

## ISO Congress Tour Russia 2012

Helsinki Finland and St.Petersburg Russia hosted 15-17<sup>th</sup> March the 55th annual congress of the International Shopfitting Organisation ISO. The participants were professionals engaged in Retail Environment Design and Contracting representing 9 European countries and the USA, getting a good look into Russian Retail Industry.

### Myymälä Shopfitting Exhibition Finland.

The meeting point of the international group was the *Myymälä* exhibition by easyFairs in the *World Design Capital 2012 Helsinki*, a successful exhibition with quality exhibitors from the Nordic shopfitting industry.

### ISO Seminar: International Shopfitting Approach to Russian retail.

In a well attended seminar at the Myymälä, ISO's principal speaker *Neil Whitehead* introduced the theme of western influence on Russian shop design and retail environments (Ref. [www.stuffid.com](http://www.stuffid.com)).

Neil is founder and owner of *Stuff International Design* in London and has more than 8 years experience in Russia. He gave a good overall view of the situation in Russian Retail today, based on more than 40 projects in 12 cities which he has been involved in. It has mainly been shopping malls and other mass retail projects, and he pointed out to the audience, the great perspectives to the Western shopfitting industry, who are interested and willing to invest time and expertise in this new, expanding, and hungry market.

"It was a surprising and new experience for us to see how quick decisions about new retail projects were made in Russia, and how short the time from idea, to project planning, to realization - and opening", says Neil Whitehead, looking back at his past hectic years in the former Soviet Union. Western European retail investors are strongly advised to enter into partnership with Russian companies, also because of the political situation which is different and unfamiliar to foreign investors.

Another hurdle is to find local suppliers and subcontractors of the needed services and equipment, to meet the high quality demands of western retailers, demands that are also increasingly requested by the emerging Russian brands. The Russian market does not yet have the necessary production and supply capacity to meet these needs, why the international chain retailers expanding in Russia bring their usual suppliers from their home countries to fit and finish the stores in Russia as well, notwithstanding high transportation, installation expenses, and customs duties.

### St.Petersburg, Russia.

After further business talks, panel discussion, dinner and entertainment on the overnight cruise from Helsinki to St. Petersburg, the ISO members enjoyed a full second day to study the retail landscape on site. The cruise package allowed Visa free entry to Russia, and the professional Russian guide and bus were waiting the party ashore. Those who had visited this second largest city of Russia in the past 20 years, since the Soviet period, could witness to the immense development which has made St.Petersburg similar to any other Western European Metropolis. The Scandinavian influence on the retail structure of this 5 million population city is unmistakable. Most clearly visible in the modern shopping malls, and large Western branded chain stores on the famous main boulevard Nevski Prospekt, but also in the ongoing efforts to upgrade and "uptrade" the traditional shopping arcades. Most remarkable is probably the "Passage" as a narrow glass covered shopping street, dating back to 1848, and still going strong, reflecting the splendor of the Czar period. But today, seen through the professional eyes of ISO, the Passage is in obvious need of new and creative retail thinking. The same applies very much to the oldest and largest department-store/shopping-mall/market-place in all of Russia (maybe Europe?), the Gostiny Dvor right across the street. Established between 1757 and 1785, the Gostiny Dvor is like the Passage still going strong!

But the historic retail clusters are under serious pressure from fully modern, efficient shopping malls popping up all over the city. An example is the GALLERIA, near the Central Station, a less than two years old 180.000 m2 center boasting almost any and all Western brand stores, among other one of 10 busy St.Petersburg partner stores of ISO member Swarovski. A single, local brand store on Nevski Prospekt is the Singer House bookstore, the largest in St. Petersburg, books on 5 floors, crowded with customers, and with a wonderful café upstairs, serving lunch for the exhausted ISO party. Obviously the tour could not owe sufficient respect to St. Petersburg's heritage and culture, but the bus, and very knowledgeable guide went by the Winter Palace, Hermitage, Resurrection Church, Peter & Paul Fortress, and St. Isaac's Cathedral. There was even time for individual strolls through the impressively restored downtown city before catching the shuttle bus back to the M/S Princess Maria.

### **Gala Dinner, new ISO President.**

While the ship struggled its noisy way back through the thick ice on the Baltic Gulf of Finland ISO held the formal, annual General Meeting in the conference room, see the separate official minutes, and the Economic Reviews of the member countries on the web-site.

The successful 55<sup>th</sup> Congress was celebrated with a gourmet dinner, wine, speeches and “change of office”.

After 3 busy and eventful years, President Francois Mathéron of CFA, France received his well deserved thanks and medal as “Past president”.

New host for the evening, and elected ISO president for the coming 3 years, is Tony Kramps of AVA Products, Holland, and member of the CBM/WWI.

A great, eventful and busy day but nevertheless, the evening went on, and on.....

Fortunately the comfortable cabins and beds were in “crawling distance” to spare the participants’ tired feet at last.

### **World Design Capital 2012 Helsinki.**

Back in Helsinki Saturday morning 17<sup>th</sup> March, some participants hurried to the airport and back to their home countries.

For the lucky majority who had booked afternoon flights, an interesting “Design Tour” around Helsinki started with the New Music Hall. Expensive, beautiful “typical” and impressive Finnish design, and of course all the furniture was fitted with specially developed felt-tipped silencer fittings from ISO member Martin Hoeft. He *HAD* to turn the chairs & tables upside down and take pictures. What an honor!

A highlight in Helsinki is of course the round Rock Church (Temple Church) which never ceases to impress with its architecture, mix of nature and construction, natural materials and outstanding acoustics.

Being shopfitters, of course there was also time among the culture sights to pay visit to the *Old Market Hall*, an icon in Finnish Retail. For late departures (or early arrivals before the cruise Thursday) there was also an opportunity to visit the FORUM city mall and the STOCKMANN department store, which is also strongly represented in St. Petersburg.

Report by Secretary Preben Bailey,

Free interpretation of large parts of Winfried Lambertz’ German report in Stores + Shop no. 02-2012, pg. 82.