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Fundació Fórum Universal de les Cultures

The Universal Forum of Cultures – a laboratory  
for ideas

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The beautiful environment of Barcelona was a perfect setting for the first Universal Forum of Cultures, a place to express concerns and hopes in relation to matters such as climate change, cultural diversity, democracy, human rights and women's and social justice issues. Image: Gerardo Borbolla.



# The Universal Forum of Cultures – a laboratory for ideas

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In 2004, Barcelona launched the Universal Forum of Cultures to offer the world's cities and citizens a stage to foster a public commitment to dialogue, creativity and common sense in a quest for development that is just, humane, sustainable and peaceful.

In 1997, the Universal Forum of Cultures was designed as a platform to show what cities and citizens could do to change the world. At a time when the world held high expectations for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and cities were playing an increasingly meaningful role in the international arena, cities were not represented in major governance bodies and most countries lacked clear urban policy agendas to offer citizens their imagined futures.

Still, the world had its share of good intentions. Excellent meetings, huge international events and important media gatherings were held that produced endless news pieces and nice pictures, as were drawn-out and well-meaning declarations, and some initiatives did result in positive policies for citizens.

## The Universal Forum of Cultures – Barcelona 2004

Barcelona, a city that wanted to strengthen its voice in the international arena, launched the Universal Forum of Cultures to offer the world's cities and citizens the opportunity to express their hopes, fears, thoughts and wishes. It was to be a forum to discuss and reflect on the common yet diverse issues important to daily life, such as climate change, cultural diversity, attitudes that improve our planet, economic organization, democracy, human rights and women's and social justice issues.

Culture in its broadest sense was to be the core of the Forum process. The Forum's founders saw three types of action as the best means to this achieving this: dialogue to talk and debate, exhibitions to show and explain and celebrations to play and express.

Through these aims and actions the Forum established a platform to question the obvious, foster the meeting of the difference and let voices of dissent be heard in an environment that cultivated a listening culture. The Universal Forum of Cultures event was to be a cocktail of cities and citizens, culture in its broadest sense, peace,

cultural diversity, sustainable development, many diverse agents and a great deal of goodwill.

The Universal Forum of Cultures was, from the start, to be a driving force behind efforts to incorporate cultural, education and urban dimensions into the global agenda. Unlike other world events, it would be a cultural exchange built on the will to develop the basic unit for conviviality – the city. It would be based on the belief that respecting human rights, promoting cultural diversity, enhancing all dimensions of sustainable development and the conditions for peace and conviviality would lead to a better, more just and more cohesive city.

To be successful, the Forum required all stakeholders – citizens, civic, cultural and social organizations, corporations, small and medium enterprises, cities, media, social movements and so many others – to get involved. As such, the Forum is a threefold movement: it is a cultural event, it is a process that encompasses and encourages city and citizen change, and it is a forum that promotes the spreading of ideas, thoughts and best practices.

Barcelona merged this proposal with its ongoing project of renewing the northeast side of the city on the Besòs riverside. A large multifunctional project was developed and a special area was opened for the Forum. Redevelopment saw a major square, an auditorium, a convention centre and a leisure port established. Recovering the coastline, burying a wastewater treatment plant, covering an urban high-speed road and the development of an urban coastal park all helped to transform one of the most downtrodden metropolitan areas of Barcelona. The project sought major renewal, with high environmental, mobility, urban and economic investments made possible by a close public-private partnership. The development of high-quality urban space was foundational to the Forum's purpose, with the area envisioned as an *agora*, or gathering place, to express and experience cultural diversity.

Concepts, ideas and projects emerged through the combined action and interaction of dialogues, exhibits, performances, artistic expressions, workshops, the Peace Camp, Speakers' Corner, 141 Questions for 141 Days and the school project. They also emerged through the active involvement and participation of citizens and students, artists and intellectuals, entrepreneurs, visitors and the worldwide online community. In total, over three million people attended and/or engaged with the Barcelona Forum. In this way, the Forum established a meeting place for different stakeholders who have (or will have) a say in the construction of solutions to global challenges. It set the stage for the involvement and encouraged the responsibility of corporations and investors in the quality of city life.

Barcelona 2004 received the support of several United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Global Compact, UN-Habitat, UNICEF, UNDP, WHO, UNHCR and the International Labour Organization, because the Forum's goals aligned perfectly with the United Nations' objectives. The Global Compact found a space in both the dialogues and the commitment of different corporations in the operation of the Forum.

Many institutions and citizen organizations also supported the endeavour. They included the International Pen Club, the International Peace Bureau, Green Cross International, Worldwatch Institute, Basic Income European Network, the International Association of Broadcast Meteorology, Casa Asia and Transparency International.

### **Barcelona and beyond**

The Universal Forum of Cultures held in Barcelona, Monterrey in Mexico (2007), Valparaiso in Chile (2010) and Naples in Italy (2013) have left tangible and intangible legacies that in different ways have contributed to improving their citizens' quality of life and changing city dynamics.

The Forums' more visible legacies are those related to physical changes in these cities, including public works and economic and/or cultural facilities such as The Forum Park, The Convention Centre and the wastewater treatment plant in Barcelona; the Parque Fundidora, Parque Santa Lucia, Museo del Nordeste in Monterrey; and the coastal bike and pedestrian path, Tornamesa, Estación Puerto and Plaza Forum in Valparaiso.

The Forums' legacies also include networking practices that have helped organizations work with each other to scale up their activities, increase the institutional capacities of local and regional bodies, develop specific

activities – such as new economic, tourism and leisure or cultural activities – and change collective behavioural attitudes encouraging respect for other people and/or the environment.

Looking at the Forum of Valparaiso in 2010 as an example, we witnessed the recovery of public spaces such as Tornamesa, Estación Puerto and the Maritime Walk. The Forum also initiated other processes, including the use of Plaza Sotomayor – the major square in town – for cultural activities; changes in ideas about urban space and its maintenance; environmental learning; Valparaiso's incorporation into world heritage and tourist city networks; new tourism activities such as boat trips on the bay; the committee for good neighbourhood; and youth peace camp initiatives.

The Forum is not only a cultural festival; the movement goes far beyond each event. The Forum is a process of change and a loudspeaker of voices, ideas, thoughts and best practices. Specific projects, including the school project, peace camp, neighbourhood actions and negotiations, have spread the Forum's values and practices while building a sense of community.

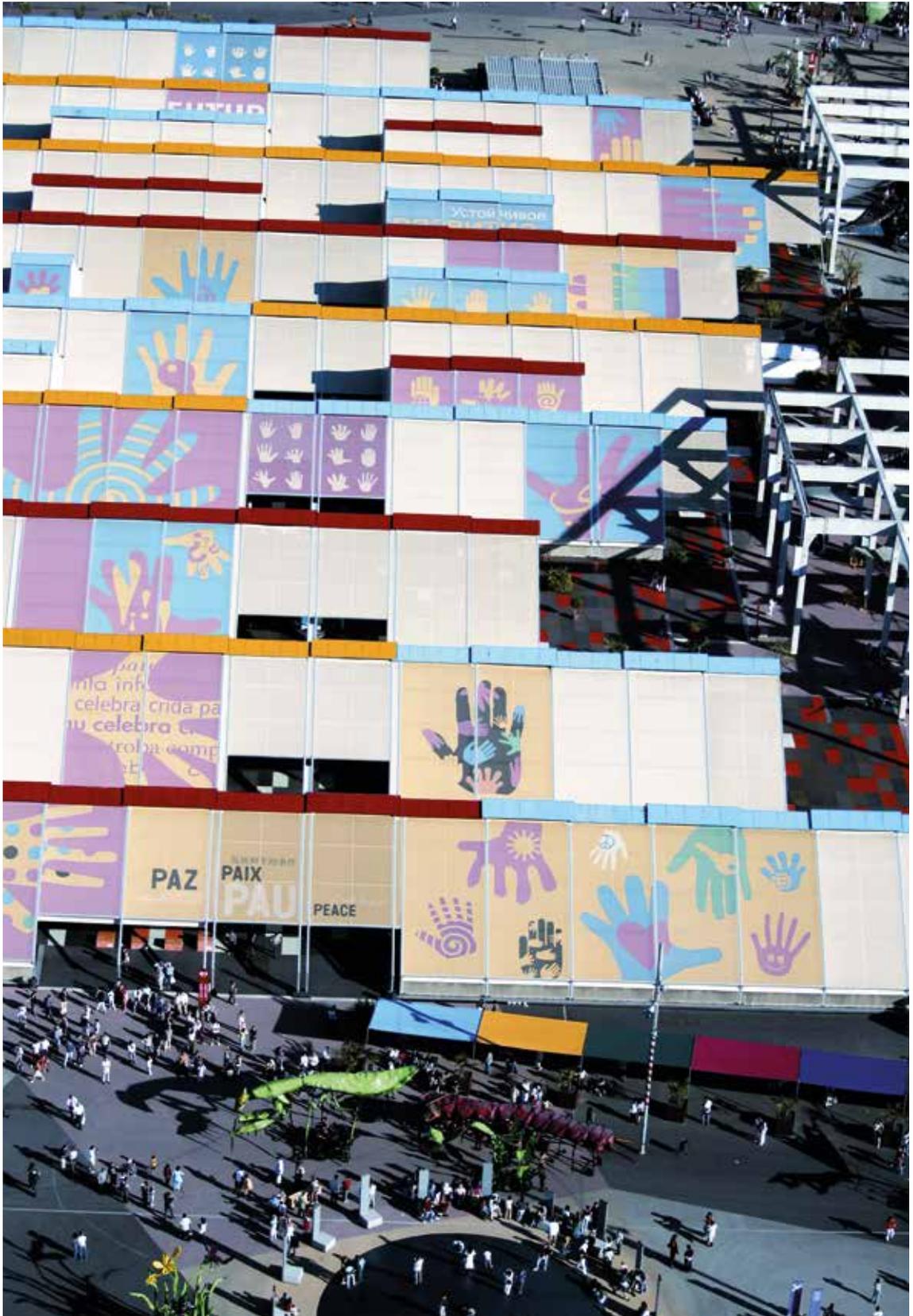
Many ideas that sprang up at the first Universal Forum of Cultures in Barcelona were innovative and forward-looking and have since been developed. New debates, old debates that were in fashion anew and ideas that seemed crazy at the time all encouraged citizens to express their opinions.

The Universal Forum of Cultures does not purport to be the solution for all of the problems facing the world, but it does aim to provide a spark and help light the road to making things better. Life is a long journey of learning and un-learning and the Forum provides a space for this experience.

*The City of Barcelona has been an international leader in promoting the United Nations Global Compact. The city established and hosted the Barcelona Center for the Support of the Global Compact in 2005. The Center grew out of the dialogue on 'The Role of Corporations in the 21st Century', which began at the Universal Forum of Cultures Barcelona 2004, and was influential in the expansion of the Global Compact in Europe. The Center's Director was a lead partner and author of Guía del Pacto Mundial para Gobiernos Locales (Guide to the Global Compact for Local Governments).*

**“UNESCO supports the Universal Forum of Cultures and its purpose of exploring new ways of development that include citizens. That was, in 2004, the singular experience of the first Universal Forum of Cultures in Barcelona. That was also our first collaboration with the Forum Foundation. The result is this laboratory of ideas, which six years later continues its innovative, solidarity-based scientific work.”**

Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO,  
Opening Ceremony, Valparaiso 2010



The Universal Forum of Cultures, which has also been held in Monterey (Mexico), Valparaiso (Chile) and Naples (Italy), leaves many legacies. Most apparent are public works such as Barcelona's *Parc del Fòrum* above. Image: *Fundació Fòrum Universal de les Cultures*.