

areas. The Basque Country has more than 160 villages and historical centers that have maintained their identity, morphology and image. Almost perfectly integrated in their environment, these towns and villages enrich the landscape of the city-region. Collectively, they are an enormous cultural heritage, as well as a potential competitive advantage for the region.

These rural nuclei are essential for the survival of Basque traditions and idiosyncrasies, but as a network they can have significance only within the context of the Basque city-region. About a hundred of these villages contain the second residences of families that live in the principal Basque cities. The rural towns and villages will be the basis of the emerging rural tourism that could be vital for the future of these spaces.

- 4 *An alternative to urban sprawl.* A key concept of the Basque regional strategy is the prohibition of new development outside of the existing urban and rural nuclei. This restriction protects the natural landscape from sprawl while safeguarding the coherent identity of the urban and rural nuclei.

It is for this alternative to urban sprawl that the Basque regional strategy was awarded an Urban and Regional Planning Prize in 1995, given by the European Commission and the European Council of Town Planners.

- 5 *Creating a network of natural spaces and ecological corridors.* The Basque Country is a region of great physical and climatic diversity. From rugged northern coastlines and mountains, to the Mediterranean plains and the Atlantic valleys, these spaces are not only closely interlaced with, but have helped shape the development of, the urban system. These spaces are invaluable ecological and visual assets that maintain the natural biodiversity and the quality of the landscape, as well as provide many leisure options.

The restrictions of urban sprawl have protected these natural spaces and corridors from future urban intrusion. However, these natural assets need to be linked together into a coherent network, as well as linked to the urban system that will allow them to be better enjoyed and managed.

- 6 *Connecting the Basque city-region to important neighboring cities.* To develop the natural strategic role as a European “hinge-point,” stronger connections need to be established with neighboring cities such as Santander, Logroño, Pamplona, and Bayonne, as well as with the larger European urban system. This has clear implications for the development of the road and high-speed rail network, as well as for airport and seaport development. A competitive role in certain sectors – logistics and tourism, for instance – will be dependent on the connectivity of the Basque city-region.

The “Miracle of Bilbao” can only be understood in the context of a society that has strong regional sensibilities and a sense of identity. The Basque society has drawn up for itself a very efficient new system of planning that allows for working at the regional scale, at the intermediate scale, at the scale of the municipalities, and at the scale of specific projects.

The concept of the Basque Country as a city-region is a new frame of