

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

In Spain, Santander Hopes a New Arts Center Will Reinvigorate the City

Raphael Minder



Santander hopes the new Botín arts center will reinvigorate the city in northern Spain the same way Bilbao, about 60 miles east, was transformed by its Guggenheim museum, opened two decades ago. Credit Enrico Cano

The new Botín arts center here offers contrasting views. Its waterfront building juts out over a bay crisscrossed by ferries and sailing boats. On the other side, it faces the former headquarters of Banco Santander, which the Botín family turned into Spain's largest bank.

Renzo Piano, the center's Italian architect, got his inspiration from the sea. "Water makes things beautiful, and that is the reason why this building is flirting with the water," he said of his first edifice in Spain.

But Mr. Piano's financing came from the Botín banking family, whose foundation paid entirely for the 80 million euro (about \$90 million) construction. This arts center is a rarity in Spain, a project financed by family philanthropy in a country whose cultural assets are otherwise largely dependent on public funding.

Santander hopes the center will reinvigorate the city in northern Spain the same way Bilbao, about 60 miles east, was transformed by its Guggenheim museum, opened two decades ago. The Botín family's wealth, in turn, is seen to assure that a project kick-started at the height of Spain's banking crisis will stay on course, as well as at arm's length from politicians who let other such projects fall by the wayside. West of Santander sits a half-built arts complex in Santiago de Compostela and a struggling arts center in Avilés, designed by Oscar Niemeyer.



An installation by the artist Carsten Höller at the arts center. Credit Pedro Puente Hoyos/European Pressphoto Agency

“I’m sure that the Botín Foundation will guarantee continuity here and not do anything suicidal,” said Vicente Todolí, a former director of the Tate Modern in London who now leads the center’s visual arts advisory committee. “You don’t invest in a Formula One car and then not have it compete.”

Despite its projected benefits for Santander as a tourism and culture hub, though, the building has had some ardent local critics who regard it as both a violation of city ordinances and a self-aggrandizing display of banking wealth.

Emilio Botín, the bank’s former chairman, commissioned Mr. Piano, laid the first stone in 2012, but then died in 2014 — the year that his museum was initially scheduled to open. Santander’s environmentalists and some citizen groups took the project as far as Spain’s Supreme Court, but to no avail. The plaintiffs claimed that the port and city authorities unlawfully allowed public land to be leased to a private foundation without any public bidding process.

Mr. Botín “could have chosen another place, but of course he had to put his center right in front of his own bank, on the spot where the Romans disembarked and this city was born,” said Carlos García, a former president of Arca, an environmental association, who also rejects any comparison with the Guggenheim, built in what was a run-down industrial district of Bilbao.



The center focuses on contemporary art, but will also occasionally host classical exhibitions. “Octopus” is from the Carsten Höller collection. Credit Pedro Puente Hoyos/European Pressphoto Agency

Fernando Merodio, a Santander lawyer, said he was ready to pursue his lawsuit before European courts against a museum project that promoted “the culture of money more than the culture of art.”

Still, most residents have clearly been won over by the project. About a fifth of the budget went toward improving the area around the building, including building an underground road tunnel that also fitted in with Mr. Piano’s idea of a museum space that helps link the city center and the sea. Mr. Piano’s split building structure is raised onto pillars, to let people stroll below and also not block the sea view. (Mr. Piano also designed the headquarters of The New York Times in Manhattan.)

Ahead of the June 23 inauguration, about 80,000 of the Cantabria region’s 580,000 residents took advantage of a special membership deal, granting locals unlimited access to the Botín Center for a one-time €2 payment (about \$2.25), compared with the normal €8 (about \$9) entrance ticket.

“If the museum in Bilbao worked, I don’t see why this one won’t do better,” said Emilio Gómez Cicero, a retired boat welder, who proudly showed his new membership card. “Whether you like the Botíns or not, you should accept that everything in this world is moved by money.”



Renzo Piano, the center’s Italian architect, got his inspiration from the sea. Credit Enrico Cano

The center’s management, however, has published no forecast about the project’s economic impact on Santander. “We care about the quality of the visit rather than the quantity of visitors,” Íñigo Sáenz de Miera, the Botín Foundation’s director general, said at a news conference.

The center was inaugurated by King Felipe VI and opened with two very different exhibitions. One floor is partitioned into separate rooms to hang 81 drawings by Francisco de Goya on loan from the Prado museum in Madrid. The walls also help protect the fragile works from damaging light.

In contrast, the other floor remains open and bathed in natural light, even if some of the installations by the artist Carsten Höller are already brightly lit. Mr. Höller’s “Y” show opens onto a light corridor, which he also compared to a uterus, that lets the viewer choose between

two itineraries exploring the relationship between life and death. At one end, Mr. Höller suspended two bird cages filled with canaries, a bird valued for its bright singing and color but also as a harbinger of death when detecting toxic gases in mines. Because of the center's construction delay, Mr. Höller said he had the rare opportunity of "having three years to prepare one exhibition." His goal, he said, was also "not to take anything away from this immaculate new space."

The center also displays its own collection, half of which comes from artists who received grants from the foundation. Mr. Todolí said that the center would focus on contemporary art, including works by Julie Mehretu, a South African artist, in October. The center will also occasionally host classical exhibitions like that of Goya, "as long as the work can say something new," Mr. Todolí said. One of Goya's main themes was social injustice, with satirical scenes of aristocratic decadence contrasting with drawings of famine and hardship in the countryside. One black crayon drawing, "They Eat a Lot," shows a friar struggling to defecate because of his gluttony. The drawings were selected from the Prado's vast Goya collection because "these ones really are pertinent to the issues of today," Mr. Todolí said. While the economy in Spain has been recovering since its 2012 banking bailout, that crisis also increased significantly the wealth gap across Spanish society.

In Santander, once a summer royal residence and built on banking and shipping wealth, the Botín Center will "change people's perception of art and also their experience of the sea," said Cristina Iglesias, an artist who built the water sculptures outside the building and who will have her own exhibition there next year. "For a conservative city, I think this opening of the mind is in itself an important contribution."