

Well connected

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12/10/2016 If he had had better eyes, John Baekelmans would have been a pilot. But as Chief Technology Officer at Cisco, the Porsche fan flies higher than anyone. And sees far into the future.

He likes to talk about the “Internet of Things” and the connectivity of tomorrow. Preferably at the wheel. The Porsche 911 Cabriolet is just the thing. The eyes behind the rimless spectacles are wide awake. A broad smile carves deep lines in his face. Anticipation is written all over John Baekelmans’ face. It's early in the morning, and the first rays of sunshine are peeking through a few stray clouds. In Antwerp, Belgium’s second-largest city, little is happening at this hour. Baekelmans likes that. He is alone with his thoughts, the city, and the 911 Cabriolet. He, the great 911 aficionado. And then there’s his fascination for Carmine Red: “Magnificent!” And it’s no wonder: he, like so many, wanted to be a fireman; memories of that youthful passion have stuck with him.

He also had to give up on another dream job from the fantasies of his youth: “My eyesight was not good enough for a pilot’s license, so I thought, I’ll build planes instead.” In the end, Baekelmans became an

engineer, but instead of jet airplanes he opted for streams of data. The 47-year-old Belgian rose at Cisco, one of the world's largest network companies, to the position of Chief Technology Officer (CTO). Today he leads hundreds of engineers and programmers. He's responsible for the Internet of Things, also referred to as Industry 4.0. Why him? "I have the gift of explaining complex things in a simple way."

Today cities are extremely complex ecosystems

The Internet of Things is a gigantic network in which everything is connected to everything else. Far from being a process that will happen sometime in the vast future, it is happening now, and we are all a part of it. "It took thirty years to connect 17 billion smartphones, laptops, and other devices with one another," says Baekelmans. "In four years it will be around 50 billion." Currently there are approximately 2.5 million apps, and every week another 15,000 are added. Yet for all the fascination with the endless possibilities of the connected reality, Baekelmans is always thinking about people first. "I want to improve society," he says, albeit without much in the way of hippie undertones. "And what better place to begin than in our cities?"

For Baekelmans, cities today are extremely complex ecosystems that are in vigorous competition with each other. "People are drawn to places where mobility and security are paired with a green environment. Intelligent cities understood that long ago and are acting accordingly." Cities like London, Baekelmans' present home. He moved there when his company was commissioned to provide the technology and connectivity capabilities for the 2012 Olympics. "That was quite a challenge with four billion spectators, the threat of terrorism, and no second chance."

Through the Flemish city in the 911

While he regards London as a clever example of a connected city, in his home country of Belgium he sees many missed opportunities. John Baekelmans grew up in Antwerp, in the region of Flanders. As he drives through the Flemish city in his 911, he bemoans the mobility options available to the city's just over half a million inhabitants. Suddenly he changes the subject: "We should perhaps start by having some Frietjes somewhere." Why not? He knows a place. The best Frietjes in the city—and the universe. The grin returns to his face.

Beyond its Frietjes, Antwerp is world-renowned for the processing of diamonds and the trade in gemstones. The city also has one of the largest ports in Europe and a noteworthy medieval center—yet its mobility problem is massive. Not one single bridge spans the river Scheldt. There are a scant two tunnels for cars and trucks, and one more for pedestrians. People looking for parking account for 30 percent of total city traffic. "If all free parking spaces were equipped with a sensor," says Baekelmans, "an app could easily direct the driver to the nearest free parking spot. That could help people save a huge amount of time, energy, and frustration."

The completely connected urban project Songdo

He speaks from experience. In Hamburg, he and his people have succeeded in connecting the shipping companies with the port and the trucks. Satellite navigation systems forecast potential congestion, software indicates the best detour and specifies the ideal loading time. “More asphalt is a very old-fashioned solution,” says the IT expert as he—a mere stone’s throw from the Port of Antwerp—surveys the latest hot spot in the city: “Het Eilandje has wonderful museums and popular restaurants. It’s just not connected.”

With connectivity, the options available to city planners seem all but unlimited. And nowhere has it been as aggressively implemented as in Songdo, South Korea, home to the world’s first “smart city.” Conceived on the drawing board, the city 40 kilometers southwest of the capital Seoul includes 400 connected buildings housing some 75,000 families and more than half a million workers. Every aspect of daily life—work, sports, leisure, school, shopping—can be reached from the residents’ homes in 12 minutes or less by foot. And at least half of the pedestrian route goes through green areas. Street cameras are used to ensure security and monitor compliance with speed limits. The heat in the buildings turns on automatically when cold weather arrives so that residents on their way home are greeted by pre-warmed rooms. And those who wish to improve their English skills can book remote language instruction with qualified American teachers via the Internet.

This extremely efficient orientation isn’t lively enough

“With this greenfield development, they were able to start from the ground up,” enthuses Baekelmans. “In cities like Antwerp, however, which has grown organically since the Middle Ages, urban planning is much more difficult.” Still, for all his enthusiasm for the completely connected urban project, Baekelmans wouldn’t want to live in Songdo over the long term: “This extremely efficient orientation isn’t lively enough for me.” But he does admire the courage, resolve, and pioneering spirit of the South Koreans. “We Europeans are too afraid of making mistakes, so many times nothing happens at all. But if we don’t change and continuously develop innovations, we’ll be left behind, and much more quickly than we might imagine today,” he says.

He relentlessly extols the courage to enact change in conversations with governments and mayors throughout Europe, practically pleading with them. Yet he pays no attention to the lout who cuts in line at the Frietjes stand: “Total waste of energy. You have to choose your battles.” Privately, some time ago he took up the fight against a few extra pounds he was carrying around. “I’ve lost 15 kilos since I started running 80 kilometers a week, and gained a huge amount of vitality. But as much as I enjoy running, I love cars like this,” he rhapsodizes as we leave the stand and he slides behind the wheel of the 911.

The fire department: Still seen as a man's world

The route takes us out of Antwerp on the E19 heading south towards Kontich. The city of 20,000, says Baekelmans during the short drive, is perhaps not the most exciting destination. But it plays a central role in his life. For the past 21 years, the techie has been a member of the volunteer fire department. "I'll tell the boys in a minute that this is their new fire engine," he quips. What connects a globally active software engineer so intimately with such a down-to-earth activity?

The fire department is unquestionably mostly still seen as a man's world, says Baekelmans. Jokes, hugs, and pats on the shoulder are daily fare, he says. Admiration too. For the worldly visitor. For the Porsche. But not for his profession and career. "Our connection is on a different level," explains Baekelmans. "We have saved lives together. We've seen people die. We completely depended on each other." This pure, unsullied experience helps him in his business life. "If you've ever had to make life-and-death decisions within seconds, the decision for or against a multimillion dollar business deal seems relatively straightforward."

Getting people to change their lives

At some point, John Baekelmans was actually offered the position of leading the Antwerp professional fire department. He turned it down. "My wife knew that it wouldn't be the right job for me," he says during the drive back to Antwerp. "I have to think in unconventional ways, stay innovative. I'm very happy among creative people and happy when people confront me with seemingly insoluble problems." He pauses for a brief moment. Then Baekelmans says, "There's one thing I'm very good at: getting people to change their lives." He smiles, broader than ever.

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