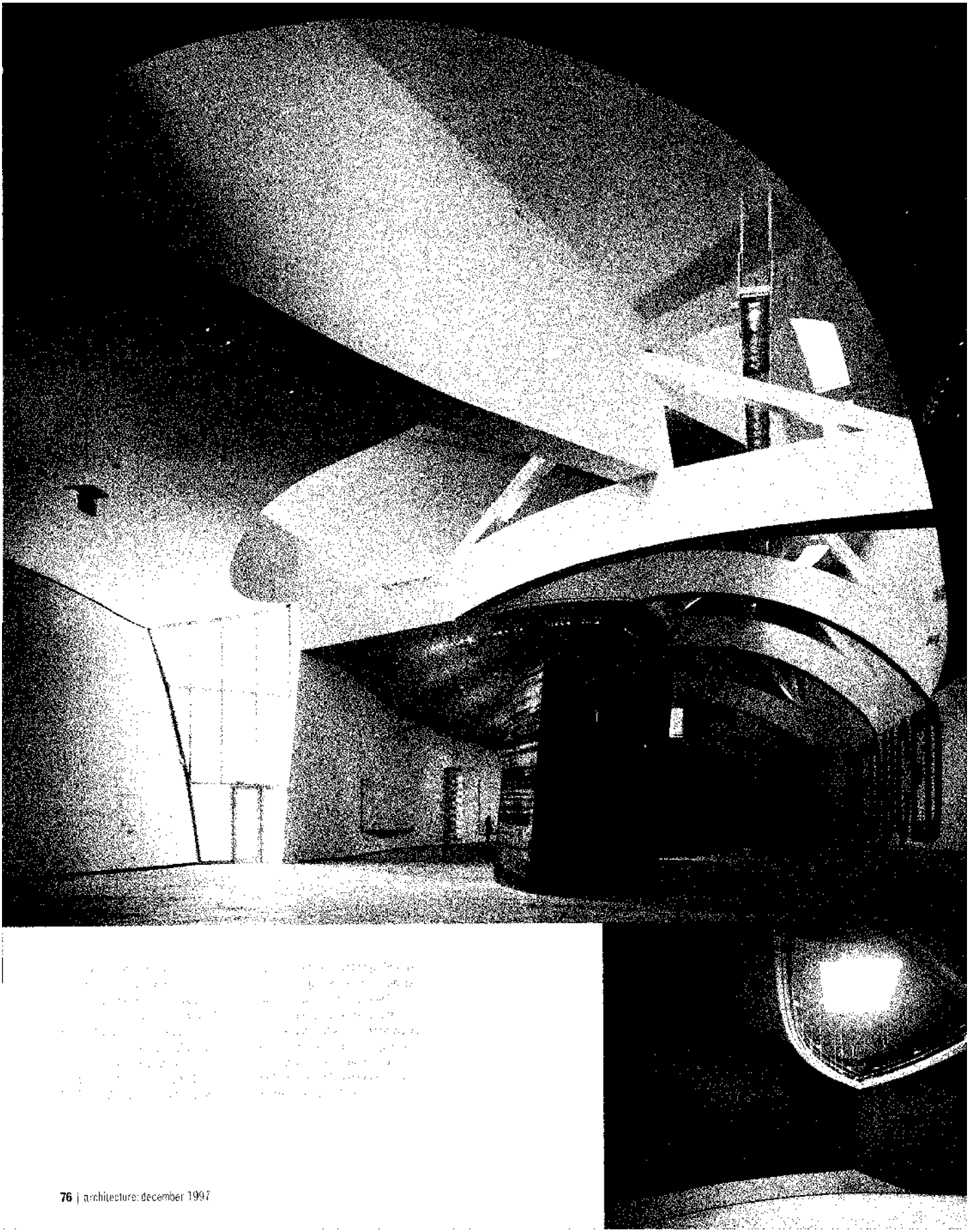
The most disturbing weakness of the interiors is that Gehry did not make the cohabitation of the classical, curved, and orthogonal galleries into anything more than a juxtaposition. The different spaces do not intersect, collide, or otherwise influence, transform, or acknowledge each other.

For his design of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, the architect interrogated the acoustician, who wanted a box, about what sound looks for in a box, and Gehry proceeded to erode the volume where it would not affect the sound quality. At the Guggenheim, he simply accepts the classical and orthogonal galleries as a given, and then smothers their presence with the titanium shapes. That few of the galleries register the continuously curved









and flowing exterior forms inside is a failure of promise and a lapse in delirium. Gehry, who uses open forms, designs so much from the exterior that the design process amounts to a closed system that often leaves interiors underdeveloped. The building interiors really want to be what the outside promises.

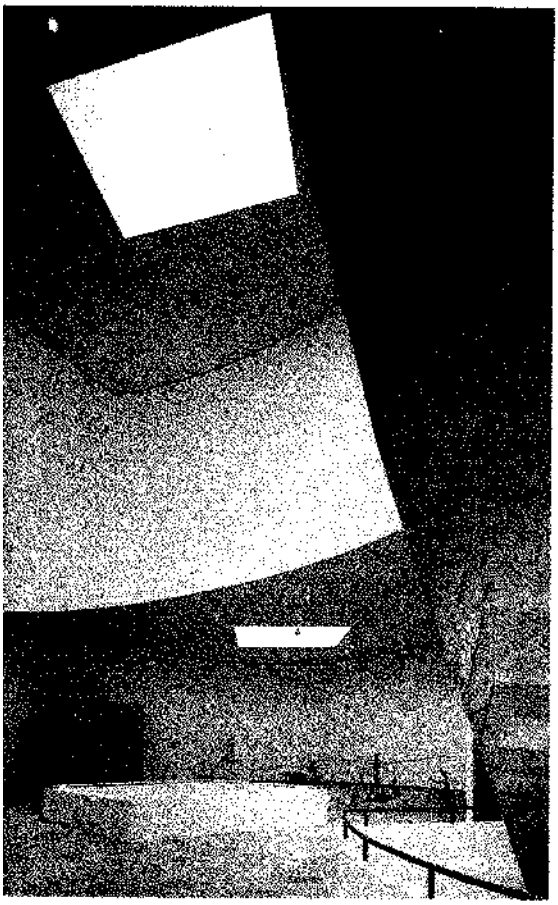
The single gallery that does carry over the exterior's adventurous form and ascendent space is a prow-shaped room on the third floor, now devoted to works by Bruce Nauman, where the ceiling opens and flows up to a skylight that washes the curvaceous walls. The formal architectural complexities courteously start in the upper reaches of the gallery above the line of sight. This gallery is both adventurous and workable.

The great fear in the art community was that Gehry's galleries would overwhelm the art. But they are, in the aggregate, surprisingly neutral and polite—even the ground-floor "boat" gallery, which is longer than a football field.

But if the tour began in the galleries, visitors would have little sense of the astounding building outside. It is the joyousness of the exterior and the atrium—the buoyancy, robustness, and power—that conditions visitors to feel that entering these precincts offers a special moment and privilege: The onrush of the titanium forms prepares them to suspend disbelief and predisposes them to appreciate art as the revelation offered by this cathedral.

Gehry's museum, a sensuous structure with a radiant spirit, does put visitors in a state approaching awe, and the spatial conditioning outside the galleries carries over to artworks that are exalted by the surroundings he creates. This is not a cold, objective building that presents art in an antiseptic context, but a warm one in which Gehry's sheer effort and conspicuous creativity posit an architectural soul in structure. The design's nonrational, nonlinear forms sharpen the senses and heighten perceptions, giving visitors the confidence of their own intuitions, emotions, and senses. The building's self-liberation and expression encourages their own.

Gehry cut his design teeth on contemporary art rather than architectural history, and at Bilbao he returns to the artistic source of his creativity by proposing art at an architectural scale. Gehry did give the building hell. Artists will want to be in it.



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