

BUILDING TOGETHER

by Bradyn S. Nicholson

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



This essay is a critical reflection on the panel discussion 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, State Demographer, Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA); Irene Aguilar, Director, Denver’s Neighborhood Equity and Stabilization Team (NEST) and former Colorado State Senator; Matilde Garcia, Manager, Mujeres Emprendedoras Cooperative; and Korkut Onaran, Principal, Pel Ona Architects and Urbanists. The panel discussed demographic and economic changes and challenges of affordability and displacement throughout Colorado.

The conference kicked off with an inspiring and comprehensive opening introduction from Katherine Correll, Executive Director of Downtown Colorado, Inc. During Katherine’s introduction, her question “How do we stop squeezing people out and we start building together?” immediately captured the why and purpose of the conference. This question remained in the back of my mind while consuming information throughout the remainder of the panel discussion.

Our society is changing and shifting. Overall, the US population is still continuing to grow, but at a slower rate. And although there has been a large boom in population and younger generations are continuing to flock to the area, Colorado’s population is also growing more slowly. Most of the growth in Colorado is located along the Front Range while 25 percent of counties throughout Colorado are losing population, particularly in rural areas. Those migrating into Colorado are younger, lower-income, and have higher educational attainment as compared to the Colorado average.

There is also a high correlation between job growth and net migration - more jobs allows for more people to migrate into Colorado. As Elizabeth Garner stated during her presentation, “A job is a person, and a housing unit is where that job sleeps” and “People create jobs just by being here.” Among industries in Colorado, health-care is the fastest growing. This finding comes as no

surprise due to the fact that our population continues to age and advancements in our society continue to expand our ability to accommodate longer life spans. Between the years 2010 to 2030, there will be 1 million people aging out of the labor force. This will create many jobs and place more demand on the need for additional workers. However, there are fewer people projected to enter the labor force moving into the future, largely due to low birth rates. With all of this considered, it is apparent that there is a need to balance jobs, housing, and population.

The most popular city in Colorado for millennials is the Mile High City - Denver. Here, housing affordability is at its most vulnerable, as the rise in rent prices is most intensive. There has been a significant increase (66%) in median household income in Denver between the years 2000 to 2017 which has also largely contributed to this vulnerability. The increase in housing demand has led to continuous rise in housing prices. The neighborhoods most at risk to price increases align with historical redlining maps created after the Great Depression. These racist and discriminatory practices were intentional and continue to shape housing policy today. These areas consist of high populations of people of color and people of low-income. Today, gentrification in these communities is becoming an all too common trend.



Communities of color and communities of low-income bare a disproportionate impact of unaffordable housing and economic and employment challenges. Irene states that the main factor is the limited wealth that exists and has existed for decades among these populations. Irene argues that the root cause of these effects is income inequality from decades of institutional racism.

Neighborhoods most vulnerable to gentrification are not alone in their desire to make improvements to their own neighborhoods and transform their community's visions into realities. Unfortunately, when these neighborhoods begin to implement improvements within their communities, people notice. Developers become more interested in investing in these areas and these new investments drive out long-term residents from their neighborhoods and communities. Matilde shared a personal journey as a resident in Westwood. Matilde stated that her neighborhood in Westwood felt very similar to Mexico just 15 years ago. More recently, the community has been experiencing being "squeezed out". New development coming into Westwood made promises to residents that development efforts would provide for affordable housing. As these promises have continued to be broken, the Hispanic population in Westwood

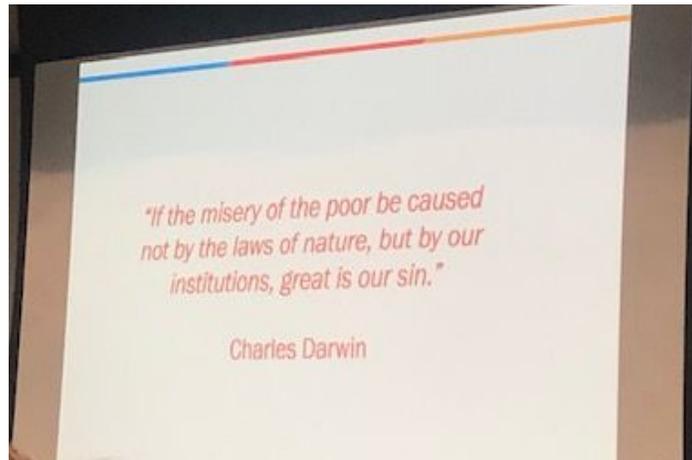
has since continued to decrease, from 90 percent to today, between 60 to 70 percent. According to Matilde, residents in Westwood are most vulnerable to displacement due to a lack of knowledge surrounding regulations, language barriers, lack of savings to overcome sudden changes, and lack of status because of immigration. A quote stated by Matilde that really stuck with me: “How do you have enough money to live where you want to live?”

The Boulder community experiences these pressures as well. In Boulder, CO, approximately 60,000 move in and out of the city each day to access jobs, services, and activities. Korkut Onaran shared a personal experience with being priced out of a condo while living in Boulder. At the time of purchasing a condo, Korkut stated that more than half of the places were owner-occupied. Yet once they had to move out of their home after prices got so high, there was only one place remained that was owner-occupied.

Demographic changes across the US and Colorado are creating economic and affordability challenges for Coloradans across the state. So how do we “... stop squeezing people out and we start building together?” A variety of strategies to address these issues ranging from community to policy, from local to regional and even statewide, were mentioned throughout the panel discussion that deserve recognition. Elizabeth Garner described the need for dramatic change in public policy, a systems-level approach for managing population growth, housing, and jobs. She also stated how jobs could be shifted away from the Front Range to disperse growth more evenly across the state of Colorado as a whole. Irene pushed for providing local jobs to local people. The National Western Center redevelopment project could provide jobs for residents living in the Globeville-Elyria Swansea neighborhoods to reduce the probability of long time residents becoming displaced and allowing them to remain in their community. Matilde Garcia expressed a more community focused, grass-roots approach. At the neighborhood-level, community driven and community led strategies including rent control policies and providing services to assist community members to better understand regulations and their rights can also reduce threats of gentrification. Lastly, Korkut wrapped up the panel with a more personal and regional recommendation. As Korkut stated, “Every time we demand things, it has an affect regionally and affects all of us.”

As a result of this panel discussion, a few key take-aways are clear. It is certainly clear that housing, population, and jobs are interconnected. It is also clear there is not just one, simple strategy to shift our societies from ones that push others out, to ones that continue to build community through building together. Implementing strategies that target multiple-levels in our societies focusing across the individual or community level to the policy and systems level can help us move the needle on maintaining affordability and reducing displacement here in Colorado. Additionally, we must recognize the decades of institutional racism that have existed and still exist in our societies. Our systems must be set up to provide opportunities for all

Coloradans to thrive, including obtaining affordable housing and allowing people to remain or live in the communities they want to live in. As planners, we have a role in working with communities to begin understanding their needs and their vision for the future, and transforming these visions into realities. Lastly, working together across disciplines will result in a more effective and successful strategy to achieve building together.



Important note: The information presented here is more of a personal narrative based on the information presented on this panel. This information does not reflect and should not be taken as a reflection of the communities or residents living throughout Colorado.