

Trade Secrets: An Architectural Enclave

ASHLEY BIGHAM

University of Michigan

Raoul Wallenberg, a 1935 graduate of the University, has been called one of the 20th century's most outstanding heroes. He is credited with saving tens of thousands of Jews from extermination at the hands of the Nazis and Fascists in the waning days of World War II. Each year, students in their final studio of the BS in Architecture degree participate in the Wallenberg Studio, which honors the legacy of Raoul Wallenberg through an overall studio theme focused on a broad humanitarian concern, explored through propositions put forward by studio section faculty. Students are challenged to question architecture's relationship to humanitarian issues. Trade Secrets: An Architectural Enclave focused on the intersection of architecture and ethics by exploring the architectural spaces and working conditions of one of America's largest corporations, Amazon.com. This studio took the position that we need to look no further than our own backyard (or computer) to find spaces where architecture can have a meaningful impact on the humanitarian issues of today. Students in this studio explored themes ranging from workplace discrimination and income inequality to the transparency of corporate headquarters and workplace surveillance. Students uncovered the deep reach of Amazon.com, which includes data storage for the NSA, delivery drone programs, and growing consumer information banks. The studio included a field trip to a 1-million-square

foot Fullfillment Center so that the students could experience the vast, endlessness workplaces inhabited each day by thousands of Americans.

Mission Statement: This studio will explore the architecture of secrets.

Warning: Students who elect this studio should be prepared to explore an architecture of secrets, whispers, miscommunications, optics, and political strategies.

Background: Our lives are filled with enclaves. We move seamlessly from gated communities and shopping malls to office parks and airports. Architecture has often obsessed over the enclave. From Michel Foucault's heterotopias to David Grahame Shane's armatures and Keller Easterling's zones, architects have interrogated the enclave as an architectural glitch in the spatial system.

This studio will explore one of the most fascinating mutations of the modern enclave: the corporate campus. Participants of this studio will delve into the inner workings of one of the largest, most well-known American companies, Amazon.com. As the company's CEO, Jeff Bezos, recently stated, "Frugality drives innovation, just like other constraints do. One of the only ways to get out of a tight box is to invent your way out."

Corporate campuses as enclaves are closed systems which create their own hierarchies,

regulations and cultural practices that may or may not reflect the territories, states, or cities they reside within. Recent corporate clients have looked to famous architects to see the design of their headquarters not as a mere building design, but as a broader, ideological statement about the future of work-life balance, inclusive workplaces, information driven social hierarchies, and corporate public image. This studio will begin to challenge the status quo of contemporary corporate headquarters and create designs which consider issues such as privacy, fear, and social strata, as well utopian corporate identities.

Trade Secrets

An Architectural Enclave

University of Michigan, Taubman College
Arch 442 Wallenberg Studio, Instructor Ashley Bigham

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Introduction:
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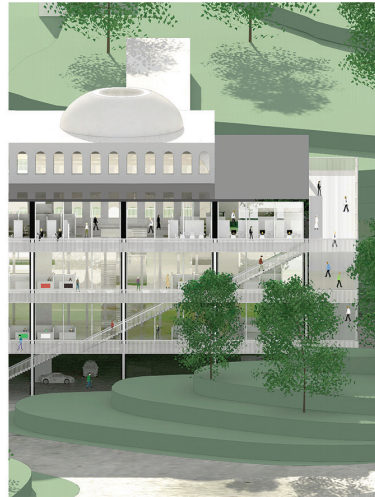
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Call to Action:
1. This studio and its participants will study typologies of enclaves: the refuge, fortress, retreat, haven, hideout, shelter, or sanctuary.
2. This studio and its participants will perform architectural actions: redaction, subtraction, fortification, concealment, removal, and addition.



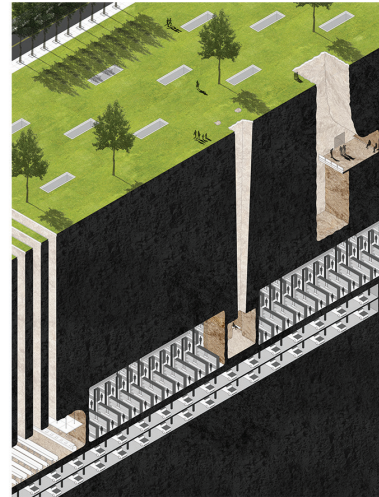
Lord Bezos
Project by [redacted]

This project is a radical rethinking of the worker/consumer in the direct-delivery economy, and considers both production and consumption within a live/work typology. Architectural precedents, religious typologies and spaces of ritual were studied. Within these religious typologies, the worker becomes an integral part of the ritual process through their labor and dedication to a cause. Applying this creed to Amazon, the worker gains purpose through the act of packing the box, the last remaining act that cannot be completed by the robots which now execute Amazon's menial tasks such as sorting and picking products from shelves. Workers pledge themselves to Amazon, living in covers atop the bottomless expanse of products and machinery that endlessly operate beneath them. This tenuous relationship between the humans above, the robots below, and the zone where the two begin to blur, becomes the place for critique and provocation.



Amazon Relocation Center
Project by [redacted]

This project attempts to harness the human resources and financial capital of Amazon.com in order to address the current Syrian refugee crisis. Amazon.com has already started a division of the company called, Amazon Handmade which competes with websites like Etsy. A new satellite workplace for Amazon Handmade is now combined with housing, religious spaces, and schools. In a combined humanitarian effort and act of self-promotion Amazon.com has created a worker's town to house and employ hundreds of Syrian refugees to harness their potential to thrive in a new, safe environment. While this project is quite serious in its attempts to create safe, secure, and comfortable housing for these refugees, it acknowledges the possible conflicts of interest which might be posed by a private, for-profit corporation taking on this social mission. This project aims to comment on the ability and limits of private companies to foster social change.



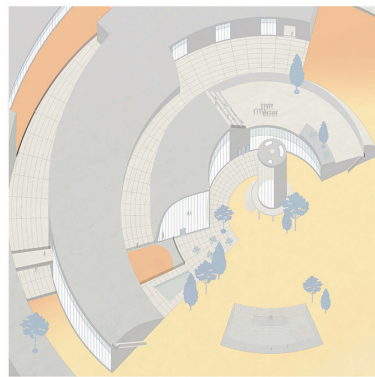
Structure as Refuge
Project by [redacted]

The typical Amazon Fulfillment Center lacks human scale and basic amenities for employees. Employees walk up to 12 miles a day with few breaks and suffer mental and physical exhaustion as a product of harsh working conditions. Rather than redesign the entire center, this project acts upon the existing center by inserting spaces of refuge that allow moments of isolation from the bustling workplace. The center is carved from the underground bedrock, creating large expanses of warehouse space supported with both steel and rock columns. Inside each rock column, a space of refuge is inserted to fulfill an employee need. Skylights in each refuge connect each worker back to the park above and transform mundane programs (restrooms, meditation spaces, entries, or dining halls) into meaningful, beautiful spaces within a sea of monotony and exhaustion.



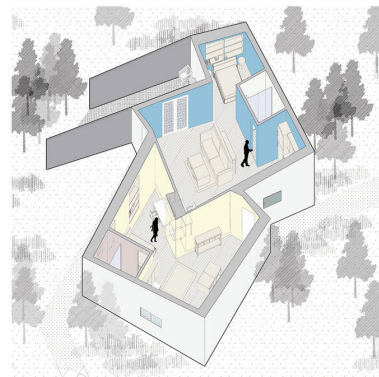
"Hacking" Amazon
Project by [redacted]

Amazon is prime for spatial hacking. Rather than tackling the entirety of their 1-million-square-foot Fulfillment Centers, this project introduces several spatial "hacks" into the Amazon system. These spaces use the leftover materials of consumerism to the benefit of the tired, overworked employees who walk up to 12 miles a day inside the Centers. Each space doubles as a program which Amazon needs (camera stand, break room, fire exit, etc.) and an alternative space (beanbag pile, green space, yoga mat, etc.) which can be used by employees.



Concentric Headquarters
Project by [redacted]

This project seeks to challenge the corporate transparency (or lack of) in the design of a new Amazon.com headquarters. The design uses concentric ring as the major ordering device to reinforce the layers of hierarchy in the corporate world. To subvert this condition, transparent materials, exterior spaces, and direct circulation paths slice through and undermine the otherwise rigid system. The building contains open offices, and unusual adjacencies to reinforce the disruption of the status quo in workplace design.



Amazonville
Project by [redacted]

Amazon has cultivated a world where people engage in limited face-to-face interactions, triggering social anxiety when forced to interact. Thus, Amazon has created a company town where people live and work in adjacent, yet secluded units. Although this environment is a refuge to people with social anxiety, limited communication occurs through a shared wall. This wall explores how architecture mediates a society that wants to remain autonomous, yet connected.