

BATTLING CORPORATE FIEFDOMS

How can learnings from the evaluation of company town developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries be applied to modern corporate-dominated settlements?

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introduction

do corporations wield more power than nation-states?

do corporations support their employees through regulations set upon them by the state?

or do they proactively create social support networks in legal jurisdictions where the state fails to do so?

Powerful corporations have previously usurped responsibilities of the nation-state, such as the East India Trading Company's control of the Indian subcontinent from in the 19th century. Corporate domination is more than a social phenomenon. It also manifests architecturally, through the infrastructure it occupies, including but not limited to warehouses, distribution centres and corporate offices.

Similarly, in the 19th century, American and British companies were responsible for creating company towns - communities that are dependent on a corporate firm for most to all of functional town life, showing that overdependence on corporations is not new. In a neoliberal economic revival, are corporations still capable of dominating non-economic spheres of life? Company towns were used as a gauge to examine to what extent companies wield influence over their employees through physical infrastructure and how company towns can be modified to reduce corporate detriment.

locations

Pullman, Chicago, IL, USA

San Bernardino, CA, USA

Googleplex, Mountain View, CA, USA

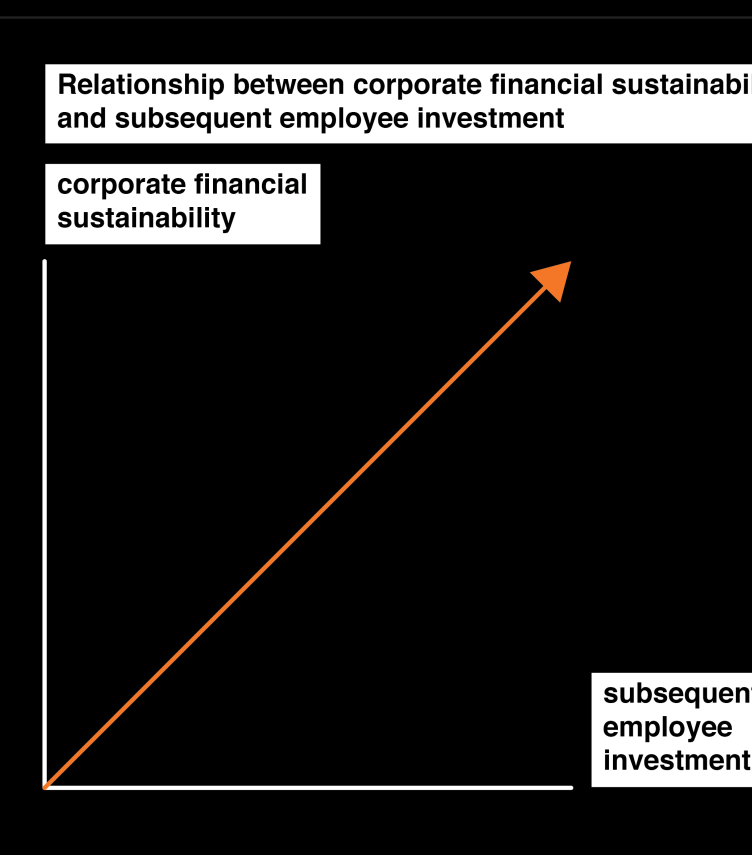
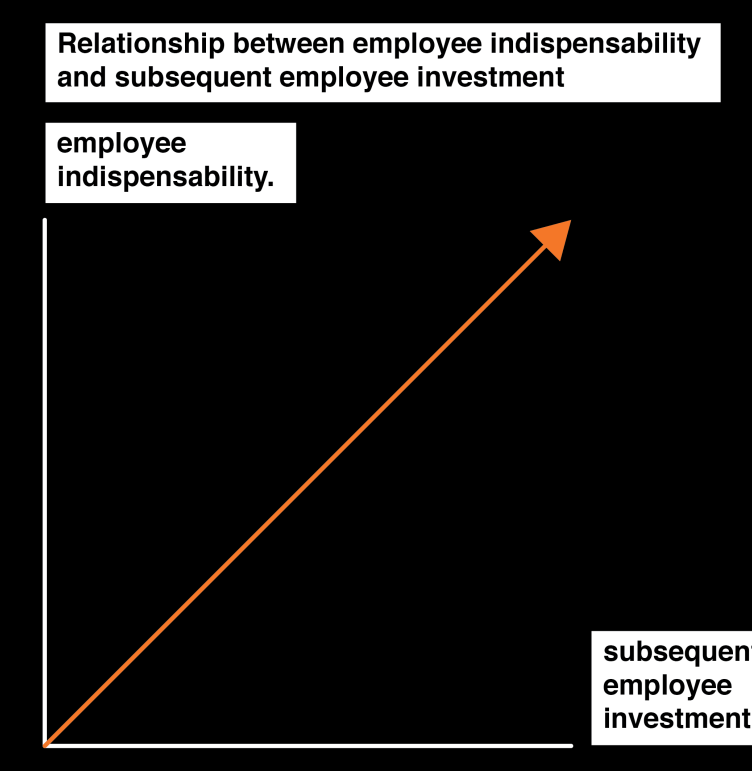
Ludwigshafen, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany

methodology

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Four company towns were identified by establishing two dichotomies of company town archetypes (*Modern-historical* and *tabula rasa-takeover*) to determine core mechanisms behind company towns. Pullman Town, Chicago, IL, USA; and San Bernardino, CA, USA were examined through in-person visits for an understanding of Pullman Palace Car Company and Amazon respectively. Studies of the area were documented via photography, videography, archive visits and hand sketches. Where visiting other locations was not possible due to circumstantial constraints, films such as *The Internship* (2013) and *Nomadland* (2021) were used as secondary study sources. Figure-ground drawings at various scales, and axonometric diagrams were the primary drawing methods in presenting research and solutions.

findings



The study scrutinised company towns to determine whether corporations provided services for employees out of a genuine concern for employee well-being, or disingenuous moves intended to meet the requirements of a functional, but juridically weakened state in both liberal and neoliberal economic periods.

The findings of this study were unexpected. Whereas the original intent of this study was to examine the effects of physical corporate infrastructure as an exercise in spatial planning, the inherent socioeconomic context behind all four case studies were nuanced and complicated, which resulted in an examination of how corporations establish control over employees through physical infrastructure. No company town is ever the same, and neither are their motives for conception. However, all company towns were created to establish and exert control over employees in one way or another.

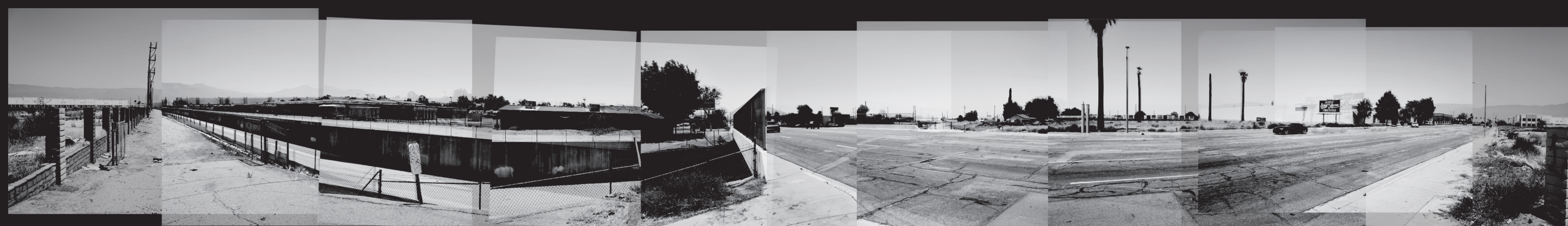
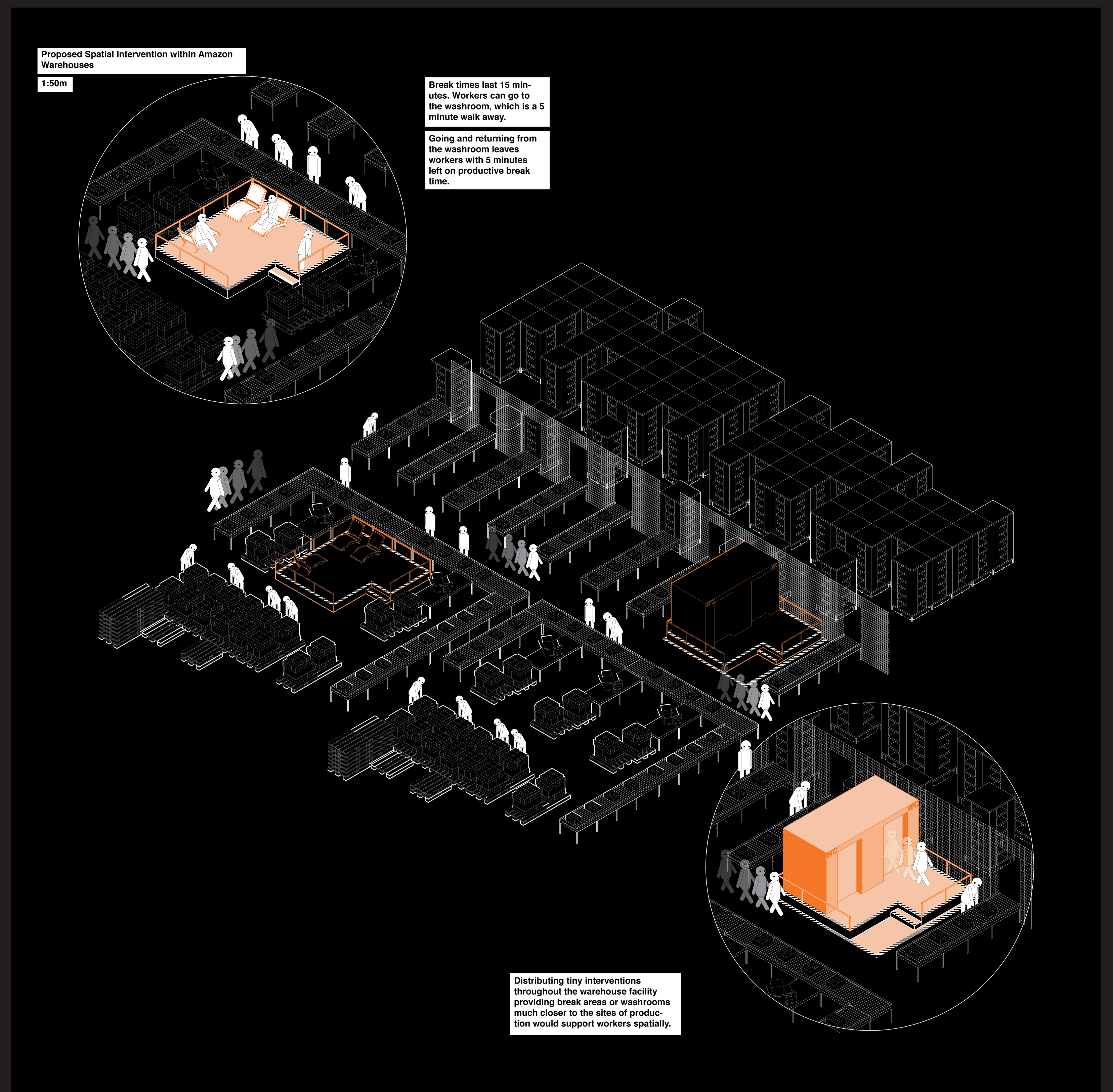
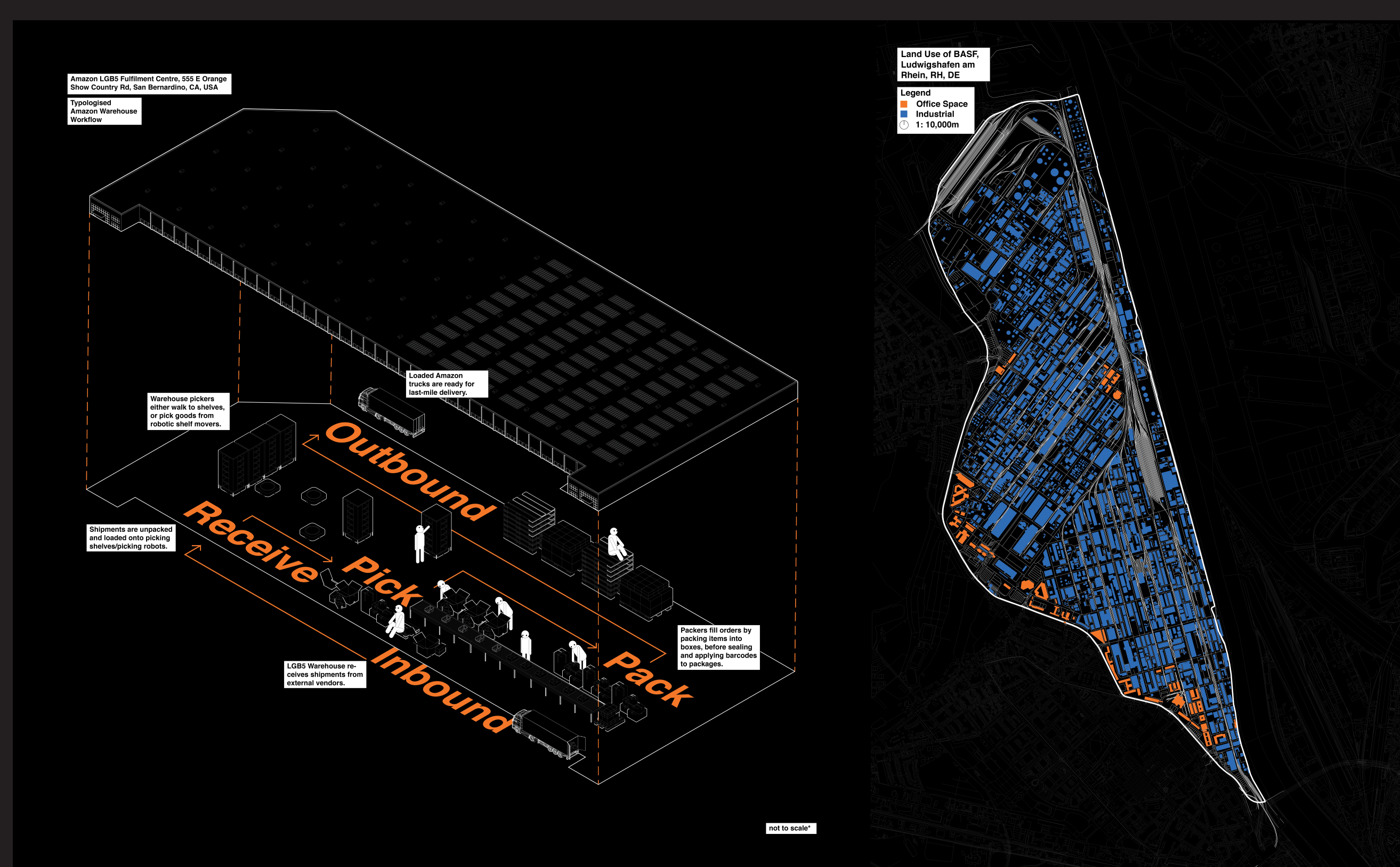
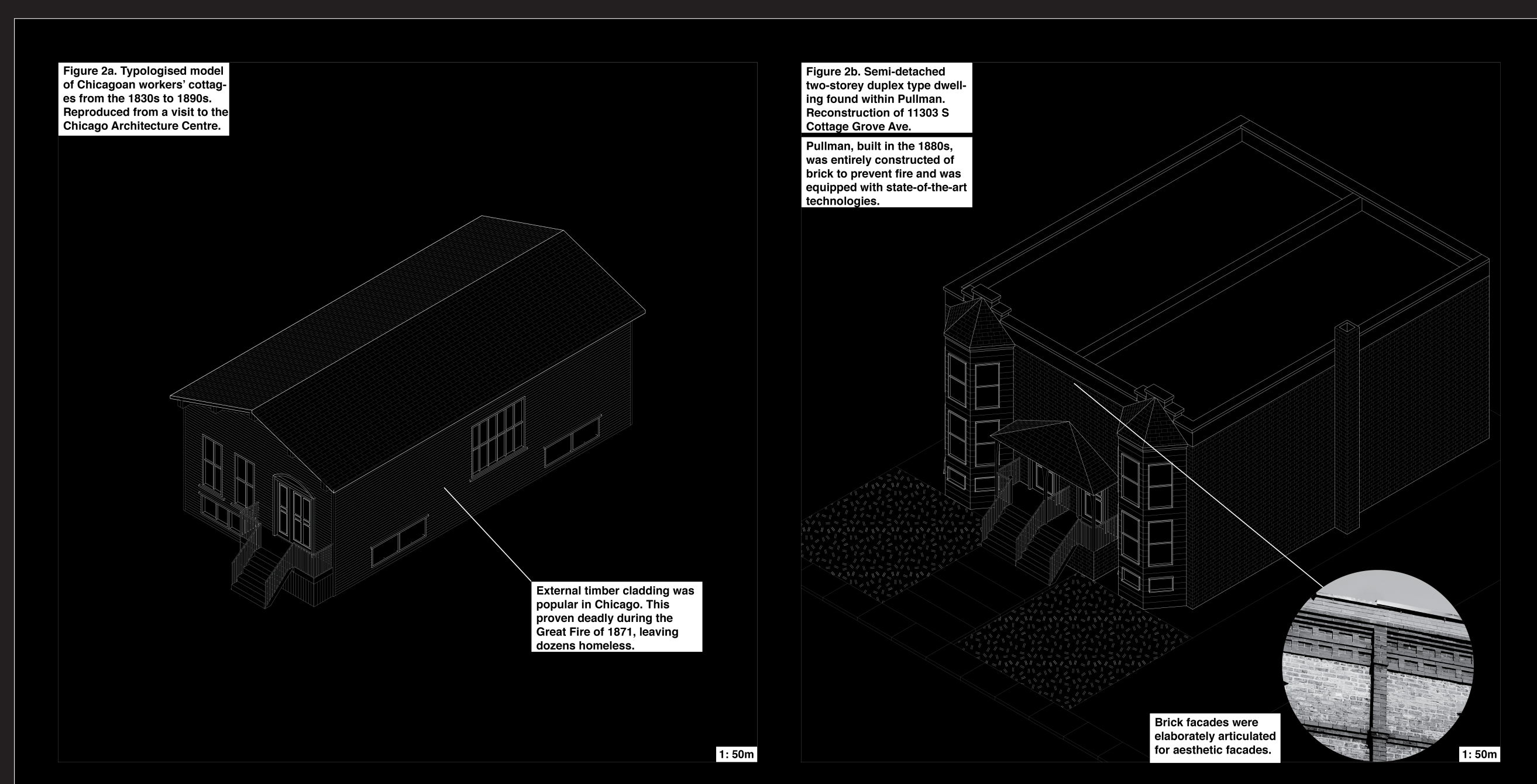
In all three American case studies, employees were viewed as vehicles for the company's maximal gain, whether through incentives or disincentives. Whether companies preferred incentives or disincentives differed via each workers' perceived value. On one end in Amazon's workforce, workers were cheap and plentiful in a transient environment. Their jobs were simple, and thus they were expendable. Amazon therefore opted for an explosive, but ultimately unsustainable use of workers. On the opposite end, the Googleplex was rated as America's best workplace for multiple years in a row with amazing benefits, recreational facilities and food. Nonetheless, this subtly coerced employees into an imbalanced work life, whereby the company itself provided the 'life' aspect to work-life balance, clearly overstepping its social responsibility. Therefore, depending on how much value employees appear to hold to the corporation, companies will invest as much as financially sustainable into their employees,

intervene interfere spatial solution

San Bernardino is identified as the most problematic example of company towns in this study and is therefore highly recommended for spatial and political interventions that will break up Amazon's labour monopsony and dignify workers. What often goes unnoticed in typical economic studies is an understanding of the relationship between physical proximity between executives and employees. In Ludwigshafen, both groups of workers were concentrated together at a site of pollution, which may have triggered the company to provide amenities and pollution measures to accommodate their executives. This resulted in ordinary workers benefiting from company services out of pure proximity.

In the short term, Amazon warehouse workers should continue to pressure Amazon into consolidating beneficial labour deals. However, change does not stop at labour organising. Amazon workers also need to diversify their skill sets or become obsolete in a robotics-dominated future, which could be supported by intensifying education programmes within the county.

However, to break up Amazon's notorious workplace culture, short-term spatial interventions can be practiced. Here, a set of micropavilions is proposed as a template for Amazon warehouses. These break areas reduce the time workers need to spend by travelling across the warehouse, and provides more frequent relief compared to Amazon's current conditions.



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