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Egalitarianism

By Nancy D. Holt

Who: Alfred P. West Jr., SEI Investments

Where: 1 Freedom Valley Drive, Oaks, Pa.

What you see: Egalitarianism. Mr. West may be chairman and chief executive at this financial-services firm, but that doesn't entitle him to a bigger desk, plusher chair or picturesque view. In fact, he doesn't even get a private office. No assistant, either. Everybody here answers their own phones at open workstations assembled from standard components. Without dividing walls, power lines are routed through red and black coils suspended from ceilings. Minimalist furnishings -- from file cabinets to planters -- are set on wheels. The setup does have its drawbacks. Mr. West had to move last month when a reshuffling on the other side of the floor set off a chain reaction. These days he faces an exposed conference room. But the soft-spoken tycoon, who recently turned 60, says he likes a change of scenery. Employees seem content: Their input has helped SEI Investments secure a spot on the Fortune Magazine list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" three years in a row. Set in its own 100-Acre Wood, the suburban Philadelphia headquarters consists of eight buildings inspired by Pennsylvania barns. Interiors are industrial and trendy, with beams, pipes and ducts visible beneath pitched metal roofs. Outer walls are decorated with contemporary art from Mr. West's collection. Some of the paintings, photographs and sculptures spend time in the "Hot Hall," where employees can post opinions on the works. Not everyone likes all the pieces, but that's the point. "They're chosen to make people think," Mr. West explains. "We focus on emerging artists, who are breaking out of the standard way of doing things."

What he sees: "No offices or parking spots. We don't use personal space to distinguish ourselves. Titles and seniority don't matter here. But this campus reinforces the company culture daily. Workstations are open, flexible and creative. And everything is on wheels to remind people not to get set in their ways. Individuals can move their desks wherever they want. It empowers them and signals that their ideas are as good as anyone else's."