How does an industrial, hardware-oriented region – that has the research-driven electronics corporation Philips to thank for its growth – continue to be relevant in an area of open innovation and digitisation? This question took centre stage in the round-table discussion that Link Magazine organised with design and innovation firm VanBerlo in Eindhoven at the end of last month. ‘Co-location’ proves to be one of the keywords: scientists, designers and engineers working together on innovation – as in the Innovation Powerhouse, where the round-table discussion was held, or in the Eindhoven Engine. This new initiative wants to have knowledge institutes and industry work out solutions to major (social) challenges together.

BY HANS VAN EERDEN

The Eindhoven Brainport region has Philips to thank for its rise as an industrial hot spot in the Netherlands. The electronics corporation covered a wide range of sectors, driven by the Philips Natlab. Lots of spin-offs, with lithography machine builder ASML being the largest, continued to build on that. Divisions such as Semiconductors and Lighting have been spun off and Philips now profiles itself as a health technology company; its research has been ‘narrowed’ accordingly. Panel chairman Ad van Berlo expresses his concern about that: ‘What does that mean for the region? Many start-ups have gained their initial experience at Philips. How do we foster that research?’

EINDHOVEN ENGINE
Maarten Steinbuch, professor of control technology at TU/e and entrepreneur with Eindhoven Medical

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The round-table discussion was hosted by Ad van Berlo, founder of design and innovation firm VanBerlo, which moved into the Innovation Powerhouse in Eindhoven. This building is part of the heritage of the Philips corporation and was erected on the Strip-T industrial estate in 1953 as a power plant for the Philips factories. On VanBerlo’s initiative, the property – building TR – was recently transformed into a high-profile business centre for innovative enterprises.

The ambition is to create an ecosystem for innovation, with Van Berlo guarding the formula, which he describes as follows: ‘A living lab for design, architecture, high-tech hardware and software, finance, big data, patents – these kinds of disciplines.’

The Innovation Powerhouse and the area around it on Strip-T is home to start-ups, innovative companies such as Additive Industries, the builder of industrial 3D metal printers, and educational institutes such as Fontys University of Applied Sciences and Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e). The building does not accommodate ‘traditional’ companies such as the large consultancies that are keen to set up shop in the area on account of its ‘hip’ look and feel. The commercial operation of the property requires a different, more long-term-oriented approach than the traditional ‘quick win’ approach. ‘A family that has operated in the property sector for sixty years bought this building four years ago after I had won them over to this new way of thinking. I really respect the way they opened their minds to this’.

Innovative is also the way in which the municipality of Eindhoven collaborates with the initiators and entrepreneurs on redeveloping the area. ‘The municipality is expected to fulfil mainly a facilitating role and allow the entrepreneurs to take part in the decision-making process. This is not an easy switch for the municipality to make, but the way they participate is commendable.’