Facebook Urbanization

A Silicon Valley Case Study

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Master of Architecture 2021

ABSTRACT

Silicon Valley arose in the 1940s and 1950s as a leading computer and technology hub. Facebook joined that boom in 2006, acquiring its Menlo Park, California office from Sun Microsystems in 2011 and constructing the office buildings MPK 20, 21, and 22 nearby in 2016. Additionally, Facebook submitted plans to expand in mid-2020 with a development, Willow Village, that includes residential, retail, and other mixed uses. This piece analyzes the three campuses through the lenses of phenomenology and American Pragmatism, and determines that Facebook's campuses are concerning phenomenological places that are quickly turning Menlo Park into a Facebook monopoly. This is problematic from a pragmatic point of view as it leads to corporate interest being the primary driver of urbanistic change in Menlo Park. In order to promote a more equitable built environment, Facebook needs to strike a balance between a strong sense of place, an integration with the surrounding communities, and a more serious attitude towards the urban developer role it has claimed in Menlo Park.

My ongoing architectural thesis work critiques the suburban office campuses of tech giants and traces their developmental trajectory. I visited tech giant campuses in the San Francisco Bay Area in October 2019 to better understand their conceptions of work and how these manifest in their built forms. In this article, I use Facebook as an example of larger trends in the technology sector through discussions of Facebook's development and takeover of Menlo Park, a suburb located approximately 30 miles down the peninsula from the skyscrapers and high-rise offices of downtown San Francisco. Through the lenses of phenomenology and American Pragmatism, I critique three Facebook developments: the original Menlo Park campus, the MPK buildings, and the forthcoming Willow Village. These developments show Facebook's trajectory as an urban form maker. I find the developments to be both

Figure 1. Aerial view of Facebook headquarters (Karl Mondon, Bay Area News Group, 2015).

Figure 2. View of MPK 21 rooftop (Eleanor Gibson, Dezeen, 2018).

> " Appearing as a single building wall, the Menlo Park campus is a compound decidedly separate from the city of Menlo Park."

troublesome phenomenological places and pragmatically problematic. The essay ends with suggestions regarding Facebook's isolationism and how Facebook might approach a solution by balancing space designated for humans and for machines, by utilizing the pragmatic idea of the public sphere, and by being more cognizant of the concept of everyday space.

My visit to Facebook headquarters included its first campus at 1 Hacker Way, which I will refer to as Menlo Park, and its expansion campus at 1 Facebook Way, also known as MPK 20, 21, and 22. The Menlo Park campus was originally owned by Sun Microsystems, the creators of the Java programming language. It was leased by Facebook in 2011 and purchased five years later. Facebook expanded its office space with MPK 20 in 2015 and with MPK 21 in 2018, both designed by world-renowned 'starchitect' Frank Gehry. MPK 22 is currently being built. The three MPK buildings are seamlessly linked to create one massive building (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 3. Aerial view of Facebook campus (Paul Moran, Level 10 Construction).

Two colleagues and I took an early morning train from downtown San Francisco and opted to walk the four miles to Facebook from the train station through the Belle Haven neighborhood. The neighborhood looks like many suburban developments: wide roads through quaint one- and two-story houses and manicured lawns (Figure 4). As we arrived at the Menlo Park campus, it was obvious the campus was supposed to be seen and approached by moving vehicles.[1] Appearing as a single building wall, the Menlo Park campus is a compound decidedly separate from the city of Menlo Park.

VOLUNTARY PRISONERS

In his thesis *Exodus*, architect Rem Koolhaas, the co-founder of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), explores the premise of a small city being built in the center of London. Koolhaas envisioned that this city would provide infinitely tantalizing amenities that would entertain people and keep them in the new city, writing: "The

Figure 4. The Belle Haven neighborhood (Falkowski, 2019).

inhabitants of this Architecture, those strong enough to love it, would become its voluntary prisoners."[2] As people continued to migrate from London into the new settlement, London would fall into disrepair and then could be rebuilt. Facebook's campuses reminded me of *Exodus* on several occasions.

The front door of Facebook leads to a reception building through which every visitor must pass. This sole door is the only outward face among a wall of buildings that shield and protect the campus. Applying the concepts of Koolhaas's *Exodus*, the reception building acts as the "first step of the indoctrination program" and a "voluntary
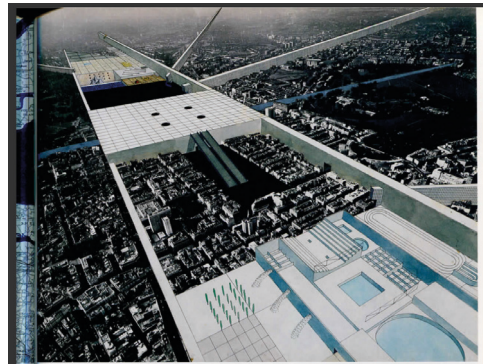

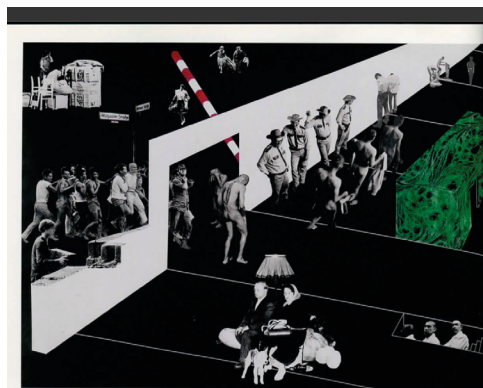Figure 5. Koolhaas's "The Strip: Aerial Perspective" (Koolhaas, Exodus, 1972).

Figure 6. Koolhaas's conception of the "Reception Area" (Koolhaas, Exodus, 1972).

public realm."[3] The building serves as a beacon to visitors, where employees meet their outside guests and help them check in; only then can employees chaperone visitors inside the campus (Figure 5 and 6).

The *Exodus* city within a city also features an area for the "frontline of the Architectural warfare" - the "Tip of the Strip."[4] The Tip is meant to be an area of confrontation. Facebook's reception building recreates this concept with the immediate restrictions it places on visitors, including us: we could not wander, let alone walk to any bathroom without being accompanied by security, and no photos were allowed inside office buildings. All of these security protocols put us on edge: why all the secrecy? What are they hiding away here?

Surprisingly, the reception building opens immediately to a heavily foot-trafficked urban street (Figure 7). The imposing building walls that shelter the campus from the outside completely melt away on the interior. Office buildings with glass facades

greet the street, a plethora of shops line the path, and people rush between buildings, stroll to get a snack, and take walking meetings with colleagues. This urban street anchors the campus and provides a small community cluster

After we finished touring the Menlo Park campus, we were shuttled to MPK. MPK comprises three buildings stitched together into a warehouse of incomprehensible production. The buildings were planned using Burolandschaft, an office planning technique from the 1960s that arranges desks into cells wedged between informal seating, houseplants, scattered conference rooms, and work pods. The pathways snake around the workspaces, making the buildings feel even larger. You cannot see from one side of the building to the other in either direction. Skylights serve as the main source of light in the space; massive cuts in the ceiling plane break up the endless array of ducts, pipes, and wires crisscrossing the exposed ceiling (Figure 8 shows a scale model of the buildings).

While wandering through the space, we saw several snack stations and cafes, two main dining areas, and several shops and vendors. Facebook is engaged in what *Exodus* calls the "hedonistic science of designing collective facilities which fully accommodate individual desires."[5] All shops and restaurants are open from eight

Figure 7. Facebook's internal urban street (Falkowski, 2019).

Figure 8. MPK scale model (Falkowski, 2019).

in the morning until eight at night and rotate through fully catered menus each week. The kicker: everything is free.

Facebook pampers its employees to ensure their loyalty to the company; they do not want employees to switch jobs and work for a competing company. Because every tech firm provides similar amenities, the companies must constantly upstage each other to recruit and retain employees. With the myriad amenities provided, there is no reason to leave the building – much less leave the job.

Halfway through our tour of the MPK campus, we were brought to the roof garden. On one side of the property is a suburb kept at arm's length by a highway and defunct rail line. On the other side are miles of salt flats and marshlands (Figure 9). The views confirmed that Facebook desires isolation. With nothing of architectural note outside the bounds of the campuses - besides miles of single-family housing - one gets the impression that employees are trapped there. The voluntary prisoners do not seem to mind.

Figure 9. MPK rooftop and Menlo Park Salt Flats (Falkowski, 2019).

A SERIES OF ROOMS

Facebook equips its buildings with top-notch amenities anchored strongly to its brand and messaging. From a broader neighborhood scale, however, Facebook's campuses sit in isolation. This conflict diminishes the success of the buildings. To discuss the tension between the internal and external ethos of Facebook's buildings, I will use phenomenology, an architectural philosophy used to define what a good place is.

Christian Norberg-Schulz was a Norwegian architect who reinterpreted Martin Heidegger's concept of *dwelling* to define what makes a good place through phenomenology. His theory revolves around the following concepts: *space*, the three-dimensional organization of a place; *character*, a place's atmosphere and the materials and details of objects within a space; *lived space*, which involves both space and character; and *place*, the combination of landscape, settlement, space, and character. Under Norberg-Schulz's theory:

space + character = lived space

and

lived space + landscape = place

In *The Place of Houses*, Charles Moore, Gerald Allen, and Donlyn Lyndon build upon Norberg-Schulz's definition of *character* via a discussion on rooms. Rooms, they argue, can be defined as "unspecified spaces, empty stages for human action, fixed in space by boundaries; animated by light, organized by focus, and then liberated by outlook."[6] The character of a room is based on its dimensions in relation to the people who occupy the space, the intended and actual uses of the space, and qualitative descriptors.

In order to critique Facebook from a phenomenological perspective, I will look at both campuses through these definitions. The original Menlo Park campus is organized as a small village of office buildings. Each of these buildings is two to three stories, organized around the interior urban street. In the center of the Menlo Park buildings, there is a plaza that acts as the

heart of campus and hosts many outdoor activities throughout the day. The plaza and urban street feel lighthearted and honest, which contributes to a feeling similar to that of an idyllic small town.

The Menlo Park campus is successful in scaling up Moore et al.'s concept of rooms to an urban scale. If a room is a stage for human action and a building is a combination of rooms, a building can be considered a backdrop for human activities. If the best buildings are able to maintain a certain character between multiple rooms, then the best urban plans can tie multiple buildings together in a similar fashion. In the Menlo Park campus, the urban street is the central corridor to the 'building' and the buildings to each side of the corridor are 'rooms,' with each building offering an individual focus. In this way, the campus provides great space.

Nonetheless, the campus struggles due to the buildings' similar characters. It reminded me of sterile New Urbanist communities such as New Town in Missouri or Seaside in Florida (Figure 10). The buildings are too constrained in massing, look, and material palette. This character flaw can be partly attributed to the campus's original owner, as Facebook inherited the campus from Sun Microsystems.

The interior landscape of the campus is quaint, with small thoughtful plantings. Directly outside the building wall, however, a sea of parking surrounds the campus.

Figure 10. Seaside new urbanist development in Florida (Scott Doyon, Placeshakers and Newsmakers, 2015).

Farther outside the parking lot's perimeter are salt flats on one side and a highway secluding the campus from the city of Menlo Park on the other. The overall landscape isolates the campus from the city.

Although the Menlo Park campus is spatially strong overall, the buildings' character is eerily similar and consistent, and the isolation caused by the landscape is troubling. Each of these factors contributes to a feeling that something is off. Utopia has some cracks that point to larger underlying problems.

strong space + consistent character = average lived space

and

average lived space + poor landscape = below-average place

MPK is one massive warehouse built in three parts. The buildings rest upon piloti to allow at-grade parking. To wander around the exterior of these buildings is to always look up at an unbroken, imposing massing. MPK is cheaply built, which heightens the atmosphere of industrial production. The more time you spend inside, the smaller you feel. The amenities in this space – two cafeterias, a café in a redwood forest biome, and an expansive rooftop garden – are increasingly out of scale with the humans occupying the buildings.

At about a half-mile long, the pure scale of the warehouse makes it inherently urban. A building this large no longer needs the city. Instead, it competes with the city; or rather, it is the city.[7] The cost of bigness is a surrender to technology, the risk of becoming impersonal, and the risk of occupants losing autonomy. The Burolandschaft planning style creates an uncertain path through the building, making the pathways disconnected segments to the larger organizational device.[8] Because there is no breakdown of space, there is no focus.

The *space* at MPK is overwhelming. The

> **" A failure to orient or a failure to identify creates a feeling of placelessness."**

dimensions are far from human scale, the placement of the buildings' office furniture is hectic and seemingly random, and the combination of bigness and busyness renders foci or repose impossible.

Despite the off-putting size, the *character* remains fresh throughout the building. Because the building is so large, the interior design can tackle spaces as biomes. These biomes are variable and interesting, and they effectively communicate when you have transitioned spaces. The trouble is that visitors don't know where that space is in relation to anything else.

While the interior *landscape* of the building is disorganized due to the Burolandschaft style, the rooftop garden is calmingly isolated. The rooftop mirrors the biomes of the interior with a myriad of plant types. MPK suffers from isolation like the Menlo Park campus, with highway, salt flats, and train tracks separating it from the city.

MPK's space is industrial and distracting, the character is completely inconsistent, and while the interior landscape is messy, the exterior landscape aids in repose and refocusing. Different factors again contribute to larger underlying problems

overwhelming space + strong character =

average lived space

and

average lived space + below-average

landscape = below average place

According to Norberg-Schulz, to *dwell* is to be located in space and exposed to that local environment's character. To dwell, a person must be able to both orient within and

identify the place from the outside. To orient is to know where one is; to identify is to understand a certain place and the place's distinct characteristics. A failure to orient or a failure to identify creates a feeling of placelessness.[9]

As the office becomes the employees' primary place, they cannot orient with aspects of the office in relation to the outside world; they cannot *dwell* and, therefore, they may feel placeless. In buildings like MPK 20, 21, and 22, an employee cannot see outside in any direction. In Menlo Park, building walls surround all sides. With no external structure to connect to, the landscape is deprived of meaning as an extension of something larger, and one is left attempting to find meaning within a network of man-made elements.[10] A sense of placelessness occurs as people do not interface with the environments and communities outside of the office walls.

Equally problematic from a phenomenological perspective is the abundance of technology. The massive presence of technology in the Facebook buildings has deprived them of their unique characteristics, rendering them placeless. Moore et al. call the emphasis on technology the "machine domain."[11] This domain consists of the spaces required by machines, the clear spaces surrounding machines, and other fixed objects needed for particular mechanical acts. As technology continues to advance, we surrender the human domain to find room for updated technology. The presence of technology in Facebook's buildings overrides unique characteristics and creates a feeling of placelessness.

A comparison of the two campuses demonstrates how Facebook's understanding of space has evolved since renting in 2006, until acquiring Menlo Park in 2011, and expanding into MPK in 2018. Since both campuses are in the same landscape, the major difference between

them is their space and character. While both campuses are similar in height, the differences in their buildings' width and length, material palettes, and overall campus planning create two separate building languages.

In Menlo Park, although the urban street is interior to the campus, it is still on the outside of its buildings, thereby uniting a series of buildings along a spine. This creates a feeling reminiscent of a quaint village. While isolated, the village is easily understood by first-time visitors. In contrast, by moving the urban street into the interior of the campus and snaking it confusingly through the buildings, MPK creates a separation between those who know the space and those visiting. The difference represents an evolution of thinking among key decision makers at Facebook: they aim to give preference to the workers and their work and to discourage interfacing with the public. This evolution is not a positive contribution from an urbanist standpoint.

FUTURE OF WORK? THE WILLOW VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

Facebook has chosen to continue development in Menlo Park. The Willow Village project has been in the works since a 2011 charrette followed by a 2017 initial proposal. Facebook is looking to pick the project up again in 2020, now with a developer in tow.[12, 13] The project plans to take over the existing Menlo Park business district by building 1.75 million square feet of office space, 1,500 housing units, 200,000 square feet of retail, and a hotel with between 200 and 250 rooms on a 60-acre site.[14] This new development is a double-sided coin: positive growth for both Facebook and the City of Menlo Park at the cost of homogenizing the professional population and furthering Facebook's monopoly of the local job market.

Phenomenologically, the Facebook campuses evoke strong senses of place as destinations themselves. However, these places cannot integrate with their surrounding context because they have isolated themselves from it. The offices at Facebook provide amazing amenity space and interesting programs but are inaccessible to a larger public.

The public investment and infrastructure work the City has asked Facebook to undertake also directly benefit Facebook's corporate brand: the public works Facebook has taken over support the company's private infrastructure as much as the town's.[15] In the developer agreement for Willow Village, Facebook only needs to perform several obligations to "investigate the possibility of" a tunnel underneath a major road, to restripe nearby bicycle lanes and crosswalks, and to develop new paths and trails.[16] The City has endowed Facebook with the right to develop Willow Village with very limited obligations to the public.

Facebook does not have to worry about the impact of future development on the City's public facilities, including, but not limited to, city streets, water and sewer systems, utilities, traffic signals, sidewalks and curbs, gutters, parks, and other City-owned public facilities that may benefit the property and other properties in the city.[17] As long as Facebook can make a case that it benefits the property and surrounding properties, the new development can go ahead without any fear of projected futures.

These problems have already manifested themselves in Facebook's role as a miasma suffocating local business. Because the company provides all amenities for its employees, they have no reason to leave the confines of the office and invest in the local economy. The local job market has also experienced less demand for non-tech, non-creative class workers, and therefore it devalues mixed professions. It also manages to gentrify the area as the market becomes saturated with tech employees.[18, 19, 20]

🟥 campus	🟨 residential	🟦 phys. boundary	⬛ rail	⬜ parking
🟩 business	🟧 institution	⬛ highway	⬛ roads	

Figure 11. Willow village neighborhood layout (Falkowski, 2020).

The development agreement tries to tackle these issues but does so in a half-hearted way. According to the agreement, Facebook must purchase from local vendors only if they have competitive quality, price, and terms.[21] Thus, this requirement can be easily avoided.

The Willow Village development will double the 1.8 million square feet of office space in Menlo Park, introducing 8,700 more employees to reach a new total of 18,000.[22] The mixed-use development will bring in different professions, but the increase in Facebook employees will offset that diversification. The entire population of Menlo Park sits at 32,000 as of 2010, meaning that Menlo Park risks being majority-ruled by Facebook employees.[23] This will pose a challenge to existing communities whose interests are not tied to Facebook. Moreover, the development

will host only 1,500 housing units; this will not meet the needs of incoming employees and will further exacerbate the housing affordability crisis.[24]

Paradoxically, the City of Menlo Park is guaranteeing Facebook entitlement to to tax credits equal to all taxes paid, without limitation, for on-site retail operations' sales taxes. The City is also granting this credit to all future taxes.[25] These massive tax incentives encourage continued investment from Facebook, but by investing a lot of local revenues into one basket, this action chokes off other local economies. It also increases risk for the City if tech companies as a whole, or Facebook specifically, declines.[26, 27]

On a positive note, Facebook is beginning to learn from and address its previous shortcomings regarding building typology diversity. The Willow Village project will

include a four-acre public park on a portion of the site near both a middle and high school, a full-service grocery store, and a pharmacy, all of which will be within walking distance and open to Bell Haven, the nearest neighborhood. Willow Village's emphasis on mixed uses will bring typological diversity to the architecture of the city and will be a big step away from Menlo Park's overall suburban development model up to this point (Figure 11).

The Willow Village development is a step – albeit small – in the right direction. Aggregations of single-use projects do not promote socially diverse, environmentally sensitive, and economically sustainable communities.[28] Norberg-Schulz recognizes that a place that is fitted for only one particular purpose will soon become useless, and it seems Facebook is becoming wise to this as well.[29]

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

I have used Facebook as an example of larger trends in the technology sector, including an approach to campus planning that leads to community isolation, impressive campus design that only looks inward, buildings that have fully stocked amenities and programs that veer towards the generic or overwhelming, and developments that have negative impacts on local communities. With these major problems identified, I conclude with potential solutions to these problems.

Between building and urban scale, the foremost need of the campuses is to deal with isolationism. American Pragmatism defines a public sphere as a discursive arena separate from the state and the economy, a space of democracy that everyone can enter.[30] Isolating the community from the company means there is no in-between space to open up public discussion and debate. The lack of exchange opportunities, where a city is

explored through a transect of places for social encounter, is one way to critique Facebook.[31] The theory of exchange opportunities assesses if there are ample places throughout the city that allow these discursive arenas to exist. Such public spaces do not currently exist in Menlo Park.

The ideas of the public sphere and exchange opportunities are crucial for American Pragmatism. The theory encourages cooperation through pluralism, recognizing that people will not share beliefs and will necessarily be in conflict with one another. Public discourse allows for self-reflection, democratic organization, and effective social policies.

> " Public forums and encouragement of healthy public discourse and debate create a richer urban environment that would encourage interaction of the public and private sphere."

When tech campuses seclude themselves, they deny exchanges with the city and its communities. They also deny a public discourse that arises from those exchanges. The employee population is too homogenous to participate in exchange opportunities between ages, professions, and experiences in the public realm. Public forums and encouragement of healthy public discourse and debate create a richer urban environment that would encourage interaction of the public and private sphere.

At the building scale, architects need to reconfigure and reconsider the machine domain. Moore et al. understand that when machines receive more careful attention than humans, buildings become not a place to dwell but a setting for equipment.[32] The

Menlo Park campus hides its machine domain well; machines do not consume the buildings. MPK, however, suffers from the machine domain. The difficulty, then, is the necessity of machines in the type of work that Facebook undertakes. This is especially important in the Willow Village development. With new building typologies come new machine domain typologies. It is important to balance infrastructural loads and human needs, which can be achieved through potential public-private collaborations.

Enacting these suggestions will lead us closer to everyday space: "The juxtapositions, combinations, and collisions of people, places, and activities create a new condition of social fluidity that begins to break down the separate, specialized, and hierarchical structures of everyday life."[33] These suggestions advocate for dissolution of the current boundary between the technology sector and the rest of us. Despite the existing problems at Facebook and other tech campuses, I am hopeful that the Willow Village development will set a precedent for more positive tech-driven urbanization practices.

Ironically, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture is working with Facebook on Willow Village.[34] Koolhaas has a very real ability to prevent his thesis from coming to life: "The existing physical structure of the old town will not be able to stand the continuing competition of this new architectural presence. [The city] as we know it will become a pack of ruins."[35] The design decisions executed in Menlo Park and MPK do not achieve phenomenological place but instead opt for isolation. These decisions have thus far set a stage for *Exodus* to occur. As Facebook prepares for Willow Village, it has an opportunity to reverse that trend. Other tech giants should take notice because the lessons learned from the Willow Village project will impact the future of the Silicon Valley urbanist model.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Falkowski grew up in Central Massachusetts and has spent the last eight years in the Midwest. He attended Washington University in St. Louis for his undergraduate studies, worked in Wisconsin for two years, and is currently pursuing his Master's of Architecture at Taubman College at the University of Michigan. Ed is interested in the intersection between architecture and urban design; his work interrogates the various scales of building, neighborhood, and city.

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