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## Are office campuses a threat to cities?

By Michel Mossessian

We have to stop 'brand creep' and keep the ground free, writes architect Michel Mossessian



After the Great Fire of London, Charles II found himself unable to enforce the grand vision for the city devised by Sir Christopher Wren, architect of the rebuilt St Paul's Cathedral. The king was overwhelmed by the self-interest of the private landowners who wanted to re-establish what they had lost in the fire.

What appeared to be a planning catastrophe then is a success today. The chaotic network of roads and buildings of London's privately owned great historic estates – Cadogan, Grosvenor, Royal Parks – enchant and seduce more than the unforgiving formality of Paris's Haussmannian boulevards, originally designed as military arteries.

You do not feel as though you need a pass to enter these private estates in London. But as an architect, I am concerned that this will not always be the case because of the growing popularity of vast, all-enveloping worker "campuses" favoured by leading US technology groups.

These commercial organisms, which started off saying you could work anywhere – you could sit by a pool with an internet connection and make a million – are becoming gatekeepers of public space. Their campuses are designed to lure employees in, keep them from leaving and prevent the competition from stealing their secrets.

The concept of an office campus that offers work, rest and play is not problematic per se. I recently ran a panel at a British Council for Offices conference. The title – "Lifestyle meets work-style" – referred to the increasing multi-functionality not just of workspace, but of public space: museums now offer places to eat and shop; shopping centres places to eat and educate; hotels places to work and entertain.

But such wraparound office developments need to allow workers to engage with fellow inhabitants – and not just their colleagues – at both ground and sky level.

The cities we love are places where we enjoy being in the thick of it on the ground, such as Venice or New York, where even getting lost can be meaningful, yielding chance meetings and exchanges of ideas. Creativity sparks and business gets done.

These are places where everyone is forced to engage, but it is to one's benefit. It is where one has to negotiate: negotiate one's own patch of land; negotiate one's own route through the crowds; negotiate over the price of a pound of apples.

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Demonstrably, this is not true of the metropolises springing up in places such as Dubai, where office buildings are objects of solitude, with no ground, isolated on traffic islands.

Office buildings, regardless of whether they are skyscrapers or low-slung developments, need to invite the public in, cater for myriad tastes and embrace change.

In the case of office campuses, I do believe it is possible to meet these needs. My practice, mossessian & partners, is, for instance, one of many working with Argent on its new development at London's King's Cross. Google has agreed to have its local HQ in the redeveloped area.

The key here is that Argent's interest is in attracting a mix of uses; an estate comprising a single brand owner would have a different feel – a pedestrian might experience a rather sinister pressure to “buy” more of that brand.

King's Cross is keeping its ground level convivial and alive by catering for all sorts of uses. The University of the Arts – which has already moved in – is not the obvious occupier for commercial benefit but its events are introducing different publics and activities to the space to augment the anonymous crowds alighting at King's Cross station, the future employees in offices emerging on the site and the local public passing through.

Plans are even progressing for a temporary natural swimming pond as part of the regeneration project. The mix is such that chance meetings between a whole host of characters can occur.

So, in my view, we have to stop “brand creep” and keep the ground free. Heed the advice of the current Skyline Campaign for better tall buildings in London: build up, not just by adding glorified, nicknamed objects such as the Cheesegrater and the Gherkin, but by making space that responds to occupants and is aware of its connectivity to the ground. The city only works if it allows us to meet, mingle and do business at ground and sky level.

*The writer is the founder-director of architecture practice mossessian & partners, which is currently building office schemes in London and Doha. Michael Skapinker is away*

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