

# Rethinking the Corporate Office Park

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Suburban U.S. office parks emerged in the 1960s as a direct response to two major economic drivers: the need for cheap land on which to site companies and proximity to an educated workforce.

White-collar workers fled the cities for the suburbs, seeking peace, quiet, trees and homogeneity. Architectural historian Louise Mozingo writes in *Pastoral Capitalism: A History of Suburban Corporate Landscapes* that companies went suburban, too, developing office parks and corporate campuses that were part of a larger utopian movement.

Flash-forward 50 years. Seismic shifts in the global economy, along with new demographic realities and technological advances, demand a paradigm shift among real estate developers and American companies.

Both the form and function of office parks are evolving—for the better—in response to economic forces and market demands. Leading-edge architects and builders are at the forefront of this change.

## Work as a Lifestyle

The typical 9-5 workday is practically extinct. Technology has freed professionals from the constraints of a traditional office environment, even as it has lengthened the work week. Americans may be working now more than ever, but they are not tethered to the office. The lines between work and life have blurred.

Echo Boomers, also known as Millennials, were born to Baby Boomer parents. As Baby Boomers exit the workforce, tech-savvy Millennials—80 million strong—are entering the workforce and exerting a powerful change on its form.

According to YResearch Partners, Echo Boomers value time over money and relationships over work. They may take work home, but they may also take a two-hour bike ride at lunch. They might want to conduct a meeting outside and they may want an espresso at 3 p.m. As a result, employer-sponsored amenities are a major incentive to spend more hours at their places of employment.

Because many professionals are postponing retirement, a majority of workplaces now boast three generations. As it turns out, both Millennials and Baby Boomers seek the same things. Office parks that satisfy the needs and wants of 20-somethings also resonate with older colleagues.

Flexibility, convenience and authenticity are of great importance to Millennials in both their personal and professional lives. Their desire to have easy access to high-value amenities such as public transit, dog parks and grocery stores is changing how architectural firms are designing office space. The Live/Work/Play or mixed-use development model is informing design.



A recent competition called the Office Building of the Future, sponsored by NAIOP, a national commercial real estate organization, invited firms to explore design for a changing workforce. This type of discussion is important because many real estate decisions are being made by boomers and will affect future Gen X and Y employees.

Several common themes emerged: the need to be pedestrian, bike and public transit friendly, the ability to be reconfigured both internally and externally and the importance of environmental sustainability. These environments will feature dry cleaners, day and elder care facilities, shops and cafes that can be used by all tenants. Some may even feature apartments and hotels.

“The office building of the future is where you come together to collaborate and get re-energized, not where you check your e-mail,” explains Craig Curtis, lead designer of the Seattle-based Miller Hull Partnership.

Buildings that are poorly located or have few amenities will be in a weak position, as owners of orphaned office parks across the country have painfully learned.



## The Relationship Between Design and Intellectual Capital

Why design differently? To gain a competitive advantage.

The Creative Class as identified by Richard Florida consists of about 40 million workers or 30 percent of the U.S. workforce. They include scientists, engineers, computer programmers and professionals within the arts, design and media. Their primary job function is to be creative and innovative. Knowledge-based professionals are also part of the Creative Class, and include those in healthcare, legal, finance and education workers who draw on complex knowledge sets to solve problems.

These professionals comprise the workforce that can't be outsourced; they are leaders prized for their intellectual acumen, driving the growth of new economy companies. Smart firms realize their biggest cost is human resources, not real estate. So if you can reduce HR costs by stemming turnover while increasing productivity, you can afford to spend a little more on the physical plant.

Providing a place where people can thrive is key to recruitment, productivity and retention.

## Bolster Work/Life Balance

Time-pressed employees appreciate convenience. An onsite gym or the use of an electric car to run errands provide big return in terms of engagement. Bocce ball courts, BBQ pits and sundecks do more to encourage teamwork and a sense of community than mission statements, framed posters or annual picnics.

Just as Frank Lloyd Wright ushered in an era of organic architecture with his realization that Nature enriches our existence, today's leading firms are pioneering a new office park model. The new model balances important social, economic and environmental concerns and respects contemporary ways of living and working.

