Paradox and contradiction are at the heart of social life and, consequently, of keen interest to sociologists like me. The tensions and contradictions that run through the upscale resort town of Aspen, Colorado, can be illustrated with a simple question: How is it possible for a town to exist where the median household income is about $73,000, but the median home price is about $4 million? Conventional wisdom among financial advisors is that a household earning $73,000 per year can reasonably afford a home in the $225,000–$325,000 price range—not the $4 million price tag found in Aspen. The paradoxical relationship between local incomes and the price of real estate is what I call “The Impossible Math of Aspen, Colorado.” Aspen is a place where many residents own homes with values in excess of $10 million, but the majority of the town’s nearly 7,400 residents cannot afford a home even far below the median price. Yet they live there, nonetheless. The navigation and resolution of this paradox is the subject of this book. I show that what solves the impossible math equation between incomes and home values in Aspen—the “X-factor” that makes middle-class life possible—is a process of place-making that involves the careful orchestration of diverse class interests within local politics and the community, with the overarching goal of maintaining Aspen’s value and
preserving its authentic small-town character. This is achieved through a highly regulatory and extractive land use code that provides symbolic and material value to highly affluent investors and part-year residents, as well as less-affluent locals, many of whom benefit from an array of subsidies—including the extensive affordable housing program that houses middle- and upper-middle-class locals—that redistribute economic resources and make it possible for them to live in one of the most unequal communities in the nation.

These analyses take as their point of departure the 2016 moratorium on development, in which the Aspen City Council pushed the pause button on development so that officials could rewrite the land use code. The land use code, produced by local politicians and their urban planning staff, plays a significant role in place-making and is also a tool that mediates the seemingly disparate interests of Aspen’s middle-class workers and its ultra-wealthy residents and visitors. In a technical sense, the land use code governs where buildings with different uses (retail, residential, industrial) can be placed, how big they can be, and what they must look like. As a centerpiece of urban political economy, these codes spell out whether developers are entitled to tax abatements or incentives or whether, as in Aspen, they must pay mitigations or exactions. In a symbolic sense, the land use code constitutes, according to anthropologist Constance Perin, a “moral system that both reflects and assures social order” by allocating membership and belonging within a community. It does so by establishing a hierarchy of uses and regulating access to meaningful social roles, including homeowner and entrepreneur. Finally, the land use code structures class relations: by creating opportunities for business ownership and residency, it shapes material interests, dictating both the profitability and the costs associated with these roles, and shapes where and how different groups come in contact with one another.

The 2016 revision of Aspen’s land use code provides insight into the process of place-making and how class relations structure and are structured by place-making. During this instance of place-making, Aspen’s politicians, urban planners, developers, the local business association, and citizens came together to negotiate the look and feel of this quaint, yet exclusive mountain town. The city council’s decision to rewrite the land use codes was a reaction to locals’ anxieties that they were no longer in
control of their community and that outside forces were increasingly dictating not just the look and feel of their community, but also the criteria for belonging. These outside forces can be glossed by a single word: \textit{supergentrification}. In response, stakeholders’ efforts focused on how to craft building sizes and shapes that would both preserve precious mountain views \textit{and} make space for locally serving businesses, and how to “right-size” building mitigations so that owners and developers are not disincen-
tivized from economic activity but are still obligated to make meaningful contributions to affordable housing. This book tells the story of how the Aspen City Council sought to rewrite their land use code, which dictates both the material and symbolic form of the town, and how they attempted to balance the divergent class interests of the local stakeholders in an effort to answer the question, “Aspen for whom?”

This book tells a story that is of interest to sociologists, urban planners, and policy makers who study land use codes, as well as anyone interested in how communities function amid rising social inequality. In many ways, Aspen challenges the conventional wisdom of what we know about politics, place, and economic inequality. The conventional wisdom, drawn from scholarly research on social class, place-making, and urban development, is that a place like Aspen should not exist. That is, a place should not exist where the median income is $73,000 per year, but the median home price is nearly $4 million. The dynamics posed by neoliberal economic policies and supergentrification should impact Aspen as they have impacted New York, London, and other global cities: elevating the interests of business, decreasing taxation and the provision of government services, and paving the way for displacement and exclusion. These dynamics should make it impossible for a community to exist where the incomes earned by local residents are fundamentally at odds with housing prices, and where working locals still exert considerable influence on how the town operates.

And yet this version of Aspen does exist—at least for now. Aspen, as it currently exists, is a place where global elites own second (or third, or fourth) homes that they visit during the winter and summer “high seas-
sons.” They ski majestic mountains in the winter and in the summer hob-
nob with celebrities, intellectuals, and other global elites during the Aspen Ideas Fest, the Food and Wine Classic, and the Music Festival. It is also a
place inhabited by 7,400 year-round residents, some quite affluent themselves, but most of whom hold the ordinary jobs that make any small town function. They are doctors and nurses who staff the hospital; teachers and librarians who attend to children and others wanting to learn; law enforcement and first-responders who keep Aspen safe and orderly. There are, of course, plenty of people who work the jobs that make Aspen a world-class resort, especially in hospitality, real estate, architecture, and the building trades. These are the year-round residents whose $73,000 household incomes place them above the national average, but who are priced out of local, free-market housing. While other scholars have studied Aspen and the very similar community of Jackson Hole in Teton County, Wyoming, those scholars have examined the tensions between the uber-wealthy and lower-income Latinos. While such work is important, it has largely ignored the middle- and upper-middle-class residents who form the core of such communities. Indeed, 75 percent of Pitkin County’s residents earn between $25,000 and $200,000 annually. This book centers their experiences, and examines the curious relationship between the affluent global elites and Aspen’s working locals, focusing on how local stakeholders strive to craft a town that operates both as an exclusive enclave and as an authentic community with a middle-class core.

While Aspen is currently home to a substantial middle- and upper-middle-class population, for many locals there is a sense that they are losing control of their beloved town, ceding ground to global elites. Locals see their town becoming a place where tenants of $20 million condominiums can lodge noise complaints against the brewpub or the exercise studio next to whom they purchased a unit, and threaten to drive out local business owners and their patrons. The existential threat posed to Aspen’s middle-class locals is supergentrification—a global economic force impacting elite resort towns and major metropolitan areas alike. 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. Within the resort economies of the west, geographers have referred to this as “Aspenization.” Locally, evidence of supergentrification is captured in the oft-repeated description of a place where “the billionaires are pushing out the millionaires.”
Aspen and the tensions it poses are abundantly clear in the town’s two newspapers, *The Aspen Times* and *The Aspen Daily News*, which circulate widely throughout town. On the one hand, these free daily papers are made possible by revenues generated from the glossy real estate advertising inserts that depict majestic mountain estates and sleek downtown condos with price tags in excess of $10 million, as well as with advertisements on interior pages for boutiques selling jewelry, vintage watches, and furs; high-end restaurants; and blue-chip art galleries. On the other hand, these newspapers’ front-page reporting captures ongoing political struggles, like the battle against a new hotel, the effort to ban luxury chain stores, and demands for more affordable housing. Every day, newspaper readers confront the ways in which class tensions and understandings play out in Aspen: the city that sells luxury and aspiration as its core brand is also a place where locals push back against supergentrification. This book documents a year in the life of place-making in Aspen, Colorado. Drawing from a rich set of qualitative data collected during a year of ethnographic field work, I show how local politicians and other stakeholders attempt to balance the seemingly divergent interests of these two groups while striving to preserve the unique small-town character—one part exclusiveness, one part accessibility—that has become Aspen’s international brand. It examines urban planning as a tool for place-making and, in this context, for managing supergentrification; it is through this same tool that class interest and class relations become institutionalized in place.

**THE STUDY OF PLACES AND PLACE-MAKING**

The fact that Aspen’s middle- and upper-middle-class locals coexist is not an accident: it is the result of a carefully calibrated process of place-making. The notion of place-making asserts that places do not exist in themselves; instead, they are made. But what is a place? A place is more than a physical location or point on a map. Places are more than the statistical or geographic units designated by the US Census Bureau or other such entities. According to Thomas Gieryn, places have three co-occurring elements. First, a place has a geographic location; it is a unique spot in the universe, with both finitude and elastic boundaries. Aspen, for example, is
located in Pitkin County and has decipherable municipal boundaries, but its imagined boundaries extend to adjacent communities like Snowmass, Woody Creek, and Basalt. Second, a place has material form, grounded in physical features, both natural and built by humans. The physical place of Aspen is bounded by the mountains that rise up around the built environment and the Roaring Fork River that parallels Highway 82 into and out of town. Equally, it is made up of structures that house its commercial, residential, and government functions. Finally, places are invested with meaning and value. As such, places are not merely stages or backdrops for human activity; rather, they emerge as they are “interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined.” And yet these interpretations are labile and contested. In Aspen, millennials and other recent arrivals sometimes accuse those who arrived in the hippy heyday of the 1970s of wanting to encase the town in amber; the latter, conversely, worry that newcomers don’t adequately understand the progressive, low-growth politics that made Aspen the special place that it is. Likewise, Aspen means something different to the local law enforcement officer living in subsidized housing than it does to the billionaire who visits the family compound a few weeks each year. Each individual or group participates in place-making, and may have different ideas about what Aspen is, what its virtues and problems are, and how its essence—and their interests—should be preserved.

The idea that places are not fixed entities hints at the notion of place-making. As used here, place-making refers to an ongoing accomplishment wherein community stakeholders, possessing varying material and symbolic interests and resources, come together and negotiate the meaning and materiality of that place. It occurs through the recursive interaction of structural and cultural elements; the intertwining of the material and ideational. Drawing on Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration, Harvey Molotch, William Freudenburg, and Krista Paulsen propose a model of place-making where place-character emerges from a “lashing-up,” in which existing structures (e.g., laws, policies, norms, etc.) and human action (meaning-making, contestation, interaction) continuously intersect and interpenetrate. On an informal level, this lashing-up plays out in an affluent tourist’s decision to return to Aspen for their annual ski vacation; on a formal level, it occurs in local government’s decisions about whether to approve the building of a new hotel or impose new mitigations
on developers. Place-making is an “unending series of adjacent and recursive choice-point moves,” where the resulting configuration is “not prede-termined, but is formed in a path-dependent way as each actor, with more or fewer resources at his or her command, shapes a new social structure by drawing upon the simultaneously enabling and constraining hand of the old.” Through these processes—which can take place over decades or during a single city council meeting—geographic locales take on distinct place characters.

Although place-making is an ongoing process, there are moments when this process is thrown into stark relief. The building moratorium and rewriting of the land use code that played out in Aspen during 2016 is one such moment—albeit, a yearlong one. The attendant proposal to regulate chain stores, which emerged midway through the moratorium from citizens frustrated by the council’s efforts to address the needs of local shoppers and business owners, is another. In place-making processes like these, stakeholders with different material and symbolic interests come together to negotiate the meaning and materiality of a place, and do so within a context where some groups have more power than others. Power, in this case refers to political influence, economic influence, cultural legitimacy, social capital, and more. A long-time citizen-activist or architect in Aspen may have less economic power and influence than a developer, but their claims to cultural legitimacy—what geographer Eugene McCann calls discursive power—may have substantial resonance in conversations about Aspen’s land use code. With these different forms of power at play, social-class groups and interests can influence the place-making process in nuanced ways.

PLACE AND THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CLASS

There is no doubt that Aspen is an affluent place, as well as an unequal place. With a median home price around $4 million and the most expensive luxury real estate market in the United States, there are significant barriers for anyone who wants to become a part of the community in a long-term way. The downtown shopping district also caters to affluent tastes. The pedestrian mall is dotted with Gucci, Dior, Prada, Ralph
Lauren, and Dolce and Gabbana. There is not a J. Crew, Zara, or Gap, anywhere in sight. Aspen is also highly unequal. Ranked among the top ten most unequal communities in the United States, the median household in the top 1 percent earns seventy-two times more than the median household among the bottom 99 percent; within the United States as a whole, this ratio is 26:1. And yet from another vantage point, Aspen is a community composed largely of middle- and upper-middle-class residents, where only 10 percent of the population earns more than $200,000 annually. These analyses focus on Aspen’s attempts to be a place where middle- and upper-middle-class locals coexist alongside global elites, where urban planning plays a starring role in the place-making process and the institutionalization of class interests.

**Affluent People and the Politics of Exclusion**

*Aspen and the American Dream* provides a novel understanding of how affluent places “do” social class. By “do” social class, I mean the routine ways of understanding social class, as well as the ways that class interests and interactions are institutionalized through cultural norms and concrete policies. Much of the existing literature portrays affluent communities in a homogeneous light, with elites operating in predictable ways. Existing scholarship depicts elites using place-making tools to protect their cultural and economic interests. One way they do this is through exclusion. As with gating, a form of exclusion that erects a boundary and restricts access to individual properties or entire communities, exclusion can operate both physically and symbolically. In *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States*, Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder write that setting boundaries through gating “is always a political act” because, by virtue of their construction, “someone must be inside and someone must be outside.” With restrictive covenants that govern what owners can and cannot do with their properties, gated communities are also a regulatory scheme that protects property values and supports claims to exclusivity.

Along with materially protecting property values, the gates that surround affluent communities “symbolize distinction and prestige and create and protect a place on the social ladder” allowing residents to
proclaim, “I am the kind of person who can afford to live in this distinctive community.” Choon-Piew Pow shows that gated communities in Shanghai became increasingly popular in the early 2000s as developers began to market them as a means to live the good life and fulfill the aspirations of conspicuous consumption made possible by liberalization of the Chinese economy. Once inside—whether in Shanghai or London—residents can, through social closure, build social and cultural capital. The nonmaterial benefits of gating are highlighted in Kathryn Wilkins’s historical account, where during the nineteenth century, residents of London’s affluent West End neighborhoods shut themselves in—rather than shutting others out—so that they could drink, dance, and revel with anyone who was anyone in British society. Gates, then, can help residents to distance themselves from the hoi polloi and facilitate the building of homophilous social networks.

When physical barriers are elusive or nonexistent, members of affluent communities can use other strategies to exclude unwanted elements and mark membership within a community. One approach is to draw upon what geographers James S. and Nancy G. Duncan call “the invisible walls of zoning.” Through their influence on zoning policies and the land use code, community members can shape the look and feel of a place, and regulate which types of activities take place there. A number of studies have profiled the efforts of affluent community members to control growth, often through exclusionary zoning. By implementing exclusionary zoning practices that increase minimum lot sizes and setbacks (distance between the primary structure and the right of way) and preserve open space and wetlands, affluent residents seek to preserve the look, feel, and charm of their communities. As Justin Farrell shows in his work on ultra-wealthy residents of Teton County, Wyoming, efforts to preserve the beauty of the natural landscape also create scarcity: scarcity of land available to develop, which further increases property values and perceptions of exclusivity.

In their ethnography of Bedford, New York, an old money New York City bedroom community, Duncan and Duncan provide a cultural critique of exclusionary zoning. Rather than overt acts of class domination, Duncan and Duncan argue that affluent residents articulate landscape preferences—for mature trees, open space, and wetlands—in ways that depoliticize them, imprinting on them the veneer of mere aesthetic preferences, rather
than snobbery or racism. “Bedford is a site of aesthetic consumption prac-
tices,” they write, “in which the residents achieve social status by preserving
and enhancing the beauty of their town. They accomplish this by highly
restrictive zoning and environmental protection legislation and by preserv-
ing as much undeveloped land as possible through the creation of nature
preserves.” Instead of considering residents’ donations of forests and wet-
lands as an act of charity or a reflection of deeply held environmental values,
Duncan and Duncan, argue that affluent landowners benefit themselves:
through their donations they receive both tax breaks and the opportunity
to have a meadow or forest within walking distance, if not within view of
their kitchen window or patio. Justin Farrell argues these same points in
his portrayal of wealthy environmental activists and their contributions to
local land trusts in the Grand Teton mountains.

These ethnographies of privilege and place portray class dynamics as
antagonistic, where the politics of exclusion typify elites’ efforts to influ-
ence policies that would erase or marginalize less-affluent community
members. Ironically, the presence of affluent residents increases demand
for lower-skilled and lower-paid laborers, yet these same affluent residents
may also oppose efforts to increase the affordable housing or social services
upon which these laborers rely. Although affluent residents welcome the
labor power that less-skilled workers bring—many of whom are Latino—
they do not welcome their visibility or their long-term relocation. An
extensive body of literature details the politics of NIMBY-ism—“not in my
backyard”—in the form of middle- and upper-middle-class residents’ oppo-
sition to affordable housing in their communities. In Duncan and Duncan’s
work on Westchester County and Corey Dolgon’s work on the Hamptons,
we find affluent residents mounting campaigns against day laborers’ ability
to assemble in highly visible locations. Residents of Westchester County
encouraged local businesses to post anti-loitering signs and, in the case of
Mount Kisco, New York, successfully urged the city to relocate the meetup
spot for day laborers to a less conspicuous place beyond the town square.
Residents also succeeded in passing an “anti-panhandling” ordinance,
which required workers to obtain permits to solicit work in public places.
This law passed, in part, based on the rhetoric that Latino day laborers
waiting to be hired are tantamount to beggars, threatening pedestrians
who would otherwise do business in the town square.
When it comes to social class exclusion, dynamics are especially complicated in Aspen. As in other affluent communities, many people experience exclusion in Aspen due to its expensive housing market. Yet during my time in Aspen, I discovered that class integration exists alongside class exclusion. In fact, the idea that Aspen offers members of different social classes the opportunity to intermingle is a beloved part of local lore. On seemingly countless occasions during my research, people boasted of the ability of the rich and famous to sidle up to the bar in the legendary Hotel Jerome and not be hounded for their fame, but to be able to fly under the radar and converse with the bartender and other (ostensibly not-so-rich-and-famous) locals. I regularly observed both elites and non-elites actively participating in Aspen’s vast array of arts and cultural events. Nowhere is this more evident than at the Eero Saarinen–designed music tent, a destination for classical music enthusiasts throughout the summer’s famed Music Festival. Inside the tent sit subscribers with season tickets, while both affluent and non-affluent concert goers, who pay nothing to hear the same music, populate the outdoor grounds. What is interesting about Aspen is that concert goers who enjoy glasses of rosé while sitting on blankets for free outside the music tent may claim that their experience is not only more fun than sitting inside the staid tent, but perhaps even more legitimately “Aspen,” given the mixing of classes and sense of unpretentious luxury. Conversations with locals also reveal complicated class relations in Aspen. Whereas some locals characterize relations as “class warfare,” with the rich waging war on the not-so-rich, others described these relationships as symbiotic, with the affluent and less-affluent gaining something of value from each other. A number of locals even described class relations in Aspen as exploitative—yet saw middle-class locals as benefitting from, if not exploiting, wealthy residents and part-year visitors, due to their reliance on tax revenues that fund local programs, especially the housing program that allows working locals a place to live outside of the exclusionary free market.

**Affluent Place-Makers and the Pursuit of Profit**

At a structural level, the existing research similarly portrays monied interests as having a relatively narrow set of goals. Seminal theories of
urban political economy, for example, situate economic elites and their economic interests as the preeminent shapers of cities. For Marxist geographer David Harvey, the city was as central as the factory for capitalists’ control over society, with cities being built to advance profit motive and the needs of production. The centrality and normativity of elites’ interests are illustrated in John Logan and Harvey Molotch’s *growth machine* theory, which argues that “the political and economic essence of virtually any given locality, in the present American context, is growth.” A pro-growth agenda is pushed, Logan and Molotch argue, by economic elites and the government officials they co-opt, who seek to maximize the *exchange value* of a place—its economic value in terms of how much it can be rented or sold for. To do so, cities provide tax abatements and other incentives to lure companies to locate there and expand jobs, the quality of the workforce, and ostensibly the tax base. At times, local residents may oppose the efforts of monied elites in an effort to preserve or maximize its *use value*: that is, its value as a place for habitation. Yet local residents are typically no match for the growth machine, which benefits from the deep pockets and continuous, institutionalized support of local political regimes.

This view of monied and politically entrenched interests seeking to maximize monetary returns is evident in studies of economic development and urban branding. Miriam Greenberg’s *Branding New York*, Kevin Fox Gotham’s *Authentic New Orleans*, and Alessandro Buša’s *The Creative Destruction of New York City* all show growth machine coalitions, led by *place entrepreneurs*, whose primary interest is selling a place and maximizing its economic value. This group includes the rentier class, made up of real estate owners and developers, who stand to cash in when a place expands or rebrands. Politicians often join with economic elites as place entrepreneurs. As shown by Miriam Greenberg and Alessandro Buša in their case studies of New York City, local politicians cultivate seamless networks with economic elites, fostering public-private partnerships that allow them to implement neoliberal economic development strategies that use tourism and intensification of FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) industries as substitutes for traditional neighborhood-based development. Urban growth and place-making are augmented by *city producers*—media, marketing, civic groups, and nonprofit organizations—who use their social,