Caitlin McCormick

March 26, 2021

***Big Tech Already Reinvented the Company Town Years Ago***

 In the beginning of 2021, [Facebook](https://www.almanacnews.com/news/2021/01/08/facebooks-willow-village-now-includes-giant-glass-dome-high-line-path-and-more) and [Google](https://mv-voice.com/news/2021/02/04/google-submits-plans-to-build-7000-homes-in-north-bayshore-the-largest-project-in-citys-history) confirmed plans that have been in the works for several years: they will be building housing for their employees on their campuses in Menlo Park and Mountain View, California.

If you don’t remember hearing about these plans, that’s probably because you didn’t. When they were first announced several years ago though, coverage immediately turned negative before disappearing altogether. From [The Guardian](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/11/google-as-a-landlord-a-looming-feudal-nightmare) to [Business Insider](https://www.businessinsider.com/company-town-history-facebook-2017-9) to [Bloomberg](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-07-19/what-facebook-should-know-about-company-towns) to the [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/technology/facebook-zucktown-willow-village.html.)*,* all journalists strangely seemed to converge on an identical historical prophecy: Big Tech was trying to create their own version of a company town. And these towns would fail, just as company towns always do.

In some ways, journalists are right. Facebook and Google, and even other Big Tech companies like Amazon, often behave like company towns—but not because they’ve suddenly decided to build housing for their employees. They’ve actually behaved like company towns for years.

Not all company towns were controlling, though, and not all of them failed. These comparisons from journalists vastly oversimplify the legacy of company towns in the United States. In the process they also oversimplify our current moment. In a time when Big Tech is by all accounts in need of criticism, lazy historical analogies hurt our ability to critique structures of power.

So what is a company town? And why is it so bad to be like one? Company towns can be understood as settlements where most residents are dependent on the economic support of a single company. They came into popularity in the 19th and 20th centuries; some lasted into the 1990s—which is to say they are actually recent history.

Usually company towns didn’t own the houses of their employees. This is a misconception. A better test would be: is it possible to live in a town without depending, someway or somehow, on said company? As historians like Linda Carlson have [noted](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Company_Towns_of_the_Pacific_Northwest/NE9nDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=company+towns+of+the+pacific+northwest&printsec=frontcover), most company towns were really more like camps, haphazardly built for mining or lumbar. They weren’t glamorous, and they usually weren’t powerful.

 The famous company towns name dropped by journalists were much rarer. Almost every journalistic takedown of Big Tech’s housing decision mentions Pullman, Chicago. In the 1880s, George Pullman of the train car fortune constructed a pristine red brick city for his employees. He hoped that if his workers were surrounded by beautiful facilities, rather than urban crime, they would [adopt](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23355812?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=The+Paradox+of+a+Capitalist+Utopia+Visionary+Ideals+and+Lived+Experience+in+the+Pullman+Community+1880%E2%80%941900&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DThe%2BParadox%2Bof%2Ba%2BCapitalist%2BUtopia%253A%2BVisionary%2BIdeals%2Band%2BLived%2BExperience%2Bin%2Bthe%2BPullman%2BCommunity%2B1880%25E2%2580%25941900%26acc%3Don%26wc%3Don%26fc%3Doff%26group%3Dnone%26refreqid%3Dsearch%253A4a1814dbb6260bfefe2a1fcaa18e3564&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Ab0336835575b5347f32991397597ffac&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) his own ideas about morality and hard work. (Spoiler alert: this situation resulted in one of the most famous strikes in American history in 1894.)

While both scholars and journalists have decided that Pullman was a failure, he wasn’t alone in thinking his city-upon-a-hill might work out. In 1907 a group of New York urban reformers put on an [exhibition](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Building_the_Workingman_s_Paradise/0tePM56xz-UC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=company+towns+of+the+pacific+northwest&printsec=frontcover) that showcased the evils of congestion in New York City. Their call to action? For companies to construct modern industrial villages, AKA towns.

Hoping to learn from Pullman, Carnegie Steel strategically placed their plant outside Pittsburgh city limits and decided not to build housing for their employees. Consequently, real-estate speculators caused unsafe housing growth around the mill, leading eventually to a strike. In 1910, with pressure from the Charity Organization Society, Carnegie Steel constructed housing. This is to say that plenty of the time, company towns have been conceptualized as real solutions to real problems, even as they sometimes created new problems.

Then tactics changed. Activists and experts during the Progressive era advocated for a new management style designed to de-incentivize labor organizing by providing welfare-like benefits. In lieu of housing, companies began to institute lunchrooms, bathhouses, locker rooms, athletic facilities and recreational programs in their factories. Company towns didn’t need to provide their employees with housing in order to structure their daily lives.

 Facebook and Google are not just seeking to build housing for their employees. They are, like Pullman, seeking to build state-of-the-art developments, both of which will be the largest in their region’s histories. Facebook plans to [convert](https://www.almanacnews.com/news/2021/01/08/facebooks-willow-village-now-includes-giant-glass-dome-high-line-path-and-more) 59 acres of its current campus into Willow Village: 1,729 housing units, 1.25 million square feet of office space, a 193-room hotel, a shopping space, a grocery store, a large neighborhood park, a dog park, a town square, and a pedestrian path similar to New York City’s highline. Google will [build](https://mv-voice.com/news/2021/02/04/google-submits-plans-to-build-7000-homes-in-north-bayshore-the-largest-project-in-citys-history) at least 7,000 new homes and 1.3 million square feet of office space on its campus in North Bayshore.

In doing so, Google and Facebook hope they will address their own urban planning problems: minimizing pollution and traffic, and mitigating their impact on Silicon Valley’s housing shortage. As John Tenanes, Facebook’s vice president for real estate, told [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/technology/facebook-zucktown-willow-village.html.), “We’re solving a problem here.”

 But Facebook and Google have also permanently incorporated the Progressive-era management style into their company cultures. They redefined the corporate welfare experience: on their current campuses, employees receive benefits like free gourmet meals and snacks, on-campus barbers, bike repair shops, dental and healthcare services, valet parking (with charging stations for electric vehicles), dry cleaning, an arcade, and even their own public transportation with wifi. Still, you would be hard-pressed to find negative press coverage of these amenities.

In other types of company towns, the company simply intersected with so much of daily life as to be unavoidable. In DuPont, Delaware, the company owned both major [newspapers](https://www.cjr.org/fiftieth_anniversary/case_history_wilmingtons_indep.php), and its executives sat on all prominent college and community [organizations](http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015008607585). In Dearborn, Michigan, the police [department](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Company_Town/RHD0Z_AiR58C?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=hardy+green&printsec=frontcover) was led by a former member of Henry Ford’s private police squad, who took his orders from Dearborn’s mayor—a cousin of Ford.

Big Tech also already has a big footprint: Facebook’s campus covers more than 250 acres. Amazon occupies 40 buildings in Seattle. It is safe to say that it would be impossible to live in these cities right now without somehow interacting with these companies. We don’t currently know the specific social milieu of what it is like to live in these areas though, like we do with Dearborn and DuPont, because journalism hasn’t prioritized it.

Journalists cannot undo how much Big Tech impacts our daily lives already. They can and should continue to cover Willow Village and North Bayshore though, while paying attention to the people already on the ground—will these projects actually help overcrowding? Will they add tax dollars to their communities? Will they intensify the level of surveillance employees experience? The question is not whether Facebook and Google are company towns. They are. Now, we need to start covering them accordingly.