



**A Speech  
by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at the conference:  
"Housing in Europe:  
New Challenges and Innovations in Tomorrow's Cities"  
Reykjavik  
30 June 2005**

Distinguished scholars,  
Researchers and public officials,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

More than thirty years ago, when I had just returned to Iceland from my studies abroad and was trying, together with my young colleagues, to bring a social science dimension into public discussions in Iceland, I attended a conference on the planning of a new suburb in Reykjavik, Breidholt. This is an area far away from the city centre, high in the hills, where winter usually arrives a few weeks earlier than down town and the conditions are often more appropriate for skiing.

The building industry in Iceland was then just beginning to use the large construction crane, and the profitability gained from being able to turn it full circle without moving the base was a major factor in determining the design of the new suburb that was being proposed by the city planners.

When we asked what effects this would have on the people, on the patterns of family life and the style of living, we met almost with blank stares – the economies of scale provided by the new construction technology were supposed to be the critical factor, and the coalition created by the city planners, the construction companies and the corporative alliance of the trade unions, the employers and the State Housing Agency ruled the day.

One truly Icelandic viewpoint also emerged: The inhabitants had to have a view, a view of the mountains and the sea. The higher one got, the

further away from the old city centre, the more spectacular was the panorama of the ocean playfully embracing the mountains.

It would be an interesting subject for research how the love of mountain views and the deep cultural attachment to the ocean have influenced the planning of urban areas in our country causing Reykjavik and the neighbouring communities to spread over an area now equal in size to that of Rome and other large cosmopolitan cities.

How indeed did we develop from the cluster of small iron-clad timber houses around the Pond, close to the old harbour, to the large metropolitan area which has become the modern Reykjavik, a city that provides a rich display of the housing policies which characterised the political process throughout the twentieth century?

When we now assemble to discuss the new challenges and the innovations in tomorrow's cities, it is worth reflecting on the patterns that were created in our past, on our mistakes and successes, on the factors which came to dominate the decision-making process, on the vision that public leaders thought was in the best interests of the people.

Housing is perhaps the core presentation of our civilization, a reflection of the values we hold dear, the way in which we organize the good life, the aspirations of our people – housing is more political, in the best sense of that word, than most other areas of governmental concern, yet it has not occupied the clear central place in public discussion it really deserves.

The pillars of western civilization are founded in a heritage provided by the city-states of ancient times, by Athens and Rome, Venice and Florence, cities which provided Europe and the western world with philosophers, artists, poets, thinkers, public leaders and rulers, builders and architects who together created forums and forms of civilisation which continue to influence and impress us to this very day and will certainly do so as long as mankind values excellence and extraordinary achievements.

How were people brought together in those city states? How did the layout of the housing, the streets, the squares and the open areas contribute to the dialogues and the discourse, the community spirit which led to the creation of such extraordinary art and such profoundly visionary thinking?

What can we learn from these periods of our past history? Or are the challenges we face in the future so new, and the innovations so

extraordinary, that we must journey forward without turning to our heritage for the necessary guidance?

What will be the most significant factors in the housing policies of the future? Will they turn out be construction technology, finance, the traffic system, ownership, the ambitions of the mayors and the city councils or the current theories in the training of architects and town and country planners?

Will the open-minded students of today meet with the same blank stares when they raise critical questions as we met with more than thirty years ago?

How can we make the decision-making process reflect the open dialogue that is so urgently needed, a dialogue which must draw on many different disciplines and challenge any vested interest which tries to frame the decisions in its favour?

Ultimately the answers to these questions will provide a vision of how we see ourselves, how we define our civilisation, how we hope to achieve the good society. They will present the prevailing philosophy of our times, our dominant political vision.

The debate on housing in Europe must therefore be at the core of our democratic dialogue, and I hope that your deliberations will significantly contribute to that process and enhance our awareness of how fundamental housing policies are to our future.

In this spirit I wish you every success and declare the conference on New Challenges and Innovations in Tomorrow's Cities open.