

action that allows the integration of all the urban and natural assets, and to participate in a global economy with a clear vision of the competitive advantages as a city-region. By taking such a regional perspective, the Basque Government was able to identify a set of high-priority actions to renew its cities and its obsolete urban areas.

### **Metropolitan Bilbao: the river as an axis of urban redevelopment**

From the beginning of this century, an increasing amount of industry and inhabitants have located themselves along the banks of the River Nervión. Today, while the municipality of Bilbao only has about 400,000 inhabitants, Metropolitan Bilbao comprises more than twenty municipalities and has nearly one million inhabitants.

The population density of the Metropolitan Area of Bilbao is nearly 2,000 persons per square kilometer, and it is in this area that almost half of the population and the economic activity of the entire Basque Country are located. In many respects, the success or failure of the Basque Country depends on the success or failure of Metropolitan Bilbao.

The waterfront has featured prominently in the growth and development of the city since its foundation in the year 1300. However, the industrial development in the past two centuries has converted the river into a great physical and psychological barrier. The Nervión River has come to represent both the physical and social division of the metropolitan region. Historically, the principal port facilities and shipyards were located almost to the heart of the city. Since the ships needed to reach these facilities, low-level or pedestrian bridges connecting the two sides of the river could not be built.

Demographically, the wealthier families and the families with Basque origins have generally located on the right bank of the river. These are families who are able to speak the Basque language, and have traditionally voted for Nationalist or right-wing parties. The more important universities have also been founded on the right bank.

The principal industrial facilities are located in the municipalities on the left bank of the river. Many immigrants from the other regions in Spain came to look for work in the Basque economy, especially during the 1960s and the 1970s. The people who live and work here are lower-income families who only speak Spanish. They have generally not integrated very well with the existing Basque society, and have traditionally voted for the parties to the left of the political spectrum.

In this way, the economic model established the physical and social segregation of the city-region. However, the model itself was clearly obsolete by the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, leading to a prolonged economic crisis in the region. The obsolete riverfront facilities were allowed to decay, and the newer urban development turned its back to the river.

It is in this context that the regional strategy of the Basque Country considered the renovation and the rehabilitation of the river and its surroundings to be the highest priority. The principal idea is to transform the waterfronts from brownfields, that are physically and economically