

25th April 1905/25 April 2015
Fez comme a Lîdje, lèyiz ploûre

Today exactly 110 years ago, Liège inaugurated its first world Expo. The idea to host the event was born with a small circle of local private merchants only 8 years prior. On the morning of 25th of April 1905, the city welcomed twenty nine nations on a 21 hectares World Expo site with a cantate performance by 800 singers. The event shall attract in total 7 million visitors. The Palais des Beaux Arts in the Parc de la Boverie is today its only remnant. (It shall re-open next year as Centre International d'Art Contemporain displaying part of the Paris Louvre collection). Why Liège?

Liège had stood at the forefront of industrialisation and innovation. It was the first conurbation on the European continent to enter into the industrial revolution. By the mid nineteenth century the iron and steel factories had created a 100 square kilometers industrialised area from Mons to Verviers, powered by the steam engine's capability of mass producing numerous industrial applications. This "Sillon Wallon" was the XIX century equivalent of today's "Silicon Valley" making Belgium the second industrialised power in the world, after the UK. Seraing, a suburb of Liège, had become a Palo Alto of those days. It is here that British born John Cockerill and King Willem I of the Netherlands joined forces and installed their company's headquarters in the summer palace of the former Prins Bischops of Liège, on the banks of the Meuse. This factory was to become a vertically integrated iron foundry and machine manufacturing factory integrating all stages of production, from the supply of raw materials to engineering, as early as 1825. As a knock-on effect, the textile industry was the first to use the new mass production ways that the industrial revolution made possible. It became the biggest employer in those days. In the Euregion, Verviers became the wool capital of the continent.

Liège also held a second Expo, in 1930 (jointly with Antwerp). It too focused on innovation of industry and science. It shall however attract only 6 million visitors, about half of what was expected. Partly due to the outburst of the 1929 financial crisis, and partly because world economic power and innovation had moved elsewhere: to the US east coast where the petrol engine was put to create yet another mass product, the automobile.

Then Liège held a third Expo, in 1939. Water management was to be the central theme with as its masterpiece the opening of the Albert Canal on the 30 June 1939. Sign of the times, German workers building the nazi stand of architect Emil Fahrenkamp were moved in and out of the site on a daily basis by trucks, as the nazi regime prohibited them to spend German marks in Liège. Geographic proximity within the Euregion made that possible. An accidental explosion and the gathering dark clouds of world war two ended the Expo prematurely.

Lastly, in 2009 Liège made a bid to host the 2017 World Expo, its fourth. If the previous Expo was *unvollendet*, this one remains unborn. The project was backed only by the Belgian federal and Walloon governments. There was no Euregional support. Consequently, the budget reached a mere 250.000 EUR. Liège lost its bid to Astana in Kazachstan.

Fez comme a Lîdje, lèyiz ploûre: « Faites comme à Liège, laissez pleuvoir ».

This local saying stipulates that if something bad happens to you, you should stay calm and let the storm pass. The above brief historic overview of four Expo's, a timespan of 110 years, could read like a story of accelerating decline. Not only of Liège, but of the Euregion as a whole. But that is only part of the story. For if it is easy to hear the big old tree collapse in the forest, it is much more difficult to hear the new younger trees grow.

During this time-span the "Sillon Wallon" metamorphosed from a wing to a triangle, and reallocated to the North. It is today the triangle Leuven-Aachen-Eindhoven where engineers from top universities and research institutes work together with global firms and globally operating small and medium sized enterprises on innovation like nano technology, big data, space and medical industries. And in its heart lies Penta City*.

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In that respect, the globalised economy in the Euregion is already much more advanced than our local political structures. These operate on a loco-provincial level as if it were still 1905. Penta City as a transnational city would be a much stronger motor for the Euregion in areas like infrastructure, education and, consequently, employment. Because its transnational governance would enable to make the right nexus between government, companies, universities and research institutes across the border. And this is a game changer. A positive answer to today's challenges. Penta City could make a serious bid to win and host the next World Expo.

But whilst none of this shall happen at short notice, new technologies of digitalisation and the globalised economies proceed incessantly, and shall end up pulverizing the hugely inefficient local political structures of the Euregion. The choice pro Penta City is one of democracy and market, rather than market alone.

** Penta City is the name we give to the main cities of the five cultures in the Euregion -being Aachen, Eupen, Hasselt, Luik, Maastricht-, cooperating in a more modern transnational local transnational governance structure (see previous Charlemagne BLOG 1 - The Euregion needs to tear down its walls 23.03.2015 for more information on the concept).*

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