



CONNECTING COMMUTERS: ALEJANDRO CARTAGENA'S SUBURBIA IN A TORONTO SUBWAY STATION

BY YOLI (YOANNA) TERZIYSKA

Contacting Toronto: Expanding Cities is a public installation on view as part of this year's CONTACT Photography Festival in Toronto and is located on the platforms and bus bays of Warden subway station—a busy stop connecting Toronto's downtown to the city's suburbs. It is a site that sees a large volume of daily commuters, who either work or study in the center, making it a particularly relevant location for showcasing Alejandro Cartagena's photographs from his series *Carpoolers* (2011-2012) and *Suburbia Mexicana* (2006-2010). Cartagena will display his images for the duration of the festival, replacing the subway posters that typically advertise local services.



Carpoolers by Alejandro Cartagena in Toronto's Warden Subway Station, Contacting Toronto, 2015

Carpoolers shows the daily commute of landscapers and construction workers in Monterrey, a city in northeastern Mexico, where the artist currently resides. Men are seen huddled closely in the back of pickup trucks, traveling to wealthy suburbs to build the fast-growing complexes there. The workers are portrayed in the claustrophobic spaces from a birds-eye point of view, shown among a clutter of tools and paraphernalia.



Carpoolers by Alejandro Cartagena in Toronto's Warden Subway Station, Contacting Toronto, 2015



Other photographs included in the installation are taken from Cartagena's series *Suburbia Mexicana*. They present the consequences of the development of Monterrey's poorer suburbs—we see pictures of uniform homes sprawling into the horizon; lined like soldiers, each house a copy of its neighbor; juxtaposed with these images are portraits of their residents, the human faces of the development. Cartagena is an archivist of this growing suburbia—documenting the effects of the massive construction of suburban complexes on people's lives, conveying what is a reality for many in contemporary Mexico, but without offering a comment or critique: *"I don't want to have somebody tell me what these realities are, I just want to document what they are"*, Cartagena told me.



Suburbia Mexicana by Alejandro Cartagena in Toronto's Warden Subway Station, Contacting Toronto, 2015



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Yet the realities he captures are both promising and insidious. Extensive construction of suburban housing started approximately fifteen years ago when PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*, or National Action Party), a center-right party, displaced the long-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In a short time, developers constructed thousands of new homes. The fast growth proved to be a hasty and poorly thought-out decision. Cartagena points to several problems that accompanied the suburban sprawl. Firstly, the inadequate public transportation available to suburban dwellers, which led in part to the evolution of a heavily polluting car culture: today, Monterrey is the most polluted city in North America. Another issue with the poorly planned mass development was the absence of infrastructures necessary to support and sustain community life (parks, public squares, community centers). These problems alone resulted in the emergence of a generation who lack a sense of community and are defined by going to and from work.



Suburbia Mexicana by Alejandro Cartagena in Toronto's Warden Subway Station, Contacting Toronto, 2015

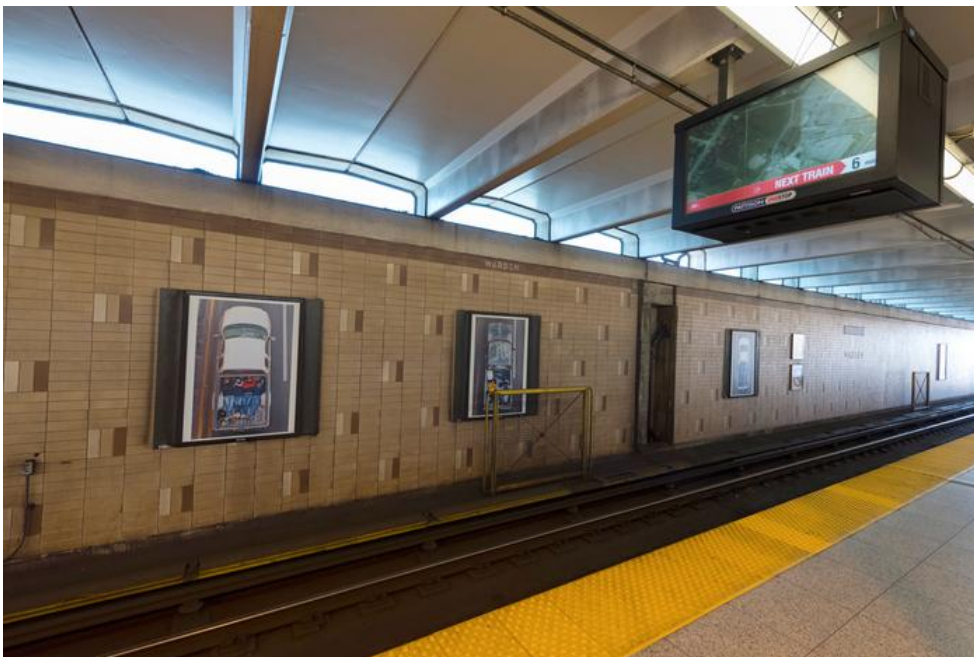


Suburbia Mexicana by Alejandro Cartagena in Toronto's Warden Subway Station, Contacting Toronto, 2015

But the picture is not completely negative—there are some residents who are content with their new lifestyles. Buying a home in suburbia carries kudos, one associated with success and independence—the Mexican version of the American dream. Purchasing a house is an accomplishment: “*people are still in love with home ownership,*” comments Cartagena. Though there is a sense of cynicism in the developers’ exploitation of that dream, with their enticing slogan “*progress is home ownership*”. The realities of congested and expensive city living in Mexico has made buying a home in the suburbs attractive but the attempt to copy and paste the American module without supplying community infrastructure has resulted in the “*subtle construction of a generation of voiceless people*” according to Cartagena.

The subtle social effects of this kind of construction are not worthy of world media attention when urgent social issues such as the drug war, poverty and corruption in contemporary Mexico prevail, often sensationalised by the global press. Cartagena’s images do not participate in this spectacle. Rather, they aim to capture the slow development and outcome of new suburban complexes and the way in which their inhabitants react to these civic changes. His images are as subtle as the implications of suburbia’s rapid growth—they are intimate and humane, unobtrusive evidence of social transition.

The installation’s location in Toronto resonates profoundly with their host environment, positioned on the border between the city and its suburbs. Commuting viewers experience the echo of suburbia: the cookie-cutter homes, solitude, the promise of self-made success and security, long and often uncomfortable commutes to and from home. Cartagena’s images portray a reality—though vastly different to Toronto’s version of suburbia—that connects through emotional experience to the lives of the growing number of middle-class citizens all over the world, a document that shows both the pride and the humdrum monotony of suburban life, a place of aspiration, comfort and docile stability.



Contacting Toronto: Expanding Cities in Toronto’s Warden Subway Station, *Contacting Toronto*, 2015. Photo: Jake Fry

The parallel Toronto suburbs are generally populated with similar peoples, families pursuing a quiet life, and new immigrant populations who cannot afford the city. Toronto’s newcomers, contributing to a steadily growing suburbia, come here seeking opportunities for a better life. My family and I immigrated to Canada for the same reason, spending our first years in suburbia; the daily experience of a new immigrant to Canada living in its suburbs is akin to the images seen in Cartagena’s photos of new working-class citizens: long commutes to arrive at a blue-collar job, pride in home-ownership as representative of social accomplishment, sprawling landscapes colonized by identical homes, and the promise of self-made success. Cartagena’s images will be seen at the Warden Station Subway by the people who inhabit these suburban spaces, highlighting a salient parallel between two cities and the way in which they experience life at the city’s fringes. Yet somehow the connection we feel with the photographs’ subject matter also destabilizes us: is this ‘living the dream’?

—Yoli Terziyska

Contacting Toronto: Expanding Cities is a CONTACT Public Installation. Curated by Sharon Switzer. Co-produced by PATTISON Onestop and Art for Commuters. Artist represented by Toronto's Circuit Gallery.

(Image at the top: Contacting Toronto: Expanding Cities in Toronto's Warden Subway Station, Contacting Toronto, 2015. Photo: Jake Fry.)

Posted by Yoli (Yoanna) Terziyska on 5/5/15

Tags: contact, Toronto, circuit gallery, suburbs, Mexico, Alejandro Cartagena, photography

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