

Landscrapers vs. Skyscrapers

What does the office of the future look like? The leading tech industry giants all seem to agree the main goal is “connectivity” that forges collaboration and ideation. But there are significant differences in how this manifests in the built environment. Recently, Facebook and Google have proposed or built “landscrapers” – large, elongated buildings, in both low- (Menlo Park, California) and high-density (London) cities. Others, such as Salesforce (San Francisco) and Tencent (Shenzhen) (see Case Study, page 12), have chosen skyscrapers. We asked, “Are ‘landscrapers’ a more plausible form of office building than skyscrapers for low- to mid-density cities?”

YES

Amy Webb

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In the near future, landscapers will create entirely new urban footprints in emerging low-density economic centers. There are a number of factors conspiring to push what was once a concept from the fringe into the mainstream.

For example, we’re seeing a migration from America’s popular coastal cities to those with more underdeveloped land. This is happening, in part, because it’s become too expensive to live and work in our existing major metros. When Amazon announced the shortlist for its second headquarters offices, the majority were in places like Columbus, Indianapolis and suburban Washington D.C., which have a lot more available land.

There’s another reason we can expect our future economic centers to shift inland: climate change. Our weather patterns are becoming more extreme, our sea levels are rising, and our ability to maintain elaborate structures sitting on coastlines will become increasingly difficult.

Smaller cities may have seemed unattractive before. A wider expanse of land meant more time driving in the car, which meant restaurants and shops were more spread out, which gave some the impression that nothing interesting was happening. Autonomous vehicles will ultimately bring us closer together.

Are landscapers a better option than ultra-tall buildings, that allow for a greater

density within a smaller geographic space? So far, we’ve seen an inverse correlation between density and quality of life. That brings us to architectural design. New buildings in densely-populated urban centers have no way to go but up. In our new economic centers, architects will be freed to develop new models for working and living. Recent innovations in elevator technologies, such as the ropeless elevator, will make it easier to move people and objects around. There are also autonomous vehicles that roll on the ground and fly overhead, that will soon be capable of safely transporting humans. It isn’t that landscrapers are a better option – they might very well be inevitable.

NO

Julian Chen

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The “landscaper” is nothing new. It traces its heritage back to the postwar exodus of white-collar employment to the suburbs in North America. As cities fell into decline, companies abandoned their former headquarters in urban high-rises and opted for self-imposed isolation on the periphery in the form of the “office park.”

Today, cities are where inspirations and innovations are found; they are also where Millennials feel at home. Global companies are increasingly leaving their suburban bases behind for urban centers to attract (and retain) top talent. Banking giant UBS recently abandoned its Connecticut landscaper and reinforced its presence in Midtown Manhattan.

Due to shortage of space and high land cost, being in centers of growth and innovation

entails being in a tall building. Silicon Valley is an obvious exception. Apart from projecting unprecedented power and prestige, these magnificent and highly bespoke horizontal office monuments have been created to attract high-caliber employees. Complete with their very own utopian visions with physical manifestations so remote from their surroundings, these physically isolated landscrapers often resemble stranded alien ships.

In contrast, modern skyscrapers are extroverts. They survive and strive by being firmly imbedded in the urban fabric. Towers in Manhattan have long capitalized on the subway and the ubiquitous street vendors and trendy food halls, while new supertalls in Hong Kong have sowed seeds for new transport hubs and cultural venues. Ironically, despite their heights, skyscrapers are far from being detached monuments. They reinforce urban centers by providing space and proximity to trade and urban life, which in turn creates more demand for space and proximity.

Unlike the recent headline-grabbing landscrapers, skyscrapers are speculative by nature. Fortunes rise and fall. To the detriment of local communities, diminished giants have, in the past, left behind ghosted suburban headquarters in the cycles of booms and busts. But speculative skyscrapers have a shelf life beyond their original occupants because of their spatial efficiency and connectivity to transportation and urban life. The same may not be said of empty landscrapers.