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Roadtrip: L'Esprit de L'Innovation

 by [Paul Tate](#) • [Sign up to receive ME Daily News Alerts](#) • Posted on Wednesday, April 08, 2009

Abstract: Saint-Etienne, a model of industrial adaptability, is an apt setting for a conference aiming to incite a manufacturing revolution.

Keywords: industrial adaptability, adaptation, innovation

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France has a penchant for fostering the odd revolutionary idea.

In 1789, in the midst of another deep financial crisis, caused by the excesses of the bankrupt monarchy of Louis XVI and his coterie of greedy Bourbon financiers, the ordinary people of Paris sparked a revolution that sent a message of liberty, equality, and fraternity across Europe.

Now, 220 years later, more than 400 of Europe's leading manufacturing researchers, developers, politicians, and academics gathered in central France hoping they, too, could start a revolution. This time the aim is to transform European manufacturing into a sustainable world-class business. And the message behind this regime change is adaptation, innovation, and collaboration.

"We've got to start doing things differently. Manufacturing is too important. Innovation has to happen faster," urged one delegate between road bumps as we left Lyon airport on a chilly December evening to reach the 2008 Manufacture Conference in Saint-Etienne, an hour's drive away.

[Manufacture](#) is a pan-European initiative to develop new manufacturing technologies and integrate them rapidly into European industrial processes. Its role in fostering innovation and regional collaboration is becoming increasingly important as companies seek new ways to survive, rethink, and regenerate their businesses in the economic meltdown.

Much is at stake. Europe's manufacturing base embraces 230,000 companies across 27 countries, generating €6,930 billion in turnover each year. That's 36.5% of the EU economy. Roughly 95% are SMEs. Altogether the sector directly employs more than 37 million people and creates a further 75 million related services jobs across the region.

Saint-Etienne, with a strong industrial tradition of exploiting new ideas and technologies, is an apt location to promote adaptive manufacturing.

Famous for fashionable ribbon makers in the 17th century, the city was renamed Armsville for a brief time during the French Revolution, reflecting its role in the mass-production of armaments to fuel the Napoleonic Wars. Local industry shifted to coal mining, while manufacturers took on a gentler role, more recently creating a national cycling hub, with a bustling network of bicycle and parts makers. It is host to the annual bike-fest called the Tour de France.

One example of local ingenuity — a bright yellow, sci-fi, all-terrain, ultra-adaptable, motorised, two-person tricycle, hung inspiringly over the foyer of the Manufacture venue to greet the delegates.

Part of what helps keep the city on the innovative edge is its links to a network of 600 public laboratories and 19,000 researchers in the Rhône-Alpes region, the second largest technical and research cluster in France. Manufacture sees such regional collaborative clusters as the foundation for future progress across the EU.

"It's time to turn the vision into real business," said Manufacture Chairman Heinrich Flegel, member of the supervisory board at Daimler, in his opening address. "We have to enhance our efficiency because time to market is crucial for everybody."

With Manufacture's guidelines now published — covering new manufacturing technologies, digital and virtual engineering, intelligent manufacturing systems, and new organisational methods — the next challenge is to drive implementation and deliver results. "That's the top priority," Flegel added. "But it won't be a walk in the park. We have to play as a team; otherwise, all the effort is a waste of time, energy, and money."

At least there's good news. Manufacture has secured €1.2 billion to back its cooperative Factory of the Future initiative to develop and integrate new adaptive manufacturing technologies. It's also working with the EU to set up a Joint Technology Initiative (JTI) to unify related projects, sharpen Europe's focus on key areas of R&D, and bring in public and private R&D funding. And it's not just the technology it hopes to transform, but also European society's attitude toward manufacturing.

"The factory of the future will no longer be a hostile, dirty, and noisy place, but rather a super-technology site," promises Andrea Gentili, the EU's coordinator for the Manufacture project. "It is for us to convince young Europeans, who are now discovering the limitations of the world of finance, that there are other ways of creating wealth."

You never know. A combination of innovative ideas, revolution, and alternative sources of wealth has always inspired youthful minds. Remember the streets of Paris in 1968? Perhaps a new revolution has just begun.

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