

Believing in Miracles:

The Rebirth of a City, Report from Singapore World City Summit, June 2010

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Do you believe in miracles? The Mayor of the City of Bilbao, Inaki Azkuna, is in Singapore to receive the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, also called the “Nobel prize” for cities. And now before an audience of a thousand city planners, mayors, ministers and urban researchers he poses this challenging question. And with good reason, because how else could the rebirth of a city like Bilbao be described other than as a miracle and an overwhelming one at that?

And then he goes on telling the incredible story of a city rising like a bird Phoenix from the ruins. The disastrous decline of the formerly thriving industrial town due to market downturns had led to an equally serious social crisis. The Mayor explains: we had a devastated region, our industry falling to pieces due to falling steel prices, and then in 1983 came the devastating flood that hit our old town and left dozens dead. The outlook for the future could not have been more bleak and hopeless.

And then the miracle happened. A stroke of fate? A product of chance? The Guggenheim Foundation was looking for a venue to build a museum for contemporary art in Europe. Paris and Salzburg had been contacted, but were not ready to respond to the challenge. So here is where the Mayor saw their chance. They built a museum in the middle of a crisis, with a ruined economy! And the Mayor raises his voice: In times of crises it is time to invest! He could have added, It is time to invest in culture and the arts. But everybody got the point, although it probably went against the commonly accepted principles of economic and urban management theory.

And here the Mayor turns to telling the success story of a city reborn, the story of a reinvented and regenerated city, a model of inclusive urban development, and of the complete change of heart of the media and trade unions from resistance

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to enthusiastic cooperation. And at the inception and center of it all was The Guggenheim Museum. One of the most audacious city projects of our times was paid for within three years.

By now our readers might have been led to think that this major conference on urban development would center on the space for the arts in city regeneration and development. Although the inclusive conference theme was Livable & Sustainable Cities for the Future, other basic issues were on the agenda at the World Cities Summit 2010. At the top of this agenda was the immediate challenge of providing a safe and adequate water supply to the rapidly growing city populations around the world.

To cite a few figures:

According to United Nations' estimates the proportion of the world's population living in the cities will rise from today's 50 percent to 70 percent by 2030. Every week sees more than a million people moving into the cities. Ninety percent of future population growth is likely to be concentrated in the cities. Asia alone will host 63 percent of the world's population of 8.3 billion people. With the present, worldwide population of close to 1 billion people who have no access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion people without access to any type of improved sanitation, close to 10 percent of diseases globally are attributable to poor sanitation and unsafe water.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is to halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015.

The immediate challenges of meeting this goal formed the backdrop for the synchronization of the World City Summit with Singapore's Water Week, which constituted the unique dual framework initiated by the organizers. First and foremost was the Centre for Livable Cities with its Director Edwin Seah. This ingenious conference structure - an innovative and timely model for interdisciplinary cooperation, laid the foundation for city planners to enter into a fruitful debate with environmentalists on the issues that need immediate attention. Equally ingenious was the conference structure with Plenaries, Expert panel sessions, Mayors' Forum, Ministerial Dialogues, and not least, the Learning Tours affording an on-site insight into the latest development of the host city - Singapore that proudly features key achievements in design, public housing, waste and resource management, urban biodiversity conservation, and marine aquaculture.

Singapore's action plan 2000 - 2012 includes reducing CO₂ emissions by 15 percent, promoting the use of renewable energy, improving the efficiency in use of applications, improving solid waste management (recycling and conversion to energy) and the expansion of the park system. Already Singapore is a city in a garden having in the span of a few years, expanded its greenery space from 36 percent to 47 percent in spite of a population growth from 2.7 million to 4.6 million.



Figure 1: Sculpture, Brasilia (Singapore World City Summit 2010)

The enormous challenges facing us call for concerted action by all individuals and all sectors of society. And here is where the inventiveness and the social commitment by artists, art educators and researchers will be needed. Bilbao has shown that art and culture can be decisive motors in urban development. At one of the conference sessions the Director of the Edinburgh Festival, Jonathan Mills, tells a similar story of design driven (as opposed to engineering driven) city development.

In 1947 as the city of Edinburgh was coping in the aftermath of the Second World War, the city fathers took the courageous decision to establish a festival that would “embrace the world.” The festival was seen as a new opportunity to enlist the cooperation of all of its citizens in building on the wartime experience of community engagement and channeling it into an effort to remake the city. People of all walks of life opened their homes for festival visitors (the editor being one of those that enjoyed the hospitality of a city family). Today the festival yearly welcomes 950,000 festival guests, buying a total of 3 million tickets to the artistic events of 9 festival sections.



Figure 2: Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (Singapore World City Summit 2010)

One of the most important aspects of the Edinburgh festival is giving its citizens and visitors alike a sense of place. Mills calls it “Sensing a city.” It is all about retaining and renewing a sense of belonging, a sense of identity – a design for a multisensory living and sustainable environment – an indispensable element in city livability. And I would add a sense of cultural continuity. A city needs a past, present and a future. It is the privilege of the arts to make this connection. City development is not only about the future. It is also about rediscovering our roots. Music, dance, sculpture and painting make this integrative development possible. Let us look forward to the 2012 World City Summit with the hope of participating in an agenda for a new exploration of an art driven, sustainable urban development.