**Bilbao, Spain**

**Name of Port:** Bilbao Port  
**Type:** Seaport  
**Function:** Cargo, Container and Cruise.  
**Scale of regeneration:** Full city regeneration (1980s-2000s).  
**Main project:** Abandoibarra waterfront regeneration.  
**Stage:** Completed

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Figure 1: Abandoibarra before development  
![Abandoibarra before development](source: Plöger, J. (ND))

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**History of the Port**

Bilbao emerged as a small trading and fishing village but was officially founded as a city in 1300. It became a successful trading port in the Middle Ages, encouraging the growth of the first iron industry in Bilbao. In 1857, industrial development was boosted by the development of the “Tudela-Bilbao Railway Company and Banco de Bilbao” and Bilbao enjoyed the first major phase of industrialisation. By the 1950s, Bilbao was enjoying the benefits of the second
phase of industrialisation which saw immigration rates soar and new manufacturing and industrial developments benefit the economy. However, by the 1970s, Bilbao was at the beginning of an economic recession and deindustrialisation. Between 1970 and 1980, Bilbao received regional autonomy and benefitted from Spain’s admittance to the EU, but Bilbao also reached the peak of unemployment and population decline. In the 1980s, Bilbao began a significant regeneration project to turn the city’s fortunes around.

**Public Policy and Governance**

During the 1980s, Bilbao developed a strategic approach to recovery which involved all scales of government (central, regional and city). A key phase in regeneration was the development of the ‘Strategic Plan for the Revitalization of Metropolitan Bilbao’. This plan was governed by the Autonomous Basque Government, the Territorial Council of Biscay and the Bilbao Town Council. It aimed to promote the tertiary sector, a cultural and creative city and tourist destination. A concern raised by the Basque Government concerning how to actually deal with the urban crisis stalled the plan until 1991 when it was officially agreed. A special urban development agency Bilbao Metrópoli-30 was created to act as the authority for the regeneration process.

‘Bilbao Metrópoli-30’ was a “think-tank [...] based on a partnership model with public and private sector shareholders”. Its key aim was to ensure interaction and mediation between the public and private sector. It also had a boosterist agenda branding Bilbao in the international market and funding research on Bilbao’s urban spaces. ‘Bilbao Metrópoli-30’ focused on four priority areas: attraction of a knowledge-based high-tech sector; urban revitalisation especially of the Old Quarter; environmental intervention to enhance water, air and land quality; the strengthening of cultural identity through culture-led regeneration.

In the 1990s, a new ‘Territorial Masterplan’ was developed to address urban decline. This plan identified key spaces for regeneration, worked with key architects such as Norman Foster and invested in major infrastructural projects around transport and other utilities. On the back of this plan, Bilbao Ría 2000 was founded as another development agency. It had a mandate of ensuring the delivery of the newly identified key spaces. As a non-profit organisation operating as a private sector company, it was led by a range of institutions representing all scales of government. The Basque and Spanish Governments owned 50% each. Initially, it was financed
by the central and regional government, but it has since become self-financing. One of the key aims of Bilbao Ría (2000) was to take control of vacant land. This included land from both port and railway authorities. Bilbao Ría has become the major planning and regeneration body in Bilbao. One of its major achievements has been the “urban development of Abandoibarra”. Further, Bilbao Metropóli-30 has launched its ‘Strategic Reflection 2035 document. The aim of this is to analyse future development projects, challenges and new approaches.

Impact

Abandoibarra (35 hectares) was a brownfield redevelopment site cut off from the city by harbour and railway infrastructure. The aim was to create a new urban centre for Bilbao and €560 million-euro funding was allocated for the regeneration of the key spaces. Bilbao Ría invested €184 million in the site between the 1990s and 2004. Private sector reluctance meant public-sector funding acted as a catalyst to create confidence. The Guggenheim Museum was the flagship development and was fully funded by the public sector.

Some of the impacts of the large-scale regeneration Bilbao Ría are:

- Increased employment from 267000 to 380000 jobs (1995-2005).
- Decreased unemployment from 25% in the mid-1980s to 10.4% in 2004.
- Since 2000, there has been a small growth in population and a 5.5% growth in the foreign population (2006) reversing three decades of decline.
- Bilbao Ría became self-funding through the “revaluation of land as a result of the rezoning of its land-use designation and the subsequent sale to developers.”
- Abandoibarra is now attracting private sector funding.
- The ‘Guggenheim effect’- the museum attracts 1 million tourists annually. Air passengers increased from 1.4 million (1994) to 3.8 million (2005). Bilbao receives more tourists than San Sebastian, traditionally the leading Basque tourist destination.
- Business visitors and conference delegates have increased tenfold (1997-2005).

Further, statistical analysis using Eurostat datasets shows a positive and stabilising population trend between 2010 and 2018 in the metropolitan region, despite population decline in the wider functional urban area, perhaps indicative of the attractiveness of the inner urban and wider metropolitan area.
Implementation

Implementation of this project began in 1980 when regional autonomy was re-instated, and Bilbao reached the peak of the industrial crisis. The significant milestones can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Implementation timeline

Plöger, J. (ND)
Bilbao Ría drove this regeneration project through an entrepreneurial top-down approach. There has been little citizen engagement and no local participation. The new open spaces are considered by some to be exclusionary only appealing to affluent groups.

**Catalysts/Drivers of change**
Several factors drove Bilbao’s regeneration:

- Regional autonomy acted as an enabler bringing power back to regional governments. Local stakeholders were able to make decisions and implement locally appropriate plans with funding.

- Bilbao Ría was a major catalyst for investment especially as it became self-financed and acted as a private company. Thus, it became an ally with private investors.

- Joining the EU offered opportunity and Bilbao benefitted from Structural funding.

- The willingness of private and public companies to transfer land to Bilbao Ría was a key catalyst in the regeneration of key sites.

**Key achievements**
The municipal bus system which was a key project under Bilbao Ría for the development of infrastructure which would serve the regenerated spaces won an EU-wide prize in 2005

**References**

