

Historic heart of Bilbao

The historic center of Bilbao is also undergoing a dramatic change. Many traditional buildings, such as the Arriaga Theatre, the “Seven Streets,” the old railway station and covered market are undergoing extensive rehabilitation. The spillover effect from the interest generated by the Guggenheim has had a very positive impact, and the historic heart of Bilbao is discovering a new role as a complementary attraction to the museum.

Nervi3n River projects

A number of urban design projects are also being developed to organize the spaces along the riverfront. Most of these projects are only proposals at this stage, but they reveal the high levels of ambition and the tremendous urban opportunities that will emerge along the edges of the Nervión in the near future.

These projects try to address some of the key issues along the river, such as the design of physical connections to bridge the river; the urban design of the new Zorrozaurre island; the area around the Rontegi bridge; and the confluence of the Nervión and its tributary, the Cadagua, downstream.

As an urban renovation and rehabilitation axis the Nervión is, without doubt, a huge waterfront regeneration project that will take at least twenty-five years to complete.

The miracle of Bilbao

Like so many other European areas affected by the decline of traditional industries, Bilbao also witnessed an alarming decline in urban conditions, especially in the 1980s. This decline was partly due to industrial and economic obsolescence, and the lack of competitiveness of the local companies and industries. As a result, unemployment levels rose while the relative standards of living fell. Extremely high levels of pollution accompanied the loss of urban identity. Social and political problems were also aggravated by the economic situation.

In the last decade of the twentieth century Bilbao has chosen to pursue a new economic and urban profile, and to achieve a real integration with the global economy and the global world. Some people have called this transformation the beginning of the “miracle” of Bilbao.

Although there is clearly still a long way to go, there are a number of reasons why a “New Millennium Bilbao” could arise from the ruins of an old industrial past:

- *Political will and cooperation.* The different levels of administration – town halls, provincial government, Basque regional government, and the central government of Spain – have been able to exhibit real political will and cooperation in the pursuit of common aims. The Basque Country has a tradition of cooperation. The ability to cooperate is a key competitive advantage for the region.
- *New regional planning strategy.* The planning instrument, “Directrices de Ordenación Territorial” (DOT), or the “Regional Planning Guidelines,” that was formally adopted in 1997, places Bilbao within the