



**SPEECH BY UIA PRESIDENT REGINA GONTHIER
OPENING CEREMONY, UIA 2024 INTERNATIONAL FORUM
KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA**

15 November 2024

Esteemed participants

Dear colleagues and friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the International Union of Architects, it is an honour to be with you here in Kuala Lumpur, a city of rich cultural intersections, a particularly fitting stage for our coming discussions and reflections on diversity in the urban fabric.

I extend my sincere gratitude to our hosts, the Malaysian Institute of Architects, PAM, its President Adrianta Aziz, the Forum Convenor Ezumi Harzani, and all who have helped make this Forum possible. It is a privilege to address you at the opening of three days of exploration into the theme of “DiverseCity” — a journey through cultural diversity within our urban landscapes.

Today, we gather in Kuala Lumpur to address questions that have become central to our profession and relevant for our shared future. Cultural identity and diversity lie at the very core of our considerations as we design and shape cities. They offer us an unparalleled richness while also reminding us of our tremendous responsibility.

This Forum presents a unique opportunity to engage in a global dialogue that considers both the nuances and the common challenges cities face today: environmental crises, economic disparities, social transformations, and rapidly advancing technology. These forces place immense pressure on our built environments and call for our profession to respond thoughtfully, sustainably, and inclusively.

UNION INTERNATIONALE DES ARCHITECTES

SECRETARIAT GÉNÉRAL

Tour Maine Montparnasse

B.P.158 - 33, avenue du Maine - 75755 Paris cedex 15-France - Tél. : +33 1 45 24 36 88

www.uia-architectes.org



By 2050, two-thirds of humanity are expected to live in urban areas, which are the largest consumers of energy and materials, and producers of waste. In many parts of the globe, we are confronted with architecturally uncontrolled urbanisation, informal settlements, and newly built cities that lack a sense of genius loci.

Over the next few days, our discussions will focus on topics essential to a resilient urban future, one that must reclaim people at the heart of urban development.

We will examine “**Cultural Iconography in Urban Spaces**”, questioning how the symbols and structures in our cities might define, preserve, and evolve cultural identity. In a globalised world, these elements should reflect both history and diversity, while welcoming new expressions. Mimicry is not an appropriate architectural approach; what is needed is fresh interpretation.

“**Space and Place for Cultural Interaction**” reminds us of the power of public spaces to foster human connections. Cities are dynamic hubs of cultural interaction, and as they grow denser and more diverse, it becomes imperative that these spaces are designed to support a shared sense of belonging, while accommodating a spectrum of cultural needs. At the same time, increasing online commerce and retreat into individual spheres threaten the utility and use of public space in our cities.

“**Cultural Sensitivity in Architecture**” invites us to honour and integrate local knowledge, traditions, and climate-responsive practices into our designs. True sensitivity respects and strengthens the unique characteristics of each place, reflecting the lives of the people who inhabit it. This topic touches the core capacity required of an architect: the ability to feel a place and recognise its specific characteristics.

When we discuss “**Policy and Governance for Urban Diversity**”, we address the frameworks that allow cities to thrive equitably. Inclusive policies are essential to ensure that diversity is a source of strength, rather than division, supporting environments where everyone has a voice and a role. Participative procedures must be developed enabling local inhabitants to express their needs, views and enable their identification with proposed solutions. The UIA encourages active community participation.



“**Reimagining Cultural Narratives in Rebuilt Spaces**” highlights the significance of heritage in our cities. Rebuilt spaces carry the memories of communities and offer continuity with the past, even as they meet today’s needs. Addressing the history of a place is a particular challenge today, as we frequently face natural and human-made disasters. The challenge is to respect the past and memory of a place while ensuring further development is based on sustainable solutions. In fact, the UIA decided to launch a student competition on this very relevant theme.

In “**Designing with People and Nature in Mind**”, we turn to sustainable practices that support human well-being and ecological resilience. Our responsibility as architects is to create spaces that not only serve communities but also integrate harmoniously with natural systems. The UIA advocates for a balanced habitat that transcends the simplistic dichotomy between urban and rural areas and calls for a fundamental shift towards a world in harmony with nature.

Finally, “**Human-Centred Architecture for Future Generations**” asks us to keep people’s well-being at the forefront of our work, and to restore the social role of architecture. This entails acknowledging the responsibility of architects in shaping inclusive, resilient and respectful urban environments, considering the needs of those who will inhabit these spaces long after us. The well-being of all must be at the centre of sustainable and vibrant communities.

Faced with growing and persistent inequalities and rapid environmental degradation in our urban areas, we must emphasise that **dignity for all people is a fundamental principle for architecture and that there is no beauty in exclusion**. As architects, we recognise that we are not the only actors responsible for addressing the pressing challenges our cities and urban areas are facing, but we are certainly very well positioned and uniquely equipped to be part of the solution.

It is imperative that we chart a new course for sustainability — one anchored in architecture and focused on urbanisation, with people and culture at the core of our cities and territories. The discussions we are initiating today are essential as we chart a sustainable path forward, building cities that value cultural diversity and environmental balance.



Together, we are shaping a vision that honours the identities and well-being of all the inhabitants of our urban landscapes, respects and celebrates the cultural and environmental richness of our communities, and puts them at the centre of urban and territorial development.

The UIA welcomes you to “DiverseCity” and thanks you for your commitment, your insights, and your dedication. May our conversations inspire the actions needed to build resilient, inclusive, and thriving communities.

Regina Gonthier
UIA President