Decomposition and Suburban Space

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Abstract

This essay provides a case-study of the development and decomposition of a number of organizing initiatives taking place in Long Island, New York during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and is particularly concerned with the relationship of these initiatives to suburban spatial organization and the institutional left and non-profit sector. Discussing the activities that these organizations cohered around as prefigurative of a new cooperative political ethics through their emphasis on direct participation, democratic decision-making processes, and a rejection of the commodity form, it eventually describes the subsumption of these emancipatory political mandates by the institutional logic of the non-profit sector and the decompositional effects of suburban space.

Considering the rapid deterioration of the credit and housing markets in the United States in the context of the current global financial crisis, this essay is more interesting now than when it was originally completed in September of 2008. The American suburb appears as a failing accumulation strategy, while the Obama administration enthusiastically draws attention to an already fading liberalism. While the American suburb has served as a class strategy on a global scale that has been successful in attacking the institutions, practices and social memory of the American working class, cooperative practices and informal networks of solidarity persist. Indeed, these practices evade formalization by co-opted or inadequate organizational forms. The "new cooperativism" seems to melt into the air in the face of bureaucratization.

For those of us in the United States the spatial relationships, financial frameworks and apparatus of governmentality that compose the suburb are important functioning elements of spectacular production, the division of labor, and capital flow. Rather than being the life in the sitcom, in the magazine ad, in the idyllic future, those of us who have lived, worked and organized in the suburbs recognize it as a terrain of struggle.

Levittown, Long Island’s first community, was designed in the 1940s with a keen eye to the recent past and all the gains made by the working class of the 1920s and 1930s. Built with the intent of capitalizing on the GI bill by selling homes to soldiers returning from World War II, developer William Levitt constructed planned single-family homes. From building materials and labour-power utilized
Decomposition and Suburban Space

in the construction of homes to the organization of space both inside and outside the cookie cutter housing, suburbia presented an opportunity to avoid the networks of support and dynamics of interaction that the spatial relationships of the city allowed for. The development of Long Island arrived right alongside Keynes’ wage/productivity deal and all its racist implications and Fordist approaches to production. Blacks and other minorities were excluded through legal prohibitions against black homeownership, as well as through an entire arsenal of more subtle discriminatory practices.\(^3\)

In suburbia, the deliberate separations of sites of reproductive labor from the workplace are retaining walls for relationships of work. Where in other spatial/productive regimes those who worked together often lived in close proximity to one another, in the suburb the dominance of personal automotive transportation and the single family home limits communication and connections between labor in the workplace and consumption in the home. The most telling manifestation of dominant power relations in the suburb is an absence of public space and participatory institutions. Levittown’s construction predated the realization and need for an organization of life that answers to the hyper-productivity of social relationships now. Through price discipline, deadening spatial striation and spectacular production, Long Island has managed to constrain activities that exist outside of work discipline and prevent the development of new social practices.\(^4\) Alienation is fully realized as a disciplinary structure in the suburban organization of life. Indeed, Long Island is the archetypal suburb and the stage setting experiment in the psycho-geography of North America. The architecture of suburban housing placed the household under a watchful paternal gaze by positioning bathrooms and bedrooms around the “master bedroom,” often in ways that made plumbing and other utilities more expensive and complex to install. The locus of social life became the single family home and its own systems of governance and governmentality.

Needless to say, it’s a lousy place to grow up and an even lousier place to be grown up. It is one of the most expensive suburban areas in the United States, with a real living wage for a single adult (correlated to housing prices) ranging from roughly $40,000 to $60,000 annually\(^5\). A report published by the Rauch Foundation in 2003 found that 53% of 18-35 year old Long Island residents have considered leaving Long Island, with 41% finding the region “unappealing.”\(^6\) The principle reasons for the desire to leave were living costs, amount of taxes, the price of housing, and lack of job opportunities.

I came of age moving against the grain with a community of young radicals in America’s first suburb. Moving from the explicitly militant Modern Times Collective to the culturally focused professional non-profit Long Island Freespace, the community surrounding these initiatives managed to maintain a
discourse around the nature of space and the practice of politics in suburbia for nearly a decade, advocating cooperative practices and ethics in opposition to the alienation of the suburban landscape.

What follows is an attempt to identify contributing factors to these communities’ successes and failures through the lenses of suburban space, the politics of scarcity implicit in the institutional left and the possibilities in our attempts and failures to move beyond both of these.

Long Island Freespace was an attempt to rescue ourselves from the material conditions of young adulthood on Long Island, functioning as a cultural space for progressive, radical and do-it-yourself youth culture for 10 months of 2004. It was the last project to arise in nearly 10 years of organizational efforts by a community of young radicals, representing our most ambitious work and our most glaring failure.

Located in Ronkonkoma, New York, Freespace served as an all-ages concert venue, a meeting place for political projects, and hosted educational events designed and initiated by young people on Long Island. From January to October of 2004 Long Island Freespace hosted roughly 60 all-ages concerts with a door price of 10 dollars or less, several feminist themed events, a number of DIY flea markets, hosted speaking engagements by academics Conrad Herold, Sylvia Federici and George Caffentzis, and organized several art-shows by local youth. Once a week, the Freewheel Bike Collective offered technical assistance in bicycle repair and maintenance, and refurbished bicycles for donation to low-income Long Islanders.

Freespace developed as an initiative of the Modern Times Collective, which was, in turn, an organizing project that arose from Long Island’s thriving late ‘90s punk and hardcore scene. In spite of the obstacles suburbia presented to their development, bands, venues, zines and record labels proliferated on Long Island; entire scenes and their social practices developed around these rallying points. Within Long Island punk and hardcore there was a deliberate discourse taking place around mandates of participation and DIY concepts. There was a conscious effort on the part of those creating punk media to stress collective ownership of the scene. Indeed, there was a mandate to participate. Individuals were responsible to their peers to start a band, a magazine, a record distribution table, or an activist group. Punks were involved in an effort to take over all aspects of the production of their culture. Instead of a bad or good student, participants could become writers, musicians, designers, technicians, or organizers of events and activities. Dialogical elements were explicit in punk and DIY culture. DIY approached politics as a series of moments and encounters, where practices prompted discussions between participants, resulting in new practices.
Throughout the course of their existence, both Freespace and Modern Times Collective enjoyed heavy participation from local band members, “zinesters, show promoters and “scene members” who lived their lives through punk and hardcore. Chris Jensen, the founder of Mountain Records, editor of Mountain Monthly, and member of the bands Countdown to Putsch and Halfman founded the Freewheel Collective. Craig Hughes, former drummer of the hardcore band Contra and former editor of the zine United We Stand organized speaking events and the Freespace zine library.

Freespace drew its organizational strength from its position as a point of development for the existing resistance activities of a strong and vibrant youth culture on Long Island. Initial Freespace activity did not develop these cultures towards new activities. Rather, it provided a vehicle through which the activities and tendencies that existed within these cultures could be developed by participants. Freespace’s initial life as a set of dialogical practices was a productive catalyst—it provided a moment of encounter where desire and experience could be tied to a collective will. Before any other prescribed activity, Freespace was participatory and horizontal.

Modern Times Collective represented a significant break from earlier progressive organizing on Long Island. Established groups ran the gamut from local initiatives against the construction of a nuclear power plant to national organizations like ACORN. With some notable exceptions, Modern Times members found other organizations to be more interested in electoral activism and appeals to governmental bodies than direct action and empowerment. There were some efforts at co-optation by organizations like the Long Island Progressive Coalition, and some decrying of the group; the director of the Nassau County Civil Liberties Union referred to Modern Times as “Bomb throwing anarchists.” Indeed, the activities of the left preceding the founding of Modern Times was a motivating factor in the formation of the group. Founding members met through protests against the Clinton administration’s bombing of Iraq. Disgusted by the protest tactics of the time, in which picket signs were sold to protesters, the idea for a direct-action youth organization was formed.

Modern Times saw its first incarnation as a network of activist groups that in hindsight seem pretty funny: A pacifist chapter of ARA, an IWW made up entirely of students, an inexplicable group called the Peacesmiths.... Nevertheless, Modern Times drew young people from across the Island to educational events, small protests and Food Not Bombs feedings, and mobilized for larger events in Manhattan. Over time, Modern Times abandoned the network form it had been utilizing and developed into a collective body focused on educational events and building a cohesive and inclusive organization. Increasingly, in late 1999 and early 2000, Modern Times Collective became involved in the national...
mobilizations against neoliberal capitalism, organizing educational events and conferences and coordinating protests.

In May of 2000, Modern Times Collective threw a public, un-permitted street party in downtown Huntington, the retail center of one of Long Island’s larger townships, to recreate suburban space and democratize it. Promotional materials railed against the alienating aesthetic and deadening uses of spaces and structures on Long Island and called for a direct intervention.

For months prior, flyers had been distributed, march routes planned and roles rehearsed. We adapted the strategic approach we had observed through our participation in NYC Reclaim the Streets, A16 actions against the IMF/World bank and the Seattle protests—a core group of direct actionists occupying and holding a key location, coinciding with a publicly announced and transparent assembly or march.11

Over 100 young people attended the march from Huntington Station. As they entered the village of Huntington, a large tripod was erected and a banner unfurled that read “This is what democracy looks like.” For the next hour, preceding 6 arrests, kids danced and interacted freely with onlookers and passersby. While this was not the last time MTC/Freespace participants would liberate space for their own purposes, it was the end of a deliberate, public presence in opposition to suburban spatial relationships.

As Modern Times began to participate in the East Coast summit protests of the early 2000s, a political shift occurred within the group. While these large protests were exhilarating and we found in them the joy, glory and power of a successful undermining of the mandates of striated space, we also saw the ease with which dominant social relationships are re-established, and began to question the sustainability of a national movement with no local base. We got a taste of the new, a glimpse of liberated space, and enough of a cold shower upon our return to know that we wanted it always: Alienation did not originate at these summits and power was not won or established on that terrain, but rather in the practices and interactions of everyday life.

After our attendance at the Republican National Convention of 2000, we returned to Long Island dejected. Many of us had been arrested, and although our lock-down had been successful, the action overall had been a failure as the affinity group and spokes council structures of earlier protests had not been utilized correctly and many out-of-town participants had to make logistical decisions that they were not adequate to. Upon our return, we decided to disengage ourselves from the models of activism we had formerly been participating in, and to attempt to build an infrastructure that would allow for a sustainable financial and legal framework for social struggles on Long Island.
Seeing this as a need but wishing to approach any new project as a community-wide initiative, MTC organizers decided a new tool was needed.

With this realization, we intended to create on Long Island an encounter around everyday life. Participants were drawn from Long Island’s many youth subcultures and student activist groups. Through this process, participants began to cite a desire for a permanent, publicly accessible space to allow for a continuity of the thought and action of what was increasingly a cohesive, interconnected youth culture on Long Island.

For years Modern Times Collective had maintained a close and friendly relationship with Robert Lepley, the radical executive director of an otherwise moderate organization, the Long Island Alliance for Peaceful Alternatives. Two MTC organizers worked for this organization as student organizers, using time and resources for MTC projects and initiatives. Robert Lepley’s former organizing work, initiating Freirien dialogs to solve community problems in Brownsville, Brooklyn, presented fascinating parallels with aspects of Modern Times’ own organizing processes. As discussions internal to Modern Times Collective increasingly dealt with the idea of a new organizing initiative, members of the collective approached Robert Lepley about initiating this dialogical practice within the group as well as with the larger community. As mentioned above, all facets of Modern Times’ work began to incorporate this spirit of dialog. Taking place between August, 2000 and July of 2002, these dialogs produced a community mandate for an open-access, participant run arts and performance space to make Long Island’s “radical” youth community more accessible and participatory. In 2002, it was decided that the proper financial and legal framework for this project was that of a 501c3 tax-exempt organization—that is, as a non-profit organization.

This marks a very unclear beginning of what was to be Freespace’s terminal decline. In the years following the decision to move forward with the acquisition of a space, much of the organization’s work became subsumed to fund-raising, real estate acquisition, and the creation of functioning “programs” that would justify funding to the organization. The dialogical work that had been at the fore of Freespace’s earlier organizing approach as Modern Times Collective was neglected for shorter and more efficient working meetings, and the organization’s previously aggressive stance on and transitory relation to space (as expressed at the Huntington “Reclaim the Streets” protest, and through the more prosaic practices of Food Not Bombs chapters and the use of residential spaces for concert events) was subsumed to a newly expressed desire for a permanent space of our own.

After several years of searching for a commercial space that satisfied the needs of the group, and attempting to occupy the space legally by conforming to all
zoning requirements and municipal ordinances, Freespace procured a building that was grossly inadequate and extremely overpriced. A large warehouse space was rented for $4,800 a month when Freespace was nearing bankruptcy. With an evangelical Christian landlord and numerous residences nearby, this was an act that perpetuated the project for nearly a year longer but ultimately resulted in the further subsumption of radical youth culture to the needs of a non-profit organization. The organization, promotion, and shit-work of concerts occupied the time and energy of the organization’s core volunteers. Freespace failed to attract new participants due to cultural insularity and physical isolation—the placement of the Freespace building in the middle of Long Island, rather than making it accessible to all, made it annoyingly distant for everyone.

In seeking a space of our own, we failed to realize that our earlier overt protest activities while operating as the Modern Times Collective were essentially about space. Rather than acknowledging the significance of Food Not Bombs or the Reclaim the Streets in the context of Long Island and our demand for space, we regarded them at the time as ideologically motivated “activism.” In reality, these activities represented a remarkably different use of space and produced an affect that opposed and disrupted suburban spatial relationships. In seeking a space of our own by bringing our prior activity into the rubric of a non-profit organization and a single space, we validated suburban space and defused the potential of our own activity.... The attempt to now earn a space that became the core of Freespace’s activity was an acceptance of the restriction of space that suburbia presented. Prior to this drive for a commercial space, Modern Times Collective and Freespace had hosted events at churches, in private residences, and in public spaces. These dispersed activities allowed the organizations to come into contact with young people outside the immediate community and to build relationships with institutions and organizations across Long Island. As well, this allowed the MTC and Freespace to serve as umbrella organizations for youth from various spatially and culturally defined cultures.

The activities that arose from Modern Times Collective and the DIY punk scene previous to Freespace could survive and confront the spatial relationships of suburbia. They were moving, fluid, able to exist in one place one day and then arise the next week miles away. Participants carried practice and analysis with them, rather than being subsumed by one space drawing numerous subjects “home.” With the gradual change in organizational priorities, Freespace itself came to stifle activity and limit the potentiality of its constituent parts. For us to open a permanent space ultimately subjected us to the same boundaries and economies of scarcity that apply to all activity in the suburbs: zoning designations, fire codes, noise ordinances... we used to find our power in being fluid, in moving around and at the outside of those boundaries. When we were articulating a demand for space, we should have been articulating a demand for all space. We failed to realize the value of immediacy. The dialog process
that Freespace initiated occurred in the context of a community, and communities are not static things—they move through levels of composition. Over the course of two years our community changed dramatically as young people moved from Long Island, were carried away by work and school, or simply lost interest or hope in the project. By subsuming a dialogical imperative to the mandates of a legal entity we allowed the processes of decomposition at play in the suburban landscape to begin disassembling us from the outside. Unwittingly, we attempted to become part of the institutional left and participated in a milieu of activity and institutions dedicated to the maintenance of the very social relationships we were opposed to.

The times when Modern Times/Freespace was most successful was when it rejected a solid organizational form or pre-determined set of activities. The moments when it began to fail were when it abandoned its earlier practices for bureaucratic structures, where it failed to act on its own political perspective, and indeed, where it failed to utilize its own analytical tools by attempting to bureaucratize the self-activity of its participants. Its real potentiality was most visible in four distinct tendencies and trends of activity: (1) a reappropriation of space through occupation, (2) the production of affects, (3) the creation of new social relationships, as well as (4) the utilization of dialogic processes and direct democracy for the formulation of community initiatives. Unfortunately, in discarding the immediacy of our demand for space, we exchanged an unfolding, liberatory process for the staid and tired trope of a failed non-profit.
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4 Barbara M. Kelly quotes William Levitt that “[n]o man who owns his house and a lot can be a Communist; he has too much to do.” Kelly argues that a major factor in the development of post-World War II suburban housing plans developed from a fear of social unrest: “In the closing months of World War II, the federal government returned its attention to the postwar economy. Among the concerns was the need to implement reconversion that would reduce the appeal of the socialist agenda which had gained strength during the Depression.” Further, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, “[t]he combination of labor unrest and the shortage of housing loomed as a genuine threat to the peace....” The new suburban homes, underwritten by the federal government, led to purchasers beginning to “derive... their political identity from their new status as landowning members of the American middle class.” Kelly, B.M. (1993). Expanding the American dream: Building and rebuilding Levittown. Albany: State University of New York Press (pp. 163-168).


7 This number is an estimate made by former booking coordinator Bryan Winston.

8 Interestingly, the Long Island punk and hardcore scenes have received more documentation than many others that were thriving in the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s. The foremost document on this is the documentary Between


What has been called the “anti-globalization movement” has been subject to what seems like countless studies, many steeped within academic isolation and lacking relevance to the movements themselves. However, there have been useful documents that have either come out of the movements themselves, or served as points of dialogue between the movements and the academy. The Midnight Notes Collective contribution stands out as one of the most insightful documents into the circulation of struggles in the 1990s and early 2000s: Midnight Notes Collective. (Eds.). (2001). Auroras of the Zapatistas: Local and global struggles from the fourth world war. Brooklyn: Autonomedia. Another work that brings to the forefront the interconnectedness of these struggles is: Notes from Nowhere Collective (Eds.). (2003). We are everywhere: The irresistible rise of global anticapitalism. London and New York: Verso. On the Seattle protests, the most useful collection of essays can be found in: Yuen, E., Katsiaficas, G., Rose, D.B. (Eds.). (2001). The battle of Seattle: The new challenge to capitalist globalization. New York: Soft Skull Press. Also see: St. Clair, J. and Cockburn, A. (2001). Five days that shook the world: The battle for Seattle and beyond. London and New York: Verso (pp. 1-69); Guilloud, S. (Ed.). (2000). Voices from the WTO: An anthology of writings from the people who shut down the World Trade Organization. Oregon: Evergreen State College Bookstore. Finally, for an analysis of the ways in which the Seattle civil disobedience was organized and reflections on the summit protests by participants, see: Whitney, J. (2004). Days of dissent: Reflections on summit mobilizations. Self published (pp. 19-23).

References


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