

2010 International Planning Conference: Christchurch

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The 2010 joint New Zealand Planning Institute and Planning Institute of Australia conference was held at the Christchurch Convention Centre in April. Attended by around 700 delegates, the conference was a huge success and received overwhelmingly positive feedback from those attending.

The better part of 18 months of event planning goes into organising an event of this scale. Venue booking aside, one of the earliest considerations is to begin approaches to potential keynote speakers. This year's conference had seven keynote speakers in addition to the Minister for the Environment Nick Smith. All were of a high calibre and provided interesting and thought provoking insights into their respective fields of interest.

The first keynote speaker was Steve Quartermain, Chief Planner in the Department for Communities and Local Government in the UK. Steve provided a UK perspective on good, proactive planning for communities and sustainable development. He also spoke generally about their planning system reforms and initiatives to improve the quality of life and environmental outcomes in the UK, particularly in the context of climate change.

Steve was followed by Peter Bell, Chair of the Metropolitan Council serving Minneapolis and St Paul in the USA. Peter provided a personable and interesting presentation on the role of the Metropolitan Council, challenges the Council face and some examples of innovative wastewater, transit and regional park initiatives undertaken by the Council. There are some issues facing the Council such as government reform and appointed versus elected members that correlate nicely with current issues facing local government in New Zealand.

Next up was Rob Freeman, Chief Executive of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority in Australia. His presentation focused on the environmental, social and economic issues faced in the Basin and the challenges of water management and planning in what is predicted to become an increasingly water-short environment. Another very topical and relevant subject for New Zealand and for Canterbury in particular.

The fourth keynote was Neil Homer, a consultant planner and urban designer from the UK, speaking knowledgeably on urban regeneration and planning in the UK.

The second day of the conference began with keynote speaker Sebastian Moffatt, president of CONSENSUS Institute and from Vancouver, Canada. Sebastian gave a fascinating overview of a World Bank initiative, Eco2 Cities: Ecological Cities as Economic Cities. The objective of the initiative is to help cities in developing countries achieve greater ecological and economic sustainability. Many of the issues the initiative seeks to address are equally relevant to our own cities and urban spaces.

The next keynote was Mark Reis, managing director of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in the USA. Mark covered some of the planning and airport management issues dealt with at Seattle-Tacoma. The challenges of planning for airports and dealing with airport noise and expansion issues within or adjacent to urban areas are broadly common the world over and it was interesting to hear how Seattle has been approaching its challenges.

The final keynote was New Zealand speaker Justice Joe Williams, a Judge of the High Court and former chairperson of the Waitangi Tribunal. A charismatic and engaging speaker, Justice Williams largely restrained himself on this occasion to guide us through the history of Maori and European colonisation and contact in New Zealand, from our earliest history through to the cultural context we work and plan in today.

There was much more on offer than just keynote speakers of course. In addition to a formal powhiri and pre-conference workshops, the conference was preceded by the highly successful YP Connect 10. YP Connect 10 was aimed squarely at young planners and was attended by around 140 students and graduates from New Zealand and Australia. As well as opportunities to mix and mingle, YP Connect 10 offered young planners sessions on topics as diverse as landscape assessment, coastal protection, urban design and career development. (A report on YP Connect can be found on the following page).

A diverse range of topics were also on offer through the concurrent sessions of the conference. Topics fell broadly under headings such as governance, quadruple bottom-line, "raising the bar", and sustainable infrastructure. In all, nearly 80 session papers were presented by speakers from both Australia and New Zealand and some from even further afield. These sessions were further supplemented by mobile workshops to places such as the Antarctic Centre, the new civic offices and a cycle tour of the city.

The final day of conference is traditionally reserved for field trips. This year the field trips went to places as far flung as Kaikoura, Arthur's Pass, Waipara, Hanmer Springs and Akaroa, as well as local destinations such as Christchurch International Airport, Lyttelton Port and Christchurch city centre. While the primary aim of the field trips was to inform, they also aimed to entertain and to showcase the region to visitors. A special effort was made on many trips to offer great local food and wine. Judging by the positive feedback received, this year's field trips generally succeeded on all counts.

Last but by no means least, the conference finished as always with the Friday night gala dinner at the Convention Centre. Attended by close to 700 people, and with the help of good food and fantastic local covers band Puree, the gala dinner was a blast and a fitting end to a fantastic conference.

Sadly, it was subsequently announced that this was to be the last joint conference to be held by the Australian and New Zealand Planning Institutes for the foreseeable future. However, we look forward to the 2011 New Zealand Planning Institute national conference, to be held in Wellington at the end of March next year.

Note:

Many of the papers presented by the key note speakers and concurrent sessions are available online through the New Zealand Planning Institute website at www.planning.org.nz.

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