

GUIDE MAGAZINE

The Model of Bilbao, Spain

What Can the Hudson Valley Learn?

By Richard Frisbie

I recently returned from a visit to Spain, the number one tourist destination in the world. As I traveled the Spanish countryside I kept comparing our desire to attract tourism in the Hudson Valley and Catskill Mountains with Spain's success. My conclusion? We would do well to study their achievements as we plan for the future.

In the early 1990s the Spanish government decided to aggressively pursue the tourist dollar by encouraging new and innovative architecture. Since then they have excelled in the growing field of Architectural Tourism. They instituted a series of municipal projects, such as libraries, train stations, museums, airports, auditoriums, etc., as well as partially funding many private developments. Every project that received public funds was required to enter into an architecture competition. New, young architects, and their established colleagues from all over the world, were invited to submit plans to a Review Board which picked the winning design. Unlike here, the architects were charged with full legal responsibility over the project from beginning to end. In other words, they couldn't just design it, collect a fee and walk away. It had to be buildable, and so well-designed that they could see the project through to a successful completion.

Imagine if that were the case for the problem-riddled Ulster County Law Enforcement Center, the largest capital project ever undertaken by the county. Then an architect would allow construction to begin only when the design was complete, virtually eliminating change backs and redesigns. But we don't have that protection here. A recent state audit listed (among other things) design flaws and poorly written contracts as the cause of cost overruns and the delayed

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Guggenheim Museum, with its undulating titanium shell designed by Frank Gehry, is familiar as the inspiration for our own Bard College's more recent Performance Bard. The Guggenheim is one of the top attractions in all of Europe.



On the revitalized Bilbao waterfront, the Euskalduna Conference Centre, designed by Frederico Soriano and Dolores Palacios, which opened in 1999. It is so huge that one of the last ship hulls build on the site is enshrined in the interior.

opening of the “jail.” There’s no clear trail to follow in our attempts to figure out who dropped the ball and caused a 40 million dollar cost overrun, with completion delayed by over a year. That couldn’t happen if we’d adopted the Spanish model. Will we allow it to happen again?

In the Rondout section of Kingston, retired Brooklyn attorney Rob Iannucci plans to develop a variety of maritime projects, including a WWII vintage PT boat museum, commercial and public space, with housing on the island, to revitalize the city’s waterfront. There is even talk of building a hotel, and his possible acquisition of the Hudson River Maritime Museum. He already owns the Cornell steamboat building; the Fitch Bluestone Co. building; Island Dock; the L&M junk yard, and Ulster Marine. He’s also leasing a 2-acre shorefront parcel from the city in anticipation of a future purchase. No clear development proposal has yet emerged, but it is prime waterfront property in an important tourist section of the city.

There is a nearby project on the 535-acre site of the old Tilcon cement company in East Kingston and just over the border into the Town of Ulster, on the Hudson River. Yonkers developer AVR Acquisition Corp. originally proposed 2,182 units of housing, including townhouses, condominiums, single-family houses and apartments. More recently, their scaled-back plans called for 1,750 high-density mixed housing, plus shops and commercial space. With a nod to the lower income segment, a percentage of the housing may be priced for entry-level home buyers. (One contractor I spoke with defined entry-level as \$250,000.) This is the largest development the company has ever undertaken, and certainly the largest Kingston has ever seen.

Between these projects is the newest proposal, Sailor’s Cove on the site of the old Hutton Brickyard. An Ohio developer, 771 Polaris Liability, recently proposed a 369-unit housing development for this extensive waterfront location. All three projects together include more than one and a half miles of shoreline. Will there be one Kingston plan in place for all three, or will we see a hodgepodge of patched together projects? In the future, Kingston will be remembered for the vision, or lack of vision, that it shows now.

Among the municipal projects Spain undertook were plans to renovate industrial waterfronts, and to rebuild train stations so they didn’t divide a city. The major waterfront project of Bilbao was similar to what we have here in the Rondout and East Kingston, except, in Bilbao, Frank Gehry designed the Guggenheim Museum that became a tourist destination for the entire world! In the process the defunct and rusting ship-building and ore-processing plants were leveled, and the old port was relocated. The many lanes of traffic on nearby highways were reduced to one lane each way to make room for public transportation in the form of a trolley-style ‘Tran,’ with pedestrian and cyclist paths adjoining it. Public gardens with sculpture were installed along the water, and each additional building vied for the architectural tourism the Guggenheim commanded. The result? A thoroughly “walkable” and beautiful community with shopping, apartments, condominiums, a library, convention center, gardens and museums that attracts people from all over the world. There is even a maritime museum! Will the Rondout and East Kingston

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A view of Bilbao, Spain. The river is girdled by new pedestrian promenades, with architect-designed foot bridges connecting both sides to the parks and gardens that follow its curving shores around this new section of the city.

waterfront developments be as striking and as much of a tourism magnet as Bilbao's? Some of the elements are already in place, with Kingston Point Park and the beach as the perfect centerpiece, but much has to be done for that area to truly succeed as a tourism magnet. It could happen if Kingston adopts Spain's plan, with all the safeguards it offers, and demands a people-friendly and architecturally stunning design.



A view of Bilbao, Spain. The river is girdled by new pedestrian promenades, with architect-designed foot bridges connecting both sides to the parks and gardens that follow its curving shores around this new section of the city.

Elsewhere in Spain, a railroad line virtually divided a city. The solution? The tracks went underground so traffic (meaning pedestrians, cyclists and autos) could easily move around the city, uniting it! The Euskotren Headquarters Development in Vizcaya became the new town center, with parks and public spaces around a soaring glass and steel structure with restaurants and shops at street level, an office complex above and the station below. Imagine that happening in Kingston. Not just the dream that passenger rail traffic will one day return to our west shore, but that the tracks will no longer be an impediment to the life of a community. Time after time Spain focused on encouraging and improving public transportation, while uniting and enervating downtown urban centers. Modern studies support that theory here, but we are too often shortsighted. We lack the vision to avoid the sprawl our planners have historically favored.

Futurists predict the collapse of suburbs. As rising taxes and energy costs make them too expensive to live in, they claim populations will shift to the convenience of urban centers. This is borne out by study after study conducted by AARP and other people-friendly organizations. Yankee magazine's top five places to live in New England all have clearly defined urban centers with libraries, shopping, government, banks, public spaces and housing, all within easy walking distance. Yet, we're still building strip malls, McMansion developments, and destination big box stores, when the future is clearly on Main Street! If that is an example of planning, it is an example of planning for disaster. Libraries, schools, Village and Town boards must all commit to preserving the viability of community centers by staying in them. With the availability of services our Main Streets could be alive and vibrant into the 22nd century.

In Spain, as it should be here, the most important building block of urban life is housing. Besides the innovative designs, housing projects that received any public funding also had to provide residences to meet the demographics of the community, and public space for tenants. The young and old of all financial strata have to be accommodated by the design. When it means the difference between getting the necessary permits to build, or not, it is amazing how creative builders can be to meet these basic standards. My favorite example is a tall narrow building with a hole in the center, like a square doughnut. In the 'Edificio Mirador' housing project the "hole" is a five story open space that serves as a public plaza for the building's "neighborhood," with an incredible view over the city of Madrid. It looks amazing on the skyline, too.

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Kingston Waterfront looking east down the Rondout toward the Hudson River (from Rt 9W bridge) with the Maritime Museum in the center left. Photograph by Richard Frisbie

One of the most controversial ways Spain has achieved its tourism success is with the composition of new, modern elements of design tied into ancient structures. We are not just speaking of the juxtaposition of modern and old buildings, but their synergy into one functional artistic statement. Here in

Kingston we have the Old Dutch Church, which was the first church built between Manhattan and Albany. It has records going back to 1660 even though the current structure dates from the 1800s. Diagonally across the street from it is the glass and steel Ulster County office building. It is an ugly abomination, very '60s modern. We have old and new together, but in more of a utilitarian, rather than a functionally attractive way. Architects in Spain make it look as if we should have tried harder. When they put old and new together it works!



Kingston Waterfront looking west from Rt 9W bridge. Island Dock is visible center left, with the old bluestone works on right shore beyond the bridge. Photograph by Richard Frisbie

There are two excellent examples in Spain that combine ancient and modern in a way which would be considered sacrilege here. The walled medieval city of Toledo was a regional government center and an important tourist destination, with limited parking and poor access for all those people. The innovative solution was to design a series of escalators and covered walkways from an underground garage into and through the ancient walls. This meant a section of the centuries-old structure had to be bulldozed, so the old and new could meld into an unobtrusive and sculptural egress. I cringe at the thought of the initial destruction, but the resulting structure is simply astounding! It works!

On a lesser scale, the Town Hall Extension for the city of Murcia uses a modern screen facade of natural materials and asymmetrical openings to balance its end of an urban square opposite a baroque cathedral. The square footage of the old town hall is increased, while the atmosphere in the square is preserved. Again, there is an amazing use of design elements to bring both old and new construction together to create a harmonious, balanced urban environment. Would either happen here without picket lines and a hue and cry in the press?

Remember when Bard College wanted to prominently locate their Frank Gehry designed performance space reminiscent of the Bilbao Guggenheim? The public outcry was deafening! The result? A world-class building which should have been highly visible, perhaps even from the Hudson River, was buried in a wooded glen. Architecture can't be a tourist attraction if tourists can't see it!

So, where do we go from here? In Kingston, a crumbling parking garage could be replaced by a combination commercial and residential building on the edge of the old stockade district. With an innovative design it would be a twelve-story architectural beacon, and an impressive sculptural presence on the Kingston skyline. We can build the six-story "glass menagerie" in the church's dooryard, but local feeling runs against any structure taller than that church's steeple! The result may be that two long blocks from the church a stubby stack of empty boxes, attracting no architectural notice, will meet the height requirements of a small minority of vocal citizens.



On the Rondout and surrounds there is more hope. Still, a proactive government has to step in and require world-class design and multi-class housing before a true tourism destination will result. Do they have the stamina and the backbone for it? Formidable foes are lined up to protect view-sheds, preserving a rural shoreline for a Dutchess County perspective, while private developers, who are angling for every conceivable tax break, cling to parochial designs. Vision will have to be found to achieve success there.

And what of our urban areas? For them to thrive, sprawl has to be curtailed, aging urban properties must be creatively and attractively redesigned for modern use, and planners must include the need for open space in their decisions. If we can learn from the tourism masters of Spain, our architecture will help attract tourists and new residents, insuring the vitality of our communities into the next century.

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