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Disruptive Design

A futuristic Silicon Valley office campus hopes to attract equally innovative tenants

By Matt Alderton

Suburbs aren't sexy. Overrun with cul-de-sacs, vinyl siding, chain restaurants, and parking lots, they're the municipal equivalent of ugly shoes: They're functional, sure, maybe even comfortable, but because they're horribly outdated, most people are embarrassed to be seen in them. The suburbs of San Francisco are no exception. And for tech companies trying to lure top talent, that's a big problem, says Scott Jacobs, CEO of **Landbank Investments**, a commercial real estate developer in Menlo Park, California.

"Companies are having a tougher and tougher time convincing employees from San Francisco to commute an hour to an hour and a half each way to spend their days and potentially their nights working in a boring cookie-cutter suburban office environment," Jacobs says. "In order to attract the kind of people they want to hire, they've got to deliver something exciting, something extraordinary."

Silicon Valley's biggest tech companies get it. Apple, for instance, will move into a new, ring-shaped headquarters designed by Foster + Partners—dubbed the "spaceship" because of its futuristic design—in 2016. In 2015, Facebook will move into a new corporate campus created by Frank Gehry, who designed it to be the world's largest open-plan office. Around the same time, Google is expected to debut its new "Googleplex," the design for which is still being tweaked by architects at Seattle-based NBBJ.

Even as companies with owned space look toward the future, however, those with leased space are stuck in the past, according to Jacobs, who says Silicon Valley developers must cater to users if they want to stay competitive. "In order to remain relevant, developers are going to have to listen to the needs, wants, and desires of large technology companies," he says. "Otherwise, they're going to miss out."

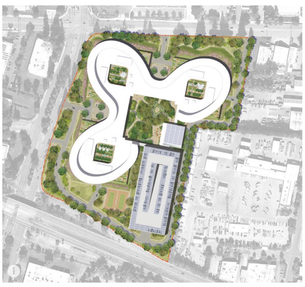
"We've set out to reimagine what a suburban technology campus can be," says Scott Jacobs, the CEO of Silicon Valley-based Landbank Investments.

Jacobs has no intention of missing out. In 2012, he made a radical decision to redevelop land his family has owned for more than half a century. By taking a new approach to an old site, he sought to set a new precedent for spec office buildings in Silicon Valley.

"A typical spec developer designs buildings that are highly flexible, relatively inexpensive, easily financeable, easily understandable, and at the end of the day, as profitable as possible," Jacobs says. "We decided to take a different approach by designing from the users' point of view. The users in this case include the company, its employees, the surrounding community, and Mother Nature."

Jacobs' grandfather purchased the 18-acre site in Sunnyvale, California, in the 1950s, when it was a pear orchard. In the 1970s, his son, Jacobs' father, developed the site into nine single-story, concrete tilt-up buildings that housed some of the pioneering technology companies that helped create Silicon Valley. Those nine buildings are notable primarily for their abundance of surface parking. There's very little open space, no sidewalks, no bike paths, no amenities, and no meaningful connection to Caltrain, the commuter rail line that runs from San Francisco to Silicon Valley and back.

"It isn't the sort of place where Silicon Valley's leading-edge technology companies want to plant a flag and set up shop," Jacobs says. "Today's technology companies are demanding a new generation of workplace environment, and that's why we think the time is right to redevelop this site."



Jacobs' vision is a LEED Platinum-certified office campus known as Central & Wolfe, named for its location at the intersection of Central Expressway and North Wolfe Road. Designed by HOK Architects, plans for the 777,000-square-foot campus include three interconnected curvilinear office buildings in the crude shape of a shamrock, a parking garage, and a two-story amenities building, inside of which would be such essentials as a cafeteria and a fitness center. Elsewhere on the campus, numerous smaller, ground-level amenities spaces include a coffee bar, general store, bike repair shop, bank, dry cleaner, barbershop, and health and wellness options.

The parking garage, supplemented by under-building podium parking, is a major feature. One reason is its roof, on top of which will be solar panels that generate at least 18 percent of the campus's energy needs. Another reason, however, is its small footprint: By eliminating surface parking, HOK preserved 53 percent of the site for open space, including a 500-person sunken amphitheater, numerous sports fields, and over two miles of on-site walking trails and bike paths.

"We didn't want to stop there," Jacobs says, "so there's also an optional 208,000-square-foot collaborative rooftop garden with an additional mile of walking and jogging paths, as well as individual seating areas for people to go outside, have lunch, gather for meetings—you name it. If our tenants decide to include that option, it will bring the open space as a percentage of the total site area to about 79 percent."

PROJECT
Location Sunnyvale, CA
Program Office space, amenities building, parking garage, open space, optional rooftop garden, transit connections
Size 777,000 ft2
Completion 2016 (expected)
Certification LEED Platinum (expected)

TEAM
Owner Landbank Investments
Architect HOK Architects
Sustainability HOK, Peter Rumsey Consulting, The Integral Group, Webcor
Construction Services Webcor
Civil Engineer BKF
Structural Engineer NishKian Menrigian
MEP Engineer The Integral Group
Lighting Banks Ramos
High-Performance Façade/Daylighting Buro Happold
Landscaping HOK Architects

Open space isn't the only feature that should appeal to Silicon Valley startups. Tech tenants also will appreciate the office buildings' 62,000-square-foot floor plates (which Jacobs calls "petals"). Because all three buildings are connected, however, the actual floor plate is approximately 208,000 square feet—a benefit to the business of innovation. "Interaction and collaboration are key drivers of innovation," Jacobs says. "When you separate people by different floors or different buildings, interaction and collaboration drop off precipitously. So the more you place employees on one highly walkable floor plate, the more you remove psychological barriers to interaction and collaboration."

Large floor plates also create more usable space and accommodate more employees per 1,000 square feet. "Because it's able to fit more employees, this campus will actually be less expensive than most Class A office buildings in Silicon Valley with smaller floor plates in terms of asking rent per employee," Jacobs says.

They do, however, pose several challenges. They're not always walkable, for instance—you can't easily collaborate with a peer on the same floor if it takes you 20 minutes to walk from your desk to theirs—and they often lack natural light. To address these challenges, HOK located the petals around a central quad that's never more than a two-and-a-half-minute walk from any single employee and punctuated each with a 15,000-square-foot courtyard that lets daylight in through interior windows.

In terms of transit, Jacobs envisions shuttle service to two nearby Caltrain stations in downtown Sunnyvale. "Plus, having so many amenities onsite will reduce the number of car trips by employees throughout the day, which will reduce traffic throughout the community," he says. Ultimately, though, it's not what the project reduces—traffic, pollution, occupancy costs—that makes Central & Wolfe so special. It's what the project creates: new opportunities for its tenants to innovate and grow.

"We've set out to reimagine what a suburban technology campus can be," says Jacobs, who hopes to commence construction this fall, with an estimated occupancy date of March 2016. "What we've come up with by bringing all these superior design elements together is the only large, developer-driven project that's going to genuinely help Silicon Valley's leading-edge technology companies attract and retain top talent, which is the biggest challenge facing tech companies today in the Bay Area."

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