

# **A History of the Institute of Cultural Affairs**

by Lucas Bensley, August 2019

If the Ecumenical Institute constituted the spirit movement of revitalizing the church, the Institute of Cultural Affairs represents the engagement of the broader, secular society: that is, the “human factor.”

Since its incorporation in 1973, the ICA was conceived as a secular programmatic direction for the Ecumenical Institute. In the postwar era, the Ecumenical Institute had been dedicated to responding to the issues of urban society in a way that rearticulated and updated the mission of the church for a modern era. By this decade, the Institute’s programs had spread across North America and the globe in the form of religious houses, layman training and community development.

It became apparent that the Institutes’ efforts were split between focusing directly on the church and addressing the secular world in which the church operates. Government agencies, corporations, schools, and social agencies, among other institutions outside of the church, were clients to many of the Institute’s training and leadership programs. In many of the countries the Institute served, the staff and program participants were indigenous and followed other faiths.

Consequently, the decision was made to take the ICA program arm of the Ecumenical Institute and incorporate it separately as a secular institution. On September 26, 1973, the ICA incorporated and officially came into being.

The timing proved serendipitous for the newborn organization. The year before, the Ecumenical Institute had moved from Fifth City to the Kemper Insurance Building in Uptown. The local press reported that the building was to be used as headquarters for the ICA’s Urban Research and Training Center. Furthermore, both the ICA and its new home came into being at a time when new issues and obstacles were identified in the communities the organization sought to serve. A Community Recovery and Preservation report from the Ecumenical Institute, for instance, cited the “jelling” of the social movements of the 60s into localized concerns with recovering “human values often lost in urban living.” Community action, according to the Institute, was frustrated by a lack of direction, factional division, and a short-term emphasis that failed to take into account the national or global dimensions of localized issues. (“Community Recovery and Preservation”)

## **Global Center**

The new space proved a valuable investment for the ICA and the Ecumenical Institute, as it became a global center for significant initiatives such as the Global Summer Research Assemblies, Local Church Experiment, and more. The assemblies were significant in that they sometimes attracted as many as 1,000 participants for leadership training and forum-style meetings designed to help participants realize and plan towards shared concerns.

These developments were well in line with a major shift in emphasis for the ICA. It was decided at this time that the entire globe was to be the missional context of the organizations. The ICA in Uptown, Chicago was to serve as the “global symbolic centrum” by which other centums across North and Latin America, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and Europe would be modeled. “Chicago is and will be THE symbol,” as Joseph Wesley Mathews said. A total of five global centums were established in Hong Kong, Bombay, Nairobi, Brussels, Chicago, each intended to

be a service center that aided and expanded upon the existing network of religious houses. By establishing these centers, the ICA and the EI pursued a five-fold [strategy](#):

1. to encourage a Global Movement with a structure and organization capable of reaching communities around the world while avoiding being steeped in bureaucracy;
2. to create a Global Historical Order composed of church projects and visitation centers around the globe to advance the ongoing religious mission of the EI;
3. to prepare local leaders for pedagogical and laymen roles to further “mass evangelism” through a Global Training Net;
4. to enable the New Social Vehicle tactical system (further information of which can be found in Collection 2: Social Change); and
5. to expand a Global Permeation Net dedicated to expanding the reach of the Institute into underserved global regions.

What exactly did this look like in practice? For one, it enabled the ICA to interact with and be more sensitive towards cultures in the regions they served. In part, this took the form of global trips. Some staff credited these [trips](#) with curing them of “Ugly Americanism” by helping to broaden their global awareness. Human Development Projects located in every time zone globally allowed traveling members of the Institute to share methods with indigenous communities and centrums they encountered. These projects, also called the “Band of 24 Human Development Projects”, harnessed the “human element” to demonstrate what a new “social vehicle” for the world would look like if it better engaged community leadership skills, creativity, and motivation. Further information on these projects can be found in Collection 1: Community Development.

Forum-style meetings and programming retained an essential role in community development at a national scale at this time. The Global Women’s Forum was offered in many of the Band of 24 Projects, while Community Youth Forums and Leadership Effectiveness and New Strategies (LENS) courses continued to reach target demographics in communities and the private sector. The most evocative example of forum-style programming came in 1976, when the ICA held 5,000 town meetings (at least one in every county across the United States) in order to mark the country’s Bicentennial, each of which identified issues and strategies unique to each locale. Further information on this campaign can be found in Collection 3: Awakening Forums.

## **Chicago Impact**

The ICA was not just the center of a global movement but an accelerant of change and community organizing in Chicago from the beginning of the 5th City Pilot. Uptown, the very neighborhood the ICA now called home, became a test site for maintaining and expanding upon the organizational methods and pedagogy practiced in Fifth City. Uptown 5. Problem Solving Units (PSUs) were implemented to help residents identify problems and solutions for task forces to develop, while LENS courses and meetings within the wards enabled them to identify their immediate and long-term political, economic, and cultural objectives. Community Youth Forums and Global Women’s Forums likewise helped these constituencies identify shared grievances and propose plans of redress. Additional information on the Uptown 5 can be found in its [report](#).

The six-year Uptown 5 project (1973 to 1979) was immediately followed by another urban-oriented project called Standing Tall in the 80’s. Between 1979 and 1984, Standing Tall similarly utilized forums to reach each of Chicago’s 77 communities to identify shared issues amongst

youth, women, and target-neighborhoods. Auburn-Gresham, Uptown, and Humboldt Park were targeted as “beacon light neighborhoods” whose lines of division and issues surrounding race, income, and community identity were seen as crucial to unlocking the potential of community and community actors in Chicago. Consequently, the ICA managed to reach well over a thousand Chicago residents in those years. Further information on this project is found in Collection 3: Awakening Forums..

The 1980s also witnessed collaborative efforts with the city of Chicago regarding the development and trajectory of its communities. In June 1986, the ICA issued a report to the City’s Department of Economic Development assessing the needs of local residents and recommending strategies for fulfilling said needs. From 1984-86 the ICA conducted strategic planning events with 46 economic development organizations - including local chambers of commerce, business associations, and training organizations, collecting over 2,000 pieces of “brainstorm data.” Based on this data, the ICA [recommended](#) a number of areas for the city to improve upon, including broadening community involvement, making city services more responsive, and combating negative community images. Programmatically, the Institute continued to engage the city’s many communities in an effort to develop local leadership. In 1990 the Chicago ICA education team facilitated school improvement planning in thirty Chicago schools.

At the same time, however, the Institute, as an international organization, radically changed its approach and concentration. At a [meeting](#) in Bilbao, Spain in the summer of 1986, representatives voted to phase out the “last vestiges” of the centrum system in an effort to decentralize the Institute and its efforts. Three “break-through teams” were established to help guide global efforts in research, international development, and long-term investments, respectively, as the Institute transitioned away from utilizing cities like Chicago as “primary units” of activity, as they had done in the past. In addition, the Panchayat, an experiment in global polity, was relocated from its Chicago base to Hong Kong, driving home the idea that the Windy City could no longer serve as the one-stop center for an international-scale organization. The Kemper building -- once serving as a global centrum -- was gifted to the Chicago-area ICA staff on the condition that they cover \$600,000 in accrued global debts. Within four years, the Chicago ICA were able to do so by renting out space to non-profit groups in the area.

### **The Mission Continues...**

**ICA GreenRise.** In recent decades, the Kemper Building, the home of the ICA, has itself been a beacon of sorts to addressing modern issues and concerns. ICA staff have worked to make the building, now known as the “ICA GreenRise and Uptown Learning Laboratory,” totally environmentally sustainable by implementing an urban farm and installing 450 solar panels, the second largest array of roof-mounted solar panels by a non-profit in the city.

**Accelerate 77.** One of the Institute’s ongoing initiatives has been Accelerate 77, an [initiative](#) to identify and work with local leaders in the seventy-seven communities of Chicago to make the city more environmentally sustainable while strengthening community and social bonds. This initiative began in the fall of 2011, when over 200 students from Chicago-area universities worked with the project to “deep-dive” into unfamiliar communities to identify leaders and sustainable programs already present. Students learned community organizing methodology, asset mapping, and other skills as part of their curriculum. This research helped the ICA prepare events to tap into these social networks with “connection events”, such as the Faith and

Sustainability Forum, in 2012-2013 to allow participants to evaluate what efforts their communities have made toward sustainability and to learn what others have been doing. A map of over 900 sustainable projects identified became available on the website.

**Chicago Sustainability Leaders Network (CSLN).** The A77 project culminated in the creation of the CSLN, of which the ICA remains the organizing sponsor. Active since September of 2013, this [organization](#) connects grassroots leaders, activists, and organizers across the city's many communities to share resources and strategies, collaborate, and to build partnerships with policymakers. The CSLN has been able to secure further support from the city as well as corporations while participating in citywide initiatives such as the Smart Grid education project that brings together educators, industry leaders, and other professionals concerned with environmental sustainability.

**Institute of Cultural Affairs International (ICAI).** There was a perceived need to fill in the void left behind by the global infrastructure of the Institute. In September of 1989, ICA staff met in Brussels to create the ICAI to serve a symbolic role in unifying the Institute's disparate parts. Models of successful programs in the Institute's past, including Fifth City, were systematized as the "Technology of Participation," to be used in ICAI leadership training as an example. At the 1992 ICA Global Research Assembly in Prague, the ICAI identified four primary objectives: sustainable development, organizational transformation, pedagogy, and international dialogue. In 2000, the ICAI added objectives such as Community Youth Development and Sustainable Community Development. At present, the ICAI has embraced a "peer to peer" approach as a global [organization](#), in that it utilizes a regionalized perspective to allow national ICAs to take on priority functions and to be the primary modes of activity and decision-making.

To say that the Institute of Cultural Affairs has radically changed in size and purpose since its creation in 1973 would be an understatement. More stories and details concerning the work of the ICA in Chicago and around the world remain to be written and collected. The period of the ICA's gradual de-centralization from the 1980s onwards, in particular, remains an under-explored and potentially rich period of examination for archivists and scholars within and beyond the organization. What cannot be denied, however, is the constancy of the Institute's devotion to the human factor in development in all aspects of society.