

SUNTA's Best Undergraduate Student Paper Prize

SUNTA awarded Nicholas Caverly's "Anti-Suburban Desire, Suburban Capital Financial, Politics and Detroit's (Sub)Urban Migration" the prize for best undergraduate student paper for 2011. His paper was nominated by Dr. Andrew Shryock, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. Caverly is currently a PhD student at the New School for Social Research.

In Brief - Funding Anti-Suburbia: Financial Politics and Property in Detroit

In spite of having some densely populated neighborhoods, Detroit has been produced in public discourses a dystopic post-industrial zone filled with vacant homes and crumbling factories. This impression is undergirded by census figures that show a loss of over one million residents since 1950. Such depictions of Detroit elide densely populated sectors of the city, producing it as universally incapable of retaining residents in the face of suburban expansion. Despite this imagery, I encountered many individuals during my 2010 ethnographic fieldwork who had recently moved to Detroit, most of them from suburban areas. Choosing to look beyond Detroit's widely circulated failed identity, these people, whom I refer to as anti-suburbanites, see affordable, architecturally distinctive residences through which they can enact distance from their perceptions of homogenous suburban lives. Nonetheless, tax credits anti-suburbanites obtain in evading life in the suburbs repackage government aid in ways that are reminiscent of suburban housing subsidies.

In the words of Adrianna, who moved to Detroit with her husband and young son from a suburb thirty miles north, "We could live out in the suburbs with miserable people in a mass of fake stucco and vinyl siding. Instead we live here, in a one of a kind house made with plaster and tile." While the residential size of my anti-suburbanite informants is highly variable, ranging from sprawling Bauhaus villas to cramped studio apartments, all echoed Adrianna's sentiments about the unique and historic qualities of their residences. Anti-suburbanites frequently contrasted these aspects of their residential built environment with depictions of "cookie-cutter" suburban neighborhoods. Although such perceptions are just as skewed as media portrayals of Detroit as entirely blighted, they are an essential component of my informants' anti-suburban identities. For them, suburbia has become compacted into a singular imaginary on the order of Marc Augé's non-place¹. It is against this stereotype of homogeneity that anti-suburbanites enact their new lives in Detroit.

In addition to referencing the perceived individuality of their residential forms when compared to suburban ones, anti-suburbanites frequently referenced the reduced cost of living compared to former suburban lives. Detroit's isolation from mainstream discourses has stymied new residential development, preserving historically significant architectures desired by anti-suburbanites, the cost of which has also been greatly diminished. By reducing costs of living, anti-suburbanites argue that they can adopt a less work-intensive lifestyle. How this is enacted (e.g. working less, pursuing volunteer opportunities, artistic endeavor, etc.) is a matter of personal preference. Shared are portrayals of their moves to Detroit as definite breaks from suburban financial discourses.

Though anti-suburbanites argue that Detroit's lower cost of living removes them from the bounds of suburban economic thinking, their purchase of property in Detroit is only possible through financial assistance from state entities, including tax credits for historic preservation and urban redevelopment. These tax programs share much with the subsidies provided during the 1950s that ultimately drove suburban expansion.ⁱⁱ While specific programs benefitting anti-suburbanites are not the same as those enjoyed by suburban counterparts, both sets of housing incentives serve to reduce tax liabilities under the guise of enabling affordable housing. Furthermore, just like incentives to suburban homeownership, tax credits aiding anti-suburbanites are produced as being earned for a particular reason (e.g. renovating instead of demolishing a historic building). The concealment of aid to suburban and anti-suburban residents alike contrasts with public housing and rent control systems directly advertised as government assistance.ⁱⁱⁱ In utilizing tax credit finance programs, anti-suburbanites engage in financial mechanisms that mirror suburban housing subsidies in their concealed delivery of state aid through a reduction in tax liabilities.

Relocating to Detroit from suburbia requires people to confront images of failure and statistical data produced about their city. Nonetheless, my informants utilize qualities of their residential architecture to justify their move and to index differences between themselves and their stereotypes of suburban homogeneity. While moving certainly allows for lifestyle changes on the part of anti-suburbanites, there are links between suburban and anti-suburban existences. In particular, refuge in Detroit is mediated by tax credit frameworks that resemble the financial tools that precipitated suburban expansion.

ⁱ Augé, Marc
2008 *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. New York: Verso.

ⁱⁱ Freund, David
2007 *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aaron, Henry
1972 *Shelter and Subsidies: Who Benefits from Federal housing policies?*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.