



SMART CITY

# SMART CITY: SONGDO APPROACH VERSUS INNOVATION LABS AND METROPOLIS UPGRADES

ARCHIVE OCTOBER 2014

**The Songdo International Business District is a smart city designed to be built from scratch in just over 15 years, making the urban residential fabric a priority. This contrasts with both the theoretical concept city projects that are popping up all over the world and the piecemeal tech upgrades being made to existing metropolitan structures.**

Overall the 'Smart City' movement divides into two camps: on the one hand 'concept cities' such as Masdar ([http://www.atelier.net/trends/articles/masdar-city-vitrine-concept-de-ville-intelligente\\_431802](http://www.atelier.net/trends/articles/masdar-city-vitrine-concept-de-ville-intelligente_431802)) in Abu Dhabi, which are basically innovation laboratories, and on the other those arising from urban policy in major existing cities such as Paris (<http://www.paris-region.com/actualites/info-ile-de-france/grand-paris-smart-city-grandes-entreprises-et-pme-font-de-lopen>). The infrastructure chaos which reigns in many a metropolis worldwide is leading to pragmatic updates designed to manage the flow of people and services so as to make citizens' everyday lives easier. This has been termed the 'easy city'. However, the Songdo IBD, part of the Greater Seoul region, differs both in its aims and its basic approach from either of these two trends. The plans call for an entire new business district to be attached to the South Korean mega-city, based on a traditional social structure but founded on the principle of environmental sustainability and equipped through-and-through with cutting-edge technology.

South Korea was the fastest industrialising country in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1953, the inhabitants began to rebuild the national capital Seoul, which had been almost completely destroyed during the Korean War. Between 1950 and 1975, the city's population doubled every nine years, today standing at twenty million. Seoul has grown, not as a central core surrounded by outskirts, but as a vast conurbation where all demographic and industrial statistics have always exceeded the forecasts. Songdo (<http://www.songdo.com/>) IBD is designed as a complete, self-contained 'smart' business district linked to the massive metropolis that Seoul has become.

## Can from-scratch tech-based districts compete

## with age-old cities?

Songdo International Business District, which is for administrative purposes part of the Incheon (<http://www.airport.kr/eng/>) urban district, is from one point of view one of the most ambitious smart cities ever built from scratch. Its two main rivals, Fujisawa (<http://panasonic.net/es/fujisawasst/>) and especially Masdar (<http://www.masdar.ae/>), do not have any specific plans or targets for attracting residents but are currently acting more like innovation labs than real living urban spaces. Meanwhile the Songdo promoters are promising residents freedom from many of the ills of a classic big city – a poor ecological environment, inequality of access to education and cramped space.

As the Songdo developers' primary concern is to improve the daily lives of megacity residents, environmental issues top the list, with plans to reduce CO2 emissions by 70% and water consumption by 30% compared with the average traditional business district. Since construction began in 2001, Songdo has boasted the world's highest concentration of LEED ([http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leadership\\_in\\_Energy\\_and\\_Environmental\\_Design](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leadership_in_Energy_and_Environmental_Design)) certified buildings (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design is a set of rating systems for the design, construction, operation and maintenance of 'green' buildings, homes and neighbourhoods). In the long term, fully 40% of Songdo IBD will consist of green spaces and there will be 26 kilometres of cycle paths. The urban design makes arrangements for cars to be parked underground in order to minimise pollutant gases in the ambient air. In addition, by its completion in 2018, electric-powered water-taxis will be plying the canals that have been created in the town centre. Energy-efficient trains linking Songdo IBD to central Seoul travel underground. Meanwhile digital systems are a central theme of the new district: computers are built into people's homes and even into the street itself. One example of the total connectivity the developers are striving for is that cars entering and leaving the underground car parks are logged by means of electronically readable licence plates.

## An attractive residential area – with a hefty price tag

Responsibility for building the Songdo International Business District, comprising a construction site of over 100 million square metres, is in the hands of New York-based real estate development company Gale International (<http://www.galeintl.com/>). The total budget amounts to \$35 billion over the 2001 - 2018 period. Fellow NYC-based architecture firm Kohn Pedersen Fox (<http://www.kpf.com/>) (KPF), which specialises in building skyscrapers, is tasked to construct the main towers in the centre of Songdo IBD. The project has already created a good many jobs on the Korean peninsula. In addition to the business centre, hospitals, schools and housing are all taking shape, with a view to attracting residents and populating the town quickly. However, the cost of housing, at a minimum of half a million dollars per unit dwelling, seems as high as the project's lofty ambitions. The international (<http://www.chadwickinternational.org/>) school, which will be unique in terms of the technology installed, will cost parents close to \$25,000 a year per place. In 2012, the population had already reached 60,000 – including a thousand non-Koreans. The official literature put out by the Songdo promoters hails the IBD as the future business hub of North Asia.

While Abu Dhabi's Masdar City developers have set out to demonstrate that top-down intellectual and technological leadership can bring about a rethink in how a city can function independently, the Songdo IBD partners are taking a different approach. The plans for the new South Korean business district provide an immediate practical alternative to basic Western town planning standards. The Songdo creators believe that across-the-board application of the latest technologies can solve the problems posed by traditional cities, with the seemingly ever-present

air pollution top of the list. The project is based on the argument that it is more efficient and more effective to provide state-of-the-art ready-made towns than try to improve and upgrade facilities in cities whose chaotic infrastructure has arisen from their organic growth process.



By **Simon Guigue**

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**By Louis Treussard**  
CEO of L'Atelier BNP Paribas  
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