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## BILBAO: THE NEIGHBOURHOODS AND TERRITORY FOR CULTURE



COMMUNITY  
**PUBLIC SPACE**  
BOTTOM-UP  
YOUTH  
INTERGENERATIONAL  
CREATIVITY

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### 1. Background

Bilbao is the most populated urban centre in the Basque Autonomous Community and the main city in the region known as Green Spain. It is located in the northwestern part of Spain, just over 120 kilometres away from the border of France.

It has a population of around 350,000, made up of 53% women and 47% men, with a density of about 8,500 inhabitants per square kilometre. Currently, one of Bilbao's largest challenges is its aging population, with nearly 25% of the population over the age of 65.

In 1989, after creating the democratic municipal corporations, Bilbao City Council agreed to the *Regulations on the Organization of Districts and Citizen Participation*. This divided the territory into eight administrative districts to manage the decentralization of services.

Today, however, most residents are still unaware which of the 34 districts they reside in, and given the fact that there are so many neighbourhoods, feelings of belonging are more concentrated in small pockets. Much like other cities that are similar to Bilbao, the differences between districts, and even between neighbourhoods, are significant both in terms of geographical area, population, socioeconomic status, facilities, services, and more. Broadly speaking, neighbourhoods with better services and a higher socioeconomic status are the centre, which includes Casco Viejo and Abando where the Old Town and the city's first expansions are located. Contrary to this, the lower income areas are the outlying areas such as Otxarkoaga-Txurdinaga and Basurto-Zorroza, in addition to some of the more central districts that are in the processes of gradual urban deterioration, Bilbao la Vieja [*Old Bilbao*] and San Francisco.



## 2. Bilbao and Culture

Bilbao has a long history as an industrial port city whose economy depended on the steel and shipbuilding industries. However, it suffered significantly during the economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, followed by severe flooding in August of 1983. Many consider the latter to be a natural metaphor for the city's accelerated decline. However, since the end of the 1980s, the city has undergone an urban revolution that has transformed Bilbao into a place that is based on the service industry, with culture at the core of its overall strategy promoting sustainable economic and social development.

Under the leadership of the City Council, alongside other local and regional administrations such as the Regional Government of Bizkaia and the Basque Government, cultural policy became a fundamental tool for overall development combined with urban planning and sustainability.

The pinnacle of this change came in 1997 with the opening of the Guggenheim Museum, designed by architect Frank Gehry, at the old port alongside the Estuary. This led to the "Guggenheim Effect", a global success phenomenon that proved how a large-scale architectural and cultural project could reshape a city's development model. Bilbao transformed from "the iron city" to "the titanium city", a reference to the material used on the exterior of the museum. The impact that international media had on the city was remarkable, whose attention contributed to substantially increasing the number of annual visitors to over one million. Of course, this had a tremendous economic impact.

In addition to all the urban rehabilitation carried out across the city, such as in the Casco Viejo and along the banks of the Estuary, other cultural facilities and projects were also key factors in this milestone. These include: the renovation of the municipal Arriaga Theatre, construction of the Euskalduna Conference Centre and Concert Hall, revitalization of the Museum of Fine Arts of Bilbao, opening of the Azkuna Zentroa Contemporary Culture Centre (also known as the Alhóndiga), and the increased budget dedicated to improving cultural initiatives across the city, among others.

It should be noted that any commitments to large cultural infrastructure projects never lost sight of the importance and value of culture, both in and of itself, and as a right to be ensured for all citizens. Indeed, these initiatives facilitate access to culture for everyone in Bilbao. The process of administrative decentralization mentioned above has been accompanied by a decentralized cultural policy, with neighbourhoods acting as a region for culture.

### 3. Objectives and Project Implementation

Bilbao and its neighbourhoods had a remarkable lack of sociocultural facilities because of the Franco era. As a result, the aim of the first democratic corporations was to provide neighbourhoods with new infrastructure.

From updating and repurposing existing buildings, converting disused schools, and in some cases constructing new buildings, over time the city has gradually accrued 25 municipal centres to host cultural and social activities, as well as a network of 15 municipal libraries.

In less than 30 years, Bilbao has successfully created an extensive network of decentralized sociocultural facilities that continues to be updated and revitalized, providing new libraries or municipal centres and renovating or expanding existing ones.

**THE AIM IS TO OFFER A UNIVERSAL SET OF BASIC PROGRAMMES TO ENSURE CONTINUOUS ACTIVITY THROUGHOUT THE YEAR SO THAT EACH DISTRICT HAS AT LEAST ONE PROGRAMME OR FESTIVAL UNIQUE TO IT, AND SO RESIDENTS WITHIN THAT NEIGHBOURHOOD CAN IDENTIFY WITH IT. —**

In order to create greater proximity between culture and citizens, as well as to schedule cultural activities in neighbourhoods that do not yet have adequate facilities, the city's squares and public spaces are used to host various events during the spring and summer months. The municipal cultural policies of recent decades have always considered the city streets a natural place for residents to first come into contact with culture, and where they can enjoy shows or free professionally produced small festivals.

Aside from the spaces, the cultural events on offer are also important. The following are two key actions in this area:

- To offer a universal set of basic programmes to ensure continuous activity throughout the year.
- To ensure that each district has at least one unique programme or small festival that residents identify with, that can apply to a city-wide perspective, and which encourages the public to get out of their neighbourhoods and visit other places in the city. The aim is to turn each district into a local destination for at least a few days.

All of this was not undertaken by the municipal government alone. Neighbourhood, citizen, and cultural associations, institutions, or collectives have been partners in this initiative from the very beginning. They were involved in designing facilities based on the needs of each neighbourhood, and also participated in decentralizing cultural planning. The latter works alongside the public and adapts to the demands, interests, and characteristics of each neighbourhood. Initiatives and proposals submitted by residents and associations are listened to and subsequently inform the Sociocultural Committees of the District Councils, which are formal participatory bodies in the decentralized municipal administration. This public involvement directly helps decision makers decide which activities will be allocated part of the available budget.



Finally, it should be noted that decentralized cultural policy is, of course, not just limited to promoting cultural consumption. Indeed, creativity is also elevated through the organization of workshops in different artistic areas. This has also been supported with free access to different locations for mainly amateur and semi-professional theatrical or musical group rehearsals. It is clear that this approach considers neighbourhoods as places for creation.

#### 4. Events Planning

As noted above, there are shared events made available to most, if not all, districts in Bilbao, as well as large events in each area. In both cases, all activities are free of charge except for the workshops.

The following are some examples of these:

##### Performing arts

- *Bilboko Zirkuitua*: theatrical performances by mainly amateur or semi-professional local companies that bring their latest works to the district's Municipal Centres
- *Eszena Kalera*: theatrical performances and street art in neighbourhood public squares during the summer months and better weather

##### Music

- *Bilbao District Jazz*: jazz concert tour around the Municipal Centres that aims to give different audiences a chance to see internationally renowned artists
- Choir Concerts: performances by local choir groups during two seasons: Christmas Choir Concerts, which takes place in different churches across all districts, and *Barrutiak kantari* concerts in other spaces during May and June
- *MusikAuzo*: street music shows in the different neighbourhoods of various kinds and formats, including concerts, travelling street bands, dances, and more
- *Religious Music Festival*.

### **Audiovisual**

- *A Summer of Cinema*: screenings of recent national and international productions on nights in July and August across all districts

### **Fine arts**

- *Expodistrito*: initiative that aims to make art accessible in all districts and display the works of primarily local artists through temporary travelling exhibitions in District Municipal Centres
- *Cultural Workshops*: beginner courses for different arts and crafts held in Municipal Centres

### **Folklore**

- *Dantza plazetan*: popular pilgrimages, gigantes and cabezudos parades, and dance performances in streets and squares by dance and gigantes groups from around the city

### **Events in the Municipal Library Network**

- Different activities are held in these spaces to promote reading and literacy among citizens, particularly children, while normalizing the use of libraries. There is a programme in place that provides guided tours to schools so that students can become familiar with the libraries and meet with various writers. There is another initiative that is geared toward children that offers workshops, competitions, and literature exhibitions. This also includes events for adults with conferences, workshops, and guided tours of libraries, as well as literature exhibitions. In addition to this, Bilbao has a *Summer Libraries* campaign, which brings libraries out into city squares.

**BILBAO HAS SUCCESSFULLY CREATED AN EXTENSIVE NETWORK OF DECENTRALIZED SOCIOCULTURAL FACILITIES THAT CONTINUES TO BE UPDATED AND REVITALIZED, PROVIDING NEW LIBRARIES OR MUNICIPAL CENTRES, AND RENOVATING OR EXPANDING EXISTING ONES.**

For smaller events or festivals specific to each district, the outline would be as follows:

#### **District 1**

- *European Researchers' Night*: This international event takes place in different European cities on the last Saturday of September. It involves different activities open to all citizens and informative talks held in schools.
- *Christmas Festivities in Basque*: The Christmas activities planned and carried out in different districts are all done exclusively in Euskera, the language of the Basque Autonomous Community.

#### **District 2**

- *Istorio Biziak*: a programme focused on oral histories that takes place over two weeks in different places across the district
- *Christmas Clowns Performance*.

#### **District 3**

- Musical and audiovisual workshops in different areas, such as video, photography, guitar, drums, txalaparta, and more, which are mainly aimed at young people
- *Magic Days*: street performances and indoor galas held in the district's two neighbourhoods. There are also workshops for beginners and professionals alike.
- *Biweekly Theatre and Choir for Senior Citizens at Christmas*: performances by elderly choirs and theatre groups



#### District 4

- *Bidaiaien Txokoa – Travellers’ Corner*: programme that hosts talks, screenings, concerts, and more to create proximity with other territories and other cultures, with various trips as a common theme
- *Udaberriko Bertso Saioak*: dissemination programme for Bertsolaritza (or bertsolarism), which is the traditional Basque art tradition of singing improvised verses to talk or deliver a speech while rhyming and following an established metric
- *Folk Lorea*: programme aimed at spreading Basque folklore with dance performances, a gigantes and cabezudos parade, etc.
- *Comedic Monologues at Christmas*.

#### District 5

- *BLV- Art*: This avant-garde programme focuses on new forms of urban artistic expression, and is carried out under the *Special Plan* on cultural action as a driving force for the revitalization of the Bilbao la Vieja area. It had been implemented in collaboration with the area’s cultural actors.
- *The Estuary Elf*: concerts and workshops that attempts to create new audiences for flamenco with performances by emerging artists in the genre
- *Bazter Fest*: project that aims to boost the work, presence, and visibility of women in the masculinized world of hip-hop
- *Street Festivities at Christmas*

#### District 6:

- *Pocket music*: small concerts by emerging local groups from different genres
- *Music is fun*: small tour of educational concerts also from different genres
- *European Music Day*: street concerts with students from music schools to commemorate this day, on June 21st, held in various European cities
- *Mila Musika Haria*: tour of concerts that feature guitar and string instruments
- *Christmas Storytelling*

#### District 7

- *Comedic Theatre Tour*: funny indoor theatrical performances
- *Zirkualde*: small contemporary street circus festival in the main square of the district – it should be noted that this is the only circus festival in the Basque Country

- *Indoor Christmas Circus*

#### **District 8**

- *Clown Zorrotza*: small clown street festival that takes place in the main square of the Zorroza District
- *Plazarik Plaza*: programme that spreads folklore from the Basque region and other communities. There is always a guest group, and the city showcases dance performances, gigantes and cabezudos parades, children's performances, and more.
- *Short Theatrical Performances at Christmas*

As mentioned, many of the programmes and festivals listed above are carried out in collaboration with associations from each respective district.

## **5. Assessment**

Finally, the following is some basic data taken from the 2019 Department of Culture. It provides better insight into this municipal commitment to decentralized cultural event planning:

- Total number of activities in neighbourhoods: 907
  - 335 cultural events, 102 exhibitions, 34 arts and crafts workshops, and 436 activities hosted by the Municipal Library Network
- 849 of the activities were free, with 94 carried out in public streets and squares
- The total number of attendees for all the activities was 77,789, of which 27,504 attended events with the Municipal Library Network, not including standard visits, loans, and other regular activities.
- The total budget for this project was €994,350, excluding municipal staff and advertising expenses.

## **6. Further Information**

The Bilbao City Council is the co-chair of the UCLG Committee on Culture. This document was written by the Bilbao Municipal Department of Culture in January 2020.

Website: [www.bilbao.eus](http://www.bilbao.eus)

Contact: [cultura \(at\) bilbao.eus](mailto:cultura@bilbao.eus)