

# Share the collective vision

AIPC President, **Edgar Hirt** says we can all shape the convention centres of the future.



One of the most interesting and, at the same time challenging, conclusions to come out of our recent AIPC Annual Conference (*in Liverpool, July 2010 - ed*) was the idea that the expansion, redevelopment and updating of convention centres may be moving from an occasional undertaking to something that is continuous and ongoing.

The essential challenge centres face is that they are long-term investments in an industry that is changing rapidly. They must remain relevant and competitive for many years even though they are constrained by the fact that, once built, they have limited flexibility in their structure. Changing market expectations are connected with not just things like programmes and services, but the size and arrangement of spaces - not easy things to address when you're dealing with something as solid as a building.

In addition, there are a host of new demands to be met, ranging from new technology to sustainability. Sometimes these can be satisfied with changes to operations; often, it requires a lot more.

Even if the new demands can be satisfied in an existing structure, they can be expensive and demanding to implement.

A big issue is the fact that there is a great deal of convention centre product out there - in fact, supply in many areas has increased faster than demand has been able to keep up. This means lots of competition, and no centre can afford to remain behind in that kind of situation if it wants to remain competitive.

It's easy to say that if there is more supply

then the business can just spread itself around. But that's not how things work. There are a lot of other reasons why organisers choose to go to a particular destination, and if a centre is fortunate enough to have good customers, it must do everything it can to avoid driving them away through a lack of appropriate facilities. That's why we will always be working to upgrade our centres regardless of how many alternatives may exist.

What this means for many managers is a lot more work: a need to become an ongoing project manager as well as an operator. What it means for the customer is more of an opportunity to shape the facilities they use.

## Greatest imperative - flexibility

The greatest imperative in convention centre design today is flexibility - on the basis that in knowing we will never be able to predict exactly what future demands may be, the best approach is to design in the ability to adapt to changing needs as they arise. Multi-purpose spaces and moveable walls can go a long way toward helping centres respond to changing meeting requirements.

It helps to have the best possible idea of what the future demands are going to be. This is where the customers come in. Event organisers are in the best possible position to anticipate the new directions that meeting formats may take, and in communicating this to centre managers, they help not just the centres but themselves as well.

The more managers know about future trends (and can then communicate to designers), the more likely they will be to get the kinds of facilities they want and need.

Centres should be designing their post-event surveys to better capture the insights clients have about how building changes would create a better meeting environment, not just how they felt about the service. As for the clients, they should look on the input process as an investment in their own future and what changes

would make the most sense for their needs.

The same thing applies to centre suppliers, whether they be food and beverage, security or AV. These are the people who often know the limitations of a centre and the expectations of clients as well as, or better than centre staff themselves - yet who may often focus more on day-to-day activities than sitting down to organise this knowledge in a way that can be used for decision making.

Let's take advantage of this trend toward more regular updates as an opportunity for everyone, and all take a part of the responsibility to get the best possible input to designing the convention centre of the future.

*AIPC is a global network of over 166 leading centres in 53 countries, with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals. Visit [www.aipc.org](http://www.aipc.org)*

