

## PLENARY SESSION. SESSION 2: CITIES

### Creative cities

#### SPEAKER:

**Alfonso Vegara**, director of Metropoli Foundation, ex-president, ISOCARP; recipient of 2007 King Jaime I award for Urban Planning, Landscapes and Sustainability.

Presided by: **Joan Trullen**, secretary general of Industry, Spanish Government.

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**"Cities have a key role in globalisation, not only in urbanism but also in the definition of clusters that incorporate companies, universities and research centres," affirmed Joan Trullen, secretary general of industry of the Spanish government. Trullen finds this aspect of cities "interesting, creative and innovative". Alfonso Vegara, director of the Metropoli Foundation and ex-president of ISOCARP, continued with this theme, stressing that every city or territory "must identify its *components of excellence* so that it can develop a distinct profile for the future".**

Vegara, an urban planner, sociologist and expert in urban housing, gave an overview of "some of the most interesting practices around the world regarding intelligent or creative territories," emphasising that every city "needs to clearly define a profile of excellence which can serve as the foundation for its future competitiveness". As one of Spain's most internationally recognised specialists on territorial planning and development, he expressed his conviction that intelligent territories have to consider and respect their own "DNA" and that they must pursue an economic strategy while seeking social development and environmental quality.

Vegara responded to the question "What are *components of excellence*?" He defined these as "elements that a city exhibits as unique strengths that can serve as the foundation for a competitive advantage". He illustrated this concept using the results from the Cities Project, a broad urban study executed by the Metropoli Foundation, which he directs, and which was founded in 1987 to defend the importance of research for sustainable development in cities and territories. The study compared the competitive strategies of 20 innovative cities with populations from two to ten million from all five continents. It employed the methodology known as *benchmarking* and explored the influence of each city's major universities. The aim of the study was to define the competitive advantages of cities including Singapore, Boston, Dubai, Shanghai, Santiago (Chile), Philadelphia, Sidney and Dublin by identifying their respective *components of excellence*.

Vegara underscored the importance of the study's data for a scenario whereby "the players that truly compete in today's global market are not states; they are cities." 50% of the world's population currently lives in cities, and this figure will increase to 70% by 2028. According to Vegara, cities "are the cradle of creative processes, and at the same time, are a response to the challenges of sustainability, precisely at a time when the greatest challenge facing us is to build a sustainable future".

The first conclusion of the Cities Project was that "in the past ten years, there was been a fundamental shift in strategies in large cities: today the key is training, attracting and retaining talent." Vegara gave the example of New York, emphasising Manhattan, "an island with an extraordinarily high talent index", although other areas have evolved with time, including

Silicon Alley, SOHO and currently, the Meatpacking District. Having described the New York model, characterised by its enormous scale, he then proceeded to the case of Philadelphia, "a smaller city which is an example of the importance of strategy". According to Vegara, Philadelphia suffered a major economic crisis a few years ago due to the decline of heavy industry and immediately sought a new urban strategy. Established in 1681, Philadelphia is considered one of the oldest cities in the United States: "rediscovering this identity was fundamental, because each city has its own, allowing them to envision and execute projects for the future". Vegara believes that this focus is characteristic of an "intelligent city" which does not endeavour so much to compensate for what is lacking, rather than "to identify future directions through its own urban profile".

One of Philadelphia's most important assets is that its metropolitan area of five million inhabitants encompasses 80 universities—the highest concentration anywhere in the US. "This revealed that the city had a major ability to continuously attract talent, but unlike cities such as Boston, it was not able to retain that talent," explained Vegara. The city remedied this situation with a simple but innovative project: Central City District, which integrates arts and technology as structural elements of a new urban development which, although located in the city centre, is now "benefitting the entire region".

### **Emerging territories: the example of Singapore**

"The ability to constantly reinvent one's self is crucial to competitiveness," affirmed Vegara. Among the most talented cities in this area is the city-state of Singapore—the smallest country in Southeast Asia—which, according to Vegara, has been undergoing a "constant miracle" for the past 40 years. It has been able to reinvent itself through strategies that take exploit location (as with its petrochemical industry), its British heritage (as with its financial industry), and currently, high technology as well as its proximity to China (Singapore is one of the most important ports in the world). Vegara emphasised the dynamism reflected in Singapore's dedication to state of the art technology parks, which, due to the Island's rising prices and salaries, they are also developing in foreign locations such as Bangalore.

One of Singapore's most important initiatives is One North, a state of the art technology park specialising in biotechnology and multimedia and designed by the prestigious architect Zaha Hadid. "One of the peculiarities of this project is that it is centred on a plan that integrates business, residential and entertainment spaces in order to stimulate the exchange of ideas," explained Vegara. For him, "the survival of Singapore is based on its ability to attract talent,"; hence, the "quality of points of interaction is essential".

### **Two examples from Spain: Bilbao and La Rioja**

Vegara then spoke on two Spanish cities: Bilbao, which he feels has undergone a "miraculous transformation", and La Rioja, which is exploiting its wine-making identity. In describing Bilbao, he made clear references to the so-called *Guggenheim effect*, although he explained that the City's transformation goes far beyond the Museum. For example, Bilbao has recuperated its historic centre. According to Vegara, "the investment to clean the Bilbao River alone was eight times greater than the funds for the Museum." He believes that the "secret to this project's success was the managing bodies, especially the public company Bilbao Ria 2000" in which various territorial public administrations collaborate over the long-term. He cited more examples of development in the Basque Country, such as the three technology parks located in the three Basque capitals as well as the ambitious project for Zorrozaurre (near Bilbao), where the traditional port business will be redirected towards innovation activities.

He then gave the example of La Rioja, "which is adopting the world of wine as a strong symbol of identity", just as California and Tuscany have done. "This model can only compete in the global market by incorporating agriculture and being fully integrated into its surroundings." Vegara mentioned the *Paisajes del Vino* (Wine Landscapes) initiative, which he himself is promoting in Haro, a respected wine making town in the northwest of La Rioja. In fact, *Paisajes del Vino* was a finalist in the 2006 European Urbanism awards.

Vegara's professional history is decorated with this type of recognition; from his work at the Metropoli Foundation to his company *Taller de Ideas* (Ideas Workshop). He was awarded the European Urbanism Prize for his work in defining the Basque Territorial Strategy and received the UN Habitat seal of Good Practices and Sustainability for his designs for the town of Sarriguen, which neighbours Pamplona.

Vegara concluded by encouraging the "stimulation of intelligent territories that identify their respective *components of excellence*," which he refers to as DNA, via "dialogue and planning",

**For more information, see:** [http://: www.fundacion-metropoli.org/](http://www.fundacion-metropoli.org/)  
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## **KEY IDEAS**

### **- *Components of excellence* to foment competitiveness**

Every territory and city must define its components of excellence, on which they can "base a unique profile for the future", because "these components of excellence are strengths that each city possesses that can serve as the foundation for a competitive advantage".

### **- The importance of cities in an urban world**

"Cities are important because in today's global market, it is cities and not states that compete." Moreover, cities are "the cradle of creative processes, and at the same time, an answer to the challenges of sustainability, which are the most important challenges that we face in building a sustainable future".

### **-Stimulating intelligent territories**

"We have to stimulate intelligent territories that can identify their respective *components of excellence*", through "dialogue and planning". We can draw inspiration from Philadelphia, which has rediscovered its identity to "invent projects for the future"; Singapore, "whose miraculous experience is based on the fact that it has been able to constantly reinvent itself over the past 40 years"; Bilbao; and La Rioja.