

INTERSECTING INSIGHTS INTO THE BUSINESS DISTRICTS OF PARIS

Interview with Jean-Luc Crochon **Founder of Cro&Co Architecture, Paris, France**

Soon after graduating from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 1988, Jean-Luc Crochon founded his own architecture firm while also working as consultant architect for RFR Peter Rice. In 1998, together with Cuno Brullmann he founded a new firm that later became Cro&Co Architecture, taking over the reins as sole director in 2008. Ten years later he joined forces with Nayla Mecattaf to set up CroMe Studio, in order to develop his international projects. With several prizes to his name (CTBUH Award of Excellence 2021 in the “Urban Habitat” category, Trophée Eiffel 2020, Prix Siatl 2020, Prix Acier 2010, Prix AMO 2002), Jean-Luc Crochon is a member of the board of the association Architecture et Maître d’Ouvrage (AMO), a member of the association Architecte Français à l’export (AFEX), and a member of the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH).



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You were in charge of designing the Trinity Tower in La Défense, which has only just been completed – unleashed – right in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. How does this 150m-tall, 32-floor skyscraper meet the new challenges of workspaces in the post-Covid era?

The main challenge when you design a high-rise office block is making it a place for community life, a place with a large number of spaces for social interaction (formal and informal meetings, chats)

and other quieter, individual spaces, so that a variety of needs are served in the same place. The Trinity tower has lots of differentiated spaces. There are meeting rooms connected to the public areas which can be turned into places for less formal interaction and discussion, there are panoramic elevators, terraces on the east and west façades, and a business centre and wellness centre with panoramic views on the 25th floor.



The Trinity Tower at La Défense, a project headed by Cro&Co Architecture.

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The west side of Trinity tower is divided into small four-storey units with large terraces that break up the façade and shatter the image of the traditional, monolithic tower block. Such buildings are often perceived as unwelcoming places that cut people off from each other, so our aim was to overcome that response by creating an airy design that opens onto the outside world.

The pandemic arrived just as Trinity was being completed, so the thinking behind its architecture predates the current crisis. But with hindsight, its specificities make it fully compatible with the new demands resulting from the public health crisis, particularly because it has so many outside spaces.

Trinity is a high-rise office block with its core on the outside, which is a first at La Défense. So it’s no longer a core but a “heart on its sleeve” that totally revolutionizes the way floors operate and are organized. With a height of 150 metres, Trinity is on a scale that still offers the architect a role, because the project design isn’t totally dominated by structural matters. Engineering plays an important part, but doesn’t dictate all the rules. This 150m height broadened the field of possibilities for us, allowing creation of something quite distinctive, and we very much enjoyed that aspect of the project development.

In a high-rise building, managing elevator movements is crucial. To move as many people as possible, a system of top and bottom batteries powers faster transport to the different parts of the tower using the “double-deck” technique, i.e. having two elevators one above the other in the same shaft. Elevator shafts are usually enclosed and the machinery is hidden. For Trinity, we decided to put in a panoramic shaft



The elevators of the Trinity Tower create visual movement on the outside of the building, with bright colours reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower's famous elevators.

that shows how it all works. We also chose to use the TWIN technology that has two independent elevator cars, and thus create movement on the façade as the elevators go up and down in full view from the forecourt. Two colours, red and yellow, were chosen in homage to the Eiffel Tower's elevators. The idea of giving people a direct external view is to help them get their bearings more easily before they leave the elevators. This makes the experience more pleasant for users, and supports "adoption" of their building. Trinity also has air purifying stations on every floor: as a result, we could relocate the air conditioning system, and that makes the building much less impersonal in its scale and size.

Trinity's features seem to be well-received, since in April 2021 the first tenant signed a contract for 7000 square metres - a very good sign in the current crisis situation.

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What contribution does the Trinity Tower make to urban design and planning in the La Défense business district?

Trinity was built from scratch in a location with no land and no earth! The site we were originally given to play with by Unibail, the developer behind the project, consisted entirely of roads. This new build fits into the Paris La Défense management agency's policy. For several years they've been working to reconnect the district's raised platform to the natural ground level.

Since the land was already concreted over with roads, Trinity can be considered a kind of regeneration project because it hasn't used up a previously undeveloped site. We repurposed and revitalized the site by creating 3,500m² of landscaping and public spaces that link up the previously unconnected CNIT and Coupole-Régnault neighbourhoods. So as well as the architectural dimension, this is a real all-round urban project. The 3,500m² of new urban spaces are very green - sixty new trees have been planted in earth covered by decking. So once the building was complete, the city regained a quality public



The Trinity Tower wasn't built on undeveloped land; it stands above the roads and motorways.



For a more attractive building and more productive employees, the Trinity Tower takes inspiration from hotel standards, as illustrated by the reception lobby.

space. Trinity has brought significant horizontal urban development to the meeting point between three neighbourhoods: L'Esplanade/CNIT, Coupole-Régnault, and Courbevoie. Now, instead of all those roads, there's a pleasant pedestrian interchange zone, reflecting a real ambition for this urban area.

In addition to the horizontal transformation, Trinity is an example of vertical development: with its inside-out core, its external elevators and its visible terraces, there's a buzz of activity up and down its full height. The interactive dimension is very strong, you can see the people on the balconies and watch the elevators moving. It's a building that's not just seen but displays itself: the life inside is perceptible from the outside. The Trinity Tower is highly visible due to its frontline position in the north skyline of La Défense, and there was no quest for extra height. We've successfully made it a living building in tune with

its environment, totally connected both for users and residents of La Défense and the surrounding areas.

In your opinion, what are the main features of the next generation of high-rise office buildings? Which new criteria are becoming essential post-Covid?

I think the latest-generation office blocks need to appeal to users, make people want to come in to work. With the Covid crisis, we expect offices to become places for meeting up and sharing, in their own right. **It's more important than ever for the office as a work instrument to create interaction**

“The outside spaces range from balconies to very large terraces, but every floor has access to the exterior. Trinity also has windows that can be opened, providing an interface between users and their environment: they can hear the noises of the city.”



Trinity has a large number of plant-adorned terraces on every floor: places where impromptu meetings happen and serendipity between users of the tower is encouraged.

between individuals, because the lack of human contact has been felt all the more strongly during the pandemic. Consequently, office buildings must be conducive to interpersonal encounters. Trinity offers access to outside space on every floor: it has large terraces (80m² on the west, and 30m² on the east), and balconies. It also has windows that can be opened, providing an interface between users and their environment: they can hear the noises of the city, and feel the air from outside. These things are essential for people to feel they are safe in a cocoon, and active in their surroundings. So overall, high-rise office properties are increasingly incorporating hotel standards.

The projects recently completed in La Défense show that incorporating mixed uses into high-rise buildings is easier said than done. What are the obstacles to greater multifunctionality? In your projects, do you consider the possibility of conversion between certain uses (offices to homes, for example)?

Trinity was designed ten years ago, and initially it was only going to contain offices, because that was the thinking at the time. Mixed-function developments are central to our thinking today. In fact, we have a project under way about high-rise buildings and integration of mixed uses. **To achieve this mix, all**

the actors involved in the build must be on board with the idea, because there are constraints that have to be managed and monitored, mostly relating to regulations: constructing offices, a hotel and housing one above the other in the same development is a complex remit. You have to create compatibility between different developments that are usually dealt with separately. But multifunctionality has real benefits, such as the sharing of services, uses and techniques. A monofunctional building is only alive half the time. When a building is totally mixed, it's constantly in operation, and that makes it more honourable in terms of its economic model and environmental perception. It's better integrated, it blends different populations, generations and functions, leading to more bonding, more animation, more interaction. **We're firmly convinced that the future of buildings lies in mixed functions,** providing quality spaces for a broader population.

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on making developments reversible while keeping the same structure and fundamentals, so that in future the building can evolve towards other functions. Now that our social lives have moved onto digital platforms, architecture is there to stimulate face-to-face encounters between people and encourage serendipity.

The idea of bringing people together was already present in our past projects, like the refurbishments of the Reflex building, the head office of Paris Habitat, and the Carré Michelet building

at La Défense. They offer duplexes, two floors connected by staircases where everyone mingles and meets, plus terraces and other shared spaces. These spaces serve multiple needs and practices, and contribute to the serendipity we want for all our buildings.

We consider that the whole point of architecture is to make buildings for their users, the people who will spend time in them, so they're happy to come to them.

A few years ago, you refurbished the 9100 square metres of the Reflex building dating from the 1980s; what were the aims of that project?

The possibility of conversion and reversibility is something we include in our new building projects, because we're aware that our properties will have many different lives over time. It's important to include certain criteria in design from the outset, such as the thickness of the walls, or the storey height. Once that's done we can work

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How does the future of the Parisian business districts look to you?

I think the outlook is rather good, despite the slightly unusual wave we're riding at the moment. Nobody predicted this, but I'm sure we'll be

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coming out of it in the next few months and years. La Défense is highly-rated in the worldwide business district rankings. I think the site has real quality in its ability to offer places where you can create a maximum number of personal connections over very short distances, which keeps travel and movements to the minimum. The urban planning issue for La Défense, and for

business districts in general, is how to create a buzz of activity centred around individuals. The Central Business District in Paris has its own autonomy, founded on the history of Paris. La Défense is taking steps to modernize, toning down the choices made in the 1960s. **Its development agency is engaged in a long-term strategy to make the district greener, and access to it easier and more agreeable.** These two business districts complement each other through their respective features and benefits, and the skyline at La Défense also contributes to the Greater Paris dynamic. ■