



PlaNYC in a global context: The UIA Congress in Torino

July 21, 2008 - Spotlights

We are living in an exciting time when urban planning and architectural practice around the world is increasingly connected. This was demonstrated at the recent UIA (Union of International Architects) Triennial Congress in Torino, Italy, which I attended with Rick Bell, FAIA, our executive director. The UIA Congress, with its theme "Transmitting Architecture," drew 9,000 urban planners, architects and policy makers from around the world who came together to share best practices, compare notes, and find common agendas.

In two panels on sustainable cities and urban landscape, Rohit Aggarwalla, the NYC director of long-term planning and sustainability, placed Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC in a global context of sustainable planning with cities such as Tokyo, Milan, and Sao Paulo. Like PlaNYC, each of their plans are the product of local, mayoral initiatives in response to urban conditions that are radically different. What binds them are goals not unlike those in PlaNYC - affordable housing, transportation and infrastructure, clean energy and air, education and outdoor space to name a few. What is apparent is these large 21st century global cities have more in common with each other than their respective countries would suggest. Continuity in political leadership has been a hallmark for successful urban redevelopment, as with Barcelona which used the Olympics to reinvent itself. In this context, Aggarwalla introduced setting up metrics and reporting progress for PlaNYC objectives. This will allow advocacy groups, professional societies, and the real estate industry to monitor progress in the next administration and to focus attention if the goals are not being met.

Individual speakers staked out common themes as well. In his "Lectio Magistralis" keynote address at the Palavela Olympic Facility, Peter Eisenman, FAIA, expanded on his remarks at the AIA New York Design Awards Luncheon this year. Peter led 5,000 young architects to an understanding of how contextualism includes transitional spaces, not objects plopped in the landscape. He described his project in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, noting that the journey or path was more significant than the arrival. UIA president, Gaetan Siew, pointed out that while "star-architecture" may dominate the global media, it is the many practitioners who have their feet closer to the ground, and are finding their own way based on local context. In so doing they are remarkably similar in approach.

We also found much in common with individual participants at the Congress. On the first evening we were welcomed by the Mexico delegation that included Teodoro Gonzales de Leon, the UIA Gold Medal recipient, and his colleague Jose-Luis Cortes Delgado who was instrumental in bringing the "Mexico City Dialogues" Exhibition to our Center for Architecture in 2005. We compared notes on our respective architectural associations and met our counterparts from different countries. We soon realized the language of architecture - drawing on paper napkins and a few universal expressions - was sufficient to communicate over dinner with an architect from Taskent, Nazarov Renat Irisbekovich, who spoke only Russian. It was evident while we may occupy vastly different terrains, we share common aspirations and goals.

Centers for Architecture, like our own at La Guardia Place and in other U.S. cities, are flourishing everywhere. Bell presented our Center for Architecture in the "Urban Centers Worldwide" Panel - it was gratifying to see our many programs and exhibitions transmitted in an international forum. In Torino itself, the Urban Center Metropolitano occupies part of a former 19th century train repair shed, with 65,000 s/f of exhibition, program and outdoor space with a cafe and playground supported by the city and local institutions. These centers provide a vital grassroots support for the urban design initiatives that are transforming contemporary cities.

The UIA Congress is much like our 2008 UN Forum on Sustainable Urbanization in the Information Age, which AIA New York sponsored with UN organizations and the Regional Plan Association. It brings people together in ways that are grounded in political reality and practical inspiration. Our Center for Architecture exhibitions such as "Berlin - New York Dialogues" and the China show "Five Projects, Five Stories" also do that. Bell and I were among the few AIA participants in Torino, but were inspired to imagine a larger AIA and New York City presence at the next UIA Congress in Tokyo in 2011.

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