

## “This Ain’t So Bad”: The Suburban Furrow in Transit”

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In this article I argue that late-twentieth century cinematic representations of interactions with the built environment offer clues to how the everyday infrastructure of parking lots and roadways reveal late-twentieth century suburban anxieties. While there may be stress at home or at work, the lack of viable alternatives to suburban life and the increasingly exclusionary character of suburbia appear consistently in its built environment. In Hollywood films about suburbia, including *The Family Man* (Brett Ratner 2000), and *subUrbia* (Richard Linklater 1996), the in-between spaces of suburbia appear in sequences that introduce conflict within taken-for-granted interactions with the built environment, such as the commute. While suburban built environments appear to function as the apparently inert background to narrative conflicts, their looming presence in moments of transit between home and work marks a particularly suburban set of spatial practices. Films such as *The Family Man* and *subUrbia* introduce conflict on the road – and while these conflicts certainly address the interpersonal problems of suburban life, they also imagine how a spatial re-ordering of suburbia needs to begin not in the private spaces of home and office, but in the shared infrastructure.

With this goal in mind, I turn to *It’s a Wonderful Life’s* end-of-the-century remake (in all but name) *The Family Man*. In his analysis of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Robert Beuka argues that the future of Bedford Falls depends on successfully reintegrating George Bailey, who:

is able to prove his worth – and thereby reinstate the notion of male subjectivity...through his battles with Potter over the future of the Bedford Falls landscape. That is, George proves his own worth and ability – if only to himself – by emerging as the person who saved the town from devolving into sleazy Pottersville.<sup>1</sup>

A veritable embodiment of GI Bill for the local working class, George helps ethnic others like Martini escape the tenement squalor of Potter’s Field for Bailey Park. George, who wanted to design the bridges *and cities* of tomorrow, instead redesigns Bedford Falls in his own inclusive image: Bailey Park brings the ethnic working class into suburban belonging through homeownership. *The Family Man* similarly figures the twenty-first century suburbs as dependent on the reintegration of a lone man, Jack

Campbell. Unlike George Bailey, Jack does not choose between two versions of the same suburb, but between a New Jersey suburb and urban Manhattan. *The Family Man* demonstrates continuity with *It's a Wonderful Life's* concern over the maintenance of suburban masculinity, but accents a late-century anxiety over the changing racial identity of the suburbs, forcefully equating a stable suburban identity with whiteness. Late-1990s Hollywood cinema represents the contest over the identity of multiple forms of suburbia – in 1950s Levittowns, in the office park exurb of *Office Space* (Mike Judge, 1999), and in the aging working-class suburb in *subUrbia* – as a spatial concern. The contrasts between *It's a Wonderful Life* and the constellation of late-1990s films typified by *The Family Man* provocatively gesture toward the suburban infrastructure – not the house or the workplace – as a key to suburban identity. More specifically, the experience of spaces through which a journey (usually) passes – the commute and the parking lot especially – reveal how in-between spaces are essential to maintaining and changing suburban identity.

Suburban critique has honed in on the house and consumerism, neglecting an engagement with other, in-between, elements of the built environment. While, as Beuka argues, *It's a Wonderful Life* “pay[s] careful attention to matters of physical and social terrain, and [its]...treatments of landscape provide compelling evidence that, even before the ‘age of suburbia’ proper, suburbanization was beginning to shape the imaginative, as well as physical, landscape of the United States,” the majority of his argument concerns the domestic and work worlds.<sup>2</sup> In *It's a Wonderful Life*, as the Bailey car carries the Martinis under the sign that reads “Bailey Park,” an Italian song plays on the soundtrack, stamping an ethnic identity quite distinct from Bailey’s onto the community where the working class no longer lives “like-a pigs.” For the Martinis, the road does not divide their lives; moving to Bailey Park means they can live and work in the same town. But in the late twentieth century, the problematic reliance on the insulation afforded by roads and highways to maintain a stable suburban identity runs throughout suburban films. The rapid growth of “exurbs” at the end of the century complicated the usual relationship in which suburbanites commute into the city, and thus the suburban identity. Some suburbanites don’t really interact with the city. They live too far out; they live in what David Brooks calls “the suburbs of suburbia...with their big-box malls, their herds of SUVs, and their exit-ramp office parks.”<sup>3</sup> *Office Space* finds its happy ending in an exurban development pattern borne of highway funds appropriated from the very towns that will lose jobs and housing to greater sprawl. In other words, a pattern that would adversely affect the working-class and lower-middle class residents in places like *subUrbia's* Burnfield or *The Family Man's* unnamed suburb. This unequal distribution of funds spatially isolates the working class and racial

minorities in less-affluent suburbs and the central city.<sup>4</sup> The signatures that suburbanites like Martini write on the landscape come not just in their home decorations, but in their motion through the built environment. The Martinis own part of their own town: they live there, work there, and travel there. But *The Family Man's* Jack Campbell lives in suburban New Jersey, works in another part of suburban New Jersey – or Manhattan – and travels between those spaces. Jack finds his signature stretched thin; his commute not only reduces both productive family time and productive work time, but also does not offer an alternative kind of productivity, or even pleasure, as compensation.

### COMMUTING AN AFFECTIVE DEATH SENTENCE

The central problem of suburban life – happiness understood as managing time to balance home-family and work obligations – frequently emerges during the journey-to-work routine. While traffic has a visible presence in *The Family Man's* characters' thinking and dialogue, it functions more as a constitutive absence than a fact of life in the film. In the first dialog exchange of Jack's Manhattan life, Paula (who may or may not be his girlfriend) tells Jack she has to leave Manhattan for family Christmas in New Jersey. Jack incredulously asks, "Jersey? Do you have any idea what the traffic's going to be like?" She answers, "That's why I'm taking the train," the first of many indications that judicious travel scheduling is something commuters must master. Time management as travel planning seems to be the province of women in *The Family Man*, for later, when Jack is offered a job that includes a Manhattan apartment, his wife Kate remains unconvinced. For her, the damage traffic and commuting will do to home-family life outweighs the potential benefits of the job. Standing in the spacious apartment, Jack addresses Kate's concern:

Listen, OK. OK you know something? I'm detecting a funky tension here. And this was supposed to be a happy day. So guess what? I don't need this. We don't have to live here. Forget it. I-I'll commute. I'll drive to work.

For Kate the problems of the suburb-to-city commute are insurmountable. "In traffic Jack," she reminds him, "it's over an hour each way. That's like three hours every day." Kate presses her point by invoking what *The Family Man* relentlessly figures as the main suburban amenity: "When are you ever gonna see the kids?" Both of Kate's examples focus on the conflict between work and home productivity. In both cases, the time invested in commuting is discussed but does not appear on screen. Similarly, in the Christmas-Day scene referenced above, Jack implies that Paula should stay and

make productive use of her city time, but is rebuffed with the importance of family time in the suburbs – made possible by the efficiency of a train trip that never appears on screen. By the same token, Kate places the business productivity of a gratis apartment in Manhattan as secondary to the most important sort of productivity, family time in the suburbs that a daily drive would shrink to nil.

Traffic patterns impinge on suburban lives to the extent that they set the schedule for family time, but this scheduling causes the category of space to disappear from the map of family interactions. The contest between family and work productivity is often waged in the journey between suburb and city, but the problems to be solved are interpersonal conflicts elsewhere, rather than traffic patterns in the space of the commute. In other words, traffic stands for other problems, but is not a problem itself. *The Family Man* features few moments of transit between city and suburb. Their absence from Jack's life-changing experiences reveals the importance the film places on representing productive time. That is to say, for all the transit time Jack sacrifices to live in the suburbs, very little of that time registers in his education as a suburbanite. Most of Jack's learning occurs in houses, offices, and convenience stores, not on the highways between them. At the onset of his life that might have been – the “glimpse life” his guardian-angel figure, Cash, gives him – Jack flees the suburbs for the city, but the space between New Jersey and Manhattan disappears in a straight cut. On the other hand, Jack's return trip to New Jersey represents the highway as a disorienting transition zone. As Jack leaves New York, an extreme long shot shows Jack's minivan moving down the highway, panning right to keep the minivan in frame, as, in the background, the George Washington Bridge emerges and eventually stretches across the entire frame, dwarfing Jack's minivan. The scene shifts to Jack at the wheel, trying to read a map that can show him the way back “home.” Thus what continuity editing presents as a coherent time and space by making the space between suburbs and city disappear is, in fact, a dis-continuous time and space. Narrative convenience – and the home/suburbs-work/city binary – erases the first trip to the city, the one certain to be the most disorienting for Jack, who has never made the trip before. The obstacle that Jack faces is how to generate productive family time; *The Family Man* formally solves this problem by excising much of the space of transit, a choice real commuters do not have.

*The Family Man's* recourse to cutting from origin to destination is perhaps the most obvious example of narrative and representational strategies in suburban films admitting their inability to solve the most common problems of suburban life in any but an ideological way, explaining away structural problems with personal triumphs. When Jack's suburban education is complete, he awakes to a city life that he flees,

rushing to his imaginary suburban wife and kids, with all of the space between city and suburb elided with a straight cut that not only reinforces the primacy of productive family time, but also reveals the near-impossibility of succeeding both in the city (at work) and in the suburbs (with a nuclear family), since cinematic editing makes possible such a massive jump in time and space. Jack's trip once again bridges the city and suburbs in a single cut, as Jack moves from panic in his apartment to the sidewalk in front of his suburban house. Unfortunately, no version of Kate lives in the house, stranding business-first Jack in family-first Jersey. In the midst of a search for family time, work calls Jack away; commuting time takes Jack not only to work but also away from family – a doubling up of lost time. While returning to the city from his New Jersey “home,” Jack is summoned by work, turning his car trip into a commute. Time in transit can be made work “productive” by adding cell phones, but Jack cannot make his time in transit into family time. Even without a family, as he races to the Big Meeting, Jack sees that the New Jersey-New York commute would have been detrimental to family productivity, and it is better that he turned down the job to which he currently rushes (according to the film's logic). In these contrasting versions of productive time, *The Family Man's* happy ending glides from the “glimpse-life” of wife and kids in a lower middle-class suburb to the actual life of rekindled-girlfriend not in the suburbs. That is, though *The Family Man* presents the suburban life in Jack's glimpse as the best-case scenario of productive family time, the film concludes with an equalization of *all* suburbia, whether in lower-middle-class Bergenfield or tony upper-middle-class Westchester County or Connecticut – a far more likely destination for the newly cozy Jack and Kate. Joel Garreau could well be describing Jack and Kate's life together when he notes in *Edge Cities*, “whenever a company moves its headquarters, the commute of the chief executive officer always becomes shorter.”<sup>5</sup> The allure of *The Family Man's* happy ending rests in its ability to suture the massive gaps between the city of financial success and the suburbs of family life in a seamlessly edited cinematic whole by eliding the commute.

The suburban form stages a choice between work and family productivity as necessary for people like Jack, and yet the commute does not appear as an obstacle in and of itself, but rather as a time for self-analysis and interiority. In other words, moments of transit are often excluded from the problem-solving of the narrative, but, when present, these moments will tend to define their spaces through what they exclude. In this way, foregrounding the edges of *The Family Man's* frame during moments of transit allows us to seek out the spaces that negotiate between ideologically opposed desires, cutting view holes in the furrow between home and work.

The suburban marriage plot – marriage, kids, middle-class life suburbs, even if that entails leaving behind urban affluence – drives *The Family Man* to its inevitable conclusion. In comparison, a film aimed at a slightly younger audience, *Office Space*, has a small investment in a version of the suburban marriage plot – settle down with a girlfriend in the suburbs, leave the comfort of your office dronery for more authentic manual labor – seems much less convinced of suburbia’s potential to generate upward mobility, even through magic (in this case, exploiting a *Superman III*-inspired bank glitch). *Office Space* represents Peter Gibbon’s ambivalence over the triteness and frustration of suburban life in which, he laments, “every day is the worst day of my life,” with its opening images of a gridlocked commute. Although he constantly changes lanes to escape the paralysis of traffic, Peter is left in the dust by a senior citizen using a walker; to accentuate Peter’s Sisyphean commute, his look of resignation paired with his off-screen escape indicates that stop-and-go is both the default position and the best-case scenario. After the gridlock sequence, the scene shifts to an office park exterior, where a sign bearing the logo “Initech” occupies the right foreground of the image. Peter emerges from behind the camera on the left of the screen, walking past the Initech sign and toward the building entrance. What at first appears to be an innocuous establishing shot demonstrates that though Peter may temporarily escape traffic, even that small victory is tainted by another frustrating interaction with his built environment – the long, impersonal march from parking place to desk. In addition, Peter enters the shot from behind the camera, almost appearing from the audience to re-assert the shared experience of Peter the office drone and *Office Space*’s presumed audience. This long walk that Peter shares with the audience (both formally and thematically) also indicates that parking for Initech employees involves a considerable trek from car to desk. This car-centered, alienating development pattern finds its apex in the exurbs *Office Space* calls home.

Much like Peter, Jack Campbell experiences significant moments on car- rather than human-scaled roadways that visually cue his suburbanity. One seemingly minor, quotidian example is Jack’s dog walking routine. When he knows that his “glimpse” suburban life is coming to an end, Jack does a spot of husbandly duty and walks the dog. Even with piles of snow plowed to the side, the street is exceptionally wide and appears to be even wider, since houses and trees are set far back from the street. Jack’s street is a residential – capillary – street, not a higher-traffic collector road. The excessive width of residential streets carries two significant risks for *The Family Man*’s nostalgic endorsement of suburban life. First, as suburban planners like Peter Calthorpe, Renee Chow, and Barrie Greenbie note, a horizontal-to-vertical ratio of approximately four to one generates a comforting sense of enclosure.<sup>6</sup> The skyscraper

canyons in Manhattan that Jack turns his back on are perhaps the most extreme version of verticality generating not enclosure but entrapment. However, too much horizontal open space can generate estrangement: *Office Space* frequently combines long shots and road width to render human-scale problems tiny in relation to the car-directed built environment. While the best-case scenario for suburban development hinges on a neighborhood “growing into itself” through time as trees grow to create a vertical barrier between the street and house, the newly-planted, spindly saplings in young subdivisions create a wind-swept street – as in *It’s a Wonderful Life’s* under-construction Bailey Park. But the wide residential streets in Jack’s neighborhood, even with trees well past the sapling stage, wide shots of the street minimize his presence. In addition to aesthetic-comfort concerns, wide streets create safety concerns. Wide streets are less safe than narrow ones. The more trafficked the road, the wider the road – from capillary/residential to minor arterial/connector to major arterial/highway. As outlined in the professional manual *Transportation and Land Development*, “the minor arterial system interconnects with and augments the major arterial system....[Arterials] should not penetrate identifiable residential neighborhoods.”<sup>7</sup> Transportation planners do not endorse arterial/collector roads in residential areas for mathematical and safety reasons. In short, since arterials join distant origins and destinations by serving large numbers of vehicles, they, by design, permit greater speed and vehicle capacity by being wider. Wider streets also create the illusion, for drivers, of a greater field of vision, which leads to increased speeds. Thus, Jack walking his dog in the street, at night, is perhaps the most *unsafe* choice he might make in the “safety” of suburbia. In addition, the residential cul-de-sac street system fights against the illusion of safety Jack experiences, trapping him physically, then ideologically. Since most newer suburban residential neighborhoods feature a single entry point, the built environment signals the inevitable conclusion that Jack senses: there is only one possible itinerary in late-twentieth century suburbs: the married-with-kids house. The built environment attests to the fact that Jack has no choice but suburban family life – other options are rendered physically impossible. His town’s development form – pod development with capillary streets connected at one point to a minor artery, and then further down the road to a major artery – effectively walls him off from his former life in the city.

Faced with the problem of access to work in the city for suburbanites, *The Family Man* turns to the already-successful urbanite Jack and his long-lost relationship with Kate. Rather than pursue a business merger, Jack pursues a domestic merger, tracking Kate down to her apartment. Once again the mise en scene shuttles Jack from in front of skyscraper offices to a medium close up of Jack in motion, this time in the back seat of a limo. Shuttling from the confusion of the office towers to a smaller scale row

house architecture (coded as dangerous, thanks to iron bars on the windows) reinscribes the necessity of Jack's "return" to suburbia as key to stabilizing his life. Repeating his gesture from the suburban house, Jack pauses at the entrance and nearly touches the building, only to be interrupted by a mover. Kate's life, much like Jack's, is one of great professional status – she is leaving that very night to head her firm's Paris office. Handing Jack a box of his old things, urban Kate tells Jack, "I've moved on...and you should move on too." But moving on, in *The Family Man's* ideology, means marriage and the suburbs. In the third-act chase, Jack follows Kate from Manhattan to the airport, runs through the airport to catch her, and then promises her a plot of land: "We've got a house in Jersey!" Jack admits that his corporate raider life in the city lacks the solid future of the suburbs:

I know we could both go on with our lives and we'd both be fine. But I've seen what we could be like together. And I choose us. Please Kate. One cup of coffee. You can always go to Paris. Just please, not tonight.

Implicit in Jack's appeal is that "us" is the house in Jersey, the place where glimpse-Kate imagined growing old together, the place where Jack would never see the kids if he were to work in the city. *The Family Man's* ending echoes *It's a Wonderful Life*, but in a funhouse mirror. City Jack has no reason to want to give up his already-wonderful life – he literally gets out of bed singing arias. Luckily, he gets to have both. *The Family Man* represents Jack's desire to rejoin Kate in the suburbs as another step down the road to home-work balancing success. The magic snow falling behind them as they drink their coffee indicates that Jack and Kate will be moving to the suburbs. A suburban life represents Jack's reward for learning, like George Bailey, from the life he missed. But Jack and Kate will certainly *not* live in the suburbs of his glimpse. There will be no racially- and ethnically-diverse Bedford Falls address for Jack and Kate. Instead, two-income senior executive/lawyer child-free Jack and Kate will move into Westchester County or a Connecticut suburb on the Long Island Sound. Jack and Kate's story tries to equate a lower-middle-class New Jersey glimpse suburb with a solidly upper-middle-class suburb, on the basis of one shared trait – they're not New York City. The suburbs are more diverse than that.

*The Family Man's* vision of suburbia rhymes with the nativist cast given to the suburbs in *subUrbia*, in Tim's class-aware critique of Burnfield. The explicit engagement with suburban class politics in *subUrbia* offers a useful counterpoint to *Office Space* and *The Family Man's* more oblique approaches. However, although Tim can mock Erica's imaginary Bel Air "middle class-ness," he explains Burnfield's economic downturn according to the racialized logic of nativism. Tim is slightly older than the parking lot

cohort; having returned to Burnfield after military service abroad. After railing against Nazeer and Pakeeza, the owners of the Circle A where Tim spends most of his time, Tim laughs at Jeff's suggestion to "Just go home and sleep it off." "What am I supposed to sleep off?" he asks,

My life? Y'know, I'm supposed to go home and go to sleep and when I wake up what'll I be, Jeff? A pilot? Maybe a Super Bowl Quarterback? Or, no, maybe a fucking rock star. I don't think so....They never hurt me? They hurt me every day with their attitude. Y'know like they even have a right. Who the fuck do they think they are? Lemme tell you something. I was born here, alright? I'm an American. And I'm owed something. They took it from me...What about my feelings? What about my fucking feelings? These assholes they come over here and they have all the answers, right? Well they don't know shit.

Tim imagines economic prosperity as a given for Americans – read: white males – and, for him, immigrants who own strip stores endanger and steal that birthright as part of a zero-sum game. Conflating inequality and physical violence, Tim pulls out a pistol as he asks, "they never hurt me?," turning the most self-pitying portion of his speech into an apology for his attacks on Erica and Nazeer, with the white male as the true victim of oppression in Burnfield. No amount of stereotypically suburban American behavior can rescue the Choudrys from Tim's by-the-book nativism, "that some influence originating abroad threaten[s] the very life of the nation from within," creating an "intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. 'un-American') connections."<sup>8</sup>

Tim may recognize that Burnfield's problems are part of a larger structural failing of suburbia and the US economy, but he misidentifies the structure. For all his proprietary feelings toward Burnfield, Tim exhibits the telltale sign of the suburban striver William H. Whyte came to know in *The Organization Man's* immediate post-War era, someone who believes that class mobility is a given and that class mobility and spatial mobility are one and the same:

Always, they will be moving on. For most of its renters Park Forest is a sort of way station, a phase of life, and beyond a certain point continued residence can carry overtones of failure....However glowingly they speak of the no-keeping-up-with-the-Joneses and the other attractions of Park Forest, transients say frankly that they expect eventually to graduate to someplace like Winnetka, the Main Line, or Westchester County.<sup>9</sup>

If staying means failure, then Burnfield's best economic option is a poor echo of the stability the Organization Man hopes for: instead of a position in a large corporation, franchise rights on the strip. Tim refuses to perceive himself as the Burnfield Nazeer wants to graduate from, to move, as Brooks puts it, "away from broken homes, away from gangs of Goths and druggies, and away from families who don't value education, achievement, and success."<sup>10</sup> *subUrbia* locates its primary critique in Tim's misapprehension, since he ends his racist-nativist fight for Burnfield by leaving the contested space, surrendering to the authority he cannot challenge: Nazeer's capital. Tim explains to Jeff that in a place like Burnfield, "There's really only one solution, my friend. Anarchy." However, as Tim intones his solution – "anarchy" – he looks not at Jeff, but at the Circle A building, whose corporate logo, consciously evokes the anarchy symbol. Tim, by looking to the store rather than Jeff as he locates the solution to Burnfield's economically-coded deficits, demonstrates that Tim refers not to the banal interpretation – upending of the current social structure – but rather to a hegemonic suburban identity that can only be white, male and middle-class. The threat posed by non-whites with franchise rights in and on the suburban landscape, leaves Tim in the in-between space of the parking lot, locked out of the bounty mobility offers.

#### THE TAR PIT OF STUPIDITY: *SUBURBLA* AND THE CREATIVE CLASS

Unlike *The Family Man's* Campbells or *Office Space's* late-twentysomethings, who all locate satisfaction within the confines of the family or romantic couple in the almost uniformly white suburbs – *subUrbia's* locates an alternative relationship to the suburbs in Sooze, who anxiously looks to the city for the satisfaction her suburban life cannot provide. In contrast to the going-nowhere boys on the corner, Sooze spends the entirety of *subUrbia* planning her escape from Burnfield through spatial practices that resist the intended use of built forms like parking lots. With the corner gang as her audience, Sooze uses the parking lot of the Circle A – a space between house and work, road and shop – to practice a performance art piece she hopes will earn her a spot in the School of Visual Arts, which, she reminds everyone, is in New York. The gravitational pull of New York appears in terms of desires as enacted on the built environment. Sooze repeatedly explains her reasons for leaving Burnfield as a search for the urban cultural life not supported by suburban patterns of development or demographics. Her migration fits neatly in the 1990s return of younger, well-educated workers to American cities, what Richard Florida calls the "rise of the creative class."

Jeff troubles the connection between location and sensibility during an argument with Sooze after she performs her piece, critiquing their surroundings as a way of asserting his difference. While sitting in a fast food restaurant, Jeff bemoans the state of

Burnfield, groaning, “look at these people...like fucking robots...look at that kid.” Jeff’s reference to an off-screen kid does not draw a reverse shot of the kid in question, an editing approach that takes on greater salience later in the scene. Rather, the reverse shot to Jeff’s critique is Sooze, who softens her stance for a moment, as she smiles and turns slightly to join Jeff in looking off-screen, drawing attention to the contest of ideas at stake in their conversation, not the embodiments of those ideas. Keeping the most distasteful part of Burnfield off-screen, even temporarily, hints at the essential agreement between Jeff and Sooze: the thing they least desire is a family in the suburbs. To get at the sorting methods of art school education and physical geography, Jeff asks Sooze, “Why can’t you [make art] here? Why is somewhere else better?” Jeff answers his own question when he admits that while New York offers Sooze networking access into the art world, all it has to offer him is a set of unappealing everyday experiences – “I could go to New York if I wanted, but what’s the point? So I could learn how to order a cappuccino? So I could get mugged by some crack head? So I could see homeless people up close and personal?” In other words, New York offers Sooze infrastructural advantages which Jeff patly dismisses as a quest for “status.” However, Burnfield offers Jeff something approaching a status opportunity as well. When Sooze, whose goal is “to create art” in New York, asks Jeff what he wants to do in Burnfield, he answers, “Nothing.” Sooze, somewhat aghast, reminds Jeff that “no one does nothing,” to which Jeff replies, “OK. Well then I’m gonna break new ground.” Burnfield appears to have stirred a case of Stockholm Syndrome in Jeff, as evidenced by his self-satisfied drive to inertia as a response to Sooze’s drive to *do* the things New York makes possible with, as Florida puts it, density and low barriers to access.<sup>11</sup> Jeff, it seems, doesn’t realize that his do-nothingness of camping in a garage, socializing in a parking lot, and turning a fast food joint into a Habermasian coffee house constitutes doing something to the spatial organization of suburban space.

The distinction *subUrbia* draws between Jeff and Sooze is one of late-twentieth century communities prioritizing barriers to entry. Searching for a reason to stay, Sooze asks,

Why should I stay here Jeff? So we can sit on the corner and watch the lights change while you bitch about Burnfield? So I can spend the rest of my life guessing what it would be like to be a real artist? So you and I can *fuck* while your parents are out having dinner at The Sizzler?

To accentuate Sooze’s point, the scene finally provides a reverse shot: a forty-something couple hunched over their fast food, looking slightly horrified that Sooze said “fuck” in public. The reverse shot of the forty-something couple, and the

subsequent reaction shot of Jeff and Sooze, function as the two key images in the entire fast food joint sequence. After earlier *not* cutting to “that kid,” denying Jeff’s point of view a place on screen, *subUrbia* provides an unflattering image of Jeff and Sooze should they remain in the suburbs as conjured by Sooze, offering a subjective point of view shot of “parents out at the Sizzler.” The reverse shot of Sooze and Jeff finds them silent for a few seconds as both smile and laugh softly at tweaking the squares. Sooze exits the scene with the grave question, “what are we doing here, you and me?” Sooze, in refusing to settle (down) in the suburbs, highlights the suburbs’ family-centered design. While Sooze hopes to sublet a flat in New York, Jeff chooses the tent in his parents’ garage because it allows him to appear to critique the valorization of the ideology of “owning your own house” while still indulging in it. In addition, Burnfield affords him the safety of David Brooks-approved negatives – no crack heads, no homeless. In her attacks on the suburban status quo for its banal predictability and lack of cultural opportunity, Sooze sees that even her sex life is as routine as the endlessly repeated green-amber-red sequence of traffic lights in the infrastructure. Rather than this inertia masquerading as stability, Sooze eagerly welcomes the unpredictability urban life offers. The only cultural life Burnfield offers is the one the corner gang makes for themselves at the spur of the moment – Sooze’s “Burger Manifesto,” “Pony Unplugged,” Buff’s videotaped clouds – in briefly poached spaces.

The flight of the Creative Class from suburbia begins with a critical relationship to the suburban built environment. *subUrbia*’s somewhat stage-bound setting reinforces this contest over suburban space: Nazeer’s policing of his parking lot conflicts with the corner gang’s precisely because they are ill-suited to suburban space. To generate escape velocity, Sooze reorders the most suburban parts of Burnfield – she turns a suburban parking lot into a performance space and her artwork (and personal connections) from a good suburban school lead her to a long bus trip along the highway to Los Angeles. Buff’s accidental show reels similarly defamiliarize suburbia’s malls and parks. The same desire for control in a place that values “education, achievement, and success” that Brooks claims pushes families like the Choudrys to the suburban fringe also pushes young singletons into the city.

## THIS AIN’T SO BAD – THE FALSE PROMISE OF SUBURBAN FORM

The happy ending *Office Space* offers is rooted in the false hope of suburban boosters like Brooks’s future tense: *this* suburb may be sub-par, but a fresh start in the *next* suburb will solve the current problems in a development pattern that privileges a car-centered, consumerist ideal. Lewis Mumford, writing in the 1960s, saw in the ascendant multinodal conurbation, “perhaps the only thing that could bring Americans

to their senses would be a clear demonstration of the fact that their highway program will, eventually, wipe out the very area of freedom that the private motorcar promised to retain for them.”<sup>12</sup> So what does this changing face of the suburbs mean for those who stay? If you are Tim, you rail against the changing composition of the suburbs on nativist lines – that white heterosexual males are native suburbanites and all others are interlopers, working women and non-whites alike. If, like Peter Gibbons, you become much less anxious about race and sexuality, you still turn away from the territory that’s changing to take part in the frantic continued expansion of flight from the urban. If you are Jack Campbell, you retreat into the past, away from the disruptive presence of non-white people, although in *The Family Man’s* world you must make sure to be rich before you go to the suburbs.

Finally, the push-pull of singletons moving to the city – *subUrbia’s* Sooze, Pony, and Buff as well as *The Family Man’s* “real-life-Jack” all live in the city without children or plans for children – and gay families moving to the suburbs appears in Brooks’s observation that “The geography of work has been turned upside down...This means we have a huge mass of people who not only don’t live in cities, they don’t commute to the cities, go to the movies in the cities, eat in the cities, or have any significant contact with urban life.”<sup>13</sup> “Urban life,” in this formulation, means two very different things, both of which the four films discussed here refute. On the one hand, Sooze and Buff head to Los Angeles as a cultural and business center, and Jack chooses both New York and London to ascend the international finance hierarchy. Such a migration falls in line with Richard Florida’s observation that, “high-skill, high-earning couples are disproportionately con-centrated in larger, denser, higher-amenity urban areas (as opposed to suburbs). In other words, places where people are not sprawled out so thinly tend to have more creative economic activity.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, while “urban” has traditionally meant non-white and/or non-heterosexual, figures such as Nazeer and Pakeeza, Samir, Jim, and Jim behave in suburban ways in that their jobs are stolid, professional pursuits such as shopkeeper, financial software programmer, tax lawyer, and anesthesiologist.

*The Family Man’s* endorsement of leaving the city for the suburbs rings false because it rests on the presumption that an aging, lower-middle-class dormitory suburb is the same as an established and affluent suburb. As Robert Fishman argues, “although to the late twentieth century mind suburbia is inevitably associated with the automobile, this association is a mistake...the true suburban means of transportation has been the commuter rail line.”<sup>15</sup> The great majority of what are now called inner-ring suburbs, as Kenneth T. Jackson points out in his history of suburbia, *Crabgrass Frontiers*, grew up around rail and trolley stations, not highway exits.<sup>16</sup> The “traditional,” or more

accurately post-World War II, car-and-highway-centered suburban life in Bergenfield that Jack promises Kate is not the life they would share should they rekindle their relationship. Rather, executive Jack and partnered Kate would likely live in far-flung suburban Connecticut or perhaps a desirable inner-ring suburb, certainly not in New Jersey. In this way, *The Family Man* imagines suburban life as found not in Bergenfield and other lower-middle-class suburbs, but rather in upper-middle-class suburbs, where anxieties about their tenuous middle-class status creates the sense that Westchester or Darien is Bergenfield. In an oblique way, *subUrbia* addresses this concern, showing how existing suburbs can survive and thrive if they escape the furrow created by in-between spaces like highways that double as boundaries between the private house and the private office. By using such in-between spaces in a more public and open manner, behaving more like the city of the future George Bailey planned to plan and established in Bailey Park, the suburbs make themselves more sustainable in the face of the usual American solution to problems: farther out on the frontier, where we can start from scratch, rather than already here in the quasi-urban, where we might re-build and rehabilitate.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 57.
- <sup>2</sup> Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 27.
- <sup>3</sup> David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004) 2, 15.
- <sup>4</sup> Myron Orfield, *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability*. (Washington DC and Cambridge: Brookings Institution and Lincoln Institute, 1997), 5-150.
- <sup>5</sup> Joel Garreau, *Edge Cities: Life on the New Frontier*. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 92.
- <sup>6</sup> See Peter Calthorpe, *The Next American Metropolis: Ecology, Community, and the American Dream*. (Princeton: Princeton Architectural, 1993), Renee Chow, *Suburban Space: The Fabric of Dwelling*. (Berkeley: U California P, 2002), and Barrie Greenbie, *Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981).
- <sup>7</sup> Vergil Stover and Frank Koepke, *Transportation and Land Development*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 83, 84.
- <sup>8</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002), 4.
- <sup>9</sup> William H Whyte, *The Organization Man*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 288-9.
- <sup>10</sup> David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 46.
- <sup>11</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community, and everyday life*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 215-326.
- <sup>12</sup> Lewis Mumford, "The Highway and the City" *The Highway and the City*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963. 234-46), 234.
- <sup>13</sup> Brooks, *On Paradise Drive*, 2-3.
- <sup>14</sup> Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 52.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. (New York: Basic Books, 1987). 135.
- <sup>16</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontiers: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985). See in particular chapters 5 and 6 (pages 87-115) for his account of rail and trolley suburbs.

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