

PITTSBURGH WANTS TO DUST OFF ITS REPUTATION

By Marie Simon – L'EXPRESS MAGAZINE – May 17, 2010

Today, the city of Pittsburgh is launching its operation of seduction in Paris. A concert in salle Pleyel, a communication team mobilized to meet with French entrepreneurs. The objective: to demonstrate that the 'steel city' deserves more than just this nickname.

Not all steel mills have closed down in Pittsburgh but their golden days are gone. But the 'steel city' nickname appears to have stuck. This industrial past remains the city's DNA. True enough, the inhabitants of Pittsburgh have suffered. In the early 80ies, following decades of growth and prosperity, 'everything collapsed' remembers William Farnith, a native of Pittsburgh. He got his first summer job in a steel mill. That was 1969; the industry was hiring and had good days ahead. But, after a peak of activities in 1979, the trends turned around completely.

'When I use the word 'collapse' I refer to the proper meaning of the word' stresses William Farnith, moved by the memory which is still painful. 'Activities dropped, investments dried up, equipments decayed. The people understood that the industry was dying in Pittsburgh, that there was no future for the sector' adds the chemist who is now living in Delaware.

Just like him, many moved away from a city eaten by poverty and high unemployment (17 percent of the active population in 1983). As a result of this mass exodus, the city lost 30 to 50 percent of its population. It became the symbol of recession. And the 'Manufacturing Belt', nestled against the Great Lakes, with Detroit, Cleveland and Chicago, its other major centers was renamed the 'Rust Belt'.

Pittsburgh does not deserve this reputation anymore because there are many restaurants, bars, arts galleries, design and ethnic boutiques in the rehabilitated districts – of Southside, where the workers lived, just as at East-End North where the mills were located. Along the Alleghany River, there is even Mogul Mind, a movie studio set up in a reconverted steel mill.

Enterprises and universities are thriving now, feeding each other with talents, money and dynamism. For instance, Gigapan, the system that enabled taking a panoramic high quality, king size picture, the day of President Obama investiture was born in Pittsburgh. There is also Captcha, the invention bought by Google last year and which can potentially transforms all Internauts into Google Books actors.

Beyond these examples, Pittsburgh has found a new life. The city was vulnerable when it was centered on steel. On the strength of this painful lesson, local authorities have sworn they would not be caught again and have lead the economy to diversify. Starting in the 90ies, organizations like the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance and the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce have initiated actions to foster this strategic objective.

Manufacturing remains a pillar of the local economy, even if it generates less jobs as a result of technological progress. The headquarters of steel giants like US Steel Mill have never left the city. But new pillars have emerged: finance, energy, information technologies, and health industries (a promising sector with the reform of the American health system initiated by the Obama administration). Alcoa, US Airways, a Google campus, Mylan Laboratories are other giants of Pittsburgh.

This variety of companies and the balance between these sectors have enabled Pittsburgh to soften the impact of the new crisis. ‘Pittsburgh has not exploded like other medium and large American cities did a few years back’ says Byron Spice, co-Manager of media relations at Carnegie Mellon University, and Pittsburgh did not plunge into recession as deeply as other US cities did.

With a 0.9 percent growth of GDP per head between 2007 and 2008, Pittsburgh fared better than Detroit, a city with a similar profile, which experienced a 1.2 percent decrease of GDP per head during the same period (Source: U.S. Department of Commerce). In terms of employment, where Detroit’s unemployment rate almost doubled between 2008 and 2009 – from 8.8 percent to 15.1 percent, Pittsburgh’s unemployment grew much slower, from 5.1 percent to 7.4 percent.

Another advantage of Pittsburgh is its housing rates remaining stable and affordable. According to the specialist of the Realtor web site, prices have never reached the heights reported in the national media, but merely a slow and regular increase. As a result, prices are, on average, 25 percent lower in Pittsburgh than in the rest of the US cities.

So now, ‘the new generations, educated in universities like Carnegie Mellon or Pittsburgh University, want to stay. There are even some who return to enjoy the family spirit of this city of 1.3 million inhabitants – a human size’ says Amy, Manager of Wild Pockets, a small company creating video games.

A Facebook group dedicated to Pittsburgh numbers nearly 17000 members, living in or exiled from the city. One of its members claims ‘I’d rather die than leave Steel City’. Many others send messages supporting the sports team of the city – the Steelers, Penguins and Pirates.

In 2009, Pittsburgh has even been elected ‘the most agreeable city to live in of the USA’ by The Economist magazine. That same year, Pittsburgh made Forbes Magazine’s top 10 of the the best US cities for job offers and family life. Lead by 30 year old Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, one of the youngest mayors in the USA, Pittsburgh hosted the 2009 G20, a real consecration for a city that managed its rebirth.

Today, Pittsburgh has made a successful transition to the 21st century and has become an example in terms of job creation. It has been transformed from the city of steel to a high-tech innovation center, especially in the fields of sustainable development, education and research. This compliment, dated September 2009, just before the G20, is signed Barack Obama.

But it is not its model of economic and social resilience that comes to mind when Pittsburgh is mentioned. Its dusty image is still sticking to its buildings and bridges. The city works to get rid of this image to better sell its new attractiveness to visitors and to US and international companies likely to set up operations here.

The objective: to go from ‘Why Pittsburgh?’ to ‘Why not Pittsburgh?’

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