

The perceived character of the cities in the Basque Country and the cultural transfer from San Sebastian to Bilbao.

### **Metropolitan**

Due to its morphological settings the metropolitan area of Bilbao stretches out along the *Ria de Bilbao*. The historical development of the city can be described as a series of urban areas around this axis; from the Casco Viejo to the seaport. A brief view on the map (Figure 2) also shows a clear pattern of cultural institutions and attractions along the river. Therefore the river could be considered as the connection between the old and the new economy; between the port and the cultural institutions. For the regeneration strategy of La Vieja, it is relevant to conclude that the relation between the river and cultural development in the neighborhood has a mutual benefit: The river connects La Vieja to the rest of the city attractions and La Vieja is the next stepping-stone in the expansion of cultural hubs in the city.



The layout of Bilbao along the Ria. The points indicate existing cultural nodes or centres.

## City

The scale of the city shows the strategic position of La Vieja (Figure 3). It lies between the 'Ensanche' (the 19<sup>th</sup>-century city-center) and Casco Viejo (the old city). The former has a primary function as Central Business District and the latter as a center of shops, galleries, bars, restaurants and nightlife.

The general view lays emphasis on the functional relationship between the various parts of the city. Between La Vieja and Casco Viejo there exists a great opportunity of a complementary relationships. Whereas Casco Viejo contains merely *consumption* functions, La Vieja could work as an area of cultural *production*. The galleries and craft-shops at one side of the river can be supplied by the works of the artists and manufacturers who found their spaces on the other side. In return, the creative workers will make use of the facilities of the Casco Viejo, to meet up with each other in one of the many bars or galleries for example. This brings us closer to a defined vision of the cultural climate and the social structure we aim at: an environment of creative interaction and inspired production which is accessible to anyone willing to participate.



Aerial photograph of Bilbao showing the relationship between La Vieja and the Ensanche and Casco Viejo. The points depict existing cultural nodes or centres.

## La Vieja now

Before we discover how the software, defined above, could be attracted, the existing hardware has to be analysed. Despite its favourable topographic position, La Vieja is poorly connected. This is partly due to the physical constraints at its borders that isolate the area: the river, the lay of the land and the railway (Figure 4). Main traffic movements pass around the neighbourhood rather than moving through it. A clear example is the tramway along the riverfront: from the city center it crosses the river to the old city as soon as it approaches La Vieja. The railway platform, which penetrates deep into the city, forms a great barrier for interaction between La Vieja and the city center.

The consequence of these constraints is that the pattern of both public and private transport movements through the area is very incongruent. Both pedestrian and vehicular traffic is concentrated on a few routes and at some crossing points (Figure 4). The situation around the

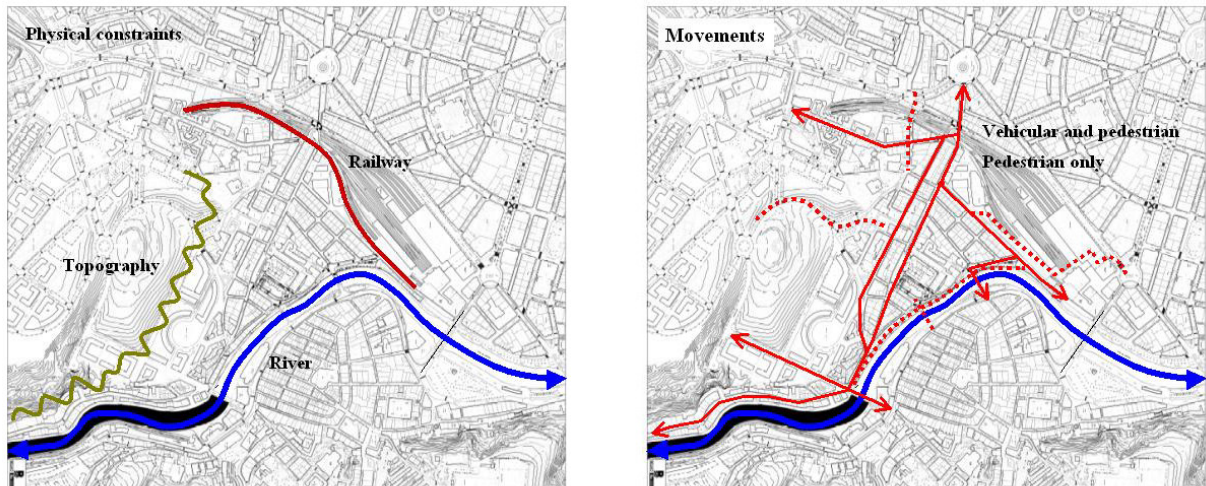


train station can be called chaotic; cars are being squeezed into the wedge between the river and the station, pedestrians are using shortcuts *through* the building and the train platforms. We propose at least to extend the tramway to La Vieja. More solutions to these problems in terms of *connectivity* are mentioned in the detailed plans further on.

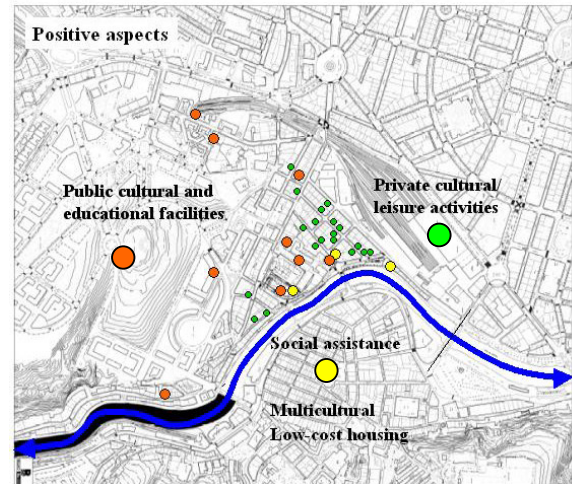
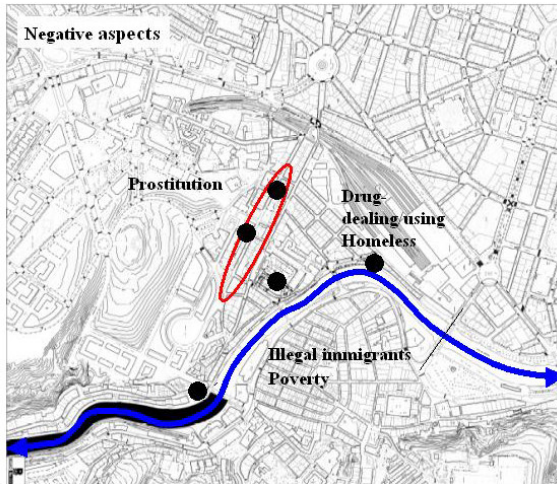
The isolated situation is also related to some actual social problems in the neighborhood, probably both as *cause* and as *consequence*. La Vieja contains all observable features of a downgraded area: street-prostitution in San Francisco Street, drug dealing throughout the area and homeless people sleeping on the street. Less visible is the fact that the population consists, far more than average in Bilbao, of households with a below average socio-economic status and illegal immigrants who are attracted to the low-cost housing (Figure 4).

Habitually we would perceive that the various negative aspects influence each other and accelerate the downgrading process. The answer, put forward by cities throughout the world, is a complete renovation of the housing-stock and services. This may result in a change of population class but usually transfers the problem elsewhere. Here we propose a more specific approach to these aspects and try not to break with the former situation.

Specifically drug addiction and dealing should be controlled in a resolute manner and homeless people should be offered a chance to find a permanent place to live. Unfortunately these elements are inevitable on the scale of the city and difficult to defeat on the scale of the neighbourhood. The symptoms appear in the city's weakest place, which is La Vieja. The facilities to improve the situation with regard to drugs and homeless, such as social assistance services, already exist in the neighbourhood. These facilities should be maintained and improved upon so that in the future La Vieja is not the weakest spot in town.



The plan to the left shows the physical constraints to La Vieja. The plan to the right shows the main existing movements, both pedestrian and vehicular, through La Vieja.



The left diagram highlights some of the areas that give La Vieja a poor image. The right diagram depicts the positive aspects of La Vieja.

Certainly, if La Vieja ought to function like a 'normal' part of the city, one should solve all these problems by combating them until they disappear. Concerning the other 'negative' aspects, this general view states that we should search for the counter side of each and transform or present them in such way that they could be seen *and* serve as positive aspects. To be exact: the great amount of immigrants also means a multicultural ambience. The run-down state of most buildings also offers low-cost housing. Prostitution can also contribute to a night-life image of the neighborhood, if it can be controlled as we see in cities like Amsterdam, Antwerp and Hamburg. The physical isolation also means a silent 'void' in a turbulent city. These are all facts that can be turned to the benefit of La Vieja. This implies a tolerant attitude towards them and an attempt to regulate them.



Example of housing in La Vieja. The colourful and interesting facades create uniqueness.

We might say that these negative aspects are to some extent relative by the way the public opinion conceives this place. At the moment La Vieja draws attention for its problems. Consequently the nice side of the quarter remains unobserved. Nevertheless, a big city marketing campaign makes the spontaneous character of the area incredible. Therefore a low profile publicity operation could help to add value to the appreciation of the neighborhood; starting by the way the municipality itself identifies the neighborhood and ending by mouth to mouth publicity of the city's inhabitants.

The fieldwork demonstrated that the neighborhood already possesses an enormous potential in terms of the *urban fabric*. The architecture is quite diverse and differs from the architecture of the Ensanche and the Casco Viejo. The colorful historic buildings give the place an authentic ambiance (see Figure 5, p.16). Together with the intense morphology and the accidental urban structure it is a very fascinating environment. The riverfront could be developed into "the face" of La Vieja as we will see in the proposals further on. All these elements are probable attractions for a creative environment.

The surroundings are ideal, but which spaces and incentives can be offered to creative entrepreneurs to undertake their activities? A fact is that the neighborhood has numerous empty "*locales*", the small and deep spaces on the ground floor of the inner-city buildings (Figure 6), generally in use as bar or shop. Due to municipal regulations imposed on these locales, which state that these units are restricted to public service or commercial uses only, many of them are vacant due to a lack of demand. At the same time it is a known fact that people in the creative profession are looking for spaces where residence, atelier or shop can be combined, particularly since living and working are continuous circumstances in their process of inspiration and production. A good example can be found already around Cantalojas Street where more private cultural and leisure activities have emerged in recent years. A liberalization of the rules towards the "*locales*" in La Vieja could attract more creative businesses and stimulate the upgrading of the neighbourhood.

The actual relative low prices of the real estate in the neighborhood are favourable for this ambition, but they should be kept low to avoid the neighbourhood becoming trendy which in turn causes the market value to rise. The risk is that it becomes unaffordable for beginning artists or entrepreneurs before the creative environment is produced.

## Proposals

To conclude we propose the following ten point strategy to regenerate La Vieja. It combines cultural, social, political, marketing and infrastructural suggestions.

Ten points to turn Bilbi into 'the place to be':

1. The city's "second wave" policy should contain a confirmation of Bilbao as a cultural center. Integrate the plan for La Vieja in the cultural strategy of Bilbao.
2. To visualize La Vieja as the next stepping-stone in the development of cultural centers in the city along the river, its riverfront should be transformed into the face of Bilbi.
3. Attach La Vieja to Casco Viejo to introduce them as the new "Quartier Latin" of Bilbao. Stimulate the complementary relationship between La Vieja and Casco Viejo by the type of functions: creative production next to consumption.
4. Drug problems and other problems will not be solved but will probably transfer themselves. Maintain social facilities for drug addicts and homeless people and increase support.



5. A tolerant policy towards illegal immigrants and the regularisation of prostitution. Regularise their presence to establish the character of a multi-cultural neighborhood with an exciting nightlife.
6. Launch modest publicity for the neighborhood; a 'whispercampaign' that puts the attention to all positive aspects of the neighborhood; the creative ambiance, low-cost housing, the interesting urban environment, the multi-culturality, the particular position in the city etc.
7. Liberalization of the regulation on the function of the "locales" by allowing living and working on the ground floor, which make them attractive as atelier for artists and other creative professionals.
8. Maintain the low costs of rent and real-estate to make it accessible for starting entrepreneurs and artists.
9. Access for public transport; in particular extension of the tramway to La Vieja.
10. Let's say from now on: "Bilbi, the place to be!"



**Empty versus used examples of "locales"**

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## The Riverfront (revisited): an Opportunity for Revitalization



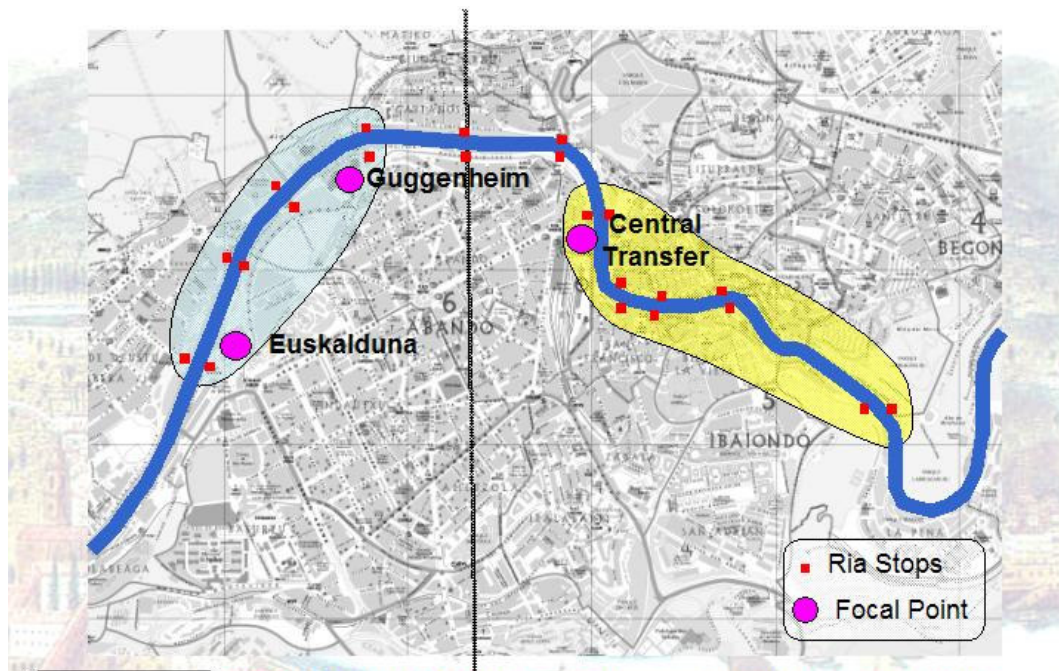
*Contents:*  
General objective  
A feature for the front of La Bilbi  
Main issues  
Area objectives



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## General Objective

To be frank, a workshop conducted in one full week - 8 hours/day at Bilbao Arte is not sufficient to develop all possibilities that exist along the Bilbao River in order to make the river a way for Bilbao La Vieja (La Bilbi) revitalization. The methods we used in our work on the given area included sites visits, photography and brainstorming. With blank knowledge of Bilbao beforehand and limited sources and access, it should be understandable that the group has limited information towards the city development of Bilbao. Nevertheless, the limited resources we have are no excuse for not doing our best. In the very best of our analysis of the problems created in the city as a whole and utilizing the river as one of the problem solutions, we found that the general objective of our work is to make **a balance between the different sections of the river and the town center.**



The area of Euskalduna-Guggenheim has been revitalized as a mixed use area. We have two important buildings on each side of the area that create an important tension between both. The space between has been used for commercial, residential and leisure purposes. For years, the area was only a back-yard of the river, nowadays all the uses are facing the river. La Ría (the river) has been the main "actor" in this revitalization scene.

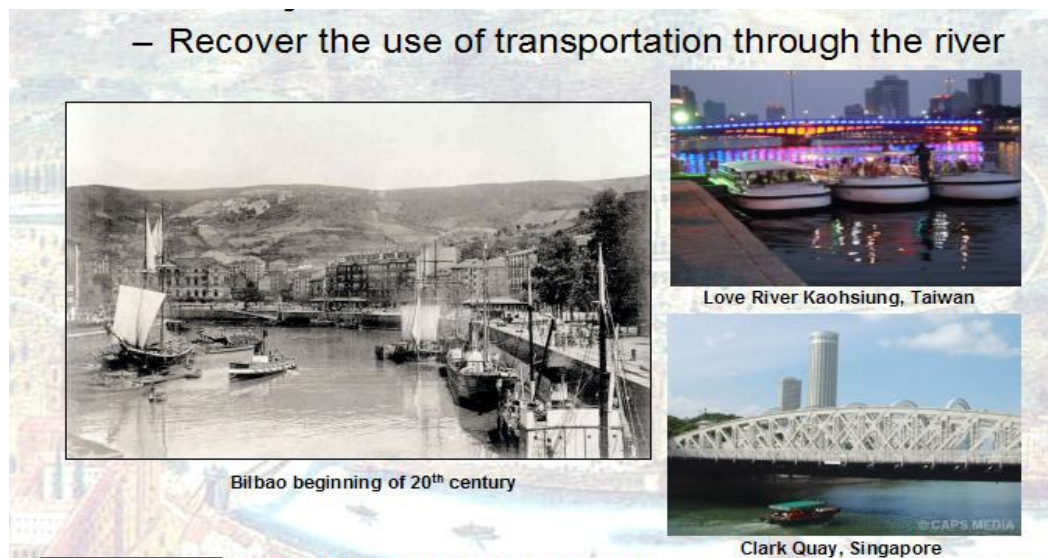
But if we have a look at a complete map of Bilbao and make an axis to divide the city equally into two parts, east and west, obviously we can see that the balance between the east and the west is not yet equal. The west side of the axis is the part of Bilbao with the old city. While all the new architectures have been developed and put in the eastern part, an admirable unphysical work has also already been done through building a function-changed strategy in this old part as it is a very useful part of the city nowadays, with a lot of day and night life. Unfortunately, the area in front of the old city, called La Bilbi (Bilbao La Vieja) – the left behind, indeed is the part that breaks the balance between the eastern and western parts of the river. So there are physical attractions in the east and socio-psychological attractions in the west hindered by deteriorated areas that grow as criminal sources full of immigrants. Therefore something must be thought of to help the revitalization of La Bilbi. How to eliminate this obstacle is the primary question for the group as well as a challenge to turn La Bilbi from a broken point into the strong point.



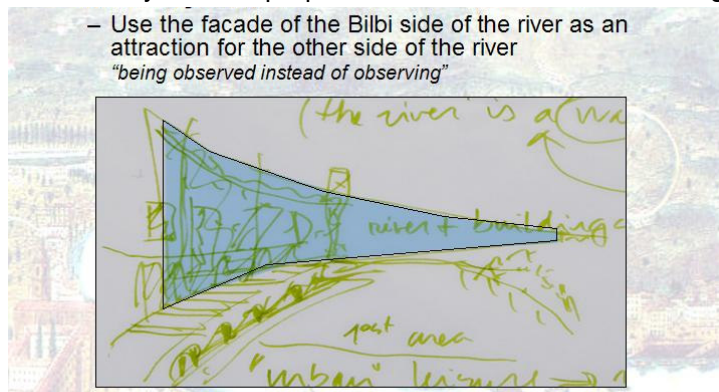
## A Feature for the Front of La Bilbi

The first step in answering the primary question is to think of a theme for this front of La Ría. Two different ideas appeared in the process as follows:

*First*, using the river as a way of transport as it has been used in some other cities in the world such as Love River in Kaohsiung and the Clark Quay & Boat Quay in Singapore. In fact, this idea was used in Bilbao during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In modern context, kinds of jet boats such as Ría Taxi (for private transport) and Ría Bus (for mass transport) can be used to travel along the river. Classical boats such as Gondolas used in Venice can also be utilized in terms of leisure purpose that offer a romantic travel instead of a speedy travel along the river. This idea would give a lot of life forms to the different sections of the river, even to La Bilbi which also would have to look at the river again if this area wants to survive and look at the river for new economical access. The position and peculiarity of the Torre Bailen, a building tower next to the Santander Station, makes it a good point to develop the Central Transfer that will be elaborated below. To provide access to the city, Ría stops (stopping place for Ría vehicles) would be provided along the river.



*Second*, each of the different parts of the front of La Ría that we have seen is having a different and a specific theme or feature respectively, but La Bilbi has not got one except the abandoned old façade of buildings. Why don't we find one for her? Looking into the existing uses along the river it would not be a crazy idea to propose the front of La Bilbi buildings facing the river as an **exposition art gallery** for the city. Therefore, La Bilbi would be observed from some other parts of the city, especially from the areas across the river instead of observing the city as it has happened until now. In other words, it is better for La Bilbi being observed instead of observing or being an interesting object instead a neglected subject.



## Main Issues

To achieve the general objective we have to identify some specific problems in La Bilbi caused by the geographical disadvantages of La Bilbi. Geographically La Bilbi is located in the lower area of the hill divided from the upper area with wall rock. The ground level difference between the lower and the upper area is about 10-15 meters high as shown in the picture below. Moreover there is no sufficient access to connect the upper & lower area.



Another geographical obstacle that makes La Bilbi more isolated is because she is surrounded by the river as shown below. This means that the access to La Bilbi is also very limited in certain places where the bridges existed. Unfortunately there are more bridges that serve pedestrians than bridges that serve vehicles. Among them only two bridges provide access for vehicles: at the old market and at the Torre Bailen.



Obviously the main issues of the La Bilbi are isolation, isolation and isolation so that the solution of this problem is access, access and access in order to make her widely open. In the point of view of urban & architectural psychology an isolated area is the support condition for territoriality. Therefore, the more isolated the more defensive an area will become. This is the reason why La Vieja becomes an ideal place for immigrants and crimes. Criminals are protected and protecting one another in this "safe" area. La Bilbi becomes a hideaways heaven for marginal people of the city and this circumstance eventually will create reluctance and resistance to change the attitude towards city development.

## Area Objectives

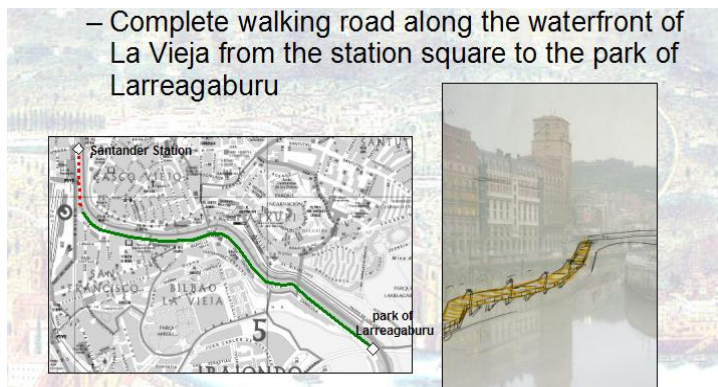
Given this fact above, the strategy for development planning of the La Bilbi is to open this area as wide as possible and to give as many as possible accesses to her, so that territoriality can be reduced and people inside La Bilbi are encouraged to socialize with people from outside. To realize this there are several area objectives for an integrated development of La Bilbi:



1. Develop a **Central Transfer** point at the main bridge of La Bilbi. The potential location for this point is the Torre Bailen area which is also in front of Santander Train Station. The reason to choose the Torre Bailen is because of the nature of the tower that can be used as a landmark of an area. A tower in the city is also frequently used as an orientation by people and tourists in order to determine a direction and locating themselves in the city. Beside, the height of the tower can be seen from a distance and at the same time it attracts attention to invite people to come. Basically the concept of Central Transfer is a central point for using various transport modes available in the city. At this central point, people can easily choose what kind of public vehicle they want to use and what direction they want to go. There are two major reasons to place this central point in front of La Bilbi area: first, to give a balance between the eastern and western parts mentioned in the general objectives above and second, to force people to go to La Bilbi so that she will gradually become an open area. This is a form of behavior modification that is usually applied in the field of urban & architectural psychology and will make La Bilbi become a starting point to explore the city of Bilbao.



2. Build and complete the walking road along the waterfront of La Vieja from the station square (Central Transfer) to the Park of Larrea-gaburu. By doing this way we can get a complete and well connected waterfront for La Bilbi to solve connection problems with this part of the riverfront. Today, the walking platform is only provided in front of San Francisco Building with 200 meters length.

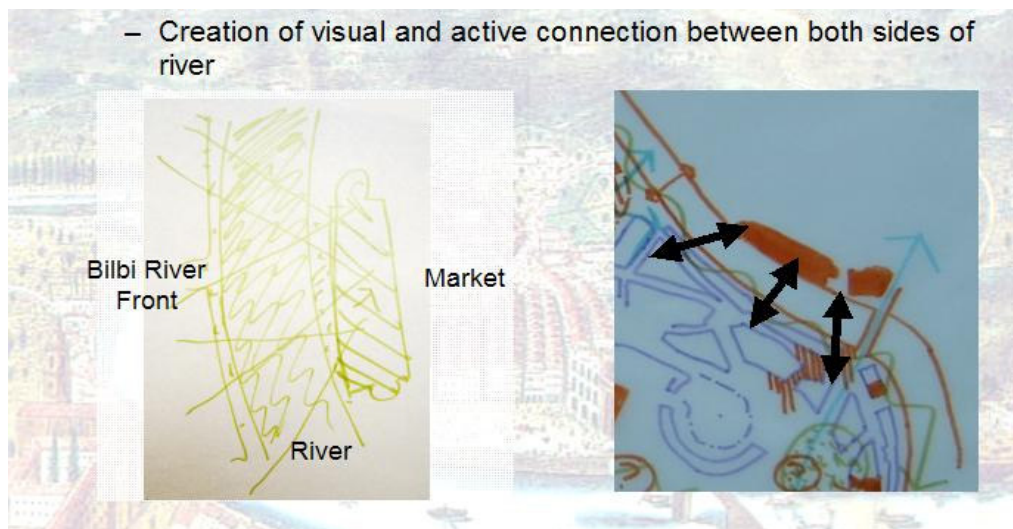




- Provisions of activities along the river. This proposal is a form of unphysical strategy of city management & development. We believe that life activities are more vital than physical developments in keeping the city alive. No matter how luxury the building is, without activities inside and outside, the building will have no meaning. Therefore, event organizers and property management must be involved to provide activities in Bilbi waterfront. The appropriate activity for this area are culinary activities by creating a food galleria that provides restaurants.



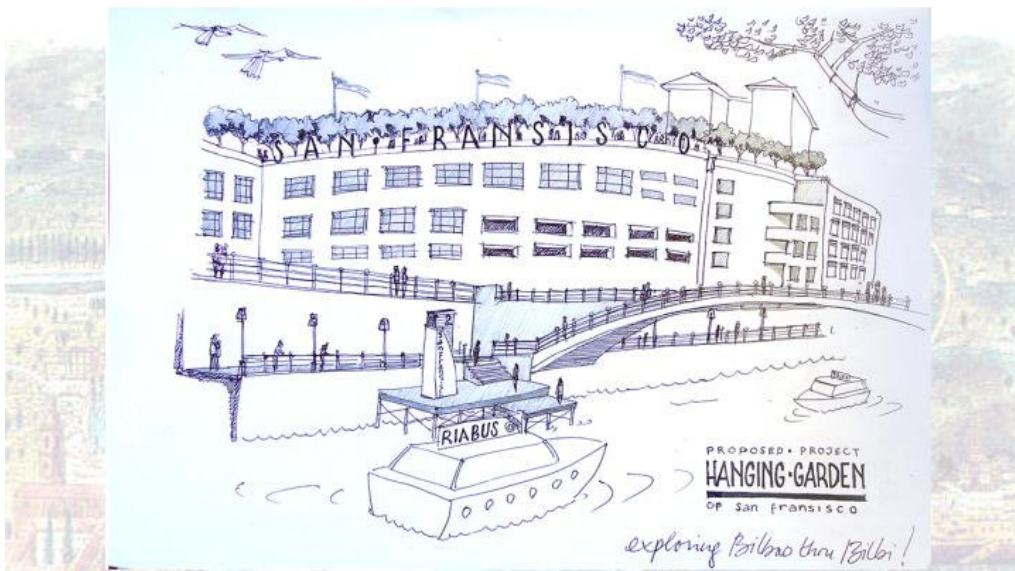
- Creation of visual and active connection between both sides of the river, (i.e. with the Market in front). La Bilbi has been a place from which one observed but it has never been observed. The relation between both sides of the river has not been completed in both directions. Visual relationship must be attempted.





**Provision of activities along the river: Art Gallery**

5. Produce new urban spaces related to bridges so that the inside of La Bilbi is connected to the riverfront. This measure could increase a better social condition inside of La Bilbi. A possible point to be opened would be Gate to Miribilla that connects the river front to the new development of Mirabilla, by breaking through San Francisco street – the major street in La Bilbi. For this purpose, we do not have to demolish any buildings since some buildings at the proposed gate location have been demolished already.



**Hanging garden of San Francisco**



**ISOCARP-UNESCO Young Planners Workshop, Oct 2005**

**Bilbao La Vieja**

6. Another strategy that can be applied is the opposite way of the previous strategy. While the Gates of Miribilla serve visual access from the river side to La Bilbi, the Hanging Garden of San Francisco provides visual access from La Bilbi to the riverside. The Hanging Garden is the square/plaza in San Francisco street which because of the level difference between the street and the river is uniquely located in the rooftop of the school building facing the river. This square is a perfect place for public space of San Francisco



people to have a view of the other side of the river such as the old city. This square could be characterized by some middle foliage vegetation that could be seen from the river.



As integrated scenario of the riverfront revitalization strategy, the six proposals explained above clearly create a sequence of different Urban Spaces along the river. By using the Ria Taxi or the Ria Bus from the starting point of Central Transfer, we can enjoy the unique Tower Balien and Food Galleria as the first scene followed by the Hanging Garden of San Francisco as the second scene, then the Gate of Mirabilla as the third scene directing to the Art Gallery on the right side and the Old Market on the left side as the fourth scene where the La Bilbi area ended. But of course the river journey can be continued to the Guggenheim and Euskalduna in the east part of Bilbao.

With regard to the City Marketing strategy, it is a potential consideration to move the Terminus at San Mames that connects the Bilbao airport with the city into La Bilbi area near Central Transfer, so that people and tourists can explore the whole Bilbao without interruption or lack of accessibility. It must be also considered to provide other modes of transportation at the airport to deliver people to the Central Transfer such as subway, train, etc., so that people can choose freely what kind of transport they prefer to use for their comfort.

Other specific proposals to work on are related to safety concerns that simply are called "brighter-wider-better". The provision of sufficient lights (especially at night), a wider riverfront platform and clean up accesses from bridges to walking roads, and better ergonomic forms for different levels of connection must be considered.