

IFLAWLIC 2004 Buenos Aires, Argentina Conference Report

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In August, 2004 librarians Sandy Campbell, Arlene Kissau and Maryon McClary attended the 70th IFLA General Conference and Council and the World Library and Information Congress in Argentina.

IFLA's first ever conference in South America was held in Buenos Aires. The drive from Ezeiza Airport passes kilometers of high rise housing, industrial warehouses and factories, and the concrete spaghetti strings of freeway overpasses which gave way to tree lined avenidas. Traffic is constant and cabs are everywhere. Locals claim bragging rights to Avenida 9 Julio's 16 traffic lanes as the widest avenue in the world. This city, though crowded and home to millions of people, still manages to present an old world elegance most would associate with Madrid or Barcelona.

The conference centre was in the Hilton Hotel, located in the newly renovated Puerto Madero area of the Buenos Aires, across a wide canal that connects to the rich brown-colored Rio de la Plata. Additional sessions were at the Sheraton Hotel, a 15-20 minute walk away or a short ride on special shuttle buses. Centrally located, both hotels were only minutes away from the National Congress, the Plaza de Mayo, with its famous Pink Presidential Palace, the theatre district and the shopping opportunities of Florida Street.

Hosting the conference was a remarkable accomplishment for our Argentinean colleagues, in light of the economic difficulties that Argentina has experienced in the past five years. As conference first timers, we were often at a loss as to how to address fellow delegates, however, a smile, adaptability and the use of body language served us well! Argentineans, in general, are very friendly and welcoming.

There were 3361 delegates from 121 countries. Imagine the challenge of arranging simultaneous translation into six languages and publishing the conference daily newsletter in at least four of them (English, French, Spanish and Russian)!

This conference, with the theme, "Libraries: Tools for Education and Development", opened with ceremony and entertainment at the Teatro Colon, the second largest performing arts center in the southern hemisphere next to the Sydney Opera House. Speakers struggled

to give their presentations with a temperamental sound system. At one point, IFLA President Kay Raseroka of Botswana, addressed the tension and mounting frustration of the audience saying "For those of you in the First World, this is a shock, but in the Third World, this is what we live with and accept." It was only later that we learned that the theatre workers had gone on strike the day before and the Conference Organizing Committee was left adding 'operate theatre' to their task list.

Each day the conference consisted of sessions organized by the various sections and working groups that comprise IFLA, plus a mid-day plenary session with outstanding and inspirational speakers. Two who truly stood out were both Argentines. Rudolfo Perez Esquivel, 1980 Nobel Peace Prize winner, talked about breaking down our internal walls of intolerance, the impact of globalization and the role of libraries in preserving culture and identity. Mempo Giardinelli, a well know Argentine author, talked about "The Library in the Life of a Writer" saying "I am a writer because I had a library in my house". His moving and poetic description of burning books to protect himself from the military dictatorship and then his flight into exile when soldiers started burning books, including one of his novels, in the streets, made the tragic political history of our host country seem very real.

Many of the conference sessions were structured as panels, often made up of presenters from five or six different countries, sometimes each speaking a different language. For example, as a member of Education and Research Panel, Sandy Campbell presented "Defining Information Literacy in the 21st Century" (<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/papers/059e-Campbell.pdf>) on behalf of the Information Literacy Section. Other members of the panel were from Cuba, Iceland, Denmark, India, Russia and the United Kingdom.

Many presenters focused on the role of libraries in building democracy and an informed civil society, literacy and information literacy, the need for training for all types of library workers, and the contribution of libraries to economic development. Librarians' core values and beliefs were in the forefront. To hear about the efforts of some of our international colleagues to support those values through their services and collections was totally inspirational.

The exhibit floor took up most of the basement level of the Hilton Hotel. Unlike the hands-on opportunity usually presented at provincial or even national conferences, the exhibitors here were promoting their companies on the much broader international level. All the large library vendors were present and we had the opportunity to see

companies in their global markets. Handouts were creatively light weight and portable. Book displays primarily featured Spanish and Portuguese language materials. With the exception of the evening of the official opening, the number of delegates visiting the exhibits was disproportionately small, due in part to the fact that many local delegates had to return to their jobs after sessions were over. For many of our Argentinean colleagues, the cost of full registration for the conference was prohibitive.

Poster sessions are another wonderful part of the IFLA experience and gave delegates the opportunity to learn about projects and products from around the world. For example, one poster featured the efforts of two young Haitians to spread libraries throughout that poor island. The poster sessions provided those who stopped by with the opportunity to talk with people involved in grassroots library development work. There were about 100 poster presentations representing at least 50 different countries and many of them were absolute gems.

While IFLA is very much an opportunity for librarians from all over the world to talk to each other, to teach and to learn, it is also a working meeting for the Council and the various IFLA divisions and sections. Members who work year round on projects and policy documents bring them to the conference to move them forward. For example, members of the Information Literacy Section held working group sessions focused on refining the draft "International Guidelines for Information Literacy" and on drafting a response to a UNESCO proposal on "Information Literacy for Life Long Learning".

Of course, social events and getting to know the host country are a large part of the IFLA experience. Conference delegates almost got used to the line ups for the buses, for the individual library tours, and to attend special events. Everyone took advantage of these queues as yet another opportunity to get to know fellow delegates. Imagine if you will, hundreds of librarians pouring out of the hotel entrance and lining up fifteen minutes in advance of departure time, three and four abreast in a line that stretched well over a block long. Suffice to say, the volume of conversation matched the traffic noise generated by the ever present taxis.

All conference information featured the IFLA logo and the image of a couple performing the tango. For delegates the music and dance of the tango became synonymous with the conference. Delegates were treated to tango performances during the opening ceremonies at Theatre Colon, at the opening of the exhibits, at the Opera Theatre cultural evening, on city streets (particularly in the San Telmo district and on Florida Street), and at restaurants that showcased

tango dancers. All delegates were bused to an opening reception just outside the city at the Golden Centre, generously sponsored by Thompson Gale. Here we feasted on South American foods and specialties from other countries before being presented with an opportunity to dance and learn the tango.

The mid-week cultural event included the Nehuen Folk Ballet troupe featuring a cross section of dance, music, gymnastics and choral selections that culminated in a procession of more than 100 children each wearing a t-shirt with the flag of a participating country.

Thursday evening was reserved for Embassy visits. The reception on the second floor of the Canadian Embassy was a memorable experience. Meeting and greeting others in English and French was a treat and the conversation buzz stopped only long enough for our Canadian Charge d'Affairs to bring formal greetings of welcome.

Library tours, showcasing a variety of types of libraries in the Buenos Aires area, gave conference attendees the opportunity to meet colleagues on their home territory. One could choose from "Bibliotecas Populares" or grassroots libraries that fulfill the public library function in Argentina, the parliamentary, special or university libraries. One popular tour was to the National Library of Argentina, a brutalist style building built on the site of the home of the former President Perón and his famous wife Evita.

The sad reality of many public libraries in Argentina is that they are under funded. Cutralco Public Library in Neuquen province, some 1400 km west of Buenos Aires, for example, has not had a book budget for two full years. Adults and children fill the small public reading area, all using worn and dated materials that would have long been weeded from any one of our collections.*

IFLA also organizes tours, some several days long, to allow delegates to experience the sights of the host country. At this conference, delegates could choose from a gaucho party, a trip to a bird sanctuary and various tours of the city and La Plata river delta. We took the opportunity to round out the visit to Argentina with a trip to Iguazu National Park in the far north to see the spectacular waterfalls.

*Long time friend and colleague, Pat Waterton, was registered to attend the IFLA conference but an extremely aggressive form of cancer took her life on September 14, 2004. In Pat's memory, plans are in the works to assist a public library in a developing nation with collection development funds. To contribute to the fund contact Arlene Kissau at 780-459-1536 or akissau@sapl.ab.ca.