

Sustainable Development of the Built Environment The Road from Rio

**NEWSLETTER
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FROM THE XX UIA CONGRESS, BEIJING

1. BACKGROUND

The 20th UIA World Congress was hosted by the Peoples Republic of China, and held between June 20th-29th in Beijing.

Under the overall heading of "Architecture in the 21st century", the XX UIA Congress focused on six major subthemes, the one which concerns our work most directly being the subtheme of "Architecture and Environment".

In 1998 the Architects' Association of Norway was given responsibility for the UIA Work Program "The Road from Rio - Sustainable Development of the Built Environment", with the Secretariat being located in Norway for a three year period. The basic funding for the Secretariat is provided by the Norwegian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Regional Affairs, and Environment.

As Director for this Program, it was our responsibility to plan and prepare our inputs to the Beijing UIA Congress. Our possibilities were limited by the fact that the three Ministries who are supporting the UIA work, could not provide extra funding for Beijing. At a later date, however, the Norwegian State Building Authority (Statsbygg) kindly provided funding, which has made it possible to fulfil our commitments in a substantial and effective way.

2. PREPARATIONS

In addition to responsibility for the international WP connections, the "Road from Rio" Work Program acted as the coordinator for the various inputs which were to be provided from all the Nordic countries, that

is from the sections of DAL (Denmark), SAFA (Finland), SAR (Sweden) and NAL (Norway). The associations in Iceland and the Færøya Islands were also contacted. Several preparatory meetings were held to coordinate these Nordic inputs, including in Helsinki in January and in Oslo in April.

Much of the practical liaison work with Beijing, as well as travel arrangements, were made by Pehr Mikael Sällström in SAR.

3. EXHIBITIONS

The Work Programs as well as the national sections of UIA prepared exhibitions which were shown in a separate exhibition centre in Beijing during the UIA Congress, after a formal opening by the Minister of Construction and other VIPs.

Initially, our WP was to present one exhibition. Later we took over responsibility for the exhibition space which was to have been occupied by the "Healthy Buildings" WP (Sweden). In addition, we arranged an extra exhibition space for the Nordic Section. This meant that in the end, three exhibitions were prepared, totalling over 30 square metres, one of the the largest exhibition contributions in Beijing. All three parts were based on themes of ecological building and sustainability, including:

1. Norway: Norway's two Green Building Challenge projects; Statsbygg's Pilestredet Park urban ecology project; and parts of the exhibition "Recollection and Change – ecological architecture" (on loan from the Landsbyforening for Økosamfund in Denmark).
2. Denmark: exhibits on recent ecological buildings and on wind power,
3. Finland: the Viikki urban ecological development near Helsinki,
4. Sweden: the seven Green Building Challenge entries, the Sahlin-awards for three new ecological projects, and presentation of some Sweden/China student projects.
5. Posters showing the "Ten Points for Sustainable Architecture" (Butters) and "The Tree of Building Ecology" (Bokalders).

These exhibitions were visited by a large number of people during the Congress week, both international participants and Chinese students and architects, and we were contacted for more information about the Nordic exhibitions by several international groups and by journalists. Requests were also made to borrow our exhibition material.

Of the above, the parts prepared directly in Norway amounted to about half of the total, and were prepared in Oslo with architect MNAL Inga Lindstrøm.

4. INFORMATION AND HANDOUTS

The following materials were distributed in several hundred copies each, during the Beijing Congress:

1. Information brochure for UIA Work Program "The Road from Rio",
2. Ten Points for Sustainable Architecture, by Chris Butters/The Road from Rio (was also presented and exhibited at the Region 1 (Europe) session.
3. Brochure about NABU: Norwegian Architects for Sustainable Development,
4. Announcement brochure for Ralph Erskine award,
5. The Swedish Green Building Challenge brochure.
6. English translation by Chris Butters of the "Urban Ecology Program for Pilestredet Park" (Statsbygg/ Oslo Municipality).

More detailed information on the Norwegian and other Nordic projects, was given during the seminars, and copies of overheads etc. were given to interested parties. Brochures for a forthcoming international conference in Lillehammer, Norway, which is being organised in September 1999 by the WP "Sports and Leisure Facilities" in cooperation with our WP, were also handed out.

5. SEMINARS

Initially our Work Program was scheduled to hold one workshop/seminar. We later arranged for a second seminar as well, which was executed with cooperation from the other Nordic architects' associations. Fairly small rooms were provided for these seminars, and they were nearly full on both occasions.

First seminar: 25th June, 3 hours: "Environmental approaches to architecture in the Nordic countries". Contributing speakers: Pehr Mikael Sällström, Varis Bokalders, Anders Bodin and Rune Boberts (SAR), Tuomo Sirkia (SAFA), Jan Christiansen (DAL), Chris Butters (NAL). Attended by 50-60 persons. In particular, presentation of the exhibited projects: Norway's 2 entries to Green Building Challenge - Klosterenga housing in Oslo (GASA Architects/USBL) and the Centre for Maritime Environment in Horten (Kristiansen and Bernhardt Architects), Statsbygg's urban ecology project for Pilestredet Park, and the exhibition "Recollection and Change - Nordic ecological architecture".

Second seminar: 26th June, 3 hours: in cooperation between the 2 UIA Work Programs "The Road from Rio" and "Architecture and Energy". Contributing speakers: Dr. Varis Bokalders, Chris Butters, Dr. Allan Rodger (Australia), Jean Bouillot and Georges Wursteisen (France), Tony Rigg (Israel), Greg Frantel (USA). Attended by 45-50 persons. Presentation in particular of Norway's NABU project, of the Ten Points for Sustainable Architecture, and of Bokalders' Tree of Building Ecology.

6. PARTICIPATION

Participation included the opening ceremony, most of the major plenum lecture sessions and meetings, as well as receptions and various ad-hoc discussion sessions with international contact persons; and the UIA Assembly proceedings.

7. NORDIC/EUROPE INPUTS

During the preparations for Beijing, we participated in the Nordic discussions and the formulation and translation of policy statements. The UIA Region 1 (Europe) prepared a series of national statements on sustainability, which we assisted in as well as preparing an additional one in the name of the Rio WP and NABU.

8. INTERNATIONAL WP CONTACTS

An important function of the congresses is as forum for meeting and establishing working contacts with colleagues. We held discussions with the directors of at least 10 of the Work Programs, including most of those related to sustainability, and with other UIA officials and individuals who can be important international links for our WP. Specific possibilities for future cooperation were discussed with people from China, Uganda, Taiwan, Mexico, and South Africa.

9. EVALUATION

The UIA Congresses are important occasions with a value at several levels. Not least, they are the occasion for high-level academic proceedings which profile the architecture profession internationally, and at the same time present a state-of-the-art overview, highlighting future trends and issues in the different major regions of the world.

On the academic level, it was very notable that the themes of environment / sustainable development were highlighted by almost every major speaker, and not least by the Chinese speakers. Activity in this field in Norway has been on the increase during the past few years, but is still not attracting the same level of priority which these issues are being given in the other Nordic countries.

However, in the environmental field, it was apparent that quite a lot of the work, including that of some of the Work Programs was superficial and does not yet have a very high scientific or academic level. There is a tendency for little serious evaluation, it is too often a case of making good impressions and using general statements. The major exhibition prepared by China had an excellent section on environmental architecture, though this too lacked evaluation and assessment of the projects shown.

On the practical level, the Congress was very well arranged by the host country, one weak point being that the WP exhibitions were not located at the Convention Centre itself, but in another exhibition hall a long way across town. Our hosts China had also provided for a series of parallel exhibitions, a range of extra-curricular activities, excursions, and

for very wide press coverage.

Within the Convention Centre, the UIA should have provided for a more accessible information desk and for better facilities such as for photocopying.

On the organisational level, my Nordic colleagues and I were not always impressed by the UIA Assembly proceedings, neither in the way time was managed nor the allocation of priorities for discussion. Amongst other issues, all the Work Programs are supposed to report to the Assembly, and we had prepared for this, but in the end only five or six WPs were given the floor to make presentations. Our WP only managed at the last minute to put in a very brief statement. The information on our WP which was contained in the Congress papers, and as presented to the Assembly, was also out of date although we had repeatedly asked Paris earlier to update it.

The UIAs resources are extremely limited. It is of concern that such an important (for us) international body should be run in this way and on such a small budget, which amongst other things sets limits to the representativity and functioning of its elected officers. The architects' profession generally does not seem to be very skilled at marketing and publicising its own interests - which should to a larger extent be seen in conjunction with those of engineers, economic planners and the building industry as a whole.

The UIA system of regions may be outdated too, in this age where strong regional bodies such as the Architects Council of Europe and ArchAsia are emerging.

The present system of UIA Work Programs does not seem to be very well structured or effective. It relies too much on individuals and lacks definition. Within the UIA there are a total of about 26 Work Programs, of which at least six focus on issues of ecology/sustainability. There is clearly some overlapping here. Environmental issues also require regional responses, so it is doubtful to what extent such Work Programs should be global rather than regional in composition. Our WP for example is defined as a global WP, however we have made efforts to concentrate on the Nordic and northern European level, because it is at this level (climatic, technological, cultural...) that networking would seem to be most fruitful. Similarly, it is only from within such a regional context that we can then contribute to real international dialogue and exchanges.

It is also a fact that these activities often comprise a great deal of international travel, talk and paper. This again is why a predominantly regional focus is likely to provide more focused, concrete results.

Part of the "Road from Rio"s activity during the coming 2 years is intended to be directed towards north-south cooperation, however this too will be most useful if it is

applied from the standpoint of one region to another - for example by bilateral projects between Scandinavia and one developing country - rather than by diffuse global interchanges.

The Work Program "The Road from Rio", has made more contributions to the XX UIA Congress than was anticipated, by providing not one but several exhibitions, as well as the two academic seminars. In addition the "Ten Points" document and other inputs to the Nordic/ regional agendas, can be noted. In the longer term, the international contacts which have been established will be among the most useful outputs from the Congress.

The following Nordic people are to be thanked for their hard work in preparing and executing the Beijing inputs of "The Road from Rio": Annette Blegvad, Jan Christiansen (DAL), Varis Bokalders, Pehr Mikael Sällström (SAR), Pirjo Pekkarinen, Tuomo Sirkia (SAFA), Ketil Kiran and Inga Lindstrøm (NAL).

10. COMMENTS ON SCANDINAVIA'S ROLE

The conferences and exhibitions at Beijing have confirmed the impression that the Nordic countries are playing a leading role in developing sustainable, environmentally healthy architecture and building construction. We also seem to be special in that a few projects, at least, are now doing this in a more integrated way, rather than just focusing on one aspect such as energy saving or water recycling. Most importantly, perhaps, in Scandinavia we are starting to focus more on actually looking for clear results – in the form of sustainability parameters and ways of measuring the environmental consequences of projects. In many other cases, shown in Beijing, one can see very good ideas and good architectural concepts but too little effort to find out which of them are actually useful and which are just good ideas. This is especially important at a time when everyone is talking about "sustainability", and a lot of projects are calling themselves "ecological" without having much basis to such a claim. Ideas for so-called ecological skyscrapers are an example of this, they are very appealing especially for cities in the developing world but can be promoting a recipe for social and ecological disaster. We must be critical of some of these environmental fashion-trends.

Architects are traditionally not rigorously scientific, and so it is especially important to set up a solid scientific perspective in this work. We have to know more about energy, thermodynamics, biological and ecological subjects. Whilst not, of course, losing sight of the many unquantifiable, "life quality" factors which make good architecture.

The Urban Ecology Program of Statsbygg is quite exemplary in this regard (though it is as yet only a set of intentions), because it clearly addresses the question in an integrated way - from ecological demolition to clean construction site organisation, design of energy-saving and healthy buildings,

life-cycle assessment, environmentally sound maintenance, and re-use, as well as the related issues of water, wastes, traffic and appliances.

We need to support and strengthen this work in Scandinavia, and if we do so then we shall have an important contribution to make in the development internationally of this field. This concerns both architects, engineers, investors and building managers. But let us not forget that in our countries, the environmental approach is not at all common yet, it is still only a minor activity which concerns probably less than 10% of the building industry! Scandinavia may be ahead in some ways, but on the other hand we have resources and should be doing far more.

This Work Program, as well as the Nordic Architects Associations generally, can make important contributions to the UIA World Congresses. The next is to be held in Berlin in 2002. However, it is only with the experience of one Congress that one is able to plan properly for a meaningful role, and it is thus important to ensure continuity from one Congress to

illustration:

Dr. Varis Bokalders, Sweden
The Tree of Building Ecology

the next. Our project costs for Beijing came to about USD.10.000, but we needed a bigger budget, in particular for wider distribution of printed materials. We must persuade our authorities of the importance of the Congresses, since it does take considerable resources to make good inputs. Nations have both a responsibility to contribute internationally, and a publicity / marketing opportunity in such events, and hopefully next time our WP can make a bigger contribution.

Chris Butters, WP Director.

”Sustainable Sports and Leisure Facilities”

This International Conference was held in Lillehammer, Norway, Sept. 17-19th 1999

*In cooperation between the two UIA WPs, The Road from Rio / Sports and Leisure Facilities
- - - - news to be reported soon*

The Road from Rio

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