



Kursaal Congress Centre, San Sebastian

# FROM DESIGNING MEETING PLACES TO DESIGNING EXPERIENCES & EVENTS

DESIGN PLAYS AN IMPORTANT PART IN THE BUILDING AND, MORE RECENTLY, IN THE RENOVATION OF CONGRESS CENTRES: ARCHITECTURAL, INTERIOR, FURNITURE, GRAPHIC DESIGN... ARE ALL PART OF THE PROCESS. HOWEVER, THE ROLE OF DESIGN AND THE PARTICULAR IMPRINT OF THE DESIGNERS INVOLVED ARE LITTLE KNOWN TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC. DESPITE THE FAMILIARITY OF THE WORD ITSELF, THE WORK OF DESIGNERS REMAINS UNCLEAR TO THOSE OUTSIDE THE PROFESSION AND IS FREQUENTLY REDUCED TO A CONCERN WITH STYLING AND FORM.

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By essence, the cross-disciplinary nature of the design project makes teamwork a necessity. Here the designer's role is often that of mediator, safeguarding the coherence of the process as a whole whilst recognising the value of each individual's expertise and input. If, however, the ultimate objective is to create

ways of enhancing any given situation, today, designers are increasingly aware of the responsibility they carry in the humanisation of business and technology and the necessary engagement towards creating a sustainable society. How does this influence the meetings industry?

## THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN ENHANCING LONG-TERM ECONOMIC VALUE

The UK national audit office (NAO) asserts that 'good' use of design as a project methodology (design management) - which represents in general less than one percent of the budget of all building constructions - has huge impact: for example, gain of time, optimization of the project for all users (workers, maintainers of the building, visitors, neighbours) etc. Such reports offer important new management insights for businesses such as the meeting industries, at a time of economic tensions and ever-increasing competition.

## PROJECTS MANAGED WITH A DESIGN APPROACH ARE USER-CENTRED

All congress centres today claim to offer optimal functionality and comfort and the integration of new digital media technologies has become the norm. Newly built centres have been designed to attract huge conferences, boasting vast auditoriums and a large choice of conference rooms. It is increasingly

difficult to choose between equivalent offers at more or less equal costs.

Key issues such as accessibility are now becoming major selling points - the new Spanish centres in San Sebastian, or Malaga, for example, clearly promote their 'Global accessibility certification'. But pure functionality is no longer enough to attract business. Congress venues will have to compete at a different level, in phase with evolutions

The San Sebastian (Spain) Kursaal Congress Centre, at the mouth of the river Urumea, is a particularly remarkable example. The architect Rafael Moneo has chosen not to violate the presence of the river in the city. The key features seem like two gigantic rocks stranded at the mouth of the river, forming part of the landscape. The Kursaal is the only congress centre which received the European union Mies Van der Rohe award (in 2001) for its aesthetic, technical and constructive innovation.

promoted. The Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC), together with the Arena and Convention Centre Liverpool and the Cape Town International Convention Centre, have joined forces to create a Global Green Alliance. The aim is to develop new eco-friendly venue design features and packaged services, giving organisers a clear choice of partner organisations that can support their CSR needs.

## Major changes are certainly needed if the industry is to remain competitive, or, even survive. The designer's job is to work with people, businesses and all kinds of experts in order to find innovative and appropriate answers to change

in the meetings industry itself, in the very questioning of the concept, experience and organisation of the events they host. Looking at every project from the human (user) point of view is a way of ensuring that it is attractive and appropriate, which, in the long term, is a guarantee that people will come back!

### IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY AND QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE

Global (corporate) identity is a key factor of differentiation. Beyond merely promoting a coherent image, the task of the designer is also to reveal and reflect the very identity of the project itself. Along with the facilities and services it offers, the architecture of a congress centre, its interior design, its visual identity and communication are all elements of a global project.

The context around the meeting place itself plays an important role in the choice of venue - the particular culture and quality of life offered by the city itself, ease of transport, connection to other attractions... all contribute to the very particular identity of a congress centre. Congress participants tire of finding the same airport/commercial centre architecture in a congress venue. People want to know where they are and who is receiving them. They are looking for a specific identity and a different experience.

People are also aware of, and sensitive to, details: the design of support materials, gifts and accessories, the care given to the choice and presentation of food and drink, the user-friendliness and accessibility of toilets, information, internet facilities, and above all, the efficiency and sincerity of staff. Every element contributes to the global quality of experience.

Certain promoters are already experimenting with new models. The Campus is a new congress centre integrated into the Grand Hotel Hyatt Erawan complex in Bangkok. Based on a new concept it aims to reproduce the experience of a university campus, with a library, working rooms, workshop spaces, an Internet café... in the hope of encouraging people from different origins and with different objectives to mix and 'invent' new forms of experience. How many centres can be said to be offering such unique, global quality of identity and experience?

### THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The environmental issue is becoming a key preoccupation for the organisation and design of international events, congresses and festivals. But up to now the challenge is mainly seen from the point of view of buildings, even if a new and more sustainable service culture is emerging and being

### LOOKING FOR NEW MODELS AND EXPERIENCES

In the near future, congress venues will be judged on the quality of all these dimensions: facilities/cost, user-experience and accessibility, sustainability and CSR. Above all, a new challenge is at the forefront, brought to light by the failure of the Copenhagen summit and the amazing environmental impact of the presence of the ONGs!

People are increasingly ill at ease about the impact of their travel and their ecological footprint. They are uncomfortable with throw-away food, throw away accessories, excessive use of air conditioning... but above all they are questioning the value of time and money spent elsewhere and looking for efficient ways of meeting without moving. Being informed or exchanging information is easier via Internet.

Will international events disappear altogether? Certainly not. People will always need to meet physically and work together to enable lasting and appropriate working relationships to form: meeting, shaking hands, sharing experiences... are all foundations for lasting relationships which can be sustained and developed via Skype or video conferencing.

However, major changes are certainly needed if the industry is to remain competitive, or, even survive. The designer's job is to work with people, businesses and all kinds of experts in order to find innovative and appropriate answers to change. Yes, design is about shaping spaces and things... but design is also very much about shaping visions, concepts, experiences and futures.

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