

# HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association  
Hawaii Chapter  
Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

## ***Planning News – Commentary***

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### **Back to the Future**

*Fortune Magazine*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and a few other publications have recently written about a fascinating trend. Increasingly, corporations are making the move to the city from suburban office parks. The man in the grey flannel suit is apparently headed back downtown. Just last summer, Twitter announced a deal to move from its Silicon Valley digs to the (decidedly transitional) mid-Market area of downtown San Francisco, following the lead of The Gap which moved to the city's waterfront from San Bruno, California a few years back. UBS in suburban Stamford, CT, was considering moving its entire operation back to midtown Manhattan; the same area they moved FROM with so much fanfare back in 1994. (It recently decided to stay put). Goldman Sachs and MetLife have moved back to Manhattan. And Bank of America recently built a new regional headquarters in midtown Manhattan smack up against a refurbished Bryant Park, not far from Times Square. The trend is not limited to the coasts. Quicken Loans has moved its headquarters to downtown Detroit, and Zappos is in the process of moving its headquarters from Henderson, Nevada to Las Vegas' former downtown City Hall building.



**Twitter's new headquarters at the SF Mart in San Francisco  
(refurbished F-Line streetcar in foreground)**

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Why? Corporate America isn't (necessarily) moving back to the city and locating in more sustainable urban environments out of concern for carbon footprints, sensitivity to the built environment, a desire to increase transit usage or a disdain for sprawl. They are doing it because they are pragmatic, profit-driven and competitive. These companies are finding that in many fields, the best and brightest human talent prefers to work in walkable, energized, high density downtowns close to restaurants, services and their urban homes. More companies are finding that locating downtown provides an edge over suburban rivals in securing and retaining the sharpest human talent, fostering creativity and competition, and allowing its workers to benefit from the 'pulse' of the urban environment, both personally and professionally.



**Compuware Building – home to Quicken Loans in downtown Detroit**

There is an increasing realization that there are real competitive benefits to being proximate to others in your industry and to being in close proximity to people in general. Synergies, chance encounters, idea exchanges, casual observations, 'elevator talks' and face-to-face engagement are proving to have real, tangible value for business success.

One interesting case study is that of Union Carbide. In the 80's Union Carbide moved from its Park Avenue skyscraper to a security-patrolled, horizontal, gated "Fortress HQ" in Danbury,

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Connecticut. Concurrent with the move to Danbury, the company was suffering tough times after its Bhopal disaster, was beset by internal company strife and some public relations crises related to the chemical industry in general. Within a few years of moving to Danbury, the company went out of business with its remaining assets sold to a competing chemical firm. Is the implication here that the Danbury move caused the collapse of Union Carbide? No. But many observers have concluded that Union Carbide's remote, insular Danbury location fostered 'groupthink', facilitated a bunker mentality, prevented it from engaging/observing other industry competitors and trends, and that the combination of all of these may have been significant contributors to the demise of the company.



**Las Vegas' old City Hall and new headquarters for Zappos**

Is this corporate back-to-downtown movement one more piece of evidence of the much discussed 'death of the suburbs'? No. The 'burbs are doing fine (but certainly suffering some middle age ailments as we all do). The suburban obituary has been written in countless forums over the last 20 years, always prematurely.

A more nuanced conclusion of this latest trend may be that today, unlike 25 years ago, inner cities and downtowns are competing successfully with all kinds of places for ideas, business, capital, infrastructure, workers, families, culture, visitors and empty-nesters.

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It is probably best that the 'us vs. them' age of bifurcated banter between city boosters and suburb rooters, come to a close. In these days of tight fiscal conditions, aging infrastructure, *Birther*-esque "Agenda 21" conspiracy theories, and the public's aversion to taxes, it behooves businesspeople, politicians and planners to work together with communities to solve problems and build the economy at the regional level. We no longer have the 'luxury' of being provincial. Increasingly, competition for talent, businesses, resources, creativity and entrepreneurship is between regions, states and countries, not naval-gazing cities and suburbs.

Check out the following links for more information:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/02Rlandmark.html?pagewanted=all>

[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704058704576015660618563654.html?mod=WSJ\\_WSJ\\_US\\_News\\_5#](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704058704576015660618563654.html?mod=WSJ_WSJ_US_News_5#)

<http://bettercities.net/news-opinion/blogs/philip-langdon/15267/apple-builds-suburban-lemon>