

REGENERATION OF BILBAO LA VIEJA: WHERE ARE WE?

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Recently a local newspaper of my city Bilbao published: "*Bilbao La Vieja prepares its social transformation*" and continued in the text "*is the great challenge of the third phase of the regeneration plans*"(1). I could not help my surprise, more than 25 years after the start of the decline of this neighborhood in the city that hosts the well-known Guggenheim Museum.

For those not familiar with this area of Bilbao is one of the oldest in the city located along the Old Town across the Nervion estuary and from which looms impressively the Ribera Market, the largest Whole Sale Food Market in Europe, currently also under a dramatic transformation process.

One of the most lively districts and centre of the retail and leisure activity on the city, *Bilbao La Vieja*, fell into the early 80's in a deep structural crisis, resulting from the arrival of the heroin in the *Gaztetxes*, crime, and the widespread crisis in Bilbao that decadent victim of one of the most serious industrial crisis in living memory. This situation affected the entire city in general and reach rock bottom with the famous flood of August 1983, where many people lost everything.

Today by 2009, many things have changed in Bilbao and personal assessments aside the fact is that social unrest, unemployment and poverty have not returned to the levels of those years, with the permission of the economic downturn we are currently going through.

Bilbao La Vieja neighborhood however, drew here a path different from the rest of the city. Far from recovering gradually began a process of continuous decline that keep many citizens out of its boundaries, except for those who, years later, began to settle in a process parallel to the great increase of housing prices in the rest of the city since mid-90s. Immigrants on the one hand, coming from Africa and South America that established in Bilbao perfuming the streets with scents hitherto unknown; 'artists' on the other, attracted by low rents, just five minutes from downtown Bilbao - and the decadent atmosphere but full of history and character of one of the most charming parts of the city. It was therefore a mixture of 'gentrification' and continuity of the spiral of decline, parallel to the opening of the Metro, the Guggenheim Museum and the Palace of Congresses and Music (Euskalduna) that would put other parts of Bilbao "between the most modern and avant-garde cities in Europe "(2).

By the late 1990s however, major urban projects sought to focus on the transformation of *Bilbao La Vieja*, giving it greater connection to the rest of the city, new areas of walk beside the Estuary of Nervión and the demolition and adequacy of urban spaces of great presence in the urban scene, as well as the provision of well-known cultural infrastructures such as *BilboRock*(old church transformed into a concert hall and entertainment) and the *Museum of Art Reproductions*.

The clearest result of this process, from my point of view, has been an obvious physical revitalization of the area that have drawn visitors from other areas of the city to its new cultural facilities and by its bohemian atmosphere. What, in fact, may be seen as a try to mix different social strata and thus "dilute" the problem of this neighborhood, and, what is more, these initiatives have probably absorbed most of the regeneration efforts for this district (3). A policy that, by the way, does not seem to have solved the situation of the neighborhood residents themselves, with low levels of income and education, unemployment and immigration which reaches 32% (compared to 8% of the rest of Bilbao), often in precarious and without the ability to access to work due to illegal status, characteristics that may undoubtedly be fueling the conflict in the neighborhood. The reason for this could be that, surely with the best intentions, **main regeneration policies have tried to focused on the concentration of such people in an area - usually referred as a "ghetto" - instead of tackling the situation of those people living in poor conditions, the.**

From this reflection however, I would not like to come to the conclusion that "nothing has been done" in terms of social regeneration, as the news headline could lead to think. Starting with the observation that there is a *Plan for Regeneration of Bilbao La Vieja, San Francisco and Zabala* (which in its latest version covers the period 2005-2009) from which different actors have promoted a number of relevant initiatives. In any case and without detracting value to these projects, the truth is that they seem not to have been sufficient, in light of the significant challenges ahead.

Some causes of this situation, from my point of view might be, lack of balance between resources allocated to an end (physical revitalization) and other (social regeneration) and the final recipients of certain initiatives, who may have benefited more citizens of the rest of Bilbao than residents of *Bilbao La Vieja* themselves. I mean for example BilboRock, the Museum of Artistic Reproductions or commercial revitalization initiatives in the neighborhood, that were rightly awarded with the European Award for Enterprise 2007 presented by the European Union (EU).

Finally, as far as I am concerned, it might be time to review the project approach, which with great effort is been moved by the many institutions involved in the regeneration of the district. It is not easy of course but balancing efforts by providing social programs with more resources and placing people and in particular residents, more clearly than ever at the heart of the regeneration strategy could help better visualize the end of the tunnel, and incidentally, clarify where we are and, especially, where we are going in the future.

(1) Published in *El Correo Español* local newspaper. September 24, 2009.

(2) Bilbao Metropoli 30. *Bilbao 2010. The Strategy*. April 4, 2001.

(3) Inaki Azkuna himself, Mayor of Bilbao, suggested that referring to the neighborhood saying, "*We spent a lot of money in planning and does not look the same as in other neighborhoods.*" Interview in *Deia* local newspaper 19 October 2009.

There are no comments yet.