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Opening Address

Discours d'ouverture

Eröffnungsansprache

Bruno THÜRLIMANN

President of IABSE
Zürich, Switzerland

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Dear Friends,

As President of IABSE, I extend to you a most cordial welcome to the 12th Congress of our Association, here in Vancouver.

At the closing session of our last Congress, 4 years ago in Vienna, Prof. Adams invited us in the name of the Canadian Group of IABSE and Canadian Society for Civil Engineering to this Congress in Vancouver. Let me express to our Canadian Friends our sincere thanks for all their efforts in organizing this Congress. I am very happy to report that the attendance measures up to their and our expectations, especially considering the economic difficulties in the construction field encountered in many parts of the world.

Let me in a few words state the reasons for holding every 4 years such a Congress and add some personal remarks.

In our daily routine work, we hardly find time to follow the technical progress, even on the national level. What is however even more needed, is a look beyond regional and national boundaries, to become aware and also be inspired by new ideas and techniques developing in other parts of the world. The Congress tries to present a comprehensive review of the achievements and developments in structural engineering over the past 4 years, in all parts of the world: in the coming 4 days they will be presented by eminent experts.

If we can learn from good examples, we can as well profit from the study of failures, difficulties and frictions. The programme of this Congress has not been focused on such difficulties encountered over the past 4 years. Hence, I would like to expand this point just a little further.

A number of spectacular and in some instances tragic failures of structures have occurred. Very serious difficulties have shown up for instance in the construction of nuclear power plants. Alone in the USA, 50 nuclear power projects have been abandoned in the past few years at exorbitant financial losses, in order to avoid even more exorbitant additional costs for their completion.

These, and similar developments in other technical fields, have created serious frictions between science-technology and the public opinion. We are learning the hard way, that not all thechnical problems have a straight forward engineering solution. A scientific proof of the safety and reliability of a technical system does not necessarily lead to its public acceptance. Ecological, environmental, social or political aspects can outweigh such a scientific proof. Nevertheless, we have often desperately tried to further strengthen the scientific arguments by applying even

highly speculative and often unproven scientific methods. In doing so, we overregulated in many instances our own technical activities and products. The most dramatic example of this kind is the nuclear power industry in the USA. It has priced itself out of business by its own entanglement into a net of overregulations.

I have elaborated on this point in order to set a clear warning. There are indications that we may overreact in other fields under the impact of public relations to failures of deteriorations of structures. Let us not produce regulations which blow up the costs of our structures without basically improve their safety and quality. Even in the age of science, common sense remains a most important asset in structural engineering, as well as in many other human activities.

A further objective of our Congress is to bring the activities and achievements of Civil and especially Structural Engineering to the attention of the public. Thereby, we would like to maintain, or even improve, the social standing of our profession. Our activity is a very basic part of our present civilisation and we would appreciate this recognition by other professional groups.

On the international scene, the Civil Engineering and in particular the Structural Engineering profession is acting in different fractions without an efficient common organization. We believe that this situation should be improved. Duplication of efforts can be avoided by closer cooperation. However, for an improved international recognition of our profession, a stronger tie between the different international associations, active in special fields of structural engineering, is required. In my opinion, the final objective should be a common administrative organization with divisions for the different scientific and technical activities. Exploratory contacts and discussions have been taken up with some organizations. IABSE is ready to further pursue these contacts. However, we also must realize that changes in our organizational structure will become necessary if a common organization should be achieved.

The final point I would like to make has a human touch. We all enjoy our professional world. But we also try to put it into a human context. The Congress provides an excellent opportunity to meet professional colleagues from all parts of the world, to make new personal contacts and to maintain and strengthen old friendships.

I would like to extend a very special welcome to all the ladies who have joined us. With your grace and charm you bring that human touch to our Congress that will make it also a memorable social event.

In concluding, I wish you all a professionally most valuable and a socially most enjoyable week here in Vancouver.

I herewith declare the 12th Congress of IABSE open.