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Nantes' urban project: putting the Bilbao model to the test

Amélie Nicolas

The experiences of Bilbao and its urban transformations have been shared and integrated into the urban-planning cultures of numerous European cities. In Nantes, the success of Bilbao initially inspired much of the strategic thinking and planning for the Île de Nantes project, until criticisms of the “Bilbao model” began to come to the fore, ultimately leading to the development of a “Nantes-style urban planning” that takes account of the city’s specificities – and which could even be considered an exemplary model in its own right.

In Nantes, it was the definitive closure of the Dubigeon shipyards in 1987, more than any other event, that initiated the planning and eventual creation of a major project, of metropolitan centrality, on a site of some 330 hectares on an island sandwiched between two branches of the Loire at the heart of the city. However, it was only following the launch of a *marché de définition* (public contract for defining the parameters of a future project) by city council in 1998 that the Île de Nantes project really took off. This project has therefore also followed the consolidation, from 1989 onwards, of the city’s government around a key “mayor-cum-contractor” figure, namely Jean-Marc Ayrault, at the head the local leadership team (Smith and Sorbets 2003).

Ten years later, the key issue in the 2008 local election campaign in Nantes was the role of culture in urban regeneration projects, and more particularly the choices made by the incumbent municipal team to not commit to the construction of a flagship facility on the Île de Nantes. Sophie Jozan, the UMP (centre-right) mayoral candidate made the following declaration in counterpoint to the selected cultural and architectural options: “We need a Guggenheim on the Île de Nantes” – precisely at a time when “Nantes-style urban planning” was being heralded as exemplary within professional planning cultures (Devisme 2009), as it gave priority to the development of public spaces and the organisation of various uses and activities for these spaces, rather than to a single, architecturally remarkable “statement building”.

Electoral controversy aside, this raises the question of a political vision and symbolism that, in Nantes, has been very much influenced by what have become staple references to Bilbao in the drafting and implementation of urban policies.

We have called into question the way in which the various parties involved in the Nantes project established political or professional relationships with the urban elites of Bilbao, thus contributing to the dissemination of urban models.¹ It was these references to Bilbao and its urban transformations that, to a large extent, drove Nantes’ fantasies of achieving international recognition as a metropolitan area capable of standing out from the crowd. Later on, however, references to a “Bilbao syndrome” led elected officials and planners to pursue a different route, distancing themselves from a project and form of “city-making” that was already the subject of criticism.

¹ These questions had already been raised in the context of research for a PhD in sociology, titled *Usages sociaux de la mémoire et projet d’aménagement urbain. Les héritages industriels et portuaires à l’épreuve du projet de l’île de Nantes* and defended by the author at the University of Nantes in 2009.

The “Bilbao fantasy”, or successfully combining economy and culture in urban planning

The city of Bilbao has impressed by the speed with which it has achieved a post-industrial turnaround combined with an internationalisation of its urban project.² Just 11 years after the closure of the Euskalduna shipyards in 1986 – the most symptomatic event of a crisis that affected the entire manufacturing and port sector in the Bilbao Estuary (“Ría”) region – the then-newest museum of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation opened its doors on what was previously a vast urban wasteland.

What has strongly marked the Bilbao project was the choice of urban and architectural design based around an international-scale cultural policy, enabling an unprecedented level of communication about the project on the external stage.³ Bilbao is no longer – in its central areas, at least – the “rich, ugly mining city” described by Hemingway, and it likes to make this fact known (Masboungi 2001). The city’s new metro (all its stations designed by Norman Foster), its international airport by Santiago Calatrava, the new crossings of the Ría, and the construction of skyscrapers such as Arata Isozaki’s twin Atea towers or César Pelli’s Iberdrola tower have, in the wake of Frank O. Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum, all been opportunities to call upon renowned architects. This insistence on urban design capable of symbolising Bilbao’s renewal has been accompanied by large-scale transformations of port and transport infrastructures all across the estuary, fostering interaction between architects and engineers.

For Nantes, as for many other cities in the 1990s, Bilbao established a model through the way in which the dialogue between city and port was designed around a combination of economy and culture (Rodrigues Malta 2004). “In the future, no city will be economically important without also being culturally remarkable,” declared Ibon Arezo, first deputy mayor of Bilbao with responsibility for facilities and urban planning (Masboungi 2001, p. 104). Faced with the impressive income and visitor numbers generated by the Guggenheim Museum, which was also spilling over to the city’s other cultural institutions, as a result of longer visitor stays in Bilbao and the development of pleasure cruises, urban planners and developers became convinced of the economic benefits, primarily in terms of tourism, of a major cultural facility combined with iconic architecture. The success of museums as the flagship features of these large operations, confirming a transition from curator-led museums to entrepreneur-led museums, is particularly revealing of an instrumentalisation of culture in urban economic development policies (Vivant 2008).

Bilbao also represented the assertion of a political choice and the expression of this choice via new tools for planning and managing urban projects. Bilbao Ría 2000, an *ad hoc* public company devoted entirely to the transformation of key sectors of the city, is a project-management instrument that has strongly influenced elected officials and planners from other cities as a result of its strategic and operational efficiency. Furthermore, project management played a key role in uniting public stakeholders in Bilbao (Frébault 2005), in a context of intense political competition. From an operational standpoint, the company was designed to recover land in run-down areas or in industrial zones in decline within the Bilbao metropolitan area. Land transferred to Bilbao Ría 2000 by its shareholders enabled the company to make very significant gains when sold on to developers, this being particularly true on the Abandoibarra riverfront and around the Guggenheim Museum. The profits generated in this way enabled Bilbao Ría 2000 to implement robust measures in “less profitable” neighbourhoods (Chadoin *et al.* 2000).

As a result of this experience, the expertise of Pablo Otaola, the director of Bilbao Ría 2000, was sought on many occasions by those involved in the Nantes project, to the extent that he became the special guest of choice at the various planning conferences organised or hosted in the Nantes urban

² In 2004, Bilbao was awarded the “Città d’Acqua” prize for the best urban project in the world, during the Venice Biennale, as well as a European Urban and Regional Planning Award.

³ Bilbao’s pavilion at Expo 2010 in Shanghai could be considered the most remarkable aspect of this international-level communication concerning the city’s urban transformations.

area. Similarly, a visit to Bilbao became an essential trip for any young project manager or adviser wishing to work on the Nantes project.

Decisions on the form of urban project management that should be adopted for the Île de Nantes operation were occasionally somewhat hesitant. The Île de Nantes–Rives de Loire mission, connected to the urban community's⁴ department of operations, quickly highlighted the pitfalls of project management that is entirely focused on and organised by local authorities, notably the degree of inertia involved in taking any kind of concrete action. The choice was therefore made to outsource the project management to a mixed-economy company, SAMOA (Société d'Aménagement de la Métropole Ouest-Atlantique, literally the "West Atlantic Metropolis Development Corporation"), that still had strong links with local authorities. By using a form of management seen as exemplary in Bilbao, and considered capable of fostering a collective and consensual dynamic among all the stakeholders involved, Nantes has ultimately become a city reputed for its "best practices" (Devisme *et al.* 2009), particularly in the field of urban planning.

The "Bilbao syndrome", or the challenges of establishing the uniqueness of the Nantes project

The overall implementation of the Bilbao project led stakeholders in Nantes, if not to emulate it, then at least to assimilate as many of its aspects as possible. However, the choice and content of developments remained very different in Nantes. Those involved in the Nantes project provoked the emergence of a "Bilbao fantasy", followed by a "Bilbao syndrome"; the latter was characterised in particular by the question of what happens to the identity of a city that is regenerated on the basis of disparate and decontextualised architectural features. Nearly 10 years separate the two projects, and critics of what might be considered a "Bilbao model" had already denounced the commodification of the city associated with architectural and cultural standardization. These criticisms decrying the "McGuggenheim" and "Euskodisney" phenomena initially came from academics (Zulaika 1997), but they were rapidly adopted by the world of urban-planning professionals, too.

One of the primary characteristics of the Nantes project remains its defiance with regard to the idea of creating an architecturally exceptional monument, and in particular the idea that such a monument should be a museum. "When we asked Nantes what the flagship feature might be," recalls a former city councillor responsible for culture, "everyone imagined a Guggenheim or a Pompidou Centre, and we decided that this was exactly what we shouldn't do, and that ultimately the thing that was so wonderful about Nantes, for very specific reasons, was that manifestations of culture had historically preceded the institutions and places that had housed them" (interview, 1 October 2008).

In Nantes, it was not the choice to build a museum that was criticised as such, but rather the way that such a museum would be funded and how it would be relevant to the local context. On the one hand, the Guggenheim Foundation had not approached Nantes with any offers, and the astronomical expenditure for the construction of such a public facility could not have been borne by the city's local authorities. On the other, the prospects for redeveloping the area via a museum would inevitably have required a compromise with local heritage organisations and associations in order to protect the area's industrial, port and working-class memory; consequently, city councillors became less convinced of the potential international attractiveness of such a project.

The reference to Bilbao in terms of the cultural transformation of a given territory was the key inspiration for the Île de Nantes project, until talk of the "Bilbao syndrome" enabled planners to instead focus on defining the originality of the Nantes project, leading to a political turnaround regarding the notion of a "major facility". At this point, the city's councillors and planners channelled their energies into efforts to make the Nantes project truly stand out and to show off the city's assets to best advantage.

⁴ The urban community (Nantes Métropole) is an intermunicipal body that coordinates strategic action across the Nantes urban area (comprising 24 municipalities with a total of almost 600,000 inhabitants).

What was eventually chosen as the flagship feature for the Île de Nantes was not a museum in the sense of an architectural and urban icon, but rather a combination of several projects. In voting for “Les Machines de l’Île” (“The Machines of the Isle”), the city’s councillors backed a playful, artistic, cultural and touristic project. And indeed, the presence of creators of fantastical, fully articulated machines several metres in height, operated by the street theatre company Royal de Luxe, has been a key feature of the city since the 1990s and has been described, in expert reports, as an original opportunity for developing the cultural and touristic potential of the Île de Nantes. These machines, spread across the island, have enabled certain sites to be enhanced, and more generally have resonated with the proposed development project for the whole island. For instance, the restructuring of the Nefs de Loire site – former boat prefabrication workshops – has provided new areas in which to set up the Great Elephant (the first “machine of the isle”), its embarkation points and the workshops in which the mechanical animals are built. This site also offered considerable potential for hosting other artistic and cultural events. In this respect, the Nefs de Loire warehouses and the cultural environment that they contain stand in stark contrast to the kind of ostentatious architectural gesture that had come to be expected of projects of this kind. What sets the Nantes projects apart is that they combine the protection and enhancement of the area’s port and industrial heritage with contemporary cultural offerings. Moreover, they have gained the unanimous approval of local stakeholders, which has also helped to calm the waters in heritage disputes between former shipyard workers and preservationists (Nicolas 2009). Here, the city’s urban marketing is based on the promotion of an event-driven cultural policy (with annual festivals and innovative events, such as the Estuaire contemporary art biennial or, since 2010, the Voyage à Nantes cultural trail run every summer in the city) that has coincided with the phasing of the Île de Nantes project and become the substrate for communication campaigns that convey the specificities of the Nantes metropolitan area. As in other cities, investing in symbolic policies that yield rapid results at relatively low cost has appeared to win over elected officials and professionals alike in Nantes.

Towards a dialectic of shared urban references

The Nantes project, which began almost 10 years after its Basque counterpart, clearly forms part of the legacy of the much discussed Bilbao project. Bilbao was, for Nantes, an urban laboratory. The relationship between Nantes and Bilbao makes sense when placed in this context of historical linearity, rather than in a context of opposition between two isolated and disconnected models. The local scale allows us to understand the choices, controversies and negotiations that led to territorial and economic transformations. However, an examination of the supra-local level – that is to say, the circulation of urban elites and the dissemination of their various city-making methods – is essential if we wish to understand the motivations behind these choices.

The professionals who worked on the Nantes project had the luxury of observing somewhere else more experienced – Bilbao in this case – and the way in which the economic and urban transformations of this “elsewhere” took place. This observation was built simultaneously on recognition, assimilation, parentage, fantasy, criticism, rejection and the integration of these “other” projects into its “own” projects. This dialectic of imitation and uniqueness, of fantasy and syndrome, reveals, in the context of observations of past projects, the willingness of stakeholders to state the specificities their city through the specification of their urban project.

Returning to Bilbao in 2014, it can be surprising to see a new way of producing the city being practised that is quite different from the more spectacular choices made earlier on. Over the long term, certain developments have been stymied by the large-scale financial crisis, while other phenomena have emerged, such as the temporary occupation of abandoned premises by “young creators”, a new sensitivity to the memory of the local area, in particular its industrial heritage, and new practices in terms of consultation and resident mobilisation. This is the case, for example, on the formerly industrial peninsular district of Zorrotzaurre, a little way downstream from the city centre along the Ría, whose master plan by Zaha Hadid, launched in 2004, was almost halted

in 2007 and has since been the subject of a number amendments. Stakeholders in Bilbao, critical of the choices made in the 1990s and sensitive to other urban experiences, are now initiating urban strategies better suited to an economic context that clearly restricts their room for manoeuvre in terms of urban planning.

Reflection on updated urban references by planners and developers remains an entry point for thinking not just about how urban models are created and disseminated with regard to urban regeneration but also about the narratives that underpin them.

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