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## Building a new conversation

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By Alan Levy

Marc Weiss plants a world-class institute in Prague's Old Town

Names can be nice, but acronyms aren't always. So when a new NGO (nongovernmental organization) called the Prague Institute for Global Urban Development opened its office above a sports bar in the Old Town earlier this year, I worried that the initials PIGUD, easily mistakable for PIGOUT, might attract a clientele hellbent on eating pork with their beer and soccer instead of improving cities around the world.

"Not to worry. We're presenting ourselves as just the Prague Institute and our logo is Pi, with a little blue-gray globe dotting the small i," said Marc Weiss, a 53-year-old Chicago-born city planner who is founder and chairman of Pi.

Weiss' brainchild was conceived here two years ago when he attended a conference on European cities.

Weiss was then a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, D.C. There, earlier in 2001, he had founded and edited an urban affairs quarterly magazine called Global Outlook, published by the Wilson center in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, where he had served as special assistant to Secretaries Henry Cisneros and Andrew Cuomo (1993-97) and then as senior adviser for economic and community development to Washington's municipal government (1997-99).

With three good issues of Global Outlook published, the fourth was on indefinite - probably infinite - hold. Why? Because it contained an article on smart growth by Maryland's Governor Parris M. Glendening. Earlier that year, George W. Bush's new Republican administration had installed a watchdog over the magazine and she refused to publish Glendening because he was (shhh!) a Democrat. Told by Weiss that it was against the law to censor an article in a federal government publication for partisan reasons, she beat a tactical retreat by saying the whole issue was "under review." It is still "under review" two years later.



VLADIMIR WEISS/The Prague Post

Sitting in the Academy of Sciences, Weiss knew his three-year Woodrow Wilson scholarship would be expiring soon and so would Global Outlook. In a career built on leaping to a higher plateau whenever the ground beneath him crumbled, Weiss had contemplated founding an institute to practice what he'd been preaching in the magazine. But Washington is so politicized nowadays that even an international NGO based there would labor under a stigma in the rest of the world; London was already at a similar disadvantage: "We were looking for someplace more neutral so people wouldn't think we were part of the U.S. government or even the World Bank." Suddenly, on the notepad before him, he scrawled the words "Prague Institute for Global Urban Development."

#### An urban dream

Marc Weiss didn't have to be reminded that the words civilization and civic and city all come from the same root: "Prague is a celebration of urban heritage - a pre-modern city that was and is in the avant-garde of civilization. And Prague symbolizes the very best quality of city life, where you can walk everywhere. It's intimate, peaceful, the perfect base for a world-class urban institute.

"Prague is politically neutral. Most people around the world love Prague - whether for its beauty and grandeur or because of [ex-President Vaclav] Havel and the Velvet Revolution. But most important: Nobody hates Prague. The worst you get is: A few people never heard of it, but nobody hates it. Wherever you go on every continent, Prague stands for good things. And it's a crossroads between the developed and developing worlds, between North, South, East and West."

Upon his return to the U.S. capital, Weiss told his backers - who included the British planning guru Sir Peter Hall and the Dutch master builder Emiel Wegelin, former head of the World Bank's and United Nations' Urban Management Programme - of his decision to make the Czech capital their world headquarters and, before the year was out, incorporated the Prague Institute. In October 2002, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service granted Pi tax-exempt status as a nonprofit organization - vital for winning grants and contributions from U.S. donors. Weiss first opened an office in Washington, near the U.S. Capitol and next to the city's glitteringly restored Union Station, and then, this February, at Kozi 7 in Prague 1.

#### A worldwide umbrella

"For the first time in history, we are living in an urban world. Back in 1950, when I was born, only a third of the world was urbanized. Today, half the world is urbanized. By the end of this century, it will be two-thirds. Yet we live in an urban world that still has an anti-urban mentality. Its institutions, government and international agencies are all anti-urban. The gap is prodigious. Everything is sharply divided between the developed world and the developing world - and never the twain shall meet.

"Then you have the further anomaly that the United States is not part of any of it. So basically you have three international networks talking about the same thing - but not to each other. I felt it was time to unite these worlds under one umbrella. Nowadays we need to build a new conversation in a world that's pro-urban, that says this is happening, it will happen, you can't stop it, so let's embrace it and find a way for it to work in rural and urban areas alike. And that's the mission of the Prague Institute.

"When I created Global Outlook, I was told that my challenges were: What could America learn from the rest of the world about urban policy? And what could the rest of the world learn from America? But not being an internationalist yet, I did something quite naive: I approached the world as one place, as a global village.

"Believe it or not, this had never been done before. Even the UN Agency, Habitat, held a meeting in Nairobi [Kenya] called World Urban Forum, with people there from all over the world. But it was not about the whole world. It was only about urban issues in developing countries.

"That's why we're unique in our approach. Whether we're commissioned to do a report on metropolitan economic strategy, urban heritage or community productivity, we'll do it worldwide - not just what's happening in Cape Town or London but in Chicago and Mumbai [Bombay] too."

#### An active agenda

Since settling in Prague eight months ago, Pi has completed seven commissioned projects, including reports for the U.S. National Governors Association, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Center for National Policy in Washington, and Metropolitan Strategic Plan Association of Barcelona, Spain. Most ambitious was a four-day "think tank" educational workshop and training session on Metropolitan Economic Strategy in Cape Town for the South African Cities Network and two national government departments; it was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Sir Peter Hall, who became a vice chairman of Pi, presented (with European Union funding) a report on "Growing the European Urban System" in a Prague lecture in June, and American community designer Peter Calthorpe will speak here Thursday, Oct. 9, for Pi. Seven other projects have been funded and launched.

For Marc Weiss, putting down roots in Prague is more than an opportune vision: "Three of my grandparents emigrated from Bohemia just before the First World War, from Podebrady in the east and Pisek and Kozarovice in the south; the fourth was Hungarian. My mother grew up in Cicero and Berwyn - the communities that comprise Chicago's Bohemian colony - and I spent a lot of my youth there, too. All of our relatives who stayed died in the Holocaust. So I've come back not just to a crossroads of civilization, but to write a new chapter in our family history."

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#### Vital statistics

Born Marc Allan Spitzer in Chicago May 21, 1950. Father, a lawyer, died at 39 when son was 5. Mother remarried Andrew Weiss and he adopted her daughter and son, who became Marc Allan Weiss at 10.

Education Stanford University, California, bachelor of arts in political science 1972; University of California at Berkeley, master's degree in city planning, 1978, Ph.D. in city and regional planning, 1984

Married Three times; divorced twice

Two sons, 23 and 19

The Prague Institute will host a public lecture, "A Global Perspective on New Urbanism," by U.S. architect Peter Calthorpe at 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 9, in Anglo-American University, Lazenska 4, Prague 1-Mala Strana.

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