



The Evoluon in 1968. Photographer Jac de Nijs. Source: Wikimedia Commons

## Dick van Lente

# Selling progress: The Philips Electronics Company's Evoluon exhibition and the debate about technology, 1945-1970

**Emeritus Associate professor Cultural History**

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At the outskirts of Eindhoven, a town in southern Netherlands, stands an elegant but curious building, a kind of concrete flying saucer: the Evoluon. It was built in the 1960s as the exhibition building of the Philips Electronics Company, the most prestigious Dutch multinational firm at the time, with the purpose of explaining to the public Philips' contribution to human progress. In this essay, I suggest that the 'Philips story,' as expressed in the Evoluon, can be read as a response to other stories circulating at the time: it was part of a conversation about the future of Western society.

After World War II, the long standing debate about technology and progress became particularly intense, in the Netherlands as much as elsewhere. The dominant political view was that reconstruction and economic growth required international competitiveness which in turn demanded technological capability. Full employment was believed to prevent a repetition of the economic and political crisis of the 1930s. The Philips company embraced all these goals and made them part of its corporate strategy. The company's research lab was to create new and better products. And providing jobs, housing, and social and medical care to employees were considered as important as making a profit. At the forefront of post-war socio-economic modernization, Philips was almost considered a national institution.

At the same time, however, well-known intellectuals such as Norbert Wiener in the US and Fred Polak in the Netherlands expressed grave concerns about current technological developments. They spoke

of a 'second industrial revolution,' the core of which were electronic technologies such as computers and industrial automation. One of their worries was that continued automation would lead to a return of mass unemployment and social turmoil. As a major electronics firm, Philips obviously felt compelled to respond to such fears.

One form this response took was exhibitions for a large public of which the Evoluon was the most spectacular. It was not the first one, however. In 1951, celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Philips sent an exhibition of its consumer products around the country and named it 'Triumph of Technology'. Upon its opening in Amsterdam, the mayor gave a speech in which he praised Philips' innovative power. Philips demonstrates, he said, Dutch technological competitiveness. 'Triumph of Technology' confirmed the Dutch government's basic economic goals.

Philips' second big show was the spectacular 'Poème électronique' presented at the Brussels World Fair in 1958. In a striking pavilion, a film created by the famous architect LeCorbusier was shown accompanied by spatial sound effects from 350 loudspeakers by composer Edgar Varèse. Its topic was 'mankind's struggle to attain harmony.' It consisted of an avalanche of sounds and images including gruesome ones of mass graves, missiles, and atomic explosions. Although there was some more uplifting material as well, the show rather neatly reflected the fears of technology in the mid-fifties, or, as Philips' president chose to call it, 'the spiritual confusion of our times.' Although it had invited these artists to create the exhibit, Philips was very unhappy with the result, and when the company's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary approached, it was decided to tell 'the Philips story' in an unambiguous way. The vehicle for this story was the Evoluon. Its opening in 1966 was attended, characteristically, by the Queen's husband, the prime minister, the chairman of the Parliament, and several high ranking officers of the armed forces.

The exhibition was spread over three levels inside the flying saucer. After entering the building, visitors were carried by an elevator to the highest level which was devoted to everyday uses of (mainly electronic) technology: lighting, entertainment, medical technology, and so on. At the next level basic technological processes were explained, such as the recording and transmission of sound. Finally, at the bottom level, the Philips company was presented. The designers kept their message implicit but we find it clearly stated in their working papers, now in the company's archives. The name of the building summed it all up: Philips was a creative community, developing technical solutions for the benefit of all, and therefore contributing to the peaceful *evolution* of society, not to the revolutionary disruption critics spoke about.

The Evoluon quickly became one of the most popular attractions in the Netherlands. However, in the seventies, a steady decline set in

and the exhibition was closed in 1989. The basic reason was that the 'Philips story' became increasingly out of sync with society. Philips entered difficult times, had to fire hundreds of employees and close several factories, which undermined its heroic national role. Capitalism and Western technology were heavily criticized in the late sixties, and the Club of Rome's Limits to growth report (1972) undermined one of the basic premises of post-war industrial politics.

Very recently, the Evoluon was designated a national monument, and rightly so: it is not only a stylish example of 1960s architecture, but also an eloquent expression of one phase in the ongoing debate about technological progress.

#### Further reading

Bruner, Jerome. *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. Cambridge, MA, 2002.

Carey, James. *Communication as Culture: essays on media and society*. Boston, 1989.

Nye, David. *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture*. New York, 1997.

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I am grateful to Jan Paulussen and his staff at the Philips Company Archives for their invaluable assistance and intellectual input into this ongoing project.