

Hangzhou International Congress “Culture: Key to Sustainable Development”

Session: 1B “Culture: The role of local governance

Date and time: 15 May – 17:00 pm – 18:30 pm

Speaker: Mrs. Ibone Bengoetxea, Deputy Mayor of Bilbao and City Councillor of Culture and Education

Bilbao is the capital of Bizkaia, one of the “historical territories” that make up the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (Spain). The Autonomous Community of the Basque Country enjoys a high level of self-government, under the leadership of the Basque Parliament. Its structure is based on historical rights recognised and protected by the 1978 Spanish Constitution and by the 1979 Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country.

Bilbao and the Basque Country as a whole have undergone a historical process of reinvention in recent years to face the challenges of the 21st century. The pessimism of the economic recessions and political conflicts of the late 20th century have given way to a collective feeling of optimism brought about by the economic, urban and environmental transformation of the city.

Metropolitan Bilbao is home to around half the population and economic activity of the Basque Country. It stands on the crossroads of the main north-south European transport route and the emergent east-west route. The city is gearing up to take advantage of this excellent location to become a true “hinge point” in Europe.

The urban hinterlands of the three Basque provincial capitals of Bilbao, Vitoria y Donostia-San Sebastián mark the character of the different territories and landscapes that make up this physically and climatically diverse region. A network of natural areas scattered throughout the region is another asset of inestimable visual and environmental worth, maintaining natural biodiversity and the quality of the local landscape, and at the same time providing multiple facilities for leisure.

The renovation of the city began with the construction of the emblematic Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and continued with major investments in infrastructure, including a new airport terminal, the Metro, the tram network, the La Alhóndiga cultural centre and the urban regeneration projects for the districts of Abandoibarra and Zorrozaurre, which are still ongoing. All these projects were made possible by co-operation between public institutions.

Bilbao: Arts, Culture and Heritage

The arts, culture and heritage are three fundamental pillars of the urban, social and economic regeneration of Bilbao. They are closely linked to the idiosyncrasies of the city and its residents. The arts form a part of everyday life: Bilbao has an enviable list of museums, sculptures by internationally renowned artists at various points in the city and a number of galleries and associations that promote and publicise all forms of art.

Public and private sector organisations strive to meet the demand for culture that characterises the city. From municipal libraries (there is one in every district) to major opera and rock festivals, Bilbao is open to all expressions of culture. Cultural events have an enthusiastic following among local people and visitors alike: theatre, literature, music and history form part of the heartbeat of the city.

Bilbao is proud of its heritage, and strives to maintain it and show it off in all its splendour. The city has become an international benchmark for the conservation and promotion of heritage sites, ranging from its earliest history (exemplified by the Old Town) through classical architecture (mainly in the Ensanche district) to its most up-to-date attractions such as the Guggenheim Museum, the Abandoibarra waterfront promenade, Metro Bilbao, etc.

Bilbao is currently a focal point for the creation and dissemination of arts, culture and heritage. Its cultural amenities promote the creation of major new projects, and present works of art in all their major forms, from the most advanced and contemporary to the most classical and traditional. In Bilbao arts, culture and heritage are not just objects of admiration; they are a way of life.

Museums and art institutions

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is much more than just an artistic and cultural amenity. It has come to symbolize a society's wish to change, based on the confidence and firm belief that it was possible to reinvent and construct the Bilbao of the 21st century on the ruins of an outdated industrial production system. Architect Frank O. Gehry designed for Bilbao his greatest building, and perhaps the finest work of cutting-edge architecture of the 20th century. The museum welcomes around a million visitors per year, making it a cultural and tourist attraction on a worldwide scale.

Bilbao is also home of other important and internationally recognized museums and art institutions. The Fine Arts Museum, home to major works of ancient, modern and contemporary art; the Bilbao Museum of Artistic Reproductions and exposition galleries; Bilbao Arte, an art production centre which provides young creative artists with the resources and infrastructures that they need to develop their works, among others.

Art in the City

Bilbao is a real open air museum of architecture and sculpture. Artists including Salvador Dalí, Eduardo Chillida, Jorge Oteiza, among others, have given free rein to their creativity in the city, giving a unique aspect to many of its locations.

Live Culture

Art and culture in Bilbao are not just seen as objects to admire but as a way of life. That is why the city hosts a wide range of artistic and cultural events which draw large, enthusiastic audiences. The cultural and entertainment calendar features film festivals, music, theatre and dance.

Bilbao, Musical Capital

From large-scale, open-air rock festivals to classical music in all its forms and even the most avant garde sounds, the range of music available in Bilbao is enviable.

Libraries and promotion of literature

In its desire to encourage reading and promote literature, Bilbao City Hall maintains public libraries in every district of the city.

Architecture of the new Bilbao

The Guggenheim Museum, designed by architect Frank O. Gehry, is one of the most spectacular architectural feats of the 20th century, and the first exponent of a new way of producing architecture. Sir Norman Foster's design for the Bilbao Metro is also outstanding. Other renowned architects who have brought their talents to bear on emblematic projects in Bilbao include Rafael Moneo (with the new Deusto University Library), Pritzker Prize winner Zaha Hadid (with the ambitious regeneration plan for the Olabeaga district) and Álvaro Siza (with the Auditorium of the University of the Basque Country), among others.

Cultural infrastructures: Alhóndiga, Bilborock, Arriaga, Euskalduna and Campos Elíseos Theaterç

The switch to being a service-based city has resulted in the building and renovation of innovative venues fitted out with the latest technology, capable of hosting major cultural and other events. The Palacio Euskalduna complex is capable of organising over a thousand events a year. The Library of the Provincial Council of Bizkaia, the Campos Elíseos Theatre and the Miribilla sports hall are the latest additions to the city's cultural and leisure amenities. However, the stand-out venue in this regard is Alhóndiga Bilbao: this historical building has been turned into a multi-purpose cultural centre by French designer Philippe Starck.

Heritage: restoring of the old quarter and the Ensanche, buildings and emblematic spaces

Bilbao's biggest and most innovative urban regeneration projects have been undertaken on and around the river. Throughout Bilbao there have been major efforts to restore significant historical buildings: the Plaza Nueva square, the former stock exchange headquarters in the "Palacio John" building, the La Ribera produce market, the Arriaga theatre, Abando railway station, the Alhóndiga cultural centre and the Campos Elíseos theatre are all examples of the city's determination to rehabilitate the best of its architecture.

Euskera, a millenary language

The Basque Country is of particular interest for its unique, age-old culture, the most remarkable feature of which is the Basque language, Euskera, which is unrelated to any other Indo-European language. Thanks to the various programmes and campaigns set in place, the number of Bilbao residents who speak Basque on an everyday basis is increasing year by year.