

Squeezed out:
Challenges of diversity and affordability
in Colorado communities
By Alex Hemmer



Panel III - Perspectives on Affordability:
Lessons Learned from Practice

Inspiring Action on Affordability in Housing

This essay is a critical reflection on the panel discussion conducted by Korkut Onaran, on October 25, 2019, as part of the conference titled Squeezed out: Challenges of diversity and affordability in Colorado communities. The participants were Tony Chacon, Fernando Pagés Ruiz, and Peter Swift.

The panel, led by three speakers with different professional experiences, explored the various dimensions of affordability and displacement including affordable housing, transportation, resident services, and ethnic challenges.

The first speaker was Tony Chacon, a proactive planner focused on where affordable housing and displacement affect the most disadvantaged parts of a community and how to approach it. He brought up the suite of tools that Longmont has put in place to address housing affordability. They have an inclusionary housing ordinance, regulatory incentives for density allowances. They've reduced parking requirements, allowed ADUs, and have set up an affordable housing fund. Despite these actions, he doesn't see government intervention as the sole solution.

One of the places Chacon sees displacement coming from is in the cycle of affordability. "There's been displacement for years, where one population, because of the affordability of a neighborhood, moves in and then is displacing another. In recent years, the millennials have found affordable housing in close proximity to downtown, where they want to be, and so that has contributed." He sees this as part of a cycle where affordability isn't constant across a city, and neither is accessibility to services and amenities. "Affordability in itself plus accessibility, has led to some of this inner city migration."

Chacon acknowledged that planners need to better prepare for the future. Speaking about missed opportunities to address housing affordability during the last recession, "keep that in mind, because you should always be looking into the future, thinking about the cycles, and preparing for them so you can take advantage of those opportunities." He continued, "it is our job as planners to look to the future, and come up with some ideas of what's going to be, and how we can meet those goals. We need to understand and address the issue in a more holistic and broader regional context. We tend to look at our communities in isolation."

Chacon ended with a call to action, that in a metro area there is a much broader dynamic at play, and it requires planners and policymakers to do a better job of working collectively.

Fernando Pagés Ruiz's section of the panel was focused on building for the multicultural community. He detailed his own experiences as a child on his first trip to the United States and how his Aunt's apartment was so culturally different from his own in Argentina that it was frightening. He kept that experience in mind when he later became an affordable housing developer in Lincoln, NE where thousands of refugees from around the world were being settled. He realized that people weren't buying his houses because there were cultural architecture differences that were being overlooked. Some families wanted closed kitchens or even outdoor kitchens. Other families preferred private outdoor patios on top of the garage over a large backyard. Muslim families wanted different arrangements in the layouts of the bathrooms to accommodate washing for prayer. Southeast Asian families preferred roof lines parallel to the street, rather than a gable end on the front of the house. Integrating all these architectural components into his homes added up to providing a diversity of housing types and options that were more attractive to more families.

"Think of housing as a cultural expression like food and clothing. Food in particular is still ethnic and prized, but architecture is ethnic too."

In the end, Ruiz was able to successfully find a niche in the affordable housing market for those refugees. By creating a variety of housing options at an inexpensive cost, his product was more attractive to those different communities. He created a project called Liberty Village. "We ended up having 24 homes with 10 nationalities living in those 24 homes. When we inaugurated the project we had a big party, and we installed in every house a US flag and a flag of the home country. We had a parade all around in the back alley. All the garages were open and we had ethnic food, and all the different communities came, the Buddhist temple, the Islamic Center. We had a DJ, everybody donated their CDs and there was bad music from all over the world. And we had a soccer game."

The final speaker was Peter Swift. His section began with the story of urban highway building as a tool of urban renewal and slum clearance. Highways were sliced through poor neighborhoods where communities lacked the political voice to prevent them. High volume arterials were built over main streets, becoming inaccessible to people and dividing neighborhoods. Then and now traffic impact analysis characteristically overestimate the amount of future traffic capacity a road needs. The prescribed solution if it gets congested is to build build more lanes.

"Fighting traffic congestion by adding lanes is like fighting obesity by loosening your belt."

Swift brought up several cases where highways were removed or failed, and the result wasn't chaos but rather the traffic just disappeared. "Robert Moses saw this in 1930 when a bridge collapsed in west Manhattan, and he sent his minions out to find out where the traffic went, they never found it." The same occurred in San Francisco after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake which damaged several urban highways, particularly the Embarcadero, which were then turned into surface boulevards. In Seoul, South Korea a highway that carried 160,000 cars a day was

removed and a river was daylighted, resulting in a fantastic recreational setting, “where did the traffic go?”

“We begin to view thoroughfares as public space, just like places squares, and parks“

In Lancaster, CA Swift worked on a main street project. Describing the original road, “this is your typical car sewer, five lanes of asphalt, 20,000 vehicles a day, a four lane facility begins with about 20,000 vehicles, so it was kind of low volume.” There was a growing arts and crafts community beginning in the town. “So I thought to myself during the threat, why don't we do this, why don't we just look at this as a public space?” They put together a plan to remove the three middle lanes, put in pavers, lighting, trees, and provide micro-loans for architectural improvements along the thoroughfare. “The mayor of Lancaster loved the idea so much that she put money into the budget, allocated it, got it designed, and built in a year and a half after the final map master plan was done. Guess what happened? The city estimated that the project has resulted in \$273 million in economic output, \$130 million in private investments, and there are 72 new stores. There's a museum. There are more festivals and crafts activities going on. 30,000 people showed up to a festival. It also was the winner of the 2012 APA Smart Growth award for overall excellence.” The status quo of car centric development along high volume arterials destroys and divides communities, while radically rethinking the right-of-way as a public space can revitalize and bring people together.

“Think outside the box. Think of public space. Don't think of an arterial street.”

Housing affordability and the displacement it causes is a wicked problem, a problem whose complexity means that it has no single solution. Instead of seeking the total elimination of such a problem, we need to realize that further action will always be needed. Addressing affordability requires us to approach it from multiple angles, with novel ideas. I thought all three of the speakers in this panel brought genuine and creative recommendations from their personal experiences, that should stand as inspirations.