

SONS OF SUBURBIA OPT FOR INTOWN

By [JANET FRANKSTON](#)

They grew up in metro Atlanta suburbs, met at Georgia Tech and now live in the city, never to return, they say, to life outside the Perimeter.

Their homes are small, but there's more to do within walking or bicycling distance, more diversity and more fun.

This is the story of four 20- and 30-something guys who've bought houses within two blocks of one another in Grant Park and are committed to the 'hood.

Cam Caldwell, Mark Kaasa, Dan Kopp and John Sitton are part of a growing trend of young professionals who have rejected the suburban lifestyle they were raised in. Their migration from the 'burbs is an unscientific glimpse of the growing shift back toward urban life in metro Atlanta. It's the very lifestyle their parents' generation moved away from, typically in search of a big back yard, a lower crime rate and better schools.

Over the last several years, the city of Atlanta has gained population after decades of suburban flight. Last year, about 7,200 people moved into the city, according to estimates from the Atlanta Regional Commission.

But as the Georgia Tech guys one day start their own families, will they stay in the city? They say yes.

All but one lived elsewhere --- New York, Paris, Boston, Philadelphia, Portland, Ore. --- before settling in the booming area east of downtown Atlanta. They bought their houses last year in a tree-lined neighborhood of bungalows painted in electric blues, yellows and sea greens, with front porches and decks.

Interacting with others

Caldwell's two-bedroom house, on Killian Street, is painted lavender. Inside, each room is a different color. From his deck facing Waldo Street, he can see the back yards of four neighbors.

"This is tiny, but it's all I need," says Caldwell, 29, who sells software for Emdeon, the company formerly known as WebMD. He works on his laptop computer from an 85-year-old house that is drenched in sunlight.

Caldwell and his girlfriend, Claire Davis, were sold on many of the features: high ceilings and hardwood floors, four fireplaces and a cast-iron pedestal bathtub.

Caldwell grew up in east Cobb County, in a four-bedroom house with twice the space, a big yard and a subdivision recreation club with a swimming pool and tennis courts. There was even a community lake with snapping turtles.

"I didn't need a half-acre," he says. "I'd rather have a public space to walk the dog, throw the Frisbee."

But he says he understands the need for privacy, too. "Some people wouldn't like our back yard."

Around the corner a block north is Rosalia Street, where Kopp and his wife, Alyssa, live. Sitton is two doors down, where he lives with his fiancée, Kristie, whom he'll marry Saturday.

An architecture major, Sitton was the first of the four friends to explore various Atlanta neighborhoods. He refurbished houses as a student and eventually lived in Cabbagetown and Castleberry Hill before moving to Grant Park.

The neighborhoods are more compact than where Sitton grew up in north DeKalb County, in two houses near Perimeter Mall. Intown, the streets are places to interact with neighbors and walkers, rather than drivers.

"Our houses are so close to the street," says Sitton, 29. "Being that close, you're forced to acknowledge people on the street. I say 'forced' in a good way. Everyone looks out for each other."

Escaping 'strip mall hell'

Kopp, 31, was the first to move into Grant Park. He was raised in Stone Mountain.

"I remember coming intown for prom and remembering how cool it was," he says, standing in Caldwell's yellow kitchen as the group and some of their parents gathered for a recent Saturday night barbecue.

He wanted to live in an area with things to do nearby and with people who may look different from him. "I wanted more diversity, more culture, more history," explains Kopp, who drives to Norcross for his job as an analyst with Accenture.

He and his wife say they're a few years away from having children. "I would rather raise my kids in diversity land than vanilla," says Alyssa Kopp, 28, while cutting vegetables for salsa.

Diversity is also a draw for Kaasa, 29, the bachelor of the group. He lives a block south of Caldwell on Berne Street.

Like Sitton and Kopp, Kaasa also commutes to a job in the suburbs. He works as a buyer at Home Depot's corporate headquarters in the Vinings area, about 10 miles from where he grew up near Marietta.

"It was strip mall hell out there," he says. "Everyone was pretty much exactly the same."

He says he sought a walking neighborhood, and the house just happened to be two blocks from the Koppes. Kaasa's sister lives nearby in Candler Park, where she is raising three children, with another on the way.

Their parents, Rosemary and John Kaasa, say they don't mind that neither child chose their suburban lifestyle. "My grandson walks to school," Rosemary Kaasa says at Caldwell's barbecue.

Like the Kaasas, Caldwell's parents say they like visiting Grant Park but wouldn't trade their house in Cobb County for the intown lifestyle.

Ronnie Caldwell, who retired last year as executive vice president with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, grew up between Austell and Powder Springs, in a mill village called Clarkdale.

Cam Caldwell says he sought out the kind of neighborhood his father grew up in --- walking to work, to church, to the baseball field.

The Caldwell's other son, Clay, still lives with them. He's looking to buy his own house, but he wants to stay in the suburbs. "I'm not coming down here," declares Clay, 25, while eating a hamburger on his brother's deck.

He says he likes the Cobb area where he grew up. But the No. 1 reason is that he wants to raise a family there. "I want to raise my children exactly how I was," Clay Caldwell says. "There are good schools out there. I'm comfortable there."

Cam Caldwell says his brother simply has a different perspective on the suburbs.

"It just doesn't fit my lifestyle," he says. "I ride my bike all the time. You can't do that in east Cobb. . . . For my birthday this last May, we did a bike pub crawl. You'd be traveling a long way [in the suburbs], and you'd probably get hit."

He says he's pretty sure he'll never go back.

"Nothing is ever 100 percent, but I'd say 99.5 percent."