

# Global growth centres

Being multi-functional is the key for new city conference centres. *Kerry Baggott* reports



For cities around the world, it seems that the latest *de rigueur* accessory is an international convention centre. New builds are announced almost every week, while existing centres are busy upgrading to compete with these new facilities.

With such a rapid pace of development, business must surely be booming. Not so, says ICCA UK chapter chairman and Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre director of sales and marketing Brian Horsburgh. "For a lot of cities it's a prestige thing," he says. "To be taken seriously they think they have to have a large-scale centre, but with this they also want to secure a slice of the industry."

However, while the demand for centres is holding up, it is being outstripped by the pace of development, Horsburgh adds. "More centres are chasing the same business which, increasingly, is being spread more and more thinly," he says.

On a positive note, for event organisers this translates as more choice and better facilities in a greater number of destinations. However, only the best make the grade. For those venues that are members of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC), attaining and maintaining the highest possible standards is the mission.

"A high level of service and technology is an expectation these days, not a luxury," says AIPC president Barbara Maple. "There is an increasing emphasis on the delegate experience and centres are having to respond to this with better facilities."

One person who assists convention centres in their

mission to meet delegate demands is Sally Greenhill director of The Right Solution. Her company specialises in advising on the design of convention centres. "The centres that work best are those that have been built with the end user in mind," she says. "I foresee a greater merger of convention and exhibition facilities. Centres have to become multi-functional – it's key to them operating successfully."

## Supporting infrastructure is key

Edinburgh is home to a prime example of a centre with a broad approach to its clients' potential needs. The new space it is building can be transformed, with its innovative moving floor, from a raked auditorium to a flat exhibition area.

However, all this means nothing without the support of a good surrounding infrastructure. "We're seeing a lot more co-operation between the centres and the destination they're based in," says Greenhill. "The two need to work hand in hand in order to provide the complete picture."

That being the case, those centres that are built in close proximity to hotels and city attractions will always be preferred. "The logistics and transportation costs involved with dealing with a centre that is not in close proximity to accommodation and entertainment venues can be very off-putting," says THA business support director Phil Whetter.

Cities, then, must take care that their new facilities offer all of the above to become a long-wearing classic and not just a 'seasonal must-have'.

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