
**WHY COMPANIES MOVED OUT TO THE SUBURBS,
AND WHERE THEY SHOULD GO FROM THERE.**

BY MATTHEW BUDMAN



American Pa



ONCE UPON A TIME, BIG CORPORATIONS PUT OFFICES DOWNTOWN AND FACTORIES OUTSIDE OF TOWN, AND THAT WAS PRETTY MUCH IT.

Then, beginning in the 1940s, as expanding roadways and cheaper cars and housing sent middle-class Americans to new suburban neighborhoods, companies began purchasing enormous tracts of land, with rolling hills and sparkling ponds and piney woods. And upon that land they built gleaming complexes of concrete and glass, situating their white-collar workers in the most desirable locations imaginable.

Of course, there's more to the story, says **Louise Mozingo**, author of *Pastoral Capitalism: A History of Suburban Corporate Landscapes* (MIT). Corporate campuses might be lush and verdant, but they're expensive, inaccessible to many or even most workers, and incredibly resource-consuming. "The idea," she says, "is that you'll look out your window and see green. I'm not saying it's not appealing. I'm saying it might not be appropriate for a workplace in a post-peak-oil world."

Mozingo lives in San Francisco; she spoke from her office at U.C. Berkeley, where she is an associate professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning.



I LIVED IN CENTRAL NEW JERSEY FOR NINE YEARS AND WAS ALWAYS FASCINATED BY THE SPRAWLING CORPORATE CAMPUSES ALONG ROUTE 1—JUST ACRES AND ACRES OF GRASS, WITH TREES AND PONDS. THEY SEEMED LIKE LOVELY PLACES TO WORK.

Indeed, if you didn't mind driving fifteen minutes to find somewhere to eat lunch.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN CORPORATE SUBURBAN LIFE?

I'm a landscape architect by trade, and I worked for two firms that designed these kinds of landscapes. That's how I became cognizant that these campuses were very important projects for landscape architects in the postwar era, in the same way that park design had been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And eventually, I realized that people use imprecise

terms such as *corporate campuses*, *office parks*, and *technology parks*, but that nobody quite understood these projects—and that nobody had studied them.

WHEN DID COMPANIES START LEAVING CITIES?

It started much earlier than people think. The first plan for a corporate campus was in 1929, for the AT&T division Bell Labs. The company bought land in Summit, New Jersey; they hired the Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts; and they came up with plans that looked like a classic college quadrangle. The Depression hit, so AT&T didn't build it right away, but they had the land and the plan, and in the late 1930s they revised it to emphasize the buildings and the technology. Bell Labs moved there in 1942, and the site became a fundamental model for everything that followed.

In the way that American managerial capitalism was invented in the 1920s and then became the model for most corporations globally, American companies developed a new management structure in that period. They created a new middle-management division: research and development. And companies needed new facilities for R&D—not downtown, where the CEO might be, and not in the factory, where scientists had typically been.

HOW DID THINGS WORK OUT IN SUMMIT, NEW JERSEY?

Summit was a very genteel area, a classic railroad suburb with no large commercial enterprises. The locals went ballistic over AT&T moving in, since they assumed the facility would be a factory and were a little worried about the workers being blue-collar.



GENERAL FOODS HEADQUARTERS

RYE BROOK, NEW YORK

General Foods conceived the 800 Westchester Avenue complex in 1979, as “a modern interpretation of a classical English manor,” and moved in four years later. But soon afterward, Philip Morris acquired General Foods and in 2004 sold the site to RPW Group. Today a number of smaller clients occupy the gleaming complex, complete with salons, TV studio, and fitness center.



The president of Bell Labs assured people it would not be a factory, but to make sure, Summit created the country’s first research-and-development zoning. The buildings were surrounded by a huge, designed landscape; it looked like a campus, so people begin to call it a campus, which was appropriate: These companies were competing with universities for scientists; they were trying to entice them into the capitalist enterprise.

AND THE EFFORT PAID OFF?

It was an enormous success: Top scientists said, “Yeah, I’ll go work for AT&T.” In 1948, Bell Labs scientists invented two things that transformed human existence—the transistor and the bit. You put those two together, and you have the rest of the twentieth century. That’s the kind of people they were

attracting. They had beautiful, up-to-date lab facilities; scientists looked out of their windows onto big trees and rolling lawn. They drove from their houses in Summit right to a parking lot a few feet from their offices. They had a wonderful cafeteria and lounge—no, Google did not invent those—where they could all talk.

WITH THESE MOVES TO SITES WITH TREES AND LAWNS, DID COMPANIES HOPE TO SOFTEN PEOPLE’S IMPRESSION OF THEM? YOU WRITE THAT, AT THE TIME, “THE BROAD PUBLIC VIEWED THE NEW PHALANX OF GIANT CORPORATIONS AS SUSPECT, EVEN THREATENING.”

AT&T was not quite in that condition, but other companies were. And over time, they all came to understand the rhetorical import of these places, and that they could use their campuses for public relations as well as recruitment. There’s this *gorgeous* view of the Deere and Co. Administrative Center, with trees and a pond, and that view is on every single one of their major corporate publications.

Connecticut General moved from downtown Hartford to the countryside, five miles away, partly because CEO Frazar Wilde was a big naturalist, and the new site got huge publicity in business magazines and architecture and



RAVINIA HEADQUARTERS

DUNWOODY, GEORGIA

Built in the 1980s, this suburban office complex north of Atlanta houses the U.S. headquarters of InterContinental Hotels Group, a number of other companies, and a woodland site; indeed, the buildings form a protective enclosure for the forest at the center.



design magazines. Wilde actually convened a conference there on the future of the American city, and it got covered in *Life* magazine—meaning that every household in America saw these *spectacular* spreads of this *spectacular* new place. These buildings and landscapes projected a very positive image.

PASTORAL CAPITALISM RECOUNTS HOW SOME COMPANIES, IN THE EARLY '50S, INSISTED THAT IDYLIC SETTINGS WERE MORE CONDUCTIVE TO CREATIVITY AND THINKING IN GENERAL. IS THERE ANY TRUTH TO THAT?

The only systematic study was done at Deere in the late '60s, and people said they really liked their offices and really, *really* liked the surrounding landscape. But when they first started working at these campuses, highways were expanding, commuting was easy, and people reported greater productivity. Today, one factor that's really important to people is how much time they spend in traffic going to and from their workplace. And these landscapes have created an untenable situation in terms of traffic—and energy consumption.

WAS IT AN INEVITABLE SITUATION, THOUGH? DIDN'T COMPANIES HAVE TO EXPAND SOMEWHERE?

Definitely. They did have to come up with some different workplace in the 1950s. Downtowns were difficult to change and not conducive to massive expansion in the corporate economy; corporations were expanding extremely rapidly, and it was really hard to come by high-quality office space that wasn't divided up into tiny pieces. Cities said they would create redevelopment zones, but that turned out to be socially and economically devastating. Businesses



had to build something new. They really needed the additional space.

Of course, corporate campuses—built by corporations for corporations—are immensely costly, even more so when they were first moving out there, since they had to build the buildings and the parking lots and the infrastructure to support everything. If you're building out on a site that's one mile by two miles, like the GM Technical Center, that's a lot of sewer lines. And then they have to maintain it.

So campuses are not cost-effective in the traditional sense. These are grand buildings meant to attract a certain kind of personnel and to create a certain kind of image. For a smaller company, it's probably too big. That's where the office park becomes useful.

You can buy a lot and build your own building, you can have the developer build to suit if you're the first tenant, you can move into a building that's already built; you can have leases of different lengths. So office parks are much more cost-effective, and much more flexible for tenants.

OFFICE PARKS DON'T EXACTLY HAVE THE SAME PASTORAL IMPACT AS CAMPUSES DO.

They have teeny little bits of landscape, to give the effect of looking out at green, but most of the surface area is given over to parking.

HOW DID THE OFFICE-PARK IDEA COME TO BE?

By the late '60s, there was plenty of office space in the cities, but cities had tumultuous social conditions and issues

of race and class, and executives were looking to remove themselves from difficult social situations. So in the middle of the civil-rights era, Atlanta saw massive expansion of office parks. The first office park was near Birmingham, in Mountain Brook—a bastion of the white upper middle class.

WAS THAT INTENTIONAL?

It was absolutely intentional. Mountain Brook was an explicitly segregated suburb. That was the formulation of corporations in the 1950s and '60s. Not anymore, of course. In my experience, corporations are stalwart defenders of affirmative action, because they recognize that they work in a global world and that it's stupid to potentially miss someone who's really smart.

**COLLEGE LIFE
INSURANCE OF
AMERICA
COMPANY
HEADQUARTERS**

INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA

College Life Insurance is long gone, but the complex the company commissioned in the late 1960s—now dubbed the Pyramids—still beautifully balances landscaping and sculptural abstraction. The original plan called for up to nine towers, connected by passages above and below ground; only three were built.



DOES MOVING TO THE SUBURBS AUTOMATICALLY MAKE COMPANIES LESS DIVERSE? IT'S MUCH HARDER FOR WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE WITHOUT CARS TO GET PLACES, AND PLENTY OF YOUNG URBANITES WANT TO STAY IN THE CITY.

It's true: Downtown, you have a wide range of workers, while in the suburbs, everything gets segregated—not just by race and class but by different kinds of workers. Suburbs today are still segregated enclaves, and suburban jobs are incredibly inaccessible to a diverse labor pool. In fact, many times, these residential enclaves and these workplaces are actually quite close to each other on the map, but you can't get there from here except in a car. So that means huge parking lots, and huge square footages of roadways, and short trips. And it's a real challenge to retrofit this kind of land-

scape to provide connectivity and density.

I know from my students at one of the design firms working on the Facebook campus that companies are interested in making campuses more urban, because that's what the kind of hipsters who work for these technology companies want. Genentech and Apple and Facebook run their own private bus systems from San Francisco to their campuses, since so many of their young employees don't want to live in Vallejo or Vacaville.

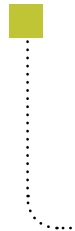
HOW ABOUT WORKERS IN OTHER COUNTRIES? HAVE COMPANIES ELSEWHERE MOVED OUT TO THE SUBURBS?

Absolutely. It happened in Britain first, with office parks, and then, in the early '70s, IBM built its European headquarters on a big corporate estate outside

of Portsmouth. A few companies built big suburban campuses, but mostly it's office parks—specifically, technology parks. In Europe, they tend to be compact, and they're connected to transit.

WHY SO MUCH LATER THAN IN THE UNITED STATES? BECAUSE OF THE OMNIPRESENCE OF CARS HERE?

That's part of it. But mostly it's because Europe has much, much stricter zoning. In Britain, they had to invent a whole new set of regulations, decades after New Jersey invented R&D zoning. You also have to keep in mind the massive domination of American corporations. European companies weren't expanding at the same rate, across so many different entities, in the 1950s and '60s. In Britain, it took three decades to recover from the war.



Only in the last few decades, we've started seeing parks in other Anglophone countries: Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. There was a huge explosion of office parks in South Africa after apartheid, for all the same reasons why they showed up in Birmingham and Atlanta.

The exception is Bangalore, where companies like Wipro have built campuses to portray the right image to overseas clients and to keep skilled people. The infrastructure in Indian cities is very poor, and companies are trying to prevent their engineers from going overseas, so they're decamping from the cities and building their own infrastructure systems—water, sewage, trash collection, power plants.

Remember that American cities got good infrastructure only in the first

part of the twentieth century, during the Progressive era, when corporations played a huge role in making infrastructure better—people had to live and work in these cities, and it behooved them to have better systems. In the developing world, they're not going through that phase—they're just abandoning the cities. There's a massive divide between ordinary residents of a place like Bangalore and what these campuses are.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR CORPORATE LOCATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES?

What I think we're moving toward is what they're doing in Portland, Oregon—a multicentered city that's no longer split between downtown high-density and suburban low-density. You're going to see higher-density clusters in the suburbs, and at some point we're going to have to link those employment centers to the places where people live. Transit will have to be reoriented from going just from the suburbs to downtown, as they do now.

Whichever metropolitan regions figure this out first are going to win the future—along with whichever corporations figure out that rethinking location and transportation can get them better workers and higher productivity. Otherwise, what's going to happen—soon, because of the dwindling oil supply—is that companies will

discover that their workers cannot afford to drive to and from work.

OK, SO SUBURBAN CAMPUSES MAY NOT BE ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE, OR CONVENIENT, OR COST-EFFECTIVE, OR IN SYNC WITH A DIVERSE WORKFORCE. BUT THEY'RE UNDENIABLY PRETTY.

Everyone is soothed by landscapes; it's very difficult to resist a garden. To resist the aesthetics of these places, you have to have an acutely resistant mindset; you have to be incredibly skeptical. Silicon Valley may be full of office parks, but it's all billowing oaks and swaying eucalyptus, and as Americans, we're trained to like that kind of composed nature. We say, "Yeah, I don't know what they do in those buildings, but the view is really pretty."

But all of the reasons why campuses might have made sense in the 1950s don't necessarily add up today. We should be talking about reshaping these parks and campuses for the future.

WHO WILL PUT THESE CHANGES IN PLACE? IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE THE PROGRESSIVE ERA.

Everyone focuses on how resource-consumptive residential suburbanization is, but these landscapes are in the hands of many fewer entities, and it seems like a really good place to start reformulating the way we live and work. We need to start asking about workplaces: Where are the transit links? Where are the pedestrian links? Where are the bicycle links?

Suburban campuses were invented by a handful of CEOs—landscape architects were only responding to the ideas of a few business leaders. It's not usually that way: Suburbanization was promoted by designers; skyscrapers were promoted by architects. *These* places were invented by CEOs. So my question is: Can't some CEOs get together and figure out what should be next? ■