



## Thoughts after the World Business Districts Summit.

Are business districts a sustainable concept? As office work becomes the main type of work, the conventional wisdom of having an area of the city devoted to office work needs to be questioned in terms of the new challenges we face. My thoughts were stimulated by the recent World Business Districts' Summit for Sustainable Development organised by the 50-year-old La Defence district in Paris, to which I was asked to contribute.

Central business districts, often very dense and at the hub of public transport networks, are relatively resource-efficient compared to distributed, car-based business parks. Hong Kong uses a tenth of the energy of Houston due to its ability to rely on a metro. But 'downtown' is often a soulless place, deserted and unsafe after hours. And need anyone travel to town when broadband allows them to work from home or the beach?

People do like to work and play together. Organisations need to be experienced physically to foster team spirit between people. Businesses like their peer, supplier and customer businesses nearby. People also like to get outside their base office and mix, before, during and after work, shunning sterile business parks. The most successful business districts are highly mixed in their use, with office buildings underpinned by good shopping, leisure and hotels, and increasingly topped with apartment living. The Athens Charter of 1942, coined by le Corbusier and others in the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), proposed an urbanism based on separate functional zones for working, culture, education, health and living, linked by arterial transport in a matrix of green space. This approach, driven partly by the undesirability of industrial work as a neighbour, became embedded in town planning practice worldwide. The mono-functional city zone is now the bane of the world, obsolete but still being propagated everywhere.

One model for the future is that dense business districts become ever stronger, with critical mass for business success (a million metres of space within 5 minutes walk of each metro stop), civilised streets and squares with the full range of urban amenities, green, shared energy, water and waste strategies and dense housing inside and close by. Pedestrian and cycle movement, backed by good public transport from greater distances, animates the district round the clock. La Defense wants to go this way; the City of London wants some of this, minus the pesky residents who can stop the City and its businesses maintaining things during the night.

richard@saxoncbe.com www.saxoncbe.com  
t +44(0)20 7585 1976 m +44(0)7768 482 838  
9 Whistlers Avenue London SW11 3TS UK



Another, less frenetic model proposes a medium-density, continuous urbanism, with all uses on any block and the full range of facilities and amenities within a cycle ride. The '22@Barcelona' project illustrates this concept within the historic Cerda grid. New, sustainable utilities concepts underlie each street in accessible galleries (no more road works), allowing buildings to trade information, energy, water and waste. It expects to accommodate an economy where firms are smaller, home-based working and education is common and institutions are mixed into the grid, not given campuses. The idea of a business district as such fades away. Arup's zero-carbon satellite town for Shanghai, Dong Tan, could work this way too.

I believe we shall see both approaches. The world cities will have energy-intensive financial districts with the process heat of their ICT used for heating and cooling themselves and neighbouring housing. The secondary cities could be much lower, or smarter, tech. I do expect low-carbon cars to be common within a decade, allowing the suburban lifestyle to continue, but sprawl and single-use zoning are clearly on their way out. 'The Athens Charter is dead', said the President of La Defence, Patrick Devedjian, to the 22 cities at the Summit. We should live where we work, like the turtle, said Jaime Lerner, architect-mayor of Curitiba. Cities are the new states and are learning from each other increasingly. There is hope for a sustainable future in this.

*Richard Saxon is Vice President of the RIBA and past President of the British Council for Offices. [www.saxoncbe.com](http://www.saxoncbe.com)*

Architects Journal March 2008