

Questions for ICCC chairs

Hi - My name is Klaus Koch and I was the chairman of the 37th ICCC held in Cape Town in August 2006.

1. How did your country get to bid to host the conference? and
2. How did you get to be conference chair?

The story is quite a long and interesting one. I shall try to be brief. My first ICCC which I personally attended was Athens 1986 in which I realised that the series of conferences had a long history. In 1988 in Porto I was nominated to sit on the traditional planning committee as South African representative - the only South African representative as it turns out - and realised that the business of the planning committee was to decide on future venues.

I was astonished to discover that future venues were selected at least 12 years in advance. Surprisingly I decided to take courage and stand up and ask the question "Why not South Africa?"

I remember Stanley Kirschner distinctly asking me how old I was; presumably he signalled that I was in for a long wait.

I realised that most of the ICCCs had been held in the Northern hemisphere in the more developed part of the world, but every now and then a conference being held in between the 2 year cycle in far way countries. This seemed to me to be somewhat unfair and I suppose this was the reason I was gripped with a determination to make a bid to bring an ICCC to South Africa or the African continent as to my knowledge then no such meeting has ever taken place on African soil. In any event my initial proposal resulted in a South African inquiry may I say so being minuted in the planning committee record, thus the seeds for the ICCC in Cape Town were sown. Of course I realised that in the context of in the bad old days of South African politics there was little chance of an ICCC coming to South Africa in view of the international sanctions against South Africa which at just this time 1988-1989 became quite intense. Nevertheless we knew in South Africa that change was in the air and so by 1989 in Broadbeach Australia and 1990 in the ICCC in Gera the former GDR a formal bid for hosting an ICCC sometime in the future in South Africa was placed on the agenda. Fortunately by 1994 after the democratisation of South Africa an ICCC in SA became a real possibility and this was followed by a formal proposal to host the ICCC in Cape Town.

In the meeting in Florence in 1998 to my surprise and probably many in South Africa our bid was unanimously accepted in 1998. So for my sins I became I guess the default chairman of the conference that was to be held in Cape Town in the year 2006.

3. What is your recollection of the plenary speakers?

Right in the beginning when we planned this we had decided to try and attract the best possible speakers that we could find and we managed to I think attract a good number of outstanding speakers. We initially invited 8 plenary speakers which were A. P. de Silva of Belfast, Northern Ireland, Peter Sadler of Edinburgh in the UK, Helder M. Marques who was a South African from Johannesburg, Kazuko Matsumoto from Japan, Tobin Marks from the USA, Rudi van Eldik from

Germany, Omar Yaghi also from the USA and of course Robert Grubbs from the USA. We were particularly pleased that Robert Grubbs accepted in view of him having shared the Nobel prize for Chemistry in the year 2005. This was in our opinion a great coup.

As it turned two of the plenary speakers in the last minutes for various reasons could not attend. Kazuko Matsumoto which I regret very much for personal reasons could not attend, whereas Omar Yaghi to our disappointment decided travel to South Africa was too risky in view of the then security situation which had reared its ugly head again.

In planning the plenary speaker program we tried to be comprehensive and representative across the world and also we decided to deviate a little bit from the traditional program of an ICCC in that we wanted an inspirational speaker to open the conference by giving a lecture on the Sunday evening to which we would invite a whole load of school children, their teachers and indeed local VIPS and the public. For this the most inspirational person that we could think of was A. P. de Silva who I must say did not let us down. A. P. de Silva from Belfast gave a marvellous lecture on messages from molecules on the Sunday evening 13th of August to an almost full large auditorium in Cape Town. This really was in my opinion one of the highlights of the ICCC. Subsequently Peter Sadler gave a wonderful plenary lecture on coordination chemistry for the design of new molecules on Monday. Helder Marques replaced Kazuko Matsumoto on Tuesday morning with an inspirational lecture on manipulating cobalt III - the chemistry of cobalt corrinoids - the history of vitamin B₁₂ which represents his life's work. On Wednesday 16th August Tobin Marks dazzled the audience with a talk about new materials and processes for inorganic transistors and printed electronics - perhaps not quite traditional coordination chemistry but truly an amazing bit of applied chemistry if one likes.

On Thursday 17th August Professor Rudi van Eldik from Erlangen in Germany gave a fascinating lecture on inorganic and bioinorganic reaction mechanisms from fundamental insight to entertainment. Professor van Eldik had become quite famous in Germany for his shows on clinical magic and he certainly did not disappoint the audience in Cape Town.

The disappointing no-show of Omar Yaghi on Friday caused us a little bit of stress but fortunately at the last minute Dr Dirk Kurth from Potsdam – The Max Plank Institute of Material Science in Potsdam, stepped in and gave an outstanding account of polyoxometallate clusters as compounds in functional materials and so saved us from embarrassment and of course the highlight was the lecture by Robert Grubbs on Friday just before the closing about the famous Grubbs catalyst the “Magic Dust” as he calls it. In summary we I think had a good group of plenaries who were all outstanding lecturers and gave inspirational accounts of their chemistry. The only little bit of advice I would like to pass onto future chairmen is to avoid getting into the situation where you pay for the airfares of people who may have a reputation of not attending. This unfortunately happened to us and we lost one airfare and a second one due to an unforeseen cancellation for which unfortunately no refund was forthcoming from the airlines. This can poke a significant hole into the budget. Overall however it wasn't only the plenaries we recall with pleasure but the many outstanding keynote lectures and in

particular those of many younger scientists and in some cases doctoral students who really gave an outstanding account of coordination chemistry in its larger sense.

4. What was the most outstanding scientific event of the conference?

As to the most outstanding scientific event of the conference was I guess the very fact that it was held in Cape Town in South Africa and exposed local scientists, students and people to really the big picture of coordination chemistry. Putting this another way the fact that we attracted 630 delegates from more than 57 countries was perhaps the most outstanding scientific event of the conference.

There were many scientific highlights within the program and it would be unfair of me to try and single individual ones out but I think perhaps the most important one in my view was the outstanding lecture by A. P. de Silva on the opening night on Sunday, which was attended by more than 150 local pupils and their teachers from 30 schools, as well as some VIPS and it was an outstandingly successful event. On the other hand the fact that local students won "best poster" prizes was also a very pleasing scientific event showing that in fact some of the chemistry that is taking place in South Africa is to be taken seriously. We thank the international community for actually affording us the opportunity of hosting the 37th ICC.

5. What was the most memorable non-scientific event?

As to the most memorable non-scientific event of the conference - well I think the opening party was probably the most memorable non-scientific event. The food was outstanding; the organisation of the Cape Town committee was outstanding and most importantly I need to thank the Constantia valley wine makers who with a little bit of arm twisting came to the party and displayed some of the better wines of the Constantia valley wine area producers of South Africa.

Another highlight in my view was the convention dinner which took place on Thursday evening. I have it on good authority that the food was very impressive, the decor was outstanding and the organisation of the evening was a true highlight. I have it on good authority that many a sweaty jiver had to be persuaded to leave the dance floor after midnight as the convention centre needed to close to prepare for the next day.

Any other comments or observations?

Finally as to any other comments or observations there is a long list one could say but I would like to first pay tribute to the outstanding help and teamwork of the organisational committee. The organisation of such a conference as one discovers afterwards is not a simple matter. One relies on the pro bono work of numerous people and in particular one of the taxing matters is that there is no financial backing for such an event so that one has to ensure that the event pays for itself. I am very pleased to say that our budget broke even, we neither made nor lost money, although we had to raise a substantial amount in sponsorship and donation for which we are very pleased. The local organising committee did an outstanding job in every respect and in particular I need to pay tribute also to the professional conference organisers African Conference Incentives who helped us a great deal in the logistics

accommodation, registration and all the other issues which otherwise which would have taxed us too much. I need to pay a special tribute to the local green shirt coordinating team which was made up by a number of postgraduate and graduate students from all 4 local universities in the western Cape, under the able leadership of Dr Jeff Chen who ensured that the audiovisual matters, the time keeping inbetween individual lectures in the complicated program, and other matters such as poster displays and so on were of an outstanding standard. Finally I want to thank everyone sincerely who helped make the ICCC a great success and wish you a proudly South African.... ."Hambani kakuhle totsiens".