



**A Speech  
by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at  
The 9<sup>th</sup> European Conference on  
Product and Process Modelling  
Reykjavík  
25 July 2012**

Distinguished participants  
Ladies and gentlemen

I warmly welcome all of you to Iceland and hope your discussions and deliberations will be inspired by the uniqueness of the surroundings, both man-made and created by the Almighty.

We are all familiar with the opening of the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis, the account of how God created the earth in six days and then decided to rest because the work was finished. The problem with this description, however, is that it is not entirely accurate. When he came to Iceland, the Almighty became so fascinated by the possibilities that the creation has continued ever since, with new volcanoes and new lava fields, and new islands rising out of the ocean, all against a background of continuous earthquakes. No doubt there will even be a few during the opening session of your conference, but they will probably be so small that sophisticated technology will be needed to locate them and measure their strength.

The Almighty has been in a productive mood when working on Iceland, providing challenges for our architects, engineers and builders but also graciously providing us with a wealth of materials: volcanic sinters, sand and plenty of stone.

For centuries, from the early times of the Vikings down to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Icelanders used local turf and stones to create unique farmhouses that were warm in winter and cool in summer. Built

from indigenous materials and with traditional methods, these houses are now for consideration as a world heritage; the homes of my grandparents in their younger years.

By the time my parents were growing up, the nation had moved into timber houses, covered with corrugated iron, many examples of which can be seen in the centre of Reykjavik. Some of these now house good restaurants, coffee houses, artists' studios and jewellers' shops. With their colourful roofs and charming windows, they are becoming increasingly popular with the younger generation.

During the lifetime of my generation, we have seen a monumental transformation of our capital and our smaller towns and villages, with the construction of roads, harbours, airports and other facilities serving the nation and furthering the process of modernisation.

For decades, our architects and engineers have gone to many countries in search of advanced education and training. When they return to Iceland they make the country a melting pot of different styles and traditions, and bring with them innovations and influences from a host of European countries and also the United States.

The new concert hall and conference centre, Harpa, is perhaps the pinnacle of these developments. It is encircled by a gigantic work of art made of glass and metal, designed by the world famous artist Ólafur Elíasson and built by a Chinese firm, the only one in the world that felt confident to complete such a construction. This is a matter of historical significance, since Harpa is the first cultural building in the Western World that has been constructed with a significant Chinese involvement, an indication of how times are changing.

Although more than 1100 years have passed since the first Viking settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, was wise enough to choose Reykjavík as the site of his home, it helps, when you arrive in this modern city, to be aware not only of its ancient roots but also of its youth.

In the years that followed the Second World War, Reykjavík was still a city of oil and coal, with smoke covering the centre every day and causing respiratory problems and health damage. The coal depot used to occupy the largest part of the harbour area, close to where Harpa now stands.

In the lifetime of our generation, we have transformed our energy economy from one based on fossil fuel to clean renewable energy. Iceland has become the leading country in such a transformation. Now 100% of our electricity and space heating is derived from clean energy

resources, geothermal and hydro. With the emergence of electric cars and other environmentally sound vehicles, Iceland could become the first country in the world to have all its land based activities running on clean energy.

In this way Iceland has become an important inspiration for others, a proof that we can construct our cities and reform our environment in a sustainable and responsible way.

Every visitor to Iceland leaves with a new vision. That was the case with Norman Foster, one of the world's leading architects, who came to Iceland for a couple of January days a few years ago. When he was leaving, he said to me: "Somehow I feel as if I have just visited the future." And that was in the middle of winter, just after the New Year! Imagine what his message would have been if Norman had joined you here in July!

Some people say: All right, you were able to make this transformation in Iceland because you only have a small population and the right natural resources. With all due respect, I don't accept this argument. There are over one hundred countries in the world that are endowed with similar resources and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century modern information technology has made it much easier for countries to achieve such a transformation; easier than it was for Iceland which started the process half a century ago.

However, people are prone to highlight excuses and barriers to change, rather than to focus on examples which inspire progress, local and regional models which can lead to a comprehensive global change.

It is encouraging to witness how increasingly many people seek to strengthen their vision by drawing examples from Iceland. One of those visionaries is Bill McDonough. A frequent visitor to this country, the architect of the Google YouTube building and the NASA Sustainability Base, author of the Cradle to Cradle approach to modern architecture. In three weeks' time he will host a gathering in northern Iceland, attended, among others, by Chinese and American experts, city planners, architects and engineers, meeting to examine how to construct the cities of the future, how to reform our approaches, our standards, our laws, our regulations; how to use the extraordinary power of modern information technology to achieve, in the immediate future, a more sustainable world.

Thus, my dear friends, you are not alone: you can seek encouragement from being in the company of Norman Foster and Bill McDonough and many others who have been inspired by what this country can offer.

Your conference is indeed an important venue for a dialogue on how to construct a more responsible and sustainable future. Your work is of great importance to us all in helping to save our communities and our cities and from facing a bleaker future. With your involvement we can all hopefully come together in order to create a better world.