



2013 Remaking Cities Congress

Re-Positioning the Post-Industrial City in the Global Economy

Case Study Summary

Bilbao, Spain

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Over the last 30 years, Bilbao has evolved from a city with severe environmental problems and a structurally run-down industrial system to being one of the most attractive cities in Europe to live in, visit and invest in. Bilbao has undergone a remarkable and recognized transformation, living out a dream which has put the city at the international forefront of urban transformation, but along with this physical transformation we have to also highlight its economic and knowledge transformation.

Founded in the year 1300 as a medieval villa or town, Bilbao became in 1511, when the trade and shipping office or Consulado was created, a trade outlet and subsequently, at the end of the 19th century, it was transformed into an industrial city covering its entire metropolitan area.

The industrial stage experienced a major crisis between late 70s and early 80s and facing a need for change, the City lived a physical change undergoing a resetting in the economic scheme, in early 80s Basque Country's economy structure accounted 48% Industry sector and 36% Service Sector, between 1983 and 2008 this became 62% Services and 27% Industry and after the Urban transformation Bilbao has been focusing its economy in Creativity, New Technologies, Innovation moving forward to Knowledge economy.

Reopening citizenship to a new attitude towards the global sphere was also a hard task for authorities but the City's success restored their faith in the future of Bilbao, lost during the harsh years of economic crisis.

Among the targets and steps to achieve the urban and economic transformation we should underline those related to external accessibility and internal mobility, such as the extension of the Port; shifting port activity to the mouth of the Nervión river has opened up inner port areas with a high strategic value for the new make-up of the city, creating an opportunity for new bridges to be built and thus providing the city new physical, financial and social lifelines. Bilbao International Airport, the main airport in the north of Spain has successfully addressed the ever-increasing volume of air traffic, involving the transport of around 4 million passengers per year.

Regarding railway infrastructure Metro Bilbao, since its inauguration in 1995 has, in fact, become the most important means of transport in the metropolitan area of Bilbao. The design and architecture is the work of Norman Foster's team making emphasis on originality, simplicity and efficiency. Doing away with railway-related urban barriers has been the key to improve urban spaces.

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Though expensive and complex, these projects have proved fundamental for the successful regeneration of Bilbao. Finally, the new Bilbao Tram that since it first became operational in 2002, has become a key player in the functional integration of new projects being developed on and around the riverfront.

Concerning environment and urban regeneration, both rehabilitation of the Historical Centre and regeneration of the River are worth of being mentioned; the cathartic transformation of the city began on the afternoon of August 26, 1983, when the historic centre was completely destroyed by a flooding. The City Council created SURBISA, the Municipal Company for the recovery of Bilbao, to drive and develop urban rehabilitation activities in this area.

Since 1979, the year that the Bilbao-Bizkaia Water Board activated the Plan for Cleaning Up Metropolitan Bilbao, 95% of the pollutant load of the river has been eliminated, reaching water purity levels on a par with those prior to industrial times. This ambitious plan, required an investment close to 1 billion euros, around six times more than the cost of building the Guggenheim Museum, funded by water rates paid by citizens.

Last but not least, Abandoibarra, the flagship project of the urban transformation of Bilbao developed on an obsolete and run-down port area. The riverside has been completely overhauled, doing away with the old railway track and building the Guggenheim Museum and the Euskalduna Conference Centre, with an attractive promenade linking both new facilities. New green areas, hotels, shopping centres and residential apartments have also been built. The riverside design, the bridges, the parks and gardens, the tram and the exhibits of urban art all go towards making this one of the most sophisticated areas in Europe.

In the future, the current Zorrozaurre peninsula will be a centre of innovation in the city bringing together residential and new business premises in a spacious urban technology park. Development is in the hands of the Iraqi urban planner Zaha Hadid, the first woman to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize.

From the historic trading and heavy industry routes we now find a diversity of strategic industries such as steel, automobile industry, energy, machine tools, aeronautics, computing, electronics, and capital goods.

Major companies that have been set up in Bilbao include Iberdrola (ranking fifth in Europe in power generation) and the Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria BBVA. This latter is one of the principal Spanish financial groups with operations abroad. Its head office is in the city.

Adaptation to the New Economy is one of the present challenges for Bilbao. The first results of the initiatives taken in this area are already visible. The European Software Institute, the Technological Monitoring and Competitive Intelligence Service, and the Technology Park at Bizkaia illustrate the readiness to adapt to the challenges of the Information Society and the New Technologies.

Training of human resources within industry and the services sector is required if the city is to be competitive. The Bilbao campus has grown considerably in recent years with the expansion of the faculties of the Public University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), which embraces the School of Engineering, and the enlarged curriculum of the city's emblematic university, the University of Deusto. Also Mondragon University has moved to Bilbao expanding academic offering.

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Finally, the Guggenheim Museum deserves a special mention having contributed so considerably to the international projection of the city. This Museum project exceeded the wildest expectations of any of those who had believed in it. The cost of the operation was 132.22 million euro, and the increase in Gross Domestic Product in the Basque Country in the First year of activity was 144.24 million euro.

But the transformation of Bilbao goes way beyond the mere construction of an emblematic building; it is, rather, the result of a wide range of interwoven measures aligned to an intelligent vision.