Postindustrial Bilbao: The Reinvention of a New City

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Reflexiones sobre el pasado y presente de la ciudad de Bilbao en el imaginario literario, en la realidad económica y el discurso de la reivención de la nueva ciudad en el momento presente.

HBilbori buruzko gogoetak, iragana eta gaurregungo egoera alderatuz, imaginario literatioaren bidez, egitura ekonomikoa eta hiri berria asmatzeko erabiltzen diren diskurtsuaren bidetik eginak.

Reflections on the past and present of the city of Bilbao in the literary imaginary, in economic reality and in the discourse of the reinvention of the new city at the present time.

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First it was the "medieval Villa" (founded in the year 1300 by Don Diego López de Haro); then it was the "commercial Villa" (after the establishment of its Consulate in 1511); then, since the second half of the last century, it was the proud regional "industrial city" we all know. But a new millenium is dawning. And now in the 1990s a new "postindustrial Bilbao" is being reborn from the ashes of its industrial ruins.

A massive infrastructural transformation and urban regeneration process is under way to turn Bilbao into a service-oriented and culturally attractive city. The flagship of the entire redevelopment, Frank Gehry's spectacular Guggenheim-Bilbao Museoa, has made international news lately. But the goal is to effect the postindustrial reinvention of the city. As it undergoes the painful yet exhilarating metamorphosis from industrial ruination to architectural rebirth, Bilbao presents singular opportunities for tourism-based industries, as well as unique challenges for students of Basque society and culture.

The Nervión River

> You are, Nervión, the history of the Villa,
> you her past and her future, you are memory
> always turning into hope and on your firm riverbed
> a fleeing flow.

Thus wrote Miguel de Unamuno of his "bochito" – his beloved Bilbao nursed by her River. The foundational charter granted the medieval Villa exclusive jurisdictional rights to the Nervión's trade. Bilbao was the natural port for the export of Castillian wool to Flanders and her wide window on the world. Ever since, the Nervión has been Bilbao's history, wealth, and metaphor.

Bilbao was doubly blessed with a seaport and vast mineral wealth. Never was this as clear as during the last 150 years of industrial boom, during which the river's Left Bank held Spain's largest iron and steel industries. After the discovery of Henry Bessemer's convertor in 1856, which allowed cheap production of steel in vast quantities, Bilbao's output of iron ore went from 55,000 tons in 1861 to 2,684,000 tons in 1880, and it jumped again to 6,496,000 in 1898. To have a sense of Vizcaya's crucial role in the global capitalist system of the lath 19th century, Great Britain, the world's imperial power, imported two-thirds of her iron ore from Bilbao (or 65-75% of Bilbao's annual exports).

But foreign companies came to Bilbao not only as buyers of ore, but also as backers and participants in the exploitation of the mines. Through investment in the iron and steel industries, railroads, and the harbor, international capital was crucial to the region's industrialization. In fact, the two most important foreign companies, the Orconera Iron ore Co. and the Sociètè Franco-Belge des Mines de Somorrostro, were multinationals. Foreign companies extracted 40% of Vizcaya's iron during the 1880-1900 period. All in all, there existed a good

symbiotic relationship between foreign and Basque capital. Historians estimate that between 60 and 75% of all the gains remained in the pockets of Bilbao's industrial elite. By 1929, although Basques constituted a mere 3% of Spain's population, Basque capital represented 25% of Spanish banking resources, 38% of the investment in shipyards, 40% of the stock in engineering and electrical construction firms, 68% of the funds dedicated to shipping companies, and 62% of the monies invested in steel factories.

A wasteland of industrial ruins is almost all that is left now of that fabled industrial period. But the ongoing massive redevelopment is testimony that the dark and generous River is still very much alive. As Bilbao emerges from the mantle of debris accumulated during the last tide of history, the city of 360,000 people has never been as remote from and yet as close to that small town of 18,000 souls that she was only 150 years ago. Already 75,000 people have abandoned the city during the last two decades of decline. But Bilbao is far from having given up her tradition of international business. Her capacity for high-stakes risk-taking remains undiminished. And don't forget her metaphor – the one that made Bertolt Brecht write "How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful is the moon of Bilbao, the most beautiful city of the continent." Hers is also the aesthetics of the "tough city" that have seduced artists such as Richard Serra and Frank Gehry. This seduction is perhaps Bilbao's greatest asset at this moment; it is the true arena in which, by architectural spectacle and the sheer will to challenge all odds, she is transforming herself in ways almost unimaginable a few years ago.

Just look at what is happening in Abandoibarra, right across from the University of Deusto: A grand titanium-skinned white whale has run aground there. Or is it a pirate's old galleon suddenly resurfaced? It is Gehry's masterpiece. It is the now undisputed emblem of a reinvigorated city unwilling to fade away with the demise of its blast furnaces – the Altos Hornos de Vizcaya, industrial engine and fiery symbol of the region's economy until just yesterday. The volcano of the Left Bank is now mostly extinguished, but the sunset" yellow colors are captured and reflected on the platinum scales of Gehry" pale cetacean. "A miracle!" proclaimed The New York Times in contemplation of the radiant building. The real miracle, of course, is the resolve of the Bilbainos not to tolerate the extinction of their city's proverbial fire and flourish.

Ashen debris, white smoke, black water, red slag...a generous supply of dirt of all colors and elements was Bilbao's emblem. Her distinctive aesthetic force consisted of turning ugliness into a badge of honor, a thing of beauty for those willing to contemplate with eyes uncontaminated by pastoral nostalgia. But now the smoking chimneys are gone, even dirt is in short supply, and the tourists have started to come. The decades of heavy industrial exploitation had turned the Nervión into a black meandering sewer upon which the Bilbainos had long since learned to turn their backs. No longer do they need to avert their eyes from the prodigious River, the very soul of their history and identity. On

the contrary, Bilbao is going to transform its riverfront into the real center of the new city. This is as great an historical transformation as one could expect from Bilbao's fin-de-millenium (end of the millenium). It signals the city's willingness to unburden herself from all the sins of the industrial revolution and the ensuing environmental degradation. The hegemony of mining and iron environmental degradation. The hegemony of mining and iron industries is dismantled, the sky is free from the drifting clouds pumped into it by the now sorely-missed smoking chimneys, and it is no longer taboo to look at the River.

From Industrial Ruins to Architectural Emblems

History is a process of decay and ruin – this is the quintessential perspective that emerges from Bilbao's fin-de-millenium. Were it not for the spectacular ruins of its metropolitan area of about a million people, Bilbao would be atypical European provincial city that exudes a bourgeois lifestyle. But it is the aesthetics of the "tough city" that sets Bilbao apart.

For months I have walked among the industrial and urban wasteland of Bilbao's Left Bank – kilometers of silent ruins, hundreds of buildings awaiting demolition, urban neighborhoods with deserted streets and industrial sites with smokeless chimneys, entire valleys devastated by pollution, river banks contaminated beyond redemption, residential zones and garden plots adjacent to the most degraded areas. By 1995 Altos Hornos de Vizcaya, the smoky "tall ovens" of fire that gave a living to tens of thousands of families, the blast furnaces that were the proud emblem of the Left Bank's entire industrial complex had shut down. In the municipal area of Bilbao alone there are 52 industrial ruins that comprise 48 hectares of land; the next town on the Left Bank, Baracaldo, has another 25 industrial ruins occupying 100 hectares. Sestao is the next municipality of larger metropolitan Bilbao, and one third of its entire area is occupied by ruins. And so on. Bilbao's book stores feature prominent photo reports chronicling the destruction of the city's old factory buildings and chimneys, the enormous steel structures of complex architecture soaring within an apocalyptic landscape like huge, rusty phantoms bespeaking desertion, silence, and drama.

But ruins beckon to new architecture, new beginnings, new millennia. And Bilbao is ready to produce them in abundance. Yes, in the beginning there were ruins but now there is, or soon will be, Bilbao-2000.

By the end of the 1980's Basque officials were beginning to accept the unthinkable: the word "decline" referring to their major city. Bilbao is the political base of the Basque Nationalist Party, the region's political force since Franco. An economically and demographically imploding Bilbao sounded several alarms. If the city could be credited with having industrialized the Basque region, it was now time for the country to repay it, to assist in its moment of cri-

sis. To begin with, Bilbao and its metropolitan industrial area is home to a million Basques. For historical, sociological and financial reasons, it is impossible to reform the Basque economy without first revitalizing its engine, Bilbao.

Enter now the architect as savior. Gehry, Foster, Pelli, Sterling, Wildford, Pei, Soriano, Palacio and Calatrava – by now household names in Bilbao. They were preceded by the discourse on "urban regeneration, " which received public attention when Mayor José María Gorordo organized (in 1989) Bilbao's first international congress entitled "Forum Bilbao for Urban Regeneration." Throughout the 1980's there had been a huge effort to build a new infrastructure, highways and bridges in particular. But a new beginning was needed – a new image, a new postindustrial economic base, in short, an entire reinvention of an ancient, declining city.

The demise of former industries on the Left Bank's riverfront had left large parcels in a state of ruin. They were close to the center and well-suited for major redevelopment projects. An ambitious $1.5 billion urban renewal plan was soon in place. It focussed upon:

1. Expansion and modernization of the port, the central artery of Bilbao's commercial life;

2. Creation of new transportation facilities that included a subway (designed by Norman Foster; its first phase completed in 1996), expansion of the airport (by Santiago Calatrava), and a central transport hub or "Intermodal" for buses and trains (designed by James Stirling, now espoused by Michael Wilford; it has been postponed indefinitely);

3. A new development on the riverfront. This included a one-million-square-foot office and shopping mall complex in Abandoibarra (by Cesar Pelli), a conference and concert hall (by Federico Soriano and Dolores Palacio), and a museum of modern and contemporary art, the Guggenheim-Bilbao (designed by Frank Gehry).

Of all these major projects two are emblematic of the new Bilbao: Foster's sleek costly subway, which, besides its practical advantages, symbolized the city's new infrastructure and regained sense of proud modernity, and Gehry's voluptuous and optimistic Guggenheim Museum. The museum has overshadowed all other projects by drawing to Bilbao the international attention that it so desperately desires. Bridging the Globe

The Nervión was first bridged long before the Villa was founded in 1300. That bridge of San Antón was the first Promethean attempt to arch worlds apart: land and shore, river and sea, interior and exterior, past and future, left and right. It is only through a tradition of bridging the seemingly impossible – with suspension bridges floating in the air and drawbridges opening up their mandibles to the sky in a big yawn as the surreptitious cargo files by, structures that were always tenuous and temporary rites of passage, always compli-

cated works of arrogant engineering – that Bilbao has sustained the fiction of a synthesis of warring elements – a historical linkage between the seemingly irreconcilable worlds of the Villa and its hinterland, of the rural and urban economies, of aristocratic and proletarian lives, of Basque and European interests.

After Deusto there were no bridges: fifteen kilometers of right and left riverbanks from the city to the sea uncompromised by any link with the single exception of the suspension bridge in Portugalete. But times are changing, and the River has been criss-crossed by several new bridges (Rontegi, Euskalduna, Zubizuri). Others are in the planning stage. The secret, as everyone knows, is that the one bridge that will really matter must connect Bilbao with entities that are at once far more virtual (so-called Global culture) and far more concrete (Wall Street) that anything achieved so far. The lehendakari's visit to Wall Street to deliver a $20 million check for the Guggenheim Museum franchise is a statement the leaves few doubts in this regard. Bridging the interior's "tierra llana" with the port-centered, open Villa was not a small feat (although this, too, dressed up in nativism and provincialism, still continues to be a source of friction). New, however, the only measure of success is the bridging of transatlantic distances, New York at one end and Bilbao at the other, facilitating traffic in modern art, museum franchises, and monies for the Basque cultural patrimony. The Romanesque arches of the San Antón bridge, medieval symbol of a proud Bilbao, are now complemented by the postindustrial city establishing herself as the key port and fundamental artistic point de repËre (landmark) of the so-called "Atlantic Arch" stretching between Santiago de Compostela and Bourdeaux. Welcome to the newly imagined global postmodern space of late capitalism.

But there is a lot of bridging to be done at home as well between the two riverbanks, the two languages, and the two millennia. Issues of violence, nationality, class, gender, and language continue to polarize Bilbao society endemically. She appears perched uneasily between a mythology of the past, which successfully deployed an ethnographic identity of premodern Basque enigmatic uniqueness, and a mythology of the future, which looks to global markets and the delirious glamour of New York for the inspiration of anew post-ethnic identity.

The discourse of urban regeneration works particularly well in fostering a sense of new direction. It embraces economic as well as environmental, cultural, social and symbolic components. Leisure activities and so-called "cultural industries" become most relevant in regenerating urban center. The distinction between "art", "communication", "culture" and "entertainment" disappears. Urban regeneration by leisure and cultural industries has been attempted with uneven results in various European and American cities. Not only yuppie tourists, the discourse reassures, but also Bilbao's unemployed, its youth, and its migrant and marginal people will benefit from such cultural industries. The

argument is that emblematic architecture is the condition for the economic renewal that will bring back jobs and prestige to the city.

In the beginning was architecture – *archê,* foundation, architecture. In classical aesthetic theory architecture is the first art. Salvation by architecture is the cornerstone of the new regenerationist ideology in Bilbao. Due to its dependence on public funds, architecture tends to be used ideologically more than other arts. Bilbao provides perhaps the grandest example of architecture as ideology and spectacle. The ideological use of architecture consists of the uncontested assumption that public power must invest massively in emblematic buildings conceived by star architects, "emblems", that is, of ideas of progress, culture, class equality, peace.

Bilbao's ruins authorize discourses of brand new beginnings. Let us build a new city and believe a new mythology. The staggering ruins of the Nervión's left bank legitimize the presence of architecture's entire star system in Bilbao. The danger seen by some critics is the imposition of a dazzling architecture that becomes the new authoritarian master. Fallen into the narcissistic trap of citizens turned into voyeurs of their politicians' grandiose projects, truly cultural objectives or even economic needs may prove secondary to the architectonic vision of the millennial beginning.

This is the time to visit Bilbao. Gehry's masterpiece is an architectural triumph among the postindustrial ruins of the Nervión. If architecture provides cause for celebration, this is it. It has been likened to a whale, a ship, an artichoke, a mermaid, a waterfall, a flower, a fish, Marilyn Monroe, a chopped-up Chinese paper dragon. It has been hailed by the critics as the building of the late 20th century.

This is also the time for Basque scholars to realize the potential rewards of turning Bilbao into a privileged topic of research and writing. Ruination and rebirth, the end of times and the beginning of time, historical processes deserving urban and cultural studies. The ruined postindustrial city turned into the postmodern model of an architecturally imprinted city. Urban planning and regeneration, architecture, museum culture, globalization, postindustrialism, migration, international art markets, cultural industries, anthropology, and history are some of the obvious discourses deserving attention. For those interested in experiencing the poetics of ruins ("You are, Nervión...memory always turning into hope") and studying the politics of building ("and on your firm riverbed/ a fleeing flow"), Bilbao, "how beautiful," is her unique sight.