

Beyond Bilbao - new cultural architecture projects in Santander, Avilés and Santiago de Compostela

Peter Nientied, 2025

Bilbao's well-known Guggenheim opened in 1997 and has been a source of inspiration for other cities, in Spain and outside. Bilbao showed that investing in culture contributes to city renewal and a new city identity. But, as studies have demonstrated, the success of Bilbao cannot be easily copied. Times and conditions are changing.

Bilbao may attract many visitors, but the Northern coast region has much more to offer in terms of major cultural architecture projects; Centro Botín in Santander, Centro Niemeyer in Avilés and Cidade da Cultura (Gaías) in Santiago de Compostela. The three Spanish cities have, each in their own way, substantially invested in cultural architecture as a vehicle for positively impacting city development. The three cities have involved well-known architects, Renzo Piano, Oscar Niemeyer and Peter Eisenman resp., to design remarkable buildings that attract attention and do justice to the development aims of the cities.

Centro Botín in Santander

Centro Botín is a cultural centre for contemporary art exhibitions, music, film, theatre, and literature. It aims to be a lively, welcoming place, a regular meeting point for people to enjoy themselves, learn, and become inspired, thanks to the diverse range of artistic experiences on offer for all types of audiences. Moreover, it aims at being an engine for generating economic, social, and cultural wealth. It is a private sector initiative, of the Botín Foundation (linked to Banco Santander). The centre was opened in 2017 by the Spanish King, three years later than initially planned.

The building (10.285 sq. m.) has been designed by Renzo Piano in collaboration with Luis Vidal + architects. It is set in an exceptional location on the Santander Bay next to the seafront. It finds itself in the historic Pereda Gardens that have been extended to double their previous size. The Centre has gallery spaces, lecture rooms, work spaces, a roof terrace open to the public and a 300-seater auditorium. It also has a popular café and an arts shop. A tunnel was constructed to guide car traffic. Before construction there was resistance against the location; precious public space was occupied by a private sector investment.

Centro Botín is a wonderful architourism experience. The building is in a beautiful environment with a park and the shore. The building invites people; for a coffee in the café, for enjoying the views of the city and the harbour after climbing the building (there is also an elevator), of course for visiting the exhibition spaces, for meeting others. Under the building there is a meeting space, and on the public space next to the building there is enough room for people who want to see a movie in the open air cinema. The atmosphere has something special - the smell of salt water, people enjoying themselves, the park in front, make it a popular and happy space. Santander is a beautiful city with beaches, a harbour promenade, a historic core, etc. etc. Many motives for a trip to Santander.

Link: <https://www.centrobotin.org>

Centro Niemeyer in Avilés

Avilés is a city with about 80.000 inhabitants, and it is close to Gijón and Oviedo. Avilés' Centro Niemeyer centre started in 2011 as a public space for arts and cultural events – music, theatre, dance, expositions etc. It is one of Asturias' tourism attractions and a symbol of Avilés' transformation. It contains an auditorium for 1,000 people, a dome for art exhibitions, a multifunctional building that has a cinema and a cafeteria, and a 13 meter lookout tower over the Avilés estuary, in use as a restaurant

Centro Niemeyer has a large open space that is open to the public and used for leisure activities. The Centre uses this space for open air performances. The centre is located on 'the other side' of the river, extending the old city centre. A pedestrian walkway was designed to cross the river, the railroad and big road and connects the historic centre of Avilés with Centro Niemeyer. After the walkway, there is a tunnel under the port road with the entrance to the Centre.

The architecture of Centro Niemeyer is different from any other place in Spain. Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, who agreed to do his last project in Europe (Niemeyer died in 2012, 104 years old). Centro Niemeyer attracted a lot of international attention, from artists, celebrities and also marketers (you find the centre in brochures of fast cars for example).

The architecture complex with its curvy character is a very nice surprise. The interior of the buildings, especially the dome, is fluid, the exterior lacks straight lines. The big open space is ideal for hanging out, walking, taking pictures or a coffee on the terrace. Families come here with small kids who want to skate or play with their bike. Architecture tourists visit the Centre but only few foreigners. The Centre offers daily a guided tour.

Centro Niemeyer offers a great architecture experience and can be a daytrip from Gijón or Oviedo. I stayed a few days in Avilés, it has a beautiful, small historic centre, but not much more than that. In nearby Gijón (270.000 inhabitants), you find the impressive Laboral Ciudad de la Cultura amongst many other sites, and Oviedo (220.000 inhabitants) is known for its historic centre, and architecture tourists may want to see Calatrava's massive Palacio de Congresos. The extension (modern wing / ampliación) of the Museo de Bellas Artes in Oviedo is worth a visit - it is modest and beautiful.

Link: <https://www.centroniemeyer.es/>

Santiago de Compostela, Cidade da Cultura de Galicia, CdC (Ciudad de Cultura, City of Culture Gaías)

CdC in Santiago de Compostela is, in its own words, a large-scale cultural hub, devoted to the knowledge and creativity of today, enabling an integrated approach to a strategic element for the development of Galicia: that of culture. Architecture has been made to be at the service of culture and art. In 1999 twelve design concepts were received by renowned architects and Peter Eisenmann's was selected. CdC was initially envisioned as a space for promoting Galicia and its culture worldwide. The proposed complex had six big buildings - a library, a newspaper library, a music theatre, museum, central services building and a new technologies building. A big park surrounds the CdC.

The Centre was faced in the past with management and political problems. The plan was discussed and in 2005 redefined when the Galician government changed and a left-wing

coalition that was very critical of the developments took over power from a right-wing government led by Manuel Fraga, a long-serving president of the regional government (1990 – 2005). Realised have been the Centre for Creative Entrepreneurship, the Library and Archive, the Museum and the Centre for Cultural Innovation, with a range of open spaces and works of art. The current strategic plan 2021 - 2027 stresses entrepreneurship, technology and the programming of Galician culture. A new building dedicated to research, the Fontán Building (12,689 m²), was added after some architectural adjustments (especially the roof), but the building with its rather conventional glass façade and steel, is quite different.

CdC is away from the historic city of Santiago, famous for its cathedral as last point of the Camino, the Saint Jacob's Way. It was thought that pilgrims would visit CdC after they ended their route, but they don't. After finishing their long hike, they rest a bit, celebrate the end of their long hike, and go home. Santiago is not a big town, and CdC looks oversized. It is a quiet place during the weekends. As an architecture experience, CdC is astonishing. The complex is magnificent, spacious, the gardens are beautiful and well maintained. It is very enjoyable and it easy to spend a day here. CdC has a cafeteria but the restaurant was closed during the weekend.

CdC is a 45 mts. drive from A Coruña (250.000 inhabitants), which is a very pleasant city and has the modern architecture of Museo Domus.

Link: www.cidadedacultura.gal/en