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High-rise versus groundscrapers

As told to Edwin Heathcote

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The central square of Doha's Msheireb development, which encourages the public to come and explore the waterfront

Michel Mossessian is a French architect who lives and works in London. He studied at Cooper Union in New York, then Harvard, and worked in Chicago for SOM. He founded his practice in London in 2005 and completed the dramatic Carmine Building at Paddington Basin in 2009. He is currently working on the main square of Doha's downtown Msheireb development, a regeneration of the medina in Fez, and a major office complex for Argent at King's Cross.

Last year I saw a presentation by the architect of the world's tallest tower, about how the skyscraper is the future, the most sustainable way of living in the city. But then you have Facebook, Google and Apple hiring star architects to build huge groundscraper campuses, so that's obviously the future of work, isn't it?

So who's right? Should we stack to the sky or stay on the ground? When you take a lift up a tall building, there's something euphoric about it. You look down on the city and there is a

sense of power. But you can't open windows; you lose control over your environment. If a city is only towers, it can end up like Dubai, which is all skyline and no ground – nowhere to go.

Or you can stay on the ground. That takes up more space but you are more connected; it forces you to engage with other people, inside or outside the workplace. The campus evolved because companies were looking at how they could keep people in the office for longer – the answer was to give them places to eat, to socialise, to entertain, perhaps some nature. Apple's new HQ (currently being built by Foster & Partners) is a ring with a huge garden at its centre. There's a blurring of use; the evolution of the office might mean you end up living there too.

The problem is that if, in translating from the suburbs to the cities, these campuses become exclusive, then they cease to be a part of the city. In London, everyone looks at the great estates: Mayfair, Belgravia, Cadogan, and the Royal Parks. These were privately owned but they are generous, no one excludes you. That sense of belonging is the most beautiful way of policing a city.

As an architect, you push at the line between the public and the private to make great cities, make them more open; often you're fighting clients. You get the sense that these huge new buildings, like Bloomberg's in the City of London, might be too exclusive. But if you decide to make your campus an urban village then you end up condemning yourself to the suburban, despite being in the city centre.

Private ownership triumphed over the collective. Selfishness has been a blessing for London

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It's important to remember that it's not the economy that starts the city off, it's culture. If you provide a place where people enjoy being and meeting, they will do business there. The two models for me are Venice and New York, hubs of their respective eras. In New York there was the grid, which set the rules; from there you could go as high as you liked.

In Venice there was negotiation, as every building was up against another. In London you have this same sense of negotiation. People here complain that there is no vision for the city, but there are rules. There are rights of light and party wall agreements and through the negotiations that emerge from these, people are able to do business and make a profit. I grew up in Paris where there was a vision and the boulevards and the squares made for a very beautiful city, but also froze it, so now it feels very old.

Whereas London feels more and more dynamic all the time. If a building isn't performing it can be demolished. London never wanted a grand plan, the property owners said "no" when asked to adopt one by Christopher Wren after the Great Fire. Private ownership triumphed over the collective. The principles of private, selfish ownership – and philistinism – led to the retention of the medieval street plan, which is what makes the city so dynamic. Private selfishness has become a collective blessing for a city based on profit and not beauty.

The city needs to establish its terms of engagement. It is a place where you can walk everywhere, where you can work and live well. You can easily get lost but that brings rewards, chance meetings. The future of the office, is maybe more like my local restaurant where there are people all day, where there are always meetings going on and people discussing business but enjoying it, a place to work and to live.

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