

Can Silicon Valley kick the sprawl habit?

America is a nation of office parks. Low-rise compounds surrounded by seas of employee parking are fixtures of the suburban and exurban landscape. Usually located miles from the nearest downtown and accessible only by car, this sprawl-intensive development pattern usually comes down to expedience: That's where space is available and where the rent is cheapest.

In Silicon Valley, though, the preference for office parks is more deeply imprinted. During the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, as the region's tech industry grew, executives found they could quickly snap up standard-issue office buildings as business ramped up, and offload them when things got rocky. The large floor plates of these buildings allowed for easy collaboration, seen as a big advantage in the tech world. Self-contained campuses fulfilled the need for security in an industry where IP is all-important.

Over time, these real-estate practices were baked into a culture that emphasizes "churn," a dynamic of rapid growth and decline. The result: a fragmented, auto-oriented landscape that puts a heavy burden on the environment and society...

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