



Photos (3): W. Koepfelle

Dealing with transfection near Strasbourg: the crew of Polyplus-transfection has 22 team members, including Managing Director Anne-Lise Monjanel (2nd from left) and CEO Joelle Bloch (5th from right).

Transferring nucleic acids in the Alsace: Polyplus-transfection (Illkirch/Strasbourg)

French Open

There are an impressive number of newly founded biotech firms in France, but most of them operate in splendid isolation. A severe lack of funding is worsening the situation. There are exceptions, however, in the Alsace.

A trip to the *Parc d'Innovation d'Illkirch*, located in the Rhine valley, a few kilometres south of the Alsatian capital, Strasbourg, is not to be taken lightly, particularly not on a cold and rainy March day. After bidding farewell to the talkative taxi driver who meandered about for a while and then charged 25 euros for a ten-minute ride from Strasbourg, one feels lonely in a moonscape-like no man's land. Several dozen futuristic examples of modern French architecture crowd barely two square kilometres, encircled by earthy fallow land, overgrown with scanty saplings and weeds. The streets are empty and once in a while a lone car drives by. It feels like the middle of nowhere.

It's hard to believe that there is life inside these spaceship-like buildings. But there is: Air France has a large base here, as well as Meteo France and lab equipment producer Fisher Bioblock Scientific. In addition, several state-run technology transfer and business development offices are located here. These include the *Ecole Supérieure de Biotechnologie de Strasbourg* (ESBS), which trains its students in Illkirch, as well as the IGBMC (a centre of biomedical research attached to the Louis Pasteur University, Strasbourg). Finally, dozens of French start-ups have made their home here.

Portholes in the Rhine valley

One of the youngest (and most unspectacular) buildings is a facility called Bioparc, established in 2004 and with corner windows that resemble portholes. In fact, Bioparc houses six young life science companies: Novalyst (a chemistry contract research firm), NMR-tec (which offers analytical services), Alix (a drug discovery firm),

Alsachim (synthesises isotope-labelled chemical compounds), Faust Pharmaceuticals (develops new drugs for neurological disorders) and Polyplus-transfection.

Behind the portholes, Anne-Lise Monjanel is sitting in her office and explains all about Polyplus-transfection. Monjanel was



The Bioparc facility, a recently constructed founder centre, located a few kilometers southern of Strasbourg, features futuristic architecture and confusing signposts.

involved in the company from the start. She is a co-founder of the five-years-old spin-off of the University of Strasbourg and is extremely well-travelled. As a student, she worked for a fragrance manufacturer in New York for two years and later lived in Nice and in Brittany. In 1989 she received a PhD in oceanography and decided afterwards to work as a teacher, which she did for nearly ten years. Today Monjanel works in biotechnology as Managing Director at Polyplus-transfection, meaning that she has to handle all marketing and sales.

The idea to found a company was born in an academic laboratory in Strasbourg in 2001, she explains. Jean-Paul Behr, a prominent expert in drug delivery and Research

Director at the National Center for Scientific Research (C.N.R.S.), had done pioneering work which led to nucleic acid carriers that were marketed by worldwide companies like Promega, Roche and Invitrogen. In January 2001, Behr decided to try his luck with his own company, dedicated to

the delivery of biomolecules. A quartet, consisting of him and Monjanel on the scientific side, and strengthened by the industrial managers Joelle Bloch (now CEO) and Patrick Metz (now managing director of a nearby Alsatian company) pooled their private funds of 349,600 francs (equal to 53,300 euros). With this money, they founded Polyplus-transfection. Nine months later, FCPI Avenir Finances, a seed venture capitalist firm from Lyon, contributed an additional cash injection of 600,000 euros (in 2004, Polyplus raised a further two million).

Beginning with 53,300 euros

Monjanel emphasises the relevance of industry-experienced people like Metz and Bloch. The latter, a former human relations manager and consultant, was at that time the only one who had the necessary knowledge and skills to supervise a company: "To have excellent scientific ideas like Jean-Paul Behr is one thing, but to manage a company is something completely different", she underlines. Two scientists, two businessmen and a touch of money – this *mélange* worked well, according to her: "We fit together very well."

