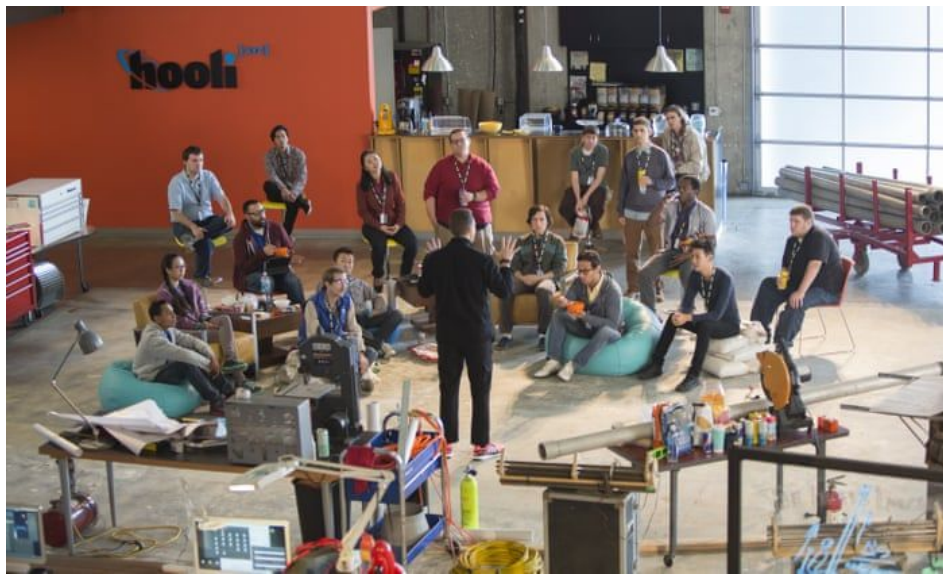


THE MYTH OF LEISURE:
BEAN BAG CHAIRS AND CORPORATE TECH CAMPUSES



Daniel Fisher
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The bean bag chair is such a simple design object, yet it is replete with associations and meaning in American culture. It has been a signpost for comfort, leisure, and informality dating back to the countercultural explosion of the 1960's and 70's. But in recent years, it has become ubiquitous with mainstream conceptions of modern corporate tech culture, being a feature of fun, relaxed work environments that present themselves as a colorful and playful atmosphere. It has become such a cultural touchstone that it is even used as punchline when describing offices at campuses like Google or Facebook, often mentioned to point out how these spaces feel more like a children's play area or a recreation center than a place where any sort of labor happens at all. It has become so deeply associated with this culture that it has additionally become a popular narrative device used in stories depicting Silicon Valley corporate startups and businesses, where movies and TV shows almost always include bean bag chairs in their set design. They're featured in the 2013 film *The Internship* where Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson play older, out of touch men competing against a younger crop of interns for a job at Google. In the HBO series *Silicon Valley*, they're a staple in the interior office design at software megacorporation Hooli, the fictional equivalent of a Google-sized company. However, there is more than meets the eye to bean bag chairs. In its imaging as seating meant to convey a casual environment, it has been utilized by corporate interior design of tech campuses to identify themselves as fun, attractive, and idyllic landscape that is the alternative to the cold, grey, and regimented office environments associated with a no-nonsense, banal solemnity. But tech campuses resemble more similarities than differences to these older office designs. The picture of the corporate playground of modern tech offices, which the bean bag chair is often a feature of, does nothing more than hide these companies' efforts to optimize productivity from their employees in existing systems of capitalist

labor exploitation. They laud these complexes as facilitating community to aid alienation in the workplace, but their architectural design commits another form of alienation that isolates employees from other forms of community outside the workplace. The bean bag chair, first created with the intention of shifting social configurations, has had a history of corporate co-opting that has diluted original use values of the chair. I will first track the history of the bean bag chair's conception in the radical Italian design movement of the 60s and 70s, then explain how it is paralleled to the exploitation of the counterculture movement as a consumer trend. Then I will show how the countercultural ethos behind the bean bag chair was utilized in both the early days of Silicon Valley culture and how it is employed now as essentially a theatrical device by companies to perform their empty promises of workplace leisure.

The beanbag chair wasn't always a cultural signpost for dot com office interior design. Even before its mainstream association with a counterculture alternative to seating, it originated as a piece of high art developed by designers from movements of Italian modernism. First called the Sacco ("sack") chair, it was created in 1968-69 by an Italian design firm led by architects Piero Gatti, Cesare Paolini, and Franco Teodoro.¹ The original Sacco surprisingly has no discernible changes or improvements from the evolution to its current iteration as a consumer beanbag chair: it was originally conceived as a chair made of a loose, closed fabric filled with tiny polystyrene balls that imitated a semi-fluid so it was able to take on different physical

¹ Lynne McNairn, "The Original Sacco Beanbag," Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences. last modified September 23, 2013, <https://maas.museum/inside-the-collection/2013/09/23/the-original-sacco-beanbag-very-cool-design/>.

structures.² The only difference between the Sacco and modern bean bag chairs is that they had a distinct backing for the sitter's head to lay, making this piece pear-shaped. Its contemporized, more common version we are now most familiar with was shaped spherically and had a more pronounced divot for the user's seated position, a result of less beads in the chair's interior. Nonetheless, the unique design enabled the sitter to mold their seating position into whatever their own comfort or practicality required.

The original Italian conception of the bean bag chair by Gatti, Paolini, and Teodoro was associated with a design ethos bred from a reactionary attitude of the increasingly industrialized Italian society following World War II. After 1948, Italy became an enthusiastic participant in European trade and made feats in their own engineering capabilities, developing industries concentrated in the urban northwest region dedicated to producing fashionable clothing, typewriters, refrigerators, washing machines, furniture, plastics, artificial fibres, sewing machines, inexpensive motor scooters (the Vespa and the Lambretta), and luxury cars.³ This period starting in 1948 until the mid-1960s is referred to as the "economic miracle" because of this rapid industrial expansion grown out of a time of economic uncertainty. In spite of these advancements in development, Italian progressives felt that the Center Left party in power during the 1960s was not keeping promises that modernized industry would result in an upwards push for a more open society away from traditional class divisions, instead citing the further social

² Hanna Martin, "The Radical History of the Beanbag Chair," Architectural Digest, last modified December 8, 2018, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/bean-bag-chair-zanotta>.

³ "Italy - The Economic Miracle," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy/The-economic-miracle>.

marginalization of the working class in the form of failed or ignored social welfare benefits and union wage initiatives as a result of this American-adjacent version of capitalism.⁴ This galvanized socialist revolts against a neo-capitalist economic system that this radical left felt was not right for Italy, culminating in mass protests at business manufacturing centers in the private sector as well as at governmental institutions.

This new climate of public political consciousness in post-War consumerist Italy spread to influence developments in art and design. Specifically, Italian industrial designers began to recognize their positionality being complicit actors aiding capitalist consumerism reinforcing class stratification and commodity consumption for the wealthy.⁵ Radical design flourished as artists began to question the innate utilitarian function of design objects from within this system, and molded design around the subversion of public goods that achieve specific functions and reify social order. A 1972 Museum of Modern Art exhibition curated by Emilio Ambasz displayed many modernist design objects coming from Italy that present this ethos of social criticism through design. He says that many of those works shown have a reformist approach “motivated by a profound concern for the designer’s role in a society that fosters consumption as one means of...ensuring social stability.”⁶ Design objects are commonly seen as tools that continually reproduce comprehensible environments for consumers to feel safe because of this

⁴ Diana Pinto, "Sociology, Politics, and Society in Postwar Italy 1950-1980," *Theory and Society* 10, no. 5 (1981): 686.

⁵ David Raizman, "Chapter 15: Politics, Pluralism, and Postmodernism," in *History of Modern Design: Second Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2011), 358.

⁶ Emilio, Ambasz, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, ed. Emilio Ambasz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 19.

self-participation in the normality of industriousness. Products in the reformist camp aimed to defamiliarize consumers from their environments by radically changing their form and aesthetics to jolt the consumer into associating new relationships with such simple, everyday objects, and by proxy with other social environments. One way of doing this was to express ambiguity for a piece's classical function and "assume shapes that become whatever the users want them to be, thereby providing an open-ended manner of use...and permit different modes of social interaction."⁷ This was the impetus of Gatti, Paolini, and Teodoro's bean bag chair, a chair that essentially forced its user to the floor, but also gave them agency to mold the chair based on their own sense of comfort with its flexible form. This provided an inventive subversion of the rigidity of a standard four-legged, straight back chair that required its user form to it. It was an effort to also stimulate users to form new social dynamics thought to be previously unavailable in conventional seating arrangements.

The bean bag chair was originally conceived among Italian modernist design rooted in anti-corporate ideology. However it was quickly reinterpreted and utilized in those industries it was supposed to be undermining. Piero Gatti and company began to parade around Sacco among artist and interior design publications and it quickly caught the attention of Macy's department store who ordered 10,000 units, fulfilled by innovate Italian furniture company Zanotta, then made its international debut at Paris Furniture Fair in January 1969.⁸ It quickly became an international icon of leisure, but had lost its original purpose of subverting conventional use-values of design objects in consumer economies through its wide dissemination as a stylish

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Martin, "The Radical History of the Beanbag Chair."

alternative to the chair. For something that had its origins in modernist Italian anti-design, it became just another version of the chair that companies peddled just the same just to profit from the popularity of youth culture's penchant for relaxed atmospheres and disruption of common bourgeois taste. Its aim to ignite social change among its users through inspiring new methodologies of community creation had become diluted through its re-incorporation into capitalist systems of commerce, morphing the bean bag chair into another banal example of counterculturist expression. This is similar to how the bean bag chair is used in the interior design of offices at modern tech campuses, utilized to express a company's commitment to shirking the cold rigidity of traditionalist office environments, but acting more as a facade that masks their confirmation of optimizing labor productivity that have not disappeared from office environments. It's simply a rebranding for younger employees to continue to be commodified in an unchanging capitalist structure.

Bean bag chairs' enjoyed wide popularity as a consumer product through the 1970s, as it became a staple for the expression of counterculture ethos through furniture. The counterculture phenomenon that began in the 1960s was a period of political and societal upheaval, in which the younger generation found a new consciousness around mainstream conservative ethics that were felt to be widely repressive. They embraced attitudes, practices, and customs that undermined the tastes and values they felt were being fed to them by corporate and bureaucratic establishments. In America, this was spearheaded by national protests over civil rights, free speech, and anti-Vietnam war efforts. Activists questioned the value of patriotism if it meant upholding corrupt, contradictory systems of governance. In addition to revolutionizing on a national level, the counterculture looked more microcosmically to bring about new ways of living through a

reframe of community. In a world that was seen to be dictated by consequences of overt opulence, labor alienation, and social inequalities that came from first-world industry, counterculture environments rejected their complacent involvement with capitalist hierarchies and expanded attitudes of interpersonal intimacy, which led hundreds of thousands of people to leave urban and suburban environments to build alternative, egalitarian communities from scratch, called communes.⁹ Communes were small enclaves of rural communities that held themselves to be distant from and unreliant on the machinations of American consumerism. The populations of communes thought principles of self-sufficiency and the commonality of humanity would bring about social change and harmonious living that were seen to be absent in the current industrial system. They were ideologically challenged structures of business and traditional governance that demanded people become “psychologically fragmented specialists.”¹⁰ People adopted a slower pace of life in their communes in which they adopted “back-to-the-earth” methods of labor and recreation to recapture a way of life that had been lost in the regimented orientations of modern industry, distinctly different from the speedy velocity of material capitalism’s productivity. Communal living spaces, and by proxy the counterculture phenomenon, thus became associated in the mainstream with unrealistic utopianism and an existence categorized by casual leisure, a perspective of members not contributing to working class efforts that defined existing notions of American maturity.

⁹ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture To Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

While counterculture bred revolution that expanded outward to affect national politics and their surrounding communities, it also brought about a subversion of culture that looked inward toward issues of self-expression.¹¹ The younger generation also shirked the traditionalist conventions of the older generation that valued reserved, modest expressions of style, behavior, and lifestyle. The Hippie movement typified this brand of bohemian life, anchored in a culture embracing free sexuality, eclectic clothing styles, psychedelic drug use, and new age religious philosophies.¹² This trend was one so widespread and known in the cultural consciousness because of increasing media proliferation that it defined the 60's and 70's. It became a cultural touchstone that defined what was cool and en vogue, and additionally what modes of expression were obsolete. The bohemian, alternative hippie became a catch-all categorization of a person who simply displayed attributes that confirmed this in the public eye, no matter how superficial.

Corporations followed suit to cater to this growing demographic of young person associated with the mainstreamified image of the hippie. The founding principles of counterculture's political activism and radical socioeconomic upheaval became lost on many people who simply wished to style their lives to reflect the most up-to-date trends and fashions. The movement became prey to the consumerist establishment values that it was in direct opposition to as all it took was to reflect counterculture externally; grow your hair long, wear bell bottom pants, smoke hash with your friends and this was considered enough of a barrier of entry to the new era of youth culture. Corporations became wise to the lucrative opportunity of catering to this market as it was growing in numbers and employed new products and

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Ibid., 32.

advertisement techniques to turn a profit, co-opting counterculture in a way completely antithetical to the origins of the movement. This was completely reflected in the way the bean bag chair took off as a consumer product. Image 1.1 is a page in an unknown catalog advertising many different kinds of kitschy, unconventional furniture including the bean bag chair in which the girl in the yellow sits. The two featured in the advertisement are clearly in their early 20's at the most, reflecting youth as the targeted consumer demographic. The other accompanying pieces of decorative materials are in a hippie style of flower-power. The most half-hearted references to themes of counterculture's earthly environmentalism are thrown together with the imaging of butterflies and mushrooms. This is right in line with the bean bag chair's organic form, which also does not require the sitter engage with it in any prescribed purpose except what they wish to have with it. In these depictions of the bean bag chair, it provides a necessary tool to facilitate leisure, wrapped in a funky, bizarre form that speaks to surreal elements of drug culture popular with youth. But these are simply external features just enough to make it desirable and sellable in a counterculture-tilted visual consumer market of the 1970s. In the other pictured advertisement (image 1.2), a group of six young people are splayed out on many of different colored bean bag chairs, all facing each other and engaged in lively conversation. Individual chairs in this advertisement have been amassed into one lump to resemble a single grand platform on which community can be fostered. Some sit in them in a very standard way, while others lay stomach flat atop many different chairs as if it were a bed. This advertisement is not specifically selling bean bag chairs, but they are nonetheless utilized in this mainstream context as a narrative device to denote communal collaboration through playful and fun means. The bean bag chair has been distilled as the marker of "difference" and the upending of social norms in



Image 1.1



Image 1.2

whatever environment it is featured in for as long as it has been around. This is especially true at modern tech campuses that employ its use in interior office design to identify themselves as attentive to holistic notions of employee satisfaction, diametrically opposed to the alienating strain of standard, closed cubicle office environments.

Now it is time to look at real tech office environments and the bean bag chair's relation to them. A similar trajectory of the imagistic mainstream adoption of counterculture's ethos has also happened in the history of Silicon Valley. In image 1.3, researchers and employees at Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center) have a very informalized meeting in a beanbag conference room. In this wing of the complex known as the PARC Computer Science Laboratory (CSL), Lab Director Bob Taylor held these periodic meetings for CSL staff to present their new ideas, receiving frank and sometimes brutal feedback from their colleagues.¹³ Xerox PARC was sprung from of the Xerox Company in 1970, created to expand the corporation's influence as more than just a supplier of photocopiers, but to design the "office of the future." The complex has had a history of assembling some of the greatest minds in computer science research who developed such essential technologies like laser printing, graphical user interfaces, Ethernet, digital video, and word processing. It even has a reputation as being the incubator of personal computing technology as we know it today, even having infamous lore around Steve Jobs finding inspiration for (or grifting) certain tech innovations for use in the first Apple products.¹⁴ The

¹³ "Xerox PARC," Computer History Museum, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.computerhistory.org/revolution/input-output/14/348>.

¹⁴ "The Xerox PARC Visit," Stanford University, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://web.stanford.edu/dept/SUL/sites/mac/parc.html>.

quest for the development of the personal desktop computer at Xerox PARC was influenced by the ideals



Image 1.3

of expanding social/interpersonal consciousnesses that were idealized in the commune countercultural movements of the late 1960's and early 1970's. PARC researchers saw a future in which the tools for this expanding consciousness could be made available to anyone in the world accessed through computer tech in the hands of common people. Technology was idealized as having the capabilities to become a great equalizer where information could be spread across networks of people from a ground-up approach, ushering in a new era of individualist trailblazing and personal freedom of knowledge that was democratically defined instead of at the

whim of powerful bureaucratic manipulation.¹⁵ PARC research invested in personal computing technology as creating a virtual commune of sorts. This commitment to engineer technology for the common human was distinct from IBM's involvement developing computational capabilities for the Defense Department and DARPA, and the corporate culture of these respective companies in the 1970s reflected these distinctions. IBM offices were stuffy environments classically representing old white collar America, a place where you could still be reprimanded for wearing anything but a pressed shirt and tie, but at PARC, scientists would dress casually and behave just as casually, riding bikes through carpeted hallways and drinking beer on the premises.¹⁶ The mission of Xerox at the time was to create computer technology to suit the common person primarily, and the legacy of the PARC attests to this with the development of electronic systems that catered to the needs of a regular Joe computer user, instead of focusing on hyper-specific tech for the military-industrial complex. The loose, open working environment at Xerox in Palo Alto, bean bag chair conference rooms and all, allowed for a sincere and dynamic creativity in their work to foster. Efforts to humanize technology was reflected in such a novel workplace that holistically catered to the employees' emotional fulfillment in providing leisurely privileges woven into the fabric of labor, in turn humanizing the researchers. This collegiate atmosphere of Xerox in Palo Alto is the progenitor of the modern playground tech office that is more widely familiar in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

¹⁵ Stephen R. Barley, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2007): 487.

¹⁶ Tom Sito, "Xerox PARC and Corporate Culture," in *Moving Innovation: A History of Computer Animation*, (MIT Press, 2013), 82.

The ingenuity of PARC's working environment defined how the next generation of tech startups and megacorporations would also approach the office landscape. It prioritized amenities recreating elements of domestic architecture blurring the lines between work and life. But there are insidious implications of this effort that impact the role of the worker in the "new economy" of intellectual labor hidden behind the supposed benefit of these amenities that cater to employee satisfaction. These sorts of workplaces often imbue their interior design plans around a "denial of banality," in which the ideals of imagination/ideas approach to working are reflected to identify the company away from associations with a dreary production economy.¹⁷ At a company like TBWA/Chiat/Day, a global advertising firm, their corporate headquarters does this by embracing wildly whimsical design plans that are supposed to evoke a sense of fun and leisure. The layout has includes an open access basketball court, conference rooms with tables made from surfboards, and recreation rooms replete with foosball and pool tables.¹⁸ There is a heavy focus on play and entertainment woven into the fabric of labor, which is supposed to facilitate creative juices to flow so that innovation and productivity is stimulated more so than would be available in the grey sterility of classic cubicle spaces.¹⁹ The inclusion of bean bag chairs in spaces like these would certainly fall underneath this denial of banality mode of expression; it's an addition to any office that inherently welcomes respite and relaxation from typical office chairs that carry

¹⁷ Ben Loescher, "Preoccupations of Workplace Design," (presentation, HAVC 191U - City on a Hill: The Architecture of the Campus, Santa Cruz, CA, February 12, 2019).

¹⁸ Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*, (New York: Doubleday, 2014), 284.

¹⁹ Juriaan val Meel and Paul Vos, "Funky Offices: Reflections on Office Design in the 'New Economy,'" *Journal of Corporate Real Estate* 3, no. 4. (2001): 330.

with them typified associations with a stoic productivity. However, for all the design elements are worth to engage in unconventional forms of stimulation, they can actually do the opposite, as the workplace becomes routine and dull to employees working there for an extended period of time no matter what the company provides to insist on the contrary.²⁰ Stimulating creative work solutions through aesthetically amusing decorations or diverse lounging areas are dependent on factors associated with employees spontaneity, which is difficult to manufacture in any unchanging environment.²¹ In denying classical notions of office banality, these fun, kitschy design objects become a new brand of banal, and as time goes on, pool tables and bean bag chairs can become just wallpaper of the same old workplace. The meaning of leisure is completely diluted and taken for granted, a parallel phenomenon to how the bean bag chair's original conception as a tool of social reconfiguration was washed away in the co-opting of counterculture images and products in 1970s consumerism.

In addition, the value of such denials of banality creating an atmosphere of fun and leisure in the office is undercut once one realizes that they exist on the margins of an intense culture of abnormal productivity. Pool tables and basketball courts provide incentives for employees to work well past their means in an office environment in industries with little regularity in schedules *de jure*. But *de facto*, the culture of information technology industry that provides corporate locations with these designs is one that prioritizes and glorifies "hustle," or the relentless mission of exerting efforts for an employer as hard as one is able to push, even if that means a 130 hour work week strategically maneuvering around basic human necessities like

²⁰ Ibid., 332.

²¹ Ibid.

sleep, bathing, and going to the bathroom in an effort to maximize productivity.²² Not living up to as high of a standard as other colleagues receiving positive attention and accolades for their rigorous work ethic could mean unemployment, therefore productivity is motivated by fear. In this trend, work life subsumes all other aspects of life that is external of company goals, especially when a job also features many tools to provide small respites from working for employees to to recharge and quickly get back to grinding. When the workplace meets all the needs of domestic life, there is less of a reason to seek this leisure at one's own home, and domesticity does not stand separate to work but becomes one in the same. But these little trinkets of company perks pale in comparison to more socialist working conditions that can actually make for happier and more loyal employees, such as paid maternity leave, telecommunication to work remotely from the office, and union contracting, programs that have been widely discouraged or phased out at many tech companies for the risk of hurting optimal productivity.²³ Bean bag chairs and related interior design features of tech campuses are nothing more than theatrics to hide the continual abuse of labor within a demanding capitalist system.

The bean bag chair has also been used in these office environments to convey the existence of collaborative communities within a company though informality, in the same ethos as Xerox PARC's casual conference rooms. They boast that such amenities, like engaging synergistic common areas or even cafeterias, gyms, spas, and even private nap areas, are loci where employees who share the values of the company can gather and gain a sense of emotional

²² Erin Griffith, "Why are Young People Pretending to Love Work?", New York Times, last modified January 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/business/against-hustle-culture-rise-and-grind-tgim.html>.

²³ Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*, 291.

fulfillment at the workplace, an organizational configuration that subverts standard conceptions of office culture's alienation. However, such amenities actually produce an entirely different kind of alienation. The headquarters of Google or TBWA/Chiat/Day are described as campuses for a reason; they are self-contained universes that have all the conveniences of a city and home life underneath one roof, therefore an employee never has to leave the campus to sustain their own biological existence.²⁴ Google even has day care, on-campus health and dental services, a resistance pool, and facilities to get a change of oil.²⁵ Many would like to see this all-encompassing landscape as utopian for employees, but this can further give employees less reason to leave the confines of the campus and be entrenched in systems that exploit their labor. They are kept optimally productive by their proximity to the culture of a given workplace even in moments of down-time, primarily fraternizing with coworkers that communicate and commiserate about what is most immediately available to their sense of commonality: their relation to the company. As a result, employees are able to associate almost their entire individuality with the company clock. These amenities can close off employees to other forms of community unrelated to their immediate work environment. Tech employees are increasingly unable to find the time to devote themselves to the world outside campus walls, unable to engage in local politics, town boards and PTA meetings, or any other embodied participation of civic life.²⁶ When food, shelter, or even entertainment are part of the fabric of the campus, there is

²⁴ Ibid., 287

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Turner, *From Counterculture To Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, 259.

little reason to find the same elsewhere. This stagnates an expansion of social consciousness of those employed by tech campuses from a perceived unrelatedness to the locality of the campus within a larger community system, based on lack of engagement. It is an alienation that is couched between yet another facade of corporations providing expansive, holistic communities at their offices.

As we have seen, the Sacco bean bag chair was a feature of the Italian New Domestic Environment to manifest a radical countercultural ethos in the home. It has transformed into a prominent player in the domestication of corporate work environment that is the complete antithesis of this original ideology entirely.

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