Recent headline-grabbing corporate headquarters designs for Apple, Google, and Facebook have something in common: The classic Silicon Valley suburban office campus has not only morphed into a larger, more impressive animal, but it is taking on subtle, critical shifts that are influencing change in corporate campuses everywhere. Today's office buildings are designed for productivity, efficiency, and workplace collaboration, as are their site plans and landscape architecture. Now, an additional focus has made a major impact on Silicon Valley workplace design, both inside and out: urbanism.

Urbanism goes beyond downtown
Workers don't want to spend their days in an isolated suburban office park. As much as it served Silicon Valley so well for decades, the low-rise, low-cost office building surrounded by easy in-and-out parking is deadwood on corporate real estate balance sheets.

Employees today thrive on interaction and collaboration, and those basic human traits are motivating workers to seek out companies with more urban-oriented offices that meet those needs. Workplaces in the thriving, walkable parts of San Francisco’s downtown, SOMA, Transbay, and Mid-Market areas are attracting employers such as Salesforce, Twitter, Autodesk, Adobe, Lending Club, Yelp, and Zynga.

How can the traditional suburban and Silicon Valley campus compete?
Landscape urbanism is one approach. Campuses designed through a landscape urbanism lens maintain the green, inviting elements of traditional planning but add critical components of urban life. Landscape urbanism suggests that facility designers start the process from an understanding of the land and natural systems, and then literally and figuratively, build on them.

In a variety of workplaces throughout the South Bay, corporate real estate directors and developers are changing the standards of the corporate campus — urban and suburban alike — from one dictated by the car and an interior-focused workplace, to one of landscape-driven, locally resonant urban design. These workplaces incorporate a sensibility to their individual settings while maximizing the opportunities of sustainable design, ample public space, and local infrastructure.

From concrete tilt-ups to Silicon Graphics
While Silicon Valley once relied on a workplace model of industrial concrete tilt-ups around parking, the 1980s and 90s saw a shift to a corporate campus based on the concept of clustering and shared facilities. Still providing areas for surface parking, the clustering allowed for some outdoor interaction and common spaces.

A pioneering design for its time in the late 80s, the Silicon Graphics Inc. (SGI) campus, which featured structured parking, high-density buildings, and public open space, set the stage for new trends in development. Brownfield issues decreased the site's allowable building footprint, pushing the designers to rethink strategies about parking, circulation, and open space. Plans driven by environmental requirements actually led to the understanding that working in a high-density enclave results in higher productivity. Structured parking and close-in, accessible green space allowed for new types of social interaction and a sense of community.

Those early elements of the SGI campus evolved further with Google, the next tenant.

Google began offering employees amenities such as fitness classes, increased outdoor gathering spaces, and company-sponsored cafes. The “Googleplex” quickly became a corporate campus model which, through a freer expression of space, began to address the demographics of the typical Silicon Valley worker. Employees were beginning to choose an urban life as far away as San Francisco, giving up their cars for a planet-friendly, less expensive, bike and pedestrian lifestyle. In response, and in order to attract the best possible talent, Silicon Valley companies offered shuttles to transport people to and from work, with Internet access onboard to increase and encourage productivity, and generally created an environment employees could enjoy during the long workdays.

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More urbanism in the suburbs

Today corporations are defining the next iteration suburban campus with a more urbanist approach, marrying the best of the metropolis with suburban scale and spaces. In Mountain View, Hewlett-Packard’s redesigned Mayfield Mall functioned as a new experiment in urban-oriented densities and amenities sought by knowledge workers. Taking over that facility, Rockwood Capital and Four Corners Properties completed a mixed-use office project called San Antonio Station with collaborative spaces, indoors and out, and a modicum of onsite services. Borrowing from headquarters locations in major cities, this development takes advantage of adjacencies — unlike Apple and other campuses that have to incorporate all their services and amenities onsite. Across the street from San Antonio Station is the Mountain View Caltrain rail stop, and a block beyond is a walkable, 12-acre midrise retail center offering cafes, entertainment, and services.

Elements of a landscape urbanism approach can be found in other new campuses. The Gehry-designed Facebook headquarters emphasizes a community environment, encouraging employees to enjoy outdoor public space, a rooftop garden, and cafes while respecting the historical characteristics of the site.

Does it add up? Yes. Landscape-driven urban design allows companies to create self-sustaining environments that encourage economic growth and maximize individual and collective productivity. The corporate campus — suburban, urban, and increasingly a blend of the two — continues to be a hotbed of ideas and innovation, requiring corporations, designers, and planners to shift workplace thinking to reflect cultural norms. As land in Silicon Valley and elsewhere becomes scarcer or simply unavailable for development, designers and developers must work collaboratively and creatively to do more with less: Urban, with a side of landscape. It’s the workplace menu employees want.

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Mountain View’s San Antonio Station demonstrates how today’s office settings are designed for productivity, efficiency, and collaboration using landscape urbanism principles. Employees may choose from a range of inviting spaces to meet and discuss projects, lunch, or just relax. Photo: David Lloyd, SWA