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Understanding Social Class in Place: Responding to Supergentrification in Aspen, Colorado

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ABSTRACT

Existing research portrays elite places as prone to exclusion, welcoming of upscaling, and focused on protecting their economic self-interests. This paper provides nuance to this research by exploring how stakeholders understand and respond to supergentrification. During fall of 2016, a group of citizen-activists in the exclusive community of Aspen, Colorado, initiated an ordinance seeking to limit the expansion of luxury chain stores. Drawing on qualitative data related to this case, we show that how communities respond to supergentrification depends on locally-specific understandings of place and social class, and how class interests have been institutionalized in local policies. In Aspen, residents opposed luxury chain stores by marshaling narratives that foreground the community’s history of class mixing and the significance of working locals. Elected officials responded by taking account of the political power of local residents as well as the city’s dependence on tax revenues from affluent visitors and second home owners. Our findings extend and complicate understandings of how power works in elite places, highlighting both the potential for, and limitations of, efforts to thwart supergentrification and associated dislocation.

Keywords: Supergentrification, social class, retail upscaling, tourism, culture
INTRODUCTION

Aspen, Colorado, located high in the Rocky Mountains, is a resort community associated with affluence. It enjoys a reputation for luxury, with retailers like Prada, Louis Vuitton, and Dior dotting the quaint downtown and vacation homes renting for $100,000 a month. But Aspen understands itself as something more than merely a luxury destination. Its planning documents and residents characterize it as a place where people from different class locations mix easily, resulting in a sense of funkiness and “messy vitality.” Moreover, since the 1970s, Aspen’s progressive politics have sustained one of the most extensive subsidized housing programs in the nation, allowing middle class residents to live in what is arguably one of the most expensive housing markets in the US. This paper examines how these very different class profiles co-exist in Aspen—exclusivity and egalitarianism—and what can happen when they come into conflict.

The apparent contradiction between exclusivity and egalitarianism surfaced in Aspen in the fall of 2016, during a community-wide debate over luxury chain stores. That November, a citizens’ group proposed an ordinance aimed at regulating—and ideally banning—formula retail. Although it was spearheaded by a wealthy resident, the group also included two former mayors and a number of civically- and entrepreneurially-minded millennials—all of whom worked for a living and many of whom were born and raised locally. Unlike other municipalities that have pushed back against chain stores (Deener, 2012; Ingram et al., 2010; Ingram and Rao, 2004), the Aspen initiative targeted high-end retailers like Gucci and Prada, not low-priced

1 “Formula retail” is the term used in municipal law to refer to chain stores. In Aspen, formula retail was defined as any entity that operates 10 or more locations within the United States and has standardized features such as building exteriors, uniforms, and product lines. We use the terms chain stores and formula retail interchangeably throughout. In Aspen, chain stores are almost exclusively luxury retailers. No fast-food restaurants exist, nor do mid-priced chain clothing stores like GAP or J. Crew. While formula retail was the target of the ordinance central to this case, some supporters of the ordinance opposed luxury upscaling more broadly. Our terminology here aims to reflect these distinctions.
chains such as McDonald’s or Walmart. Aspen’s citizens were pushing back against supergentrification, the process by which already gentrified locales become increasingly exclusive and expensive (Lees, 2003). With supergentrification, property values dramatically increase, resulting in residential displacement and the replacement of businesses frequented by locals with high-end restaurants and retailers (Atkinson, 2015; Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Gravari-Barbas, 2017). In Aspen, many working locals have been pushed into adjacent bedroom communities as housing costs have escalated. With a median home price of $4 million (USD), there are virtually no housing options in the private market to accommodate residents, whose median household incomes are about $73,000. On the retail front, mid-priced chains like Banana Republic and J. Crew have been priced out, and beloved coffee shops and ice cream stores are perpetually threatened with replacement by stores selling $1,000 cashmere sweaters. With the expansion of high-end chain stores, supergentrification can also erode a sense of distinctiveness and community character: what makes Aspen unique if the same stores are found in Dubai, Tokyo, Rome, and London? Despite these tensions, many of Aspen’s citizens and stakeholders understand that luxury retail plays an essential role in town, contributing both to the town’s association with exclusivity and the tax revenues upon which working locals depend. The 2016 debate over formula retail foregrounded these complicated social class dynamics.

Our research explores how stakeholders respond to supergentrification. Drawing on five months of field research, we ask: how do stakeholders negotiate the meaning of place and mediate class interests within the context of supergentrification? We show that how residents, activists, and elected officials define the threat posed by supergentrification, and the tools they use to respond to it, emerge from locally-specific social class dynamics. More specifically, Aspen’s locals expressed opposition to supergentrification by marshalling place narratives
(Brown-Saracino, 2018) that frame Aspen as an exceptional and egalitarian place. These narratives serve as a powerful symbolic resource, countering material forms of power (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition, elected officials and other stakeholders evaluated the fight against high-end formula retail in light of policies that institutionalize class interests. In Aspen, the rights of locals—especially working locals—are enshrined in local politics, where an array of taxes and fees sustain a subsidized (social) housing program and other amenities. These analyses make two important contributions to the existing literature: first, they extend understandings of how places associated with elites operate, showing how residents seek to preserve class mixing alongside exclusivity; second, they provide nuance to understandings of gentrification and supergentrification—and the politics of contention surrounding them—by highlighting the opportunities and constraints that both residents and local governments face in navigating these pressures.

CLASS, PLACE AND SUPERGENTRIFICATION

Supergentrification refers to the process whereby an already gentrified neighborhood is further upscaled, so that homes, restaurants, and retail establishments that once catered to middle-class residents are replaced by those that cater to an increasingly affluent clientele. It emerges from the “intense investment and conspicuous consumption by a new generation of super-rich ‘financiers’ fed by fortunes from the global finance and corporate service industries” (Lees, 2003: 87). It is fueled, according to Zukin (2009: 543–544), by “speculation in a neoliberal market system: an increasing volume of investment capital seeking profitable returns, an increasing array of financial instruments to channel investment into risky deals and an increasing anxiety on the part of city governments to maximize resources so they can compete for the money and prestige that are conferred by deal making.” Supergentrification is the logical
consequence of neoliberal urban policies, where redevelopment and public-private partnerships are the go-to means of bolstering city finances that have lagged due to declining federal investments (Busà, 2017; Hackworth, 2007). Local leaders use tax subsidies to lure development, especially development in tourism and high-end real estate and retail. The increased flow of capital encourages private investment in older properties; after evicting current residents, global investors renovate these properties and rent or sell them to a higher-paying clientele. As new residents demand a higher level of consumption, further upscaling occurs. Meanwhile, less-advantaged residents are displaced and dwindling social services mean that their needs go largely unmet.

The neoliberal city, with minimal regulation and minimal provision of services, has also been called the “minimum city” (Atkinson, Burrows, et al., 2017). With governments and property owners seeking reinvestment, global capital lands where it finds preferential fiscal arrangements, like reduced taxes and fees. In extreme cases, this gives rise to the plutocratic city, where funding for social services is bargained away and the city’s objectives become “identified and aligned with the presence of wealth elites while wider goals, of access to essential resources for citizens… have withered” (Atkinson, Parker, et al., 2017: 179). Such portrayals show supergentrification as a process in which elites remake municipalities to serve their interests, exclusively, with little consideration of the people they displace.

While retail gentrification (Hubbard, 2018; Monroe Sullivan and Shaw, 2011) and tourism gentrification (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Gotham, 2005; Gravari-Barbas and Guinand, 2017) are conceptually distinct, they often emerge from the same conditions as supergentrification, and have similar consequences. In Paris’s Le Marais district, for example, residents bemoaned the impact of supergentrification and tourism development on housing availability and retail
offerings—particularly the presence of shops and services geared toward everyday needs. There, the facades of heritage buildings may say “Boulangerie,” but actually house clothing boutiques (Gravari-Barbas, 2017). For long-time locals, these shifts may erode social networks (Marcuse, 1985), as new, upscaled places shut out older residents, whether because of price or feelings of belonging. As a result, residents lose important connections to public spaces within their cities and neighborhoods, and to one another, and experience symbolic displacement (Atkinson, 2015).

Existing analyses of supergentrification depict a common theme: elites acting in uniform, self-interested ways, with non-elites suffering the consequences. Japonica Brown-Saracino (2009), however, adds to this conversation, demonstrating that gentrifiers cannot be painted with a broad brush. Her analyses show that the class positions of community members do not always neatly map onto their class interests or their class strategies. Some gentrifiers work to preserve local character and the rights of long-time locals, rather than pursuing their economic self-interests. Much of the existing literature also shows local governments succumbing to the demands of global capital. Lees, Shin, and Lopez-Morales, however, have called for greater attention to localized conditions, and how municipal governments respond to gentrification (Lees et al., 2015). Our case study of Aspen, Colorado, responds to this call, showing how class interests have been institutionalized within local politics and the land use code, and how these forces shaped one community’s response to super-gentrification.

Our research makes a second contribution, complicating understandings of how affluence and class privilege shape both places and sense of place. Substantial research has documented the tendency of elites to retreat from socially diverse places, and to use physical and regulatory barriers to ensure that places remain exclusive (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Dolgon, 2005; Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Pow, 2009). Their efforts at regulation and preservation benefit
landowners, producing and protecting views, recreational spaces, and higher land prices (Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Farrell, 2020; Schmidt and Paulsen, 2009). Collectively, these efforts become institutionalized, often through the land use code, thereby shaping how class works in place, and for whom, usually with the result enhancing the economic and symbolic assets of the dominant classes. But this is only one model of how affluence works in place, as we increasingly see those whose resources would allow them to live anywhere choosing to live in gentrifying urban neighborhoods whose attraction rests in part on perceived authenticity and the appearance of class mixing (Atkinson, 2006; Brown-Saracino, 2009; Butler and Robson, 2003; Zukin, 2009). This invites questions about how class works in places, including the degree to which elites seek to use power to shape more mixed places to their will, how contested those efforts might be, and what outcomes result.

In reimagining the concept of social class, British scholar Beverley Skeggs (2004, 2011) distills the notion of class down to its essence, arguing that “class” simply and generically names a struggle. Gentrification and supergentrification constitute such a struggle. For Michaela Benson and Emma Jackson, gentrification is “a struggle over space through which practices over valuation and ownership are writ large” (2017: 70). This struggle involves the material and symbolic ownership of a place, which in turn impacts access to safe and affordable housing, quality education, and political influence, as well as distance from environmental hazards and other dangers. Within this conception, social class is relational, situational, and context dependent; it is not found exclusively in employment relations or economic indicators. Social class becomes a process, not a social position; it moves beyond a priori categorizations of class and assumptions of who belongs in which class and what their interests may be. Like Pierre Bourdieu (1986), we see the material and symbolic aspects of class as analytically,
interactionally, and structurally distinct. Given the autonomous role of social and cultural capital, class relations and class interests can play out in surprising ways, and may even give subordinate classes the power to shape place-making processes. This perspective frees up analysts to attend to class struggles without being wedded to orthodox definitions where, for example, gentrification involves the displacement of working-class persons by middle-class persons. Instead, one can observe social actors coming together, with varying types and volumes of economic, cultural, and social capital, using these capitals to intervene in struggle. While we note that class struggles can play out in locally specific and novel ways, we recognize that such struggles are embedded within a broader context where the dominant classes have disproportionate power. Because of their disproportionate power, the subordinate classes typically experience diminished life chances, in terms of housing, education, political influence and so forth.

These insights pave the way for this study of Aspen, and the complicated ways in which local stakeholders grapple with supergentrification. Our analyses show how symbolic understandings of social class, conceptualized here as place narratives (Brown-Saracino, 2018), are used to oppose supergentrification. We also show that place narratives operate in conjunction with the institutionalization of class relations and class interests in local politics. Ultimately, this case complicates understandings of both supergentrification and social class, showing that seemingly disparate class interests can intersect in complicated ways; these understandings, moreover, intersect with the tools that local governments have to respond to supergentrification.
STUDY SITE AND METHODS

Research Setting

Aspen, Colorado was founded in 1872 as a silver mining town. In the 1940s, it emerged as a ski resort and has since become an elite, multi-season destination. In the 1970s, Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson made it the home base for his pointed social and political commentaries and folk singer John Denver sought it as a refuge that offered a “Rocky Mountain High” lifestyle. For many decades, Aspen has sought to balance what locals describe as its “funky mountain-town feel” with global economic forces that have made it a destination for affluent vacationers and ultra-high net worth home owners. Since the 1970s, elected officials and city planners have implemented policies aimed at limiting growth, extracting mitigation fees from developers, and maintaining a subsidized (social) housing program that accommodates the local workforce. Although Aspen resembles other resort communities in Colorado and the American West, it differs in the spirit of bohemianism and contemporary progressive politics (Travis 2007). This makes it an interesting case for studying processes like supergentrification, which typically challenge localities’ political autonomy and cultural distinctiveness.

Aspen and Pitkin County, Colorado, are currently home to approximately 17,700 year-round residents. With a median household income of about $73,000 and 65 percent of the adult population having a bachelor’s degree or higher, residents are more affluent and educated than the U.S. as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Still, 75% of the community is neither rich nor poor, with incomes falling between $25,000 and $200,000 per year (see Table 1, Community Demographics). With a median home price of $4 million, the majority of year-round residents—teachers, journalists, medical professionals, public safety employees, and hospitality workers—cannot afford housing in the private market. For them, the Aspen Pitkin County Housing
Authority (APCHA) maintains a system of social housing. Residents are eligible if they work in the county for a minimum of 9 months and 1500 hours, annually. The program is made up of 3,045 units, 1,382 available for rent and 1,663 for ownership. Prices start at $50,000 for a studio apartment and top out around $1.5 million for a 4-bedroom home. Two-bedroom townhomes carry a price-tag of about $250,000. On the rental side, studios start at $538 and three-bedroom apartments top out at $2,425 per month. Households earning as much as $307,650 per year may qualify for the program (if they have a 6-person household). The housing program is subsidized by mitigations paid by developers and real estate transfer taxes (RETT) paid by largely affluent home buyers.

The term “local” is used extensively in these analyses and is also a term used extensively within Aspen; it is generally used to claim a degree of honor and membership in the community. While the definition is somewhat elastic, it most certainly refers to someone who lives in Aspen year-round; it also has the connotation of someone who works in the local economy, whatever their occupation. We use the terms local and working local somewhat interchangeably throughout; the term working local is meant to differentiate those who work in order to earn an income from those who work even though they may be able to live off of investment income.

Analytic Case

These analyses are part of a larger project investigating social class and placemaking in Aspen. This case study focuses on a citizens’ initiative to regulate formula retail, which we frame as opposition to supergentrification. In Aspen, where locals have ample social, cultural, and political capital, it is not unusual for citizens to propose legislation or sponsor ballot

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2 For comparison, a 6-person household in Denver, Colorado, could qualify for subsidized housing if they earn $60,800 annually (Denver Housing Authority, 2021).
initiatives. When venture capitalist Jerry Murdock\(^3\) and his citizens’ coalition presented Aspen City Council with an ordinance aimed at regulating formula retail in November 2016, Council had been engaged in a year-long effort to align its land use codes with the Aspen Area Community Plan (AACP), the comprehensive plan that spells out the city’s vision for economic sustainability, housing, transportation, and environmental management. The rewriting of the land use code was prompted by fears that Aspen was losing its character and that the forces of supergentrification were displacing locals. During these revisions, City Council devoted considerable attention to commercial issues, seeking policies that would encourage commercial spaces that meet the needs of year-round residents and visitors alike. Unsatisfied with Council’s efforts, Murdock’s group proposed an ordinance regulating new formula retail. This coalition, composed of former mayors, former owners of locally-serving businesses, and aspiring small business owners, was concerned that high-end chain stores threatened both local character and opportunities for locals to realize their entrepreneurial dreams. If Council chose not to take up the matter, the citizens’ group indicated that they would propose a ballot initiative banning chain stores and defer the matter to a public vote. This was no idle threat, as Aspen voters had successfully used the power of the ballot to derail other unpopular development initiatives.

**Data Sources**

Analyses are based on qualitative data collected between November, 2016 and March, 2017, the period during which city council deliberated proposed regulations on formula retail. A primary source of data are verbatim field notes taken during more than 25 hours of public

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\(^3\) Some informants hypothesized that Jerry Murdock’s advocacy of this issue was informed by his wife, Gina. Gina was a local who spent many years working in the service industry; she was also committed to wellness and sought to develop a wellness-oriented business. This experience gave Murdock insight into the barriers faced by aspiring local business owners. In his public comments, Murdock spoke of wanting to protect locally-serving businesses, like a favorite bike store that had closed.
meetings, including seven Aspen City Council meetings and a five-hour stakeholders’ roundtable. The field notes provide a comprehensive accounting of the ordinance’s public-facing journey. Additionally, the first author conducted 20 one-on-one interviews with persons having intimate knowledge of the case, including the ordinance’s sponsors, local activists, city council members and city planners, land use lawyers, and business owners. These interviews provide insight into negotiations that took place beyond the public eye. Finally, data include documentary sources, including reports from land use consultants and lawyers, minutes from government committee meetings, formal efforts to gather public feedback (both virtual and in-person), blog posts, and letters to the editors of the local papers. These documents provide technical and factual details, as well as insight into how the community responded to the proposed regulations on formula retail. All of these materials are a subset of a larger, year-long project in which one author was embedded within the community, collecting 110 hours of structured observations at official meetings, conducting 90 structured interviews, and participating extensively in formal community events and gatherings of smaller groups.

This diverse set of data is useful, first, because it sheds light on the process by which this ordinance was introduced, modified, and ultimately passed. Second, it reveals the narratives used by stakeholders to define the meaning of Aspen and offers accounts of how high-end formula retail affects that meaning. Data were analyzed in a chronological manner, looking for key decision-points and moments where elements of the legislation were affirmed or revised. Debate and testimony were coded for analytic meaning, characterizing and categorizing support for and

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4 Following Brown-Saracino and Stiman, (2017), we recognize that public meetings do not represent the totality of a community or of community-members’ views.
opposition to the ordinance, especially as they relate to understandings about Aspen’s character and social class dynamics.

FINDINGS

During the five-month period in which it played out, the citizen-led initiative featured complex dynamics between stakeholders, including elected officials, landowners and business operators, and community activists. The push to regulate formula retail highlights how place narratives and the institutionalization of class interests shaped local efforts to resist supergentrification. On a symbolic level, locals used place narratives to fight retail gentrification, arguing that luxury chains are out of step with Aspen’s distinctive character. In addition, residents marshalled discourses on social class, arguing that local residents contribute to Aspen’s sense of authenticity and have a right to the city. Beyond the merely discursive, we also show that efforts to regulate formula retail are both enabled and constrained by the complicated ways in which seemingly disparate class interests have been institutionalized in Aspen’s political landscape: while middle-class residents’ political power bolstered their efforts, their reliance on amenities and services subsidized by luxury retail and other manifestations of supergentrification moderated them.

Local Character and Local Characters: The Deployment of Place Narratives

Across the class spectrum, those who live in and visit Aspen agree on one important issue: Aspen is unique. While the Mountain West is dotted with seemingly countless resorts, locals believe that what makes Aspen distinct are its sense of place and authenticity. Through the late 1980s, only one national chain had gained a foothold in Aspen: a lone McDonald’s outlet, that closed in the 2010s. With the dramatic expansion of global capital, however, high-end chain retailers have nudged out stores with more modest price points. With stores selling apparel with
prices below $300 becoming rare in Aspen, locals can no longer find basic wardrobe items. Instead, storefronts for Dior, Gucci, Valentino, and Prada line Galena Street, attesting to Aspen’s identity as a luxury resort.

Many locals and some developers feared that the proliferation of international retailers was homogenizing Aspen. At the November City Council meeting in which Jerry Murdock and his group introduced the ordinance, former mayor John Bennett lent his support, characterizing Aspen as “one of the most unique, special, small towns in the universe.” In Bennett’s view, the proliferation of retail chains threatened that specialness. He worried that, “We could become a mountain with a mall at the bottom. Our uniqueness is not automatic.” This narrative echoes a longstanding account of Aspen’s distinctive qualities, some of which have been codified in planning documents. For instance, the 1993 Aspen Area Community Plan states that, “Aspen as a community should avoid an environment that is too structured, too perfect, and eliminates the funkiness that once characterized this town” (City of Aspen and Pitkin County, 2012: 7).

Funkiness and messy vitality are evident in Aspen’s built environment, where Victorian era storefronts butt up against alpine-style chalets—a contrast to the artificiality of purpose-built resorts like nearby Vail. The renovations and upgrading to buildings that luxury chains typically require can both undermine the sense of messy vitality and eliminate the older, smaller spaces that house locally-owned and locally-serving businesses.

In supporting the effort to regulate formula retail, some locals warned that upscale homogenization was a threat to Aspen’s bread and butter: the ability to attract affluent visitors to town. Speaking at the November, 2016, City Council meeting, lodge manager Bob Morris attested to the demand for local character in Aspen’s retail environment: “I hear a lot of comments from guests,” he said, “and one of the comments I hear is that with Gucci and all of
the other stores, ‘I feel like I’m walking down Michigan Avenue in Chicago… it’s the things that make Aspen different that I come to Aspen for, not to see the same stores with the same fur coats and $20,000 purses.’” In describing the Aspen “brand,” locals also tied its value to the fact that Aspen provides repeat visitors and part-year residents the opportunity to interact with “local characters.” As such, class mixing and authentic interactions between visitors and locals are asserted as essential elements of Aspen’s identity. At a stakeholders’ roundtable, Katrina DeVore, a third-generation Aspenite and member of the citizen’s group, voiced her opposition to chain retail by drawing on her experiences as a ski instructor: “I have a lot of really high-end people flying into Aspen from all over the world, and they tell me that they can shop in those [upscale chain] stores in New York and L.A. But they come to Aspen because it’s different, and they want to get involved with the locals and they want to know what the locals are into.” While upscale retailers offer a sense of luxury, which is understood as part of Aspen’s brand, upscale chains were seen as homogenizing the town, marking them as antithetical to Aspen’s unique brand of exclusivity.

Speaking at the stakeholders’ roundtable, boutique owner Giselle Leal provided a fine-grained illustration of the Aspen brand, showing how locally-owned boutiques contribute to that brand. She said that what fundamentally differentiates her small accessories store from the international chains is “the story-telling element”—which she described as the opportunity to curate her merchandise, establish relationships with artisans, and then share their stories with customers who return, year after year:

I shop for the same customer, year after year, season after season. I see their families grow; it’s so warm and fuzzy. The products are from local designers or they are handmade. I’m not even sure that people are buying it because they love
the product, but they love the story. I am a source of entertainment for them.

That’s what’s different from going to a Prada or a Burberry. From me, they’re buying 20 minutes of their day to have a conversation with a local.

High-end chains, by contrast, were characterized as cold and rigid, focused on standardization rather than individualization, whereas locally-owned and operated boutiques, bars, and restaurants were seen as facilitating the kinds of interactions that make Aspen unique.

While local stakeholders agreed that chain retail posed a threat to Aspen’s identity, they differed in what they saw as causing their dominance. Numerous business owners spoke of the high cost of doing business in Aspen, with locally-owned retailers being squeezed out by permitting fees and mitigations that raise the cost of doing business. For architect Charles Cunniffe, the main threat was the high price of residential real estate. He succinctly and cleverly stated: “We don’t have the population density to support locally-serving businesses… In order to have a local-town character, you have to have local characters living in the town.” At the same roundtable, a woman named Patty noted: “It used to be that everyone was out, everyone was talking and congregating in one place or another.” Now, she and others noted, working locals have moved to down valley—30 minutes away to Basalt and Carbondale—where rents are lower. Even Mark Hunt, Aspen’s largest developer and landlord, understood the storied role of locals in shaping Aspen’s character. “The beauty of Aspen,” he said, “is … all of that bumping into each other that I love about downtown. I would hate to rip the locals out… and do that segregated thing”—referring to the possibility that the local workforce would move down valley, leaving Aspen proper to visitors and uber-affluent part-year residents. In that case, Aspen would lose some of the character it gains by being a lights-on community and a real town, rather than a mere resort.
Aspen’s “Beautiful Dichotomy”: Understandings of Social Class

In constructing their narratives of the Aspen brand, many opponents of the proliferation of high-end retail foregrounded the primacy of locals; while they did not explicitly name their social class, it can be assumed to be broadly middle-class, given the town’s $73,000 median household income. Yet explicit references to social class also characterized conversations about and opposition to formula retail. These narratives foregrounded the notion that in Aspen, people from different class strata enjoy mixing with one another. “The origin myth of Aspen,” architect Clark Demming said in an interview, is that it is a place where “miners can rub shoulders with millionaires—billionaires, now, but millionaires, back when the phrase was coined.” Having arrived in the early 1970s, journalist Jesse Hanks recounted that “there was tremendous mixing across all the different—I’d say across different social divisions, but there really weren’t so many social divisions.” While newly-arrived residents sometimes questioned the applicability of these narratives to their own lives, there remained an ethos that Aspen is an egalitarian place, where affluent outsiders are expected to assimilate into the local culture and defer to locals’ political and economic decision-making. High-end chain stores threatened these presumptions.

In debating the formula retail ordinance, Aspen residents acknowledged that multiple constituencies have some claim to this place—which may present divergent class interests. Activist Toni Kronberg described Aspen as composed of “three communities”: including “the resort community, of people who come visit here; the local community, who are year-round; but we also have the second home owners, who have the multi-million-dollar homes.” Some locals articulated the need for balance among these groups, but many suggested that affluent outsiders were encroaching on locals’ claims to place. Locals fretted, for example, about “The Russians”—occupants of a condo downtown, who lodged numerous noise complaints against the
adjacent pub’s live music. More broadly, “The Russians” and other luxury condo owners were seen as “sterilizing” the downtown core, where the exorbitant prices on top-floor condos allow developers to keep the street-level retail spaces vacant. While this pleased noise-averse condo owners, the lack of foot-traffic undermined Aspen’s status as a lively, lights-on community. These conflicts ultimately led city council to prohibit future housing development in the downtown core and embedded no complaint clauses in some property sales agreements.

During one council meeting, Mayor Steve Skadron addressed head-on the existential anxieties felt by many of locals—anxieties caused by growing class disparities and displacement:

So what is the core issue? I’ll tell you my answer. It’s the angst that I am being rejected by my own town. I think there’s a sense that the town has been co-opted by the wealthy, and that the soul of community is missing. And that affects the brand perception of Aspen, which speaks to local character, and I equate local character with our shared experience in the [downtown] core. That shared experience, which now seems to be lacking, cuts through the economic stratification that, in effect, is causing some of this angst. We want to celebrate Aspen’s beautiful dichotomy [of affluent visitors and less-affluent locals], and I think some of that’s been taken away.

Indeed, whether the influx of formula retail itself caused theses dynamics, Mayor Skadron concludes that its consequences are bad for locals’ sense of belonging, illustrative of the dislocation experienced by residents in other super-gentrifying areas (Atkinson, 2015).

Even developer Mark Hunt—perceived as the poster-child of upscale retail in Aspen—understood the importance of class diversity in Aspen. He recounted: “One of the things I hear about what people miss about Aspen is everyone coming together in one space… It’s the haves
and have nots, the young and the old, everyone rubbing shoulders. I’ve heard that story over and
over, about why Aspen is different.” The mixing of the “haves and have nots”—an explicit
reference to class difference—heralds Aspen as a place where ski instructors chat with venture
capitalists while riding the chair lift and sharing a slice with Hollywood-types at New York
Pizza. Many locals lamented the loss of diners and bakeries where locals, tourists, and the
wealthy would mix—places that have closed under pressure from rising rents, only to be
replaced by high-end formula retail or restaurants serving $40 branzino entrees and $18 glasses
of wine—which surely inhibits the mixing of social classes. Yet rather than ban chain stores—
the core tenants of local developers’ operations—Mark Hunt urged council to identify incentives
for landlords to lease to locally-serving businesses.

Given this context, supporters of the formula retail initiative asked city government to
protect the economic interests of locals. Explaining why he initiated the ordinance, Jerry
Murdock spoke of his sorrow over the closing of a beloved bike shop and his desire to promote
the entrepreneurial dreams of locals. Former mayor John Bennett, too, hoped the initiative
“might help level the playing field, a little bit, for the young entrepreneur starting off, [so] he or
she doesn’t have to compete with Prada or Gucci.” Locals accused global luxury retailers of
having the unfair advantage of vertical integration in their production chains and of being able to
operate their Aspen stores at a loss, whereas local businesses lacked the resources necessary to
survive the seasonal economy.

On the surface, it may appear that local entrepreneurs were not opposed to the selling of
$2,000 handbags; rather, they wanted to be the ones selling the $2,000 handbags. If so, this
would suggest that their opposition to chain stores was not about supergentrification, but about
homogenization. Yet throughout these deliberations, residents testified to the need for locally-
serving businesses like watch repair shops, dry cleaners, and barber shops. They also spoke of the desires for themselves or their children to open bike stores, ski shops, and restaurants, and to preserve the funkiness seen as central to Aspen’s character. These kinds of businesses are both markers of Aspen’s sense of place and opportunities for locals to participate in the town’s economy. In the context of supergentrification, operating small businesses provides locals access to economic opportunities beyond those available as employees of corporate entities like luxury retailers and hotels. As locals advocate for entrepreneurial opportunities, they assert a desire for economic inclusion. Opposition to luxury retail and upscaling also reflects a desire for social inclusion. As spaces that facilitated class mixing are replaced with more exclusive establishments, locals lose opportunities to gather and socialize in their own town. While opportunities for class mixing might represent an entertaining dimension of Aspen’s appeal for elites, for locals, these represent ways to remain relevant and included in their community, as the accumulation of staggering wealth pushes them to the margins. As such, these expressions of how social class should work in Aspen can be read as indications of specific class struggles emergent in spaces of supergentrification.

**The Institutionalization of Class Politics and Class Interests**

Narratives regarding place and class can be marshalled to oppose forces of change such as supergentrification, but they are not sufficient to keep it at bay. Narratives, and the versions of place they represent, are made durable through institutionalized policies and procedures, in this case regarding class interests. Local policies and land use regulations structure the built environment and delineate the conditions under which different groups can make claims to that place. Land use regulations do this, for example, by preserving wealth through exclusionary zoning or making housing accessible through policies like rent control.
Since the 1970s, Aspen’s progressive leaders have implemented policies that subsidize middle-class locals’ access to a real estate market that has long exceeded their purchasing power. Early progressive regimes instituted a social housing program that today accommodates nearly 50 percent of Aspen’s workforce. The program is heavily subsidized by fees collected from developers and homebuyers. Even Councilmember Adam Frisch, a self-proclaimed free-market proponent, embraced this legacy, acknowledging that social engineering has made Aspen the special place that it is. He described Aspen as having “the thickest land use code per capita of anywhere in the world” and as operating a “mitigation industrial complex” that extracts exceptionally high fees from developers. Alas, Frisch was resolute that the fees paid by developers, which simultaneously increase the cost of doing business, trickle-down, and “make Aspen thrive because of, not in spite of that.” Aspen has thrived, he suggested, in large part because it has institutionalized the needs of working locals.

And Aspen has thrived. Counter to the ordinance’s backers, some asserted that Aspen’s retail environment was not broken. “How is it broken,” landlord Tony Mazza asked, “when sales taxes and real estate taxes are up, occupancy is up, the farmers’ market is packed every weekend, and everyone wants to come here? Some are saying this model [high-end formula retail] doesn’t work; it doesn’t work philosophically for some of the people here, but factually it is working.” The sense that formula retail is working for some—including landlords and deep-pocketed visitors—inspired some landlords to threaten lawsuits against the city, should they implement regulations on formula retail. From this perspective, the institutionalization of locals’ rights through the land use code, and the resulting extractions on development, had done their job and what needed consideration were free-market principles.
With the goal of promoting community well-being and aligning policy with the Aspen Area Community Plan—the planning document that articulates the importance of accommodating working locals—city council considered the proposed formula retail ordinance. They considered the sizable tax revenues provided by luxury retail as well as legal constraints, namely landlords’ property rights on existing buildings. Ultimately, Council sought to maintain the mix of working locals and affluent visitors that Mayor Skadron referred to as Aspen’s “beautiful dichotomy.”

The ability to merge a funky small town with a world-class luxury resort was described by some stakeholders as Aspen’s “golden goose.” This funkiness and authenticity are what attract visitors and seasonal residents to town; once there, they pay property and real estate taxes, along with taxes generated from high-end retail. These taxes, in turn, provide considerable benefit to the community, funding the employee housing program, as well as transportation, education, and recreation programs. As council member Frisch stated at a February, 2017, council work session, it is disproportionately visitors and part-year residents who:

- pay for what I call the community’s bar bill of about $100 million a year [the city’s budget]… [W]e have to understand that the people who come here put a tremendous amount of money into this town, and they’re happy to, but those same people… also want a community-based resort, and they want the funkiness and they want to go into the shops and restaurants. That’s a golden goose we don’t want to kill.

Here, he emphasizes the dual draw of funk and exclusivity. Other key players, including Mayor Steve Skadron and developer Mark Hunt, also emphasized this connection. Whether from sales taxes, annual real estate taxes, the one-time Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT), or the mitigations
paid by developers, it was conventional wisdom within city council that non-locals and developers disproportionately fund the programs that locals need and enjoy.\(^5\) What appear to be disparate class interests intersect in terms of how different class strata benefit from Aspen’s sense of place. Although it would be incorrect to view class relations as genuinely symbiotic, working locals immediately benefit from housing, educational, and recreational opportunities paid for by affluent visitors and part-year residents—even if these same groups also threaten their displacement.

Locals on both sides of the formula retail debate recognized that the current regulatory structure benefitting Aspen’s year-round, middle-class residents is a necessary component of class relations here. Contention emerged, however, in identifying the right amount of high-end retail and luxury properties needed to provide these subsidies without eroding Aspen’s funkiness and authenticity. This delicate balance of placemaking and class politics, along with the political reality that elected officials serve at the pleasure of a largely middle-class voting bloc, guided Council’s deliberations over chain stores.

**Passing an “Imperfect Ordinance”: How Council Kept the Peace and Preserved Legitimacy**

In March 2017, after nearly five months of consideration, the Aspen City Council passed Ordinance 6, which established a conditional use review process for formula retailers wishing to locate in town. Mayor Steve Skadron called it an “imperfect ordinance”—perhaps because no solution could adequately satisfy the complex and interconnected needs of Aspen’s diverse stakeholders. For landlords representing elite interests—including investors and shoppers who

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\(^5\) The amount of retail sales attributable to different demographic groups (locals or non-locals) and to different sectors of the economy is hard to estimate. The Aspen Chamber and Resort Association reports that in 2016, retail sales in related categories were as follows: luxury goods (watches, furs, jewelry) $26,000,000; clothing, $57,000,000, and sports equipment/clothing, $49,000,000. This totals $132,000,000. Lodging, ostensibly paid entirely by non-locals, contributed $209,000,000 to local sales, making up 29% of all sales in Aspen in 2016.
enjoy Aspen’s upscale retail—Ordinance 6 was a material victory. For legal and economic reasons, the final ordinance contained significant exemptions, permitting formula retail in all existing buildings and development projects in the pipeline at the time of passage. Only new developments and significant renovations are subject to review. The citizens’ group and those advocating for the economic and business interests of less-affluent locals won a symbolic victory. Aspen City Council affirmed their claims about authenticity and character: for instance, council member Frisch repeatedly affirmed the value of Aspen’s “sense of place,” and hoped the ordinance would forestall additional homogenization. Council also affirmed locals’ desires to maintain a foothold in the local economy. At the same time, the Aspen City Council arguably won a political victory. From the standpoint of the town’s middle-class voters, passage of the ordinance showed political leadership within the context of a community that has felt increasing anxiety from supergentrification and attendant feelings of dislocation.

Any consideration of how this ordinance passed in the form that it did must take into account how locals’ voices, interests, and activism have been institutionalized within city politics. From the beginning, Murdock’s team indicated that if city council did not take up the proposed ordinance, they would craft their own and place it on the May, 2017 ballot, where it would be voted on by locals—the same locals who vote for council members and benefit from an array of subsidies. The citizen-sponsored version would surely be more extreme than Council’s preferred version. These were not idle threats, as Aspen had become a place where middle-class voters propose citizens’ initiatives to protect their town. In 2015, despite being massively outspent by the opposition, citizen-activists used Referendum 1 to veto a new lodge previously approved by Council. Due to the threat of a ballot initiative, and perhaps to preserve their own political legitimacy, Council took on this issue. In unanimously passing the ordinance regulating
formula retail, which included significant exemptions for local property owners, the Aspen City Council preserved their political power within a town where working locals exert considerable political leverage.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In Aspen, the threat of supergentrification, and high-end formula retail in particular, prompted a robust discussion of what Aspen should be, and who it should be for. Emerging narratives coalesced around the importance of Aspen’s “funkiness” and “messy vitality.” This version of Aspen is widely held—even by actors who don’t always support the city’s extensive regulation and taxation. These place narratives gave middle-class residents an important resource in opposing supergentrification, and bolstered their claims to having a right to participate in the economy. During deliberations, no one asserted that middle-class residents or working locals—the local characters—were not essential to the character of this exclusive mountain town. Rather, debate turned on the ideal means of achieving the mix of luxury and authenticity central to Aspen’s brand. The effort to regulate chain stores, which emerged from locals’ activism, was not universally supported, nor entirely successful in addressing their concerns. Its passage, however, further institutionalized the primacy of Aspen’s middle class, and will likely impact the trajectory of formula retail in this high-end destination.

Our case complicates accounts of supergentrification. When confronted with retail upscaling’s transformation of their downtown, Aspen’s middle-class residents did not withdraw from public life, or cash out and leave. Although some have been residentially displaced “down valley,” many residents actively opposed supergentrification and fought to reinscribe policies that allow people from varied class backgrounds to live, work, and play within the community. This is contrary to other studies of supergentrification (Burrows and Knowles, 2019; Butler and
Lees, 2006; Lees, 2003), where upscaling and increasing property values result in marginalization. Further, our findings echo Japonica Brown-Saracino’s (2009) finding that gentrifiers cannot be painted with a broad brush, and that sometimes cross-class relations develop—even, as in this case, between a billionaire and working locals—to defend and protect a shared sense of place.

Our case also complicates accounts of the alignment of capital and power in shaping places and policies (Atkinson, 2019; Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Stone, 1989; Webber and Burrows, 2016). While the referendum on luxury chains was backed by a wealthy resident, the coalition supporting it was broad, and the interests advanced were those of middle-class residents—not global chains or the super-rich. The referendum’s mix of supporters offers one complication to the conventional narrative regarding affluence and place, in that new, cross-class alliances emerged to preserve the interests of working locals. A second contribution is reflected in the coalition’s success, which we understand as supported, at least in part, by the institutionalization of class interests in Aspen. Here, middle-class residents have advanced policies and programs that protect their interests—the social housing program foremost among these. And those who live in Aspen full time, including working locals and those residing in social housing, form a voting bloc that faces little opposition from more monied interests. After all, voters in the U.S. can be registered in only one jurisdiction, and Aspen’s uber elites typically vote in their “home” districts of Chicago, Houston, L.A., and elsewhere. The influence of working-locals shows that policy context and political jurisdictions can profoundly shape opposition to supergentrification and its outcomes, namely in terms of how political capital and economic capital operate as distinct sources of power.
While the political power of Aspen’s year-round residents certainly buoyed activists’ efforts, Aspen’s tax structure constrained them. The city’s subsidized housing program, its parks and trails, and distinctive elements that create its sense of place, depend on revenues generated in part through taxes on luxury retail and other tourist- and part-time resident serving businesses. This is not altogether unusual. The redevelopment of the urban core and public-private partnerships found in late gentrification have become typical, and even naturalized, as a means of bolstering flagging city finances within the neoliberal city (Hackworth, 2007). Supergentrification extends these processes, drawing upon global capital—in the case of Aspen, investments from developers and space for high-end retail—to increase local rents and taxes while simultaneously making places more exclusive. Aspen is also not alone in confronting tourism gentrification aimed at affluent visitors (Cocola-Gant and Gago, 2019; González-Pérez, 2020; Gravari-Barbas, 2017; Navarrete Escobedo, 2020). The Aspen case can thus be understood as an extreme variant of a common pattern in which local governments view gentrification and tourist development—and resulting property, hotel, and sales tax revenues—as a means of maintaining city services without raising taxes on most voters. Our work shows how locals may weigh these financial gains against social and cultural costs.

We can also glean from the Aspen case insights into how supergentrification, tourism gentrification and retail upscaling might contribute complex new forms of class coexistence. In places where middle-class residents successfully articulate claims to place, where these claims are officially sanctioned and not merely understood as self-interest, cities have some leverage in pursuing intensification of land uses to subsidize the needs of working- and middle-class residents. Municipal housing authorities are one example of this (e.g., Howard, 2014; Lazarovic et al., 2016). In Aspen, a successful social housing program is sustained almost exclusively by
taxes and fees paid by developers and buyers of second homes. Yet the same policies that fund these programs also lead to ever-increasing commercial rents and prohibit many locals from starting businesses, purchasing a home in the private market, or finding useful commercial options. As a result, working locals may continue to live in upscaling areas, but more holistic forms of social integration cannot be taken for granted.

Although supergentrification marks the increased push of global capital, it plays out in varied ways, intersecting with local cultures and patterns of development. Aspen and other places that are heavily reliant on tourists and wealth from part-year residents may have political tools that are lacking in communities where the most affluent residents are also the most politically engaged. The relationship between residential and social integration in places experiencing different types and degrees of upscaling thus presents a compelling question for future research.
REFERENCES


Travis


Table 1: Select Demographic Characteristics, Aspen, Pitkin County, and U.S. (2018)

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<th>Aspen, Colorado</th>
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Sources: Sommeiller and Price 2018; U.S. Census 2020a, 2020b