

France remembers optoelectronics researcher

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Paris — On a sunny day in Paris last week, more than 100 electronics industry researchers, executives and government officials gathered at France Telecom's "garden of innovation" to honor the memory and achievements of Jean-Pierre Noblanc. Noblanc's sudden death last September sent a shock wave through the many fields he influenced through most of his 65 years.

The number and caliber of participants attending the July 6 tribute, at a time of year when most French tend to pay attention to little more than their vacations, illustrated the depth of this storied researcher's influence. Noblanc was director of France Telecom's Applied Research Center of Bagneux and the Microelectronics Center of Grenoble.

The daylong tribute, under the theme "Science of Semiconductor Materials and Technology Progress Since the 1960s," focused particularly on Noblanc's pioneering research on optoelectronics in France. Noblanc was instrumental in developing a strong research partnership — located in Crolles, France — between France Telecom and SGS-Thomson, a forerunner of STMicroelectronics.

Noblanc, who later became chairman of the supervisory board of STMicroelectronics, also contributed to the revitalization of the European microelectronics industry and its R&D activities as chairman of Medea+, a pan-European industry research program on microelectronics.

The gathering was also an occasion for many in the research community to hobnob with practically everyone on the who's who list of the French electronics industry — including Pasquale Pistorio, president and CEO of STMicroelectronics, and Didier Lombard, executive director of France Telecom and a board member at Thomson. Officials of the European Commission and the ministry of industry in France were also present.

The four-part program highlighting Noblanc's personal achievements also recalled the turbulent history of French microelectronics research. Maurice Bernard, former director of CNET, now France Telecom's R&D division, was frank about the mistakes and misguided research directions that sidetracked the French in the early days of semiconductor technology development, leaving them well behind the United States and Japan.

Though heavy on nostalgia, the program shed light on the politics of French microelectronics in the 1980s and 1990s, the issue of technology transfer from labs to production and the transition from micro-optoelectronics to nanoelectronics.

ST's Pistorio described Noblanc as a "scientist and humanist." Pistorio said that, although Noblanc had a background in scientific research, "while I come from an engineering, marketing and business management background," the two men became close friends when they first met more than 10 years ago.

As the program unfolded inside the auditorium of France Telecom, time almost appeared to be suspended. Free from the daily rat race, the buzz of mobile phones and the demands of e-mail, the participants — who were familiar enough with one another to dispense with name tags — lingered all day, comparing their impressions of the program or just reminiscing.

The gathering also showed how tightly knit the French microelectronics research community is, and how closely tied it is to the industry and the government. Moreover, it revealed the existence of an Old World — still alive and well — where researchers and engineers pay a full measure of respect to their distinguished elders.

The Paris event also demonstrated a sensitivity to the idea that corporations have social responsibilities and a consciousness of the unique R&D challenges faced by European Union nations.