



## The rebirth of Bilbao

**This former industrial city has transformed itself into a vibrant open-air art gallery, and in doing so, it has been awarded the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize**

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The Spanish city of Bilbao, which has been transformed from an industrial wasteland into one of Europe's top tourist destinations, will be recognised in Singapore on Tuesday. The Mayor behind this incredible metamorphoses shares how his city scooped the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, dubbed the "Nobel Prize" for cities.

Bilbao Mayor Inaki Azkuna is an old-school political street-fighter who has led his city for the past 11 years.

Dapper with a neatly-trimmed moustache, the 67-year-old former hospital doctor chooses his words carefully and methodically, a trait prevalent in many top politicians used to making their case before seemingly immovable opposition.

Indeed, every step of Bilbao's revival has been a political battle for Senor Azkuna. The Guggenheim museum, one of the major turning points in the city's journey from urban eye-sore to centre of culture and beauty, was one of his first.

Still a health minister in the Basque government at the time, he was involved in the struggle to have the world-famous museum franchise built in his city. The remarkable titanium structure now stands as a monument to Bilbao's "miraculous" transformation.

In an exclusive interview with Today ahead of his visit to Singapore this week, he explained: "When Paris and Venice turned down the chance to house the Guggenheim, we were given an incredible opportunity.

"But people said: 'This is how you plan to get us out of recession? You want to waste money on a museum?'

"Of course, the master stroke was getting Frank Gehry to design the building. And when the people saw the beauty of his titanium structure they realised we were right."

He added: "I have to admit that every step of the way in rebuilding Bilbao, we have faced opposition. It goes on even now, political and public opposition. I want to make that clear.

### DEJA VU OF A CRISIS

A major seaport and industrial centre with a population of about 350,000, Bilbao - at barely 41 square kilometres, or one-seventeenth the size of Singapore - is the largest city in the autonomous Basque Country.

The 19th century industrial revolution saw the city grow rich from mining, steel and shipbuilding.

In 1983, heavy floods devastated the city and dozens perished. The old town - Casca Vieja - was hit particularly badly.

When I meet the Mayor and his team in the imposing 19th century building which houses City Hall, he is holding a crisis cabinet meeting following two days of major rain fall. There is a fear the river which snakes through the city might burst its banks within hours, triggering a repeat of the disaster 27 years ago.

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and tram system to travel from area to area.

This means that when you walk around the city there is a wonderful sense of space, so much so that you wonder if you have arrived during a local holiday.

#### IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO FALL IN LOVE

Other new landmarks include the Santiago Calatrava-designed Zubizuri Bridge and the Euskalduna Conference Centre, also on the riverside replacing a run-down railway track.

The buildings, bridges and other landmarks scattered around Bilbao take your breath away, and it is impossible not to fall in love with the city.

Huge efforts - not to mention sums of money - have also been invested in restoring Bilbao's most historic buildings. From medieval plazas to 19th-century theatres, to outdoor street markets dating back 500 years, old Bilbao has been returned to its former glory to sit seamlessly alongside the new generation of buildings.

This is City Hall at its most potent, and it is impressive. Senor Azkuna is a man on a mission: Having created a world-beating environment for Bilbao's residents, it is clear he is creating a city which he wants people from all over the world to enjoy.

"What does it all mean? It means we have created a cultural capital and a quality of life which has improved beyond anything we could have imagined 20 years ago," he says.

"Winning the World City Prize has been wonderful for us and validates what we have done and what we will do in the future."

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# Editorial and Comment

## At last . . . the wrong decision

**T**HE DRAWN-OUT saga of Queens Wharf has become such an embarrassment that it is tempting to greet Friday's compromise with a sigh of relief.

Non-Aucklanders who make good sport of ridiculing Jafas wonder with good reason how collective civic expertise could make such a hash of what seemed like a simple task.

With the Rugby World Cup barely a year away, decision is better than indecision, but the two parties to Friday's announcement exhibited as much satisfaction as someone contemplating root canal work. That is as it should have been, because regardless of what they had decided to do, Queens Wharf was always going to be — and remains — the wrong place to do it.

The very name "Party Central" should have served as a warning that a disaster was in the making. The phrase's dated, geeky overtones were exaggerated by the fact that it was coined by the Prime Minister, who is not everyone's idea of a party animal. And it assumed that everybody — never mind rugby fans — would get together and party where they were told to.

We have a scant tradition of gathering outdoors to watch sporting events on giant

screens, particularly in rain-prone spring: New Zealanders who aren't able to get to the ground prefer to enjoy their sport in pubs and clubs or at home.

And imagine the private reaction of police — from the top brass to the lowliest constable — at the news that the Prime Minister was wanting all the rugby fans in Auckland to gather in one place at the same time and start drinking.

— HERALD ON SUNDAY —

Doubtless the PM wanted to inject a little atmosphere into the Queen City on the occasion of the biggest sporting event ever held here. But if the intention was commendable, the execution has been awful.

The dithering by local body leaders has seemed worse than it actually was: advice about the heritage value of the cargo

learned nothing from the stadium debacle.

So now it's decided: Shed 10 and the temporary "slug" (the Government's preferred description is "cloud") will make a "fan zone". Final costings — as distinct from the final cost — will emerge in the days ahead.

But it will remain the wrong plans in the wrong place at the wrong time. The city having only just retaken possession of its waterfront, this is a time to

carefully explore the idea of an integrated development joining the city to the water. Whatever happens at Queens Wharf will either pre-empt some of that decision-making or involve substantial expenditure on structures that will have to be bulldozed or further refurbished.

In a country already borrowing \$250 million a week, it is madness to pursue the Queens Wharf option when the Viaduct Events centre is being built anyway; is scheduled for completion well before the Rugby World Cup; and is far better sited, close to an entertainment precinct rather than tucked behind a commuter ferry terminal.

As our informal poll today suggests, most Aucklanders think a Viaduct location makes more sense. If Queens Wharf's proximity to Britomart and Queen St — scarcely the pulsating heart of the City of Sails — is important, that is easily solved by laying on a continuous, free shuttle-bus service linking it to the Viaduct's eastern and western sectors.

As matters stand, we are committed to a dog's breakfast of a design in a place no one will want to go. Auckland may think that the arguments are over, but the problems with Party Central have barely begun.

## Jobs law changes not all bad

**THOSE WHOSE** business is defending the rights of workers are naturally appalled at the Government's plan to extend the 90-day employment trial period to all workplaces.

At the National Party's conference in Auckland today, Prime Minister John Key is expected to announce planned amendments to the Employment Relations Act which will allow any employer to dismiss a worker within the first 90 days without being liable to a personal grievance claim for unjustified dismissal. When the scheme was

introduced last year, as the recession was starting to bite, it applied only to workplaces with fewer than 20 employees — which, it should be remembered, is about 90 per cent of them. Its intention was to encourage employers to take on staff without fearing a protracted employment dispute if the employee proved unsuitable or the economics of the decision didn't stack up.

Unions have vowed to fight the extension and Opposition leader Phil Goff seems keen to use the issue to lubricate his party's rusty links with labour. But their case would be

stronger if they could produce evidence that the scheme has resulted in a significant erosion of workers' rights.

Employers and Manufacturers Association figures show that three out of four employers have used the scheme and almost 90 per cent have kept workers on. Those aren't bad results. Anything that encourages an employer to take a punt on a new worker — and in particular to give a chance to someone who shows promise but lacks credentials — must be worth trying. It defies common sense that cost-

conscious bosses will casually sack someone they have spent three months training. Foreshadowed restrictions in union access to workplaces are more disturbing. There is no evidence that the present system is not working, and the amendment as proposed will make it harder for union representatives to protect their members' rights and easier for bad employers to escape scrutiny. That is in no one's legitimate interest. But in opposing the extension of the trial scheme unions seem more driven by ideology than good sense.