

Bilbao and Brussels: Urban Marketing By Whom? For Whom?

The two cases
represented here
– Bilbao and Brussels –
show the very
different and myriad
possibilities when
it comes to
urban marketing.
The key questions:
By Whom?
For Whom?

There is some agreement that large conurbations (an aggregation or a continuous network of urban communities) are the emerging 21st Century magnets of development, in Europe as elsewhere. In the global economy, we see competition among them, and also their cooperation (this is sometimes referred to as “coopetition”), which are expressed through a variety of networks and a variety of marketing outfits. The goal is to increase individual visibility independently from national visibility and from their municipal components.

Let’s examine two cases of metropolitan image-building, as different as possible from each other: Bilbao and Brussels.

BILBAO, A CASE OF STRONG-WILLED URBAN IMAGE BUILDING THROUGH A PUBLIC-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP

Bilbao’s metropolitan area is around 900,000 inhabitants; the municipality is around 350,000. This is a bland medium-sized city, traditionally dependent upon the iron- and steel-based economy. The abrupt collapse of this sector in the 80s generated an acute crisis (loss of confidence and pride) of the City and Region’s economy and society as a whole. It also brought the realisation by some planners that the city should shape a new

economic, social and physical vision in accordance with the requirements of a modern knowledge-based society, rather than attempting to look at new industries to generate activity and jobs.

The new vision – and the associated urban image-building – would concentrate on place-making and public art, on quality of life and urban pride, on optimal accessibility from the outside and mobility inside. The

new centre for culture and congresses, both on the RIA “brownfield”, and next to the City Centre.

The mobility component was the new METRO, developed at the level of the conurbation. Although the size of the city was less than one million inhabitants, often considered as the threshold for a metro, the choice of this mode was justified by the emphasis on linear development along the waterway, and

Bilbao: implementation of the vision only
possible with eye-catching urban icons
+ a strong urban transport component

focus was the transformation of the industrial waterway (RIA) that crosses the city and the conurbation around it.

The implementation of the vision only was possible if it included eye-catching urban icons, and a strong and very visible urban transport component.

The urban icon was provided by choosing emerging star architect Frank Gehry to conceive and build a museum using the name of a known museum: the highly publicised GUGGENHEIM. This thereby created a

its key areas, that favoured a corridor effect. It also was justified by the will to recuperate existing urban space and create new ones, through design. The choice of Norman Foster for the stations was fully congruent with that purpose. One decade of operation has corroborated the success of this modal choice.

In addition to the institutional commitment to build the Museum and the Metro, another original feature of Bilbao’s approach to both urban place-making and transport image-building has been the tool



conceived: the PUBLIC-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP known as *Ria 2000*. This is designed to capture the value increment generated by these huge public investments programmes, to put that increment to the public benefit, and to spread the image of an urban renaissance.

Land necessary for the projects, such as railway yards and old warehouses, were put under the control of a single hand, instead of a multitude of public fiefdoms - State agencies, the Province and some 30 municipal governments – each pursuing their own agenda. In addition a consortium at metropolitan level, called “Metropoli 30”, ensured promotion at regional level.

Ria 2000 has meant that all key institutional players delegate the development of some of their real estate to a non-profit corporation collectively owned and controlled by them. For example:

- The Port Authority was persuaded that its historic know-how in handling and storing goods should no longer be used in the urban part of the waterway.
- The Railways were persuaded there was more added value for them in joining the city-wide vision than sticking to their own

investment plans and image-building. The most improbable tract of waterfront industrial land (although located at five minutes walk from the central

(opened in 2002). Old Bilbao now starts to attract new investors. The existing COMMUTER RAIL line running south of the waterway also has been modernised

The Bilbao renaissance:
integrating land use and mobility
content with urban image

place of the CBD) was cleared and partially used for the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum and for the Congress Centre.

- The remaining part of the riverside brownfield area *Abando-ibarra* became land ready for development, entirely controlled by Ria 2000.

This approach is diametrically opposed to the so-called Public Private Partnership (PPP), by which the public sector delegates to the private sector the development and its profits while taking charge of the land acquisitions.

The huge profits of Ria 2000 were used to rehabilitate difficult areas such as the slums of crime-ridden Old Bilbao. The waterfront of Old Bilbao has been made entirely pedestrian. A new TRAM line, with exclusive right of way, follows the waterfront

and complements the spectacular new Metro in serving the developments along the waterway and elsewhere.

Impressive as all this success is, new challenges, and some of them substantial, lie ahead, that cannot be solved by image. For example, for a relatively small city, there are five different rail-based systems (Metro, Renfe, Euskotren, Feve and Tram) and, on top of that, the high speed network is arriving soon.

As other cities have illustrated, this process can be more difficult than building the cultural infrastructure and the transport systems in the first place, and building an urban image around them. Given the strength in public-public partnership shown in Bilbao it should be within reach. Integrating the land use and mobility content with urban image is very much appreciated



by the ultimate clients, the citizens and visitors of Bilbao, and would sustain in time the renaissance image that has been achieved.

To sum up Bilbao's renaissance and development since the early 90's: the result of a proactive partnership among public actors at the service of global image-building at urban and metropolitan level.

BRUSSELS, A CASE OF OPPORTUNISTIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH A LOW PROFILE AND WITHIN A CONTEXT OF INTERNAL COMPETITION

Brussels has flourished for centuries under the influence of foreign powers, while simultaneously keeping a rich local culture alive. To a certain extent the city has been determined by external forces, through foreign rulers and planning decisions taken beyond its borders. The City of Brussels is the heart of the Brussels-capital Region, comprising 19 communes including the City of Brussels, and the Central Belgian mega-city, described in Peter Hall's 2006 Polynet study, which extends to Antwerp and Ghent. In this respect, Brussels is a microcosm

of the present decentralized Europe. The Brussels-capital Region is the Capital of both the French and the Flemish language Communities, the Capital of Belgium, and the host to international institutions and citizens from many nations, while simultaneously being highly protective of its Communes, neighborhoods and traditions. It has been Europeanised long

tourism policy; no urban development agency, development being *de facto* left to private developers). Instead of assembling land for projects it let the State sell the assets it had. Today's Brussels-capital Region is subjected to economic constraints imposed from rival neighbouring Belgian regions. The airport area, located in Flanders, and the Ottignies-Louvain

Brussels: the political capital of Europe
can be called a heteropolis, or cosmopolis

before the birth of the European Union. But by keeping the strength of its local culture it has set an example for European unification, proving that diversity in unity, the slogan of Europe, can actually exist.

The Brussels-capital Region has never been able to administer its territory efficiently and to develop its urban destiny through a single regional policy, tying together European and local interests and aims. It keeps an extremely low profile (no "urban center"; no single

la Neuve area, located in the Wallon Region, are developing faster than Brussels and are in a "cooperation" relation to it.

However, political isolation within the Belgian centrifugal context has played in its favour and helped it to become the political capital of Europe, without the actual support of its national government. It can be called a heteropolis, or cosmopolis, where people from elsewhere like to develop their own projects, or simply find a tax haven.



The opportunistic development of Brussels is illustrated by the European Parliament, now located in Brussels except for 11 plenary sessions per year held in

readily available, while huge empty spaces were available around the North station, close to the city centre, and linked to the airport in 15 minutes. This

Brussels: Perspectives on a European Capital - P. Laconte and C. Hein, Eds (www.ffue.org).

Brussels' infrastructure is polycentric:
 the location of the European institutions
 resulted from the location of its initial building

Strasbourg (France). The Belgian government was hostile to hosting the Parliament, for fear of the French government, which supported Strasbourg. The private sector, aware of the Parliament's wish to be close to the European Commission, decided to build a "Congress Center" that happened to fit the needs of a Parliament: when finally the Parliament was able to move to Brussels, the facilities were waiting for it.

In terms of infrastructures the situation is equally polycentric. The location of the European institutions resulted from the location of its initial building. This location was in a residential area, next to a public park, where no infrastructures were

location however suited developers, who saw the opportunity to buy low density residential buildings and build high density offices in their place. Only many

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 the examples of Bilbao & Brussels are as
 different as they could be...

years later, because of the pressure of the European institutions, a set of access infrastructures were gradually provided, including a direct rail link from the Parliament and the Commission to the airport, to open in 2009.

These examples and others of similar nature are analysed in

CONCLUSION

Urban marketing raises the questions of who is initiating it and whom it serves.

In the case of Bilbao, the economic and social difficulties brought together the public institutions and made them accept a grand city project and the institutions needed to successfully implement it. This project was at the service of both the City and its metropolitan Region.

In the case of Brussels, a city with a long tradition of dependence and grabbing of opportunities, no grand city project was proposed. The attraction of the City-Region and its 19 Municipal components to international investments resulted, not from proactive marketing but from being open to projects proposed. ■