



**INNOVATION – CREATIVITY
INSPIRATIONS FROM ICELAND**

**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a Forum in Berlin
During a State Visit to Germany
26 June 2013**

Distinguished guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

In recent years, leading thinkers, analysts and experts have increasingly emphasised the importance of innovation and creativity in the economic and cultural progress of nations and communities.

Whereas the industrial revolution made material resources, factories and technical skills the key to success, the arrival of the computer, the Internet and social media have transformed the world in fundamental ways, making the individual with his or her brainpower, creativity and innovative capacities the driving engine of the 21st century economy; the individual, alone or together with a few friends.

Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Björk or Ólafur Elíasson – and thousands of others – are proving with their track record that this is indeed so. Now, innovation and creativity move the world forward. Change – in software, media, the arts, culture, technology or business – can come from anywhere. No place is too small to be significant in this new world of opportunities.

Iceland illustrates this transformation with examples in abundance. For centuries, we were a nation of farmers and fishermen where industrialisation mainly took the form of fish-processing plants, meat factories and a few clothing and shoe manufacturers. Aluminium smelters

and ferrosilicon plants – technology that had been developed decades earlier – became the modern evidence of the industrial age.

We are, however, fortunate to have a new symbol of the emerging era; a beacon of culture and the arts, which was recently awarded the most distinguished European architectural prize. It is a monument which, in the wake of the banking collapse, could have become a painful symbol of failure. In the years following the collapse, however, it rose like the Phoenix from its ashes to become a temple of creativity, of culture, dialogue and innovation, demonstrating how they can be combined to transform our societies.

Harpa, this new music and conference centre by the old harbour of Reykjavík, is already a global landmark, distinguished by the artistic glass and steel shell created by Ólafur Elíasson in partnership with my old friend and schoolmate Einar Þorsteinn Ásgeirsson. Both of them have been living here in Berlin for a long time now. The shell which encases Harpa comes to life as a symphony of light and colours, in summer reflecting the glorious glow of our summer nights and in winter the Northern Lights, playing *frisch* and *fröhlich* with the ocean, the waves, the wind and the mountains.

As a concert hall it has already acquired fame, allowing us to enjoy not only our own symphony orchestra and the Berliner Philharmoniker, but also numerous choirs and bands, singers, soloists and festivals of young musical talents.

As a conference centre it recently hosted Startup Iceland, an international gathering deliberating how the country could become a kind of Davos of the IT world, allowing creativity to transform technology and our societies in an open and free way, without restrictions imposed either by governments or by corporate giants. It has also hosted CCP's Eve-Online jamboree, a kind of Woodstock of the multiplayer online game community. And next October a new assembly, called the Arctic Circle, where those interested in the development of 'our ice covered world' are invited to discuss how the profoundly changes in the Arctic will transform the world. The list is long – every day, Harpa hosts gatherings of artists and musicians, IT activists, debaters, thinkers, promoters, experts, innovators; anyone with an idea or a creative spirit.

When the banks collapsed in October 2008, there were many who advocated that the big black hole that had been excavated for the foundations of Harpa should remain as a warning and a lesson to us all – never again to let what Alan Greenspan called "Excessive exuberance" determine the course of our societies.

Others argued there was an even stronger message to be put across by finishing the building. Despite, or rather because of, the financial crisis, this multiplatform building with a wealth of stages and places for presenting new forces of creativity, culture and innovation would demonstrate a new way forward. Fortunately the latter view prevailed.

But Harpa also gives us the key to another and larger story and provides a signpost that lets us discover how the collapse of the financial industry unleashed a pool of talent which in the last four years has strengthened and invigorated a multitude of sectors, including companies in software, computers and IT, companies in design, fashion and cosmetics, companies in ecotourism, specialised travel to view glaciers and volcanoes, companies offering unusual locations, and unique experiences, combining culture and nature in innovative ways.

In just a few years since the banking crisis, Iceland has evolved into a showcase of innovation and creativity, almost a national laboratory where the dynamic forces of individual daring and social cooperation continually transform our society, building new pillars for our future.

By giving you a few examples here today we hope to enlighten you about our country and also provide a vision of how others can successfully make innovation and creativity the guiding forces of the 21st century.