Spatial inequality is an increasingly vital concept in urban sociology, capturing the inequitable allocation of resources across space. But it omits an important and often overlooked form of inequality that takes place at a more immediate and direct level, inhering not in the relationship between spaces, but within the fabric of place itself. This paper argues for “emplaced inequalities”—power imbalances that are manifest in the material, symbolic, and institutional frameworks that guide behavior in a specific urban setting. Drawing on a diverse body of research, I suggest an analytical vocabulary useful in describing and explaining emplaced inequality. At the center of this argument is the concept of the program—a pattern of social action that is endorsed or constrained by the social architecture of place. I then apply this vocabulary to an empirical case drawn from research on downwardly mobile suburbs in the New York Metropolitan Area.

Spatial inequality is a concept of growing prominence in urban sociology. In the last 10 years, the term has been used in more than 300 published sociology articles, up from 133 in the prior decade, and 43 in the decade before that.¹ This trajectory makes sense, given the increasing spatial concentration of wealth and poverty in the United States and abroad (Lichter et al. 2012; Massey et al. 2009; Musterd and Ostendorf 2013). As an analytical construct, spatial inequality helps us to see the consequences of concentrated economic advantage and disadvantage, highlighting the role of space in determining who has access to what. Typically, it describes the inequitable allocation of resources across and between discrete spatial units, such as neighborhoods, census tracts, or zip codes (Lobao et al. 2007; Logan 1978).

But something important disappears at this scale. The varied urban landscape does not simply confer access to resources—it directly affects the contours of human experience on a moment-by-moment basis, and it does so differently for different people. Inequality is manifested not just across space, in other words, but within place. Urban sociologists and geographers have documented a variety of urban settings that vividly illustrate this insight. Whyte (1988: 160), observed the use of brass fittings and spikes to prevent
prolonged sitting in public plazas. Duneier (1999: 131) described the elimination of protective “niches” for sleep or panhandling in New York’s Penn Station. Davis (1990) cited examples of “sadistic” urban design, while Flusty (1994) went further, formulating a typology of “interdictory spaces” designed to deceive or punish unwanted human users. More recently, urban scholars have noted the growing use of local ordinances by North American municipalities to achieve parallel ends (Blomley 2007a; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Mitchell 2003; Valverde 2011, 2012). Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht (2009), for example, list 15 major cities that have prohibited sitting or lying on the sidewalk (163).

These findings have little to do with the accessibility of amenities, goods, or services. And yet, they have something important to tell us about how inequality is reproduced in urban space. They suggest that inequality does not just happen through space, it takes place, adopting material, symbolic, and legal forms that may not be obvious at a higher analytical register. Although there is no shortage of contemporary and historical examples to illustrate this insight, the process by which inequality becomes invested in place has not been extensively theorized. In explaining the measures described above, analysts point to their origins in political economy (Marcuse 1997; Smith 1996) or class-based fear and mistrust (Davis 1990). While acknowledging these proximate causes, I suggest that they are cases of a more generalized process by which social structure is translated into the frameworks that direct and constrain behavior in any given setting. The “poor door” utilized in contemporary mixed-income housing (Licea 2016) and the servant’s staircase in the 18th century manor house (Mumford 1961) emerged from entirely different political, economic, and social contexts, but have much in common. They are cases, but cases of what? We lack a conceptual framework that gathers and organizes such examples, in order to derive the lessons they have to offer.

In this paper, I make an argument for a form of spatial inequality that is localized, immediate, and direct in its effect on social actors—an inequality that inheres not in the relationship between spaces, but in the fabric of place itself. Although a straightforward notion when encountered in nonscholarly usage, “place” has proven a surprisingly difficult concept to operationalize. Gieryn (2000) defines places as having three qualities: They occupy a unique geographic location; they have a material form; and they are invested with meaning. I follow his lead, acknowledging the material and symbolic dimensions of place, while adding a third “institutional” dimension, which describes the set of formal or informal norms that apply within a specific setting. Inequality, I argue, may be “emplaced” (Gieryn 2000), programmed into the social architecture of place through material, symbolic, and institutional frameworks that together help to define social reality for inhabitants or visitors. Like spatial inequality, emplaced inequality is a means by which social structure is manifested and reproduced within space and across time. But its mechanisms are more direct: When translated into a set of brass spikes in a public plaza, or a velvet rope sequestering a “VIP” section, inequality becomes something that is visible, tangible, and immediate.

Given the multifaceted nature of place, I look to several distinct analytical perspectives to frame the following argument, drawing on four distinct literatures that have not previously been integrated: Science and Technology Studies (STS), a branch of research and theory that pays particularly close attention to the social ramifications of material objects (Law 2010); the “urban culturalist” perspective in sociology (Borer 2006); the interdisciplinary field referred to as “environmental psychology” (Russell and Ward
Building upon these perspectives, I suggest four propositions: First, urban researchers interested in inequality should look beyond social exclusion, and consider the complex ways in which small urban places control user behavior; the second, a clear extension of the first, involves identifying the implicit behavioral assumptions, or programs, embedded in urban space; third, I suggest that analysts can profitably focus on conflict as an empirical indication of emplaced inequality that helps us to identify the opportunities and constraints that places present to different constituencies of local users; fourth, I argue that power becomes visible in the concrete strategies that stakeholders employ to reinforce or adapt existing programs. I then apply this vocabulary to an empirical case drawn from research on pedestrian risk in downwardly mobile New Jersey suburbs, in order to illustrate the capacity of place to enact and reproduce social equality. Finally, I argue that emplaced inequality offers a renewed opportunity and obligation for urban sociology to engage with the fields of urban design, planning, and law.

BEYOND, BEHIND, AND BENEATH EXCLUSION: CONTROL

In a context of growing urban inequality, it is not surprising that analysts have emphasized the capacity for places to exclude. Researchers have been prolific in studying gated communities (Atkinson and Blandy 2013; Blakely and Snyder 1997; Low 2004; Vesselinov 2008), urban “citadels” (Flusty 1994; Marcuse 1997), and fortified enclaves (Caldeira 1996; Davis 1990, 1998). Meanwhile, scholars have documented a related trend toward the privatization of public space that has resulted in the walling off and monitoring of spaces of consumption, recreation, and habitation (Low and Smith 2013; Mitchell 2003; Sorkin 1992). Overtly exclusionary places are of clear substantive and theoretical importance. In the defensive walls and restrictive ordinances that protect these enclaves, the material and legal fabric of place can be seen working alongside larger, more abstract forces (e.g., housing markets, development policy, or municipal zoning), carving up urban space in ways that may reinforce broader societal inequalities.\(^5\)

But it may help researchers to intentionally look beyond exclusion in their case selection and analysis. First, history is replete with examples of places in which exclusion has been impractical or untenable for those in power. In heterogeneous settings, for example, on feudal estates or in the early industrial city, the maintenance of elite power and privilege required that inequality be reproduced within the contexts in which classes came into contact (Fishman 1987: 111–113; Lofland 1985).\(^6\) When the mechanisms that preserve spatial inequality break down, or when the organization of economic activity requires contact between different social strata, inequality may be constituted in and through the environments in which this contact occurs.

Looking beyond exclusion in this way allows us to make sense of the details and shows how they matter: It was not coincidental that black passengers were assigned to the rear of public buses in the Jim Crow South, or, for that matter, that servants were confined to the lower levels of houses on the estates of the landed gentry in Victorian England. To paraphrase Schwartz (1981), spatial classification is “the natural language of inequality” (150). Social exclusion in these settings was only maintained through discrete moments of ritualistic subjugation that were guided by the configuration of shared, heterogeneous
spatial exclusion. In the conceptual and empirical leap to exclusion, we run the risk of missing the direct mechanisms through which the outcome of interest is reproduced and maintained. The creation of spaces that are physically or psychologically uncomfortable for the homeless is a logical means by which to create spaces in which there are no homeless. In this regard, it makes sense not just to look beyond exclusion, but behind it, revealing the direct, place-based mechanisms through which broader social and spatial boundaries are inscribed and enforced.

This point is underscored when we consider how contemporary legal and material mechanisms actually work when they serve to reproduce distinctions of race or class. In the post-Civil Rights era, the local ordinances that control public space do not overtly exclude defined populations; instead, they rely broadly upon city government’s traditional power to regulate the uses and “functions” of urban space in the name of public well-being (Blomley 2007a, 2007b). Even if the effect of an ordinance banning panhandling in specific areas of the city (for example, close to banks and ATM machines [Valverde 2012: 38]) is to exclude homeless people from spaces of commerce, this effect is contingent and indirect, relying upon the link between a social condition (homelessness) and an activity (panhandling). As Valverde (2011) shows, this example is not idiosyncratic: The mandate for city government to control public “nuisance” is historically central to municipal power, and has been used to justify everything from land use to highly specific local regulations, for example, the number of decibels that can be emitted from a car stereo on a given street corner at a given time of day. Contemporary local ordinances, by their very nature, do not directly exclude individuals or social classes from urban spaces, they regulate activities, an important distinction. The same can be said for the material contexts of the city, which shape the social contours of place by endorsing or restricting socially structured patterns of use.

Finally, analysts should look beneath large-scale patterns of spatial inequality created through social exclusion. The material, symbolic, and institutional fabric of place intersects with social structure in ways that are not limited to the inclusion of wealthy urbanites and the exclusion of the poor. At ground level, place reveals itself to shape and constrain social experience in remarkably varied ways. The vast majority of material artifacts encountered in urban places are not blank concrete walls, rolls of concertina wire, or CCTV cameras (Davis 1990: 221–265). They possess a more nuanced functional repertoire than binary inclusion or exclusion, exerting “control” (Shepard and Smithsimon 2011) over user behavior through often sophisticated cues and directives. For every time and place in which social exclusion occurs due to the design of built space, there exists a universe of moments in which the behavior of users is more subtly guided and constrained. By focusing too narrowly on overt social exclusion, we run the risk of missing other types of outcomes that may be relevant to inequality, ignoring the capacity of place to marginalize, embarrass, inconvenience, or, conversely, to confer safety, comfort, and privilege.

**Proposition 1.** Beyond and behind their capacity to exclude, places serve as arenas of social control.

**THE SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE OF PLACE: PROGRAMS**

By manipulating these cues and directives, property owners, planners, regulators, and other empowered actors shape the social architecture of place in ways that may reflect and reproduce social inequality. The basic building blocks of this architecture are
hypothetical patterns of behavior, or programs. Every manmade object, large or small, concretizes a potentially innumerable range of assumptions about how it will be used. These assumptions rely on potentially complex inferences about the society that surrounds the object (see Ellis and Cuff 1989). As Gieryn (2002) notes, when architects and designers conceive of physical structures, they necessarily “theorize about society… (creating) a blueprint for human behavior and social structure…” The design of even the simplest and most banal of urban places—e.g., waiting rooms, parking lots, or bus stops—contains a set of behavioral and cognitive assumptions, establishing normative “programs” of action (Studer and Stea 1966), referred to elsewhere as “scripts” (Akrich 1992; Latour 1992), or social “affordances” (Costall 1995; Gibson 1975; Norman 1999). A typical modern, urban sidewalk, for example, assumes that pedestrians will want to travel in a linear direction, as opposed to in circles or sine curves. In making this assumption, the sidewalk helps to produce the world anticipated by its design (Giddens 1979). (De Certeau [1984: 98] notwithstanding.) Places, in other words, contain material programs—hypothetical sequences of behavior that are endorsed by the physical attributes of place.

At the same time, these physical programs are surrounded by symbolic contexts that also inform user behavior. Signs, labels, color coding systems, recorded announcements, and the like offer another form of programming, sanctioning some behaviors and discouraging others. These symbolic programs support or modify the meanings that are already attached to places, which inform thought and behavior (Borer 2006; Lofland 1998; Milligan 1998). As Borer (2006) observes, “People act differently in a church on Sunday morning than they do in a football stadium on Sunday afternoon. Those differences are cultural, and so are the similarities.” Places are loaded with symbolic and ritualistic meanings, and these meanings do not follow strictly from material form. The urinal mounted on the wall of an art museum demands a different pattern of behavior than the one in the lavatory, even though the two may be identical in design.

Even the simplest of everyday practices require a preexisting stock of knowledge that suggests what to do in a given setting and how to do it, an insight that is foundational to the field of environmental psychology (Rapoport 1977, 1982; Schank and Abelson 1977). A place may serve as a “complex symbol of basic values, life processes, historic events, fundamental social structure, or the nature of the universe,” a quality that Lynch (Lynch 1981) refers to as “significance.” But settings also contain symbolic cues that simply make them “transparent” or “legible,” signaling the basic social functions and activities that normally take place within them (139–141). Symbolic programs, as I define them, consist of all of the signs, symbols, and expressive cues that tell users how to behave in a given place.

Finally, a third, institutional form of programming serves to codify and enforce the behaviors appropriate to a place. These rules vary widely in their formality, ranging from implicit systems of etiquette to federal laws. Like material programs, they are coercive, but only indirectly, by virtue of prospective social sanction. Thus, they require third parties—e.g., bystanders, neighbors, or the state—to help to monitor and enforce appropriate modes of behavior. As Latour (1992) points out, a speed bump and a police officer are interchangeable mechanisms of controlling traffic speed (hence, the British term for a speed bump, “sleeping policeman”) but they work through different methods, the former promising damage to the undercarriage of an automobile, the latter writing a ticket. Among the various institutional programs that guide everyday behavior, local ordinances that regulate the “functions” and “logics” of place play a particularly
important role (Blomley 2007a, 2007b). These ordinances owe their legitimacy to the historical mandate for municipal law to control public nuisances by regulating the behaviors appropriate to a specific location (Valverde 2011).\textsuperscript{11}

Every form of programming has its advantages and disadvantages. Material programs can be immediately, physically coercive. Symbolic programs are easily and inexpensively reproduced and disseminated through space. Institutional programs can be extremely precise, and carry the weight of legitimacy.\textsuperscript{12} The three types of programming are deployed interchangeably or in combination by property owners and other empowered stakeholders, regulating activity in ways that reflect local morality, preserve a designated social order, or protect stakeholder interests.

A brief example is illustrative, and helps to bring inequality back into this discussion. In New York City, rising homelessness and a deterioration of the shelter system has led to an increase in the homeless population sleeping in public spaces. This in turn has raised political pressure on city officials to prevent the use of benches in a popular Manhattan park for sleeping (Foderaro 2014). In such a situation, the desired behavioral norm can be “programmed” by the city in three ways. First, the space can be materially programmed, the seating area of the benches fitted with raised ribs, permitting sitting, while making it uncomfortable to lie down on the bench—rendering them “bum-proof” in Davis’s (1990) phraseology. But it might not be necessary to materially reprogram the park bench, an expensive and time-consuming fix. Taking their cues from broken windows theory, park managers might just apply a new coat of paint, or, if that fails, post a sign discouraging loitering. In these cases, the place would have been symbolically programmed in ways that might discourage sleeping. Finally, a law prohibiting lying down for designated amounts of time might be enacted, or a park curfew put in place, and police officers might be tasked with enforcing that law, permitting users to sit on the bench during the day, but evicting all park visitors at night. In this case, the space would have been programmed institutionally.\textsuperscript{13}

In fact, though the parks department briefly considered removing all the benches in the park, an extreme example of material reprogramming, they instead opted for a combination of symbolic and institutional intervention: Signs were installed prohibiting overnight occupancy, and these were coupled with added enforcement by the NYPD (Foderaro 2014). The interchangeability of the three types of programs suggests their linkage within the normative infrastructure that dominates in a given place: Material form, symbolic communication, and legal or informal prohibition may provide interchangeable and mutually reinforcing guidelines, working together to regulate the morality of public behavior (see Figures 1 and 2).

It is important to recognize that places (and their constituent programs) offer opportunities as well as constraints, and the opportunities are often more relevant to inequality. A latte bar with café seating does not hurt anyone, but as a material and symbolic addition to a neighborhood, it says something about who belongs, thus exerting a form of power over a place and its people (Zukin 2010). A bicycle rack next to a train station offers a programmatic opportunity—it endorses and accommodates a behavioral option—but only for those who travel by bicycle. Although it does not constrain any class of users, this kind of affirmative programming of place, apparently innocuous in its functional affordances, can nevertheless help to reflect and possibly reproduce inequality by symbolically demarcating space in a manner that endorses the lifestyle of one group or another. Again,
exclusion shows itself to be a limiting lens with which to view such cases, as they represent something more accurately described as “selective inclusion.” It is, in fact, precisely this logic that has revealed bike lanes to be political lightning rods when they first appear in gentrifying neighborhoods (Hoffman 2015; Stehlin 2014). To be clear, places do many other things beyond the scope of this discussion. But their ability to program social behavior—to impose selective opportunity and constraint—is the most fundamental means by which places exert social control, and is thus key to understanding how social inequality becomes invested in place:

**Proposition 2.** The social architecture of place consists of material, symbolic, and institutional programs that endorse or constrain patterns of user activity.
If, as I have argued, the social architecture of a place lies in its programs, then the object of research is fairly straightforward: to unpack these programs and reveal their substantive implications for different groups of people. But simple does not mean easy. At this point, this argument runs into a well-known methodological problem that is not limited to the study of inequality and place. Much of the time, the various materials, symbolic and institutional infrastructures that constrain human agency remain invisible to everyday people and researchers alike, a quality that adds to their power by rendering them uncontroversial. It is this quality—the apparent inevitability and naturalness of the social assumptions embedded in mundane urban space—that has led some theorists (e.g., Davis 1990: 253) to follow Foucault (1995) in seeing cities as “carceral” realms in which disembodied forms of social control are invested in a “multiple network of diverse elements—walls, space, institution, rules, discourse” (Foucault 1995: 307). To the extent that programs are hegemonic, shaping the needs and desires of everyday people, the exercise of power that lies behind and within them becomes very difficult to identify (Lukes 1974).

But social control is never absolute. Programs can be ignored or disobeyed. A book can be used to stabilize a wobbly desk. Cobblestones can be thrown at the riot police. As McDonnell (2016) shows, material culture tends toward "entropy" when social context diverges from the assumptions of designers and regulators. If the power behind place is diffuse and disembodied under normal circumstances, it is nevertheless concentrated and, in a sense, reembodied at specific moments. As many others have observed (Cresswell 1996; Garfinkel 1964; Latour 2005; Star 1999), episodes of conflict, breakdown, or disruption are methodologically crucial, affording the opportunity to observe the internal workings of social or material infrastructures. More concretely, if no one ever attempts to sleep on the bench in the park, it becomes difficult to weigh the respective contributions to social control made by the metal ribs that were installed to prevent comfortably lying down, the sign admonishing against loitering, or the security guard who periodically walks by. Only when a person lays a piece of cardboard over the ribs to soften their impact, ignores the sign, or disobeys the security guard, do these infrastructures become evident.

At times such as these, programmatic conflicts occur that are central to the politics of place, and that can therefore be revealing to researchers positioned to observe them. Moments of programmatic conflict uncover the underlying architecture of social control, and in doing so, expose the various collectivities that are affected by the way a place is designed or regulated under normal conditions. However, under normal conditions, empirically identifying these constituencies—populations defined by how they use a place—is difficult, requiring a Herculean effort in data gathering to identify all of the potential patterns of use, undertaken by all users, at all possible times (e.g., Whyte 1980, 1988). The work becomes easier when programmatic conflicts occur, as constituencies make themselves visible by supporting, resisting, or contesting a newly controversial program.

An illustrative case, in keeping with previous examples, is the Tompkins Square riot and its aftermath. The episode, which began on a hot summer evening in 1988, is recounted in detail by Smith (1996), who pointed to the events surrounding the riot as the most militant antigentrification struggle to date in the United States. The riot was touched off by
an official reaction to programmatic conflict. In response to repeated noise complaints by residents along the park’s gentrifying western edge, city police officials decided to enforce the park’s 1 am curfew. The move would create clear problems for two constituencies—the park’s sizable homeless population, and members of the Lower East Side’s thriving punk scene, who staged late night concerts in its band shell, sparking the noise complaints in the first place (French et al. 1988). But the prospect of the curfew mobilized other constituencies who wanted to keep the park free of regulation, including, according to Smith (1996: 3), a “diverse mix of anti-gentrification protestors, punks, housing activists, park inhabitants, artists, Saturday night revelers, and Lower East Side residents.” During the riot, the police responded to the mobilization of these groups with a maniacal display of force, charging protestors on horseback and attacking them with batons, their badges concealed.

Ethnographers have documented a number of comparable programmatic conflicts that have divided heterogeneous communities, catalyzing latent tensions between groups, with far less violent repercussions. The issues at stake are often similarly banal in nature, but take on a broader meaning due to the overlap between place-based constituencies and lines of class or race: whether it is acceptable to barbecue on the grassy divider of a neighborhood street (Pattillo 2007: 260–262), allow children to roam free through suburban back yards (Gans 1967: 159–161, 175–181), host a party in the co-op lobby (Freeman 2011: 138–139), or sell food from folding tables at the local ballfield (Zukin 2010: 91–92). Conflicts over use of space reveal the various constituencies of place and articulate the links between social structural fault lines (race, ethnicity, class, etc.) and typically implicit notions of public propriety or, more simply put, how to behave in public.

But the Tompkins Square case does not just illustrate the way in which programmatic conflicts reveal latent constituencies. It illustrates the capacity for such conflicts to expose the exercise of power involved in design and regulation. Following the 1988 riot, the curfew was temporarily dropped, but in the years that followed, as the park’s homeless population grew again, the city resumed its campaign, reinstating the curfew, fencing off sections of the park, and posting large contingents of police officers at its entrances. These measures were understandable as attempts to materially and institutionally restore the dominant program for the park. After finally evicting the homeless and shuttering the park entirely, Mayor David Dinkins said as much, asserting “the park is a park... It is not a place to live” (Smith 1996: 5). But in the wake of the initial programmatic conflict of 1988, the uses of the park had become controversial, the political and ideological battle lines clearly drawn. In this context, Dinkins’s apparently straightforward assertion that “a park is a park” served to align the city with the interests of condominium developers and affluent residents who desired a peaceful, quiet Tompkins Square. Responses to programmatic conflict, even when they seek to reinforce or restore a previous program, reveal the interests and “master narratives” that are concealed within infrastructure (Star 1999), bringing not just everyday users, but empowered stakeholders (e.g., designers, planners, owners, or regulators) into the light of day.

Reinforcing a previous pattern of use is not the only option, of course. To the extent that programs set the rules, the rules can be changed by altering the program. Informal and “DIY” urbanists specialize in reworking urban space to accommodate patterns of action that were unanticipated by their original design and regulation (Douglas 2014; Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014). But municipal agencies and urban planners can also respond to programmatic conflict by modifying the social architecture of place. In a
shady grove in the southeastern corner of Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, a semicircle of split log benches serves as a comparison case for Tompkins Square. For several decades, as the park has been steadily enveloped by gentrification, an informal gathering of drummers has played West African rhythms on Sunday nights, wearing a bare patch in the grass and drawing occasional complaints from neighbors (CBS 2015). But rather than reinforcing an existing program, the Parks Department eventually recognized the drum circle and made its claim official, installing a formal bronze plaque that reads “Drummer’s Grove” and installing the split log benches for the drummers’ use (Low et al. 2009: 56). Rather than reinforcing the dominant program, it changed the program, materially and institutionally accommodating a pattern of use that conflicted with the original intentions of the space (see Figure 3).

**Proposition 3.** Programmatic conflicts expose the various constituencies with a stake in the programming of place.

**Proposition 4.** Programmatic repair involves either reinforcement or adaptation, strategies that can take place through the material, symbolic, or institutional dimensions of place.

Through the mechanisms described above, inequality is injected into the material, symbolic, and institutional contours of place, producing environments reflective of lifestyles and behaviors that are, in turn, tightly coupled with social structure. The formal or informal rules that prevail in places of inequality—*sit, but do not sleep; shop, but do not beg*—allude to and reproduce socioeconomic cleavages, aligning locally sanctioned behavior with the desires of one constituency, while negating the needs of another. In this way, inequality is manifested and reproduced not simply between places, but within place. For homeless, poor, or low-income constituents whose interests run contrary to the dominant programming, inequality is translated into a set of behavioral constraints, as well as
more direct costs—inconvenience, embarrassment, discomfort, and even physical pain. A disadvantaged social position is thus converted into negative modes of sensory and social experience that are intrinsic to place and irreducible to broader patterns of social inclusion or exclusion.

In the preceding discussion, I have summarized and integrated examples drawn from existing theoretical and empirical work, developing a set of concepts that may be useful in analyzing what I call emplaced inequality—a form of social inequality that inheres in place. But this argument is not worth much, if it does not add descriptive or explanatory power to the study of actual existing places and the people who use and inhabit them. In the remainder of the article, I put my analytical vocabulary to work on some empirical material, attempting to illustrate the added value of thinking with and through emplaced inequality. The context for this example is the suburbanization of poverty in the United States (Kneebone and Garr 2010).

EMPLACED INEQUALITY IN DOWNWARDLY MOBILE SUBURBS

During the postwar period, a combination of market forces and exclusionary local policy closed off newly created suburban communities to low-income residents (Downs 1975, 1994; Massey et al. 2013). In the 1990s, however, pockets of suburban poverty began to proliferate, particularly in aging, “inner-ring” suburbs in the Northeast and Midwest (Jargowsky 2003). This process expanded through the 2000s, aided by a decline in the value of postwar suburban housing, surpluses of new housing at the expanding suburban fringe, and the migration of low-wage workers into suburban communities (Alba et al. 1999; Berube and Frey 2006; Lucy and Phillips 2000; Murphy 2007; Orfield 1997). By 2010, more than half of the nation’s poor lived in its suburbs (Kneebone and Berube 2013: 141).

Viewed through the lens of spatial inequality and social exclusion, the suburbanization of poverty poses a set of important research questions. Recent demographic work has charted the spatial concentration of suburban poverty (Dwyer 2012; Lichter et al. 2012), the segregation of the suburban poor from more affluent suburbanites (Dwyer 2012), and their isolation from sources of employment and social services (Kneebone and Berube 2013; Murphy and Wallace 2010). Inequality appears in this research as a spatial attribute—an economic disparity between proximate localities, or a measurable distance separating poor residents from important amenities. A related, but analytically distinct, question concerns how inequality is immediately, directly experienced within declining suburbs. Partly in order to answer this question, between 2010 and 2015 I undertook a mixed-method study of pedestrian safety issues in the interior of Atlantic County, New Jersey, a suburban corridor in which poverty rates have risen sharply in the last 25 years.16

In the late 2000s, pedestrian mortality across New Jersey climbed steeply as a percentage of overall traffic deaths (O’Neill 2009; Rouse 2009a). According to the Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS), a federal traffic safety database, two of the most dangerous roads in New Jersey were Atlantic County’s White Horse and Black Horse Pikes, where a total of 39 pedestrian deaths occurred between 2005 and 2013. The two arterial roadways are not new. They were instrumental to the development of Atlantic County in the mid-20th century, opening up thousands of acres of farmland and forest for suburban residential development (Cammarota 2001). White Horse and Black Horse Pikes are
testaments to the spatial and cultural association of the private automobile and the suburban home during the postwar period, twin centerpieces of a middle-class lifestyle that promised convenience, comfort, and freedom to homebuyers in the region (Baxandall and Ewen 2000; Cohen 2004). In the 1950s, federal tax incentives spurred commercial development along state and county roads, producing low-density retail corridors, rather than compact, walkable commercial centers (Hayden 2003). As a result of these processes, White Horse and Black House Pikes are flanked by tract housing, drive-through restaurants, motels, and strip malls—material artifacts of postwar consumer culture and trademarks of suburban “sprawl” (Duany et al. 2000).

LIFE IN THE MARGINS

In recent decades, poverty rates have escalated precipitously in many suburban census tracts in Atlantic County. Although programmed to endorse an automotive, middle-class lifestyle, the landscape now serves two distinct constituencies: drivers, who are either passing through or visiting the retail along the sides of White Horse and Black Horse Pike; and a growing population of poor and near-poor residents, many of the workers employed by the stores, hotels, or restaurants that line the roadways, who are forced to navigate this landscape on foot. The area's social inequality, in other words, is manifest in different ways of using public space.

Between 2010 and 2015, I visited White Horse and Black Horse Pikes 11 times, conducting roughly 42 hours of participant observation along the two divided highways. This fieldwork revealed a low-income population who, by necessity, move through an environment of tangible hostility, enduring physical risk, humiliation, and inconvenience in the course of routine activity. In older, urban neighborhoods that were built for walking, narrow roadways, 90-degree turns, and other “traffic calming” devices work together to slow the speed of motor vehicles and protect pedestrians. On White Horse Pike and Black Horse Pike, the opposite holds true: The geometry and scale of the landscape were engineered to offer motorists free reign. In some places, the highway is six lanes across. Arcing turn lanes permit drivers to maintain a high speed while exiting or entering the roadway. Speed limits are typically upwards of 35 miles per hour, the threshold at which a moving motor vehicle typically does fatal damage to a human body (Ewing and Dumbaugh 2009). Conversely, pedestrian infrastructure is scant. There are few sidewalks or crosswalks, and virtually no pedestrian signals to indicate right-of-way. The pedestrian deaths on White Horse and Black Horse Pike are a byproduct of this imbalance—indicators of a place that categorically privileges the needs of one constituency over another.

Examples drawn from my field notes indicate attempts by pedestrians to modify this landscape to suit their needs. At a spot between two distant intersections, someone had cut an irregular opening in a fence with pliers, permitting me (along with a construction worker walking home from work) to step through the hole, and cross from a shopping area on one side of the road to a bus stop on the other. In the grassy fringes adjacent to the shoulder of the White Horse Pike, pedestrians had worn a dusty path, creating an informal sidewalk. At a bus stop on Black Horse Pike, others had flipped two grocery carts on their sides and left them to rust in the open air, improvising a pair of rusty, but well-utilized benches. These examples indicate both the quotidian frequency with which pedestrians use this environment, and the degree to which their use is neglected by the
design and planning of the space. They represent attempts at materially reprogramming the space, but are ad hoc, humble, and incomplete. As Douglas (2014) points out, even informal urban design is difficult and expensive. In many areas along White Horse Pike, manmade or natural obstructions deny pedestrians even these improvised areas along the sides of the road. In these places, they are forced to occupy the asphalt shoulders of the highway, walking among pieces of shredded tire rubber and pieces of broken safety glass and plastic taillight, reminders of the frequent violence associated with high-speed automobile traffic (see Figures 4-6).

For these pedestrians, the physical risk involved in violating the dominant programming of the place is manifest at all times. On a humid evening in July 2010, I observed an elderly man carried a large shopping bag down the shoulder of the Black Horse Pike. He was sweating through a white windbreaker that he wears, in spite of the heat, to avoid being hit during his twice-daily trip to the bus stop, a 20-minute walk from his house. His niece had been struck by a sports utility vehicle the year before, and had spent nearly a month in the hospital recovering from a severe concussion. To the extent that White Horse and Black Horse Pikes offer access to habitation and work, exposure to risk is not a matter of choice. My fieldwork revealed pedestrian activity on the roadways to be limited by neither weather nor age. A field visit to White Horse Pike in the early twilight of a frigid winter afternoon in 2012 revealed a team of four hotel cleaners in uniforms, two of them elderly women, climbing a cement barrier and hurrying across four windswept lanes of high-speed traffic in order to move from one place of part-time employment, a budget motel, to another, an auto dealership.

Importantly, this landscape does not just impose risk on its pedestrian users: It offers constant reminders of their subordination within the system of social categories (consumer/service worker; driver/pedestrian) around which the environment is organized. Occupying the shoulder of a highway is dangerous, but it also communicates, in no uncertain terms, where one stands within a social hierarchy that is produced and reflected by the material configuration of the place. In this case, marginality is literal as well as
metaphorical; material as well as social. An excerpt from my field notes, from late June 2015, illustrates this dimension of social experience in the margins of a high-speed arterial road:

I stood on a patch of dirt on the side of Black Horse Pike that serves as a bus stop. There was no seating available, so my companions, an unemployed bartender and a cook at a nearby fast food restaurant, were sitting on the ground when heavy gray rain clouds rolled in. The bartender was on her way to her grandmother’s house for dinner, and had left her home, a mere 21 miles away, more than two hours earlier. After walking a mile and a half and taking two buses, she still had another 30-minute bus ride ahead.
As large raindrops began to fall in the dust and a peal of thunder suggested worse to come, I retreated several hundred feet away to the overhanging roof of a gas station, along with the six or seven other people at the bus stop. A few minutes later, the sky opened up, and sheets of cold rain kept us pinned under the overhang when the bus arrived. Already 16 minutes late, the bus cruised by the bus stop at what appeared to be at least 30 or 40 miles per hour, as there was nobody there to hail the bus. Two of the people waiting alongside me were brave enough to chase after the bus and received nothing in return but drenched clothing, while a disabled military veteran standing next to me spit a series of colorful invective into the rain. The next bus would not come for nearly 40 minutes. A series of apparently unrelated inconveniences—the lack of shelter, the speed of traffic on the pike, the infrequency of service—had conspired against us, revealing that these inconveniences were, in fact, related after all.

The first half of this article mentioned cases in which the spatial relationships within a given place concretize and signify social hierarchies: the upstairs/downstairs logic of the manor, or the front/back logic of the Jim Crow public bus. On White Horse and Black Horse Pikes, a similar relationship holds between central and marginal spaces. To motorists, this landscape offers centrality and freedom: reasonably direct and safe routes through space, and the ability to choose one’s own schedule. To unemployed bartenders and other low-income residents, it offers peripheral, unsafe spaces, and demands a haphazard, rectilinear slog, interrupted by gaps in the bus schedule and long walks on the sides of highways, all while surrounded by danger, road dust, and noise generated by more affluent users of the space.

As this example illustrates, the programming of White Horse and Black Horse Pikes imposes a social burden that is qualitatively distinct from the costs of spatial inequality. In many cases, minimizing the latter—decreasing the distance to employment opportunities and amenities, for example—explains why low-income residents have come to the suburbs in the first place. But moving through this environment requires that they experience a different type of inequality—one that inheres in the material, symbolic, and institutional contours of place, exacting direct physical and psychological costs. Emplaced inequality is not intentional in this case, nor is it an automatic outgrowth of social inequality. It is a product of a mismatch between the programming of White Horse and Black Horse Pikes, which makes a set of socioeconomic assumptions—most notably, that users will have access to a private automobile—and the needs of the low-income users of the space. In this way, the case points to the capacity for place itself to impose inequality. As Gieryn (2000) observes, place is, at the very least, a powerful mediator of social life; occasionally, however, it can become more, “an agentic player in the game.” The inequality experienced by low-income residents of Atlantic County’s suburbs is both intrinsic to the place they inhabit and irreducible to their broader social context.

REINFORCEMENT VS. ADAPTATION

The death of an individual pedestrian may be idiosyncratic. In the late 2000s, however, an “epidemic” of fatalities in New Jersey forced pedestrian risk into the public eye. State newspapers ran editorials on the state’s pedestrian safety problem, and pressure mounted on elected officials and government agencies to provide solutions (O’Neill 2009; Rouse 2009b). The analytical vocabulary developed above helps us recognize this moment for what it was, a programmatic conflict—a public debate over the behaviors appropriate to
WHERE INEQUALITY TAKES PLACE

FIG. 7. Symbolic and physical reinforcement on Black Horse Pike.

a place, prompted by a case in which a group (pedestrians, drivers, or both) were understood to be breaking the rules. It also helps us to understand what happened next, pointing toward the political implications of attempts to resolve this conflict. Following the conceptual framework laid out in the first half of this paper, officials faced a choice between adapting and reinforcing local programs, and could do so through material, symbolic, or institutional means. The choices and tradeoffs involved were nontrivial: They reveal how inequality is manifested in everyday planning and design.

One solution undertaken by the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) on roads across the state was the installation of median fences—chain link barriers inserted between the central lanes of a roadway. On Black Horse Pike, between a residential development and a shopping mall, a 6-foot median fence was deployed along with a sign that symbolically reinforced the dominant program, telling would-be pedestrians to “Use the Crosswalk” (see Figure 7). Unlike other material fixes for pedestrian safety problems, median fences can be erected relatively cheaply, and on short notice. The NJDOT guidelines allow for their installation on state roads such as White Horse or Black Horse Pikes without public input, but warn that they are not an optimal solution, and should only be installed where illegal pedestrian crossings are “an ongoing patterned problem,” rather than sporadic in occurrence.

In Monmouth County, a local law enforcement officer explained the logic manifest in the fences to a local newspaper reporter: “If people go by the rules and the laws of the road, right now our roads are very safe for pedestrians” (Burd 2008). By asserting the need to obey the institutional programming of the space—the “laws of the road”—in order to resolve programmatic conflict, the officials offered a discursive translation of the logic that is materially manifest in the fence itself, which prevents fatal accidents by physically preventing pedestrians from crossing. The fence, in other words, materially reinforces the dominant program of the space, asserting the priority that high-speed automobile traffic holds over pedestrian use and offering an intentional symbolic and physical deterrent. To be precise, it converts risk into inconvenience for pedestrians, as the only way of crossing the road now consists of walking 5 or 10 minutes along the shoulder of a divided highway to the nearest intersection.
By constructing median fences, the state transfers the costs of alleviating conflict entirely to pedestrians. They are made safer by this intervention, but their marginalization within the symbolic and the functional terms of the space is only reasserted. The fence reinforces a program (this space is for driving, not for walking), thus prioritizing the needs of one category of user over those of another. In doing so, it perpetuates a local power imbalance that is rooted in social inequality. Lacking wealth or political influence, the pedestrian constituencies of White Horse and Black Horse Pike had little voice in this process—the disempowerment manifest in the fence reflects a deeper lack of influence in local and state politics.

To understand why this matters, it is helpful to consider a pair of comparison cases. In 2009, in Ocean City, New Jersey, just 20 miles to the south of the site of the median described above, a 21-year-old female pedestrian named Casey Feldman, the daughter of a prominent Philadelphia attorney, was killed in a crosswalk. Feldman’s death prompted extensive media coverage and a political campaign mounted by the victim’s family. Where previously drivers were required to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks, a new state law, referred to as “Casey’s Law” by officials, would require that drivers come to a full stop. In March 2010, the legislation was announced in a public ceremony in which members of Feldman’s family appeared alongside state transportation officials (Casey Feldman Foundation 2010). The new law changed the rules that apply at crosswalks across the state, institutionally adapting the programming of many thousands of intersections in favor of pedestrians. But it is notable that it was the high-profile death of a young, white woman from an affluent family that produced this change.

The same year at an intersection in northern New Jersey, a different approach was adopted by state transportation officials. The intersection of Route 46 and Savage Road, in the town of Denville, bears a passing resemblance to areas along White Horse and Black Horse Pike. Route 46 is a six-lane divided highway with no shoulder. A fast food restaurant and a chain steakhouse are situated along one side of the road. Unlike many intersections on the Atlantic County roads, this location already had a stoplight, a designated pedestrian signal, and a striped crosswalk. But the sheer size of the highway and the speed of traffic nevertheless makes crossing dangerous, as pedestrians were required to cross nearly 80 feet of pavement in a relatively short time. Setting aside the physical similarities, the surrounding area offers a sharp socioeconomic contrast to the setting along White Horse and Black Horse Pikes. On one side of Route 46 is Indian Lake, an upper-middle class community composed of 1,200 large suburban homes clustered around a private lakefront club requiring membership. On the opposite side of Route 46 is a large and well-maintained public park.

In 2009, after a sustained lobbying campaign by the Indian Lake community, the NJDOT unveiled a $3.3 million pedestrian overpass that would cross Route 46 at the intersection with Savage Road. The target audience for this modification—its constituency—was the same as that of the median fence erected in the median of Black Horse Pike: pedestrians who would cross the road. But, in contrast, the process was prolonged and intentionally democratic, including public meetings at the Denville Municipal Building where community members were invited to offer input on the design (Denville Township 2009). In the discourse of public officials, the overpass was presented as evidence of a broader governmental commitment to walking and bicycling. Governor Jon Corzine, in a press release, explained the logic manifest in the overpass—the logic of program adaptation: “The Route 46 pedestrian bridge reflects the State of New Jersey’s dedication to
improving pedestrian safety…[it] will encourage residents to walk rather than drive” (NJDOT 2009).

Like Casey’s Law, the Savage Road overpass does not reinforce the apparent behavioral rules of the space—it changes them. The overpass materially adapts the program of the immediate area, redefining the intersection as a space conducive to travel by foot. These comparison cases are instructive because they show alternatives for programmatic repair undertaken in cases where pedestrians possessed a voice in the process. A cheap chain-link fence and an expensive pedestrian overpass respond to a similar need, but have starkly different politics—the objects themselves empower and disempower—and this capacity is brought into relief when the pedestrians on whose behalf they were built differ in socioeconomic status and political representation.

But even more instructive is the fact that pedestrians on the Black Horse and White Horse Pikes continue to be deprioritized by their environment in relation to its other users. Long after elected officials and advocacy groups highlighted the pedestrian safety issues on the two roads, pedestrians continue to die at the rate of four or five per year. Once emplaced, inequality is continuously reenacted, as the material, symbolic, and regulatory stuff of place continues to enable and constrain behavior on an ongoing basis, doling out rewards and punishments, until inequality itself is lessened, or a place is reprogrammed to be more inclusive. Latour (1990) wrote that “technology is society made durable,” and the same can be said of traffic signs and speed limits: Inequality develops an “obduracy” (Hommels 2005), partly by virtue of being designed and regulated into discrete places. In this sense, where thinking in terms of spatial inequality permits us to see how inequality is realized and expanded through space, emplaced inequality shows us a mechanism (though certainly not the only one) by which the lived experience of inequality persists over time, extending through a temporal rather than spatial dimension.

**CONCLUSION: GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM**

In this paper, I have argued for more attentiveness to the “emplaced” aspect of inequality: the capacity for imbalances in the distribution of wealth or power in society to be reflected and reproduced within discrete places. This capacity has often been regarded through an analytical lens that focuses on the capacity to include or exclude, and thus to locally produce or reproduce broader patterns of spatial inequality. To be clear, both social exclusion and spatial inequality are real and consequential; they should not serve as straw men, for this argument or for any other. Resources and opportunity in the United States are powerfully constrained by location. Affluence and deprivation are concentrated in different census tracts, neighborhoods, and cities. These findings are very well supported, and the intention of this paper is not to put them to the torch.

In the case of suburban poverty, for example, a growing body of research shows that lacking an automobile imposes significant costs due to the spatial distribution of job opportunities, services, and amenities (Kneebone and Berube 2013; Murphy in press). Carless suburbanites are confined to place in a way that automobile-owning residents are not. This is an important finding, and points to a significant policy challenge. However, in heterogeneous urban or suburban communities, inequality takes a different form that is also worth studying and understanding, and that requires a different set of analytical tools.
To appreciate how a place reflects or mitigates social inequality, we need to consider the way its material and symbolic contours affect the experiences of local users. This dimension of spatial inequality—smaller in scale, immediate, and direct—does not describe the relationship between spaces, but a quality that is integral to the fabric of place itself.

I suggest that an important step toward understanding emplaced inequality is thinking small. Places do something in the here and now—they shape the moment-by-moment consciousness and the experiences of their users. The key to linking the direct, immediate, microsociological contours of experience in a given place with their broader social structural implications, I have suggested, is the concept of the “program” of social action. I stake no claim to this idea, as it appears in virtually identical form in a variety of literatures, often bearing different names (e.g., “script” or “prescription” [Akrich 1992; Latour 1992] or “affordance” [Costall 1995; Gibson 1975; Norman 1999]). The idea that programs serve to embed social structure in place, however, is something new that seems uniquely useful to urban sociologists interested in how power and inequality are manifested in discrete social settings.

Following up on this argument will bring urban sociologists into a closer dialogue with practitioners and scholars of architecture, design, urban planning, and law: fields concerned with how places are materially, symbolically, and legally constructed and modified. To be clear, this would not be uncharted territory for urban sociologists. It would simply mean renewing a preoccupation with urban form that has led many urban sociologists (by training or by adoption) to produce some of the discipline’s most consequential and powerful work (e.g., Gans 1991; Jacobs 1961; Suttles 1990; Whyte 1980). Nearly two decades have passed since Gieryn (2000) asked rhetorically whether there was “space for place” in sociology. Though his article has been cited thousands of times, much work remains to be done to understand how social forces and processes are manifested, reproduced, and enacted in place. By taking a close look at how material, symbolic, and institutional programs relate to broader social structure, urban sociologists can add depth and leverage to our analysis of place, complementing our traditional strength—describing and explaining the social life of the city—with a fully multifaceted view of the forces that shape human behavior in any given setting.

Notes

1 According to a full-text search of articles archived by SOCIndex.

2 For an excellent example of this micro-local approach in practice, see Chapter 2 in Valverde (2012).

3 Although Duncan’s (1978) work was not a direct inspiration, this “institutional” dimension of place comes through strongly in his work, as well as in the work of other ethnographers who have analyzed environments characterized by a strong “moral order” (Baumgartner 1988).

4 Fregonese and Brand (2009) note, “STS has the potential to appreciate the messy social dynamics that influence the design of public spaces, buildings, street layouts, and cities,” but has only rarely been applied to this task.

5 In this sense, social exclusion can be seen as the local face of spatial inequality, the two concepts complementing one another within an analytical perspective attuned to the way social structure is reflected and reproduced in space.

6 Historical examples that are more recent and closer to home are easy to find, particularly in pre-Civil Rights era settings in which inequality was reinforced materially, symbolically, and institutionally: separate spaces for
black and white users; signs designating these spaces for “White” and “Colored” users; and legal and informal sanctions reinforcing segregation as a behavioral norm. While a narrow reading of these mechanisms might imply that they excluded blacks from privileged white spaces, it seems equally apt to suggest that they also played a more direct role, marginalizing and degrading blacks within the symbolic and material context of any shared place.

Social context imbues built space with meaning and consequence. In the controversial case of the overpasses in the Long Island parkway system, which, according to Winner (1980), were designed low by Robert Moses in order to exclude working class residents from the parks and leafy suburbs of Long Island (although, see Joerges 1999), any exclusionary effect of low overpasses would have been necessarily indirect, relying upon the socioeconomic profile of the typical bus rider in comparison with that of the typical driver or passenger in a privately owned automobile. The technology does not exist, nor will it ever, to make an overpass inherently racist or classist, net of these considerations.

For example, the size of a stop sign and the text that it displays make a set of inferences about the speed that motorists will be traveling, at which times of day, and with which kinds of linguistic capacities and cultural experiences.

This is not meant to be flippant—it is a reference to Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” sculpture, an everyday urinal that acquired the status of high conceptual art.

The most obvious examples of the limitations of programs are places that accommodate densely symbolic activity or that are entirely devoted to the expression or reception of meaning: A movie theater is not helpfully described as a place where people sit facing the same direction; nor is the Wailing Wall a structure to be leaned against, or the Blarney Stone a rock that people kiss. See Borer (2006) for a comprehensive typology of how places convey or capture meaning.

To be clear, in many urban settings, informal rather than formal norms do much of the heavy lifting. The transit authority that presides over the New York subway system imposes a code of passenger conduct, enforceable by its workers and city police officers, but it does not instruct passengers to limit eye contact with strangers, or to be discreet in their over-the-shoulder reading. I deemphasize these informal programs here simply because they are less directly under the control of elected officials, planners, etc.

These comparative advantages typically guide the choice of deployment. Designing a parking spot that only exists at certain times of day would be preposterously expensive and difficult, while it only requires a steel rod, a small flat sheet of pressed aluminum and a small amount of paint to indicate that no parking is permitted between 9:30 am and 11 am.

This issue is far from new. Under Mayor Rudolf Giuliani, a crackdown on sleeping in public encouraged people with no choice in the matter to learn the skill of sleeping while sitting or standing to avoid being woken up and ticketed or arrested (Lefer 1999).

According to Cresswell (1996) such moments create “heretical geographies,” as the taken for granted meanings of urban space are called into question, highlighting the respects in which the configuration of urban space defines “what is and what is not ‘the right thing to do.’”

This empirical exercise is increasingly required in the case of large scale development projects that require an environmental impact review, but is only very rarely demanded of property owners or planners executing small-scale interventions in built space.

Decennial Census and American Community Survey data show that roughly a 10-percentage point increase in county poverty rates among working age adults took place between 1990 and 2015.

In the tracts along White Horse and Black Horse Pikes, poverty rates among working-age adults have typically risen from 2 to 5 percent in 1990 to more than 15 percent in 2015, according to Decennial Census and ACS data.
REFERENCES


