

BILBAO

From Industrial Origins to Cultural Metropolis: Bilbao's Transformation

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Bilbao, the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Laureate in 2010, has undergone a remarkable transformation from an industrial hub into a modern cultural metropolis. The city's past, present, and future ground-breaking initiatives continue to shape its dynamic urban evolution.

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Idoia Postigo is the General Director of Bilbao Metropoli 30, a non-profit public-private association dedicated to promoting the revitalisation and development of Metropolitan Bilbao through strategic planning, public-private collaboration, and transformative projects.



Aerial image of Bilbao and its river.
Image: City Council of Bilbao





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The revitalisation of Metropolitan Bilbao from an industrial region into a modern cultural metropolis has been recognised internationally as a successful model of transformation.

In the late 1980s, Bilbao and its metropolis—a thriving industrial region based on shipbuilding, iron and steel—faced a severe crisis. The collapse of its main economic and industrial sectors set off a decline in economic power.

To counter this, its public, private, and social leaders made a bold decision to launch a visionary Strategic Plan for the whole Bilbao metropolitan area, encompassing one million inhabitants, 30 towns, and a former industrial

port. Unemployment, pollution, and derelict land were just a few priorities that the Plan would address.

From the very beginning, the Bilbao Revitalisation Process focused on building and updating its infrastructure. After years of joint efforts in design and construction, the Metro was opened in 1995, followed by the Guggenheim Museum in 1997.

The momentum and support gained from the extraordinary success of these two highly-visible projects helped Metropolitan Bilbao push on with its other strategic projects: the Euskalduna Congress and Concert Hall,



Aerial view of Iberdrola tower, a key symbol of Bilbao's urban transformation.
Image: City Council of Bilbao



Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.
Image: Guggenheim Bilbao Museum

Bilbao Exhibition Centre, the new Bilbao Airport, its Port enlargement and river clean-up, the new San Mames Football Stadium, the Azkuna Cultural Centre, the Fine Arts Museum extension, the recovery of the Abandoibarra and Urban Galindo areas and, more recently, spaces such as Ametzola, Olabeaga and Zorrotzaurre.

Infrastructure and regeneration, however, were not the only focus. What was essential in the transformation of Bilbao and its metropolis was establishing a public-private collaboration scheme that would align individual efforts towards achieving a shared and future-oriented vision.

Institutional Innovation

In 1991, a new organisation and fresh institutional model, Bilbao Metropoli 30, was set up to implement the Revitalisation Plan. Our non-profit organisation comprised more than 140 associated members, representing the public and private sectors. Declared a public interest organisation by the Basque Government in 1992, Bilbao Metropoli 30's main function was to guide the public, business, cultural and social

communities in long-term strategic thinking, contributing ideas for the future, promoting research and learnings from cities all over the world in support of revitalisation.

In addition to Bilbao Metropoli 30, the public agency, Bilbao Ría 2000, was set up in 1992, to rehabilitate degraded and industrial areas by instigating environmental, transportation and urban development projects.

As a result of its transformation, Bilbao began to attract both residents and urbanists. Our model stood out not only for its physical transformation, but also three distinct features:

- First, it builds on the identity of our ancient Basque society. Our *leitmotiv* is *Auzolan*, which in Basque means "collective action". This underpins the public-private collaboration which has unleashed the potential of our community to drive change with a single certainty: we cannot do it alone.
- Second, the transformation is supported by a system of values that emphasises equality as a radical commitment and focal point for our imagination.



Bilbao's Ria industrial landscape circa 1910.
Image: City Council of Bilbao

- Third, in times of crisis, we believe in our capacity for change, in ways that are beyond our conscious possibilities. Our confidence and narrative that deep change is possible has enabled us to turn our transformation plans into reality.

These are the strengths that Bilbao and its metropolis have relied on through its reinvention and achievement of being the first city to receive the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize (LKYWCP) in 2010. They are also, without a doubt, the key to tackling present and future challenges that affect not only our metropolis, but the world.

It is timely now for us to think about the paradigms which have driven global progress and competitiveness in recent decades. The human race and our world are on course to reach more than 10 billion people, of which more than 85% will live in cities by 2100. This journey towards a fully urbanised society could, in principle,

bring many promises and opportunities, such as greater social mobility and sharing of common prosperity, and a slowdown in global warming.

Currently, however, our city systems and societies seem to be accelerating down disruptive paths. Violence and the barbarity of war continue to devastate people and countries around the world. Poverty and inequality are growing in our cities even as we promote prosperity. Our challenges have become more acute and magnified. Our global systems, structures, and economic order have failed to eradicate poverty, ensure universal access to health and education, safeguard the planet, or create a fair, equitable, and safe world.

These challenges are not impossible to address—but we cannot afford to wait any longer. We need radical actions and measures, based on consensus, to push for a completely different status quo.



Urban Revolution Aurrera! seeks to support and promote a wide range of programmes across the world that offer urban innovations for addressing the complex problems of our cities.



A New Phase for Collaborative Ecosystems: A Global Movement and Community

This is why from Bilbao, Biscay, Basque Country, **Bilbao Metropoli 30** is launching a community of practitioners, activists, thinkers, authorities, interested professionals, and allies from across the world, who are united in a shared quest to change cities in a disruptive way.

The name of this community is "Urban Revolution Aurrera!". "Aurrera!" is a special Basque word that means "forward". It implies an unwavering will to move forward and create unstoppable momentum.

Our initiative seeks to add value by supporting and promoting a wide range of programmes across the world that offer urban innovations for addressing the complex problems of our cities. We hope that this movement will become a powerful and influential driver of reflection and change, inspiring cities to take action in ways that make their goals of sustainability, inclusion, prosperity, and social justice a reality.

We are not alone in understanding the depth of the global crisis, nor are we the first. Another magnificent example of international collaboration is the recently-formed network of strategic think tanks from the LKYWCP Network winning cities, led by our colleagues from the Centre for Liveable Cities in Singapore. Bilbao Metropoli 30 is participating in this with the City of Bilbao.

Our aim, therefore, is to address and augment the appetite and commitment that many feel, by creating a community of urban change makers who will inspire, share, bond with each other, and multiply confidence.

We want to address big urban issues, help create more human-centred cities that heal the environment, live well with nature, confront inequality, and foster fairness. This requires pioneering and disruptive solutions that challenge how city-making happens and also show the way forward. We do this because change is possible.

Together as a community, we are launching the biannual call for **The Bay Urban Awards**. These awards recognise pioneering solutions that not only address today's most pressing urban challenges, but also have the potential to encourage and inspire all those concerned with cities around the world. Awarded initiatives and projects are recognised for their contribution to a long-term, sustainable, and collaborative vision for the urban regions. They demonstrate originality and impact in one of the five following categories:

Horizon Shaper Award

This award is presented to initiatives from around the world that have conceptualised and cultivated a long-term, strategic vision of their urban future, through deftly orchestrated intricate initiatives which have manifested in real transformations.

Partners in Progress Award

This award showcases examples and projects of public-private-civic collaboration initiatives around the world that have resulted in substantial improvements in the competitiveness and well-being of their citizens.

SDG Champions Award

This award recognises places and projects from around the world that have tangibly implemented the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda in ways that are close to citizens and involve them.

Prosperity Catalyst Award

Places and projects from around the world that have succeeded in generating prosperity in their communities, as well as fostering wealth redistribution and social and territorial cohesion are awarded in this category.

The Bay Urban Pioneers Award

This award represents the best global urban strategies from places that offer proven models of success and that have become global benchmarks for combined achievements in urban planning, economic development, inclusion and well-being of their citizens.

Visit www.thebayawards.com for more information and details about the awards.



The Bay Urban Awards 2024.
Image: Bilbao Metropoli 30



Cities and their metropolises are ecosystems capable not only of innovating but, as Bilbao and its metropolis have shown, establishing themselves as unique, distinctive, self-reliant, resilient, and self-conscious.



Deep Change is Possible Everywhere

The Metropolitan Bilbao revitalisation process is proof that an urban revolution is possible. Public-private collaboration, backed by shared, bold and disruptive decisions, can produce far-reaching changes capable of addressing challenges of great magnitude.

Addressing this urban revolution requires significant optimism, along with opportunity and proactivity. Bilbao Metropoli 30's launch of Urban Revolution Aurrera! aims to boost strategic reflection and actions that drive groundbreaking ideas and projects which go beyond improving what already exists.

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There's no time to waste. Let's join forces and start this Urban Revolution now! 