# Walter Staveloz: Ecsite Executive Director until January 2006: The Last 10 Years

If one would ask, 'How did it all begin?' the answer would probably not be easy. To the simple question, 'Who was the first Ecsite president?'at least two names are mentioned. Is it Prof. Richard Gregory from Bristol or Roger Lesgard from La Cité des Sciences in Paris? Who can tell where the first Annual Conference took place? And why did the Nuffield Foundation decide to fund a European Network? Not easy questions to answer, even if you are in the field today. It seems that most of us mostly look to the future to understand what our co-operation will achieve rather than to the past. Nevertheless at some point looking back gives a better measure of how the original aims where achieved and what didn't work. The Ecsite Office staff have been busy cleaning up the office after a few years of intensive activity with few resources, trying to make a new start on a more professional basis. Doing so we had the chance to re-discover old documents that where produced at the earliest stages of the association. This activity very soon appeared to be more archaeology than cleaning-up, and gives the answers to the questions above.

The creation of the Exploratorium in San Francisco by Frank Oppenheimer (1969) and the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto the same year, is the start of the fast growing field of interactive science-technology centres in the US. They shared a commitment to visitor's participation, with specially constructed exhibits that encourage interaction. Very soon, the great number of new institutions initiated the creation in 1973 of ASTC (Association of Science-Technology Centers) in the USA. The same evolution took place in Europe but later and with fewer centres. In the Minutes of one of Ecsite's first Directors meetings at Heureka in July 1989 we can read: 'the European centres equal, and in many cases surpass, the American centres in popularity and innovative exhibit design.' A little further in the same text it is admitted however that ASTC was initially an invaluable source of information and contacts for European interactive exhibitions. The reality is that ASTC was the inspiration not only for exhibit design but for the creation of the European network Ecsite as well.

It was during the ASTC meeting at the Museum of Science in Boston (October 1988) that Joël de Rosnay from la Cité des Sciences in Paris decided to invite the European participants to a meeting in the 'Roof café' to discuss the possibility of creating a European network. Things went on fast since that informal get together. On 9 January 1989, 23 museums voted unanimously to found Ecsite during a meeting at 'La Cité'. It was admitted that a critical mass of institutions was

reached, and a strong desire was expressed to set up a Collaborative to meet the specific needs and interests of European museums and science centres.

The first elected president was Prof. Richard Gregory of the Exploratory, Bristol, UK. Melanie Quinn of the Nuffield Foundation's Interactive Science and Technology Project was appointed secretary general. The aim of that project established two years before was to ensure that the ideas and methods being pioneered by the science centres should be exploited as widely as possible. It was thus considered an attractive basis from which to launch Ecsite's operations and the executive office was established in London. From that point on, several meetings of the founding members where organised to discuss the aims and objectives of the organisation and its legal status. A first Annual Meeting was organised at Museon in The Hague, 19-20 June 1990. A lot of questions raised during the debates: How to market Ecsite for members? What are the limits of membership? What are the geographical boundaries of Europe? What expectations do members have from Ecsite?

…At that meeting the Belgian Science Policy Office introduced the way of installing Ecsite as an International organisation under Belgian Law that would lead to the Extraordinary meeting in Brussels (January 1991) where the association was officially founded. In his opening address J. Wautrequin the secretary-general of the Belgian Science Policy Office indicated: "It will be recalled that the object of Ecsite is to promote public understanding of science and technology by facilitating co-operation inside Europe. The association also aims to be the interlocutor for European Institutions wishing to act in the same field, … The vocation of Ecsite, based on recognition of the different cultures and the development of these cultures through their dissemination, is very much keeping with the Belgian mentality, which is particularly well acquainted with the cohabitation and cross-fertilisation of various cultures".

At the same meeting, R. Lesgard, president of La Cité was elected president of Ecsite for two years. Munich hosted the second Annual Conference in November 1991. Barcelona followed in 1992 with the election of Jorge Wagensberg as the new president who always inspired the Board to tackle new visions and debates.

From that stage the demand for professionalisation increased and it was the merit of the Dutch presidency (94-96) to indicate that a permanent Executive Office should be established with an appointed Executive director. I had the honour to be chosen for that position and am in place since August 1995. It was Pelle Persson (President 96-98) who made possible the installation of this office in Brussels. Under his presidency was also started the discussion to change the statutes into a more democratic version that would bring an end to the situation of standing members. As a result the AGM in Luleå last November was the first totally 'free' election and we have no standing members anymore.

W-P. Fehlhammer, elected in Lisbon (98) is the father of the very successful 'Chemistry for Life' project that collected a lot of financial support from industry for the creation of innovative new presentations in the field. John Durant, the actual president runs the equally successful 'Bionet' project that will remain in ECSITE's history as the first 'virtual exhibition'. Not to forget the permanent involvement of Asger Høeg as a Board member and for four years now the treasurer that allowed us to run the accounts in a professional way.

Did we manage over the years to achieve the goals that we had put forward? Most of us would say that the purpose of Ecsite is to serve the members. But to 'serve' successfully means helping the members to be successful. And that is, providing the best possible services. And those need constant overview and development.

Traditionally Ecsite provides information services and networking tools such as the Newsletter, the website, the Annual Conference, specific seminars for directors and staff training. But regarding the above, over the years the network has tried to increase the professional capacity of the whole field by taking up different challenges and projects.

Latest development of networking is the organisation of professional sessions in the frame of the Annual Conference that are targeted to staff members, such as: exhibit development, tools for education, multimedia products and marketing for example. The objective is to increase direct contact in these fields between people and, by this, increase the professional capacity of the whole science centre sector.

What makes the strength of Ecsite is the capability to manage network projects in addition to providing the traditional information and networking services to members. That means initiatives from the Brussels office that involve several members for specific projects that will become beneficial for all members. It also means that the Brussels office is sometimes a platform for exhibition projects between members. I will give just a few examples.

…Chaos, an amazing interactive exhibition on cutting edge science became the first co-operation between three institutions thanks to Ecsite. Museu de la Ciencia in Barcelona, Palais de la Découverte in Paris and Museon in The Hague shared scientific know-how and design skills, 1994 -1996. The resulting temporary exhibition was showed at the three locations.

In the last few years, more and more Natural History museums have joined Ecsite. Two years ago the networking possibilities through Ecsite activities made these institutions discover the benefits of acting together. Instead of creating a new independent network, five of them decided to work together under the Ecsite umbrella to take profit of what is already organised and to concentrate on a specific project. The aim is to establish a programme of exhibitions in their own institutions that avoids unnecessary competition and increases the possibility to exchange exhibitions. The most ambitious project is the creation of a new common exhibition on 'animal communication'. The EU supports the project. Ecsite offered expertise to build up the application to the EU.

Ecsite is the natural body for genuine European projects. 'Chemistry for Life' is the premier example in this category, and has been widely reported and commented in the Newsletter, since its launch at the Annual Conference of 1997 in Brussels. Ecsite is also the ideal partner for European Union funded projects. Of these, the most recent is ISCOM: Improving science communication in science centres and museums, a major project supported by the EU. Through ISCOM, Ecsite is achieving important improvement of networking activity by providing food for thought to the whole field – not least by inviting important experts from all over the world to address our members twice a year, within the programmes of the November Annual Conference and March Directors' Forum.

# John Durant: Ecsite President (2001-2002) – the next 10 years

Our European network of science and discovery centres has come a long way in a relatively short time. When Ecsite was created back in 1989 there were just a few dozen science centres in Europe. These were concentrated in a mere handful of countries – half the current member states of the European Union, for example, had no science centre at all – and the prospects for further growth in the sector were very uncertain. Since then, the number in Europe has risen from a few dozen to a few hundred; almost all EU member states today have science centres; and – with many more centres currently in planning or under construction – the prospects for still further growth are excellent.

This expansion is part of a global trend. Since the opening of the first modern science centres in North America in the late-1960s, the growth of the science centre movement worldwide has been truly extraordinary. Everybody, it seems, wants science centres; and overwhelmingly they want them for one clear and simple reason: at a time when science and technology play an ever more important role in human affairs, science centres have a unique ability to engage all sections of the community in the processes of exploration and discovery. As school systems struggle to equip students with the scientific and technological skills, so science centres are emerging as key partners in education. In the 21st century, the world continues to look to science centres – as places of learning, certainly; but also as places of inspiration, of wonder, of questioning and of debate.

As our sector expands, so the potential benefits of partnership increase. It's always been a central aim of Ecsite to facilitate collaboration between member institutions, and this area of our work must increase considerably. The recent success of 'Chemistry for Life' and the current success of 'BIONET' – the Ecsite project through which eight member institutions are collaborating in the creation of an on-line electronic exhibition on contemporary life – point the way forward. Collaboration allows us to combine ideas and experience, to share the high costs of exhibition development and to facilitate public engagement across national boundaries. For all these reasons, we shall see a great deal more collaborative exhibition and programme development in the coming years.

In the end, none of Ecsite's plans for the future will be realised unless we secure its finances. Frankly, Ecsite has struggled with inadequate funding for far too long. Given the importance of our sector and the sheer number of worthwhile things waiting to be done, it is absolutely vital that we create a stronger financial basis for the future. We need to properly resource our executive office in Brussels in order to support the enhanced services our members deserve. For these reasons, the Board has modestly increased membership fees this year (and it may do so again next year if this proves necessary). At the same time, it has created a Development Committee to oversee a fundraising campaign designed to secure additional support from both the public and the private sectors.

Science and technology have never been more influential in our lives than they are today. Europe's network of science centres is an invaluable resource for all who are concerned to deal

constructively with the cultural, educational, economic and political challenges that science and technology pose to European society. Ecsite exists to serve the needs of this network. In coming years it will need to be energetic, flexible and responsive if it is to remain at the cutting edge of change – in science, in society, and – most important of all – in our science centres, as they continually seek new and better ways of bringing science and society closer together.

“In a moment of excitement I named Ecsite (actually at a meeting in Boston), and became its first President. The excitement of hands-on science continues to burn my brain – which may explain why most of my ideas are half-baked.
“The aim is to introduce science to kids, and what remains of childish dreams in adults, by Shaking Hands with the Universe. To discover how this can be done effectively we must shake hands with each other, and share ideas and swop facilities and exhibitions. If things go wrong, Ecsite becomes Incite, which is very different.
“Science, like music, is an international language. And as for music, science is a little different in each country’s traditions and ways of thinking and feeling. There are heroes and villains. This takes me to Harry Potter. The Harry Potter books have sold over 100,000,000 copies – magic. Why not on science?
“A telescope, a microscope, a spectroscope is far more exciting than a magic wand! If Ecsite can present the drama of discovery and invention – games lost and won against nature – surely kids would resonate to the true magic of science, and sweep the stars with their eyes.”

In creating the Exploratorium, Frank Oppenheimer drew inspiration from the working models and experiments at the Deutsches Museum and at the children’s gallery in London’s Science Museum. In turn the north American hands-on philosophy inspired the development of modern science centres and museums in Europe. And in 1988 Ecsite was conceived at the annual ASTC meeting. .

# Otto Luehrs describes how the cycle of inspiration came full circle in Berlin.

“Since about 1900 various technical museums existed in Berlin. There was a large museum for traffic and engineering, an important maritime museum, a great collection of airplanes and several other smaller museums. After World War II some of them were damaged, none of them was accessible to the public.

“At the end of the seventies the Berlin administration wanted to start a new technical museum with all branches under one roof. A team of museum experts was appointed to advise the administration. One expert, Dr. Stefan Waetzoldt, president of the Foundation of Prussian Culture presented a surprising suggestion. Berlin should create a new type of museum, ‘eine Konzeption nach Art der anglo-amerikanischen Science-Centres’. This proposal was not accepted, and it was decided to erect a museum of technology and its history: Museum für Verkehr und Technik. In 1980, Guenther Gottmann was appointed the first director, beforehand responsible for public relation at the Deutsches Museum in Munich. In 1980 he visited the conference ‘Towards the Year 2000, organised in Mexico City by ASTC and Cimuset. There he heard the lecture of Frank Oppenheimer who talked about his Exploratorium in San Francisco. Immediately Guenther Gottmann decided to travel to San Francisco and there he continued talks with Frank Oppenheimer. .

“Back to Berlin he reported about his experiences in America to the Berlin administration and he wished to add a department like the Exploratorium to the museum plan. This idea was accepted and I was chosen to visit the Exploratorium in February 1982. There I met Frank Oppenheimer, Sally Duensing, Rob Semper and others. I spent a fortnight there, again and again walking through the Exploratorium with a yardstick, camera and sketchpad, watching the exhibits, the staff, the workshops and the visitors.

“Despite the director’s support, in Berlin there was some opposition within the museum to this strange project. At that time it was very helpful to recall the ‘Urania’ – an early Science Centre in Berlin. The Urania existed from 1888 to 1928, offering a public observatory, a science theatre and a hall with about 100 hands-on exhibits a lot of them to be started by push-buttons. So there was an old root which could not be ignored very easily.
“When the museum opened for the public in December 1983, besides the historical exhibitions of locomotives, automobiles, print media and an old workshop with transmission driven machines, the hands-on gallery was presented with 40 exhibits in 300m2. .

“Today the hands-on exhibition occupies its own building: ‘Spectrum’ presents 250 exhibits in about 1400m2. In 2001 the visitor number reached 205 000 for the first time. Probably the Spectrum is the exhibition with the highest visitor density in entire Berlin. This popularity is also challenge. In the future school classes will only be accepted if they have prepared their visit well. We have no choice because the Berlin community has really no money to finance the Science Centre, at the level that public recognition necessitates.

“Unfortunately Frank Oppenheimer died shortly after my visit. So I can only thank Sally Duensing and Rob Semper for their advice and support twenty years ago.”

*Otto Luehrs, Spectrum, Berlin, Germany*

“Ecsite is a force in the science centre (SC) field perhaps because this was what a handful of Europeans dreamed of one afternoon in Boston in the autumn of 1988. We were young Europeans in America, dreaming, in the last century, of the Europe of the 21st century. Barely thirteen years have passed, we are still young, and Ecsite is a brilliant reality. The idea of building a network for the free circulation of ideas and experiences in scientific museology has been consolidated: we are a family that gets along well, a big family that keeps on growing: each new member triggers the arrival of new ones. (I remember that while the headquarters was in Barcelona, between 1992 and 1994, the number of members trebled, and now it is double that triple). And today, any city over a certain critical size claims its SC with the same naturalness as it aspires to a symphony orchestra. Ecsite has successfully come a long way. However, I believe that at times of reflection and taking stock, such as now as we celebrate 50 issues of our Newsletter, perhaps it is more appropriate to highlight the old dreams that have yet to come true or the new ones that have emerged during these years. I shall mention just two.

“The basic aspect of scientific exhibitions is right on track. This, I believe, accomplishes half of the aims of a good Science Centre: to provide stimuli to the scientific method and knowledge. But the other half is no less so: to provide stimuli to the creation of scientific opinion. And this is achieved in another way: with physical presence, with conversations, discussions, debates, lectures, courses… Along these lines, a SC should be the natural setting for the meeting between the scientific community and society. Ecsite would thus turn a network of SCs into a network of forums for debate. Such a network is a requirement of democracy – an excellent tool for globalisation correctly carried out. The new technologies would also help to make a local event at one nexus in the network into a global event of scientific opinion for members of Ecsite as a whole. “Another attractive idea that has not yet gelled is to broaden Ecsite to include areas of the world that are just now awakening to the need for scientific knowledge as a useful tool for modernising the community. Latin America is a good example of the emergence of SC, and we can help; Africa is showing signs in two or three cases, but the vast majority is pre-SC, and we can help. Is there anything more attractive for Ecsite than to have scientific proselytism as its vocation?’

*Jorge Wagensberg. Museu de la Ciència de la Fundació “la Caixa”*

“Ecsite is a force in the science centre field, because our common mission cannot be accomplished if we stay alone, isolated, pleased to be unique and unaware of our weaknesses. Ecsite does force us to open our mind and heart to the fact that we will all succeed or all fail together. It is better sooner than later to be aware of our collective fate. By being the polarized mirror of our common dreams Ecsite is simply helping us to be more ourself.
“A noble raison d’être!”

*Goéry Delacôte , The Exploratorium*

“Ecsite is a force in the science centre field because it provides superb networking at a European level. This, in turn, provides opportunities for benchmarking and maintaining professional quality. Science is international, and so is public understanding of science. Many of our members have a rather small national base and that is why we need an international exchange. Ecsite is the forum for exchange of information at a professional level. Ecsite also provides business

opportunities and in fact, a possibility to diminish costs, by exhibition exchanges. .
“Ecsite stands for the collective professional wisdom of the science centre field in Europe. We couldn’t live without it.”

*Per-Edvin Persson, Heureka, the Finnish Science Centre*

Ecsite is now established as one of Europe’s leading science organisations. Over the past 20 years, it has become widely accepted that it is vital for the scientists to engage openly with the public – where better than science centres and museums to do this? Ecsite does hugely valuable work in sharing best practice in our field and in setting up European collaborations, for example Bionet, which began as a Science Museum initiative. This project is an excellent example of the imaginative use of digital technology to reach new audiences on hot topics, in innovative ways through new partnerships. I would very much like to see more projects that follow this lead, taking advantage of the host of new cable TV channels that will be opening up in the coming years. These provide new opportunities for us to engage with the many audiences especially teenagers and young adults – we have yet to reach effectively. Thanks to Ecsite, the European science centres and museum are well placed to respond to these challenges. We look forward to discussing these and other issues at the Ecsite annual conference in London.
“Hasta la vista!”

*Lindsay Sharp, National Museum of Science & Industry, including the Science Museum.*