

WETLANDS

The Metropolis Observed

Bunshaft preservation

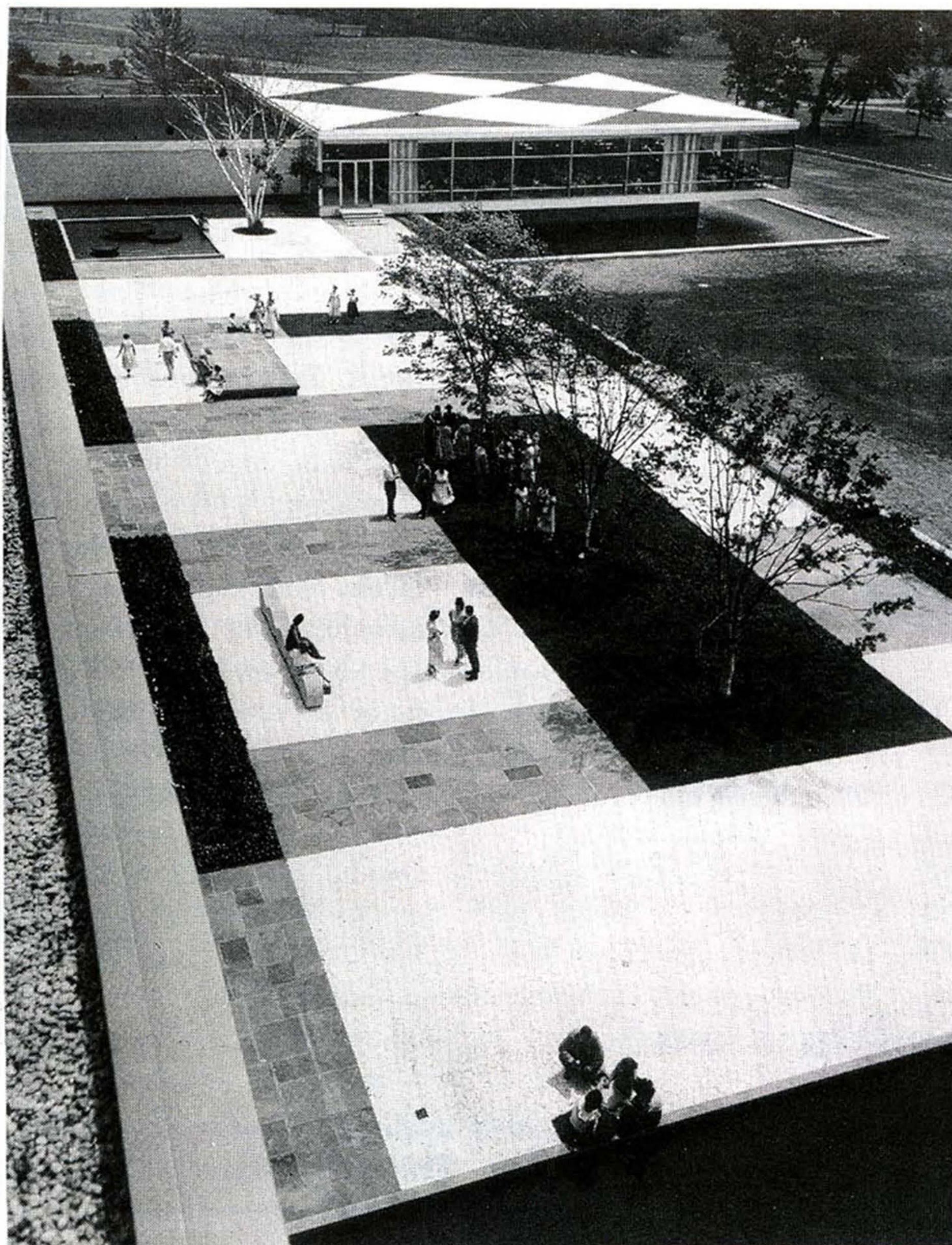
Preferring a golf course, CIGNA ditches classic works by Gordon Bunshaft, Isamu Noguchi, and Mother Nature.

In the postwar period, Modernist architects swept through America, replacing what they considered to be outmoded structures with new, sleekly efficient buildings. Half a century later, corporate bad taste has turned the tables on a Modern masterpiece.

In 1957, the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company (now the CIGNA corporation) completed its new corporate headquarters in Bloomfield, a suburb of Hartford. Frazar B. Wilde, chairman of Connecticut General, wanted a thoroughly modern structure that would be expandable, economical, and adaptable to new technologies. His firm hired the architect Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), who had designed the watershed Lever House a couple of years earlier.

For Connecticut General, Bunshaft built a low-slung 500,000-square-foot building with an attached glass-walled cafeteria. The structure is punctuated by four of Isamu Noguchi's Japanese-style interior gardens and a large, beautifully proportioned terrace, also landscaped by Noguchi. Adjacent to this terrace is a rectangular decorative pool used for ice-skating in the winter. Surrounding the main building is its park-like site, designed by SOM's Joanna Diman, which features paths that wind around a large Noguchi sculpture and a man-made lake.

In January of this year, CIGNA petitioned the town of Bloomfield to approve the redevelopment of the property. Its plan would replace the Bunshaft building and the 650 acres of surrounding grounds with a championship public golf course, a hotel and conference center, 400 residences, and several new office buildings. CIGNA has received conditional pre-approval from the town's wetlands board and is now presenting the plan to Bloomfield's zoning board. The scheme is expected to be approved.



A golf course and hotel may soon replace Gordon Bunshaft's 1957 complex, including the Isamu Noguchi-designed south terrace (above).

CIGNA seems unaware of the complex's considerable charm. "They are obsolete facilities," spokesman Ken Ferraro says. "It is more cost-effective to build a new facility than try to renovate the existing ones." Nor does CIGNA understand the architectural significance of its HQ. "We don't see any historical value to the building," he says. "It's only 40 or 50 years old."

Architect Robert A.M. Stern is incredulous. "This is a landmark by any normal standard," he says. "It's a very important building in the history of postwar American architecture and urbanism, when the corporations were moving into the suburbs."

Tyler Smith and Jared Edwards, two Hartford architects, have initiated a letter-writing campaign to preserve the building. CIGNA management, Bloomfield residents, preservation leaders, and architects nationwide have all been targeted. "It is a campaign to shame CIGNA," says Smith. "We hope to convince CIGNA to downsize the proposed development and preserve the buildings and the most important features of the landscape."

"We would like to see them preserve the building," says Shoji Sadao, executive director of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation. "If they tear down the building, the courts that were designed in relationship with it cannot exist."

News coverage of CIGNA's plans has so far focused on environmental concerns. Local resident Laurie Julian has organized opposition to the development and appealed the wetlands board's decision. "We are arguing that the wetlands commissioners abused their discretion when they failed to require of CIGNA alternatives that would lessen the impact on wetlands and wildlife," she says. Diana Balmori, a landscape designer and the co-author of *Redesigning the American Lawn*, is also concerned. "The chemicals and insecticides used on the golf course will run off into the wetlands and can kill all life in them," she says.

Activists are aware that it may be impossible to dissuade executives with visions of golf carts dancing in their heads. "To save this Modernist architectural icon is a long shot," Smith says, "but worth it."

—Ana Maria Torres