

LES MACHINES DE L'ÎLE DE NANTES.

From the workshop of the craftsman and the artist
to the event in the city



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Les Machines de l'Île de Nantes. From the workshop of the craftsman and the artist to the event in the city

A critical study of an innovative cultural policy: inclusion, participation, and democracy

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Abstract

Since 2007, the *Machines de l'Île* company has established itself as the main attraction of the new 'creativity district' of the city of Nantes, revitalising the space of the former naval workshops, closed in 1987. The result of a cultural, economic, and tourist policy initially based on the Bilbao model, the aim was to institutionalise a tradition of street theatre that had existed for nearly 40 years and to make Nantes an event city, with its productions on display for all to see. This dazzling success, which radically transformed the city's image on a local, national, and even international scale, was, however, part of a complex set of organisations, leading to a lack of transparency in financing and a lock-up of the various positions held within the company.

Keywords: event, street theatre, workshop, technique, creation, machines, urban policy, rehabilitation, local economy

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Introduction

Les Machines de l'Île, inaugurated in 2007, aims to be an unconventional form of museum, a street theatre space and a thematic park that is operated by machines, combining art and engineering. Indeed, the company of *La Machine* is known for its construction of enormous animal-like machines that interact with the audience, extending the aesthetics previously developed by *Royal de Luxe* (a French mechanical marionette street theatre company). It recomposes exotic nature and creates an aesthetic and cultural identity for the place where it is developed. Little by little, a veritable mechanical bestiary has been created: elephants, sloths, spiders, caterpillars, or even marine creatures. Jules Verne and Leonardo da Vinci largely inspired the aesthetic identity of these machines, which are now exported internationally (like the Lang Ma dragon today in China).

The company is based in Nantes, a former port and industrial city of 300,000 inhabitants located in the Pays-de-Loire (about 380km from Paris). *Les Machines de l'Île* is a major project that aims to attract mass tourism and revitalise the region by creating new jobs and supporting technological innovation. 194,216 people came to the Machines in the first year after its launch in 2007. In 2019, the company reached a peak of 738,579 visitors, which was followed by a sharp drop in the number of visitors due to the COVID-19 crisis (321,866 in 2020) and a slight recovery in activity in 2021 (with 433,275 visitors).

In accordance with the values associated with the world of street theatre, the machines are, in essence, accessible to all from the public space, free of charge. Only visits to the workshops, the discovery of future machines, and the entrance to the carousel are charged.

On the other hand, such a project requires huge amounts of public funding. The company has needed local, regional and European support from the beginning, using more than €70 million in public subsidies. It is thus a typical example of the projects developed from the 'cities and creative industries' perspective of the 2000s.

Methodology

Several tools were used to approach the various problems in this case. First, we opted to collect as many documents containing information as we could. We searched the Internet for press articles, academic resources, videos, and useful websites to drive our study and constituted a corpus composed of documents of different natures: press articles, television reports, articles published by the company *La Machine* (presentation of activities and activity reports), reports from the EU (*artOtech*), reports of the Chamber of Accounts, and multiple

interviews already carried out with the persons in charge of the project. Some of these documents were provided to us by *Anticor*, an organisation affiliated with the *Ministère de l'Intérieur* [French Ministry of Interior] that closely follows the legal and financial procedures related to the implementation of the company's various projects.

Moreover, some members of the French team went to Nantes twice. First, they spent two days onsite to discover the location of *Les Machines* and its surroundings and to make some contacts. However, their mission was hampered by the wave of heat sweeping France that weekend. They managed to interview some staff members in contact with the public (6) as well as local, French, and foreign visitors (20). The aim was to collect information and opinions on the working and visiting conditions, but also to situate the visitors socially according to their relationship to culture. We regret, however, that we were unable to interview the workers in the workshops due to the physical and organisational impossibility of approaching them.

This first field mission was also an opportunity for us to take pictures and notes on the location of the main building, its construction, and the advertisements surrounding it. The second stay was motivated by the organisation of a technological meeting at *Les Machines*, called Nantes Maker Campus. Professionals in the tech field, educational agents, and amateurs gathered for three days to present their inventions, school programs, and artworks linked to design and technology. The use of the English language shows the wish for internationalisation in the city. The French team interviewed participants of all types to evaluate the scope of such an event.

Context and background

The *Machines de l'Île* are part of a long-term transformation project for the city of Nantes. As summarised by Cartier *et al.* (2013, 24–25, *passim*), after the closure of the shipyards in 1987 (see *Timeline* below), various projects for the redevelopment of this industrial area were

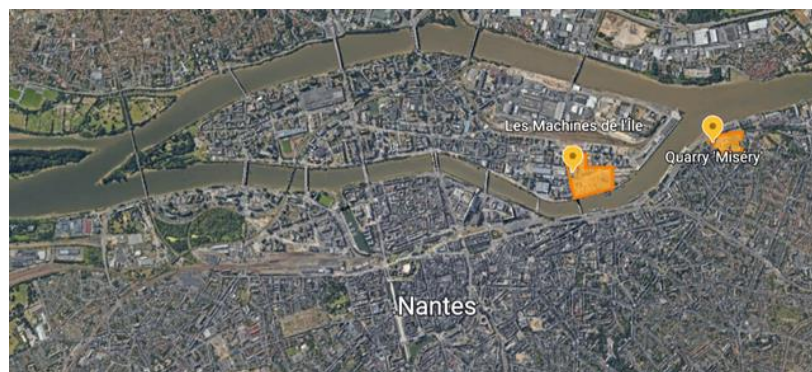


Figure 1 - Aerial view of the Île de Nantes and the sites of the *Machines de l'Île* and the quarry 'Miséry'. Photo credit: Google Earth.

envisaged, but none of them came to be implemented. At the beginning of the 1990s, studies undertaken by the City of Nantes contributed to building, not without tension, a common vision of the future use of this island space of more than 300 hectares, very close to the historic heart of Nantes. Called *Île de Nantes*, the project aims to develop housing with a potential of more than 800,000 m² of building space as well as facilities and services, particularly for cultural and tourist purposes. The project began in the early 2000s with the redevelopment of the quays and, above all, the construction of a new courthouse.

The development principle adopted is intended to be relatively straightforward, on condition that it respects major guidelines, such as cultivating a dialogue with the Loire River, respecting

The City of Nantes: A Timeline

Until the 19th century	Nantes was the European epicentre of the slave trade , occupying an important place as a port in the triangular trade.
1840-1960	Development of an industrial economy based on the shipbuilding industry .
1960-1987	<p>Deindustrialisation of the economy, with the last shipyard (<i>Chantier Dubigeon</i>) closing in 1987. In 1968, blue-collar workers represented 32.3% of the population; in 1990, they were 19.9%; and in 2009, they were 15.4%. Over the same period, professional and managerial staff have increased from 7.5% to 25.9% of the population.</p> <p>The 1980s were marked by strong tension between the landowners in collaboration with the local authorities and the workers' groups and unions. The former aimed at a complete reconstruction of the port area and the dismantling of the old shipyards (the 'clean slate' policy); the latter aimed at the preservation of the working-class memory and a more active participation in the design of the urban space.</p>
1989	Under the influence of the presidency of François Mitterrand (1981–1995) and the ' cultural turn ' his government promoted, the socialist party came to power in Nantes and has governed the city ever since. First with Jean-Marc Ayrault (1989–2012), then with Patrick Rimbart (2012–2014) and finally with Johanna Rolland (since 2014).
1990s	<p>A new conception of the city and of its cultural policy began to be elaborated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of the urban intervention area called 'Île de Nantes'. • Creation of major festivals (music, arts, theatre) • Hosting of new cultural enterprises (<i>Royal de Luxe</i>, <i>Les allumés</i>, <i>La folle journée</i>, etc.)
2000s	<p>Marked the start of the implementation of urban redevelopment projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2000 - Construction of the new courthouse • 2003 - Creation of the SAMOA [<i>Société d'Aménagement de la Métropole Ouest Atlantique</i>] • 2005 - Redevelopment of the François Mitterrand quays • 2007 - New cultural venues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Hangar à Bananes</i> ○ <i>Les Machines de l'Île</i> and the Mechanical Great Elephant
2009–2020s	<p>The period of consolidation of previous projects and the development of the 'Creation District':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2009 - The Ecocity • 2009/11 - ECCE Innovation • 2009 – Nantes School of Architecture • 2011 - <i>La Fabrique</i> • 2012 - Marine Worlds Carousel • 2017/19 - A new School of Fine Arts building

the existing buildings and the port's tradition. In 2007, the *Machines de l'île* program was inaugurated, the emblematic feature of which is a 12-metre-high mechanical elephant. More recently, *La Fabrique*, a new cultural space of more than 7,000 m², opened its doors in 2011.

This cultural orientation is part of a larger program, initiated in 2009, that concerns the construction of a creative district designed as the new flagship project for the Nantes urban area. The aim is to concentrate, in one central location, establishments and companies linked to innovation and creation. After the School of Architecture, which arrived in 2009, the School of Fine Arts, the School of Design, and some university courses will also be housed in the former Alstom company halls and will have between 3,000 and 5,000 students in the future

Les Machines de l'Île were created in 2007 by Pierre Oréface (born 1954) and François Delarozière (born 1963), who are considered the co-founders. The idea was born in 2000, when the two men met. It is part of a two-decade-old Nantes tradition. Indeed, the two men wanted to take the city undergoing conversion one step further: to perpetuate this street theatre tradition, from which they both originate, in an infrastructure, a company, or a workshop.

In 1983, François Delarozière, then a designer, met the *Royal de Luxe* company for the first time in Aix en Provence. From 1987 onwards, he became involved with the company, designing and directing some of the machines that would make up the famous 'Saga of the Giants'. It was within this company that he met Pierre Oréface, administrator of the company in the 1990s, once it was settled in Toulouse. In the meantime, François Delarozière founded the association *La Machine* and became its artistic director, involved in the construction of theatre sets, machines and merry-go-rounds. The son of a musician and a handyman, François Delarozière asserts a constant preoccupation in all his fantastic creations: 'I like people to see the inside of machines, the architecture, the cogs, the pulleys, to feel how it is done'. After 21 years of collaboration with *Royal de Luxe*, he decided to devote himself entirely to his association *La Machine* and his joint project with Pierre Oréface for the *Machines de l'île*.



Figure 2: Pierre Oréface (right) and François Delarozière (left). Photo credit : lesmachines-nantes.fr

In fact, in 2003, François Delarozière and Pierre Oréface proposed to Jean-Marc Ayrault, deputy mayor of Nantes and president of Nantes Métropole, to participate in the great urban renewal project. The change in political horizons of the municipality of Nantes was a godsend for the implementation of their new project, whereas the two had encountered difficulties in Toulouse. In 2004, work began, and in 2007, *the Machines* opened. Pierre Oréface, with a degree in economics and political sciences, became director of *Les Machines* and was responsible for communication and marketing. Made a knight of arts and letters in 2013, he is the state legitimacy of this company.

In an interview in 2020, Pierre Oréface himself emphasised the political dimension that made such a project possible: 'Since Jack Lang, culture is managed almost directly by the mayors and it is a strategic tool for their re-elections because it is what makes the city friendly; our spectators are their voters. So, culture has become very important, and I have surfed all my career on a rise in power of this sector.'¹

The Machines project was approved by the urban council of Nantes Métropole in 2004. *Le Voyage à Nantes*, a public and local body, has been in charge of its management since 2007. This innovation is part of a global urban panoramic project of the *Île de Nantes*, the island where *Les Machines* are located. It was also a question, through this attraction, of revitalising a district that had been left fallow since the closure of the shipyards in 1987 after two decades of crisis. While the Bilbao model of economic reconversion through the construction and promotion of monuments initially guided public decision-makers, it was ultimately the Nantes model that emerged and shaped the city's cultural policy². Events and technological innovation linked to art are the keys to this 'Nantes-style urban planning', this innovative cultural policy.

Questions

After briefly tracing the political and economic birth of the *Machines de l'Île* project, some questions emerge. First of all, in the context of the urban renewal movement initiated by the socialist municipality, we must ask ourselves: how does this private initiative project concretely participate in the implementation of an ambitious city policy in cooperation with the public sector? In the same vein, the economic impact of the *Machines* on the city and its surroundings, in terms of employment, trade, tourism and culture, and on local and even regional economic development, must also be questioned.

Finally, to what extent do the ideas that drive this art form, inspired by theatre and street performance, successfully contribute to opening up access to culture to the greatest number of people and to benefiting the whole city? This question is all the more important since the achievements of the *Machines*, recognised as works of art by the state, benefit from very important public funds.

In short, it will be a question of proposing here a critical vision of a cultural policy unanimously described as innovative but with a certain cost for the territorial authorities and thus the residents.

¹ Pierre Oréface : « Je voulais être là pour avoir des idées, pour qu'il se passe des choses », interview for Artistik rezo, 2020 : <https://www.artistikrezo.com/art/pierre-oreface-je-voulais-etre-la-pour-avoir-des-idees-pour-quil-se-passe-des-choses.html>

² Nicolas, « Le projet urbain nantais ».

Description of the concrete cultural policy instrument

Occupying a large area redeveloped on the former docks of the *île de Nantes*, the machines are first of all a space where the attraction itself, its public, and passers-by meet each other on a large esplanade. It is located between a shipyard converted into a 'gallery', a gigantic yellow crane called 'Titan' (which has become a monument to the memory of the workers), and the Loire.



Figure 3 – Aerial view of the Machines des île site. Photo credit: Google Earth

In this esplanade, three main attractions are proposed: the Big Elephant, the Marine Worlds Carousel, and the Gallery of Machines. [The Big Elephant](#) was the first one, created in 2007. It is an automaton that moves along the esplanade, interacting with the general public (on which it can throw water) and simultaneously carrying 50 people inside (€5.50–€8.50 a ticket). It became the emblem of the city of Nantes as it walked in the local urban space.

The [Marine Worlds Carousel](#) was then launched in 2012. As its name suggests, it is a giant carousel, almost 25 meters high and 22 meters in diameter. It is in fact made up of three superimposed carousels representing each level of the sea. It is composed of 36 mobile elements representing marine creatures that are manipulated by the public. 300 people can visit it at the same time (€5.50–€8.50 a ticket).

Next to these attractions is *La Galerie des Machines* (€5.50–€8.50 a ticket). This is a space that allows visitors to discover the entire history of the company as well as the manufacturing process in the workshop. For this, a 14-minute film is broadcast there with an overlay in French sign languages, returning to the history of the site and the ecological and urban significance of the project.



Figure 4: The Big Elephant

Into the *Galerie des Machines*, we see the animals come alive through mini-shows, and animals regularly integrate this visit area like the chameleon in 2021. The Workshop Terraces are two terraces where visitors can observe the work of craftsmen and workers being done around steel and wood. The idea is to place visitors in a type of experimentation laboratory where the 'bestiary' of *Les Machines de l'île* is presented to the public. The animals presented in the *Galerie des Machines* will, then, go to populate one of the attractions of the *Machines de l'île* or the esplanade where the project is located.

The newest project of *Les Machines* is the one called [the Heron Tree](#), which should be ready in 2027. This project is the greatest ever produced by *Les Machines*. It is a steel tree with a 50-metre diameter and 35-metre height. On its 22 branches, taking more than one kilometre of

extension, a great number of automatons will be arranged. They will compose a 'mechanical fauna'. The tree will be topped by the Herons family, which will allow passengers to take off for a circular flight at 42 metres above ground. Once inaugurated, the project aims to attract a public of five thousand people per day (500 thousand per year).

The project started in 2015, but there was no empty space on the *Île de Nantes*, which was problematic. As territorial planning was a core priority of the project, the old quarry 'Miséry' was chosen as the location of the tree. The quarry was exploited between the 17th and the 20th centuries. It has now become a so-called Extraordinary Garden, as a part of the rehabilitation plan of the district.



Figure 5: the reduce-sized projet of Tree of Herons and the old quarry 'Miséry'

The Heron Tree project was supposed to cost 52 million euros, 35 million of which came from public subsidies. However, the inflation of the cost of materials and a reorganisation of the implementation of the project raised its estimated cost to 80.4 million euros (September 2022). For this reason, the local authorities in

Nantes have withdrawn from the project. Now it is trying to obtain funds independently, but it obviously counts with the support of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Nantes St-Nazaire.

Culture and innovation as a tool of regional economic development

Les Machines are part of the urban planning of the district of the *Île de Nantes*. In 2022, a vast part of the building was created in this district³. The west side of the island is even more concerned about the construction planning, dealing with the project *Nantes Métropole*. An official video produced by the city hall presents its future, with the intention of making Nantes a 'European city with operations in order to cultivate the singularity or just the charm of the city' with businesses, diversity, mixed use, parks, bicycles, etc.⁴

Les Machines are located near *La Fabrique*, the artistic laboratories of the island, in the heart of the new 'Creation District'⁵. Since 1997, the city has wanted to develop the west side of the district through the principle of innovation. Transdisciplinarity, territorial dynamism and social transformation are the keystones of this project.

The site is strategic. Five years of work (2002–2007), made it possible to transform the construction site. The quays allow for beautiful walks, while the *Maison des Hommes et des Techniques* [House of People and Technology] serves as a museum of naval history. Other infrastructures should be noted: an urban beach, exotic gardens on the former industrial wasteland, and the eco-district of the *Prairie-au-Duc*. The island is in the middle of the river and therefore at the centre of the city.

³ « Urbanisme à Nantes : les grands projets de 2022 ».

⁴ « A l'ouest de l'île de Nantes, un nouveau quartier se dessine - YouTube ».

⁵ Morteau, « Dynamiques des clusters culturels métropolitains, une perspective évolutionniste ».

When it comes to regional development, *Les Machines* are also keen to participate. The Nantes *Maker Campus* is a prime example of this initiative. In 2022, as in 2019, two days were dedicated to a meeting of technology enthusiasts, with a focus on machines in art. This year, the *Maker Campus* in Nantes took place from July 8th to 10th, 2022. *Les Machines* is the co-organiser of this gathering held in the very heart of the nave of the former shipyard's workshop. On this occasion, a prototype of a mechanical heron that will be integrated into the Tree of Heron project was presented.



Figure 6: Nantes Campus Maker

More concretely, the *Maker Campus* aims to bring together the actors of the Nantes and regional economies. The very strong inter-knowledge that reigns there allows schools, associations, local craftsmen (xylographers, ceramic workers), artists-developers, landscapers, and engineers to work together. The enthusiasm of the participants testifies to the success of this meeting, which greatly contributes to promoting innovation and the economy in the service of the territory.

The themes structuring this gathering are inclusiveness (with regard to issues related to disability: the manufacture of prostheses, for example), research in computer science and robotics, training (particularly for the most vulnerable: children in foster care), and the sustainable economy, with a marked attraction for the recycling of waste.

The project *Les Machines* presents itself as an innovation in the world of culture. Indeed, it consists of linking theatre, urban planning, architecture, and technology. It is therefore a unique project. The Heron Tree, for example, completely redesigns the former quarries of the city; its monumentality, a real technical challenge, and the associated park rehabilitate the space and participate in the development of a new urban identity. This identity, however, is not a mere fantasy. The port city of Nantes has a bestiary playing on this imaginary travel.

The project is also about linking in each machine the art, the story, and the technology related to the steel already worked on the old shipyards. These two axes of reading, aesthetic and mechanical, are maintained in the visit by the contrast of colours between the wood (art) and the frame (technology). The visitors interviewed unanimously recognise the innovative aspect of the project and tend to displace the conventional definition of what culture should be. In their statements, innovation is seen as the basis of art.

The exceptionality of each piece created in the workshops, together with the infinite possibilities of creation associated with it, make this way of making art exportable to other contemporary spaces.

Analysis

As many urban revitalisation projects strategically use cultural facilities, it is important to put into perspective not only the 'promises' of the project and what has actually been achieved,

but also to evaluate what has been implemented relative to its potential. At first glance, the feedback from the public of *Les Machines de l'Île*, which we assessed through interviews and the analysis of reviews on specialised platforms, was very positive, systematically mentioning the 'magic' of the places combining mechanics and bestiary.

The *Machines de l'Île* are fully in line with the city's policy of making Nantes an experience between the ordinary public space and the extraordinary space of events, renewing the tourist relationship with the world. The principle of gratuity inherent in the street performance work, defended by the founders of the *Machines de l'Île*, allows everyone to benefit from the cultural work, in particular and above all from the elephant wandering in the public space. Many groups of children testified to the concern of the municipality to introduce everyone to the attraction. Thus, if some families do not come on their own, the actors in Nantes' cultural policy seem concerned with bringing the public to local attractions.

However, to really discover all the attractions, one needs to spend about €25 per person. Thus, the public we met during our field missions consisted predominantly of families, i.e., of young children accompanied by parents or retirees, or young working people, coming from Nantes, France, or even from abroad. These people possessed economic resources and often had a prior attraction for culture, the arts, and engineering. Having sufficient funds to buy their tickets as well as their previous interest in art, which is socially situated, characterises the public that enters the *Galerie des Machines*.

Use of public funding

Another recurring point in this type of project is the issue of funding and, in particular, the importance of public funds both in the implementation of the project and in the current budget. The implementation of the *Machines de l'Île* budget initially cost 4.8 million euros. However, the *Nantes Métropole* council reassessed the cost at 6 million euros before signing a public service delegation agreement with the manager of the *Machines* until 2025. The project was supported by the EU's *Objective 2* programme. However, there were also other sources of funding, predominantly local. Thus, for instance, the *Marine Worlds Carousel* was funded 36.5% by *Nantes Métropole*, 20% by the EU, 20% by the French state, 13.5% by the departmental council, and 10% by the region⁶.

⁶ Saint, « Nantes ».

Highlight: Objective 2

As early as the 1990s, the EU set up several regional programs aimed at promoting the development of regions with weaknesses (economic, demographic, and conversion lag). Among them, Objective 2 was to reconvert areas in industrial decline⁷ identified in 1993.

For the period 2000-2006, the *Pays de la Loire* region (an area suffering from a lack of investment) benefited from a share of the amount allocated to France. It was based on five pillars: establishing sustainable agriculture, strengthening territorial attractiveness (through culture, for example), modifying infrastructure to create jobs, improving business competitiveness, and contributing to equal opportunities through professional qualification.

The *Machines de l'Île* were thus supported by a European investment. Of the initial budget of 4.8 million euros, 1.785 million were financed by the *Objective 2* programme, or 25% of the total. EU participation amounted to 20% of the second phase of the project, through the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund).

Financing actors	Share of financing during the 1 st phase (2004-2007)	Share of financing during the 2 nd phase (2008-2013)
Nantes Métropole	50.4%	36.5%
Union Européenne	23%	20%
Région des Pays de la Loire	26.6%	10%
Etat	X	20%

	1st phase	2 nd phase
Total cost	7.7 M €	10 M €

Source: Dossier de Presse Machines de l'Île 2019, <https://www.lesmachines-nantes.fr/presse-2/>.

In terms of its implementation, the most controversial project of the *Machines de l'Île* is undoubtedly the Heron Tree. Indeed, in addition to the already mentioned high cost of the project, it involves a controversial use of the status of 'work of art'. Because of its legal status as 'work of art', the project was able to receive additional funding and is not subject to public market regulation. In other words, the basic principle of economic competition is suspended, and the company is allowed to choose any service provider without competition⁸. Nevertheless, there is still uncertainty as to the delimitation of the 'work of art': should the mechanical element or the earthwork be included in the status at the risk of breaking the competition?

Independently of the answer to this question, the ambiguity of the status of the 'work of art', combined with the ambivalent role of corporate sponsors of the project, draws attention to the lack of transparency in the use of public funds, which would initially fund more than 80%

⁷ « Europe - Note d'information sur les fonds structurels - Sénat ».

⁸ « A Nantes, le projet de l'Arbre aux hérons électrise les débats ».

of the total cost of its implementation. This doubt about transparency in the use of public funds was reinforced by the very negative report of the Regional Chamber of Commerce on the *Marine Worlds Carousel* (2017), followed by the custody of the directors of the company in charge of this project in the context of the judicial investigation on the inadequacy of competition and favouritism (2022)⁹.

From the point of view of the current budget of the *Machines de l'île*, public subsidies represented 18.4% of the total revenue in 2019 (1,7 million euros out of the total of 9.2 million) and 33.9% in 2021 (2.5 million euros out of the total of 7.4 million). This represents the company's second-largest source of revenue after individual tickets, which generated 3.9 million euros and 2.5 million euros, respectively. In addition to having systematically negative economic results (with the exception of 2019), this subsidy implies that each ticket sold (all categories included) included between €2 and €5 of public subsidy. As the geographer Isabelle Garat points out, '(...) what is criticised is that the municipality grants huge subsidies. It is expensive, compared to the whole of the budget for culture. It is criticised because it is [a] tourist [project], and not culture. It is not culture that enhances an old industrial site'¹⁰.

Vertical hierarchy

Our discussions with multi-skilled reception agents, machinists, and ushers have given us feedback on the working conditions and jobs created by *Les Machines*. The jobs are mainly intended for students or recent graduates: part-time, 70% most often for machinists, and 30 to 50% for ushers. Being flexible seems to generally satisfy the staff, for which this is the first employment activity. They appreciate the contact with the public linked to their role as mediators, and they adapt to the audience: children as well as adults. The job even seems to give rise to a form of pride.

On the other hand, our discussions with the general-purpose workers described a more nuanced reality. Being at the bottom of the ladder, they suffer from the rigidities of the hierarchy. Obtaining the shutdown of the machines because of excessive heat would have been difficult if not for the fact that a firefighter at a higher level was concerned about the situation. Moreover, the working conditions described are sometimes dangerous. These workers are on the front lines, an employee said, who had to open an abandoned bag to ensure the safety of visitors. In addition, these open-ended jobs sometimes become involuntary part-time jobs imposed on employees, especially young workers looking for a second job to live decently. Finally, the prospects for career development seem clearly obstructed: acquaintanceship and diplomas preside over experience within the company in the allocation of senior positions in the hierarchy.

Nature and ecology

Ecological issues have been integrated into the projects implemented on the *île de Nantes*. In the case of the *Machines de l'île*, however, ecology and nature are quite instrumentalised. Indeed, since 2018, a partnership with the association [*Des Éléphants et Des Hommes*](#) [Elephants and Men] has been developed. Through this partnership, visitors are invited to

⁹ Grethen et Jaunet, « Nantes. L'enquête sur le Carrousel, petite pièce d'un grand puzzle ».

¹⁰ « Politiques culturelles et développement urbain de la ville de Nantes », 67.

make a donation equivalent to the rounding up of the value of the tickets to the next euro. The *Machines de l'Île* is committed to adding the same value to the amount that will then be donated to the association.

Reminders of this are omnipresent in the *Galerie des machines*, with flyers near the cash desk, a banner falling from the building, and information panels. Two major projects are supported: a brigade of forest guards working in the protected nature reserve of *Nam Pouy in Laos* (composed of 12 individuals); and the reproduction project of the Lao Elephant Conservation Centre. *Les Machines de l'Île* plans to donate about 30 thousand euros per year to the association (50% from visitors' donations). However, due to the relatively unstable financial situation of the company, these donations are only possible through the indirect appropriation of money from public funds. Once again, the question of transparency and the purpose of the use of public funds originally intended for culture is raised.

Distortion of working-class collective memory?

The machines were set up in the *Parc des Chantiers*, where the naval dockyards of Dubigeon (1760–1987) were located. Very quickly, the idea of wiping out the old infrastructure emerged, leading to a tug of war between the municipality and the former shipyard workers. *Les Machines* seem to have been concerned at first sight about preserving this tangible and intangible heritage. The nave has been rehabilitated to accommodate the machines. The terrace of the workshop allows the workers to be observed at work from above, as was the case at the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition with the attraction of the *Galerie des Machines*, whose name has been taken up here.

Nevertheless, this elitist, heroic, aesthetic, or fantasised imaginary of the worker seems to completely transfigure the daily reality of the former shipyards. Far from making the working-class memory alive and able to speak to the new generations, *Les Machines* invented a new identity without any real consultation with the bearers of the memory. The transition of the site from an industrial economy to a tertiary economy was thus made through numerous conflicts and attempts at compromise, often precarious. The rails preserved on the former site were concreted over to avoid technical accidents with the Elephant¹¹.

Conclusion

The *Machines de l'Île* is a typical expression of cultural policies centred on a strategy of revalorisation of the urban space through cultural facilities and the promotion of creative industries. The project was supported by public actors, including the EU, for over two decades. It should first be said that, by rethinking artistic activity through the integration of technology, *Les Machines* allows all the local, regional, administrative, economic, industrial and tourist players to work together in the implementation of cultural policy. The entire regional economy finds its own dynamic, likely to transform the territory, trying to take into account contemporary issues: ecology, inclusiveness, schooling, job creation, etc.

¹¹ Amélie Nicolas, Usages sociaux de la mémoire et projet d'aménagement urbain Les héritages industriels et portuaires à l'épreuve du projet de l'île de Nantes, Theses, Université de Nantes, s.l., 2009.

The part of the urban area where the project is located has also been transfigured: the monuments and machines mark the territory, and the shows and events renew the ways of inhabiting the public space and the city for all. The *Les Machines de l'Île* project allows a transformation of the flow of the local population, in particular during vacation periods. By targeting the tourists in an ever-wider circle, a new flow of people reconfigures the rhythm and style of economic activities implied in the surroundings.

Nevertheless, the real viability of these attractions is brought into question by the very high costs of the project, funded primarily from public funds. There are also questions related to the priority of using (scarce) public funds allocated to culture, as well as the issue of what kind of results are achieved by using public funding, for example, regarding the accessibility and inclusiveness of the content. In addition, the lack of transparency linked to organisational complexity, combining public and private, and the vague status of a 'work of art', raise questions about funding and their use.

Furthermore, the cost of visits and the increase in the price of land linked to the rehabilitation of the district call on local actors to be vigilant about the real accessibility of these attractions. Likewise, some reflection should be given to the issue of how to make the site accessible to people who are not usual visitors to cultural events.

Finally, the loss of working-class memory brought about by the *Les Machines* project should be mentioned. In the current landscape, there are very few sites that evoke the working-class heart that used to make the city pulsate some decades ago. The policy put in place has made a gentrified centre emerge from the ruins, turning mainly towards consumption and leisure. The idyllic and denaturalised way in which the work of labourers is promoted and presented by the machines and their construction is rather a materialisation of a gentry narrative à la Jules Verne than a tribute to those who, preventing the *Île de Nantes* from being completely demolished in the mid-1980s, opened the way to the reconstruction of this urban centre.

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