

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

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LAREG



BILBAO
43° 15'25"N 2° 55'25"W

SIZE	40.65 KM ²
POPULATION	874,879
DENSITY	8,700/KM ²
ELEVATION	19 M
TIME ZONE	CET/CEST (UTC+1/2)

A TALE OF MANY CITIES — THE EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPE OF THE GREATER AREA OF BILBAO

Maider Uriarte

A BIT OF HISTORY

Bilbao and its metropolitan area are located geographically in an estuary valley limited and structured by mountain ranges which belong to the pyrenaic system, in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, close to the French border. The Bay of Biscay in the Atlantic Ocean is named after the province to which Bilbao is the capital city. It's the fifth urban agglomeration according to average densities and population in Spain, and the most populated urban area of the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC). Although it holds an important status in economic and demographic terms, it's not the capital of the BAC. Bilbao and its influence area account for a medium population and high densities of land occupation distributed in 35 municipalities.

Founded as a town [villa] in 1300, Bilbao evolved as an important market and port. A villa can be considered the equivalent of a medieval town governed by special rules and with certain privileges regarding merchandise, communication infrastructures and so on; Bilbao's privileges concerned

the trade of Castilian wool and local iron ore and in so doing, responded to the merchant interests of the Castilian crown, functioning as its branch. This of course generated the usual tensions with the ruling nobles of rural settlements [anteiglesia] that responded to the local law [fuero] which didn't permit trade with iron. The port of Bilbao was located 16 km upstream where the effect of the tidal shift ends and ships could navigate to, and not, as we might think, by the sea. Traffic along the estuary was controlled by the Bilbao Consulate, an important administrative figure that managed also infrastructural ameliorations and any conflicts with the villages [anteiglesia] that might emerge.

Town [villa] and village [anteiglesia] represent the medieval settlement morphologies that have evolved differently in the case of the Greater Area of Bilbao. The town associated to commerce and port activity represented by Bilbao (and in a less significant way by the Portugalete municipality) was a typical walled settlement with a dense pattern of streets, squares where the church or the town hall stood, a marketplace and the suburban developments along the roads that came out of the gates. The village, associated to the rural way of life, corresponds to the other 32 municipalities. Originally

comprised of scattered farmhouses, their administration assembled in a certain church or parish and the immediate square accounted for the main public gathering space. It could be said, that while the traditional structures of the towns has been maintained, the villages have lost most of its formal structure (except the testimonial squares around the churches) to urban development. The current municipalities house several of the former villages as neighborhoods [auzo]. The most prominent and well kept example of the town [villa] morphology is of course, that of Bilbao, which has kept its commercial character over centuries.

During the 19th century and 20th century, thanks to the port and the local mining industry it became the second most important industrial region in Spain after Barcelona, its main activity revolving around the iron and steel industry and ship building and the creation of associated services of banking, insurance, energy companies and so on. The whole area suffered huge demographic increases and urban development in two waves of economic increase, first by the end of the 19th century, and the second in the 1960s. These two waves and the accompanying urban development established the bases of the area as we now know it.

THE G LEVEL OF PLANS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The dictatorship of Francisco Franco¹ probably represents the strongest expression of urban development authority of the central G level, as well as the least effective and efficient. In this sense, the urban planning that was produced during this time -mainly the district plans of 1946 and 1964- was of technocratic character, focused on the support of the industrial activity of Bilbao, as well as the interests of the regime's loyal oligarchy. Many infrastructural interventions were planned: docks along the tributary rivers to increase the shipping capacity, building a bridge to connect both banks (there was none in 16 km), planning further locations for industrial activity etc. An interpretation of these plans shows the pretentious scale of the proposals, but lack of management directives and of population growth forecast. This, together with the lack of funds gave origin to a chaotic city which improvised most of its growth through private speculation and without the necessary infrastructural development.

If we turn back in time, however, by the end of the 19th century the area was quite well developed in the sense that there was a tightly-knit web of railway lines that ran parallel to the banks, to and from mines, factories,

docks, and Bilbao proper; a network that was mostly privately funded and developed in parallel to the advancements of industrialization, and also in response to the marginalization of Bilbao/Biscay from the radial lines from Madrid towards the borders with France. The industrial class clearly supported the railway services in detriment of roads, which were developed much later on and had to then deal with the already outgrown dense residential and industrial areas.

From the 1960s onwards, in the framework of the economic flourishing period of the Spanish Miracle within the dictatorship, the main priority was placed in road transportation in answer to the demands of properly connecting the Port and the industry of Bilbao with Madrid and the Mediterranean regions. This meant that most of the building took place in the left bank (which corresponds to the south side of the estuary) where the access was easiest to the industrial areas and naval facilities. However, significant projects like the bridge over the river connecting both banks as well as the Behobia - San Sebastian - Bilbao highway along the coast as well as the bypass roads and accesses to central Bilbao came later in the end of the 1970s. After the establishment of the 1978 constitution, the power hierarchy in

Spain shifted from a central to a decentralized system of Autonomous Communities (AC). The document known as the Gernika Statute of Autonomy² managed the specific competences, among other the spatial and urban planning of the Basque AC and those of the three Provinces within. The Basque Government focused its interests so forth in developing a closer connection with Europe. Based on this view, think tanks such as the Fundación Metropoli developed spatial planning directives which depicted the BAC in an eccentric position with regards to European economic axes that connected with the Mediterranean axis through Barcelona. Bilbao has always seen itself displaced in this European network, and thus much strength and funding has been directed towards the modernization of the airport, the building of an external port and many roads and town bypasses that should guarantee the relationship with Europe. The next step in this euphoric trajectory is the building of the High Speed Railway connecting the three provinces (within less than one hour road trip's distance), and that will enable the people "to have breakfast in Bilbao and dinner in Paris", but still the intense inter-valley traffic will depend on roads. This development is nowadays in building process though

highly compromised by the economic situation.

P LEVEL OF THE APARTMENT BLOCK

The Greater Area of Bilbao is characterized mainly by the P level as in very dense residential areas of multi-storey housing. Most of the development took place in between the 1960s and the 1980s and provided housing for the immigrants (which raised the population to a maximum of 1 million inhabitants in the area) who found work in Bilbao's steel and iron industries. These developments were built in a disorderly manner, with almost no planning and without any social service facilities or public space provision. In this sense, it was a state of social emergency which triggered the building process, and the private speculator which most profited from the situation, enabled by the Land Act of 1956 and the District Plan of 1964. These plans allocated enormous amount to residential zones and facilitated the transformation of a rustic land to a buildable one, yet, established little or none developmental regulations. All in all, this urgent and improvised urban development which was no different from the informal settlements of previous periods (end of 19th century) of emigration if we attend to morphological aspects of land occupation, is the

basis of the inherited city that had to be retrofitted from the 1980s onwards in the so called transition era, and the base of the metropolitan area as we now know it.

This is not to say that there weren't any good practice precedents in the area, for the 19th century extension plan of Bilbao [Ensanche] was and is formally a planning reference. This structure is based on squares and streets as articulating open space and the urban block which comprises commercial space on its street level and dwelling on the higher levels. However, it must be said, that this extension was very slowly developed as land owners speculated with the value of land enormously and in such way, introduced a social exclusion factor attached to house purchasing power; the demand for housing in the early 20th century was satisfied elsewhere, mainly in the suburbs of Bilbao proper.

But, let's continue with the pre-war precedents. In the framework of the "Ley de Casas Baratas" (literally, the law for cheap houses) of which the first version dates from 1911, Bilbao built many public funded housing following trends of other European cities also in architecture style and housing typology. In this sense, the city was a reference and still is one of the cities which the biggest stock of public housing in

Spain, many as we said, built before the Civil War (1936-39). The emergence of many low-density neighbourhoods built in the style of the Garden City is a consequence of this law.

But returning to the end of the dictatorship era, we confront ourselves with a disorganized, very dense, eminently in state of profound economic crisis urban situation. The transfer of power from the centralized state government to the different autonomies and thus to the municipalities, gave way to a bigger intervention of the public authorities in urban design and housing matters. Urban design was approached as a retrofitting process whereby closely following the postmodern theories of urban continuity, architecture and the structure of the 19th century expansion where the main tools.

In the 1990s population began to flee from their former dense municipalities to others where the dream of the rural idyll could still be achieved in the form of minuscule terraced houses with gardens of 15 sqm, mainly located in towns of the right bank. The same right bank that was once chosen by the industrial oligarchy as the preferred residential area; near the beaches and the sea, where the rural landscape still remained somehow uninfluenced and far from the factories and the immigration of the left bank.

THE M LEVEL OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

In between the G level which is in close connection to ruling classes and economic power, and the P level of the home, the family and work related shifts and relocations, we find the flexible M level which adapts itself to whatever condition the other two levels shape by contracting and expanding through escape routes or spaces of opportunity.

As mentioned, town and village [villa and anteiglesia] have been the traditional morphologies of settlements, and thus, of public space in the area. While the first one has kept its formal and functional features, the latter has been thoroughly transformed. The rural settlements, developed chaotically and then where retrofitted as to resemble 19th century cities with squares, boulevards and arcades.

On the one hand, it can be said that the rural M level of social organization and functioning was transposed into the urban in the sense that despite the developments of the 1960s, the strong tradition of the neighbourhood communities has been transmitted into the suburbia settlements. Thanks maybe to the short work-home distances –family, neighbours, and community associated and built ties to a specific space or neighbourhood. In the midst of the

dense city and lack of social facilities, the space immediate of the apartment block was somehow a prolongation of the P level into the M, becoming thus an informal public space. This might explain the strong sense of belongingness within the municipalities and their neighbourhoods of the Greater Area of Bilbao; while still resembling one urban unit dependant of the core, each community knows (or knew) where its territory ends –this street, or the railroad track, or that bridge, as well as the limits of belongingness. It is said that Bilbao only refers to the modern extension and old town [Ensanche and Casco Viejo, respectively], the rest are seen as semi-autonomous social communities.

The counterpoint to that is that while the streets felt safe as home, the social relationships and customs were closely watched and scrutinized. Nowadays, there's some nostalgia attached to the time where kids could play all around the streets and the public space was full of lively urban activity in spite of the tight social control of space.

On the other hand, as an example of the expansion of the M level into the P level, a mention could be made to the strong social cultural activity that took place in hiding during the dictatorship period (1936-1975), specially related to the transmission and enhancement

of Basque culture and a creation of an educational system in basque language, as well as of reclaiming proper living spaces in suburban districts during the dictatorship's repression. This accounts for an inherited culture with a strong sense of community, social organization ability, political commitment and critique of the establishment that developed more in the private level away from the public sphere.

An important shift has taken place following post-industrial developments. The increase of work-home distances has brought about much mobility enabled by infrastructural development and change of living space, changes in G and P levels. In this sense, although people wish they could still live in the same place where they grew up, close to their families and circle of friends [cuadrilla], this has become more and more difficult due to housing market prices and availability of land. The quality of public space has also been modified in the sense that it has become a space of franchised consumption, with the help of public promotion of land for shopping malls and the pedestrian safe areas. So, the neighbourhood and its social ties might have lost their significance and the urban space, while lively, has acquired a homogeneous identity.

The last 20 years have seen changes

promoted by institutional efforts to generate cultural facilities that answer both to global demands –Guggenheim museum, congress centres, trade fairs—and more local ones –municipal and neighbourhood social centres, sports facilities and so on. However, this mostly can be translated as a physical beautifying of the urban space, more than an increase in the social power to mediate of the M level. The top-down model of communication and mediation still rules, even if the power to decide is closer to “place” than ever before.

THE N LEVEL OF NATURAL MORPHOLOGY

Wilhelm von Humboldt, on his dedicated second visit to the Basque Country (1801) praised the picturesque hills of lush greenery on the banks of the Ibaizabal river (one of the names for the estuary) that resembled “the most beautiful and diverse English Garden”. According to him, by climbing those hills one could in one look perceive the most charming landscape with “the sea shimmering on the distance”. One can still achieve this today; however, Humboldt’s image is a long gone state.

The estuary, as the backbone for development, has suffered much transformation, the first and most significant

being the engineering of its trajectory by the acclaimed Evaristo de Churruca by the end of the 19th century. The main challenge that nature placed was the dynamic sandy bed of the mouth that made it very difficult for ships to navigate into the port. At the same time, the sandy beaches of the right bank gave place to a culture of sea-side resort, in the trend of the time, and were chosen as the recreation place for the rising oligarchy of the industrialization. The municipalities in the right bank along the coast later developed as the suburb inhabited by the economically favoured class. But this fact cannot be understood without knowing the transformations taking place in the left bank.

Structuring the main valley where the estuary sits, are three mountain ranges that encompass heights from 400m to 1000m. Due to its ferrous composition on the south side mountain range, correspondent to the ranges on the left bank, the forge activity was a common proto-industrial trade of the area. When the liberalization of the common lands of the mountains took place in the 19th century³, many mining companies established activity in the left bank municipalities and also in Bilbao –where the mines stood opposite the city centre. The location of the mineral in straight lines acces-

sible from the summits of the mountains, made it very easy to labour; the strong demand of mineral, its good quality and abundance required many pits and tunnels to be opened causing a frenetic activity. Today, these former productive landscapes are either open air leisure areas or have disappeared under developments or filled with waste. At the same time as the mining activity, the iron and steel factories were located also on former common land on the marshes, as they represented perfect flat land that was otherwise scarce and had the possibility to build docks as well. The industry which attracted huge immigrations, and grew informally first, and then in very dense communities near the factories was mostly established on the left bank.

The rural activity somehow lasted on the right bank, and this together with the associated value of the elite establishing its residences there made it the desired location away from the hustle and bustle of the city and the factories. The fact that the sea and the beaches were in close proximity also increased the value of the area. Nowadays, there are still some municipalities with neighbourhoods that maintain the structure of the scattered farmhouses and pastures but are inhabited by few farmers and the houses are exclusively of residential use. The rural activity

survives thanks to public funding in most of the cases. All of the above accounts for a spatial specialization of the area that can still be recognized today.

In the end, it can be said that the N level has been mostly fought back and remains present in the form of the estuary's tides (no longer can we find marshes or dunes or creeks), also in the form of an atavistic presence of the sea, the coastal cliffs and the beaches, and finally in the form of the mountains; that is, often relegated to inaccessible places outside the city. Taking hold of Humboldt's words, one must climb the mountain (or plunge into the sea) in order to interact with natural space, in other words, escape the dense city.

INTERACTIONS

We can firstly say that establishing a decantation of the 4 levels which compose a territory is a challenge, for all levels interact in periods of varied intensity whereby one or more levels are of bigger prominence. I would say that in the case of Bilbao (as in any other case) the G level assisted by the P level of high class and wealth have been the main shapers empowered by the euphoria. The M level has adapted itself to the particularities of each period, whilst the N level has suffered trans-

formations that in many cases have no way back.

The main consequences of the euphoric development now can be diagnosed as the dislocated social relationship towards space in all levels, as any individualistic society might convey. It seems that space has become solely a commodity and an object to regulation and control, with little implications in cultural meaning. The planning system has much to say in this, as its procedures show contradictive shifts between the foster of private initiatives sectors and the promotion of conservative environmental regulations generating social and spatial collisions, which in turn result in many gaps and seamless edges. If we focus on the N level, as mentioned above, it has been profoundly modified, all the way to become almost a mere presence at the background, physically close but with problems of accessibility due to topographic conditions; but nevertheless, capable of adaptation and encroachment through opportunity loopholes towards the built environment.

Continuity with the euphoria of the past is still latent within the G level for politicians are still focused on investing on infrastructural, so called strategic development to remediate the “eccentricity” of Bilbao/the Basque Autonomous Community from Eu-

ropean axes and to keep its place in a global rank and brands of cities. In a way, acting eccentrically to solve eccentricities. At the same time, the wish to “protect” the traditional landscapes and biodiversity is also present in the G level; however no clear strategy is established thus showing signs of “double entendre”, an idealization of the past through tourist appealing images combined with retrofitting type management in an effort to integrate large transformations. This reflects the main tension detected between globalist and localist attitudes of trying to keep up with the world while maintaining and idealized vision of the past.

In conclusion, we can identify the following potentials that can assist on a remediation or creation of non-euphoric landscapes:

G Level: On the one hand, the administrative hierarchy shows very local levels of action, with three local levels of administration (Basque Government, Provincial Government and Municipalities). On the other, planning technicians have it in their system that urban growth rates of the past must be avoided. There's a chance to use this administrative proximity and technical sensibility to implement more bottom-up decision making.

P Level of dwelling: Due to the high density rates, the territory is not as

sprawled as it is in other areas. Does this define a scenario where frequency for social interaction is higher?

M Level of public space: The liveliness and use of public open space together with the multiple social cultural associations, many acting on neighbourhood level, define a situation where criticality and action are abundant, along with cultural diversity. These social-cultural strengths could be directed towards a more affirmative activity which focuses on the opportunities for action (rather than just the flaws) that the current situation conveys.

N Level: The intricate geographical features means that the city has had limited opportunity to sprawl, thus natural spaces are available at a little distance. The potential for creating connections is thus high.

If we turn towards the spatial scale, we can focus on the urban landscape by means of two levels of the everyday; that of the regional scale which is interlaced by transport and communication infrastructure, and the smaller scale of the neighbourhood connected by foot. At the scale of the whole area an interesting interaction occurs between the N level elements of mountains, sea, lowlands, slopes and estuary with the transportation network of the G level. The former allows for movement flows that travel parallel and per-

pendicular, move from high points to low ones along the estuary or the subsidiary valleys; turn around, meander and go under hills through tunnels to find a completely different scene. That is, mobility along the area using different means of transport (car, boat, train) enables a rich sequence of perspectives, vantage points, long views, at varying altitudes accompanied by changing scenic frames. This valuable quality that has been achieved thanks to euphoric development of infrastructures, was often, not planned on purpose and still, it is part of the everyday experience of the area.

On the other hand, if we focus on the smaller neighbourhood scale, movement on foot or bike is more problematic, especially in the non consolidated areas between municipalities or on the edges of built environment; where the street becomes a path, the asphalt becomes gravel, the private garden is substituted by formal and informal orchards and where, instead we find dead ends and other kind of spatial collisions of land uses. Perceptions of landscape as well as the interaction with space at such human pace render more visible the effects of careless development and are in need of specific interventions.

It is perhaps that at this scale a reinvigoration of the M level can be extremely

useful, where we can already find examples of success. A formulation such as the traditional neighbourhood work [auzolana] is considered appropriate, for it's based on the communal cooperation to solve problems of practical life also relative to space and built elements, with self-regulating character, traditionally practiced in rural settlements, in villages (in the former anteiglesias). This formula of course isn't groundbreaking or exclusive to the area; nevertheless its interest relies on the scale of application and traditional existence.

Application in a different scenario such as the urban one might render weaknesses; however, the benefits that this practice based on ethics of care might bring about the responsibility and appropriation of the communal space. Neighbourhood work [auzolana] can have the ability to influence political mediation, social relationships, leisure associated to public space, responsibility over infrastructural problems, public space maintenance, social care services etc. Some examples of such practices found in Bilbao include local associations which take care of the paths in the mountains and forests, groups which keepurban/periurban gardens and orchards, neighbourhood "time banks" where anyone can offer their own time to provide a service for

their community and groups of people which organize and manage cultural centres. Their success shows that neighbourhood level communal effort can be considered a possibility with chances of spreading to other areas.

For instance, if we focus on the problematic of spatial experience and landscape perception at the walking pace and on the reinforcement of built and un-built elements' interaction and connection, then settlements located on slopes, foothills, or nearby the coast, that is, on the edges of consolidated areas play a key role. In the case of the slope settlement areas, we find that these are often structured by the adaptation of access roads, paths, stairways, squares, ramps to the slopes and in-between residual spaces of unspecified character. These elements could be used as basic foundations to implement micro interventions that would seam the said gaps and become part of a more general strategy of connecting dense areas of the municipalities with the un-built, let's say greener surroundings. A similar intervention has been already implemented in the Bilbao municipality through the "Bilbao green belt" strategy. However, acting merely from the G level, it lacks the mediation of M, and, as a consequence, many well kept and established illegal orchards have been cleared and re-

placed with random tree plantings. This G level programme could have profited from the interaction of the M level, through neighbourhood level space appropriation and social intervention on it.

Perhaps, becoming producers of space could be the key to reinvigorate the M level while at the same time fostering a balanced interaction with the rest of the levels, and in so doing, influence an improved landscape.

ENDNOTES

¹ The dictatorship period lead by fascist general Francisco Franco was established at the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and finished by 1975 when he died. In 1969 Franco designated the actual King Juan Carlos the 1st as his successor who took over in 1974 due to Franco's illness.

² The Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country is the legal document organizing the political system of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country which includes the historical territories of Alava, Biscay and Gipuzkoa. It forms the region into one of the autonomous communities envisioned in the Spanish Constitution of 1978.(from Wikipedia)

³ This liberalization process took place amongst the towns which lost the 3rd Carlist War against the liberal side and had to pay debts to the Spanish crown which they did by selling their common land.