

FORM

PIONEERING DESIGN

FORM

PIONEERING DESIGN

U.S. \$6.95 / CANADA \$8.95



6 86345 97698 1

A PUBLICATION OF BALCONY MEDIA, INC.

DESIGN FOR
THE MIND

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2011



Why does Silicon Valley hide its talents behind a slew of look-alike, nondescript office buildings? Two Bay Area architects comment on the digital empire's dearth of design.



"THERE IS NO THERE THERE," GERTRUDE STEIN FAMOUSLY uttered upon visiting Oakland, California, in the 1930s. The same could be said for its neighbor Silicon Valley, where, since the early 1970s, the pervasive tilt-up concrete windowless structure has been the most patent expression of a culture that has jettisoned architecture. In terms of the magnitude of its inventions, the culture could easily be compared with the Florence of the Renaissance, and yet we have no movies to account for this vast urban carpet, no literature to mark the unfolding of human affairs in its dispersed fabric, no iconic image etched in the mind of the general public. We have only tales of digital marvels with no visual correlates in the real world. Visitors to the legendary Silicon Valley fail to compute the sharp contrast between the revolutionary dreams of its workers and the drab reality of its buildings. Is this industry entrenched so deep inside its digital realms that it's lost touch with the phenomenology of the body? Is the division between work and play so razor thin as to admit no breathing room for the necessary pleasures of architecture?

A cursory ride on the vehicular grid of the Valley reveals the pervasive generic qualities of its built environment.





THE LAND OF MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Text by Pierluigi Serraino, AIA and John Marx, AIA
Photography by Mark Luthringer





Through the windshield, the eye sees an unflattering parade of one-story quasi-storage spaces in prefabricated corduroy concrete floating on desolate seas of on-grade parking. Landscaping typically camouflages the nondescript designs that have been generated over the years. The pattern of land use consistently pushes construction away from the property edges, enforcing urban silence by turning off the centripetal force of city life. When it comes to the offline built environment, companies seem to be less keen on inhabiting a building that projects the innovations harbored within its walls and more intent on having a facility resembling that of a start-up company. The mythology of the Hewlett-Packard garage still brings to bear attitudes and self-representation in the popular imagination.

Very distant from this mindset are the dreams of European organizations, which are crafting built utopias to instill loyalty and commitment in the workforce. Conceived by Daniel L. Vasella, the chief executive of a Swiss pharmaceutical company, the Novartis campus

in Basel, Switzerland, for example, is a collection of architectural gems plugged into the master plan of Italian urban designer Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani. Its goal is to promote the generation of ideas in an interdisciplinary setting rich in design stimuli. Back in California, companies dismiss the value of architectural preciousness in favor of radically utilitarian, purposely toned-down structures to appease the alleged anxiety of American investors concerned with a perceived inappropriate use of their finances. The “attract and retain” motto should have, in architecture, its most potent and untapped ally in Silicon Valley, but this is not the case.

One reason for the aversion to these types of office utopias is the myth held in the Valley that any company confident enough to build a vanity campus would soon go under. This myth has shown to be unfounded, as the success and failure ratio has less to do with a vanity campus than it does the sheer number of start-up companies that rise and fall in the Valley. In the past there have been

a few myth-busting design sparks with venerable names attached to them. Erich Mendelsohn’s Varian Laboratories was a first step in creating an aesthetic attempt in Silicon Valley, and, more prominently, the IBM San Jose Research Center by Gerald McCue of the early eighties. In the last 25 years, however, the overwhelming number of organizations that have suffered unfortunate destinies have had mild or nonexistent architectural ambitions.

This view helps perpetuate the standard practice of clients hoping to project an attitude of frugality and financial responsibility by demanding undifferentiated and ordinary buildings to host their workforce. Rather than seeing architecture as a potential built expression of the revolutionary work taking place inside, the client representatives engineer an unassuming front to reassure investors that their money is used wisely and that no jealousies among co-workers will be caused because of one facility being more carefully designed than another.





As of now, this system has worked. The classic Silicon Valley employee has fallen somewhat into the model of the tireless engineer working around the clock. Aesthetics in the workplace environment hardly played a part. That might begin to change as a new breed of technological players are becoming

between the aseptic settings of the technological lab and the benevolent urbanity of San Francisco. This trend of the enlightened strata of techno-workers rejecting Silicon Valley as a place to live has led some companies to abandon Silicon Valley altogether in favor of San Francisco's hip SoMa neighborhood.

intellectual property, employee retention and the visibility of architecture is, we believe, a critical obstacle in resolving the Silicon Valley dilemma. It is an apt metaphor to think about the office/campus as a literal fortress of knowledge. Fortresses are building types from the antiquities that stand remote and distant from their surrounding landscape. Moving beyond that relationship might provide the key to reshaping this urban conundrum and restoring place as the locus of the human experience. Much like the attract-and-retain mentality of its European counterparts, Silicon Valley would be wise to consider its architectural fabric as a whole. Although one or two ambitious designs—like the recently released plans for the new Apple campus—might be a start in the right direction, the problem will be left unresolved without a much broader strategy. ■

This trend of the enlightened strata of techno-workers rejecting Silicon Valley as a place to live has led some companies to abandon Silicon Valley altogether in favor of San Francisco's hip SoMa neighborhood.

more interested in success' accompanying lifestyle. Borrowing from Rem Koolhaas commenting on the nomadic character of privileged groups pulling the strings of the European economy, the idea of a "kinetic elite" also applies to the high-level workers shuttling

Relentlessly rethinking the nature of how things are done is one of the first principles of digital technology. Therefore, it is a legitimate question to ask why Silicon Valley leaves out the built environment from its sphere of influence. The negotiation between safeguarding

Pierluigi Serraino, AIA, heads an independent design practice in San Francisco's East Bay. His books on modern architecture and digital design include *Modernism Rediscovered* (Taschen, 2000) and *NorCalMod: Icons of Northern California Modernism* (Chronicle Books, 2006).

John Marx, AIA, is the founding design principal of Form4 Architecture in San Francisco, CA. For the past two decades, Marx has worked extensively in Silicon Valley on projects including the headquarters for Netflix, NVIDIA and VMware. He is the subject of a new monograph, *Wandering the Garden of Technology and Passion* (Balcony Press, 2011)

