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The chemical company abandons
Park Avenue for a corporate commune. The
building's terrific, the timing terrible.

HEADQUARTERS

Union Carbide Takes to the Woods

by WALTER McQUADE

From the air Union Carbide's new headquarters in Danbury, Connecticut, looks like an enormous displaced Aztec frog sunning itself amid New England foliage. Inside it is equally striking. Here is an office building that addresses the ancient question of which executive deserves the grander office, as compared with his or her superiors, inferiors, and peers. Union Carbide's answer: no one; well, almost no one. The orientally intricate architecture of the building gives each of Union Carbide's 2,358 executives and specialists the same size office—182 square feet, typically 13½ feet by 13½ feet—with two or more windows looking out on the sylvan view. A few executives are more equal than others, however. The chairman, president, and 15 other senior managers have as many as 3½ of these snug rooms.

Executive scramble

The building may well be a pivotal one in design for corporations, which in recent years have increasingly enclosed their staffs within rooms made of movable partitions that are constantly reshuffled like playing cards. Offices are expanded or contracted, refurnished and repainted;

Research associate: Alison Rea

executives scramble among them as their fortunes change. But in Carbide's new headquarters an executive can move up or down the corporate ladder without leaving his office.

As pleased as Carbide is to be on the cutting edge of office innovation, the move has been much more expensive than the company anticipated. The final cost will be more than \$230 million, which includes about \$190 million for the building and \$40 million for relocation. According to some reports, the total is well over twice what Carbide, which managed the construction, had budgeted for the job.

In retrospect, Carbide could not have timed the sale of its previous home, a 52-story skyscraper on New York's Park Avenue, more poorly. In 1977, near the nadir of the city's financial crisis and therefore a trough in the real estate market, Carbide agreed to sell the building to Manufacturers Hanover Trust Co. for \$110 million, or \$92 a square foot. Manufacturers Hanover held on to its own Park Avenue headquarters, a much smaller building, until 1981 and then sold it for \$161 million, a whopping \$333 a square foot.

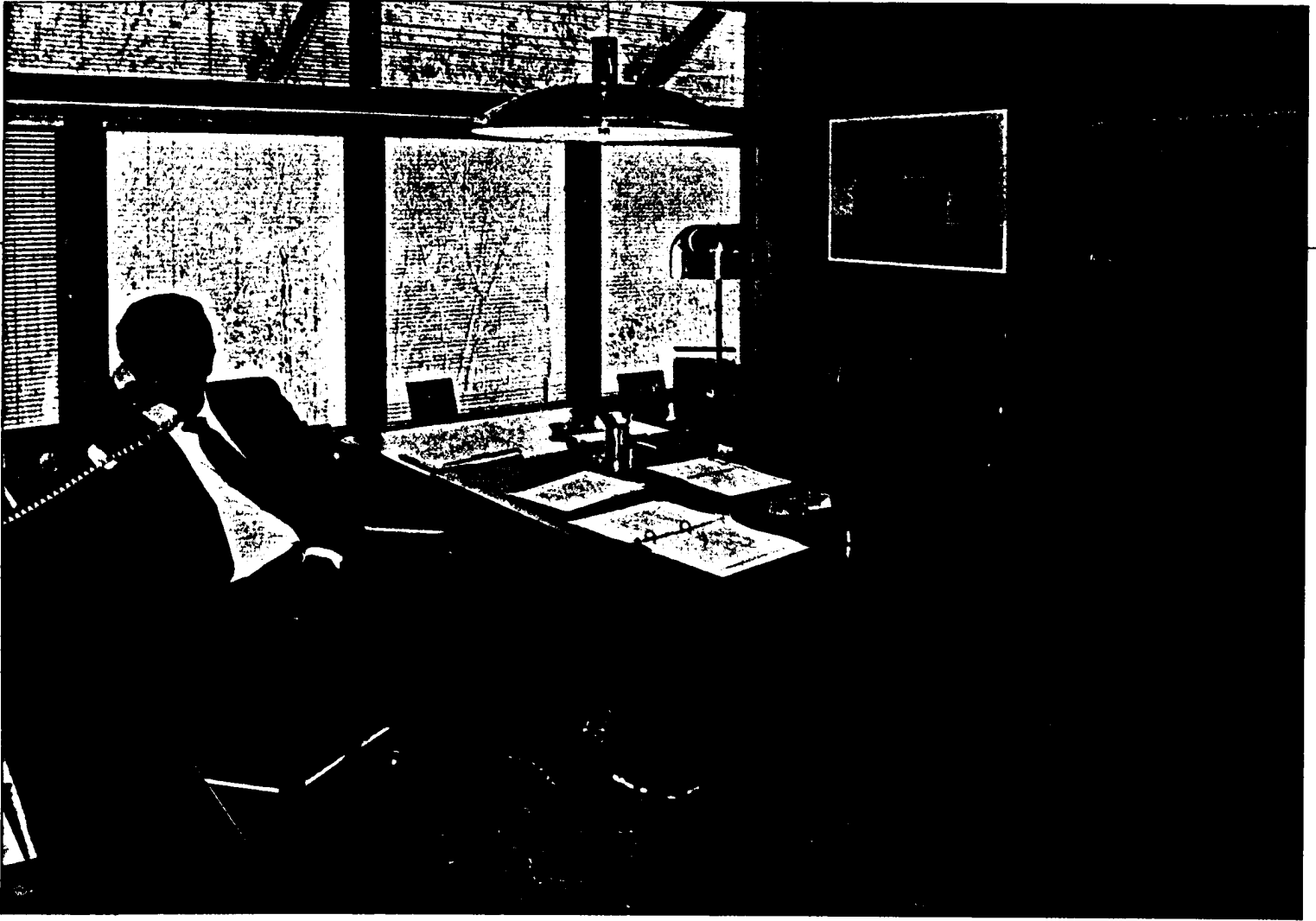
And the move, which has stretched out over 2½ years, is being completed when

Carbide, like the rest of the chemical industry, has been suffering from the recession. Earnings dropped 49% in the third quarter, and several thousand workers have been laid off at plants around the country. Under the circumstances Carbide has not felt much like celebrating its arrival in Danbury. Few photographers have been allowed on the premises. Union Carbide explains that the visitors' entrance is not quite finished nor is the landscaping complete. This is the first time pictures of the highly significant building have been published in a national magazine.

Despite the problems, the structure is likely to become a mecca for managers who need big new headquarters and for architects too. Typical of the building's delicate design is the way the behemoth is based on the earth. Its sinuous bend conforms to the shape of the open meadow on which it was built, riding the slope of the meadow rather than flattening it. At the northwest end the offices sit on short concrete columns. As the building stretches and the ground falls away, the columns get longer, repeating the shapes of the tree trunks. The windows are shaded by dark glass canopies to soften the summer sunlight; the aluminum walls are sandblasted

Carbide's 3,200 workers drive into the core of the new building on 19 lanes of roadway and then take short walks to their offices, which are in the 15 pods radiating from the center. When the building is finished, automobiles will not be allowed to park outside and mar the rustic landscape like those cars at center left.





The standard office is 13½ by 13½ feet, decorated to the occupant's taste: traditional, transitional, Scandinavian, or modern.

Marshall C. Lewis (above), director of corporate communications, chose transitional, with an Oriental rug.

to match the color of the concrete, a fastidious touch rare in such a large building.

Carbide's former chairman, William S. Sneath, decided to shift the company out of the city in 1976. He gave the familiar explanation that many companies offer when they leave: it was becoming increasingly difficult to persuade the promising young employees in the far-flung Carbide empire to move to expensive, congested, clamorous, crime-ridden New York. Carbide settled on a forest in Danbury, 70 miles north of the city. Once the hat capital of the country, Danbury has fallen on hard times in recent years. American men have been wearing hats less since the 1940s, and hat factories have closed; Danbury's other renowned institution, the Danbury Fair, folded its tents for good this year, its 112th. Mayor James Dyer was delighted to have Carbide come into the forest. The company will pay \$3.2 million in real estate taxes

this year, close to 9% of the town's budget.

The move is also a tax boon for many of Carbide's employees. Those who moved to Connecticut no longer have to pay onerous income taxes to New York State and New York City. Because Connecticut has no state income tax, Carbide's accountants pointed out to employees when the move was announced, someone making \$20,000 a year in 1976 would have saved \$922, one making \$80,000 would have saved \$5,837, and a \$200,000-a-year earner would have been \$11,600 ahead. Sneath's own situation was more complicated. He lived in Greenwich, Connecticut, and paid a non-resident tax to New York State and a commuter tax to New York City on his income, which last year came to \$781,176. His maximum tax liability to New York State and City was \$80,993, although whatever he paid would have reduced his income for federal tax reckoning. As it worked out, Sneath didn't get a break on his New York

taxes because of the move. He took early retirement on January 1, 1982, at the age of 55, before the transfer to Connecticut was completed.

To help employees sell their homes, Carbide engaged Merrill Lynch's real estate arm. Carbide also underwrote employees' moving expenses and offered to pay for five years the difference in rentals up to \$100 a month between their old apartments in Manhattan and equivalent accommodations around Danbury. If the former tenants wanted to buy houses, they were eligible for grants of as much as \$6,000 to help with down payments.

Most impressive, Union Carbide agreed to pay closing costs and mortgage charges above 8½% for five years on new houses bought by migrating employees; or, if they held mortgages on old homes they had to sell, to pay the difference between those mortgages' interest charges and the new ones they were to assume, also for

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In New York employees worked an eight-hour day with an hour off for lunch. In Danbury the day is 8½ hours with a half hour off for lunch in one of four cafeterias, like that above. Still, most workers spend more time at home because of shorter commutes.

five years. One reason the relocation costs jumped high above budget was that Carbide had not anticipated the staggering climb in interest rates. Carbide also volunteered to pay driver-training tuition for transferring employees who did not know how to drive and to pay interest on the first \$6,000 of an auto loan. Severance payments, \$1,200 at the minimum, were made to those who did not transfer.

To design the new headquarters, Sneath went to Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates. Roche is a renowned architect. In 1982 he won the \$100,000 Pritzker Award, architecture's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Born and educated in Ireland but a U.S. citizen since 1964, he is a forceful intellectual with a streak of Gaelic mirth beneath his gravity. Before Roche began designing the building, he spent most of a summer in the Union Carbide Building on Park Avenue interviewing several hundred employees about their needs and

wants. That building, by Skidmore Owings & Merrill, was itself much admired in the 1960s. It was the tallest building constructed in Manhattan since the 1930s and was one of the early skyscrapers to incorporate the movable partition. The size of an office could be adjusted to the needs and, more important, to the authority of the occupant. An employee's rank on the organizational chart dictated not only the size of his office, but also the furnishings, down to what was provided on an executive's desktop. "I was interviewing one middle manager," Roche says, "and he told me nervously, 'They came yesterday and took away my water carafe!'"

"Offices were a symbol of prestige, not of function," Roche says. "Moreover, this created a bit of a problem for the managers, because furniture, finishes, and offices constantly had to be changed. They were playing games with people who were trying to get their jobs done."

The constant adjustments were costing Carbide \$1.5 million a year, even without calculating lost time and efficiency during moves and refurbishings. Roche also studied the clerical and secretarial areas and decided they were uninhabitable. "Modern design is relentless on the lower ranks," he says. "Secretaries, for example, usually have to sit out in office traffic."

Convinced that all executives need approximately the same amount of space and equipment regardless of their positions in the pecking order, Roche began toying with the possibility of a uniform office size. Sneath liked the idea, and Roche put it on the drawing board.

When it ordered furniture for the offices, Union Carbide again diverged from common practice. In the 1960s and 1970s many corporations thought it important to present a monolithic image, and many an executive, when his or her company relocated from one building to another, ended

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up surrounded by a perhaps flawless, but impersonal, arrangement of new desk, file cabinets, and chairs, with artwork on the walls preordained by a hired specialist. A notorious example was New York's handsome granite CBS Building on the Avenue of the Americas at 53rd Street, where the employees were discouraged from hanging photographs of their families, dogs, or yachts so as not to impair the immaculate look of the building. At CBS just one exception to the aesthetic discipline was permitted, and his name was William S. Paley. Chairman Paley brought his sculpture, paintings, and burnished antique furniture over from his old office on Madison Avenue. In the anteroom hangs a still life painted by his mother.

Roche wanted Union Carbide's workers to choose the furnishings for their offices in Danbury. While the company was still on Park Avenue, he requisitioned space and had his assistants mock up, at full

Chairman Warren M. Anderson brought along several pieces of well-used furniture from his Park Avenue office. He describes his taste as "1939 modern."



John Madere

scale, 15 offices furnished in arrangements of four different styles described by the architect as traditional, transitional, modern, and Scandinavian. Carbide executives were invited to wander through and choose their styles. "People didn't choose what architects might choose—high-design desks and chairs," Roche observes. "Those seemed to be the least appealing. I found out that most people don't want anything to do with chairs created by famous designers."

Down with tradition

Even with a mockup, many of them were unable to visualize the finished office, Roche continues. "For example," he says, "a glass table-desk was not a popular choice, yet when they saw one later in the finished building a lot of people said they wished they had chosen it. It was also interesting that the traditional style with paneled wooden desks and imitation period chairs was not popular at all. We are repeating this process for another client and have eliminated that style completely." The most popular mode was transitional: unadorned wooden desks and chairs. "People also asked for a lot of storage space," explains Roche.

In the Danbury offices no lighting fixtures are recessed into the ceiling. Instead lamps are closer to a domestic scale. This enabled the architect to use an eight-foot four-inch ceiling. Low ceilings mean that the building is smaller, a saving in both construction and heating costs. Nor is there any of the usual wall-to-wall carpeting in the offices. An eight- by 12-foot rug in the center of the room allows the border of the oak floor to show. Employees could select artwork in styles from Currier and Ives prints to exotic framed textiles. Whatever style office the occupant chose, the budget for furnishing each office was exactly the same, says Roche, except for those 17 executives at the top.

And wonder of wonders, the windows actually open, or at least can open. Roche installed windows that pivot, convinced that fresh air would not seriously disrupt the building's air-conditioning system.

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The fiberglass wall at left allows in daylight to illuminate the hall.



At ramp level the building looks as though it sprouted from a superhighway.

Carbide, which has to pay the heating and cooling bills, isn't so sure. It keeps the windows locked.

A final egalitarian touch to this painstaking design is the employees' parking—900,000 square feet for 2,850 cars, which occupies all four levels of the building's center and is entered by a formidable 19 lanes of roadway. All employees will be about the same distance from their cars, an average of 150 feet, under cover.

There are so many offices at Carbide that if they were lined up on both sides of a hallway, it would be 2.6 miles long. In-

stead they were arranged in pods branching out from a central trunk of the immense garage. One reason Carbide's new headquarters has taken so long to complete has been foundation problems for these pods and the garage. The borings that Carbide commissioned did not reveal the true condition of the subsoil, which turned out to be largely muck.

Not all employees were as enthusiastic about the move as Sneath. Though most were seasoned commuters used to struggling from the suburbs into Manhattan and back each day, many lived west of the

city in New Jersey, or east on Long Island, a long way from Danbury. In the end, 800 of the staff of 3,200 chose not to make the move and left the company. These included 60% of the clerical and secretarial people and 20% of the managers and technicians.

And some who have moved are not especially happy with their new surroundings. They miss the excitement and the opportunities of Manhattan. Says one, "You can't just go across the street and get another job. The company has really wrapped us up." Clinging to the city are some 60 or 70 who still commute from Manhattan to Danbury and back on two company buses, a trip that takes almost two hours each way.

A lingering skyline

One who refuses to liberate himself entirely from New York's grasp is Sneath's successor as chairman, Warren M. Anderson, 61, who was born and raised in Brooklyn. Although he recently bought a condominium in Greenwich, which is his legal residence for tax purposes, Anderson sometimes commutes to his Manhattan apartment in a chauffeur-driven Cadillac.

Anderson says that he agreed all along with Sneath that the move to Danbury was right for the company, but he doesn't deny that he misses at least some things about the city, such as the walk to work in the morning along Park Avenue. When he arrived at the Danbury office his aides had hung pictures of the New York skyline in his windows. Governor William A. O'Neill of Connecticut came to call one day and out of politeness Anderson ripped down the pictures beforehand. Just as he suspected, there were trees outside.

Anderson has come to feel more at home in his 674-acre forest. Carbide's building occupies only 2% of the land and is not likely to intrude further. The building is constructed so tautly that there is no way to add a wing. That's okay, Anderson says cheerily. Considering the state of the chemical industry, he would just as soon have a building that could be shrunk a little. ☐