

Flash International Urban Design Workshop:  
La Défense – Quartier Saisons  
January 24 - 28, 2025

## Saisons District: Driving La Défense's Urban Renewal



**International call for applications**

open to professionals of all disciplines and nationalities

**Topic document**

**les Ateliers**  
maîtrise d'œuvre urbaine



This international call for applications document was prepared by the association Les Ateliers Internationaux de Maîtrise d'Œuvre Urbaine de Cergy-Pontoise, in November 2024, as part of the preparations for the Flash International Urban Design Workshop La Défense – Quartier Saisons, which will take place in January 2025.

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This workshop is organized by the association Les Ateliers Internationaux de Maîtrise d'Œuvre Urbaine de Cergy-Pontoise, at the request of the Paris La Défense Public Establishment and in partnership with the City of Courbevoie, the Hauts-de-Seine Departmental Council, and private partners from the district. It is part of a forward-looking and collaborative approach launched in 2024 with stakeholders from the Paris La Défense area and the Saisons district, which will culminate in a flash workshop in January 2025. This document presents the topic and main questions of the international urban design workshop; it invites professionals of all nationalities and disciplines to apply to participate in this event. The statements in this document are written by Les Ateliers and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Paris La Défense Public Establishment.

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# 1. The international business district of Paris La Défense

## A metropolitan economic hub

Paris La Défense is the largest business district in Europe and the fourth most attractive business district in the world. It is located to the northwest of the Parisian capital, in the Île-de-France Region, in the department of Hauts-de-Seine, within the territories of the municipalities of Courbevoie, Puteaux, Nanterre, and La Garenne-Colombes.

The history of La Défense began after World War II, when France launched an extensive program of reconstruction and modernization. In 1958, the French government decided to create a new business district to relieve congestion in Paris and meet the growing office space needs of booming businesses.

The Paris La Défense district was built along the extension of Paris's historical axis, which starts at the Louvre Palace — continues through the Place de la Concorde, the Avenue Champs-Élysées and the Arc de Triomphe — and extends beyond to the Pont de Neuilly and La Défense Arch. A visual and symbolic continuity is established between historic Paris and its modern business district.



*Paris's historic axis, the road to La Défense*

This district holds a unique place in the metropolitan landscape of the Île-de-France Region, with its design based on the principles of the modernist movement.

Organized around an artificial slab above the natural terrain, a vast 1.2 km-long pedestrian esplanade, the district was designed to separate circulation flows:

- On the upper level (on the slab): public space accommodating pedestrian circulation and access to various buildings.
- On the lower level (beneath the slab):
  - Secondary functions (automobile circulation, deliveries, parking, management of networks, waste, and fire protection for the buildings)

- Public transportation (RER stations, followed by suburban train stations, metro, tram, and bus terminals)

Additionally, the district was developed vertically. Today, it is made up of 65 towers, mostly high-rise buildings (known under the acronym IGH in France), which shape the landscape of La Défense, making it a unique district in France.



A showcase of the dynamism of the French economy, this tertiary hub has historically specialized in hosting the headquarters of multinational corporations in the finance, insurance and energy sectors. It is home to over 500 companies, 41% of which are foreign, including 15 companies from the Fortune 500. The district represents nearly 10% of the metropolitan office space market, with 3.8 million m<sup>2</sup> of office space and 59,000 m<sup>2</sup> of co-working spaces. Its economic fabric has been diversifying in recent years with the arrival of small- and medium-sized enterprises covering all sectors of the economy: fashion, consumer goods, law, auditing and consulting, industry and production, information and communication, health, etc.

Paris La Défense has diversified to become a more vibrant district, especially in terms of:

- Cultural offerings, notably with Paris La Défense Arena, the largest indoor performance venue in Europe with 40,000 seats, and the around sixty works of art displayed around the slab;
- Commercial offerings, with 142,000 m<sup>2</sup> of retail space at the Westfield Les Quatre Temps center, one of the largest shopping malls in Europe, and over 150 restaurants;
- Tourism, with 3,000 hotel rooms and tourist accommodations;
- Higher education, with numerous educational institutions established in recent years.

Today, Paris La Défense hosts, in addition to the 180,000 employees and tourists, 70,000 students spread across more than 50 higher education institutions with various specializations, and 50,000 residents.



*La Défense skyline, seen from Neuilly*



*Esplanade de la Défense, pedestrian axis*

## A business hub facing multiple crises

In 60 years, Paris La Défense has become an exceptional territory, an economic powerhouse with international reach. However, the sector has been facing growing challenges and certain difficulties in recent years:

- **Ecological crisis and adaptation to climate change:** The ecological crisis, now widely recognized and documented, demands a reassessment of the urban development model of Paris La Défense, a historically energy-intensive and significant emitter of greenhouse gases during both its construction and operational phases. Thus, it is necessary to reconsider how to build (or at least rehabilitate) this business district and to adapt it to the realities of climate change, so that it remains “viable” in a Paris which is potentially facing extreme temperatures that could reach 50°C. In response to this collective challenge, the public institution of Paris La Défense adopted a “raison d’être” in 2021. Its aim is to become the world’s first post-carbon business district. This strategic goal includes a target to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030.
- **Obsolescence of buildings:** An increasing proportion of buildings in Paris La Défense are now outdated in terms of technical, environmental, energy and usage standards, and thus becoming more and more difficult to commercialize (37% of the built space was constructed before 2000 and needs to be renovated, amounting to 1.5 million m<sup>2</sup>, according to Deloitte for AUDE). Although some have already been renovated or are in the process of being rehabilitated, the modernization of these towers remains a slow and extremely costly process, hindering the overall adaptation of the district to new challenges.
- **Effects of the health crisis and rise of remote work:** The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly transformed work habits, with a massive rise in remote work that has solidified its place in professional practices and enabled a better work–life balance. As a result, companies are tending to optimize their leased spaces to accommodate this new usage, thus making savings on operating and rental costs. This effort is helping to free up significant spaces in some towers, which, due to multiple factors, are partially or completely empty, forcing property managers to rethink their offerings. These changes are part of a broader, national shift towards transforming lifestyles and an increased focus on well-being in urban environments.
- **Real estate crisis and rethinking office real estate:** In the context of a global oversupply of office spaces in the Île-de-France, with 4.4 million m<sup>2</sup> of vacant space (Institut Paris Région, November 2022), the Paris La Défense sector has been particularly affected by the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a decrease in new office lease agreements since 2020. The district still records a high vacancy rate of about 14% (compared to 4% in central Paris, IMMOSTAT Q3 2024), which only includes spaces immediately available on the market. The construction of “speculative” real estate projects, i.e., without pre-identified buyers or tenants, has been a common and historical practice. However, the evolution of the market and the increase in vacancy rates over the past few years (with a recent stabilization) are now raising more and more questions.

**In the face of these multiple crises, a transformation of the real estate stock appears necessary, accompanied by a complete overhaul of the district in terms of urban planning, landscaping, and ecology, within a logic of resilience, sobriety, and repair. This represents a true paradigm shift, requiring a deep reevaluation of the principles that guide the development and redevelopment of such districts, breaking away from the urban planning model of the last century, which is now obsolete and unsustainable.**



## How to rethink the Saisons district?

The Hermitage project, initiated in 2007, aimed to transform the Saisons district, a mixed-use area located in Courbevoie at the entrance to Paris La Défense along the Seine, by erecting two twin towers of 320 meters. Designed by Norman Foster and promoted by the Hermitage Group, these towers, just one meter shorter than the Eiffel Tower, would have been the tallest in France and were intended to serve as a showcase for the business district.

However, the project was quickly stalled by legal disputes and opposition from residents of the Damiers Bretagne and Anjou buildings, which were owned by RATP Habitat and slated for demolition to make way for the new constructions. Despite the approval of building permits, the work never started, even after the 250 housing units in the Damiers building were evacuated, with the last occupant leaving in 2020.

In 2021, the board of directors of Paris La Défense decided to abandon the project, unanimously agreeing that the situation did not allow for sales agreements to be concluded with the Hermitage company under conditions acceptable for the public institution, particularly due to the lack of financial and technical guarantees provided by the project developer. In July 2024, after 17 years of waiting, the Prefect of Hauts-de-Seine declared the building permits null and void, thus marking the definitive end of the project.



*Hermitage project abandoned*

The Saisons district, long on hold and whose challenges reflect those of the entire Paris La Défense area, is at a crucial turning point. It is now imperative to rethink its future.

**How can this unique and strategic site be valued in the context of multiple ecological, economic, and societal crises? How can the Saisons district serve as a lever for the regeneration of Paris La Défense and its surrounding territory?**



*Current seasons, Damiers emptied*



## 2. Saisons, a gateway to the city and the world

### An exceptionally well-situated international gateway...

The Saisons district, located at the entrance to Paris La Défense from Courbevoie and along the historical axis of Paris, serves as a gateway to the international business hub.

The district benefits from excellent road and public transport connections, including the RER A, Metro Line 1 (the "Esplanade de La Défense" station directly serves Saisons), as well as suburban train lines U and L, the T2 tram, numerous bus lines, the recent arrival of the Eole (an extension of the RER E), and soon the arrival of Metro Line 15 of the Grand Paris Express automatic metro.

Located along the Seine, at the exit of the Pont de Neuilly, Saisons enjoys a unique position. The district was created on a peripheral slab of the Paris La Défense slab, known as the "Saisons slab." Four levels separate the ground from the slab's surface. This promontory, overlooking the river, offers clear views of the Seine and Paris, despite a dense urban environment.

This exceptional site gives the district a strategic position within the Paris metropolitan area and Paris La Défense. It is one of the last original urban pieces that has seen almost no significant urban renovation and thus represents one of the last potential land reserves for the public institution.



*Saisons on the historic axis from Paris to La Défense*



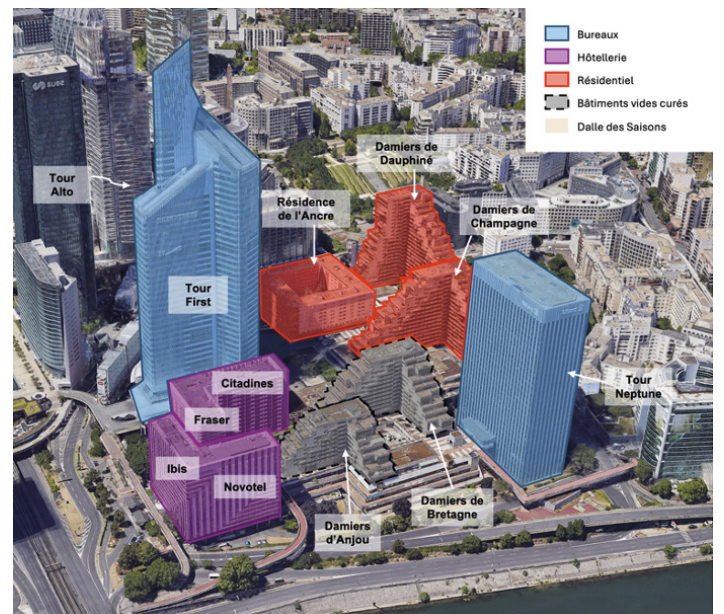
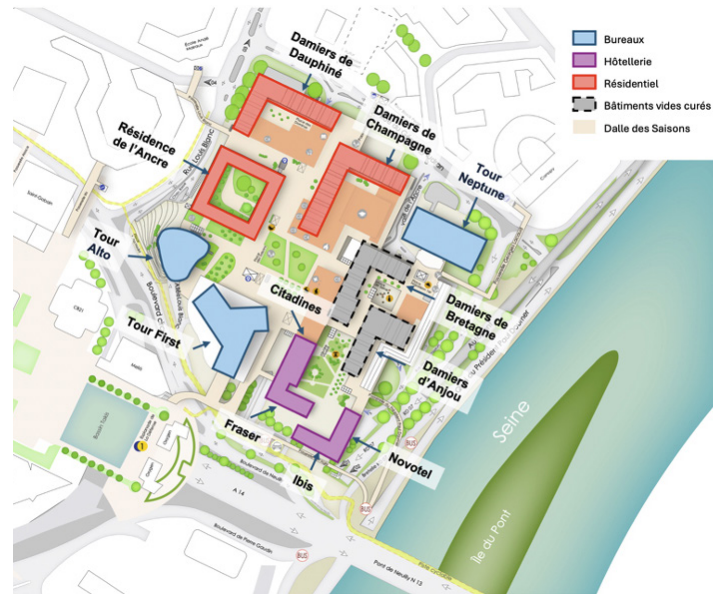
## But also a gateway to the city of Courbevoie

The Saisons district is not just a part of the business district; it is a gateway into the city of Courbevoie. Saisons is a mixed-use, residential neighborhood that revolves around three main functions:

- **Residential:** Nearly 1,600 Courbevoisiens live on the Saisons slab, spread across the Damiers Champagne and Dauphiné buildings and the Résidence de l'Ancre. The Résidence de l'Ancre was renovated in 2015. The Damiers, with its iconic brutalist architecture from the 1970s, offer quality housing due to its size, dual orientation, and the presence of outdoor terraces that make for a pleasant living experience. However, as is often the case with large private multi-ownership buildings – especially those from the 1970s and classified as high-rise buildings (IGH) – residents face challenges maintaining the buildings, particularly due to high co-ownership fees.
- **Commercial:** The Neptune (Allianz), Alto (Abu Dhabi Investment Authority), and First (Axa) towers make up the office space in the Saisons district, totaling around 188,000 m<sup>2</sup> of office space.
- **Hotel:** The Ibis and Novotel hotels, as well as the Citadines and Fraser Suites Harmonie residences, are owned by Axa and benefit from very high occupancy rates due to their strategic location, making them ideal for both business and tourist clientele.

The district also offers retail services, primarily focused on dining for the working population of the Saisons district and its immediate surroundings. Only a pharmacy remains as a local shop. The commercial fabric of the district has been weakened by the departure of the 250 families who were living in the Damiers Anjou, Bretagne and Infra buildings, and the opening of the commercial galleries of the Damiers for the Hermitage project. Since the last small supermarket closed a few years ago, residents must leave the slab to do their shopping and to access local services and facilities. On the Saisons slab, however, there is a municipal library, a Protestant church, a municipal daycare, and the ESG Immobilier business school (which is in the process of relocating).

At the foot of the Saisons slab, the Hauts-de-Seine department, the city of Courbevoie and the public institution of Paris La Défense aim to carry out a major renovation of the Diderot Audran district, near the Diderot Park, in connection with the arrival of a new facility in the business district: the European School.



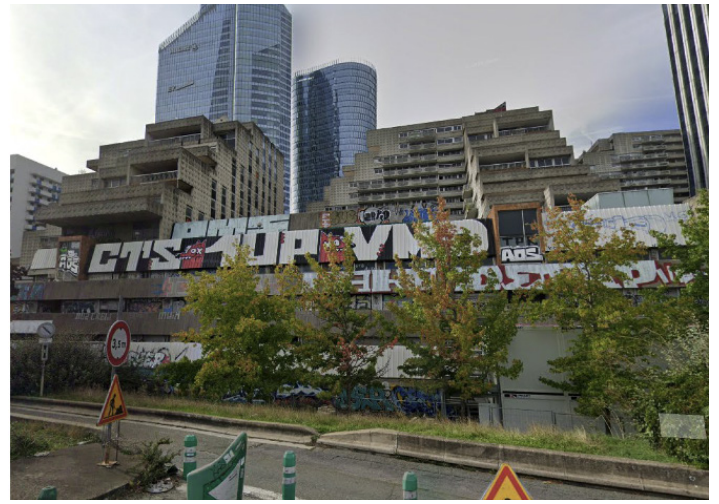


## An isolated and suspended gateway to the city

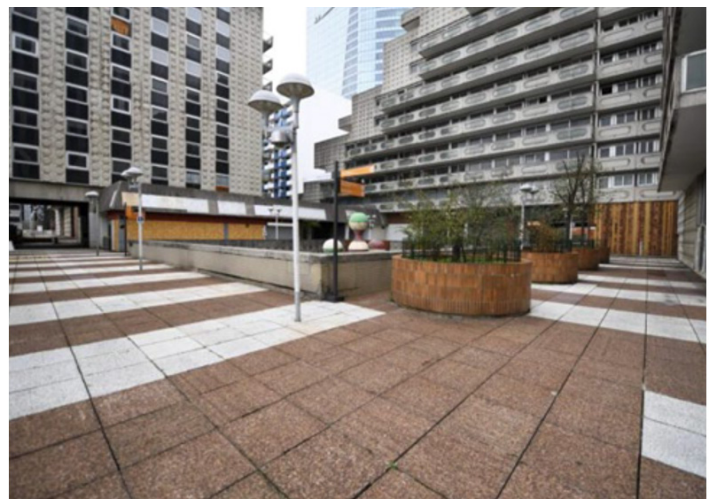
Rather than taking advantage of its strategic position as a gateway to the business district and the city, the Saisons district has become isolated due to its complex urban layout as a road junction, its level differences, and its lack of pedestrian and soft mobility access.

A clear divide is noticeable between the slab and the city, marked by a significant height difference of up to 10 meters in some areas, and served almost entirely by a complex network of walkways, including those from the business district's slab and from the Pont de Neuilly.

This configuration makes the district unwelcoming for people with disabilities, the elderly, or cyclists. Although a cycling path — complex and unclear — connects Neuilly-sur-Seine/Paris to Saisons, there is no further cycling connection to the city center of Courbevoie. For children, while the absence of cars on the slab creates a sense of safety, the connection to Diderot Park, city facilities and services needs to be rethought. Finally, several parking lots under the slab are closed and may face issues with squatting.



The departure of some residents and businesses has further weakened the district, amplifying the sense of isolation and abandonment that prevails there. **How can the Saisons district become a showcase for the business district, a welcoming entrance to the city, and a more pleasant living area for its residents and users?**





### 3. The Saisons district: Disconnected from its natural environment

In addition to its isolation from the city, the Saisons district, built as an island on a slab 10 meters above ground level, is partly cut-off from its natural surroundings. Although this affects the quality of life for its residents by creating a sense of enclosure and a lack of conviviality, it is worth noting the existence of green spaces such as the square around the Fountain of Dialogue, the garden at Place des Saisons and the garden at Square des Saisons. These small, often hidden spaces are appreciated by the residents and deserve to be expanded, connected and enhanced to strengthen the link with green spaces and local services.

#### A district at odds with its natural surroundings

The Saisons district, like the majority of the business district, is highly urbanized and largely artificial, with a slab covering 80% of its surface. This slab, an artificial surface raised above the natural ground, mainly houses parking lots, technical galleries and roads. The roads located to the north of the site, as well as the Neptune Tower and the departmental roadways along the Seine, are built directly on the natural ground. The site has a potential of 1.3 hectares of open land, which could be extended to 4 hectares by incorporating the surrounding roads and spaces.

The Voie de l'Ancre, a street beneath the slab at ground level, forms a "U" shape and plays a structuring role at the district scale. This road provides access to the underground parking lots, delivery zones, waste collection and fire access. Due to its logistical importance, any modification to this road would be complex and costly.





RD7

Street Louis Blanc, Res. of Ancre

Surroundings of the Neptune Tower

On this site, current open ground surfaces are limited, mainly found in the gradients between roadways and around the Neptune Tower. However, these spaces are neither developed nor enhanced. Although slab-based urban planning considers the risks associated with the Flood Risk Prevention Plan (PPRI), natural soil contributes to water retention, supports biodiversity, and helps mitigate urban heat islands.

## A lack of landscape continuity and green spaces

Due to the high mineral density of the site, the district creates a disconnect from nearby green spaces such as Diderot Park (a hallmark of Courbevoie to the north), the future park along the historical axis, the Seine, the wooded park on Pont Island in the middle of the river and, more broadly, other notable green spaces upriver like Domaine de Saint-Cloud and Bois de Boulogne. However, work to green the south sidewalk of Rue Audran and the east side of Rue Louis Blanc was undertaken by Paris La Défense's management service in 2023–2024 to begin calming these high-traffic roads.

## A disconnection with the Seine

Despite its riverside location, the Saisons district lacks direct access to the banks of the Seine. The height difference between the slab and natural ground, as well as between the ground and the river, complicates this access. Additionally, a major road junction, which includes the RD7 and its overpass (a visual and spatial barrier) and the Neuilly Bridge, separates the district from the river.

As a result, the district is isolated from the Seine by several busy roadways at different levels, making pedestrian access completely impossible without protected crossings. From the district, the river is visible but inaccessible.

A layout plan for the banks of the Seine, completed in 2022, highlights the uncomfortable nature of this stretch, which disrupts ecological continuity. This document recommends selective redevelopment of the existing embankment and proposes studying a linear promenade suitable for non-motorized transport, as part of a reconfiguration of the RD7.

## Views to be enhanced

From the historical axis, several visual openings reveal the contemporary urban landscape, offering views not only of the skyline of the Paris La Défense towers but also of the Damiers, buildings whose brutalist architecture is immediately visible when arriving from Paris by metro, car or bicycle — their presence mark the district's front along the Seine. This unique position gives the Damiers a showcase role, making the district a form of "advertising" in itself for external viewers. It is this strategic location that motivated Hermitage's choice to build here. Thus, the perspectives work both ways: views from the district, opening up to the Seine, Paris and the high-rise towers; and views from outside, where the business district emerges as the iconic face of La Défense.

This riverfront viewpoint position also offers extensive clear views of the Seine, surrounding greenery and expansive panoramas, despite the dense and imposing urban environment. Beyond the views from the district outward (the Seine, Paris, the towers), the external views toward Saisons, featuring iconic buildings like the riverside Damiers, are also an asset. This district could become a true showcase for Paris La Défense, its broader area and the city of Courbevoie.

**How can the regeneration of the Saisons district reintegrate the site into its natural environment?**





Neully bridge / RD7

View from Novotel

## 4. Creating a shared space in the Saisons District, creating a shared space in La Défense

### Business districts in the 21st century: what new model?

In the face of numerous challenges confronting Paris La Défense — economic and commercial real estate crises, lasting impacts from the health crisis, changing lifestyles, ecological pressures and a housing crisis — the area is reevaluating its own model. How does La Défense, a symbol of the 20th century, reinvent itself and shift toward a sustainable economic model for the 21st century?

**What should a business district like Paris La Défense become in this new era? How can it preserve its attractiveness while enhancing the quality of life for residents and users alike?**

### What ambitious yet measured program for this district?

Despite its ideal location and soon-to-be accessibility to over 4 million people (within 30 minutes, thanks to the Grand Paris Express), the district Saisons has suffered in recent years from stagnation and a lack of major investment. Empty residential buildings bear witness to the urgent housing crisis. It is, therefore, crucial to act now, developing a new program that seeks to utilize unused or underused spaces, revitalize neglected areas, and foster social connections along with a vibrant neighborhood dynamic.

Should the district's existing mix (student hubs, retail, logistics functions, productive city spaces, social and solidarity economy, third places) be strengthened, capitalizing on opportunities offered by the riverfront and the considerable interdistrict spaces? Where could intensified usage be introduced?

**Could a more modest, frugal urbanism and architecture that is respectful of its heritage help reinvent how spaces are used? How should we approach urban forms and high-density developments today, in light of the ecological crisis and diminishing resources?**

### How to imagine a shared space between the Seine, the city of Courbevoie, and the Paris La Défense business district?

At Saisons, flows of workers, residents, students and tourists intersect but rarely mingle. How can we create a lively neighborhood conducive to social interactions, exchanges and community life? How can connections be improved between the business district and Courbevoie's town center? What role should public spaces (squares and streets) play in fostering conviviality and social interaction, thereby supporting a collective identity?

What common space could be envisioned to redefine the identity of this neighborhood? How could it strengthen its role as a gateway between the Seine and the heart of Courbevoie?

Through its transformation, Saisons could become the spearhead of Paris La Défense's renewal, featuring an iconic space that fosters a sense of community — a symbolic, reference-worthy location. This area could become a destination in its own right, attracting people from Courbevoie, Paris La Défense and the broader metropolitan area, further enhancing the attractiveness of this international business district.

**In this period of great economic uncertainty, how might we reimagine a project-oriented economy that supports the regeneration of the territory?**

# Participate in the Workshop

## The workshops of Les Ateliers

Founded in 1982 as a non-profit organization (Association Loi 1901) and presided over by former minister Pierre-André Périssol, the International Workshops of Urban Design and Development have become a prominent international network of professionals and decision-makers in urban and regional development. At the request of development authorities and local governments in France or abroad, the organization conducts workshops focused on ideation, foresight and urban design, bringing together professionals from around the world for set periods: 5, 10 or 15 days of project work.

These workshops gather carefully selected professionals of all nationalities who work in interdisciplinary teams over several weeks, blending expertise from urban planning and architecture with other fields such as geography, economics, landscape, sociology, art, engineering, and environmental science.

## Outline of the Flash Workshop at La Défense

The preparation process with local partners begins several months prior to the workshop. It involves four key collective meetings: a launch workshop, two expert round tables, and a partner and elected officials committee meeting, which establishes the framework and shared priorities of the local actors at various spatial and temporal scales.

Following this process, the workshop is then organized.

In January 2025, the workshop will bring together 20 local and international participants from diverse disciplines (urban planning, economics, environment, architecture, landscape, geography, engineering, sociology, arts, etc.) for a 5-day collaborative workshop focused on the La Défense area near Paris.

The first day will be dedicated to exploring the Saisons district, with on-site visits and exchanges with local stakeholders and partners. Afterward, participants will form teams to begin collaborative work.

At the end of the workshop, a forum will convene decision-makers and professionals from both local and international backgrounds to listen to and analyze the teams' proposals. This is not a competition; the goal is not to select a single project but to showcase the most relevant ideas and define strategic orientations for the future of the area.



## How to participate?

This workshop is open to experienced professionals of all ages and nationalities with careers or expertise related to cities and territories. All disciplines are welcome, including architects, economists, sociologists, geographers, landscape architects, engineers, environmentalists, and artists. Proficiency in English is advantageous, as some teams will work bilingually.

Two round-table discussions recorded in September and October 2024 are available along with a presentation document detailing the subject, context and background information with necessary maps.

Participant selection will be conducted by the Cergy-Pontoise International Workshops' selection committee, comprised solely of members and representatives of the association to ensure full independence. Selection criteria include the candidates' professional skills, relevant thematic experience, approach to the subject, communication abilities (language, visual expression) and motivation.

### To Apply is simple:

- Complete the online application form: [Application Form](#).
- Attach a one-page CV.
- Add a one- to two-page statement explaining your interest in the workshop and the skills/experience you can contribute.

The final deadline for submissions is **December 8, 2024**, at **11:59 p.m.**

For questions or to apply via email, contact: [ldefense@ateliers.org](mailto:ldefense@ateliers.org)

### Your participation:

Applying to the workshop is free.

Once selected, travel to La Défense will be covered by the organization. International and local travel expenses, accommodation, meals, visits, and workshop materials (except personal computers) will be provided for the duration of the workshop.

Participants will be accommodated in the Saisons district and will work on-site in facilities provided by the Paris La Défense public institution.

Participation in the workshop is voluntary, and participants will not receive any form of payment.

To join the workshop, participants are required to become members of the association for 2025.