

ESO at SPIE – Astronomical Telescopes and Instruments in Marseille

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The latest in the series of biennial SPIE meetings devoted to Astronomical Telescopes and Instruments, held alternately in the US and Europe now for more than a decade, took place in Marseille from 23 to 28 June 2008. Its theme was “Synergies between Ground and Space” and, with more than 2 000 participants and 1800 papers, came close to rivalling the, so far, largest meeting in Hawaii in 2002.

ESO was again a major presence contributing 140 participants and over 50 papers plus a Symposium Chair, 6 Conference Chairs, many Programme Committee members, a Plenary Speaker, plus the large stand shown in Figure 1 which proved to be one of the most popular meeting points. As overheard more than once, it provided a great opportunity for ESO Garching and Chile staff to meet!

- The Technical Programme comprised
- three plenary talks: Fabio Favata on the ESA Programme; John Mather on the COBE satellite, his resulting Nobel prize and JWST; and Tim de Zeeuw on European Perspectives for Ground-based Astronomy;
 - eight telescopes and systems conferences;
 - four technology advancement conferences;
 - continuous poster sessions;
 - half-day plenary workshop of invited papers on the Early Universe;
 - seven courses on optics, detectors and software;
 - a student networking lunch;
 - an extensive exhibition featuring many high-tech companies and ESO.

- The social programme included
- welcome reception;
 - conference dinner, in the spectacular setting of the palace built by Napoleon III overlooking the old port of Marseille and with an entertaining after dinner speech by Matt Mountain, Director of the Space Telescope Science Institute;
 - visits to local facilities such as LAM, OAMP, OHP and SESO, largely organised by Jean-Gabriel Cuby.



Photo: E. Janssen, ESO

Figure 1. The ESO stand with models of a possible ELT dome and an ALMA antenna amongst other things – and some interested and engaged visitors.

As usual, this meeting covered essentially everything happening, or planned, astronomically on the ground and in space and placed considerable stress on individual participants to map out their own interests amongst the parallel sessions. I personally think one of the most useful products of these symposia is the Technical Programme, which provides an invaluable directory of astronomical projects and those involved. Given the weather, some opted simply to stay in the rooms with the best air conditioning. Fortunately, that was acceptable in the main auditorium where the plenary talks and the plenary conference were held. Having led the development of the ASTRONET Science Vision, Tim de Zeeuw (Figure 2) was in the unique position of being able to present both Europe’s astronomical research priorities and those planned to be met with ESO’s current and future facilities, while Nobel Laureate John Mather and the director of the Max-Planck Institute for Astrophysics, Garching, Simon White, reminded us of their goals to discover the unexpected.

One big attraction for me was the possibility of hearing overviews of the performance of most major facilities (all the

8–10-m observatories) and the status of future projects (ELT’s, SKA, JWST) from those responsible, and all within the space of a few days. Others were probably more interested in more detailed technical aspects of optical and detector systems, mechanics, software, operations or system engineering and management (a big theme for synergy between ground and space) or discussing directly with the authors of posters over a glass of wine.

Despite the range and high quality of the programme itself, I would also not be surprised if most people still got more practically out of the numerous organised or impromptu side meetings and personal contacts which these symposia foster. A classic I attended myself was a meeting of the informal 8-m club, formed many years ago to facilitate exchanges of technical information and experience amongst the VLT, Gemini, Keck and SUBARU projects. Rather than telescopes, this time it was mostly second-generation instrumentation, adaptive optics and laser talk.

The next meeting in this series will be held in June 2010 in San Diego, California, which I am sure will again attract a substantial number of ESO staff.



Photo: H. Boffin, ESO

Figure 2. Tim de Zeeuw, Director General of ESO, delivering his plenary talk “European perspectives for ground-based astronomy”.