

# Towering ambition

Large-scale development is set to make Paris's La Défense business district more tempting for living and working – and it has UK staff in its sights, says Jenny Southan

I am not a fan of heights, but every now and then it's important to get yourself into a glass lift and see the views. Looming 111 metres high, La Grande Arche is La Défense's most familiar landmark; a monolithic open-sided cube, with an 11,000 sqm, newly renovated roof that allows you to gaze all the way down Avenue Charles de Gaulle to the Arc du Triomphe, on the other side of the River Seine.

Construction of this two-square-mile cluster of high-rise towers began in 1958, with the intention of replacing farmland and dilapidated suburbs with a hub for business and banking. The first building erected was the low but expansive Centre of New Industries and Technologies (now a convention centre and Hilton hotel at the foot of the Arche), followed by the first of France's office blocks – the Esso Tower and the Nobel Tower – in the sixties.

Today, La Défense is the largest purpose-built district in Europe, hovering above a network of roads on a 30-hectare elevated concrete platform called "the Slab", which allows pedestrians to walk freely across enormous plazas while cars pass beneath. For decades, the area has been home to a forest of mono-functional structures, occupied nine-to-five

by workers who ebb and flow from their jobs to their outlying homes.

However, Paris has realised that it is falling behind other cities with its lifestyle-less urban planning, so has embarked on turning La Défense into a place not only for work but for living and socialising, too. Central to this is a host of ambitious projects that will set new records for scale; and in so doing rob London's Shard of the title of "tallest building in the EU".

At the same time, with Brexit looming, the French capital is looking to pull in as many as 20,000 UK finance workers as they are compelled to migrate. Competition between London and Paris is hotting up.

## LOOK OUT, LONDON

"Tired of the fog? Try the frogs." So reads the latest ad campaign from government organisation Defacto. This summer it hosted a five-week pop-up in front of La Défense's Les Quatre Temps shopping mall. Deckchairs were laid out on Astroturf lawns, food trucks parked up and people played table football on their lunch breaks. It was designed to embody a slice of London – there were signs for King's Cross and Queensway, Union Jack flags fluttering against

**Pictured:**  
Rendering of  
the forthcoming  
Hermitage Plaza





## A BRITISH EXPAT'S VIEW

**Adam Ramjean, investor relations manager at Pernod Ricard:**

"Before moving to Paris, I worked for Pernod Ricard UK, a French wine and spirit company based in Chiswick. Working for the same multinational has certainly made my transition easier. The environment is a little more formal in Paris and hours can be longer, but there is a much better work-life balance.

"The most obvious challenge, and one I'm yet to overcome fully, is the language. You can easily get by with only a few phrases but if you really want to fit in, you need to learn French.

"Paperwork and payments were a bit of a learning curve. Not every shop accepts cards, and cheques are still a valid form of payment in a lot of places. Making bank payments aren't as straightforward as sort code/ account number – you need to provide a printed out 'RIB', which feels archaic.

"One thing I never expected is how much cleaner and greener London feels. Paris has some great parks – I particularly like Parc des Buttes-Chaumont – but London has a lot more.

"Overall, I don't think the difference between London and Paris is particularly significant. The same trends are present in most Western cities and defining how their cultures are developing. You have the same backdrop of increasingly unattainable house prices, student debt, austerity and the growth of digital. All of these shared factors are bringing us closer together."

a familiarly grey sky, and spray-painted murals of Big Ben. All that was missing were cucumber sandwiches and jugs of Pimm's.

Thomas Ledoux, head of communications for Defacto, says: "The idea is to show people that you can live here like you can in London. We launched our campaign after we heard it would be a hard Brexit – we wanted people to know Paris will welcome you. We have office space available, whereas in Dublin, for example, there is none. That is a problem. Frankfurt is efficient but it doesn't have the size of Paris, and with that [size] comes a certain lifestyle."

Earlier this year, Goldman Sachs announced that it would move 6,000 staff to Frankfurt and Paris as part of a contingency plan ahead of the UK's departure from the EU. HSBC has said it will move 1,000 jobs to Paris, while Reuters will relocate 9,000 to the continent. Newly elected president Emmanuel Macron has pledged to rejuvenate the French economy and has been campaigning for financiers to choose Paris over other European hubs such as Milan, Amsterdam, Madrid or Luxembourg.

A spokesperson for the French Embassy in London says: "[Paris] is a major financial centre, committed to Europe, to the single currency, to business stability and to long-term perspectives. Besides, French regulators have been recognised internationally for

*'The idea is to show people that you can live here like you can in London'*

their work; they provide clarity to businesses and ensure financial stability.

"Increasing France's business attractiveness is directly linked to economic reform. We will focus on improving our economic competitiveness, business environment and labour system through an ambitious plan spearheaded by the new government. These reforms do not target British businesses specifically. However, Brexit may create opportunities in some sectors, which France stands ready to seize."

### DESIGN FOR LIFE

While the rest of Paris enjoys beautiful Haussmann boulevards, pavement dining ▶

**Clockwise from right:** The Sisters towers; Table Square; U Arena





## LA DÉFENSE IN NUMBERS

### 15

Fortune Global 500 companies  
(29 in total in Paris)

### 1

European city ranking for number  
of Fortune Global 500 firms

**3.5 million sqm**  
of office space

**275,000 sqm**  
of vacant office space

**200,000 sqm**  
of new tertiary office space  
coming by 2019

**€550**  
office rental cost  
per sqm per year

**€1,554**  
annual cost per sqm for prime  
central London office space

**2,600**  
hotel rooms

**160,000**  
workers

**43,000**  
employees at foreign companies

**31%**  
jobs in banking and insurance

**27%**  
jobs in energy

**10%**  
SMEs

**320 metres**  
height of proposed  
Hermitage Plaza

**310 metres**  
height of London's Shard

(Sources: Defacto, Katalyse, Epadesa)

*A pair of towers being designed  
by Foster and Partners will be  
the tallest in the EU*



and chic ateliers, La Défense tends to be inhuman in scale and substance, with impenetrable Brutalist blocks and never-ending esplanades. There have been attempts to brighten up the place – there is an “art walk” that takes in more than 60 al fresco sculptures, a freestanding chimney decorated in rainbow stripes and an urban garden near the Yaacov Agam fountain. But developers want to improve it further, with mixed-use projects that cater to tourists, locals and British bankers alike.

The best example of this is Hermitage Plaza, a pair of towers being designed by Foster and Partners that will stand at 320 metres tall, making them the highest not only in Paris but in the EU. Located on the banks of the Seine, with a jetty for people arriving by speedboat, construction on this new “arrondissement in the sky” will begin next year and is scheduled to be completed in early 2023. It will comprise 35,000 sqm of office



space, 488 high-end apartments and a 230-room five-star hotel, plus a spa and pool, designer shops, restaurants, a concert hall and art gallery.

Emin Iskenderov, chairman and chief executive of Russian developer Hermitage, calls it “a new era for La Défense”. He says: “From Wall Street to Canary Wharf, this model exists everywhere in the world except France.” But the €2.4 billion project is setting a new trend for Paris.

Dozens of other new buildings are also on the horizon. French architect Jean Nouvel has designed the Residence Campusea, a gleaming block of student apartments that will open next year, and the faceted 220-metre Hekla tower, to follow in 2021. Next year, the Belvédère will provide 18,000 sqm of office and commercial space. In 2019 will be the 140-metre tall Trinity and the 165-metre Saint Gobain. In 2020 there will be the Alto tower and, in 2022, the Sisters – one standing at 200 metres and the other at 100 metres. Connected by a glass bridge, they will house offices and a hotel. ▶

From left: Defacto pop-up at Les Quatres Temps; Citizen M Paris La Défense

In a continuing effort to introduce more green space, next summer will see the unveiling of Oxygen, a 1,500 sqm semicircular park at the end of the Slab, with outdoor terraces partitioned by banks of tall grasses, living walls, sleek cafés with turf roofs and free-flowing organic architecture.

In 2019, Table Square will become a “bistronomy” destination with seven new restaurants and bars. “For decades we have been growing vertically – now we are developing horizontally,” Ledoux says.

#### CREATIVE CLUSTER

To the north-west of La Grande Arche is a long aerial walkway that ends abruptly outside the new Citizen M La Défense hotel in the Nanterre zone. Opened in June, the 175-room property is a far cry from nearby business hotels such as the Mercure, Renaissance and Pullman. The Dutch brand has instead delivered a place to stay where all rooms are the same, you get iPads preloaded with free porn, and prices are capped even during peak season.

The communal lounges are decorated with quirky modern art, and there’s co-working space, a concept store, a 24-hour self-service canteen and stylish meeting rooms with whiteboard walls. “We are about affordable luxury. We have designer Vitra furniture and our house pour is Ketel One vodka but we don’t charge premium prices,” says Alex Perper, Citizen M’s area manager for France.

From the outdoor deck, you can look across to the new U Arena, which will open this autumn with a concert from the Rolling Stones. The 40,000-seat venue will also be used for rugby matches, motocross championships and conventions.

Come 2022, next to it will be the La Tour de Jardins de l’Arche. Resembling a tower of glass Jenga blocks planted with



*‘The Grand Paris project represents a radical transformation of the capital’*

trees, it will have offices, 700 hotel rooms, a spa, pool and rooftop restaurant.

Corinne de Conti, president of event services company City One 111, says: “The neighbourhood has been transformed during the past couple of years – it has become very dynamic and young.”

The final part of the urban renewal plan is the €26 billion expansion of the Paris Metro system, taking place over the next 15 years. The Grand Paris Express is expected to boost capacity to two million people a day by 2026, with the addition of four automatic lines, the extension of two existing ones, and 72 new stations.

By 2027, there will be a direct link from La Défense to Paris Charles de Gaulle’s Terminal 2. The French Embassy spokesperson says: “The Grand Paris project represents a radical transformation of the capital. By 2030, it could generate an additional €100 billion to €200 billion in GDP, as well as 115,000 jobs.” One thing is for sure, London can’t rest on its laurels.

■ Visit [businessstraveller.com/tried-and-tested](http://businessstraveller.com/tried-and-tested) for a review of the Citizen M Paris La Défense. [citizenm.com](http://citizenm.com)

■ Eurostar operates up to 19 times a day from London to Paris. [eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com)



From top: La Tour de Jardins de l’Arche; U Arena