

Hotspot or themepark?

Times have been difficult for workplace consultants, furniture dealers and designers. In the past few years, their clients haven't shown much interest in their futuristic stories or fancy experiments. Instead of beanbags and lounge chairs, they wanted efficient, low-cost workplaces.

An additional problem was the decline in the demand for office space. As the economic recession kicked in, companies preferred to inhabit the decor they were already in, rather than constructing new corporate show cases.

At this moment, the market slowly recovers in most European countries. Nonetheless, the long term outlook isn't too bright. With an aging population and an increasingly global competition, the number of office workers is likely to shrink. More and more employees will be trading in their laptop for a rollator during the coming years. And as long as most countries keep their gates closed to immigration of foreign talent, there will be no one to take their place. At the other - cheaper - side of the world such problems do not exist. Asia is not populated by expensive

workers who are nearing retirement age but by young, motivated people with science degrees who are prepared to work for much lower wages. These countries are not very strong on innovation or marketing - there is still no Asian equivalent of Google, Starbucks or Prada - but they are learning rapidly.

This economic shift is clearly visible in the changing skylines of cities with exotic, but increasingly familiar names like Dalian, Chennai or Hyderabad. In these places, new buildings are being put up faster, more efficiently and in greater numbers than was ever the case here. In other words, our offices are not dissolving into cyberspace but disappearing towards the East. Just like their Western colleagues, Asian 'nerds' and 'geeks' spend their days in shiny air-conditioned buildings, filled with contemporary office artefacts such as cubicles, break-out rooms and water coolers.

When visiting these offices, you wonder what will happen to Europe in the coming decennia. Will Europe still play a significant role in the global knowledge economy, or will it slowly fade away? In the more pessimistic scenario, Europe will end up as one big historical theme park for Asian tourists and pensioners. Empty offices can be converted into care homes or hotels. In the more optimistic scenario, Europe will turn into a creative hotspot

COLUMN VAN MEEL



where nothing is produced any more but new products and services are developed. Such activities still demand workplaces, but not the stultifying, boring workplaces of today. The offices of tomorrow will have to look more like artists' studios, craftsmen's workshops or scientists' laboratories. Workplace professionals will have to come up with new concepts to stimulate creativity and innovation. There will be plenty of work in the workplace business. If not here, at least in Asia.

*Dr. Ir. Juriaan van Meel is a consultant at ICOP, a design consulting firm advising companies on issues of architecture, real estate and facility management (www.icop.nl) and a senior lecturer in the department of Real Estate & Housing at Delft University of Technology. His publications include *The European Office* (2000) and *The Office, the whole office and nothing but the office* (1999).*

ASPECS is a publication of Koninklijke Ahrend NV

Editor-in-chief: Dirk van Ginkel
With contributions from:
Francine Houben
Juriaan van Meel
Bill Schoenfish

Concept, design and lay-out:
Eden Design & Communication

Photography: Bram Budel,
Hans Morren, Yves Paternoster

www.ahrend.com
info@ahrend.com

ahrend

Ahrend.
Always ready
for things to
come