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Laurent Lescop

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LAURENT LESCOP

Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'architecture de Nantes, France

LIVING IN A HARBOUR
– **NANTES (FR) FROM CRANES TO ELEPHANT**

Abstract: In Nantes, the last shipyard closed in 1986 leaving the city in a desperate situation. The cranes, symbolizing the industrial activity, one by one stopped. Unemployment stroked. The question was between turning the page, tearing down the workshops and reinventing a new story or trying to preserve would appear to most of the population, a kind of modern bulky legacy.

In the early 2000's, the revitalization of Nantes' former industrial area, led to developing a new way thinking. Instead of designing an urban map with major spots and rows of housing, A. Chemetoff thought better to draw an urban landscape where the past could mix with the future. The industrial heritage has been then preserved in two different ways: construction halls have been reshaped preserving the original structure, everything should be reversed. The intangible heritage, meaning worker's knowledge, has been reinvested in the cultural industry.

This way, the image of the city, its brand, moved from industrial to cultural, attracting a new kind of business, mainly high-tech, students, in a new: "art de Vivre" (Art of living).

Keywords: culture, street theatre, ambiance, industrial renewing, industrial heritage, storytelling,



Figure 1. View of the former harbour
Photo: L. Lescop.

1. Fiction to understand reality

For a long time, the identity of Nantes was difficult to picture. It's a harbour, but far from the sea, it's a river that everybody fears of, it's a bridge city, connecting two regions, but only develops towards the north, it was a huge urban area, with a void in its centre. Nantes is a threshold: a threshold between Brittany and France, between North and South, between the saltwater and freshwater, slate and tile. Sixty kilometres away from the sea, Nantes is the birth city of Jules Verne who was dreaming of distant adventures when looking sea boats cruising to the ocean.

To understand the image of a city, the ambiance, one can look at postcards, tourist guides or cinema. Cinema is a good way to see how a city is perceived from a cinematographer point of view, it often reflects what is really in the air, positive or not. Let's take Rome, for instance, after the war, it was a desperate city and films like *Roma città aperta* (Roberto Rossellini 1945) or *Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica 1948) show a postwar Rome of poverty and violence. In *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler 1953), the atmosphere is lighter, the sun shines, the characters ride through famous places. Woody Allen in *To Rome with Love* (2012) shows the eternal city, it's a tourist postcard, an open-air museum. France is also a beloved destination for films and often a romantic place for foreign filmmakers. If Nantes is not as famous as Paris or Nice or Marseille for filmmaking, it's about 20 films that were shot since the end of the Second World War. Famous movies like *Lola* or *une chambre en ville* by Jacques Demy, created a fictional reality that visitors wanted to experiment. "Lola" filmed in 1961 shows Nantes as a city of cranes, with a strong shipyard and a dense industrial activity. Docks are full of strong guys, ready for a fight, prostitutes and lost girls. The harbour is certainly not the place to walk the dog.



Figure 1. "Lola"
Photo: [J. Demy 1961].

In 1982, Jacques Demy, who, by the way, was born in Nantes, shot *Une Chambre en Ville*. The action is set in 1955 and it shows labourers wondering about their future. But in 1982, part of this future is already known, and the iconic *Transporter Bridge*, destroyed in 1958, is recreated with a glass shot, [Aumont, Daguin 1998] a matte painting. Nantes is characterized by its cranes, the shipyard, and the workers.

In 1986, the last shipyard closed, leaving the once affluent city, even if its wealth did come from the slave trade, in a desperate state [Barrau, Wester 1998]. The city had lost its identity, which was only boosted up once in a while with its football team. Five years later, French director Jean-Loup Hubert, filmed *La Reine Blanche* with Catherine Deneuve. The action takes place on the south bank of the river Loire, in a small village called Trentemoult. In this film, everybody can feel the profound nostalgia of a lost era when Nantes was a dominating place. This nostalgia is shown with the silhouette of distant, unreachable cranes, on the other side of the stream. Ten years after, in 2001, Pascal Thomas shows a quite different interpretation of Nantes in *Mercredi, Folle journée!* The city is active, modern, characters are using public transportation. They are moving fast from place to place. But still, cranes remain as a leitmotiv, like the skeletons of ancient monsters, rising their tusks up to the sky. Cranes appear in this film bigger than in reality, they can be seen from any place.

Since 2000, cranes and former shipyards have been little by little replaced by more contemporary scenic places with recent buildings and contemporary references.

What happened meanwhile?

2. Urban planning vs. landscape planning

1989 saw Jean-Marc Ayrault, the newly elected mayor, set up a competition to encourage the rebuild of the city centre, but the city was still feeling very nostalgic. The winning team succeeded in bringing new ideas, including the reduction in the number of cars, dimming of street lights and converting large areas to grass and parkland.

In its past history, Nantes was divided into several islands, scattered east/west by the river Loire and split by the river Erdre coming from the north and joining the Loire in perpendicular. Little by little, the islands were merged, drawing a more linear riverbank. In the 20th century, the last branches were filled as well as the river Erdre, leaving huge empty spaces, taken by cars as roads, streets or car-parks. Little by little, cars fled the city centre. As a result, spatial divisions caused social partitions.

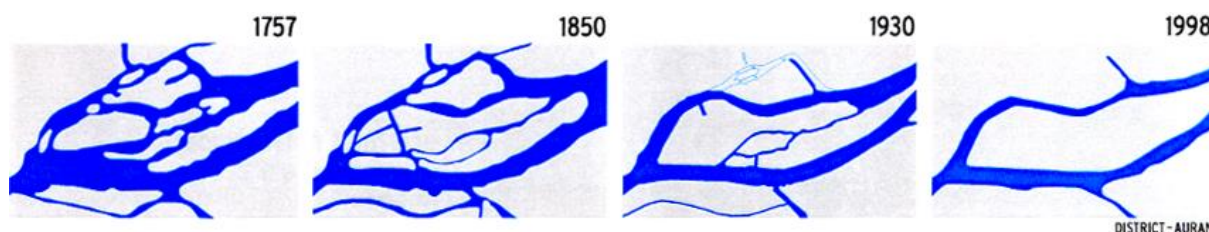


Figure 2. Transformations of the Isle of Nantes
Source: district AURAN - Nantes

In December 1992, architect Dominique Perrault conducted an exploratory study and drawn major principles of intervention in the city of Nantes [Perrault, Grether 1992]. In his chapter called. “Method”, the architect considers unrealistic to establish a general plan for the development of a vast territory. Interventions must register *different and concurrent* topics without hierarchy. He suggested promoting new installations, connections, and participation. Before 2000, Nantes didn't develop by strata, by layer, with a new sheet covering an old one. Each period had conquest a new territory developed it or abandoned it. This resulted in a very strong sectorization with virtually sealed borders and striking contrasts of scale. As a consequence, industrial sites, located in the inner centre of the island of Nantes, turned to lost areas, dangerous zones. It was a dead spot in the very centre of the city.



Figure 3. Before the filling of the Erdre
Source: Postcard, Archives de Nantes, cote 9Fi620



Figure 4. Before the renovation, the flow of cars



Figure 5. Today's situation

Source: Ville de Nantes, Nantes Passion

Let's understand the situation. In the western part of the island, huge industries left big empty spaces. In the centre part, old housing was held by poor families and in the eastern part, new housing seemed so desperate that the only wish there, was to leave as soon as possible. The island was cut into three parts by a large and fast motorway that brought people living in the south part of the city directly in the centre. Perrault's answer was too vague about what to do with this bulky industrial past and out of date Urbanism. We've seen that cinema showed Nantes as a city of cranes. For the inhabitants, the image of their own city was more blurry. A large investigation has been made in order to determine the way to the Island of Nantes was perceived [TMO-Régions 1998]. As a matter of surprise, a great majority didn't know that the Island is *one* island. A lot of people thought that it was still a collection of small islands as Neighborhoods' names suggest it. In the surveys, somebody said that he cannot walk the dog around the island, so it can't be true. The eastern part of the Island is called Beaulieu. It's an important dwelling area. For three-quarters of the inhabitants, it was a transitory place and 70 % of them were moving away within a period of six months. As often advocate architects, offices were mixed with a housing as a result of a feeling of not being in a private area.

3. A great upturn

But in the 1990's saw a great upturn in Nantes. It didn't with standard solutions in the economy, but from the world of the art. Between 1990 and 1995 the artist group "Les Allumés" annually lit up the city's nights [Saranga 1993], with the first event running from 15th to 20th October 1990. Dreamt up by Jean Blaise, this free, open-air, the theatrical festival was designed to "invite" a foreign city to Nantes, that first year being Barcelona. Storytelling, concerts and plays, were performed all over the city turning Nantes into an exhilarating place. The following years saw Saint Petersburg, Buenos Aires, Napoli and Cairo on the guest list. Great artists also joined the festival, exhibiting all over the city in venues ranging from large hall to small bars, in the open air and in private houses. The classical music festival "La Folle Journée" was also organized in the same manner, and brought top quality concerts to large audiences.

The idea of promoting street theatre as a way to get people of different ages, interests and education levels together then followed. The theatrical company "Royal de Luxe" established in 1978 in the south of France took, in 1990, Nantes by storm with a thunderous parade of the "History of France". Dozens of actors in costumes paraded through the city on large carnival floats, with huge mechanical sets, blasting objects, creating smoke in the streets, shouting and cheering. The success of the parade was considerable and there was no question that the company was now part of the renewal of the city, and the residents gladly took ownership of it all.

In 2007, Jean Blaise remembers those years and says: "A few cities have used, as Nantes did, culture as a lever for economic development. It's a real challenge that is today a success. We bet on the international and the unusual, with symptomatic events symbolizing the mutation of the city like "Les Allumés". The National press followed with enthusiasm. Within a year, the image of the town as radically changed. Major artists like "Royal de Luxe", choreographer like Claude Brumachon, have arrived. "Play it like in Nantes" means that demanding and singular artistic forms are shown, but always, with the idea to please the public. For instance,

we gave the opportunity to provide in Nantes, many occasions to rediscover their industrial heritage, but also new settlements like the “Ile de Nantes”. Culture as well as economic development and social binding, but also a way to conquer unexpected places. In the “Lieu unique”, we welcome no less than 490.000 visitors every year, without the great festival, just with a collection of tiny events. We also shelter artists. With the Biennale “Estuaire 2007”, we want to achieve a territorial project, creating a large single entity from Nantes to Saint-Nazaire. This territory is already an economic reality. However, the inhabitants not yet appropriated the banks of the Loire. The estuary, home place of major industries that have contributed to the economic development, will now be given to pedestrians¹”.

As we can see, at the dawn of 2000, Nantes was dealing with a serious urban problem. As we saw in the corpus of films, the main cultural heritage was an industrial site: the harbour, which was, at that moment, closed. The knowledge, the identity, even the landscape of cranes, ships and workshops was lost, wiped away by the mid-eighties crisis. In 1999, the city of Nantes launched another huge competition to rethink the former harbour area and all districts now known as the “Ile de Nantes”. Despite recommendations from economists urging to follow the Bilbao example, the chosen solution preserved a “low profile” approach with slow improvements rather than building a huge complex to be a symbol of the city. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, designed by Canadian-American architect Frank Gehry was inaugurated on October 1997. Since then, industrial reconversion, cultural developments bound with economic improvements seemed to have a magic recipe: a huge, spectacular building, a nice area around to spend money and great names from the world of art and creation. This way of thinking has been rejected in Nantes, for philosophical reasons, but also for economic considerations: the risk of paying an expensive building with no certainty on economic sustainability was unacceptable in the context of job loss. The winning team, led by Alexandre Chemetoff, suggested, in a first draft, that he would work as an archaeologist searching for hidden tracks of the recent past. His design preserved the ancient industrial buildings as well as local knowledge.

4. The Island

For this competition, three teams of architects were selected: Labfac, Bruno Fortier and Chemetoff. Labfac designed a green sinusoid and Bruno Fortier a green promenade. *We must give to the Isle of Nantes a strong image, a contemporary image, at the metropolitan level*, said Fortier. He thought of building a vast museum, reflecting what was done in Bilbao, giving the city a major attraction centre within a green area.

A. Chemetoff went a totally different way. In this project, the island is divided between public and private spaces and shared between the “River Island” and the “Sea Island” areas. Chemetoff submitted as "game rule" through a “Plan-Guide” that will allow stakeholders, public or private, understand and appropriating the overall project. The main problem in Nantes, and especially in this area is that the historical value of the urban spaces and buildings are not obvious.

¹ Jean Blaise, l'« allumé » nantais, Lesechos.fr • Le 14 mars 2007.



Figure 6. Plan-guide
Source: [Chemetoff 2010].

No specific architecture, no spectacular constructions that would need to be preserved. Long discussions were held between the architect and local associations on what to keep and what to transform. In the end, everybody went to the conclusion to see in this area the ground of *intangible heritage* composed of knowledge, small histories and a specific way of life. The challenge was to convert it into urban design. First, A. Chemetoff worked on the visual aspect of his drawings. He took the look and feel of city maps that everybody can find at the tourist office. By this, one can have the belief that the project is already done. Then, his main concept was a division of spaces. The industrial area is characterized by vast plots that are not urban scaled. He redrew streets, places, esplanades. For him, no matter those spaces would become, it's just a question of the private/public area. Chemetoff then worked as an archaeologist, tracking all tangible remains of the recent past, to preserve them. He, of course, also protected the cranes as symbolic landmarks of the former harbour. Some industrial buildings are chosen to be renovated. The structure is preserved, the rest is destroyed. New parts are designed to be easily removed. Nothing should last.

The first idea was to develop a kind of business incubators for biotech. The concept was in the air and even if it wasn't rooted to anything in this area, it sounded nice for reborn of the industry. The problem was the loss of the intangible heritage and cutting the roots from the previous activities. Meanwhile, the great popular success from the big parades of the giants led Chemetoff to think of a new kind of continuity. Workers from the harbour could carry on working, in the same workshops, doing the same kind of activities but on a completely different purpose. Instead of building ships, they could construct a giant elephant.

5. A Giant wooden Elephant and Giant Little Girl

In 2005 the most impressive image of all was created with the arrival of the giant puppets: the Little Girl and the sultan Prince and his Elephant. It is difficult to imagine how the most amazing feeling could be conjured up by a giant puppet, but seeing an Elephant, as tall as the tallest building in the city, walk through the narrow streets amongst stunned crowds is

something that cannot be forgotten. Its success was so immense, the love of the city residents so deep for these puppets and their creators, that has completely rejuvenated the city.



Figure 7. The first elephant
Source: Mairie de Nantes - 2005

Following the regeneration of Bilbao, with its iconic museum, it was possible to imagine that culture could add value to a city looking for a second wind. In the early years of the new century, the growing use of the internet and computers have brought prosperity and economic growth to the city of Nantes. But it also turned out that street theatre, and particularly the wooden Elephant, has encouraged more people to visit Nantes, some even to stay, and the residents to love their city. This, in turn, has improved the economy with the influx of new talents.

During the mid-2000's, the theatrical production company *La Machine*, split from the *Royal de Luxe* and built a new Elephant which became the emblem of Nantes. This Elephant, designed not as a piece of art, but as a walking building, totally changed the way of urban thinking. In a way, the Bilbao effect came not from a huge iconic museum, but from a giant wooden Elephant, dragging tourists and residents to a part of Nantes that was, not long ago, seen as a “no-go” area. After the elephant, artist and designer François Delarozière conceived many mechanical creatures, some for Nantes, some for parades, and some for other cities.

It's always surprising, to see such an urban project and believe that cultural and industrial heritage could be worked that way. Heritage can be seen as buildings, and Nantes kept the main landmarks to recall the past history. Heritage is also intangible like folk traditions, food and so on. In Nantes, heritage, finally, is not the exact preservation of what was there, but how it makes possible to write a new story, without destroying what was there before, but by

overcoming the old ways. The success created perplexity and interrogations. One spoke about *the Nantes process*, and studies were launched to dissect this process. But nothing was written or formalized before. What is being implemented at the urban level, is also at the architectural level, from sketch to completion, each small box comes to take his place on the layout. Chemetoff said he left a blur document on which he gradually focusses. The more the image is sharp, the more one sees details, better understands the nuances. It is a powerful concept, that of 'living logic'. Chemetoff said: *all work on the city requires you to accept a part in uncertainty, it's the same when you plant a tree. You choose a location, you choose an essence, but you don't know exactly how it will grow. A city is a tree, it is alive*².

In ten years, the city of Nantes has radically changed its image. To achieve that, it needed a lot of new images to be created. In the early 21st century, the new paradigm for a city is to be able to generate a tremendous amount of visuals that would be spread through the web. When Jean-Marc Ayrault has been elected as Mayor of Nantes, the city was cowering from its past that was well identified by cinema: a skyline of motionless cranes, still as the city was. But then came to the street theatre pushing people outside their home, bringing them new dreams, new visions. By opening a competition on this wide urban wasteland, Jean-Marc Ayrault understood that a link could be made between urban design and street theatre, a new direction could be followed.

The inhabitants of Nantes become familiar with bold shapes, modern architectures and even adopt a wooden elephant around which they flock in mass on Sundays and public holidays. Have we forgotten the cranes, certainly a bit, they are heritage, they denote the harbour from the past or a Steampunk image accompanying the mechanical creatures? The island of Nantes took its autonomy and is no longer the bulky part of the city, but rather the opposite, it becomes its motor, its inspiration. Ten years and one struggles to imagine that this place could be otherwise, old images become blurred, fade, one could hardly remember what was there before the elephant station, before the renewal. The city of cranes, Nantes became a city of the elephant, before the industrial city, it became a city of culture.

6. Transposition?

² (Île de Nantes : une ville se construit sous nos yeux, Alexandre Chemetoff ou la logique du vivant, 2007).



Figure 8. The new elephant, **François Delarozière, Les machines de l'île**
Source: Blog Yulbaba, 2012

Is this experience suitable for other cities? Can it be applied elsewhere in France, Europe or China? Bordeaux, Nantes' great rival, moved in the same way, developing what we could now call a *narrative urban design*. Close to Nantes, La Roche Sur Yon called Chemetoff to repeat his "method" on a very controversial site. Chemetoff asked François Delarozière, the creator of the elephant to imagine a story that would be told all along the works. Delarozière designed mechanical creatures, just like the elephant that the public can operate. This fantastic world of mechanical animals travels around the world. It started with a giant spider in Liverpool in 2008, the Aeroflorale in 2010, in Dessau and last year, Long Ma Jing Shen – the spirit of the Horse-Dragon, in Beijing, China. We can imagine that those fantastic creatures, as they did in Nantes, could help to connect past history, heritage issues and contemporary questions on development, sustainability and well-being.



Figure 10. Ma, the Horse Dragon, François Delarozière

Source: Big City Life, 2017

As a matter of fact, the main question becomes “what is heritage?” In Europe, the main answer has been to freeze things and turn them into a dead object state. Ancient cities transformed into open-air museums as well as former industrial sites. This model has been massively exported to the rest of the world. Problem is, in many countries, this excluded people from places they used to live. The next idea was also to protect the intangible. Now, UNESCO/ICOMOS is looking for new ways to bringing back life, art, creation, inventiveness into places that have to be protected for what they hold, but also for what they represent and for the feeling of wellness everyone can have when visiting them.

Art has become a consideration in city development. Just like Montreal, the beating heart of the city of Nantes is now the *Quartier de la Création*, meaning the *Area of Creativity*. Schools of art, architecture, design, fashion, dance and cinema, located there, attract engineers, scientists of all kinds, philosophers. The word “Quartier” can also be understood as “village”. The western part of the Island of Nantes would be a village dedicated to creation. That’s a very interesting way to rebuild a story on the remains of the past, to start a new era.

The last question is: what remains of the former harbour in Nantes? As a matter of fact, as no real naval activities are held in the city itself. The city has been reshaped by cultural and high-valued industries and the shipyards have completely moved to Saint-Nazaire on the estuary end. It’s in a way a clean cut between white and blue collars also witnessing a new territorial segregation.

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