Office buildings and their locations have emerged and developed in the urban setting during the last century. Urban and architectural plans were developed according to the ideological principles of that time, promising health, space, sun and air for the cities’ key functions: housing, work and recreation. The architecture and urban design of our buildings and cities are still based on the principles of this unique period of history. However, these principles no longer apply to our use of the city or to the way organisations and their employees work, and so office locations developed according to these principles experience structural vacancy will be deteriorating and become obsolete in an ever-increasing pace. In this paper, we will discuss the corporations’ changing ideas of the city and their location choices within that city, using empirical material from a Delphi survey on office user preferences and a study of the Amsterdam office market.

We performed the Delphi survey applying a panel of experts on office users’ spatial preferences in order to reveal several aspects important to office organisations searching for new office space. Based on literature (Korteweg 2002; Louw 1996; Rodenburg 2005), 21 building and location characteristics were defined that might influence office users preferences. In a multiple-round Delphi approach, we interviewed the panel members individually. After two rounds the polling was stopped; the predefined required degree of consensus of the panel was reached or the results were not improving. The expert panel was asked to rank the characteristics of office buildings and locations according to the office users’ preferences. The preferences of two important office user groups in Amsterdam were considered, applying user-profiles defined by Atelier v (2005).

The final ranking results were to a great extent in accordance with previous research. However, looking more closely to the results, diverging ranking of the location-characteristics tells us that user preferences are possibly changing. In the Delphi interviews, the experts were asked to argue their ranking, and stated that albeit accessibility by car is considered the most important location characteristic, the importance of the locations’ status and the amount of available facilities is growing. Interestingly, when asked which location characteristics may be related to structural vacancy, low status and facility level were mentioned, not accessibility by car.

The aspects revealed as important to the office user were applied to a study of the Amsterdam office building population, scanning 250 office buildings of which half has a structural vacancy rate of at least 50%, depicting negative user preference. The buildings were selected from the transaction- and supply- databases of ITRZ and the member list of the ROZ/IRP index. We expected the most preferred office buildings to have sufficient parking places, a good exterior appearance and good user recognisability.

1 Structural vacancy is defined as vacancy of the same square metres of office space over a period of three years or longer, with no perspective on future tenancy.
The location of the building should have a high status and be well accessible by car. However, studies by DiPasquale (1996) and Dunse (2001) recognize submarkets within office markets, and in his thesis, de Man (2008) reveals the existence of submarkets within the Amsterdam market, suggesting a hierarchy in the influence of the location and building characteristics on the buildings performance, according to which the influence of the location characteristics are subordinate to the market, and the building characteristics subordinate to the location; a mechanism that is also argued by the Delphi expert panel. In his thesis, de Man analysed the accessibility of the different Amsterdam submarkets revealing only small differences, explaining why in the Delphi-survey accessibility is recognised as important to the user preference but is not explaining vacancy.

After the first office scan analyses we see a strong convergence with the Delphi survey on the location characteristics. The status of the location is characterised by the location type, the quality of the public space, the vacancy in the area and the safety index. The two office locations experiencing the most vacancy problems, Telepoort and Amstel iii, are best defined as office areas with a low spatial quality. Both areas are mono-functional; and although both have railway stations surrounded by different facilities, these are located at the rim of the location and do not seem to influence the users experience of the location itself.

The structural vacancy within Telepoort and Amstel iii is location related. The structural vacancy of buildings within other locations in Amsterdam cannot be explained by the location, and the analysis of the building characteristics will probably be able to tell us more. Both the Telepoort and the Amstel iii are examples of office locations developed according to the functionalist ideals of urban planning, divided from other urban areas by roads or railway.

Interviews held with office market experts in 2006 (Remøy, 2007), confirm our ideas of the malfunctioning single-use office location. The reason is sought not so much in the organisations' appreciation, but in the employment market and the employees' appreciation. Well-educated employees are scarce, and are not convinced to take on a job only because of a good salary; hence secondary benefits such as a safe working environment, with urban facilities like cafés, shops and restaurants within walking distance are important.

The full paper will be concluded by discussing the influence of office organisations on the future development of cities.