

Nantes, 2 July 2015

Nantes, a city on the move, resilient and transformable

A breakfast debate on the theme “Renewing the urban fabric, economy and cultural life of Nantes” organised by the **Observatoire de la Ville**, a body sponsored by the **Bouygues Immobilier corporate foundation**, was held on Thursday, 2 July 2015 in the unusual setting of Aire 38.

Here we look back at a fascinating discussion moderated by the architect and planner **Christian Devillers**, during which **Jean-Luc Charles**, Director General of Samoa, the Nantes regional development agency, **Gaëtan Bourdin**, director of Les Badauds Associés, **Florent Orsoni**, director of the Sustainable City Design Lab at Nantes Atlantique School of Design, **Bénédicte Grosjean**, architect and planner, and **Alain Bourdin**, sociologist and planner, put forward their vision of the renewal of Nantes and addressed the broader question of what the cities of the future will look like.

From a city in crisis in the 1970s to the creation of the Île de Nantes, an attractive place symbolising the city of the future

Nantes experienced a major crisis in the late 1970s, due amongst other factors to closure of the city’s shipyards. An attempt was made to start an urban regeneration project but it was halted in 1989 by Jean-Marc Ayrault, the city’s newly elected mayor.

Then, in the early 1990s, the architect and planner Dominique Perrault came up with the idea of the Île de Nantes, and in doing so gave the city fresh momentum.

“It’s like the awakening of Sleeping Beauty. Artists have been the first to return to these abandoned places, coming to their own terms with what they find there and helping the people of Nantes to see them with a fresh eye. A new form of urban development has been invented here.”

Jean-Luc Charles, Director General of Samoa

Little by little, the Île de Nantes has become an attractive and fashionable place, though it still bears the imprint of its memories and the traces of its past, in old buildings, for example.

As a result, Nantes has become a magnet for creativity. Old warehouses like the Karting and the Alstom Warehouses have been rehabilitated, offering incoming businesses an opportunity to join a whole eco-system. The former shipyards have become a tourist and cultural attraction, reflected in the arrival of the Great Elephant, a perfect symbol of the renewal of the Île de Nantes.

The change has taken place slowly but surely as sites have been gradually redeveloped under the planners’ watchful eye. New venues have emerged, endorsing the definition of urban planning and development as “inculcating a culture of change”.

Press contacts: Bouygues Immobilier corporate foundation

- ❖ **Valérie Petitbon**: +33 (0)1.55.38.25.25 – VPB@bouygues-immobilier.com
- ❖ **Véronique Guilloton**: +33 (0)1.55.38.25.25 – VGU@bouygues-immobilier.com

"We put living before planning in order to build the Île de Nantes. We took the island as it was and just slipped into it."

Christian Devillers, architect and planner

The new challenges of a modern city

The process of becoming a modern city presents a number of challenges, not only to the city itself and to planners but also to residents, whose way of life is changing at the same time as the place where they live. The first challenges to arise are those of mobility and reversibility.

"When cities are in the process of transformation, planners are there to influence the course of things that are already changing."

Bénédicte Grosjean, architect and planner

Public spaces have now become theatres for experiment and coproduction as they are temporarily adapted in order to try out various types of use in abandoned places. That was the case with the Green Island project on the Île de Nantes.

"Neighbourhoods are created where they didn't necessarily exist before; that's how you change a city. People have to learn how to live with those changes and not be afraid of them. That's when mediation becomes important."

Gaëtan Bourdin, director of Les Badauds Associés

To help such renewal projects as best they can, some ports such as Nantes have taken an approach based on an innovative process of co-creation/coproduction and collective intelligence known as **design thinking**.

"Design thinking is essential in urban regeneration because it aims to get people on board behind a project. You have to try and design and make the city with them."

Florent Orsoni, director of the Sustainable City Design Lab at Nantes Atlantique School of Design

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So what will the city of the future look like in practice?

“The city of the future will look very much like the city of the present because it is not the city’s form that will change but its uses and types of use linked to sharing”, says architect and planner Christian Devillers.

Alain Bourdin, professor of urban planning and development at the French Institute of Urban Planning concluded the conference with these words: “The city is being transformed and that means not only involving residents in decisions about the changes taking place in their living environment but also setting up temporary structures. In order to do so, we use “ephemeral” urbanism, meaning the temporary development of public spaces which brings the many different players involved into contact. But this movement in the city cannot be improvised. It calls for strict and organised planning.”

And what is the outcome?

“Ephemeral urbanism makes places attractive because it generates uses in public spaces. It encourages people to come to places where things are happening. As such it is a precious resource for cities trying to draw large numbers of people and boost their economy, for example.”

About the Bouygues Immobilier corporate foundation

The Bouygues Immobilier corporate foundation, created in 2009, is one of the company’s responses to the challenges of sustainable development. Its stated ambition is to make the urban environment more people-focused by using architecture and urban planning to serve the environment and the community.

It has three main missions:

- *to promote architecture and urban planning to the general public*
- *to support urban solidarity*
- *to encourage expert discussion of the city of the future and to circulate information to local authorities and the general public through the Observatoire de la Ville*

About the Observatoire de la Ville

Created by Bouygues Immobilier in 2006, the Observatoire de la Ville is open to everyone with an interest in urban issues, from residents and politicians to architects and planners. It offers a forum for information and discussion in order to imagine innovative solutions for the urban environment of the future. Its theme for 2015-2016 is “Rever(cités), recyclable and resilient cities”.

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