

New Business Park Topographics

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2023



Uber
Downtown, Sunnyvale, CA

Urban Action

The New Topographics: A Man-Altered Landscape

In 1974, the photographer Lewis Baltz published *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California*, a landscape photography series. The monograph does not consist of verdant and transcendental images of National Parks. It is a series of deadpan images of industrial parks sprouting up in Orange County during the suburban sprawl of the 60s and 70s.

Baltz and his monograph represent the New Topographics school, a group of photographers that came of age during the economic prosperity and social and geographic transformation of the postwar period. Suburbanization changed the landscape of America, displacing the natural environment with a man-altered variety. The generation before them represented nature as sublime (Westerbeck, 2011). The New Topographers' subject was objects found in their everyday lives. The rectilinear nature of industrial parks, tract homes, parking lots, motels, and strip malls replaced the elemental landscape of the modernists before them. Stylistically, the photos of the New Topographics reduced the built environment to a topographic state to document rather than convey beauty, emotion, and opinion, much like a U.S. Geological Survey (Sichel, 2010).

A survey of the images in *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California*, would suggest that Baltz is engaging in a dispassionate documentation of the landscape in Orange County. However, his article "Notes on Industrial Development" belies this claim. While the writing reads as an objective and repetitive report on the land-use, planning, construction, functions, and economic considerations behind the development of industrial parks, the veneer of neutrality cracks when he describes the social ecology of these developments:

"Typical environmental relations: Industries which tenant the new industrial parks are often induced to locate there by neighboring communities which regard light industry as an economic asset. Characteristics of heavy manufacturing and extraction industries, such as air, water and noise pollution, unsightly structures, and the necessity of a large unskilled labor force are explicitly absent from the new industries. In contrast, new industries tend to have substantially lower pollution levels; are housed in inoffensive, anonymous structures, often with extensive landscaping; and are staffed by a small, technologically trained labor force, earning middle to upper-middle range salaries," (Baltz, 1974).

Contrary to the artist's claim of dispassionate neutrality, the New Topographers' works have been reframed under the socioeconomic and political context that transformed the cultural and physical landscape of America. To refrain from declarations of intent, the New Topographics created pictures that some critics and viewers still consider banal and devoid of style. However, when placed within the socioeconomic context of land-use policies of the era, the catalog of images conveys an attitude towards the shift from community to consumerism (Rohrbach, 2010), the hegemony of privatized spaces (Dunaway, 2011), and the consequences of land-use policy (Salvesen, 2010).

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South wall, Mazda Motors, 2121 East Main Street, Irvine
By Lewis Baltz



South Wall, Semicoa, 333 McCormick, Costa Mesa
By Lewis Baltz



Unoccupied Sunnyvale, CA

Irvine and Sunnyvale, CA: Social Transformations and its Spatial Expressions

I called both Irvine and Sunnyvale home. There are striking similarities in certain built environment characteristics between the two: the industrial parks. The structures are single-story concrete buildings with pre-fabricated windows and doors. Overall, they are non-descript buildings where the company sign can be easily replaced.

The origins of these mundane buildings are also from the same social transformation of the 60s and 70s. Suburbanization was enabled by a constellation of laws: the Federal Aid High Act paved the autoway from the urban core to the suburbs; the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Authority enabled homeownership and created a segregated landscape in Santa Clara County (Schafran, 2018) and Orange County. The major industry shifted from agricultural to industrial, becoming the headquarters for military facilities, aerospace engineering, and technological industries and largely eliminating the need for low-wage labor (Baltz, 1974).

But in the mid-2010s, these mundane and largely unoccupied buildings in Sunnyvale began to change. I live in the medium-density residential area adjacent to the industrial and service zone (Map 1) that benefited from office tenant overflow from Cupertino and Mountain View (Wilson, 2014). With the tech industry’s growth, the City of Sunnyvale rezoned the industrial and service zone as the Peery Park Specific Plan (PPSP) in 2016. The planning framework seeks to utilize private and public investment to “enhance the beauty and vitality of this major City workplace district (The City of Sunnyvale, n.d.).

After all, cities need to compete for businesses, people, and the tax dollars that come with them.

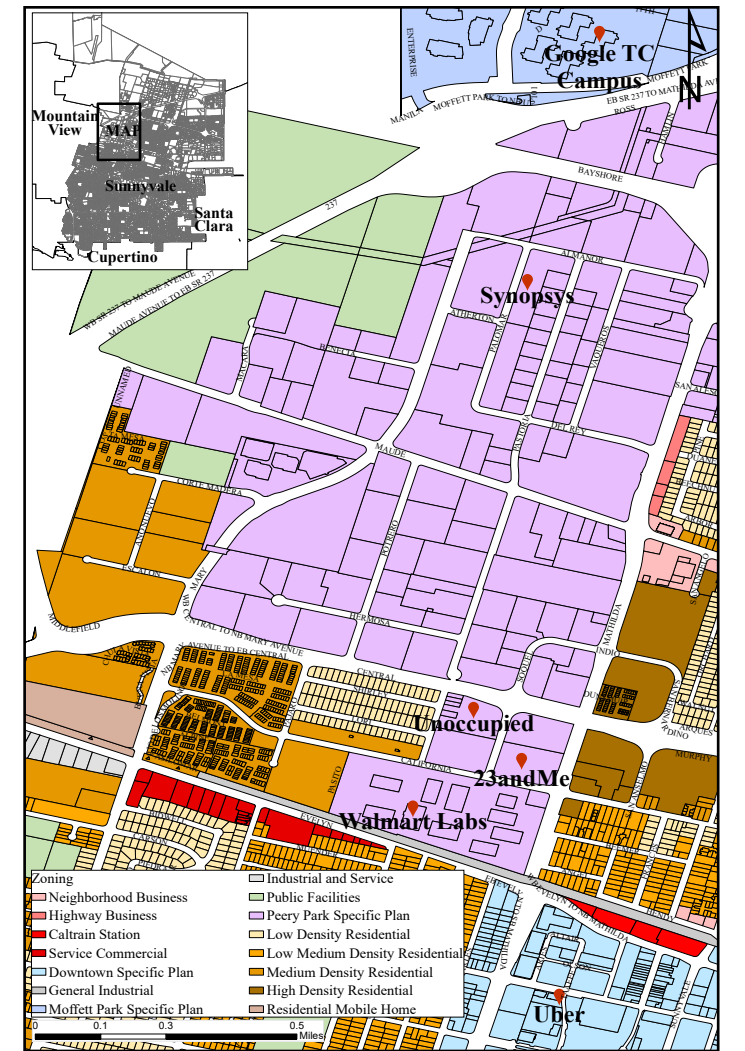
New Business Park Topographics

The uncertainty and anxiety of the pandemic was the impetus for this photo essay. I began imitating Lewis Baltz’s monograph and took deadpan images of the everyday objects of my pandemic: the parks – of the business variety – in my neighborhood in Sunnyvale. I was refamiliarizing (Iveson, 2013) myself with my neighborhood. It started in the Walmart Labs area. Then, I slowly expanded my scope into other business parks – specifically, their parking lots – that I only drove past in my car. I was reclaiming the space that, as someone with no association with these companies, excluded me.

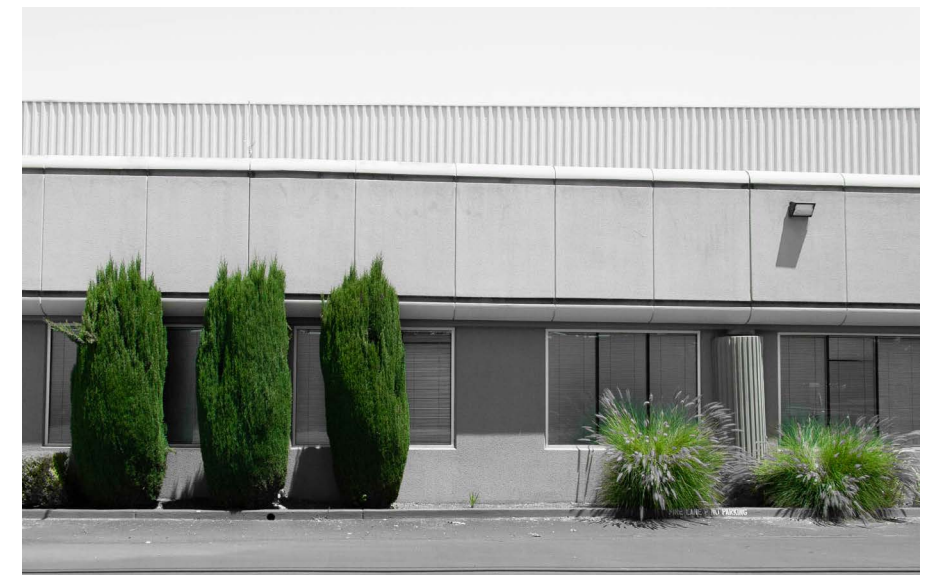
I watched the light slowly slide through the angular parking structures without worrying about people staring, getting hit by a car, or explaining to a security guard what I was doing. I would take note of the time and return to see how the sun moved the direction of the slant of the light while watching and listening to the leaves gently rustle in the wind. It was only possible because of that rupture in time and space.

Who knew that parking lots could be so verdant? It reminded me of the power nexus of tech, old money, and environmentalism that stifled housing production and perpetuated inequality in the area (Schafran, 2018). It’s probably also a sign of cities competing for tax dollars and company-private partnerships to finance much needed affordable housing in the region.

Map 1: Zoning in Sunnyvale, CA and Locations of Photos



Source: City of Sunnyvale By MJ Bark



Google Building E501, Mountain View, CA By MJ Bark



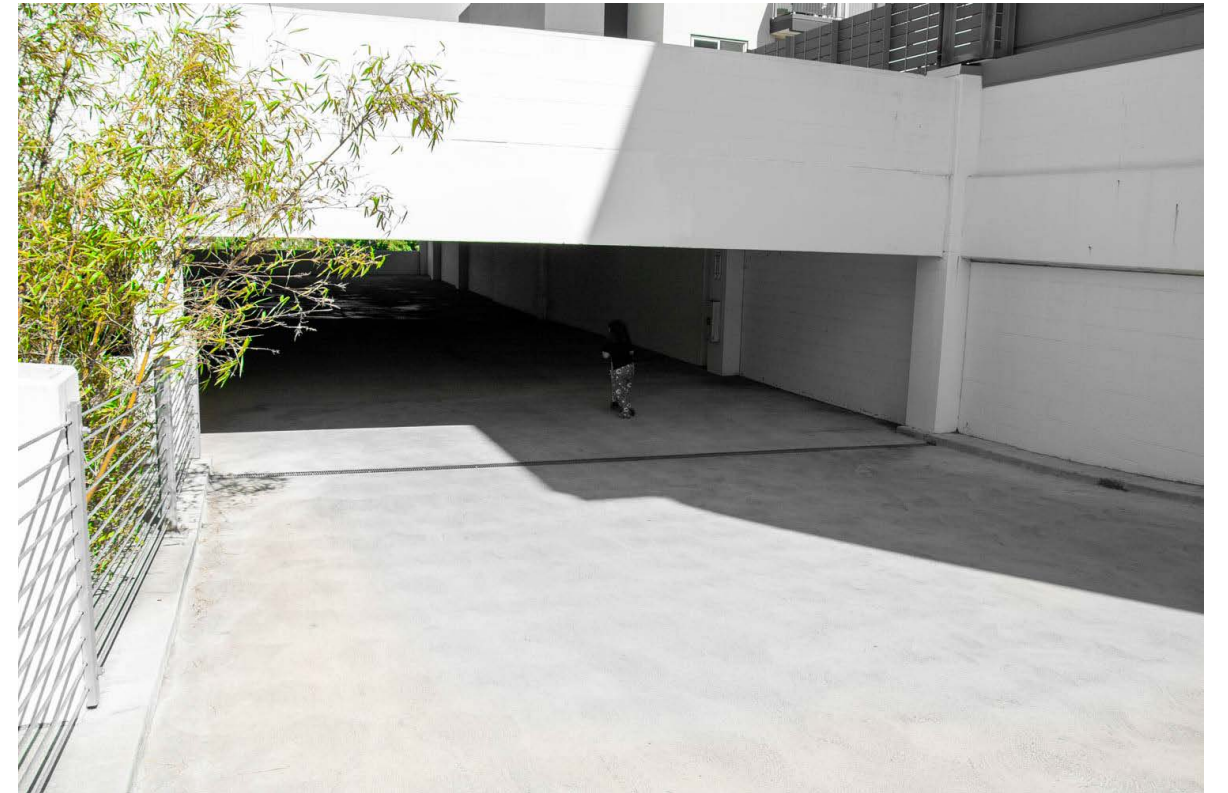
23andMe
Sunnyvale, CA



23andMe
Sunnyvale, CA



Synopsys
Sunnyvale, CA



Uber
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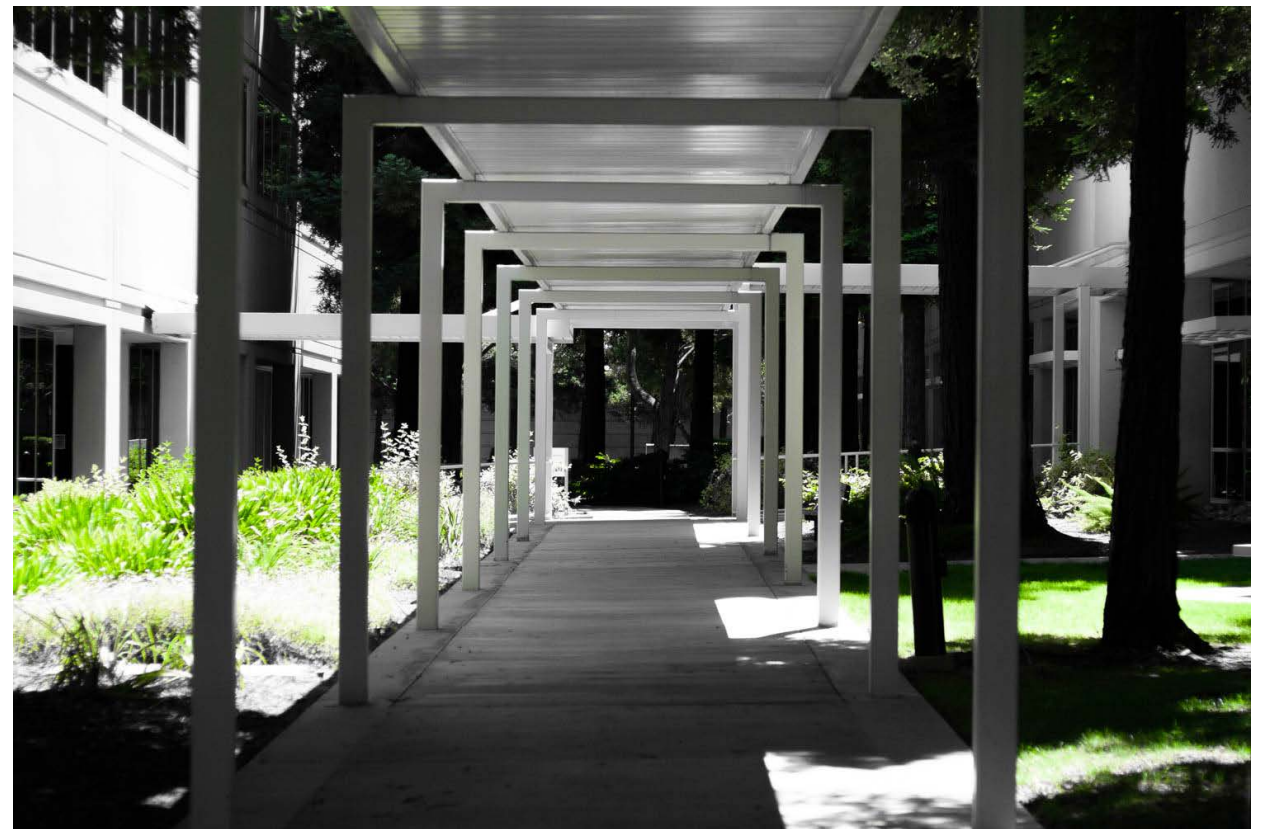
Google TC Campus
Sunnyvale, CA



23andMe
Sunnyvale, CA



Unoccupied
Sunnyvale, CA



Walmart Labs
Sunnyvale, CA

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