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## Why Is a Tech Company Building a Ghost Town in New Mexico?

Pegasus Global Holdings is building a full-size city to be populated by... no one. The company's planned New Mexico ghost town will be a huge research facility where scientists can tinker with the mechanics of a house, neighborhood or whole city without inconveniencing any humans. Which brings up the question: Just what could you do with an empty city in the middle of the desert?

By Mara Grunbaum

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"Doom Town" as depicted in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

Paramount Pictures

September 21, 2011 4:00 PM

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### To test a big project, you need a big lab.

Pegasus Global Holdings, a technology development firm and frequent Department of Defense contractor, is planning to take that idea to the extreme: It recently announced plans to build an entire new working city in New Mexico—complete with a downtown, suburban neighborhoods and outlying rural areas—for scientists, government agencies and private companies to use as an enormous testbed for green development and other projects. But there's one thing this town will lack: people.

The \$200 million Center for Innovation, Testing and Evaluation will be built with all the dressings of a typical mid-size American city. There will be houses, office buildings, roads, highways, gas stations, banks and even a shopping mall, all connected by working utilities and telecommunications infrastructure. But no one will actually live there. The only people around will be experimenters and workers in an underground control center who run all the city's systems.

Although a fully operation city with no people sounds a little like the setup for a dystopian sci-fi novel, Pegasus CEO Robert Brumley says the Center is actually modeled after Disney World: "Most of the maintenance of the facility is done

underground, and aboveground is the amusement park." And in some ways, the Center will be like an amusement park for scientists and innovators. Brumley envisions it as a place where people developing new technologies can run large-scale experiments in real-world conditions that—for practical, financial, bureaucratic or safety reasons—they wouldn't be able to do elsewhere. "People can go there and experiment without restrictions," he says.

If it all sounds too crazy, here's a down-to-earth example: Say scientists want to see if a new kind of smart thermostat can make an entire neighborhood more energy efficient. They could hand out the thermostats to homeowners in Albuquerque and check in on their meters for the next year. But the results would depend on a lot of factors out of the researchers' control, such as how warm or cool individuals like their rooms to be or the houses' insulation quality. And if the experimental system doesn't work, the scientists would have disrupted people's lives and maybe hiked up their utility bills.

But nobody lives in the Center's buildings. Computerized systems will mimic human behavior such as turning thermostats up and down, switching lights off and on, or flushing toilets, but they'll do so under

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the scientists' control. A research team could install the thermostats in a block of the Center's two-story suburban houses, then run multiple long-term scenarios, manipulating the imaginary residents' behavior to see what the energy use is under different circumstances.

Plus, unlike some smart city projects springing up from the ground (such as Masdar City in the United Arab Emirates), the Pegasus facility will have the same mix of new and old infrastructure found in typical American cities. "You'd be able to experience what you'd experience if you introduced a new product or service into an urban, suburban or rural environment, and then see what the ripple effect would be," Brumley says.

The ghost town could also be used to test [driverless vehicles](#), Brumley says. Driverless trucks controlled over a wireless network could make freight more efficient, for example, and the upgraded communications systems required could help rural communities along the highway get better broadband access. [Some companies are already developing the technology](#), but testing unmanned trucks on real highways would endanger human drivers, and tinkering with telecommunications could disrupt regular service. But inside the unpopulated city, there's no problem. "There'd be nobody to interfere with," Brumley says.

Pegasus chose New Mexico for the project because it's the location of two Department of Energy labs—and also because it has a lot of undeveloped land. The company expects the Center to span up to 20 square miles, about the size of New Haven, Conn. Brumley says private investors are footing the \$200 million bill, and once the personless metropolis is up and running, Pegasus plans to fund operations with access fees and by selling excess power the facility's energy experiments generate to nearby communities.

Over the next six months or so, Pegasus will figure out what technical systems the Center will have, design the town and then figure out just where in New Mexico they're going to build it. (The company is targeting public land, of which there is plenty in the state. Brumley also says offers have been flooding in from people who want to sell private land.) Pegasus plans to break ground in June 2012 and be up and running two years later. He claims to have researchers already interested in conducting studies in the Center but would not yet reveal specifics. "They need to have a place that's big enough for them to do the things that they want to do," he says—and no people to get in the way.

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