

We all have a role to play

# Convention centres of the future

by Edgar Hirt



One of the most interesting and at the same time challenging conclusions to come out of the 2010 AIPC Annual Conference was the idea that the expansion, redevelopment and updating of convention centres may be moving from an occasional undertaking to something that is to a large extent ongoing. The reasons behind and the consequences of this are interesting, for both the centres themselves and for their suppliers and clients. The essential challenge centres face is that they are basically long-term investments in an industry that is rapidly changing, and that 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 actual structure. In recent years, changing market expectations have had to do with not only

aspects such as programmes and services, but also the size and arrangements of spaces – not the easiest of things to address when dealing with something as solid as a building.

In addition, there are a host of other new demands to be met, ranging from new technology to sustainability. Sometimes these can be satisfied with changes to operations, but often a lot more is required. The result is that even if new demands can be satisfied in an existing structure, they can be expensive and challenging to implement.

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

It is easy to say that if there is more supply, the business can simply spread itself around, but we all know that is not how things work. There are many 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. This is why we will always be working to upgrade our centres, regardless of how many alternatives may exist.

## The future looks bright on both sides

What this means for many managers is a lot more work, and the 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.

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 for the ability to adapt to changing needs as they arise. For example, multipurpose spaces and moveable walls can go a long way towards helping centres respond to changing meeting requirements, while good design

can also facilitate changes in how buildings operate when this is required.

But it certainly helps to have the best possible idea of what the future demands are going to be – and 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 taking the time to communicate this to centre managers, they are helping not only the centres, but themselves as well. The more managers know about future trends – and can then communicate to designers and others involved in the development process – the more likely they will be to get the kinds of facilities they will want and need in the future.

I believe this is something we should all keep in mind as we contemplate a time when centres will have to be updated on a much more regular basis – and there are a lot of ways to encourage better dialogue. For their part, centres should be designing their post-event surveys to capture better the information and insights clients have about how building changes would create a better meeting environment, not just how they felt about the service they received. As for the clients themselves, they should look on the input process as an investment in their own future and take the time to think through what kinds of changes, whether in an existing building or a potential one, would make the most sense for their needs.

The same applies to convention centre suppliers, whether these are food and beverage, security, housekeeping or audio visual. 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 on sitting down to organise this knowledge in a way that can be used for decision-making.

Let us take advantage of this trend towards more regular updates as an opportunity for everyone to take a part of the responsibility of getting the best possible input for designing the convention centre of the future. **35**



### About the author

Edgar Hirt is the president of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC) and the managing director of the Congress Center Hamburg. The AIPC is the pre-eminent international association of convention centres, with a mission of encouraging, supporting and recognising excellence in centre management. The AIPC is a global network of over 166 leading centres in 53 countries, with the active involvement of more than 650 centre management professionals. For further information please e-mail [marianne.de.raay@aipc.org](mailto:marianne.de.raay@aipc.org) or visit [www.aipc.org](http://www.aipc.org).