GOING THE DISTANCE
Supercommuters and American car culture in tension with metropolitan identity in Rockford, IL

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Abstract

Supercommuters, or people whose commute times fall at the extreme upper end of typical commutes, account for an outsized portion of gasoline consumption and car dependence. Thus, accounting for supercommuters is crucial in addressing environmentally untenable transportation practices and deemphasizing car travel when reframing future urban development and identity. There is no scholarly consensus on the commute time or distance that defines a supercommute, so I rely here on interlocutors' self-definition as supercommuters between the Rockford, IL metropolitan area and greater Chicago (within Cook County). Existing research on commuting tends to focus either on the social experience of automobility, or on the historical and contemporary car-centric forces that shape the built environment; addressing why and how people participate in the extreme supercommute within the particular geographic context of the Rockford-Chicago commute reveals the values and suburban cultural logics that undergird this practice. This, in turn, allows the practice to be understood through simultaneous environmental and anthropological lenses. By undertaking an analysis of the experience and motivations of supercommuters between Rockford and Chicago in relation to Rockford's ongoing reflexive economic and urban development planning and practices, I address both the collective priorities that enable the daily physical grounding of supercommuting and the incongruities between these practices and Rockford's contemporary process of identity (re)formation. I argue that the suburban, automobile-reliant ideals that undergird supercommuters' logics run counter to the foundational principles of sustainable urban communities. Thus, development professionals' work in reorienting Rockford's identity towards a cohesive, locally-centered cosmopolitan and metropolitan area is situated in, and must contend with, the friction between this new paradigm and the suburban ideals which make supercommuting not only viable but voluntary.

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Introduction

The United States is built for cars. Highways are the veins of the American landscape; in many places, car ownership is a prerequisite for access to food, school, and work, and parking and roadways take up an immense amount of space. Outside of dense urban areas, driving is a necessity to move between the separate spheres of the home and the rest of the world. The consequences of car use operate on the same sweeping scale: personal vehicles are the single greatest source of US greenhouse gas emissions, at ⅙ of nationwide emissions. However, the sources of vehicle emissions are not distributed evenly: only the top 10% of gasoline users account for an outsized 32% of gasoline use (London, Metz, and Rosler 2021).

One prominent group of superusers are supercommuters. The category of supercommuter is not standardized across texts, and definitions vary by travel time or distance, so I rely here on interlocutors' self-definition as commuters between the Rockford metropolitan area and Chicago/Cook County. In the Chicagoland area, the limited existing research on supercommuters indicates that the greatest origin for supercommuters is the Rockford metropolitan area, the second largest metropolitan area in the state of Illinois with a population of around 300,000 and centered about 90 miles northwest of Chicago's downtown (the "Loop"). A seminal 2012 study from New York University estimated that around 14,000 people commute daily from Rockford to Chicago (Moss and Qing 2012). The supercommute encompasses a wide range of experiences given that commute distances and times between these two metro areas vary significantly by mode of travel, time of day and weather conditions, and precise origin and destination, among other factors. By avoiding a restriction by distance or time, I aim to capture the diversity of these experiences. Within this variance, though, the Rockford-Chicago commute places any driver

well within the top 10% “superuser” category, meaning that addressing their habits is crucial in maximizing emissions reductions.

Additionally, the practices of supercommuters, and the infrastructure in which they operate, are emblematic of the integral nature of cars to the development of the modern built and social environments. Supercommuters are an extreme case of the car dependence that pervades the global landscape. Thus, an approach that centers supercommuters in turn makes visible the innate, often-accepted systems of suburban car dependence that undergird the American built landscape. Examining this extreme form of automobile reliance reveals, and thus allows for the questioning of, the necessity and ubiquity of cars, roads, parking facilities, and other forms of infrastructure for access to basic needs and the places and social networks around which life is centered.

The experience of supercommuters who do not commute by car is also premised on automobile systems. The development patterns that make their commutes viable (e.g. of affordable single-family homes far from their workplaces) are built as such because of the centrality of cars. Though supercommuters’ behavior may represent an extreme, it is the end of a spectrum on which the vast majority of people fall. Car dependence at some degree is pervasive, and its environmental and social impacts are similarly integral to modern networks of human interaction. Rockford itself is an example of a city reliant on the paradigms made desirable through car dependence. It is, in large part, centered on neighborhoods of single-family homes whose communities emphasize the insular family and local suburban-styled encounters. Travel and engagement among people must happen as mediated by cars, to the extent that it happens at all. Despite recent efforts by local officials to elevate the city’s metropolitan nature and increase its cosmopolitan identity, the urban center is largely deemphasized by residents.

Though there exists a wealth of research on the fields of commuter studies and mobility, as well as discussions of the values and physical infrastructure that allow for car-centric travel, suburban environments, and the environmental consequences of this love affair with the automobile, there are few academic analyses that address the environmentally and socially critical population of supercommuters. Understanding the forces and values that drive supercommuters—who exemplify an extreme of the car-dependent, suburban paradigm, where the pursuit of elevated social ideals tied to suburbia ostensibly outweighs the cost of regular travel—is key to developing informed strategies for gasoline use reduction.

In speaking with Rockford-Chicago supercommuters, I apply theories of mobility and suburban studies to their lived experiences, and answer the linked questions of how and why people supercommute. By interviewing supercommuters across a range of ages, personal experiences, industries, backgrounds, and priorities, I work to understand how members of this group are united by the shared commuting experience, and how they perceive the commute in relation to their experience of the Rockford metro area as a whole. I supplement these conversations with interviews of key figures in Rockford's housing, talent attraction, and economic development industries; I build an understanding of the motivations and intentions of those shaping the city's external reception and self-perception.

Drawing on John Urry's seminal and widely-referenced theory of automobility, I analyze supercommuters' habits in light of their historical and cultural grounding, as well as the unique situation of Rockford's current attempts at urban reinvention with an eye towards a budding cosmopolitan identity. I aim to answer the following questions: How are the broader value systems and embodied practices associated with automobility (beyond direct car dependence) reflected in supercommuters' comments about Rockford and the Rockford-Chicago commute?

What values and visions do people in Rockford's development industries express regarding the city's future? How might a comparison of these priorities evidence differing or aligned pressures and desires, especially regarding suburban ideals?

I find that supercommuters' motivations align largely with a view of Rockford as exemplifying the appeals of the suburban neighborhood despite technically being a large city, while professionals in the economic and urban development fields aim increasingly to construct an urbanity centered on Rockford itself as a metropolitan hub. I argue that these two views demonstrate a tension inherent in the necessary shift away from the unsustainable, untenable suburban system. Supercommuters' willingness to participate in extreme commutes demonstrates the ways they privilege the suburban ideals achieved through the commute, often at great personal cost. The suburban paradigm encompasses interconnected ideals of homeownership, the centering of the insular family and immediate neighborhood in social life, and material standards of wealth. Because of the extreme nature of supercommuting practices, studying suburban logics as embodied by supercommuters exposes these logics more clearly, while also demonstrating the extent to which they are embedded within and influence supercommuters' habits. In order to disrupt suburban patterns of resource and land consumption, pollution, and social isolation, new development must challenge and contend with the suburban ideology that underlies supercommuters' practices.

In order to trace this argument, I first provide a summary of academic literature describing the origins and operation of the values associated with American suburbia, car culture, and the commute. This incorporates anthropological, sociological, historical, and political approaches to the object of the commute and the social logics that enable it to operate. I then offer an overview of my methods of interviewing and data collection, followed by a

summary of the pieces of Rockford's history that participants determined were important to convey to me as a non-local. This grounds an extensive analysis of interviews with 11 supercommuters and development industry professionals in Rockford. Within that analysis, I cover the throughline of affordability in discussions of the city, supercommuters' direct experiences, the ambitions of those involved in shaping Rockford's metropolitan identity and future, and tensions between the visions of residents (as exemplified by supercommuters themselves) and these professionals whose work caters largely to an external population of prospective new residents. These tensions expose the difficulty in shifting towards a sustainable urban paradigm while involving current residents.

Literature Review

Analyzing commuting necessarily draws on several fields of theory. Following the geographically-situated path of the commute itself allows for connection between these fields. This path begins in the study of suburbs or ex-urbs (or in the case of the Rockford-Chicago supercommute, the secondary metropolitan area of Rockford itself), continues into an examination of American car culture and the built infrastructure that supports car travel, and arrives at existing research in mobility studies and varied forms of commuting as they affect both societal and individual function. Understanding the personal, social, and physical dynamics of a supercommute must consider each of these aspects of study: supercommuters choose to live in socially- and historically-established suburbs or suburban-styled areas, travel largely by car (and are willing to do so for extended periods), and experience this travel as active agents. Suburban studies, particularly as related to the codevelopment of suburbs and car-based infrastructure, provide the physical grounding for supercommuters' homes, and as related to their separation from workplaces. Car-centric transportation infrastructure most directly shapes the logistic and

bodily experience of supercommuting. The theory of automobility provides the foundation for an understanding of the reflexive, self-perpetuating social and built aspects of car dependence, at a societal and individual level. When combined with pre-existing qualitative research (albeit minimal) on gasoline superusers and supercommuters, these historical and theoretical bases provide the foundation for a qualitative study of the experiences of Rockford-Chicago supercommuters.

Suburbs and the Case of Rockford

The defining moments of the American suburb came in the periods following each world war, as a post-war pattern of increased consumerism (first in the 1920s and again in the ‘50s) dominated the cultural landscape. Suburban developments in the United States are characterized by single-family homes, separate residential and commercial areas, houses with yards, and sprawl (McDonogh 2006). The concurrent meteoric boom of the automobile, general wealth, manufacturing, and suburban development linked all four in the creation of the quintessential American ideal that dominates and shapes contemporary culture; all four contributed to the recentering of suburban social life in the insular family inside the home, and the decentering of community spaces and collective sociality (Wells 2014; Bissell 2018; McDonogh 2006; Putnam 2001). There is a wealth of existing scholarship regarding suburban dynamics of the period (McDonogh 2006; L. J. Miller 1995a; Redding 2021; Rome 2001). One notable phenomenon is that of of “white flight,” referring to the movement of middle to upper class white Americans from cities to suburbs and the implicit and intentional racial segregation that resulted—this dynamic is also often associated with suburban development in the period (McDonogh 2006). As such, the suburbs are commonly conceived of as dominated by these populations. However, some scholars challenge this concept of white suburban homogeneity. McDonogh highlights the

role of Black suburban communities in shaping modern American suburbs (and their frequent dismissal in suburban studies), while Vaughan et al. emphasizes the role of cultural specificity and heterogeneity in suburban spaces and forms (Vaughan et al. 2009; McDonogh 2006).

These patterns are evident in existing literature on Chicagoland suburban development. Chicago's suburbanization was preempted by the recent converging influences of the city's status as a manufacturing and industrial hub and the influx of Black residents as part of the Great Migration. As industry declined, however, the balance shifted away from the industrial city center as the locus of new development: "In whatever way it is measured—number of firms, employment growth, or factory construction—the city experienced incremental decline, while the suburbs took over as the metropolitan area's premier location of new production space, especially after the end of World War II" (Lewis 2020). Whereas educated, white residents were able to move to suburbs, the Black Chicagoans who had largely moved to the city in search of the abundant manufacturing jobs had neither the resources to do so, nor the legal ability; the practice of redlining and its legacy effects essentially preserved systems of segregated housing in and around Chicago (Mohl 2001). Though these restrictions have since been struck down in name, and suburbs have since diversified significantly, the Chicagoland area—including the varied suburban regions elaborated by McDonogh and Vaughan et al.—remains segregated by race and wealth (Lindstrom 1995). The image of the affluent white suburb still dominates popular imagination, and Chicago is no exception. While there exists a variety of demographic influences on Chicagoland suburbs and ex-urbs, notably including recent patterns of migration from Latin America, contemporary literature reveals that suburban communities still inherently prioritize longer-term white residents unless they make specific, narrow efforts to the contrary (Flores-Gonzales, Clarno, and Guridy-Cerritos 2015).

One prominent comprehensive ethnographic approach to suburban identity and values is that conducted by Heiman in a New Jersey suburb of New York City (Heiman 2015). In particular, she examines the anxieties present in suburban life, as a lens through which to view suburban priorities and pressures; she comments on standards of achievement and success as premised on consumerism and displays of material wealth that have become decreasingly achievable as prices rise. Additionally, she examines suburbia through the unit of the family and the home; suburban living implies that nuclear families live together in single-family homes, and that this forms the base of their outward displays of class as mediated by visible hyperconsumption. She dubs the increasingly difficult but nonetheless dogged pursuit of this sort of property ownership and constant consumerism as "rugged entitlement." This ethnography approaches suburbs as a comprehensive social system. The suburban built environment is more than a pattern of construction; it grounds a system of values, interpersonal relationships, and the operation of people within that environment.

Paradigms of new urbanism have been formed largely as a reaction and counter to this suburban system of ideals. The new urbanist movement has grown in response to the perceived shortcomings and damages created by the elevation and primacy of suburbia, particularly suburban sprawl. As summarized in a synthesis of literature on the New Urbanist movement in relation to sustainability, proponents of new urbanism espouse a metropolitan ideal founded on principles of environmental consciousness, dense mixed-use construction, public and active (e.g. cycling or walking) transportation, and communities anchored by engagement in/availability of public spaces like parks and community centers (White and Ellis 2007). These urban ideals are fundamentally based on contradistinction and tension with the suburban paradigm. Their

implementation would disrupt the established suburban, car-centric patterns of values and development that currently forms the status quo in Rockford and much of the United States.

Broadly, suburban culture and dynamics define the experience of supercommuters from Rockford to Chicago. While Rockford is defined as a separate metropolitan area, it acts as a suburb in relation to Chicago. Although there has been a recent, increasing push to expand the city's adherence to urbanist conceptions of development, Rockford's history points to suburban ideals founded on car culture. Rockford is emblematic of the consumerist middle-class white American dream, and residential areas are described as cookie-cutter single-family homes: "Residential areas bounding [industrial areas] are likewise generally clean and consist of well-maintained homes on large lots with considerable set-back lines, appreciable lawn space, shrubbery, and numerous trees. For a city of about 100,000 inhabitants Rockford has a surprisingly small area of slums" (Alexander 1952: 19). The homogeneous purity touted by Alexander owes to a history of redlining, whereby restrictive covenants maintained the character of the neighborhood he so praises (Leaf 2015; Stephanopoulos 2016). Industrial production in Rockford, owing to the heavy machinery industry in the late nineteenth century and the furniture industry in the first half of the twentieth century, enabled it to follow the trend of post-war manufacturing as a catalyst for economic and residential development reflective of the broader ideals of the time. The legacy of this dynamic has shaped modern Rockford.

Car-centric transportation infrastructure

Both the 1920s and the 1950s saw a spike in automobile purchases, first due to the advent of the Ford Model T and then because of general economic success. Thus, the development of suburbs in both periods was inherently an automobile-centered process. Regardless of the variance within and among suburbs, car centricity appears as a constant and a given.

Because of suburbs' reliance on automobiles, networks of highways expanded in concordance with the building of suburbs. General academic discussions of suburbs frequently center cultural norms that rely on car use. For instance, Lindstrom (1995) examines Chicago's suburbs through the focal points of transportation infrastructure, considering elements including radial expressways, the street grid, O'Hare's development, deindustrialization, and commuter rail lines in her application of urban ecological theory. However, there is generally minimal research on car-centric infrastructure in and around the Chicago area; the majority of discussions of transportation infrastructure focus either on public transit and microtransit within the city, or Chicago as a hub for long-distance rail lines.

In the United States, focus on car-centric transportation infrastructure mostly addresses the sprawling metropolises of the Sunbelt and West Coast. Major highways characterize American transportation networks and facilitate movement between and across metropolitan areas. Scholarship regarding the human impacts of highways focuses both on the communities that highways disrupt or displace (Estrada 2005; Putnam 2001) and the communities they connect (Bissell 2018). Economic analyses of highway commuters tend to almost universally bring up the planning misconception that adding highway lanes will reduce congestion: scholars including Lawler (2024) and Putnam (2000) address this assumption. General consensus among environmental scholars is that a shift to public transit wherever possible is a key solution to the massive pollution of passenger vehicles. However, there is minimal record of successful densification and transitions to transit (Schuetz, Giuliano, and Shin 2018), and evidence that "most car journeys were never made by public transport," indicating that the mobility afforded by the personal automobiles which dominate American mobilities would be difficult to integrate into transit systems (Stradling 2002). This indicates that car dependence has resulted in an

entirely original system of mobility; the affordances of cars, roads, parking lots, and other infrastructural features provide the foundation for a unique set of journeys that in turn shape possible experiences, interaction, social dynamics, and interpersonal relationships.

Automobility and car culture at a societal scale

Studies on the mutual effect of cars and social patterns of travel and interaction revolve around the concept of "automobility." Within the past quarter century, studies of the societal impacts of car dependence nearly universally reference the conception of automobility postulated by John Urry (2004), or the expansive system of social, individual, physical, and environmental impacts instigated by the globally dominant scale of car use (Urry 2004).

Urry's contemporary, Mike Featherstone, enumerates the extent to which automobilities—which he defines as "autonomous, self-directed movement"—influence structures:

> There clearly is an increasingly globalizing car system, conceptualized as a powerful socio-economic and technological complex which sustains the car as a key object of mass production (Fordism) and mass consumption, which has impacted on spatial organization through roads, city layout, suburban housing and shopping malls and demands new forms of social life, sociability and time-space flexibility. (Featherstone 2004)

Featherstone's observations use the same term of a "car system" as Urry's seminal works; as cars shape the physical landscape, they create the conditions for their own continued necessity. Urry (2004) refers to the path dependence of auto primacy; there exists a self-reinforcing reliance on automobiles, such that suburban development, roads and parking lots, habits of commuting, and other car-facilitated social action all reconfirm the constructed necessity of cars, which in turn begets a greater number of cars requiring further car-dependent development. A variety of scholars explore how the cultural logics of the car, captured by the term "car culture," have developed and evolved. Cultural ideation of the car has shifted from a status symbol in its early

days, to a feature of consumerist ideals that emphasize “mass individuality” in the middle of the twentieth century, and integrated such that it has come to represent “the different identities of lifestyle groups in a leveled and pluralized consumer culture, as theorized by postmodernism” (Gartman 2004 quoted here; see also Putnam 2001; “The Automobile Age” 1986; Wells 2014; Lutz and Fernandez 2010; D. Miller 2001).

Urry’s systems of automobility appear in anthropological examinations of engagement with roads and the broader systems and values they connote. Stewart, in particular, identifies the cocreation of roads and the American dream of suburban material culture:

> “The droning of routine is embedded in the asphalt. Mind-drifting senses orbit the purgatory of gridlock. The fantasies of potential ‘home’ scenes spied, in passing, on the side of the road are lodged in the daily commute side by side with the shock of near collisions and the desperation of being trapped. The road is a series of events accreting in a material-symbolic infrastructure. It is as if slabs of asphalt were thrown into the black hole of the American dream.” (Stewart 2014)

Here, she details the values that pervade the built environment, the visceral experience (and constant possibilities of danger) of driving, and the suburban-styled “home” associated with the imagery of the American dream. Suburbs, Americana, car use, and the physical infrastructure that enables it are all experienced in coordination with each other. Thus, they must be examined as part of a continuous system.

Automobility and commuting at an individual scale

The car-centric aspects of the built environment necessarily structure how people interact with their surroundings, while also promoting a set of values associated with car culture. The correlation between suburban expansion and car dependence means that cars facilitate social isolation—in suburban areas dependent on cars, the same trends of individualism, private life, and prioritization of the self over community are visible (McDonogh 2006; Putnam 2001; Urry

2004). As examined by Lochlann-Jain, automobiles provide a framework that structures engagement with the surrounding world, both by drivers themselves and bystanders:

> "The automobile embodies two great ironies of American culture. First, enveloped in a rhetoric of freedom, the automobile concentrates the most astonishing degree of hyper-regulation. For drivers, a shiny new car comes embedded in a sticky web of laws and fines—not to mention a series of material needs from parking spaces and gas to oil caps designed to fit a single make and model. Second, the technology of automobility has defined public space in virtually every U.S. community. Here, the term irony has not only contradiction but opposition built into its locution—freedom meets regulation and a potential for individuation rubs uneasily against an actualized homogeneity" (Lochlann Jain 2004).

Automotive culture makes the restricting effects of the automobile invisible, as it is taken for granted in every arena. Personal and public life, physical movement, and the space in which either takes place is premised on the automobile. Though supercommuters' time is more dramatically influenced by automotive movement (whether they use a car themselves, or choose not to because of the cost pressures of automobility), their experiences operate on the extreme end of a spectrum of automotive influence, meaning their analysis makes this influence more eminently visible.

Commuting is emblematic of these dynamics, perhaps more than any other activity. The home and the workplace are both socially and physically isolated spheres, between which one travels in the sensorily restricted bubble of a car. The automotive experience is that of "being encapsulated in a domestic, cocooned, moving capsule" (Urry 2004). Laurier and Edensor each theorize the individual and isolating impacts of automobility through Latour's actor-network theory, which postulates that the qualities of places, agents, or actors are not fixed but rather continually reshaped through their interactions with one another (Laurier 2004; Edensor 2004); through the rhythms of driving, it is made clear that "places possess no essence but are ceaselessly (re)constituted out of their connections" (Cresswell 2016). Within this reconstitution, the car and driver (or passenger) are merged and imbued with "co-agency"; through its

inhabitation by an individual, it becomes a social extension of the individual (Cresswell 2016). Commuting and car use therefore both shape and are shaped by the actions of the individual agent—the "auto"—who is part of a larger plurality of automobilities (Featherstone 2004).

In discussions of agency and motivation, Urry (2002) posits that "hypermobility," or the increasing integration of mobility into all aspects of daily life, is desired as it enables the physical co-presence we collectively rely on to form social connections; physical co-presence is crucial in establishing social capital. This provides a potential ironic logic to the commute, especially if one commutes alone—achieving time in co-presence both at home and in the workplace comes at the cost of the time spent commuting.

Wilhoit and Jabloner each take a critical eye towards characterizing time spent commuting. Wilhoit deems the commute as a liminal space, that exists outside and in between the primary and secondary spaces of home and work/school (Wilhoit 2017). Though it may feel removed from the groundedness of everyday life, commuting and car use fundamentally shape the non-liminal aspects of routine life. Liminality is therefore part of the routine itself; to experience oneself as removed from other systems becomes part of these systems, and influential on them too. Interestingly, she aims to espouse the value of this liminal time, which allows for activities that do not fit within other structures (daydreaming, reading, etc.). Jabloner sees commuting time as far less positively generative. She describes how commuters on her multi-hour train journey are brought together by shared tedium and the collective enduring of what is seen as a painful necessity (Jabloner 2020). She sees this as the cost of American ideals; the unavoidable commute is unfamiliar to her from her Austrian upbringing, but taken for granted as an aspect of American social logic. In either case, the commute forms a complement to other aspects of life, cementing itself within a system of automobility even if it is not traveled

by car. Jabloner's need to commute, for instance, is driven by the need for affordability in the car-built sprawl of the expensive San Francisco Bay Area.

Supercommuters

As commute times occur on a continuous spectrum, studies of commuting in general may be extended, to some degree, to supercommuters. However, as the term supercommuting is intended to define the extreme of the commuter spectrum, supercommuters may face unique or exacerbated pressures and challenges. While the question central to my research—why supercommuters participate in the supercommute—is not yet explicitly addressed in anthropological, sociological, environmental, or economic scholarship, other scholars' examinations of extreme or widespread commuting practices may aid in explaining the varied pressures that lead supercommuters to the practice. David Bissell's chapter, "Squeezed Transitions: Traveling Times, Lost and Found," in his 2018 book, *Transit Life: How Commuting Is Transforming Our Cities,* is the most widely-referenced (and perhaps the only published) interview-based approach to the study of supercommuters. In his conversations with three supercommuters in the Sydney, Australia area, he finds three wildly different motivations for similar practices: the desire to be near natural spaces on weekends (i.e. on non-commuting days), financial stability and increased affordability, and through the inertia of difficulty moving either work or home (Bissell 2018). A variety of economic analyses also address the potential costs and benefits of commute times. Most address the monocentric city model, which posits that rents and wages available both decrease as one travels further from the city center (Ahrens and Lyons 2021), and many propose a variety of new models to predict or explain commuting patterns based on economic factors including rent prices or pay (Schmidt 2014; Wong, Zheng, and Qiao 2020; Berliant and Tabuchi 2018; Stutzer and Frey 2008). However, there is yet to be consensus

regarding a single factor, set of factors, or model that dominate commuting decisions. This suggests that no one factor is dominant or determinant. Rather, motivations are likely to vary by individual, and to result from a complex interplay between social (e.g. the normalization of automobility, access to particular schools), infrastructural (e.g. housing and road availability), and personal (e.g. family, proximity to particular resources) values and preferences. Where quantification has proven difficult, an ethnographic study may assist in capturing the complexities faced by the constituent commuters generating these broader trends.

The supercommuter is an emerging category that has yet to be explicitly defined in scholarship. Rather than adopting the varied time- or distance-based definitions of "supercommuter" proposed in other texts, I use the term "supercommuter" to refer to a person who has self-identified as a regular long-distance commuter between the Rockford metro area and Chicago. Any individual may have a highly variable commute, and still fall within this category—mode of transportation, weather, time of day, and traffic, among other factors, may all influence commute times while still falling within a commuter's definition of their own standard commute. This variability is a key feature in commuters' experiences, and thus I avoid reducing it through restrictive quantitative criteria. As of the writing of this thesis, there is little quantitative research on supercommuters, and practically no qualitative or anthropological research that addresses this population specifically. Different authors may reference either time or distance thresholds (or, in some cases, a combination of the two) (Bloom and Finan 2024; Moss and Qing 2012; Rapino and Fields 2013). The U.S. Census Bureau defines "extreme commuters" as those who travel 90 minutes or more each way to work. This, combined with the lived experiences of my interviewees, formed my initial working definition as the majority of Rockford-Chicago commuters I spoke with fall above the 90 minute timeframe. However,

imposing this definition as an absolute obscures the variability in commuter experience. The most commonly cited work on supercommuters is Moss and Qing's 2012 report which coined the term; this report primarily provides demographic summary information of known supercommuters (Moss and Qing 2012). Here, Moss and Qing identify Rockford as the greatest source of Chicago's supercommuters, at an estimated 13,700 daily commuters. There has been no more recent quantitative analysis of the number or demographics of supercommuters.

In parallel to the demographic of supercommuters, there has been a recent push to orient electric vehicle incentives towards gasoline "superusers," or the top 10 percent of gasoline users (London, Metz, and Rosler 2021). This research is entirely oriented towards state policy for electric vehicle rebates; however, the studies produced in support of this policy are the first and only currently existing, somewhat comprehensive research on the distribution of gasoline use among drivers. London, Metz, and Rosler find that the average superuser drives 83 miles a day (London, Metz, and Rosler 2021); the 178-mile round trip commute between the metro center of Rockford and Chicago's downtown Loop puts Rockford-Chicago commuters well into the range of superusers. Additionally, superusers spend an average of 8 percent of their income on gasoline—becoming "gasoline-burdened" in the case of low- and middle-income superusers—in that the financial cost incurred by their driving is outsized in comparison to their income (London, Metz, and Rosler 2021). So far, a more detailed analysis has only been conducted in the state of California (London et al. 2023); thus, both qualitative and quantitative analysis of superusers, including supercommuters, is highly underdeveloped.

In conducting interviews with supercommuters, I aim to supplement this demographic research and provide an application of theories of commuting and mobility studies as grounded in the cultural and built context of suburbanized Rockford. I anticipate that practices and

experiences of supercommuting require examination through the lenses of these fields; one must choose to supercommute within a system of cultural pressures, and through a built environment that both informs and is informed by those same pressures. I follow the ways in which Urry's concept of automobility plays out in the physical context of Rockford as well as supercommuters' practices. Rockford is functionally a suburb in supercommuters' relation to Chicago as well as in their conceptualization of their priorities, and thus established paradigms of suburban car dependence may be reflected in Rockford. I compare this analysis of supercommuters' expressed priorities and implied values to interviews with professionals in Rockford's development industry. The juxtaposition between the two further clarifies the values that underlie each, and the tension between suburban and metropolitan visions of development and community.

Methods

This project seeks to understand how systems of automobility appear in supercommuters' perceptions of their commutes and the city of Rockford, as well as how people in the development industry perceive the city. I contrast these two views to demonstrate the values inherent in each, and where there exists tension between visions of the city's (sub)urban future.

In order to develop an understanding of why and how people supercommute between Rockford and Chicago, IL, it is necessary to address the supercommuters' lived experience of both the physical and social infrastructures that operate on their commutes. Most crucially, this includes (1) their decisions to live in the city of Rockford, and (2) the choice and experience of the commute itself. Rockford's collective identity has been constructed in relation to other proximate locations (specifically, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Madison), as well as the region's industrial past and the suburban ideal that followed. However, this collective identity is both

composed of and by individuals. The primary method of data collection was interviews; those recruited for interviews largely fall into two categories: supercommuters, and individuals involved in Rockford's development and housing industries. This delineation is a start at "studying through" the socially-animated object of the supercommuter, as defined by Wright and Reinhold (2022). As opposed to "studying down" a hierarchical system of influence or "studying up" from those under the influence of such a system, the method of "studying through" allows for the tracing of the factors impacting and impacted by a particular policy or object.

Understanding how supercommuters and development professionals view the Rockford metro area's character and appeal provides insight into the logics that inform their decisions and actions. An examination of what is spoken—and what must therefore motivate opinion—allows for the critical observation of the values and priorities that shape Rockford via its inhabitants. Interviews and direct reflections given by those who shape and are shaped by these factors inform the study of factors themselves. Interviews with both supercommuters themselves and those involved in shaping Rockford's urban identity through the housing and urban development industries are grounded in existing research on transportation infrastructure, car-dependent suburban development, and theories of (auto)mobility and commuting. Thus, the object of the supercommute is addressed both directly and indirectly (i.e. by supercommuters themselves, and by those whose work is intimately shaped by a notion of the collective perceived group of supercommuters).

Interviews were the primary method of research. Select interviews happened in situ (e.g. in workplaces). In order to participate, each subject was required to give consent for an approximately 30-minute semistructured interview, either online, over the phone, or in person at the interviewee's discretion. Interviewees were working-age, and no minors were involved in

research. Additionally, in order to conduct some interviews in person, I spent a weekend in Rockford. This experience is referenced occasionally, though it did not form an official part of the research process. I primarily draw from imagery and the occasional chance encounter when referencing this brief immersion.

Interviews with supercommuters

Subjects were recruited through personal connection and through posts on social media platforms, specifically the Rockford area Reddit group (denoted r/Rockford) and locally-based Facebook groups including "What's Happening in Rockford IL? UNCENSORED!!!!," "What's Happening in Belvidere, IL?," and "What's Happening in the (815)?" (the local area code). This variety of recruiting methods allowed for a plurality of experience. Though interviews were not exhaustive, individual interviewees' experience may be used to illuminate the various pressures present on supercommuters. Six supercommuters who travel regularly between the Rockford Metro Area and Cook County were interviewed for this research. The pseudonyms I use for each and the major aspects of their commuting experience (years spent commuting, time spent in transit and by which mode they travel, and current commuting status) are included below:

Table 1: Supercommuters' pseudonyms and commute details

Name	**Commute frequency**	**Commute status and duration**
"Judy"	25+ years supercommuting 5x/wk, ~3wks/month	Now retired Standard commute: Drive 5x/wk, 1h30m each way
"Susan"	15 years supercommuting 5x/wk	Now retired Standard commute: Drive 5x/wk, 1h30m to 3h each way
"Brenda"	25 years supercommuting 5x/wk	Former commute: Drive 5x/wk, 1h30m each way Current commute: Drive + Metra, 2h each way

“Liam”	10 years supercommuting 3-4x/wk	Former commute: Drive up to 5x/wk, up to 2h each way Current commute: Drive 1x/wk, 1h15m each way
“Dennis”	4 years supercommuting 4x/wk	Current commute: Drive + Metra + bike 3x/wk, 2h30m each way; Drive 1x/wk, 1h30m each way
“Amber”	1 year supercommuting ~1x/wk	Current commute: Drive ~1x/wk, 1h to 1h30m each way

Information gathered through interviews with supercommuters is useful in understanding how they conceptualize their own commute, including what their motivations and priorities are, how they understand themselves as part of (or not part of) the communities they live and work in, and what factors most influence their perception of their commuting habits. This supplements and exposes existing theoretical assertions about the factors that contribute to supercommuters’ choices and habits, and matches social pressures and cultural trends to the conscious lived experience of those implicated by them.

Interviews with development industry professionals

Non-supercommuting subjects were recruited for interviews through direct outreach through connections to housing groups in Rockford (specifically, through the Yes In My Backyard national organization (YIMBY)) and through snowball sampling (personal and professional connections of interviewees). I found that individuals and groups would often be referenced by one another. This indicates that these interviews either cover a significant portion of the people involved in characterizing Rockford from a development perspective, or that different efforts (which I have thus not acknowledged here) exist in parallel. Interviewees and their professional titles are listed below:

Table 2: Development professionals' names and roles

Name	**Role and Organization**
Ron Clewer	Executive, Community Revitalization and Public Housing Partnerships - Gorman and Company Former chair - Rockford Housing Authority
Conor Brown	Executive - NorthWest Illinois Alliance of REALTORS®
Whitney Martin	Director, "Made for Rockford" program - GoRockford (formerly Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau)
John Groh	Executive - GoRockford (formerly Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau)
Wally Haas	Executive - Transform Rockford

Interviews with people involved in the Rockford development, civic engagement, and housing industry provide insight into how Rockford intentionally crafts its own identity, and how external factors (especially the demographics to whom the housing industry caters) inform the city's conception of itself. The intentions and pressures to which these professionals respond reflect the factors most important in perpetuating Rockford's focus on itself and its own identity.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai software. Interview transcripts and notes were edited, anonymized (in the case of supercommuters), and hand-coded to establish themes and patterns. This applies both to supercommuters and development professionals; buckets for hand-coding primarily consisted of the values that I inferred or observed to inform declarations (e.g. family-centric life among supercommuters, housing affordability, and ideas on where community ought to be centered).

Interviews were framed as a co-examination of the object of the commute and its implications, both on individuals' lives and on the city of Rockford; thus, interlocutors were

interviewed as co-investigators. Interlocutors were asked to discuss both their own personal experience and motivations regarding supercommuting (whether as a process they personally experience or as a factor in their professional life), their perceptions of its broader implications on the city of Rockford (as a collection of people and as a total entity), and their experience of the Rockford metro area more broadly. I asked interviewees to characterize the city in their own words and experiences, and used my own lack of familiarity as a touchstone for them to elaborate on the elements they considered most crucial.

Scope and Limitations

Rockford was chosen as a location of study as it is the point of origin of the largest number of supercommuters to Chicago, according to the limited data available (Moss and Qing 2012). However, this necessarily means that the range of supercommuters' experiences could not be captured in this set of interviews. The supercommuters I interviewed all had access to social media, and reached out to me; others may have been hesitant to share their own experiences, or may not be present on the platforms (Facebook and Reddit) where I conducted outreach. I spoke primarily to white supercommuters who live on the east side or eastern suburbs of Rockford. I was also unable to directly observe the commute, and must take participants' word regarding their experience at face-value; I was unable to contrast their descriptions to their lived experiences, as I did not have access to the latter. I take supercommuters' experiences as an extreme representation and subset of Rockford residents as a body. However, the history of racial segregation (through restrictive housing policies among other covert and overt manifestations) and the limited demographics of the supercommuters I interviewed limit the applicability of this extension. Supercommuters are but one sector of Rockford's population, and even when they reflect on the community at large, they provide a limited view.

Though the involvement of development industry professionals in this study aids in gaining a broader scope of perspective on Rockford as a whole, the city's established history of segregation and inequality, most often mentioned in reference to historical housing discrimination and the resultant unequal public education system (Leaf 2015), also means that these officials are likely to cater towards economic benefit, and thus leave some perspectives behind. With the acknowledgement that this study operates within a dynamic of situated privilege (i.e. supercommuters have a set of resources and values that typically aligns with a white, middle-class, suburban identity), it may be taken as reflective of those systems at large. Automobility and the suburban paradigm are tied up with this privilege and exist in the broader American context, rather than in isolation; Rockford's case may be taken as an exemplar of semi-historical versions of these paradigms. The suburban ideal that has become inaccessible given rising prices across the country is still dominant in Rockford, so studying continued suburban-styled attitudes in Rockford offers insight into the overt operation and continued relevance of these attitudes elsewhere. Thus, conclusions I draw regarding the tensions between supercommuters' suburban ideals and a metropolitan vision of the future may be used as a case contextualized in a fading tradition. The legacy of this tradition still underpins current trends nationwide, but it is rarely itself visible so strongly as in the world of Rockford's supercommuters.

Characterizing Rockford: the city's past in residents' own words

An analysis of Rockford must take into account its history, especially as seen by its residents. I find that Rockford's monikers are a neat way to capture the central aspects of its identity in resident's eyes. In particular, residents' perceptions of the city can be categorized according to the labels of Rockford as the "Forest City" (in reference to its natural surroundings),

as “Screw City” (a nod to its manufacturing history), and its 2013 dubbing as the third most “Miserable City” according to Forbes Magazine given its economic and social circumstances. As I walked around Rockford observing public signage, window-shopping in local businesses that feature city-branded merchandise like the Rockford Art Deli and Maze Books, and asking residents to characterize the city in unstructured conversations, I encountered each of these monikers at least several times—murals and city signs declared the “Forest City,” t-shirts, postcards, and bars referenced the “Screw City,” and rideshare drivers, business owners, and coffee shop patrons discussed the city’s poor reputation and negative perception. The prevalence of each indicates their continued applicability in shaping Rockford’s self-conception, whether explicit or ingrained. These perceptions provide the foundation for Rockford residents’ experiences, and the future trajectory of its development.

“Forest city”

One of Rockford’s early monikers is that of the “Forest City,” so-named because “a visiting journalist from the New York Tribune was impressed by our thick blanket of trees” in the mid nineteenth century, as noted by a local radio station (Hollingsworth 2022). The Rockford metro area is characterized by greenery in the summer months; in addition to designated green spaces like the parks scattered throughout the city, the Anderson Gardens, and Rock Cut State Park, neighborhood boulevards and the riverwalk in downtown are tree-lined. As remarked to me by Judy, a lifelong Rockfordian and supercommuter, “We have beautiful parks. Wouldn't know it from this time of the year [midwinter], but we have absolutely gorgeous parks.” The emphasis on the integration of natural features in and around the urban landscape in turn deemphasizes its urban quality; Rockfordians like Judy and Dennis, another supercommuter, emphasize that time

outdoors and time in the city can be synonymous, delineating it from the concrete jungle metropolitanism of major cities like Chicago.

"Screw city"

Rockford's growth and identity from the mid nineteenth through late twentieth century was characterized by manufacturing, specifically of bolts, fasteners, and screws (hence the literal meaning of this now-beloved crass nickname), and of furniture. This heritage is widely present in the popular imagination, as described by commuters. In describing the city to me, Judy mentioned the shift away from manufacturing that she saw in the 1980s and 90s, and the subsequent rejection of change and resistance to new development by residents who wanted to preserve the city as it was:

> "All those big companies just started folding up and moving away, and that was a real problem for Rockford. We still have a lot of big industry here in town, and… [corporations] move here like Woodward and Collins Aerospace. But I think sometimes Rockford has this mentality of, I don't want it in my backyard. That's an okay thing, but I don't want to see it. And they scream, 'You're going to ruin my property values.' Every five seconds, 'You're gonna ruin my quality of life.'"

Inherent in this is an attitude of, in some way, preserving continuity of the past without encouraging or building the industries necessary to sustain that standard. Screw City no longer makes screws, but Judy's description of other Rockfordians' priorities—'I don't want to see that, I don't want my property value to be changed by proximity to industry'—implies an individually-centered conservatism and focus on residential life, without consideration for the industry that such a lifestyle needs to sustain itself.

For newer residents, though, there is significantly more optimism towards the emergence of new forms of industry. While mingling with people at a mixer event for new residents in Rockford, I spoke with Trevor, who described the nascent, up-and-coming aerospace and medical industries as his primary motivation for coming to the city. Dennis also sees a similar

resurgence as an attractive feature of the city's revitalization: "Rockford [has] been hurt economically, not being this big industrial hub as it used to be, even though there's great glimmers of light here. That's why I moved here with the aerospace [industry] and all that."

Both pessimism and optimism about the return of manufacturing lean on a desire for the city to return to its mid century manufacturing heyday (whether or not that manufacturing is directly visible), which coincided with the broader ethos of suburban expansion as characterized contemporarily in Alexander's article emphasizing Rockford's plethora of affordable single-family homes and suburb-styled neighborhoods (Alexander 1952). This time period and the associated mythos of the suburban American dream is thus still a major element in Rockford's self-definition among residents. Though this is nostalgic in some respects, the perception of industry resurgence means that such nostalgia feels within reach and increases the relevance of this historical ideal to visions of the city's present and future.

"Miserable city"

In 2013, well after the degradation of the manufacturing industry, Rockford was listed as number 3 on Forbes' list of "Most Miserable Cities," with the following brief reasoning: "A three decade decline in the manufacturing base has hurt Rockford's economy and kept unemployment high. The metro's recent 11.2% unemployment rate is one of the highest rates in the U.S. Another burden: high property tax rates" (Badenhausen 2013). High unemployment built on a history of racial segregation in the city, meaning that this was a statistic situated in a time of fracturing, disenfranchisement, and disillusionment with Rockford's promise of the American dream. In our conversations, residents, both supercommuters and those in housing and development industries, made frequent oblique and overt references to a reputation of high crime rates. In one informal conversation, a resident referred to Rockford as "Glockford," a play on the

Glock brand of pistol. Wally Haas, who has recently transitioned from a decades-long career as a reporter for the Rockford Register Star to guide Transform Rockford, a community development organization funded by the philanthropic initiatives of the aerospace company Woodward, described his arrival in Rockford: "In 1979 I interviewed here, and I drove down east State Street. Once I got downtown, there was a huge adult bookstore…It was like a movie theater. And there were at least four bars with dancing girls, and, I thought, 'What the hell am I getting myself into?'" His initial impression of Rockford, like that of many external observers, was one of crime, vice, and dilapidation. The founding of Transform Rockford was itself inspired partially by that Forbes statistic, he tells me; by that time, as continuing from the preceding decades, there was widespread disillusionment with the state of the city. Residents of the suburbanized city largely avoided the downtown that Haas encountered, preferring instead to stay in their homes and immediate neighborhoods and decouple their experience of Rockford from the vision presented on State Street.

The question of perceived safety and economic disadvantage is tied up in race and racial segregation. Ron Clewer, who currently works in community development at Gorman & Company and was the former CEO of the Rockford Housing Authority, remarked that,

> "If we go way back, it was the folks who lived east of the river [the Rock River, which runs through downtown] were good, wealthy people, the folks who lived west of the river were not, and so the river was our dividing line. Over years, we've worked to change that narrative. The narrative changed, but the dividing line just moved eastward, so it was more of a 50% of the city versus 50% of the city."

In spontaneously offering me her own brief history of Rockford, Judy also referenced the river's lasting segregating impact—"some of it's still very true today, the river being a dividing factor [between] the people that live on the east side versus the west side"—and continued to explain how city efforts to mitigate this divide have often been deemed performative at best until litigation necessitated change:

> "When my son was going to school, there was a big lawsuit about discrimination, and one of the things that came up were the two high schools that they built, and how, essentially, they were the same building, but they weren't kitted out the same way…the one on the east side had beautiful work. It had a fancier gymnasium, a fancier pool…and the one on the west side was very bare bones… Rockford lost that lawsuit, and we had to go through quite a long period where our taxes were sky high, while they had to make changes to the way the school district was run."

This history of segregation aligns with discussions of departure from major metro areas towards suburbs. Though Rockford is defined as a metropolitan area in its own right, segregation and eastward expansion away from the historically-Black, lower income populations west of the river, as well as its deference to the major cities of Chicago, Milwaukee, and Madison as it lost its own manufacturing centrality, means that the alignment of Rockford's trends with broader suburban mechanisms of racial and class hierarchy and differentiated privilege still determine the city's own character (Lindstrom 1995).

Newer adjustments have, to some extent, addressed disenfranchisement in the city—for instance, Clewer says that "there's been a strong push the last couple years that I've done, that many have done, around advocating for those in need of affordable housing." To others, though, these adjustments have instead obscured inequity, as per Judy's characterization of the desire for the city's challenges to be out of sight and out of mind. For Dennis, this was unintentional but became apparent only as he expanded his understanding of the city:

> "I was like, getting these looks [when I would mention Rockford]. What's wrong with Rockford? It's beautiful. It's nice. I live right by this golf course…And then there's this gorgeous Japanese garden, the Anderson Japanese Gardens that are only half a mile away from me…So I didn't realize that across the river, I was like, "Oh, this is where it's kind of a little bit dilapidated. This is where people are talking about." But I see the city going through a big resurgence, because Rockford has a huge aerospace industry here that people are not aware of."

Bound up in his perception of the city's degradation is the promise of revitalization. Between industry resurgence, intentional community revitalization, and the various appeals of the city to current and prospective residents, Rockford is looking forward. However, the promise of the

city's future looks different among the people I spoke with; while the appeal of affordability unites real estate developers, development professionals, and supercommuting residents in their view of Rockford, that which is affordable differs. While supercommuters find the affordability of a lifestyle in line with suburban paradigms, those in the business of selling the city market the affordability of a new, metropolitan future instead. This dissonance is elucidated through the further analysis of interview and observational data.

Data and analysis

In seeking to understand the operation of automobility, suburban ideals, and the promotion of a new metropolitan paradigm in the Rockford metro area, I interviewed six supercommuters and five professionals involved in the business of selling the city of Rockford in one way or another. Here, I examine and contrast their views of the city. By discussing the experiences and views of supercommuters and development industry professionals—whether they are in the real estate and housing industries, tourism and resident attraction, or civic engagement—regarding their respective priorities, I examine the value systems on which those priorities are premised. I argue that the broad appeal of Rockford is its relative affordability, especially the affordability of single-family homes. This provides the premise for supercommuters' experiences, which are necessarily grounded in two fundamental decisions: to live in the Rockford metro area, and to work in Cook County. Here, I am focused primarily on the former, though the two cannot be readily separated. Thus, an examination of the appeal and perception of Rockford from multiple perspectives can offer insight into what values underlie commuters' decisions to undertake such an endeavor, and how these values are apparent in their analysis of the city. Such values for supercommuters include affordable single-family homes, along with the centering of family and the immediate neighborhood community in social life, all

worth the cost of the commute. Contrasting supercommuters' experiences and the tradeoffs they make with the vision of the city's future advertised by those in the business of selling the city—most specifically, John Groh and Whitney Martin, two interlocutors who lead Rockford's tourism, visitors, and talent attraction efforts—throws two systems of values into relief by placing them next to one another. This alternative vision is premised on the invigoration of Downtown Rockford as a center of commerce and culture, and directed towards young professionals, reflecting urbanist ideals whereby local community is the anchor of social life as facilitated by dense, multi-use, vibrant development. In order to achieve this new paradigm, though, it is necessary to recognize that these systems of values do not align, and that the dominant suburban ideal must be contended with during the transition.

The appeal of Rockford: more life for your dollar

The primary throughline in every interview regarding Rockford's appeal, whether with supercommuters or development professionals, was that of Rockford's relative affordability and low cost of living, especially the affordability of a single-family home on its own parcel of land. In addition to single-family homes, this same affordability means that Rockford has a wide variety of housing options; however, the single-family home dominates the conversation and the city's geography.

Those engaged in marketing the city at large—specifically, John Groh, who guides GoRockford (the former Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau), and Whitney Martin, who leads Made for Rockford, the city's talent attraction campaign (itself housed under GoRockford)—emphasized the low cost of living and homeownership in marketing materials and our conversations alike. Martin praised Rockford's low cost of living in our conversation—"Our cost of living is so much cheaper here compared to anywhere else in the

nation. We're 24.7% lower"—and guided me towards advertising materials that place this statistic front and center as a primary form of appeal. Groh extended this to homeownership specifically: "You can attain homeownership much more easily" in Rockford as compared to other local or national contexts, implying that homeownership is the ultimate goal of prospective and current residents. The achievement of this goal has become increasingly rare nationwide, and is often held up as a paradigm of financial and personal success associated with a dying economic system and housing market. However, in Rockford, the once-dominant model remains achievable and appealing.

The affordability of living in Rockford formed the crux of my conversation with Conor Brown, CEO of the NorthWest Illinois Alliance of REALTORS®, as well as my discussions with Clewer, who has a similar perspective from within the housing industry. Given that realtors quite literally must, in Brown's words, "sell the community," the trends that they identify necessarily reflect an orientation towards the appeal of a property or region. Brown remarked that land at a low price is "not only the house you can get, you know, for a lot less money here in Rockford, but you're also getting more square footage, more yard. So if you have kids or pets or just want more outdoor space," then Rockford can make true on that promise. Clewer remarked on a similar theme: "You can get more house for your dollar." Commuters and residents in interviews and informal conversations alike near-universally mentioned the affordability of Rockford as a major draw; those who would not be able to afford a home elsewhere could achieve that dream in the Rockford metro area, especially on a Chicago salary. To have a home implies enacting one's life in the space in and around it, too. The concept of an affordable, desirable, valuable home is associated with the footprint of that home and the life one leads in it. Achieving desirable homeownership, uniquely possible in Rockford, also means taking up space.

Taking up space extends beyond the home; Martin noted that her primary message to prospective residents is that "your dollar goes further here, and you could have a bigger life here." The idea of a "bigger life" implies suburban ideals of visible consumerism and material wealth (Heiman 2015), made accessible to residents at a lower price point. To purchase a home in Rockford is also to buy into the city's offering at large—in Brown's words, "Affordability is certainly at the top, or near the top of the list [of appealing traits]…the second is accessibility. We are a very accessible community. It's easy to get around the Rockford metro area; you can be where you need to be in about 20 minutes or less." This statement presupposes car ownership; once someone can move about the Rockford area and beyond by car, they have access to a full life. Clewer concurs: "folks coming in are attracted by our affordability as well as our regionality. So [affordability and] being in a very good spot to hit Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, are two of the big drivers that we hear often" for resident attraction.

This access within and beyond the Rockford metro area means that the region is defined by a plethora of urban, suburban, and rural housing options: in Brown's words,

> "If you want to live in the urban part of Rockford in a loft, you can do that; if you want to live in a historic neighborhood, in a historic home, you can do that; if you want the suburban lifestyle and take advantage of a quarter acre, third acre lot, you can do that. But also there's a lot of rural options very, very close to the city for people that want to have chickens and livestock, and really have that rural sense, but still be relatively close to a major city that gives them everything that they could need or want."

The effective presence of this continuum is to both reemphasize affordability and accessibility—whatever a homebuyer wants, they can get—and create an average character that settles neither at the rural or urban extremes but rather in the suburban center. Because the Rockford metro area straddles this spectrum, its center of mass and general appeal sit somewhere in the middle. As described by Dennis, who told me he had initially moved to Rockford from Chicago so that he could own a suburban-style home with space for his hobby cars, motorcycles,

and pet dogs, “I chose Rockford because it has the best of both worlds….It's like little bit of country and city, so I don't have to be weaned or like [move] cold turkey, away from any city life.” Dennis’ experience exemplifies the promise of Rockford, and the theoretical promise of the suburb at large; he can afford to take up space in a way that is reflective of the legacy of suburban ideals of property and home ownership, while simultaneously still accessing and easily affording a variety of amenities that enable ease of living.

Supercommuters’ experiences: the draw and the drawbacks

During interviews, supercommuters identified four primary defining features of their motivations and experiences: the affordability of larger homes and properties, a focus on family (insular and extended), the presence of neighbors and their neighborhoods, and the physical and temporal experience of the commute itself. Individuals’ experiences of each of these features was consistently double-edged. Access to each benefit comes at a cost, but a cost that supercommuters are willing to pay. Examining the process of balancing values demonstrates the ways in which suburban ideals dominate supercommuters’ experiences and influence where they identify benefits.

Space for less

Across several discussions with supercommuters, interlocutors discussed the price of their homes—universally, of single-family homes in Rockford as compared mostly to units in multi-unit developments in Chicago—as the initial pull to the area, reflecting the experiences and comments of Brown and Clewer in the real estate market. However, these financial savings couple with the direct cost of the commute. When finance is a top priority such that the access enabled by living in Rockford while paid a Chicago salary fits commuters’ personal logics as an

accepted foundation, the price of the commute—in gas, parking costs, car repair, or added time to take transit—becomes the next source of monetary concern.

Dennis detailed his own homebuying experience, directly comparing prices in Chicago and Rockford:

> "I happened to find property out in Rockford, and I couldn't believe the prices out here at the time. So for perspective, I bought my condo [in Chicago] in 2007 for $180,000 and it skyrocketed from there. So then once the pandemic hit, I was able to sell it for a nice chunk…My Rockford property was $131,000…half an acre, three car garage, all this other stuff. So I was like, why not?"

That rhetorical "why not" was only answered after he returned to in-office work from a fully remote schedule:

> "The economical standpoint is, I pay for gas constantly, for those 82 miles one way. So that's 160 a day,. Rack that up. I did the math…I'm looking at needing to get a car every two, three years, plus the maintenance in between. So I'm like, I can't do that. That's why I started looking into Metra and all that. But then, well, what are the trade offs? My time."

His experience is particularly telling in that he experienced a temporal separation between realizing the benefits of the move—the achievement of homeownership, on a relatively large plot of land, with space for cars—and the cost: his finances or his time. He kept the Rockford property, and now splits his time between a cheaper, longer Metra commute and a more time-efficient, expensive car commute. Neither his time (saved by driving over taking transit) nor the relatively-lower costs (of transit as opposed to the drive) outweigh his appreciation for the non-dense, suburban-style home and associated accoutrements he obtained through the move.

Susan, another supercommuter who has traveled daily between the Rockford area and the South Side of Chicago for the past 15 years, expressed a similar desire for space at an affordable pricepoint—she moved from Chicago to Rockford with her partner and her partner's two children, and remarked, "What a change in lifestyle…with two people splitting the cost, you can afford to have a five acre backyard on a golf course." However, she has been frustrated with her

lack of freedom to take advantage of that space: though an avid cyclist in her younger years who spent countless hours on Chicago's lakefront, she has essentially put that piece of her identity on hold during her time commuting: "My retirement plan is to replace my six hours of commuting with six hours of exercise…I guess that while I was doing all this commuting, I was not exercising. Maybe a little bit on the weekends, but I wasn't racing, wasn't training. I want to get back to myself." That last phrase—"I want to get back to myself"—speaks to the gravity of her choices. To have space and enable her partner and children to pursue the associated lifestyle means that she must limit the way she identifies herself and spends her time.

Liam, a commuter and lifelong Rockford resident with two young children, discussed his financial motivations as well, specifically with an eye to suburban quality of life: "The quality of living [in Rockford] is the same that you would get essentially in the suburbs, but for, three quarters of the price, or half the price, just because cost of living is so much cheaper out by in the Winnebago County area." However, he also told the story of calculating the financial cost of his commute to convince his supervisor to allow him to work remotely:

> "I put forward the numbers. This is a 61.5 mile drive three times a week. This would cost me this much in gas, this much in tolls. It would be a $12,000 pay cut for me to come into the office three times a week. So I had to explain that to them, and I was lucky enough to get the waiver to do the [commute] one day a week."

The initial commute, for him, was a direct financial tradeoff; lower costs in one arena contrasted with higher costs in another.

Family

As aligned with the suburban ethos of social life as centered on the immediate family (L. J. Miller 1995b), family consistently played a central role in supercommuters' discussions of the benefits and drawbacks of commuting. One of the primary motivators expressed by both Susan and Brenda, another commuter with children who had gone through the Rockford area school

systems (and mentioned by both Liam and Judy) was access to a well-rated public school system and family help with childcare. Proximity to family forms the basis of supercommuters' social experiences for all of those I spoke with other than Dennis. The family is the unit by which they measure their experience and around which they center their lives. Commuting is a necessary piece in providing for their families, and simultaneously restricts their engagement with relatives and their familial community.

Susan and her partner chose their home, which Susan knew would require a multi-hour commute, in the Belvidere school district (Rockford's neighboring town) primarily for their children: "The Belvidere school system was really excellent, and she [Susan's partner] wanted the kids in a good school system." Though Susan herself could not engage substantially in her children's school community or lives because of the time pressures of her commute, she sees the commute as the cost she paid to enable them to be educated in this school district; she operates in the context of the family unit. Amber, a student who lives in the Rockford area and commutes regularly to Chicago for weekend classes, has also chosen to remain close to family so that she may help her parents during weekdays. She says that she would prioritize making her home close to family in the future, too: "I think that something that I would really focus on is … trying to stay semi close to my family. I mean, even if I was a town or two over, I still would want to be close enough where I know that I can jump in my car and go help my mom, because my mom's got a lot of health issues." At the same time, she hopes to work in a metropolitan center, and aims to find a place where her future counseling or therapy practice will be fulfilling: "Even if it comes kind of at the cost of a little bit of distance, to have that fulfillment and know that [I'm] in a place where [I'm] needed" is a priority. She does not see the two as incompatible—to be close to her parents and to work in Chicago, Milwaukee, or Madison at a clinic where she feels she is

most needed are both possible and desirable concurrently. The commute allows her to satisfy both her own career aspirations and the obligations of daughterhood. The opportunity it provides outweighs the inconvenience so totally that the commute itself becomes a necessity to navigate rather than a consideration.

Brenda similarly chose Belvidere for her family, and for the proximity to the support afforded by (rather than to) relatives. As a single parent absent for much of the day due to her commute and work in Chicago, she sought to be near her own parents, and to lean on them as a source of support: “Given the pressures that I was under with two small children, I needed somebody to help me with after school stuff. So Belvidere made sense. It was right up the freeway entrance to I90 so my mom and dad live 25 minutes away, and they were able to help out with the kids.” Her family-centricity is a multi-step process; in order to provide for her family both financially and temporally, she chose to reduce her active parenting during her children’s childhood and share that responsibility with her own parents instead. The commute to a higher-paying job enabled her to provide for her family financially, while also restricting the ways in which she could enact her role as provider and caregiver. Liam, too, reflects on a similar tradeoff, citing his desire to care for his family, and the way in which the commute prevented him from doing so prior to negotiations with his supervisor: “You leave at six, and get home at six, you're out for 12 hours. You're drained of your humanity….How are you supposed to be a good parent when you can barely be a good person?” His identity as a father itself was disrupted by the commute, which was paradoxically also necessary in maintaining his role as a financial provider and parent. His own engagement with the system of commuting and automobility means that by enacting one piece of his role, he precluded himself from fully inhabiting the very ideal he seeks to sustain.

Family is both a connecting and disconnecting factor for Judy, a lifelong Rockford resident, too. When I asked why she remained in Rockford, she responded that her immediate and extended family was the primary motivation and her greatest tie to the city: “My family has kept me here…my brother and his wife and his oldest son and his wife, and so my great nieces; my mother and father and my sister and her two daughters; and then I also have some cousins and aunts and uncles and, you know, all that stuff.” Rockford is home because she can be close to her immediate and extended family; her experience is contiguous with theirs. However, her rootedness in the community—those family ties and immediate familiarity with Rockford that accompanies them—was disrupted during the period in which she was commuting, with enduring effects: “If you've lived here for a long time, it's hard to go someplace and not run into somebody you know, but because I commuted for so many years, I kind of broke that cycle…I can run around and I don't know anybody.” The commute literally and metaphorically created distance between her and her home. Family and community happen at arms length, and her embeddedness in the community has been reduced despite the source of the commute being her own conviction and tenacity that she ought to stay in this place that she associates with family.

Neighbors and neighborhoods

Interaction with neighbors and the local community (or lack thereof) forms another centerpiece of supercommuters’ perception of their experience and of the Rockford area more broadly. Each referenced local communities as the primary nexus of interaction beyond family, rather than the city at large. Often, these sorts of relationships are built through the interface of family, e.g. through school districts. When I would prompt commuters to discuss the city as a whole, they would reference the city center and Rockford as a collective identity as a peripheral piece of their experience, if at all. Social life, when it is present given commuters’ time

constraints, is centered in their immediate surroundings. This local community, composed of family or household units and geographically bounded, is too a hallmark of a suburban experience.

In addition to Judy's description of the formation of local communities—of walking around town, and being able to find people in one's circles given the limited density and geographic spheres of residents' lives—Susan, Dennis, and Liam also referenced locally centered communities. Dennis, the only commuter I encountered who does not live with family or have family nearby, cited his immediate neighbors as a source of sociality and support: "I pretty much know almost everyone in my block here, and we help each other out with, like, today's snowstorms and everything. I like this sense of community here, and that's the biggest pro right now." In his limited time in Rockford, he has developed a sense of home and belonging centered around proximity to his neighbors, rather than the topic- or interest-centered communities that tend to proliferate in cities. His physical location and home enable him to access this sort of community and support; the built environment itself sets the stage for his sociality. From her interactions with neighbors, Susan seconded this assertion: "People are very friendly, too…you'll have a lot more people around, like, on the sidewalks, walking everywhere in most of the communities, a lot of people help [each other] out." These communities are brought together by repeated chance interactions and consistent proximity in less-dense environments. They are not intentionally orchestrated, but rather form organically, and hold appeal for residents.

Those spontaneous interactions are premised on time spent in community, though, and for many supercommuters, that time is reduced in comparison to their neighbors or other, similar suburban communities in which the entirety of residents' lives happens locally. Susan said that, prior to her retirement, "I felt like I was just sleeping [in Rockford], because, you know, I'm

getting up so early [at 4am]. I was in the city, and then…[I'd arrive] home, usually around 7:30, eat dinner, try to relax, and go to sleep." The friendly sidewalk interactions that she had mentioned earlier require her own presence on the sidewalks; the suburban collegiality and community became (at least temporarily inaccessible) when she conducted most of her life elsewhere. Brenda identified a similar dynamic: "For me, it's a total bedroom community. I really don't know my neighbors that well…I don't spend a whole lot of time socializing outside of my family." In the limited time she has, she chooses to focus on her immediate family as the primary community with which she engages. Her neighborhood may not objectively be a "bedroom community," but she identifies that it is "for [her]," not generally. Her particular mode of engagement makes it such; given that she has limited temporal access to her own home, and chooses to prioritize family, her community is limited to the family unit.

Time in transit

Though the commute itself is often discussed as liminal non-time and non-place (Wilhoit 2017; Lutz and Fernandez 2010; Bissell 2018), it is experienced in just as much complexity and with just as much variety as other any other activity (Laurier 2004; Jabloner 2020). For supercommuters, this experience of time is sometimes solitary, sometimes communal, sometimes a part of the workday, sometimes one's time between work and home, and invariably stressful in one way or another.

In addition to taking time that would otherwise be spent at work, home, or in another third space (Urry 2004), the supercommute requires scheduling around; no supercommuter I spoke with left their home later than 7 or 7:30 each morning, and some (Susan and Dennis) left as early as 4:30. This time toll is mirrored on the return; numerous commuters told me about days where weather or traffic would extend their commutes to a near-equal time as their

workdays. Brenda recalled, “I [regularly] got stuck in a lot of traffic. There were times when it took me as long as seven hours to get home because of snow. I remember one night, when a plane slid off the runway at Midway, I didn't get home until after midnight. It was so bad, between the snow and the traffic, it was bad.” Judy described a time when she was exhausted to the point that she did not notice a red light, and was subsequently pulled over: “I said [to the police], ‘I left [work] at six. I was late getting going. It's 11:15[pm] now, and I'm just getting home.’ Oh gosh. And I said, ‘I'm just tired.’” They let her off with a warning, she said, forgiving her actions given the five hours of driving that had preceded it. These extremes—be they time taken or the physical dangers inherent in driving—are normalized in supercommuters’ exaggerated experiences of the ordinarily mundane process of the commute. Incurring this danger is required to continue to uphold their norms.

By car, the commute is a solitary experience, despite the reality of driving as involving the unspoken coordination between the many people on the road operating their own vehicles. Judy describes how the commute meant her life generally was much more solitary than it has been since her retirement: “I think about how much time I spent in my car alone, okay, and how much time I spent in hotel rooms alone,” in comparison to her post-retirement recentering of life on family, even without a return to the community sociality she had experienced before beginning to commute. Brenda similarly “would listen to books on tape while [she] was in the car or podcasts, just to kind of make the time go by,” implying the undesirable, solitary boredom of the commute through the need to pass time that she perceived as unwanted and involuntary. The commute, specifically the solitary commute, is a “necessary evil,” in Dennis’s words; its temporariness is what made it bearable for Susan before she retired.

For those who split time between commutes by car and transit, the experience of commuting by Metra happens or happened under a different valence, though with the same overtone of the commute as something that has been chosen for or forced on them, rather than an active, agential choice. Dennis mentioned that he has developed a sort of Metra community out of repeated incidental interactions with the same commuters. They endure this undesirable activity in quiet solidarity punctuated by occasional small talk. The parallel experience of long commutes by transit, and its normalization, is referenced as uniquely "Americanist" time by Austrian anthropologist Anna Jabloner in her discussions of long-distance commuting in California (Jabloner 2020). The inbuilt expectation and normalization of supercommuting trends is viable within the American system of work, commuting, and the suburban living ideal. The time spent commuting limits their capacity for engagement in other arenas of their lives. Thus, their prioritization of work and family as the two poles of their time appears even more stark.

A new Rockford: the metropolitan vision of the development industry

My conversations with John Groh and Whitney Martin hinged on a version of Rockford's appeal with a vastly different focus to the priorities that supercommuters espoused regarding their own choices to live in Rockford. While acknowledging and emphasizing the current desirability of low cost of living, particularly of homeownership and a suburban-styled experience, Groh and Martin both focused primarily on the revitalization of the city's downtown and the expansion of its identity as a metropolitan center for arts and entertainment. This falls in line with a set of ideals more congruent with the major metro areas to which Rockford has access, such as Chicago, wherein community life falls on the intentional curation of events and spaces by organizations and the city itself, as opposed to the geographically bounded family and neighborhood communities explored above.

I am, ostensibly, not looking to move to Rockford or visit frequently as a tourist, and yet both Groh and Martin operated with a clear sales attitude during our conversations. Each asked me about my personal perceptions and priorities beyond the project, and responded to my attempt at neutral replies (I've learned a lot by spending a bit of time in the city, and I am interested in finding establishments, restaurants, etc. that feel iconically Rockford, respectively) before returning to a broader pitch of the city.

Martin, whom I met in the brightly painted downtown Made for Rockford offices, described her own role as expanding new residents' understanding of the city beyond the insular sphere of their family and immediate surroundings. She used individual narratives to do so:

> "I was at a community meeting a couple months ago, and there was a woman who said, "Hey, like, I didn't even know South Main," one of our streets, "went down this far." She was at this meeting, and she said, "I basically go to work and then come home." And she was like, "That's it. Like, that's all I do. I'm busy. I don't know anybody here." And so part of my role is to make sure that she gets out and attends the [new residents] mixer [hosted by Made for Rockford] tonight; goes to a hockey game; and maybe goes to a show at the Coronado [Theater]."

The lives that commuters described to me parallel this woman's experience; they have two nexuses, the home and workplace, connected by the commute. Martin envisions a city with a different sort of collective life, one where experience is centered in access to local businesses and community spaces extending beyond individuals' spheres: "We have so many local businesses, but also the Starbucks…you have national chains that recognize downtown. That Starbucks is brand new….[we're] having national chains also recognize that downtown is a big deal, while also, of course, spreading the love to all the local businesses." This concept of the urban-centered life, in which major national chains recognize Rockford's downtown as "a big deal" and sit side-by-side with local businesses, evokes a desire for a more metropolitan experience.

Martin and Groh both mentioned the surge in dining options, entertainment, and the arts as a draw to Rockford's downtown. While it may not be a tourist hub, Groh emphasized that

visitors come to Rockford for a variety of reasons, and that on average, the city's hotel rooms are 60% occupied by visitors, whether they are in town for family, business, or leisure. Given that Martin's own role is targeted primarily towards new and prospective residents, while Groh focuses on temporary visitors, their combined external focus represents a different vision for the future of Rockford, one founded on a metropolitan cultural and social identity centered around the city's downtown. Groh specified that though initiatives operated by GoRockford cater to visitors, there is an assumption that this angle will benefit current residents too: "We don't want to do anything that would not be appealing to or good for residents…Doing so makes it an even more appealing place to visit. Our marketing and promotion work is really externally focused and our intended purpose is to bring visitors." The people directly animating Groh's ambitions for the city are newcomers. Though there may be oblique indirect benefits for residents, they act more as a limiting factor—"we don't want to do anything that would not be appealing"—rather than a driver. As the guiding forces in downtown community revitalization, though, this means that the center of the city is made with visitors and new residents in mind.

Walking around the renovated downtown, the evidence of this in-progress revival is ubiquitous; old warehouses, factories, and industrial buildings are now coffeeshops, galleries, restaurants, and boutiques with exposed brick walls. Though it was far from bustling on the midwinter weekend I spent there, flyers for events—many sponsored or organized by Made for Rockford—are posted regularly on bulletin boards and in businesses. The intentionality and presence of GoRockford and Made for Rockford are visible throughout.

Along with this effort towards (re)centering of the city in popular life, at least in the eyes of visitors, there has been a push from outside the GoRockford/Made for Rockford campaigns to increase civic engagement in the formation of a collective urban identity. While neither Martin

nor Groh noted this push, indicating that their vision for the future is founded on the buy-in of newcomers rather than the cohesive engagement of existing community members, Clewer and Haas (of Transform Rockford) both focused on the necessity of rising community engagement in addressing historic and enduring inequity in the city. As described by Clewer,

> "When I first moved to Rockford and started getting involved on the real estate development side, it was very much a small circle of people making decisions for the city. That has changed. There's a great deal of public and civic engagement…the last 18 to 24 months is when we've started to do it very well. And what I mean by that is we're actually engaging all voices. What we found, up until the last couple years, is anybody who is engaged in any sort of civic activity, whether it be housing plans, comprehensive plans, land use plans, it was all the same people. It was a very small, older white group who had the time to devote.What we're seeing now is [intentional efforts are] bringing more people of color and more people of varied income levels into the discussion."

Here, Clewer speaks to the ongoing need to remedy racial and economic divides that have previously defined and still do define the city. However, this strategy—along with the metropolitan paradigm that grounds the sort of urban development championed by Martin especially—hinges on a vision of city-wide, collective development that differs from the family- and neighborhood-centric practices and paradigms that dominate the supercommuting residents' experience. Clewer connects development to a conception of Rockford as a cohesive entity, while supercommuters' lives echo the individual or siloed experience at the center of suburban value systems.

Incongruities

The metropolitan identity being crafted by the work of Martin and Groh would take Rockford in a decidedly new direction from its Rust Belt manufacturing past, its previously dilapidated, segregated downtown, or its suburban-styled present. However, that new identity is directed towards a new audience; the values evidenced in supercommuters' espoused priorities and experiences and realty professionals' observations align with a separate paradigm.

Supercommuters expressed that it feels like the downtown reconstruction is not for them, and its promises of economic and social bloom remain hollow. None expressed an alternative vision for downtown, either, implying that they do not see the city center as a site of their sociality, whether in current, proposed, or alternate forms. Additionally, the continued demand for single-family homes from new residents demonstrates that the affordable suburban ideal to which supercommuters subscribe is still a major pull into the city. Civic engagement and the location of community remains a dividing factor between these visions. Those brought into the area through Made for Rockford experience community in a different way to those who come for the suburban life and center their time and experiences on family and neighborhood.

Supercommuters expressed broad-strokes appreciation for the buildup of downtown Rockford, but never in personal terms. Liam described development downtown as "more peripheral than anything. It doesn't affect my family…downtown Rockford has become a draw for people…[but not me] especially because I've got two young kids and city life doesn't lend itself well to having young kids." He recognizes the work of Made for Rockford's resident attraction programs especially, but does not see this as fitting with his family-centered experience. "The city life" is a different life to his own. It is for someone else, demonstrating the divide between the suburban and metropolitan paradigms of both development and life in general. Brenda noted that the benefit to her would only exist if higher-paying jobs in her field moved to Rockford: "it doesn't matter what amenities you have, I don't care how many coffee shops you open. I'm gonna work in downtown [Chicago] as opposed to Rockford." The community-building aims and cultural draw of these amenities simply is not appealing to her, financially or personally. Her professional life is in Chicago, and her personal life is in her home and neighborhood.

Those moving to the city as inspired by Made for Rockford are primarily seeking single-family homes; though they may appreciate the appeal of a metropolitan, collective social life, they are not bought into the urban patterns of denser development that are premised on multi-family housing and mixed-use spaces accessible by modes other than car transportation. While downtown revitalization is ongoing, there are a significant number of vacant properties remaining, in sharp contrast to the highly in-demand housing market. As people do come to the city, their desire for lives centered around their homes and immediate surroundings is outpacing their approaches to downtown. Clewer identifies this dilemma in the housing market: "How do we hook folks, so to speak, under Made for Rockford? But if we don't have any housing stock, we're not going to get those folks. And I think that there's a big recognition of that now, like, oh, we really have to instigate the housing market, particularly single family [homes]." For those to whom Made for Rockford's metropolitan vision is alluring, so too is the classic American dream of a single-family home. This aspect, at least, of the suburban paradigm maintains its hold. Brown noted that Chicago-area realtors (i.e. those based outside of his Northern Illinois jurisdiction) are often selling homes in the Rockford area to people who are ostensibly looking for both space at an affordable price point and access to amenities. As prices rise in the direct Chicagoland area, Rockford provides an affordable, appealing suburban-styled alternative. Dennis is one such example. While he appreciates the variety of cultural amenities and budding urban character, they do not form the center of his life; his experience and primary motivation is premised on his ability to own a large home and partake primarily in neighborhood sociality.

The organization of civic life and community buy-in differs among these visions, as well. Granted, some institutions, such as the Rockford IceHogs, the local American Hockey League team, do seem to unite the city (pretty much everyone I spoke with in any capacity, from

rideshare drivers to coffee shop baristas to supercommuters to development professionals, expressed enthusiastic support for the team). However, the vision for collective engagement espoused by Groh, Martin, and that provided the premise for forming Transform Rockford, Haas's organization, do not resonate among supercommuters. Groh described community engagement in the shift in Rockford's trajectory: "as we've been winning as a community, more, there is a stronger sense of everybody's in it together, and we're pulling in this new direction." This attitude was apparent in the early days of Transform Rockford's organizing, about a decade ago, in which hundreds of community members organized into committees to pursue civic improvement goals. However, as the city has shifted on from its 2013 low, this public engagement has almost entirely subsided. Disenfranchisement has changed tone, but far from disappeared: in Judy's words, "I think there is still fragmentation, but I think that the fragmentation in my mind deals more with political differences and socioeconomic differences" as the city's development patterns address the starkest geographic differences. Individual neighborhoods, where life is centered for many current residents, remain isolated and socioeconomically homogeneous. Martin has made conscious attempts to construct new social networks through the "Go Team," a group of approximately 40 volunteers who "love the city, and then they are that first friend of people when they come here [through an informal matching process between new and existing residents]. So if somebody's like, "I am really into hockey," I can look at the Go Team and say, "Oh, Dave loves hockey. He'll take you to a game."" Though this is an active piece of her professional life, and may extend social networks manually, her own personal priorities reflect the trend of family centrality: "it's just kind of what your priorities are. For me, it's always been family and being close to them…there is a sense of community here. You can't go to the store or go to a city market without running into kids from [her son's] class."

Her own social networks are organic and family or neighborhood based; they are spontaneous and suburban. Any alternative requires intentionality, as it does not fall in line with existing cultural logics.

The different visions and priorities provide evidence for different value systems among the current residents I spoke with, and newcomers who do buy into the metropolitan vision. These residents, anecdotally, may operate as isolated from the neighborhood and family nexuses of others' experiences. Martin narrated one instance in this trend:

> "I have noticed more young professionals coming to the area. I was at a coffee shop, and I was hanging up posters for the mixer [an event she was hosting for new residents]. And someone goes, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Oh, this is this for a mixer that we're having. Is anybody new here?" And everyone in the coffee shop raised their hand, and they were like, "We're new here.""

The coffee shop is a paradigmatic example of an urban-coded third space, a place where community is located outside of the primary spaces of the home and work/school. In this case though, the only people who had sought this space did not fit into the otherwise-dominant social structures of the family and neighborhood. The coffee shop is a space for "young professionals" searching for collective mooring outside of the home or workplace (whether that workplace is in person or remote). This is the audience of the metropolitan ideal.

Even still, this is a subset of the residents that Rockford attracts. Dominant trends in real estate point to the continued desirability of single-family homes and the suburban lifestyle that they act as the foundation for (Ferretti 2025); residents' emphasis on the family as the center of social life deemphasize the constructed community of downtown Rockford; and supercommuters' willingness to make the arduous commute in order to have access to a system based on these values for themselves and their families demonstrates the strength of the suburban paradigm. A comprehensive shift towards a new, future-looking metropolitan identity thus

requires a reckoning with the suburban ideals that entrench current lifestyles and undergird the logics by which supercommuters operate.

Conclusion

Commuters between the Rockford and Chicago metro areas operate on the extreme end of the often-overlooked, mundane daily practice of commuting. Given the amount of time they spend in the "liminal" (Wilhoit 2017), "Americanist" (Jabloner 2020) time of the commute, an examination of these supercommuters places their justifications for the process of extreme commuting in sharp relief. For the supercommuters I interview, major factors speak to the pursuit of an Americanism built on the enduring legacy of midcentury suburban ideals, namely centering lives on the immediate family in single-family homes with access to plenty of physical space (yards, larger houses, or other products facilitated by the sprawl of the sub-urban or semi-urban built environment). Though this is achievable through the commute to the various higher-paying, white-collar Chicago jobs held by the supercommuters I spoke with, its achievement comes at the expense of that lost time, and along with it, other deprioritized aspects of the good life—neighborhood or community connections, athletics, or time spent with the very family they aim to support. The selling of the suburban dream and the large life at low cost is part of the appeal of Rockford, as described by professionals in the economic development, real estate, and talent attraction industries. However, there is a simultaneous, intentional push from these industry professionals to emphasize the urban character of the city, and the unification across stratified, disenfranchised sectors that would come with it; they promote cultural events, metropolitan amenities, and businesses. The direction of this messaging towards young newcomers, rather than current residents of any age (supercommuting or otherwise) belies a disconnect between the selling of the city's future and those who have already bought into it;

among residents, the suburban paradigm remains supreme, while those in the business of promoting the city emphasize an incongruous, metropolitan paragon.

Supercommuters view the commute as viable and desirable when faced with the choice of whether to access the suburbanity afforded by the Rockford metro area or to subject themselves to a more costly, downsized life that would nevertheless return their time and the potential of community engagement. This desirability, even at the extreme cost of the commute itself, crystallizes the challenge in confronting American car dependence and associated attitudes. Urry's associated systems of automobility—cars as determining development and thus the values with which people move through the world, which in turn perpetuate car use—are exemplified here. Whether or not supercommuters travel by car, the automobile premises their suburban-styled lives and the distance between their homes and workplaces. They subscribe to the system of automobility in one way or another. For these commuters, shifting their lifestyle and financial priorities is less likely than spending hours of their day in the lost time of the commute, and the non-space of transit. The appeal put forth by campaigns like Made for Rockford and proponents of locally-centered life is lost on them. It does not carry the intended weight as they function under a fundamentally different dominant system of value assignment than either urban planners with an eye to sustainability or those in the business of "selling the city" of Rockford. The two visions of the city create tension and disconnect; it is not possible to sell the cosmopolitan, densified, cohesively whole version of Rockford to those who hold the ideals that allow them to supercommute, nor is it possible for the city itself to maintain a self-contradicting suburban-urban duality without compromising the viability of either identity. The process of dismantling the systems of suburbanity and supercommuting in favor of a reimagined urban identity encounters the value systems which maintain the suburbs themselves.

Paradigms of environmentally sustainable urban development hinge on local self-dependence; global networks of employment, trade, travel, governance, materials sourcing, agriculture, and interreliance are broadly cited as fundamentally tied up in extractive practices and the exploitation of land and people.

As a former Rust Belt manufacturing and rail hub seeking to reinvent itself, Rockford poses specific priorities and premises. As with any city, its character and situation are unique. However, as a city with a remarkably low cost of living located in the Midwest (rather than the fastest-growing regions of the coasts, where supercommutes are most commonly practiced) and its own historical identity, this character may limit the generalization of findings regarding Rockford-Chicago supercommuters even further. Rockford provides a rare opportunity at an increasingly less common Americanism, and the city's visions of the future are necessarily premised in this unique history and present. Thus, these results ought to be intentionally taken in context. This examination of individuals' lived experience demonstrates the nuance and complexity inherent in the decisions and pressures that result in supercommuting practices. To generalize to supercommuters categorically, a much larger-scale, multi-sited study would be necessary.

While Rockford does pose a unique circumstance, this analysis is nonetheless based on (and thus reflective of) national and global patterns, and thus provides a commentary from a particular vantage on much broader-scale trends. The case of Rockford makes visible the history whose legacy shapes current widespread forms of car dependence and ideals of suburban living. Commuting, suburban culture, and car dependence reflect an individualism that is premised on global extractive economies and indiscriminate resource overuse. This is agreed upon to be environmentally and socially untenable. However, these costs are rendered invisible under the

current dominant suburban value systems, including and especially by those living within and perpetuating these systems. Their explicit acknowledgment as part of the broader paradigm of suburban priorities is necessary in effectively shifting this paradigm.

Sustainability is necessarily a socially integrated process, and therefore must be considered as such; to posit sustainability as an isolated sphere is to misunderstand it. The appeal of sustainable development and an orientation towards these rising urbanist paradigms (which themselves reflect pre-automotive development and urban orientation, especially in Europe) are social processes that themselves interact with the desirability of variously resource-intensive construction patterns and lifestyles. This is not a unidirectional association. Movement towards sustainable urban communities must shift away from both the isolationist centering of life on the individual and immediate family, and the extractive reliance on global, consumerist supply, manufacturing, and waste systems that premises suburban living.

Rockford's political and development movement towards a local focus are a partial, unselfconscious step towards a rejection of these environmentally harmful practices. However, this must be coupled with other principles of sustainable communities (densification, equity, land use, etc.) in order to be a full shift with associated social and environmental implications. Supercommuters' experiences demonstrate both the continued relevance and impact of the distinctly American suburban lifestyle, and a nascent impossibility of its continuance, especially at the most extreme levels. The supercommute is not compatible with environmental or social sustainability.

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