

Getting to grips in Graz

The International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC) announced nine new members joining up over the past six months at its 49th General Assembly, held in Graz in July.

Now with 155 members in 53 countries, the association is extending its reach and authority. Seventy-one delegates attended the annual conference in Austria, and there was good representation from the media and other industry professionals at the Graz Congress Centre for the two-day programme of presentations across a range of industry topics.

The format was designed to facilitate real workshop debate among congress centre managers on key topics, with input from speakers representing areas that impact the industry.

Of course, the social functions were also valuable for networking and, thanks to chief organiser Nicolaus Breisach, ex-CEO at the centre, art forms in themselves.

Rod Cameron, who presented the AIPC Outlook Survey at the association's general assembly, told delegates gathered in the elegant Chamber Music Hall, that AIPC "truly represents the congress centre industry on a global basis".

Over two-thirds of membership had responded to the survey, said Cameron, and they were reporting an 86 per cent increase in business.

Fifty-five per cent of those surveyed expressed confidence in the market, with a further 40 per cent reporting 'no change'.

Reasons given for the optimism were 'improved economy', 'more bookings' and 'increased attendances'.

Corporate business is leading the way it seems in member centres, with association conventions following, ahead of trade exhibitions and consumer events.

Changing revenue expectations topped the list of challenges over the next three years for centre owners, Cameron reported.

Outgoing AIPC president Barbara Maple, stepping down after three terms, reported on some of the year's successes: including the launch of the AIPC Academy, a quality standards pilot project, and a sales and marketing summit.

AIPC had evolved, said Maple, "into an aggressive, professional organisation", with a strong and driven membership.

The conference served up presentations



Steven Powell

on city branding, venue construction and insights on the latest trends in the hotel sector. This latter topic was presented by IHG senior vice-president Steven Powell who reported: "unparalleled growth", although pointed to "changes are on the horizon".

Powell urged the centres to take note of hotel trends, as these were ahead of the business tourism market cycle in general. "Prepare for the inevitable downturn now", was his message, and IHG figures, he said, anticipated such a trend starting in the third quarter of 2008.

Powell also identified regional trends, with urban markets doing best, especially those in the emerging markets. RevPAR in Abu Dhabi was up 32.7 per cent year-on-year, and Singapore (24.5%). Among the mature markets, Tokyo (15.7%) and London (12%) and "bursting out of its seams", were particular stars.

In Europe there was slightly more demand and less supply, whereas in the US supply was catching demand, Powell noted.

He also pointed to increased merger and acquisition activity, with Blackstone's recent \$26 billion purchase of Hilton.

Starwood, Marriott and IHG are also likely to appeal to the investment funds and private equity houses.

David Greusel, Principal with HOK Sport Venue Event shared his thoughts on the evolution of centre design. Although he had presented at 70 conferences in the past ten years, the Graz Congress Musicians' Hall, he said, "was the most beautiful of them all".

Centres can impact destinations in good and bad ways you can have great centres in challenging destinations (Louisiana) and poor centres doing great business in popular destinations (such as some of the conference facilities in Las Vegas).

He pointed to the need to integrate planners' ideas with the preferences of meetings delegates. "Delegates like daylight, while planners were generally 'creatures of the night' who preferred often 'black boxes' on which to focus their own design ideas.

Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre's Peter Brokenshire spoke on accreditation and the tough process of setting high standards in hygiene and food delivery.

Simon Anholt, founder and publisher of the Anholt Nation Brands Index, →

highlighted the challenges of globalisation. "We are now competing in a giant supermarket," he said, with the brand, a way of making everyday decisions more reliable.

Anholt certainly had plenty of brand clichés on Eastern Europe, and may do well to revisit and update some Cold War stereotypical and rather UK-centric thinking.

Brand Branson may carry a lot of weight with Western wannabee business people, but the same perception cannot be transferred to all other parts of the globe, where the laid back approach doesn't push the buttons in some more formal business cultures.

Of course, congress destinations need to manage their brands, but maybe the brand gurus fail to differentiate properly between the intelligent professional's perception, and that of the man in the street?

The heart is more important than the head, was Anholt's message for the marketers. 'Don't bother with Africa' was another of his simple messages, as he junked the reputation of a whole continent. So much then for the AIPC delegates from Arusha, Cape Town and Lagos – all doing reasonable business, as the AIPC workshops later made clear.

Jacquie Rogers presentation on the built-in environmentally-friendly features at the new Arena and Convention Centre Liverpool (ACCL), gave much Green food for thought, a theme also taken up by Pierre-Michel Bouchard, president and CEO of Quebec Convention Centre. Bouchard reported on the centre's new offer for 2007 of 'eco-friendly events'. With green imbued in the leafy marketing material at QCC, it is clear being in the vanguard of environmentally friendly thinking can be good for business as well as the conscience.

The AIPC conference also included a poster session for 16 entries in the AIPC Innovation Award competition. Awards were won by Metro Toronto Convention Centre, for recognising the importance of green issues through its 'Zero Waste' programme; the Centre Convencions Internacional Barcelona (CCIB) for its technology management programme, and by Washington State Convention and Trade Centre, Seattle, for a food and beverage programme that combines service, marketing and community relations.

Board elections at AIPC's General Assembly that followed the conference resulted in a new slate of directors and executives, with Edgar Hirt of Hamburg elected president.

Artful approach at Graz

How does a congress centre go about the business of organising a conference for its own kind, its industry peers, surely the hardest audience of all to please? Grazer Congress's Barbara Gigler shares with CMW some of the ideas and planning that went into making the AIPC 2007 Conference and General Assembly such a success.

Art everyday

When Graz and the Grazer Congress were nominated to host this year's AIPC annual conference, in Quebec 2005, we instantly decided that we wanted to theme the Graz conference 'Art and culture everyday', with the intention to offer our guests a daily encounter with art in the many different aspects of the word. This idea is related to the fact that both ancient and contemporary art are integral parts not only of the architecture and product design of the Grazer Congress centre, but also of its communication strategy (cf. 'one-minute-sculptures' by artist Erwin Wurm), and not least on the fact that the city of Graz calls itself a 'capital of culture'. The town's symbiosis of historic and modern architecture and its diverse cultural and art programmes reflect on a larger scale what the centre offers on a small scale.

Conference promotion

So we set out with our AIPC conference arts theme by offering a 'picnic belt', by the Austrian artist Martin Walde, as a special attraction for the closing lunch held in Montpellier 2006, to promote the Graz conference; we chose a literary quote by the German writer Almut Tina Schmidt, 'We meet at the fridge', as the official Graz

conference motto and visual (we found a strong relation to our meetings industry in that quote in that most parties end in the kitchen, at the fridge, at midnight or past – a time also when the best ideas often come up), we chose a text by the late Styrian writer Wolfi Bauer to wet our colleague's appetite for Graz.

Social programme

During the conference we were able to offer our guests two different Eat Art events by the artist Daniel Spoerri, founder of EAT ART and co-founder of the Nouveau Realisme movement; one event was a palindrome dinner based on the mismatch of vision and taste, the other a 'rich and poor' dinner with the philosophical background that 'no throw of a dice can replace chance'; but we were also able to introduce our guests to the provincial and local Styrian art and traditions of fashion, food, music and lifestyle, as well as to the art of Styrian wine-making, and not least, during the Singapore closing lunch (*Singapore is to host AIPC's 2008 conference -ed*) at the Sculpture Park.

New experiences

What we have tried to achieve in this fast moving world and in a business where we like to think that we have seen everything and done everything and that nothing is left to tickle our senses, or contradict our expectations, is to make our guests step back, slow down and re-think their experiences - hoping that they gain new ideas, new encounters and insights - by little things, not by 'the bigger-better-faster'. What better tool to try and achieve this than art, which is never an end in itself?

All the above was the backdrop to an interesting educational programme put together by AIPC. Of course, it is only possible to go this extra bit further if you have a professional and dedicated team, like the one which we can boast of at the Grazer Congress.



Re-thinking their experiences

Grazia mille

The International Association of Congress Centres (French acronym AIPC) got down to some serious annual conference business in Graz, Austria, earlier this summer. Former Grazer Congress CEO Nicolaus Breisach made a philosophical imprint on the social proceedings, with a design swansong at the official dinners. A new AIPC board was elected and plenty of vital industry topics debated.



Top left: Rod Cameron presents the key AIPC report. **Top, centre:** The Styrian capital, Graz. **Top, right:** Grazer Congress, ready for AIPC. **Centre left:** Stairway to heaven, or at least the ornate conference hall. **Centre right (top):** Nicolaus Breisach welcomes ACC Liverpool's Jacquie Rogers and Tom Lechthaler. **Centre right (bottom):** Round table discussion over one of many special dinners presented by the Austrian hosts. **Bottom, right:** Winner of the AIPC golf tournament, the Royal College of Physicians, Regent's Park managing director Clive Ostler. **Bottom, centre:** There was also a little room for exhibitors to promote themselves at the AIPC conference. **Bottom, right:** The General Assembly votes in a new board and sets new, ambitious targets for 2008 in Singapore.