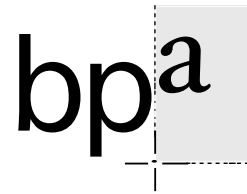


ARCHITECTURE AND PROPERTY

ARTICLE

SATELLITE OFFICES

Development opportunity to save the planet



Last year I gave a number of presentations with this title. It is a bold proposition to suggest that the received wisdom on office working might be radically changed to save the planet but recently escalating concerns about spiralling fuel costs, transport congestion and pollution have made it even more pertinent. It ticks all the boxes on the sustainability wish list and many on other lists besides.

Many office based workers do virtually all their work and work related communication electronically, increasingly with on-screen video and telephone conferencing, even when working within the same building. They do not have to be in a centrally located office or certainly not all the time. The concept of the satellite office is to locate a clone of the central office work station in a building very close to where employees live. Ideally within easy walking or cycling distance. In the 1960s an optimum "ten minute community" was proposed by Constantinos Doxiadis - a community in which everything was within ten minutes walk of everything else. How very far we have strayed from that since. If a significant proportion of the office work force could walk to work and simply commute by wire, it would go a long way to redressing the balance.

Consider the benefits. The more people work this way the less pressure on transport. This in turn reduces congestion, pollution, fuel consumption and generation of greenhouse gases. It reduces the need for ever more expensive improvement to transport infrastructure. It reduces pressure on cities and the need for people to migrate to them or even just to cross them from side to side. It eliminates travel cost for the individual, lateness and absenteeism for employers. It enables work access for disabled people or people wanting to work part time - mothers with young families or older people. It stops communities depopulating during working hours and reduces vulnerability to crime. It offers enhanced economic viability to rural communities.

Home working stakes a claim as a solution but, while it works for some, there are downsides: isolation from the social interaction, peer pressure and group motivation of a working environment - distractions from the intrusion of home life and other people who are not working - loss of the cherished notion of home as a refuge from work, for example.

The concept of the satellite office can take many forms. It can be a dedicated office for one employer close to where a number of employees live. It can be shared office space in another company's more conveniently located office. It can be a new or converted office located in a residential area or a rural community where office space can be rented by different employers either room by room or work station by work station. The street level floors of urban apartment blocks are ideal for the purpose.

This is not radical. Planners have long been advocating mixed development - business premises mixed in with housing. But with no linkage between the two, people working in the business space probably still travel from miles away and nothing is gained. The difference being proposed here is local workspace specifically for use by local residents.

The benefits are easy to identify. More difficult is to get employers to accept the need for change. In fact it has been demonstrated that the protocols required for successful Satellite Office Working actually improve efficiency and productivity. Also improved, through better work life balance, is employee retention.

Even more difficult is to get a property industry geared to a set pattern of working and large scale projects to address the issue and provide funding and development vehicles to accommodate it. Can they be persuaded to the E F Schumacher proposition that: small is beautiful, that the security of lettings to numerous companies is as good if not better than a lease to one big one and the investment as attractive to sell on? Surely spreading risk reduces it.

Some pump priming would be helpful. The concept was widely embraced at the Satellite Office Working Conference at Victoria Quay in June 2001 but virtually nothing has happened since. No money for a demonstrator project has been offered by Government. Few initiatives have been taken in the private sector. A proposal with an enlightened private developer to convert the former town hall in Kinross for the purpose fell through when the building was sold to a higher bidder for inevitable conversion to housing. This is an endlessly repeated pattern but positive Planning Control could alter

it.

The opportunity to “save the planet” comes with a real challenge to architectural imagination. It needs a flexible, sustainable and efficient architecture to provide on a small scale a working environment to compete with the modern high tec head office. Part of our inspiration for this came from our sustainability awards winning conversion of Norton Park School in Edinburgh into offices for 27 different voluntary organisations. Such buildings adapted for this purpose, rather than demolished or converted to provide still further housing, offer perfect opportunities to retain treasured landmarks as catalysts for the creation of self sustaining communities out of otherwise sterile dormitory areas.

Working practices have changed radically in the last fifteen years as a result of the accelerated adoption of I.T. The ease with which people and organisations have been able to make these changes shows the capacity we have for learning new processes and ways of doing things. Project that rate of change forward over the next fifteen years - this is the world we need to be designing for. Imaginative planning, property development and architectural innovation are urgently required now.

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