

Seattle and Bilbao: what can we learn from each other?

Audio 1 – Introduction

My name is Lesley Bain. I am an urban designer and an architect. I live in Seattle. I founded a firm called Framework Cultural Place Making in 2013 because I love trying to figure out ways to make how we live better. I'm going to Bilbao to a conference about creativity.

The organizers in Bilbao have been talking with people from Washington State about creative culture here and what's happening here. They've been doing a study of various places around the world and Washington State is one of them.

I've been thinking about the differences between Seattle, a city I know, and European cities. I've been spending more time in Europe because all three of our sons live there. As someone who watches cities, tries to learn from cities, I'm really interested in Bilbao because they really took culture and design seriously. Their city was one of many that was in industrial decline and they went all in on design and culture. And it's no coincidence they're the ones having this conference.

I would like to offer some lessons learned to people in Bilbao about building a new neighborhood that is focused on tech and the creative sector, the knowledge neighborhood. We've developed this neighborhood here in Seattle that is the headquarters of Amazon. We've got all kinds of tech industry here. It's the kind of place that cities all over the world want to create—a 21st century neighborhood. We have one. Bilbao is trying to do one.

Audio 2 – Zarrotzaurre & South Lake Union

When I was in Bilbao in June we were looking for interesting things to do, and a lot of the most interesting things were happening on this island of Zorrotzaurre. So we went; we spent some time there. We watched flamenco dancers from a school there. We took a ukulele class. We ate a really nice lunch under the fig trees. And it was a neighborhood like we'd had in Seattle where there had been an industrial economy and then it left. A bunch of artists moved into vacant industrial space. It's the kind of culture that's a grassroots culture. It's arts and culture for people that do something that they love rather than a commercialized kind of culture.

Lake Union had been quite industrial. When I was growing up there was a concrete plant down there, Lone Star Cement. There were train tracks going down to the water, a lot of wholesale operations, and a variety of different industries. It was low rent kind of place. The neighborhood had historically been immigrants, laborers for the industrial uses. It was an affordable neighborhood.

So it went from a place where industrial uses that had been vacated, and the warehouses, etc., became great places for theater and artists. It was a really fun neighborhood for a brief moment. It started to change after 2006, thereabouts.

Because the land was being vacated by the industrial uses and was just north of the city downtown, a lot of people started eyeing it. There was actually a proposal to make it a giant park, but the voters didn't pass the vote twice in a row. And meanwhile, Paul Allen, one of the founders of Microsoft, started buying up property there. Neighborhoods in a city like Seattle where it's grown so much and real estate prices have gone up so much, artists get kicked out and you end up at the end of the day with sort of a monoculture that's not interesting. That is commercialized, and that is like anywhere else in the world. In 2006, there were some 24 cultural uses there. Ten years later, there were only four left.

Audio 3 – An American Looking at European Cities

One of the things that's interesting to me as an American looking at new development in European cities, is that the newer cities seem to have forgotten about the life at the street. Through my American eyes, it seems like there is a stark difference between the quality of public life in the historic neighborhoods versus the new neighborhoods. That that ground level—the liberated ground plane that Corbusier wanted in modernism-- is just boring. I would like to have a conversation with people who are city builders in European cities is what can we learn from each other?

I think looking at South Lake Union, putting some residential on the street level can be done in a way where it really works well. There's not necessarily enough retail for everything at street level, but there are cultural uses to put there. And that's something that we've been working here to try and encourage, is on that street level to have community-based uses and spaces for artists and spaces for culture that makes the neighborhood exciting and vibrant. It's been exciting for me to see the “green factor” in action in South Lake Union. It's a mechanism that Seattle took from Berlin and Malmo, Sweden, where when you develop a site, you need to put in what would be the equivalent of a third of the site being in a natural condition. It's a point-based system. So you get points for doing green roofs, for having trees, for having shrubbery, for having green walls, etc. You get more points for having bigger trees. You get more points if you can see the greenery from the public space. You get more points for doing things that make the sidewalk nicer than you do for doing the green roof that people can't see. But it's easy to see in South Lake Union how green and lush the neighborhood feels.

I think the thing that's most important is that the life of the street is critical to making a neighborhood that is a great place to live--public life happens at that level. I think the green factor and the residential at the street is something that could really be infused into a European model. Europeans understand walkable neighborhoods. I think that the ground level is something that maybe we have something to offer them in terms of ideas.

Audio 4 – What 21st Century Neighborhood Should Look Like

It would be great to have some discussions about what a 21st century neighborhood should look like. We're getting denser. A lot of this is being done in a very top-down way. There's really no other way these neighborhoods are going to get built. So how do you keep that humane “yeast” that makes the city a place that has some soul to it? That doesn't come from the top-down, even if they try. The life of the street happens when you have businesses that make a living by having a great bar, restaurant, shop, that musicians are attracted to hang out there and play on the street because they can make some money doing it. That's the naturally occurring art and culture that often gets lost in these neighborhoods that are very top-down, that people want to control everything. That somehow you've got to loosen up some of that control to actually make a vibrant neighborhood.

What is Seattle's Cultural Space Agency? The idea was to preserve cultural space where you can, to encourage private developers to see the value in having cultural space involved in their private sector developments. One of the things that we found is that developers didn't really know these community organizations. They didn't think they'd pay rent. It was a lot easier for them and just the world that they live in to get some kind of very commercial chain thing that would rent the space.

What could we do to show developers that were attracted to these culturally rich neighborhoods to keep a cultural use in them? Because developers were coming to these attractive neighborhoods and making them less attractive.

One approach was, "Hey, you guys are looking for the cool restaurant to have downstairs. How about a cool restaurant and a cool cultural space? What if you had a little theater in there?" It could be a community-based theater. And the Cultural Space Agency would have that space and ensure an income stream to the developer. It might not be quite as high as Quiznos, but it would be a reliable source of income that you wouldn't have to worry about. And it would make your building attractive.

Audio 5 – The Cultural Space Agency

The Cultural Space Agency is a public development authority, which is quasi-public, quasi-private. So it's a creature of the state or the city or the county, but it's also a bit separate from them legally. The advantage is that you have somebody whose mission it is to do cultural space. They can get funding in a lot of different ways; they can attract private funds that are tax-deductible. They can also accept money from the city. They can accept money from other government sources. They can accept land from the city. The idea is to get that land into the hands of community organizations. A lot of community organizations can't get loans. A lot of them can't really buy property. They don't have the ability to do that for a lot of reasons. But the

Cultural Space Agency can purchase the land or be gifted that land, and then over time have the community organizations buy it from them.

When we're looking at why developers don't include the cultural space in their buildings, the Cultural Space Agency can actually be given that space in a building by the developer, and they can program it. So the developer can have a cool thing in their building that attracts people to want to live in that building. But also the developer can go to the bank and say, "I have secure revenue coming from this space." Instead of a cultural use being or appearing risky to a developer, it's actually an attractive use. If you look at what I think are actually creative neighborhoods, it's usually cheap space.

Artists need cheap space. So do people who are business startups, it's not just arts. It's entrepreneurs. It used to be people that were making things in their garage that turned into real businesses. It was bands that were playing in their garage that ended up being famous bands. It's cheap space that really can offer space for creativity. And I think that's a lesson that we all should learn.

Audio 6 – What is Culture

Culture is a lot of things. So I think we talk about arts and culture a lot because arts, people kind of think they know what those are pretty much. There's visual arts, like painting, there's performing arts, like theater, there are spoken word, all those kinds of arts. People have a pretty clear picture of. Cultural uses are much broader.

It's interesting when you ask people what your culture is. I think if you were to ask some people in Bilbao, there are a lot of things that are very clearly Basque culture. They're very unique pieces of culture. When you ask an American what their culture is, sometimes you get sort of a blank look. And they think, well, maybe it's we have a folklorico dance troupe. It's our football team, maybe.

It's hard for us to see our own culture here partly because it's very internationalized and not unique. Partly because it's very commercial. And I think partly because maybe we don't love it. The Basques are very proud of their culture. And so I think it's not a coincidence that they're a city that took culture seriously to reinvent themselves. I think culture is something that brings people together, where they gather. More and more the digital is included in that mix, not just physical space, which is interesting in itself. But I think culture is something that encourages creativity, not just as an observer, but as a participant.

Culture is also things that are meaningful in your neighborhood. For instance, one of the things we talked about in terms of cultural space a lot here was a barbershop, Earls Barbershop, that was really an important place in that neighborhood. It's where people went.

So cultural spaces can be businesses as well, small businesses. Again, not so heavily commercialized that it's just any old place. Places that have some kind of unique connection with people that live there. Culture is stuff that you love. So when you close your eyes and think of a place, where is it that you like to go to? Where is it that if you've left a place you would go back to? Where do you spend your Sunday afternoon? Where do you run across people that is just by happenstance? Where do you actually have a conversation with somebody? It might be where you walk your dog. It might be where you go to get your vegetables.

But those places are the pieces of your life that have meaning in being in a particular place with a particular group of people. I would say that Bilbao seems very rich in cultural organizations. And that is hugely valuable. Starting those from scratch is hard. Right now there's this school of flamenco. Don't let that die. Give them some space. They're going to be building all of these buildings, give them some space on the ground floor. There's co-working folks. Give them some space.

Those organizations are really, really valuable, and they are valuable in bringing vibrancy to a neighborhood. I have a passion for skate parks. Give these folks a skate park. They'll make this place fun and a place to watch some wonderful things going on. Put art in it. I think there's a tendency in these top-down places that are created, these new neighborhoods, to try to control everything that happens in public space. And that's a vibrancy killer. People keep saying they want a vibrant neighborhood, and they keep killing all the things that bring them vibrancy.

Audio 7 – Gathering to Talk About Creativity

I'm excited that there's a gathering of people that are talking about creativity in cities. I'm excited that Washington State is represented there by some people that I think are fantastic representatives. I'm really interested in hearing what other cities are doing. I'm interested in the discussions that can be had there. I'm interested in meeting some people that are in Bilbao thinking about these things, because I really would like to be more knowledgeable about the city. And if I have anything to offer, I'd be very excited to share. I would like to come home with some ideas that I might be able to put into place in Seattle. And I think the most exciting possibility would be to see some ideas that we might be able to share could have any influence in a city that is as well known for design and culture as Bilbao.