

# AIPC Annual Conference

## Lessons from a City Reinventing Itself

Taking part in a congress whose delegates are actually the very people you deal with when you associations organise yours is always eye-opening. And when that congress takes place in a destination that's reinventing itself – and whose congress centre is part of that reinvention – you clearly understand how associations, venues and destinations can better work together to make the most of a conference.

Words Rémi Dève

AIPC, the international association of congress centres, represents a global network of over 185 centres in 59 countries with the active involvement of more than 900 management-level professionals worldwide. It encourages excellence in convention centre management, based on the diverse experience and expertise of its international representation. To do so, it is engaging in a variety of educational, research, networking and standards programs. Its Annual Congress is part of those efforts to bring excellence in all areas of centre management: 2017 saw more than 150 delegates converge to Sydney and its international convention centre to tackle the very broad theme of *Transformation!*

Competition and adaptation are the two top challenges facing centres worldwide today, and for most venues that means applying new models and refreshing established ones in a transformation process that involves both the destination and the centre itself. At the same time, this must be linked to the broader strategies and approaches of the city and country in which centres operate, in order to ensure consistency with overall destination priorities.

In this regard, it made sense for the AIPC Annual Congress to kick-start with a session on how cities that want to play a role on the world scene – like Sydney does – must have all their stakeholders, including convention centres, work together to achieve the same unified vision and achieve growth. This way, association events can be regarded as

partaking of this growth. Sydney, a recognized destination, indeed chose to reconfigure itself based on a new vision for its economic future, based on a range of perspectives that re-imagined the role of the new convention centre in the context of economic sector advancement, talent attraction and acquisition, academic leadership and an image consistent with all these goals.

As Michael Rose, Chairman of the Committee for Sydney, an independent think tank and champion for the whole of the city, pointed out: *"Convention centres are a platform for success in the business events economy, have to play a role of a facilitator, and sometimes even of an accelerator, of knowledge and are hence a crucial partner in the way a city thinks about itself."*

Of course, I was particularly interested in a session called 'Client Perspective'. After all, how associations and congress venues can work better together? What's the overall experience of clients when it comes to convention centres around the world? Jan Tonkin, Managing Director of the Conference Company, which, among other things, offer convention services to associations, and Sven Bossu, Head of the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), who organises Sibos, the only global conference on financial services out there, shared their perspectives on change and evolution in the industry.



Jan Tonkin explained how key client groups are re-shaping event formats, centre expectations and traditional business practices. She summarised her experience this way: *"Clients – including associations – and centres alike must demonstrate their open-mindedness, flexibility and forward-thinkingness. The trend is to experiment with meeting environments, designing 'nooks and crannies' possibilities or better interactive learning experiences. Security concerns are also dramatically on the rise, and collaborative planning in the matter is absolutely key."*

Sven Bossu explained: *"Our last conference, which took place in Geneva, was completely reshaped. After having around 13 forums the previous year, we restructured and reformed the programme into four streams. Sibos is all about financial compliance, all about anti-money laundering, and all about cybersecurity, amongst other things. The goal is to bring people together and make them think about how to solve common challenges and that is what we've always tried to do with an event like ours. If convention centres understand what we want to achieve and they can be part of it, then it's win-win situation."*

Other sessions explored areas of immediate centre concern including the growing spectre of cybersecurity, and the opportunities associated with the rise of a powerful Asian industry. At the same time, the broader value of business events in general and association conferences in particular was touched upon, in a session led by some researchers from the University of Technology Sydney, who reported on the key

benefits of such events beyond tourism. This is done within the framework of a global Case Study Program initiated on the behalf of the Joint Meetings Industry Council, which the readers of Boardroom must be familiar with by now.

Fifteen AIPC members also competed for the AIPC Innovation Award that recognizes innovative projects or initiatives in the true sense of the word; that is, the development of a new, more creative or more effective approach to any aspect of convention centre management, operations or marketing. Winners of the Award were the Palais des Congrès de Montréal for the "Urban Agriculture Lab", a green rooftop development created by the centre to explore green inner-city opportunities and the Cairns Convention Centre for their innovative response to the question "What to do with an old roof".

The General Assembly which closes the Annual Conference elected a new Board of Directors, including Aloysius Arlando, CEO of the Singapore EXPO Convention and Exhibition Centre, and former AIPC Vice President as President, Greg O'Dell, CEO of the Walter E. Washington Convention Centre in Washington DC, USA as Vice President. The 2019 AIPC Conference will take place at the Flanders Meeting & Convention Center Antwerp in Belgium.

