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Abercrombie and Fitch Headquarters

WM There are several reasons I like this project. As a work environment it's extremely human. You look at this and say, "Boy, I would really want to work here." Image-wise, there is a strong match between architecture

and corporate identity. And there are some very nice architectural features you don't normally find in office buildings. I also think there's a strong connection with the landscape. It makes, in summary, a very nice work

environment. ASL Unfortunately, the most common office environment are cubicles. They're anonymous and conventional, and there's nothing to like about them. They come from a confused idea of efficiency at work,

As a clothing company, Abercrombie & Fitch emphasizes a hip, fun feeling and a healthy, outdoor lifestyle. When the company set out to create a new headquarters for itself they wanted a place that would reflect these values. They also wanted a place that employees would feel lucky arriving at each morning. And they wanted a work environment that embodied flexibility, communication, and fun—qualities they hoped would lure talent from such urban centers as New York and San Francisco to a quieter, more conservative part of the country.

Eventually, these concerns coalesced into a single question in the mind of the company's CEO Mike Jeffries: "If Abercrombie & Fitch were a place, what would it be?"

How does the image of a leading clothing manufacturer translate into building and site design? For Anderson Architects, it meant approaching the headquarters project as if creating a scene in a movie—one where it is possible to leave the everyday world behind and enter a wholly Abercrombie and Fitch experience.

Creating a sense of place through corporate branding: the idea, while it might make some squirm, can have powerful results. In this case it led to a playful corporate campus in the woods near New Albany, Ohio.

Site Design as Narrative

According to the New York architecture firm's principal, Ross Anderson, establishing a sense of context was the first important goal of the project. In its marketing, A&F relies heavily on the lush, evocative photography by Bruce Weber which often depicts the vitality of youth and physical sensuality in simple but powerful landscapes. The architects wanted a similar sense of narrative to animate their site design.

"As soon as you entered their landscape," Anderson says, "we wanted to make sure it felt like them, not like the rest of New Albany. A place that was to itself. About itself."

New Albany, located near Columbus, was once a mill town. But recently it has become better known as the headquarters for a number of well-known apparel makers, including Victoria's Secret and The Limited, A&F's parent company.

The area offers a strong workforce, inexpensive land, an accessible airport, and most importantly, the test-market consumer that many mainstream American apparel companies prefer. But the recent influx of development has also meant that open fields and forests are fast being replaced by suburban-style office parks. And Anderson Architects understood they would need to take a completely different course if they were to succeed in embodying A&F's image.

Their first response to the headquarters project, therefore, was to secure the rural benefits of the company's 300-acre property. This involved proposing that much of the company's land be dedicated to permanent preservation. Fortunately, this was something A&F had in mind from the start. Against such a rural backdrop Anderson felt they could establish a narrative of the company's presence.

The story now begins after one turns off the main road. The infrastructure here changes immediately; curbs disappear, and discreet signage points out site-specific street names, such as "Smith's Mill Road" after an old sawmill on the property.

The road twists, forcing cars to slow down. Then it passes over a bridge into a series of small parking lots carefully screened from view. From here, visitors must continue on foot—first across a boardwalk that perches above wetlands, then through a relatively narrow gap in the trees that provides an intimate entry point to the campus itself.

The extended entry sequence provides a contemplative tour that helps establish an image of the company in the mind of visitors. By the time they actually encounter a building there can be no doubt they have departed one realm and entered another.

At Home in the Forest

The narrative of youth and fitness continues when one arrives at the main campus buildings. The built area is designed as a street that winds through the trees. Among precedents for such a design, Anderson points to Charles Moore and William Turnbull's Kresge College at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

As one continues, the path widens and narrows, creating opportunities for intimacy and for larger gatherings. The intent was to demand continued interaction with the site, and between the people who work there. Part of this strategy was to create outdoor spaces that would be inviting at all times of the year. Several outdoor fireplaces, which are supposed to remain lit during cold weather, help create this atmosphere. The largest and most memorable fireplace is located in a covered outdoor room. This space, which is also dominated by a monumental chandelier, provides a truly theatrical setting for large gatherings.

The campus has several other notable landmarks, deliberately distinguished from the common shed forms of the main work buildings. Perhaps most noticeable is a "tree-house" containing a conference room, located at the widest

Top: Site plan shows how buildings cluster along an internal street.

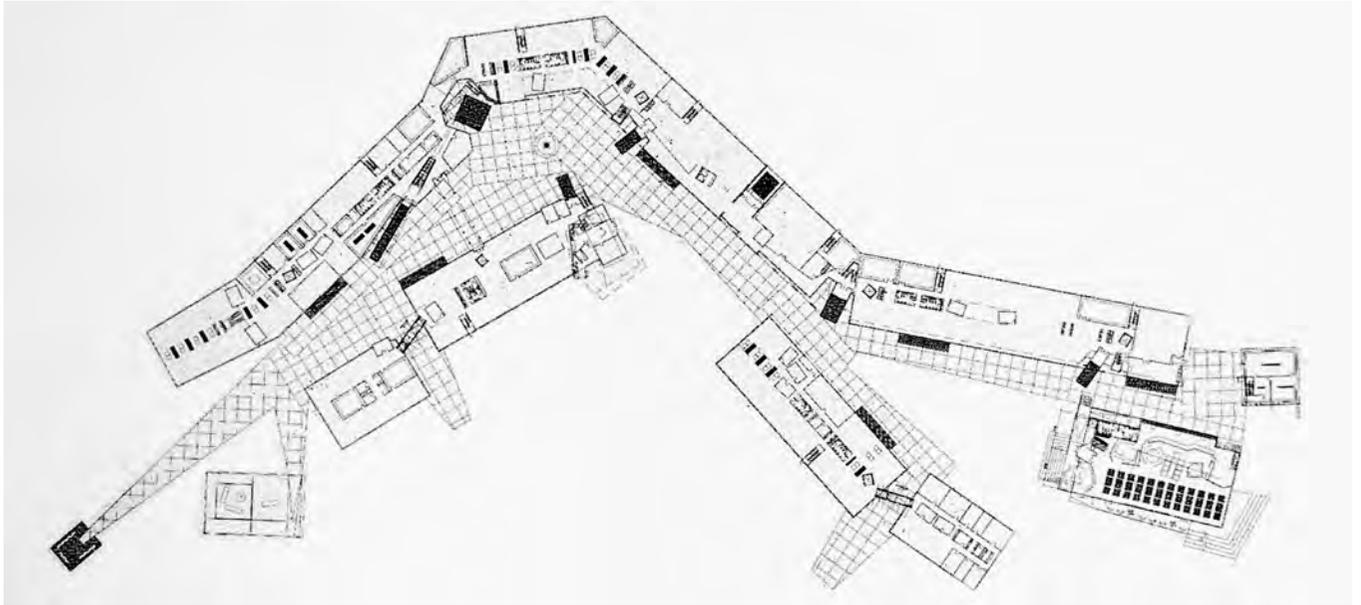
Bottom: View of the dining barn at the east end of the campus.

Images courtesy of Anderson Architects.

that we shouldn't be distracted. Here you find a much different view of what a work environment should be. It is more humane, more sympathetic to nature. There is a better relationship between inside and outside spaces. There is also a public realm, which is indoors and outdoors, where people

can congregate. **WM** It's light on the landscape. It is an incredible site plan. And the idea of social structure and how you bring people together so they can communicate as teams is a good example of incorporating existing literature on the new office environment. Yet it doesn't make the mistakes

that some new offices do; you don't find any of the clichés. **ALS** And I really liked the honesty of materials. If there's wood, it's wood. If there's concrete, you know it's concrete. The material is not hidden. It's exposed. **WM** There's an interesting play in this building of ordinary materials used





point of the complex, near its entrance. The intent was to call this out as “the center of the place,” Anderson explains.

Another featured piece is a dining “barn.” Clad in rusted Corten steel, it can be found at the eastern end of the project, where it opens onto an undeveloped common area.

Above left: “Treehouse” at the campus entry provides meeting space.

Above right: Utility building can glow at night through wood slats.

Below left: Outdoor room for ceremonial gatherings.

Below right: Work areas feature natural light and operable windows.

Photos courtesy of Anderson Architects.

A third striking element is a mechanical room, wrapped in wooden slats, that glows at night at the edge of the campus like a lantern.

Anderson and CEO Jeffries advocated fiercely for such special design features. They believed they would inspire employees by encouraging them to get up from their desks and walk around. Such elements also lend a sense of vitality and inhabitation to the central outdoor space even when it is unoccupied.

A similar design strategy was also employed inside the shed-like buildings that provide the bulk of workspace in

extraordinarily—as well as some very sophisticated detailing. Some of the window walls are really well done. As an architect, I think they fell down on the coordination of some of the building systems; but that’s being picky. *SL* But it’s not perfect. They only interviewed the heads of the

departments, rather than employees. There’s a big difference between people on the ground and those who boss them. Their site plans, topography, climate and geoscience, the wetlands analysis, toxic-waste analysis, and archeological analysis, were all stronger than the social—as is often

the case, unfortunately. It’s a very beautiful, competent, well-thought-out design, but not all the right questions were asked.

the complex. Thus, just as the exterior fireplaces and dining barn provide landmarks articulated against a more anonymous backdrop, entrances and gathering spots are given special treatment on the inside.

One way this happens is through changes of materials. The project is mostly built of durable materials such as cement board, plywood, slab floors, and galvanized panels. However, at places of importance, the texture changes noticeably, and wood is introduced for its tactile qualities. In other locations such as the dining hall, where people gather, the building framing is also singled out for expressive treatment.

Anderson believes such details encourage a more personal interaction with a building. He also believes treating these spaces in special ways increases the chances for spontaneity and chance interaction.

Another factor that played an important role in the project was its severely constricted timetable (two years from hiring the architect to occupying the buildings). “Literally, we were hired one day, and told the next we were behind schedule,” Anderson laughs.

Simplicity and consistency were crucial to meeting such a schedule. Decisions could not be second-guessed, and a model had to be adopted that embraced flexibility. Among other things, this meant that decisions about important spaces had to be made right away, while the character of other spaces was left for users to personalize and modify later.

Interestingly, such an approach matched the design team’s insistence that the workplace they were creating be flexible and simple at its core, with only special areas called out as important. In effect, the abbreviated schedule created an even greater mandate for such simplicity, and allowed architect and client to push this approach even further.

A Democratic Workspace

The jury was impressed with the beauty of the outcome. But they also praised the depth of research underlying the design, particularly the master site plan. Analysis here involved assessment of sensitive wildlife and wetland issues. Initial investigation also uncovered Native American archaeological sites that yielded significant artifacts. The project not only preserves these resources, but highlights them as features in the site.

A considerable effort was also made to understand the needs of company workers. A&F is structured into twenty-one distinct, but related departments. To better understand the nature of their activities and provide for necessary adjacencies, the architects interviewed the heads of all these departments. Several jurors did question why lower-level

employees were not interviewed, however, since their views might have added considerably to the effort.

In negotiating a balance between a traditional office and a more open campus, the primary precedent was A&F’s vision of an open working environment. But the design also benefited from a growing body of research on new forms of office design, especially notions of community and democracy in the workplace, jurors noted. As part of this strategy, the usual order of private cubicles and common break rooms is inverted, with only a handful of employees receiving individual offices (largely to allow privacy for legal and/or personnel matters). Most everyone else works at adaptable groupings of tables, separated from one another by sandblasted Plexiglas dividers.

The work areas in the main shed structures are also distinguished by a series of so-called “subway-cars,” which run down their center and contain pin-up space, conference rooms, bathrooms, clothing display areas, and storage space. Built of a variety of materials from concrete block to wire mesh, they create a sense of scale within the larger whole.

In the end the principal goal of the design was to afford workers flexibility in carrying out their assigned tasks. At any given moment an employee might be working alone, collaborating with others at a group of desks, or visiting members of an adjacent department in a conference room or at a larger table.

A certain amount of respect for employees comes with such a diminished sense of hierarchy in the workplace. And CEO Jeffries wanted to show that he was not exempt from this spirit. Originally, the “treehouse” at the entrance to the campus was intended to contain his office. But this was changed in later versions of the design to a conference room for the entire company. In addition to signaling a desire for less exclusivity, Jeffries believed the change would make him less isolated from everyday activities at the company.

In summing up his feelings about the project, one juror praised the “extremely human work environment” created by the design team. The complex consistently takes advantage of the rural setting and context to establish a vital and almost urban sense of place.

“This is a company that doesn’t like email,” Anderson says, “because it discourages contact.” Such a bias is clearly manifest in the emphasis on diverse work spaces and alternate meeting areas, and in the attempt to encourage personal interaction in a more democratic workplace design.

— *Laura Boutelle*