

We Like It Here, Why Should We Leave? Displacement and Affordability in Colorado

By: David King

Panel I: Development, Affordability, and Dislocation in Colorado Cities



This essay is a critical reflection on the panel discussion conducted by the Community Engagement Design and Research Center (CEDaR), on October 25, 2019, as part of the conference titled *Squeezed out: Challenges of diversity and affordability in Colorado communities*. The participants were Elizabeth Garner of the Colorado Department of Local Affairs, Irene Aguilar of the City of Denver, Matilde Garcia of Mujeres Emprendedoras Cooperative, and Korkut Onaran of Pel Ona Architects and Urbanists.

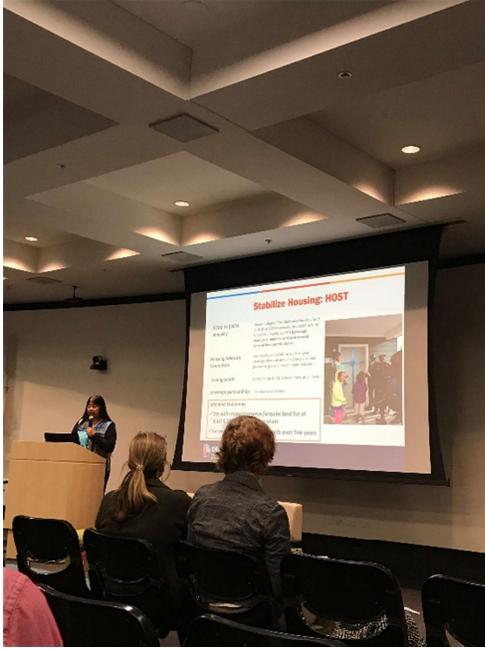
One of the greatest issues facing the state Colorado both in the immediate and long-term future is housing affordability. Dislocation is a repercussion of the lack of affordability that the state has continued to struggle with. Encompassing both affordability and dislocation is the larger topic of development. In a state like Colorado, where segments of the state are experiencing exponential growth and a booming economy, there is a growing feeling that significant portion of the population that is beginning to feel pushed out of the places that they have lived for years. Interestingly, it is not just low-income people who are feeling that squeeze.

Cities like Boulder are becoming playgrounds for the wealthy, with middle income residents having fewer opportunities to live in the city. The first panel at the *Squeezed Out* conference addressed the causes and implications of affordability, dislocation, and development. Each panelist used their background and knowledge to bring a unique perspective to the questions at hand. The first panelist, Elizabeth Garner of the Department of Local Affairs, focused on the demographic changes that can be expected in the coming years and decades. The department is forecasting continued growth in Colorado, with an increase of 2.4 million people by the year 2030. Growth will continue to occur in Colorado but at a slower pace. Ms. Garner emphasized that it is important to make the connection that people equal jobs. As many Colorado residents



move towards retirement, it is imperative that the state attracts young, educated people to the state.

The second presenter was Irene Aguilar with the City and County of Denver. Ms. Aguilar



continued the discussion around growth in the state, specifically focusing on Denver, and not simply population growth, but economic as well. She reported that in the time period between 2000 and 2017, there has been a 66% increase in household income in the city of Denver. There has also been an increase in the millennial population of Denver, which has become one of the biggest boomtowns in the United States. Ms. Aguilar focused on the areas of Denver that are vulnerable to gentrification, which is much of the western half of the city. Residents in these neighborhoods are increasingly feeling the squeeze when it comes to affordable housing and improving their communities. Ms. Aguilar identified the root cause of these problems as the income inequality gap that is seen today. She did not simply state the problem. “The best way to fix it (income inequality) is through public policy,” she declared. Ms. Aguilar proceeded to go through a number of projects that her team, the Neighborhood Equity and Stabilization Team

(NEST), have worked on in Denver to try to address the problems of income inequality and affordability in neighborhoods throughout the city. These strategies included building more affordable housing while increasing the developer opt out fee, increasing access to opportunity through policies like starting and minimum wages and partnering with anchor institutions within the community, and working in minority communities to build wealth and economic empowerment. Ms. Aguilar argued that by strengthening the existing communities, they will be better prepared to encounter and answer problems of affordability and displacement.

The third speaker was Matilde Garcia of Mujeres Emprendedoras Cooperative. A resident of the Westwood neighborhood in Denver, Ms. Garcia spoke of the community organization that she helped build that worked for the benefit of current neighborhood residents. In a powerful presentation, Ms. Garcia described the effect that increased investment had on the neighborhood, as it became visible to the rest of the city for the first time and began to attract new residents. This led to the displacement of some residents, as new development did not contain the affordable rental units that were promised. There significant barriers preventing current residents from remaining in the community, including a lack of knowledge about regulations, language barriers, lack of savings, and immigration status. Members of the community, however, decided to work to empower the community, creating the Mujeres Emprendedoras Cooperative, a community-led organization that helps residents better understand rent policies and regulations and renter’s rights, as well as offering educational classes for community members. Ms. Garcia’s talk centered around one of the main questions at hand. She asked, “This is the neighborhood we wanted to build, why should we have to move?”

The final speaker was Korkut Onaran of Pel-Ona Architects. Dr. Onaran told a personal anecdote of displacement from Boulder, as he and his wife were squeezed out of their condo by a lack of owner-occupied units, which led to a deteriorating living situation. The housing prices in Boulder forced them to look elsewhere, becoming one of the 60,000 people who commute to Boulder on a daily basis. With that displacement come environmental and social problems, as fewer people are working the same area where they live. It is also important to note that while affordability and displacement is a social justice issue for low-income communities, they can happen to anyone.

There was a topic that was missing for much of the conversation that one could argue should be at the center of a discussion around affordability and displacement. In her presentation, Ms. Garner noted that rural towns and counties were losing people to the Front Range corridor and were not benefitting from any migration. What would it look like to focus on those places as potential areas to attract new residents that could live and work in the community? Are there economic incentives that could be put into place to encourage responsible growths in small towns? It would seem to be cause for concern if the state continues to welcome new residents, while only encouraging them to live within the limited area of the Front Range. Not only would there be benefit for small towns, it would also allow for more neighborhoods in places like Denver and Boulder to improve while maintaining their unique identity and character and preventing residents from suffering the fate of being squeezed out. Additionally, a suburban voice was missing, and could have provided a perspective on how suburban neighborhoods are undergoing shifts as urban populations are grappling with displacement.

Throughout the panel, each presenter provided a thought-provoking look into questions of affordability and dislocation in Colorado, specifically the metro areas of Boulder and Denver. These issues are complex and multi-layered. It was important to hear the presentation on demographics in Colorado first, as it provided a foundation for the other presentations. There is an instinctual feel that Colorado's population is growing but having evidence to support that conclusion is essential to producing a fruitful conversation around growth. In a state where growth is often viewed as an unquestioned negative by many communities, presentations like Ms. Garner's that show that growth is a necessity for Colorado to remain competitive are of enormous importance. The presentations by Ms. Aguilar and Ms. Garcia provided the framework for how a city like Denver and neighborhoods like Westwood can potentially work to improve affordability and resist displacement. While the conversation could have benefitted from the addition of a small town or suburban perspective, the panelists provided a look into the demographic realities that drive affordability and displacement, coupled with examples of how cities and neighborhoods can deal with those issues.