

# CREATING AN ECO-COMMUNITY In A Post-Industrial Wasteland



Robert Alcock describes how residents are redesigning a crumbling urban settlement into a very special ecological community.

In January 2000 my partner and I moved to a village in Spain. So far, so familiar. But this is not your typical story about life in a sleepy rural idyll. The area where we live, the Zorrozaurre Peninsula in Bilbao, is a post-industrial wasteland at the heart of Spain's third biggest city. Fifteen minutes' walk from the Guggenheim Museum, that titanium-clad temple to postmodernism, is an urban village of 500 people, living alongside ruined factories with natural grass roofs, where lizards dart among mosses and samphire, and kingfishers and cormorants

fish in the river. Here we are trying to create a sustainable barrio (urban neighbourhood), in the face of financial and political interests that see the area as a playground for speculative development.

Almudena and I met in Dublin in 1997, working together in a research group on the environmental impacts of buildings and cities. Then she found a job back home in Bilbao, the main city in the Basque Country of northern Spain. After experiencing the mountains, the wave lashed coast, and a culture where life still seemed to be about quality, not quantity, I was ready to join her.

We ended up in Zorrozaurre by sheer luck, or maybe fate. Looking to buy a flat within cycling distance of the city centre, the very first place we viewed was a spacious old apartment overlooking the river. Thanks to the decaying neighbourhood, it was a bargain, even by local standards. To clinch it, a Brazilian friend was renting the flat just downstairs – serendipity!

We closed the sale, moved in and soon felt at home in the low-rent, bohemian atmosphere of the peninsula, where local working people mixed with squatters, immigrants and the odd artist.



*Top:*  
The waterfront of Zorrozaurre seen from the river.

*Above:*  
Mural on a squat.

*Bottom left:*  
Dressed up for carnival.

*Bottom right:*  
Nature reclaiming the flat roofs of abandoned units.



Isolation gave the community a friendly solidarity; the city was just over the mental horizon. We fell in love with the flowing light on the river, the crumbling beauty of the industrial architecture, the diversity of life in unusual micro-habitats. The area's problems – traffic, air pollution, lack of services, graffiti and grime – seemed a small price to pay for living in such a unique place.

#### FIRST STEPS

One of the first things we did after moving in was to create a communal riverside garden, together with a few neighbours. The site – a concrete landing stage – could hardly have been less promising: no natural soil (the soil here is mostly contaminated, anyway); intense sun reflected off



waterfront – luxury flats and shopping malls, ‘anchored’ by big high-profile buildings like the Guggenheim and the Euskalduna concert hall – was spreading down river like a very expensive rash. Most residents believed their homes would be bulldozed to make way for yuppie flats, and felt powerless to resist. There was a deep-rooted cynicism and resignation in the barrio.

In contrast, I saw Zorrozaurre as a huge opportunity. I had read about many places around the world where people had created more sustainable settlements and ways of life: from Village Homes in California to Las Gaviotas in Colombia, from Curitiba in Brazil to BedZED in London... If we could do the same here, it would have a tremendous impact.

As well as being a community strongly identified with a unique and beautiful place, Zorrozaurre was also a significant area of land (57 hectares / 143 acres) in a highly visible location at the heart of a major city, the region's economic engine. I dreamed of an ecological barrio: where people lived

*Top left:*  
Beauty in the calm reflections.

*Bottom near left:*  
Part of the author's riverside garden.

*Bottom far left:*  
A lush garden belonging to a house due for demolition.

*Centre top:*  
Waterfront houses on the Zorrozaurre peninsula.



the water surface, salt-laden drying winds, and no nearby water source, the river being brackish. We made containers using concrete blocks and car tyres,<sup>1</sup> collected plant material from wherever we found it, imported some soil and made more with worm bins.

It was hard to get our fellow residents to compost, especially in hot weather when fruit flies became a serious nuisance. People were a bit more convinced once they saw the tomatoes that grew in the improved soil, which also held plenty of moisture. Our neighbour's son even applied for a government grant to start a worm farm! (Sadly, he was turned down.) Today, after five years and many setbacks, the garden is still very much a work in progress. I'd love to hear from anyone with experience of creating gardens under similar conditions...

But we soon became aware that our little world was endangered. The redevelopment of Bilbao's



amidst wildlife, fruit trees and roof gardens, where streets were for people and not cars, where the best ideas in sustainable design would be tried out in practice.

But how to get there from here? We came up with the idea of a forum, a space for open dialogue. We would invite all the stakeholders

*Top right:*  
Salt tolerant plants growing on the river wall.

*Bottom near right:*  
Residents painting a mural.

*Bottom far right:*  
Reeds growing in old ferry steps.

*Centre bottom:*  
Aerial photo of the Zorrozaurre peninsula.

in the area, the residents would put their concerns, experts would come to talk about sustainable cities.

Through the local residents' association, where Almudena sat on the committee, we began lobbying politicians for support. We found that while doors might be open, minds were not. There was little awareness in Bilbao of the global environmental crisis, and no culture of citizen activism.

#### ARCHITECTURE FOR PIGS

We often became discouraged and thought, why should we bother? In the end, I suppose, we bother because it's our place, our environment. It's where we stand. I think that to be happy you need to be creatively engaged with your surroundings – which



the Forum for a Sustainable Zorrozaurre a reality. But first we had to convince the residents' association, which was hardest of all; they didn't trust the politicians and thought it would be a lot of work for little return.

The first meeting of the forum was held over two days in March 2004. It was a lot of (unpaid) work, but with great returns. About 150 people came. Politicians, experts, residents, and even a representative of Zaha's team, expressed a great diversity of views about Zorrozaurre and its future. The press came and some actually wrote about it. Contacts were made inside and outside the peninsula. People told us they had never thought it possible, nothing like this had happened in Bilbao before...



could mean a little riverside garden, your neighbourhood, or the whole planet.

Behind closed doors, meanwhile, powers were mobilizing. A managing commission for the area was formed, made up of government and major landowners; the residents were not invited. It was announced that a famous architect was going to design a plan for Zorrozaurre. After much speculation, they named the Anglo-Iraqi 'superstar' Zaha Hadid – an architect with no experience in urban planning and no noticeable interest in ecology; she has been quoted as saying, "Ecological architecture is architecture for pigs."<sup>2</sup>

Then a city election brought a more sympathetic party into the Urban Planning and Environment department. With the backing of the Town Hall, suddenly the provincial and regional governments wanted to play too. We had the funding to make



But we soon realised how much work there was left to do. In October, to great fanfare, Zaha Hadid's team presented their plan for the area. In some way it was better than we'd feared: all the existing residential buildings were to be retained. But while lip service was given to 'sustainability', the only real actions proposed were recycling rain water and diverting traffic away from the main riverside street. It was a 95% conventional plan.

It seemed, from later conversations, that Zaha's team blamed the client (the managing commission) for not demanding more sustainability; whereas the commission thought it was up to the architects to show them what a sustainable city would be like: both sides were vaguely aware of the issue, but neither took responsibility for it.

The forum continued its momentum, now with more support from the residents. In November, in collaboration with some sympathetic architects, a community workshop<sup>3</sup> took place where residents and others discussed and voted on visions for the future of Zorrozaurre. The results were very encouraging: the top five proposals included 'Eco-City' (in which the development of the whole peninsula is based on environmental criteria), 'Green Zorrozaurre' (where priority is given to green space and the regeneration of natural habitats), and 'Barrio for Pedestrians'. Those three ideas together express the essence of what I would call an ecological barrio.

*Centre top:* Part of the design from the Ecological Centre workshop.


*Centre bottom:* Voting on the proposed visions.

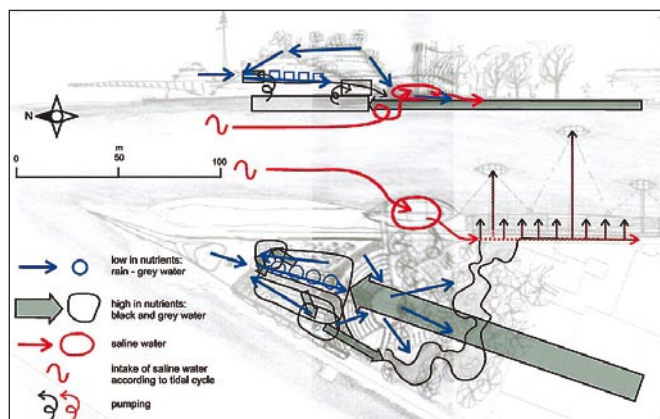
We also held another smaller workshop focused on a specific location, the northern tip of the peninsula, a fantastic site in every way and key to the area's future identity. The participants proposed a centre for ecological knowledge which would promote and demonstrate sustainability, acting on scales from local to regional, based on an open-source philosophy and the idea that human beings are part of nature.

## DREAMING THE FUTURE

So far, it looks as if the forum has laid some solid foundations in Zorrozaurre. The residents are secure; the association is currently negotiating with the town hall and the managing commission for money to rehabilitate the houses. The local art foundation has also been reprieved from eviction, and they're going to release a documentary about Zorrozaurre and the forum. Sustainability even seems

groups in neighbouring areas – especially the area across the river, which faces similar pressures. We're bringing in more people with experience of urban sustainability/permaculture to work the residents and local experts and exchange experiences with groups in other cities. Another project is to create an 'open source' website<sup>4</sup> to which anyone can contribute. Here, we are dreaming of a truly sustainable barrio – whatever that means in an area that could be below sea level in 100 years.

It is still only a dream. Zaha's plan is now under consideration, prior to approval by the city and provincial governments, which would be a major step towards a business-as-usual future for the area. On a wider scale, the region is in the throes of a property boom – prices reaching ever more exorbitant levels, and green fields disappearing every day under tarmac and tacky suburbs. At times I think of Bilbao's (malignant) 'growth' economy as a monstrous beast, and an ecological Zorrozaurre as a dagger to its heart. We keep pushing the blade in, but it looks like the beast will take a long time to die 



It would be an 'observatory' to study and guide the development of Zorrozaurre and Bilbao towards sustainability. It would pay its way with an organic restaurant, through education, and by treating the area's sewage and greywater, using a selection of ecosystems comprising a microcosm of the river estuary and its watershed. Castles in the air? Perhaps, but as Thoreau said, that's where they should be – now put foundations under them.

to be trendy in Bilbao now; senior politicians have been heard talking in public about the area as a 'car-free island' and other such radical ideas.

We're continuing to build our network of contacts. We are organizing events in the barrio: boat tours of the peninsula, talks on local history, ecology and architecture, and maybe this autumn a 'car free' day. We are talking to the politicians and the managers, with respect even when we don't believe them. We're also strengthening links with community

## MORE INFORMATION

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- <sup>1</sup> See [www.lesspress.com/ecodesign/tyres.htm](http://www.lesspress.com/ecodesign/tyres.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> Reportedly in a speech at Harvard, 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> Based on the 'European Awareness Scenarios Workshop' methodology.
- <sup>4</sup> All Forum publications are available free from our website at: info@zorrozaurre.org