



'I owe my soul to the company store': learnings from corporatocracies

Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Programme
Experience Abroad Report

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on research conducted on company towns in 2023

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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?

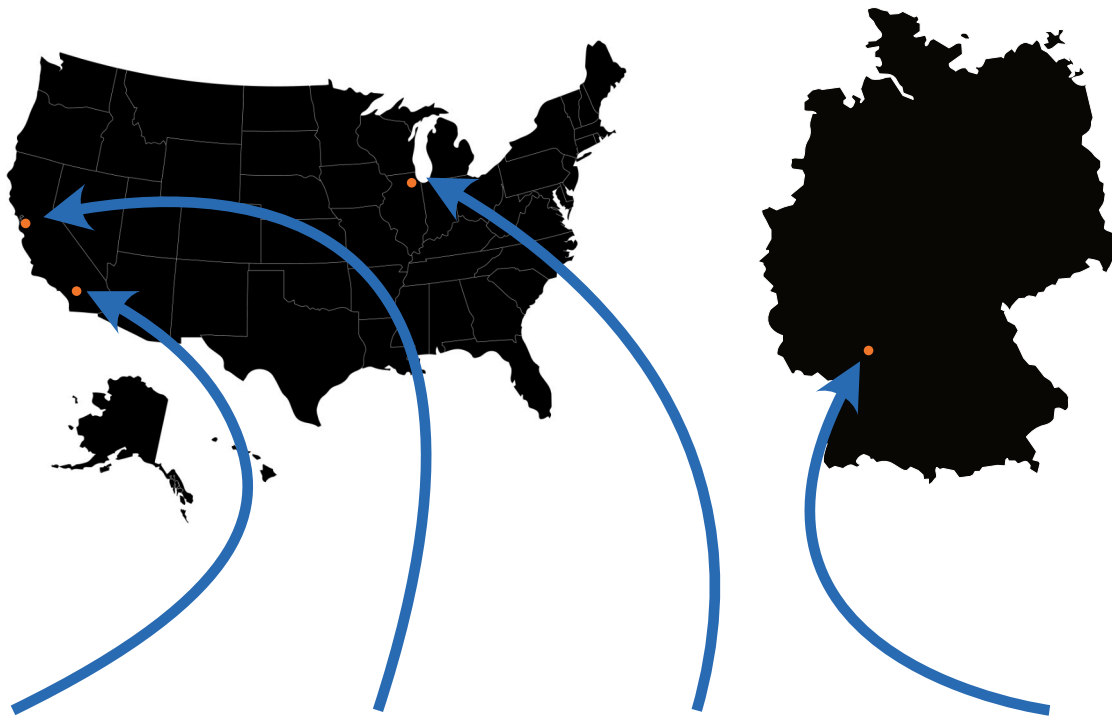
“You load 16 tons, what do you get? / Another day older and deeper in debt / St. Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go / I owe my soul to the company store...”

Lyrics from the song, ‘*SIXTEEN TONS*’ by American singer Tennessee Ernie Ford, recorded in 1955. The song is about a coal miner who works for an exploitative company, which uses a practice of issuing private company currencies known as ‘scrip’ to company workers. Scrip could only be exchanged for commodities at the company-owned store, which had virtual monopolies on prices. This put company workers into debt, essentially enslaving them indefinitely.

Do corporations possess more power than nation-states in favourable economic conditions and spatial environments?

Are corporations capable of supporting their employees through regulations set upon them by the state, or by proactively creating social support networks in legal jurisdictions where the state fails to do so?

This paper studied four case studies of company towns that employ population majorities to compare and contrast historical precedents to recommend spatial interventions.



San Bernardino, CA, USA

Silicon Valley, CA, USA

Pullman, Chicago, IL, USA

Ludwigshafen, RH, Germany

Research took place through examining historical and modern precedents against one another - by discerning company towns through a matrix of factors: *historical/modern* and *takeover/tabula rasa* towns.

Why visit?

I visited two company towns with the funds available: Pullman Town, near Chicago, where George Pullman manufactured his Pullman luxury sleeper cars in the 1890s and was the site of the largest worker strike in US history that set modern labour laws and outlawed predatory corporate practices. However, company towns have evolved since then. San Bernardino, California, was where contemporary news outlets have identified Amazon's

presence in the Inland Empire as modern-day company towns. To validate patterns of urban planning and compare changes in 200-year old history, I visited Pullman and San Bernardino with the intent of visiting and photographing towns, producing drawings, collecting historical information e.g. map data, and meeting outspoken professors on the topic. Nonetheless, I ended up meeting and learning much more than I expected.



Gulliver's travels: in America

Pullman Town's North Erecting Shop in Chicago, IL, a location where Pullman cars were assembled. However, a fire in 1998 destroyed part of the erecting shop and administrative building.

Travelling to America on my own was a new experience.

While I grew up in Hong Kong, spending early childhood years in Europe as my father worked for a German-based multinational company meant that my parents brought me to many countries in Europe: Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Italy, etc. However, this was the first time I was travelling to the Midwest and West Coast on my own. I was immersed in American culture. In addition, the towns I was visiting were both drastically different in comparison to the tourist spots I previously

frequented.

While San Bernardino went bankrupt after the 2008 financial crash, Pullman town is located in the south side of Chicago, an area that has been slowly impoverished over the late half of the last century. However, I was surprised to find that people wherever I visited were very welcoming and friendly, which exceeded my expectations. I was able to meet a variety of people, from residents from the Inland Empire, to a landlord in Pullman, and Chicagoan locals.



Historic Pullman Foundation Office, Pullman Town, Chicago IL.

One Last 'Whoo-Hoo!' for the Pullman!!

My visit to America was mostly performed as an outsider - to the neighbourhoods I visited, and as a researcher. For instance, I mainly visited Pullman with the intent of finding out how elements were structured in a planned town, as well as understanding the architectural typology involved in Pullman's design. As such, I visited to take photos and make drawings, such as the building captured in the photo above. Such architecture is unique to the area, as it was created from George Pullman's desire to build humane living conditions for his workers, to become happier, and more productive to the

company. While Pullman was disbanded as a company town after the Strike of 1894, residents continued to live in the town as ordinary Chicago citizens. While wandering the town, I met a landlord named Felipe, who originated from Mexico but owned a number of buildings in the neighbourhood. Felipe showed me around his properties, which allowed me to get a better understanding of the present demographics, as well as the interior layout of the row-houses that I was attempting to document from the exterior.

↳ lots of restrictions

↳ In search of a model town

Complaints

↳ wages → Gov to bosses

John Wick: Vice President

↳ HR: no response

Company Spotters

↳ Monitoring issues

in the town / complaints /

Gossip

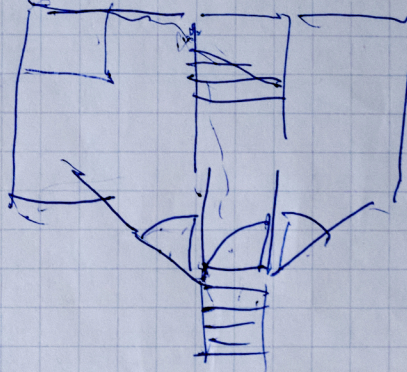
(unconfirmed)

Writer: Richard Ely → visited Pullman 1880s

↳ written 1830

1999 since, owned

bedroom



Each unit

1 bedroom

apt

↳ kitchen,

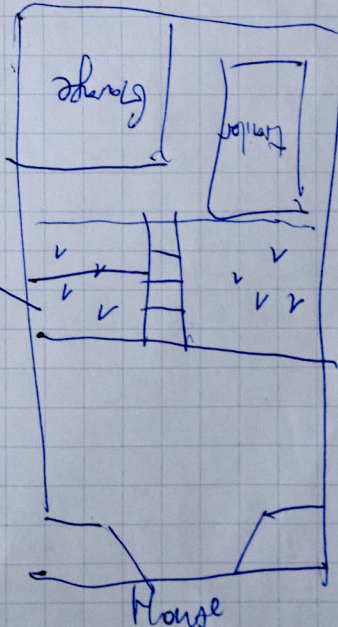
living room,

WC, bedroom

850 ~ Ma.

⑤ E114 & Champlain

ban
BSS

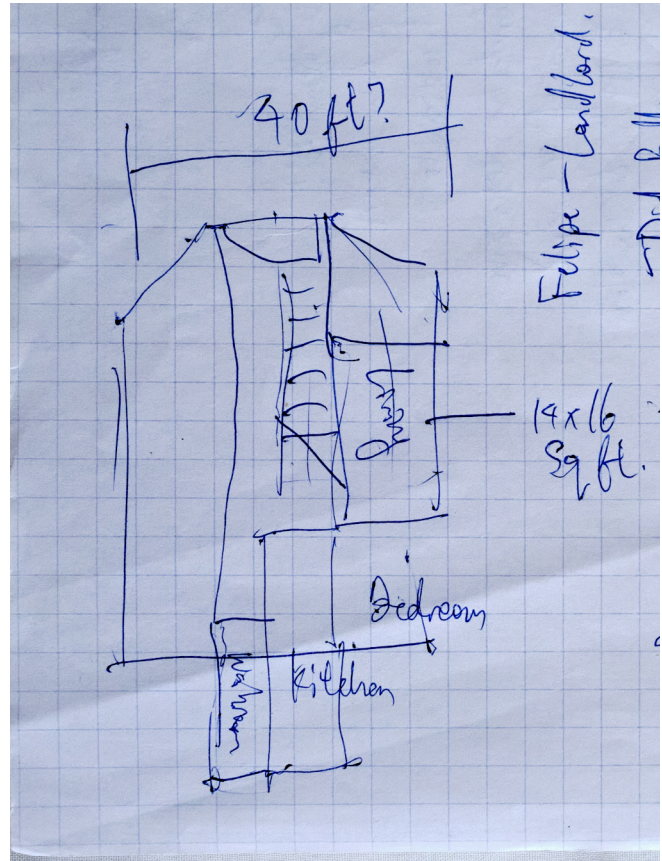


Notes and sketches made during my visit to Pullman, as well as my sketches of house interiors, and backyards that have been modified long after the Pullman occupation.

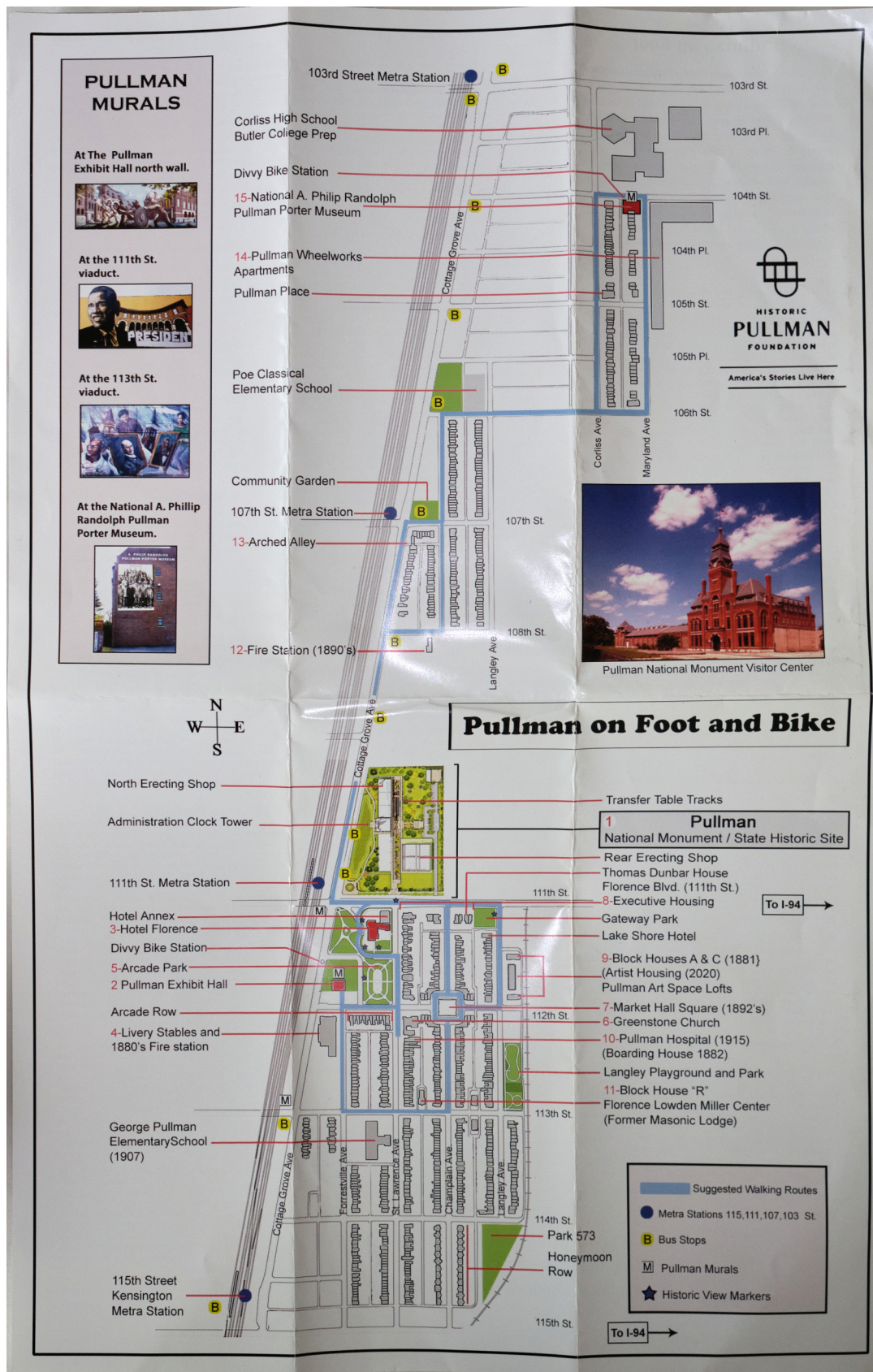
Come On! Feel the Illinoise!

My meeting with Felipe was unexpected and helped me feel relaxed in the neighbourhood. However, I came across other surrounding areas that made me realise that much of my life has been spent in stable, low-crime areas. On my second time travelling to the site, I accidentally boarded a different commuter train headed towards Chicago's South Shore, reputedly one of the city's most dangerous areas. Walking to the proper train station gave me an opportunity to understand Chicago's neighbourhoods outside the downtown core. What struck me in Chicago were the racial

demographics. In general, Chicago has a much higher black population than Toronto, and it was evident in the South Side. In addition, I noted that there seemed to be many unemployed people lingering on the streets, which is an indicator of poor economic performance. This was further supported with the neighbourhood environment. I realised that Chicago has faced strong economic disparities due to racial segregation, enforced through post-industrial histories and urban policy itself. This experience was eye-opening towards the need to create more inclusive urban planning policies.



Left: An abandoned lot near Chicago's Pocket Town neighbourhood. Right: A sketch of interior building layouts made regarding buildings in Pullman Town.



Above: a map of Pullman's notable buildings, collected from Pullman National Historic Park.



Ambient 1: Music for Airports

My original travel itinerary was to stay in Chicago from June 23 to June 28th, 2023, before stopping over in Los Angeles while on the way to San Bernardino. However, as my flight was cancelled, I was unable to find another flight in time, which meant that I had to wait overnight for the next departing flight. Since I had never travelled on my own before, this was an unprecedented experience that left me without accommodation for one night, making me virtually homeless. By going through the airline's customer service, I was able to navigate a new but stressful situation. As a person who tends to

become very nervous in unexpected scenarios, I tend to overreact by pursuing as many actions as possible, going as far to contact my travel agent in the hopes of getting a refund as at one point I had arranged to board a connecting flight between San Francisco and San Bernardino; however, my flight on the day of had been cancelled due to inclement weather. Nonetheless, having gone through this ordeal I feel more prepared for future events that might have happened, by staying calm and formulating a plan of action, as well as keeping control of my emotions.

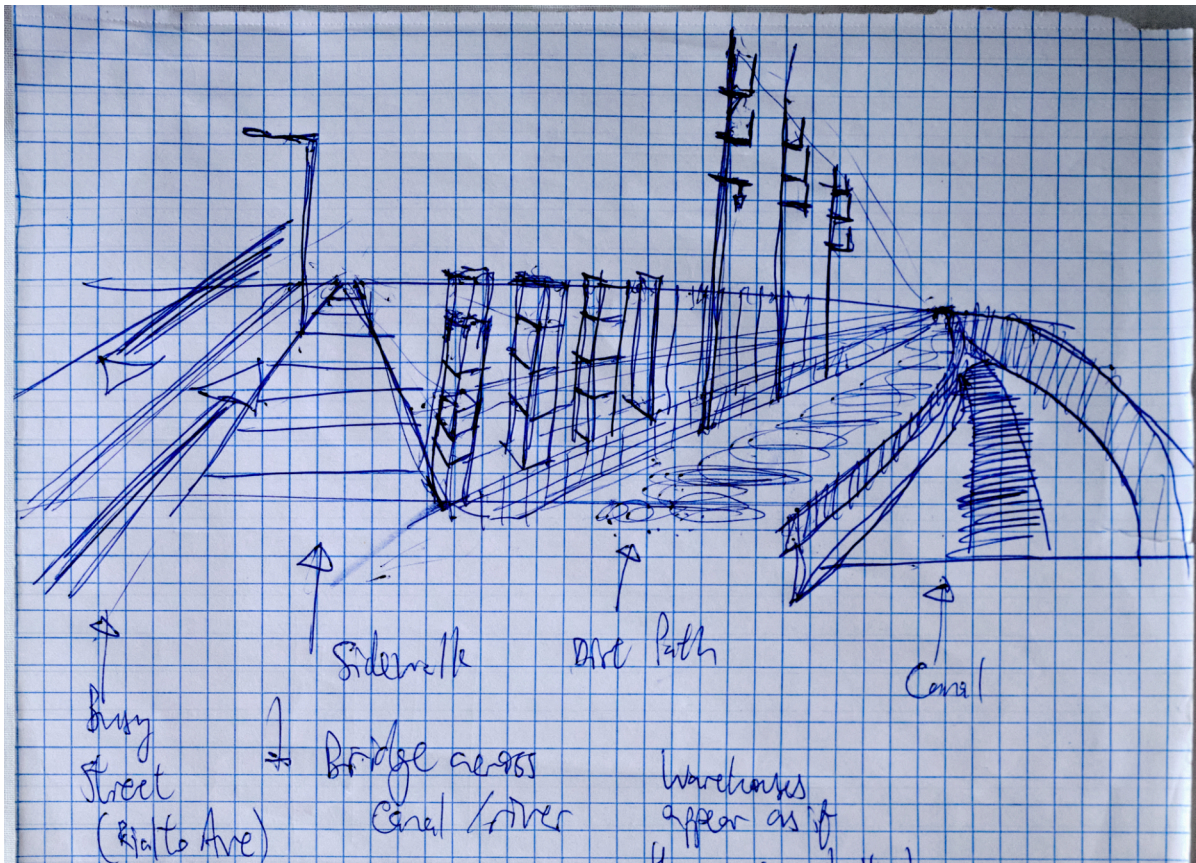
Going to California

By the time I arrived to San Bernardino in the early morning of the 30th of June, I was truly alone. Whereas I had contacts from high school to meet up and lodge with in Chicago, San Bernardino was an industrial town where I was a total stranger, as was Los Angeles. During this time, I used the same strategy of documentation as I had done in Chicago, but spent more time walking on the streets of San Bernardino. This was relatively harder as San Bernardino is made for cars, while lacking suitable public transport options.

Many roads were built during San Bernardino's car cruising era, which were long, without many turns. Its low density makes it very unpleasant for people without access to bikes or cars. In this sense, both Chicago's south side and San Bernardino represented unjust societies propagated by urban planning, which could be resolved by introducing measures such as bike lanes, redefining zoning, but also finding ways to revitalise both areas economically without increasing monocorporate dominance is crucial to creating more sustainable neighbourhoods and reversing neighbourhood decline.



Above: rough sketch of Los Angeles' skyline, from the Griffith Observatory with several notable buildings during a day of general research in LA before focusing on San Bernardino.



While photographing different places in San Bernardino, I also sat and make sketches observing the urban patterns of the street. For instance, San Bernardino really, really sucks as a city. I absolutely hate it.

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road

I felt that most of my travels were spent in areas with dangerous reputations. Both my host in Chicago and Uber drivers I patronised in San Bernardino warned me against the crime rates in the area. However, I was surprised by how approachable people could be, compared to Toronto, as well as how hospitable Americans could be. By actively listening and finding out their stories, I was able to learn more about my studied areas, than I would have from a standard, remote academic point of view, such as the landlord Felipe and his willingness to show me around his properties in Pullman

Town. However, this trip was also a wake-up call to the stark inequalities that existed outside my typical routines in Toronto, making me realise that for all Toronto's flaws, we live in an area of great privilege, assisted by our fantastic neighbourhoods & economic potential. From visiting, I feel more strongly motivated to improve urban planning by considering demographics that become excluded from accessing the core components of community. I'm glad for the opportunity to visit America as a way to expand my horizons and find new inspiration in my work.



Taking a wrong turn, I ended up in the mountains of San Bernardino, which are only accessible by car, and lack data accessibility. Using the courage to ask a nearby storeowner for WiFi to get my bearings, I learned to be adaptable and resourceful when in need.

A glass dome adorns the roof of the Chicago Cultural Centre, in downtown Chicago.

