

SUBURBAN PLANNING POLITICS:
HOW URBAN DESIGN AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE CAN BUILD A HEALTHY FUTURE
IN THE DENVER METRO SUBURBS

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation investigates the politics of health in relation to the built environment and the suburban development processes in the Denver Metropolitan Area (DMA). Focusing on suburban communities such as Arvada, Broomfield, and Centennial, this study explores how urban planning processes reflect individual, group, and community values around public health, sustainability, and growth. By examining these understudied suburban areas, the research offers a new perspective on how smaller urban environments shape public health outcomes through planning and development practices. This study bridges the gap between bureaucratic planning procedures and the long-term public health effects that emerge from these processes. It identifies how urban planning decisions influence the social experience of place and residents' well-being, often in ways not directly addressed by policymakers. Through a mixed-methods urban ethnographic approach, the research incorporates interviews with local leaders, visual sociological methods, content analysis of primary documents such as comprehensive plans, and thematic review of public hearings on local development projects. This approach captures the complexities of suburban development politics and its relationship to public health. The research highlights several key findings. First, city comprehensive plans in the DMA demonstrate limited integration of public health considerations, with plans often over-emphasizing car-centric designs while promoting integrated land-use strategies that encourage walkability, bikeability, and public transit use. Second, the results reveal a tension between the region's goal of environmental stewardship and local development, which suburban cities attempt to balance

while managing fiscal sustainability concerns. Additionally, the current planning practices have significant procedural issues with entrenched social inequalities that ultimately continue a status quo of restricting flexibility in land-use, reinforcing historical patterns of unequal access to urban resources such as parks, healthy food stores, and affordable housing and transportation. Planning commissions, composed of residents with varying levels of expertise, play a pivotal role in mediating between developers, professional planners, policymakers, and community members. However, they often face limitations stemming from outdated zoning or building codes and procedural constraints, which hinder their ability to significantly influence healthier development patterns. The dissertation identifies the need for improved public engagement strategies, including more deliberative planning commission hearings and simplified evaluation criteria for proposed developments. To promote healthier suburban environments in the DMA, this research points towards several different research and policy directions. Prioritizing environmental stewardship to slow unsustainable growth, refining comprehensive plans and zoning laws to enable mixed-use development, and expanding the sociological lens beyond major urban areas are a few key steps. Additionally, fostering citizen-driven, localized planning with clear evaluation metrics can strengthen public participation and ensure that diverse community needs are being addressed. This dissertation contributes to the urban sociology scholarship by showcasing the political and social dynamics that shape suburban development. By focusing on smaller cities, it challenges traditional urban sociological theories that have primarily studied major metropolitan areas and urban cores, offering practical insights for fostering healthier, more equitable suburban communities.

DEDICATION

To my family, and especially my mother, whose unwavering encouragement and steadfast support have carried me through every challenge along the way.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health has become important in public consciousness and city politics. Community health has concomitantly received renewed attention in urban development and the politics of community planning, zoning, and design (Wittenberg 2020, Constable 2020). Due to the pandemic, cities across the country had an opportunity to experience new forms of land use, such as the small “parklets” that took over city parking spaces when fewer cars were out on the streets or the expanded outdoor dining options that many cities implemented to keep restaurants afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pantic 2021). Urban public health systems and sanitation were tested and (nearly) broken in many ways as we sought new ways to live while protecting ourselves from an unknown virus. The lessons learned from the pandemic are not guaranteed to stick around, as many of these were temporary zoning code changes implemented during a “public health emergency”. At this point, the tail end of a global pandemic, will our society return to the old forms of development we have used for decades or adopt some new methods of planning, zoning, and urban design? The political oversight bodies of each town and neighborhood will be deciding that future right now.

Sociologists, public health professionals, and urban planners have known for over a century that the built environment directly impacts population health and sometimes exacerbates existing health disparities through environmental toxins, behavioral constraints, and psychosocial mechanisms. Researchers in public health, epidemiology, and sociology have outlined a few of the social determinants of health by exploring food accessibility (Block et al. 2018, Caspi et al. 2012), racial segregation (Massey and Denton 1998, Acevedo-Garcia and Lochner 2003, Kramer and Hogue 2009), and concentrated poverty (Kramer 2018, Wilson 1987, Jargowsky 1997), and socioeconomic status and inequality (Marmot et al. 2010). However, this knowledge is often left

at the door of urban planning meetings and rarely implemented. Ironically, urban planning was originally driven by goals to improve “public health, safety, and morals”. Nevertheless, those social goods and public health goals have been abandoned in favor of tumultuous urban economics: supply and demand. This dissertation accepts what most researchers and health professionals agree on and explores the messy, turbulent sociopolitical machinations we must understand to implement the healthy city plans our communities’ desire.

The Denver metro area (DMA) has grown significantly, nearly 15% between 2010 and 2021. The metro area added an estimated 430,000 persons between the 2010 Census (2.54 million) and 2021 (2.97 million) (ACS 2021). Only about a quarter of that growth has happened inside the city limits of Denver; the physical expansion of suburbia and the smaller cities around Denver have absorbed a significant amount of the new population. Now, these outlying communities find themselves at a crossroads with the need to continue growing without running into cost-compounding issues of suburban sprawl. Unfortunately, in the DMA, the continued expansion into the “suburban frontier” lands, which has followed the traditional pattern of urban growth across the U.S. and where decades' worth of prior growth has been concentrated (Jackson 1987), is no longer sustainable (Gutfreund 2004, Montgomery 2013, Gray 2022). Unabated suburban expansion has led to poor air quality (B Stone Jr 2008), worsening traffic congestion (Willson 1995, Levinson and Wu 2005, Ewing, Tian, and Lyons 2018), increasing greenhouse gas emissions (Williams 2022), and replicating the housing crisis that has plagued U.S. coastal cities since (Plumer 2022). Fortunately, over this same period of growth, communities of activists such as Strong Towns, NUMTOTs, YIMBYs, and the Congress for New Urbanism have been developing new tools and plans for urban growth and leading the conversation on what the future of our cities should look like.

While the suburban Denver communities have varied public processes for community planning, the region, the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), the Regional Transportation District (RTD) (a state-funded independent agency), and the state government have advocated for and invested heavily in public transportation infrastructure and environmentally sustainable design policies, which have directly impacted the local experience of urban development. This is also true of all eight of the state-recognized cities of the suburban DMA, where approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population growth is occurring. This dissertation derives insights from 10 suburban communities: Arvada, Aurora, Broomfield, Englewood, Lakewood, Northglenn, Wheat Ridge, Centennial, Westminster, and Thornton. The ethnographic analysis features select neighborhoods identified by research participants.

The consequences of pushing the urban/wildlife boundary of the “Front Range” cities have led to new concerns over access to water supply (Lewis 2022), the potential for wildfires like the Marshall Fire in Boulder County (Oldham 2022) and worsening existing public health crises such as rates of asthma (Perez et al. 2012) and pedestrian fatalities (Ewing, Schieber, and Zegeer 2003). Overall, in the case of the DMA, the suburban frontier is no longer even an economically defensible growth model. Continued suburban sprawl is driving up environmental costs and risk, increasing unsustainable vehicle infrastructure and associated costs, and increasing regional housing prices. After ignoring decades of research regarding the harmful effects on the residents' declining social life and community health, some of these communities are adapting their community plans and striving for new plans for future growth. As an added benefit, the Colorado Revised Statutes (CRS § 31-23-207) already require that public health be considered in developing and reviewing new urban development plans. Unfortunately, city comprehensive plans often lack insight into the built environment's effects on public health.

This dissertation reviews and triangulates the relationship between the politics of urban development, population health, and the social experience of place. This dissertation adds to the current urban sociology literature by focusing on the political processes of urban development and their impacts on public health within the smaller cities that make up the larger metropolitan statistical area units. While traditional and contemporary urban sociology has focused on large cities (Ocejo et al. 2020) such as New York (Smith 1996; Wynn 2010, 2011), Chicago (Park and Burgess 1921, Sampson 2012) or Los Angeles (Davis 1992; Dear 2002), that may overstate the theoretical impacts and fail to align current social theory with the experiences of smaller cities. Additionally, this dissertation highlights the significant variation within these smaller cities and the need to craft urban planning and public health policy that considers these differences at both the state and local levels. Finally, this dissertation and literature review emphasizes and explores the circular relationship between a community's social environment, built environment, and the political processes that construct both environments. Overall, this research extends the reach of urban sociology beyond the theoretical and into the empirical day-to-day politics of many American cities and their impacts on millions of Americans that live in these places.

The root of all urban planning and development decisions are regularly attributed by field professionals to the city comprehensive plan. This all-encompassing document regularly features visions for all aspects of the city: community social life, economic development, green spaces, traffic, and public transportation, etc. Chapter four starts the dissertation research with a content analysis of the comprehensive plans of 10 cities, to understand how these documents set goals for the future of the built environment and potentially impact population health outcomes. The chapter's analysis focuses on where these references are and what they are associated with. The Colorado Revised Statutes require that public health be considered in these plans, and so it is

expected that there are (at least a few) references to public health at times throughout the comprehensive plans. Previous research has shown that planning and zoning decisions can have significant impacts on public health, such as increasing pedestrian and bicyclist deaths in high-traffic areas and decreasing access to healthy food and recreational spaces in isolated communities. The researcher expects that few of the comprehensive planning documents in the DMA will explicitly consider the impacts of the built environment on public health, and that references to health may be limited to the inclusion of green spaces and parks. This research is important because the ongoing housing crisis in the U.S. is likely to worsen as the DMA population continues to grow, and incorporating considerations of public health into city planning processes could help address future housing and public health issues.

Chapter five summarizes a case study of two city planning commissions to understand how their participants navigate politics and various interests of the review processes. It charts current shifts in public discourses in development processes rather than merely observing and critiquing the built environment theoretically. Evaluating how current political processes and community practices initiate and implement values-driven urban development will provide information to improve development processes in these communities and elsewhere. Today's urban development strategies have been theoretically equated to the new "green" model (Dilworth and Stokes 2013, Jocoy 2018, DuPuis and Greenberg 2019) of "growth machine politics" popularized by Molotch (1976, 1993, Jonas and Wilson, 1999). Each community has built unique systems for evaluating its future design and development, but all share similar contextual and cultural experiences. In multiple communities, urban development processes aim to support "values-driven development", focusing on residents' needs and desires through their direct input. Even with such various processes across communities, the conflict between

technical, financial, political, and residents' interests appears to be common. This study compares the design review processes and content of public input through thematic analyses of planning commission representatives' discussions and public comments made during public hearings reviewing proposed developments. The analysis particularly focuses on the common trends in the discussions of development and seeks out a space for public health in the review procedures. Ultimately, social scientists need to focus on evaluating current practices to help create better public policies to guide future development and planning to meet the entire regions' needs and address residents' issues.

Finally, chapter six is an ethnographic exploration of the experience of the place from the community representative's perspective. This chapter draws upon interviews and "neighborhood walks" with community representatives – including local elected officials, professional planners, and planning commissioners to better understand the decisions made by the design and development review boards. The interviews also draw out how these community representatives social experiences and connections to the built environment impact their perceptions of personal health and community health. In doing so, the research aims to show how conflicts on planning commissions or the politics of urban development can make or break the collective efficacy of a community, which is defined as the belief in the collective good and the ability to work together for the common good. The chapter also aims to examine how community representatives understand the connections between green spaces, sidewalks, air pollution, and public health, and how they may associate certain architectural and urban planning features with health or "healthiness." The ethnographic analysis follows the lived-experiences and places chosen by the interview participants, stretching from a new urbanist neighborhood in Westminster to the political and financial struggles in sprawling neighborhoods in Centennial. The entirety of the

Denver metro area has experienced significant growth in the last decade, and many of these neighborhoods represent different planning visions for healthy, growing communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of public health in urban development and the role that the built environment plays in population health. While urban planning was originally driven by goals of improving public health, safety, and morals, it has since prioritized economics over these goals. The Denver metro area has experienced significant growth in recent years, but the traditional pattern of suburban expansion is no longer sustainable and has led to negative consequences such as poor air quality and unaffordable rental unit and home prices. Fortunately, communities in the Denver area have been developing new tools and plans for suburban growth that prioritize public health and sustainability. This dissertation seeks to explore the sociopolitical factors that must be understood to implement healthy city plans in the Denver metro area and contribute to the ongoing conversation about the future of our cities.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

“When you look at a city, it’s like reading the hopes, aspirations, and pride of everyone who built it”.

Hugh Newell Jacobson, Designing America: Creating Urban Identity 1993

THE PEOPLE AND POLITICS OF COMMUNITY PLANNING

Getting a new building constructed in the U.S. includes various actors, experts, and bureaucratic paperwork. To make matters even more difficult, each locality can generally set its building regulations, zoning laws, and administrative requirements on its own. The community planning and development process is a goldmine for examining social interaction because much of this process takes place in discussions held in public forums and is meticulously documented by local community development departments. While some may view these public procedures as overly formalized and point out that many aspects of the decision-making process are made behind closed doors, such as in meetings between developers and the city’s urban planners, these public forums still hold significant sway over the final approvals and often can delay or derail entire development projects. This section overviews the various actors and parties involved in planning and evaluating the built environment.

We begin with the architectural and development teams that design the proposed project; long before the public hearings and local politics come into play, the often demonized “developer” starts the conversation. The developer is not a singular person; development firms are a team of experts and administrative professionals from various backgrounds, including architects, public relations/outreach teams, financial support¹, contractors for construction, and

¹ Financial support for developers can come from multiple sources. Some development firms are privately owned and privately financed which may provide them more freedom to design and build as they see fit. Alternatively, many development firms will require outside funding from financial institutions (some public, some private) which may drive up development costs and subsequent profit expectations.

legal experts. Developers and their teams constantly address the needs of a simultaneously overregulated and underregulated market, a concept that will become clearer as you progress through this review. Developers and architects are the first designers of the project; they often make sales pitches to the local community at public hearings, do market research, and evaluate what services their project might provide the local community. The development firms are often reading the tea leaves of the market for new housing or commercial construction, while the architects creatively produce the answer to those market needs and desires. Many think that architects and urban planners are the same, but while their skill sets may overlap, their professional viewpoints and specializations differ. Architects oversee the detailed drawings of plat lines², landscape planning, construction materials, and rendering 3D visualizations shared with the other actors throughout this process. Both the architect and the urban planner may recognize the potential social impacts of a project. They differ from urban planners in that they are focused solely on the individual project, often only addressing the immediate impacts their project may have on the surrounding community³. Urban planners, whom can be found within each local community planning department, are often focused on the broader social, economic, environmental, and other impacts of the wider community they serve.

The work of an urban planner is much more comparable to that of a sociologist, especially since both professions often use many of the same tools, such as surveys, interviews,

² Plat lines are the official boundaries between one property and another. “Property Line Maps” often referred to as plats, in the U.S., are often based on historical agreements and require occasional updating by professional surveyors. Disagreements about fence lines or other new construction between neighbors may require a re-evaluation of the property lines and updated plat maps. For an interesting example, listen to the Strong Towns podcast, “What Customer Service Should Mean to a City” (Marohn 2022).

³ The “surrounding community” is usually defined in local laws and varies by community. The zone considered could be as little as a few hundred feet to a one-thousand-foot circular perimeter around the plat development site. Citizens living within the defined area are often invited to community meetings or discussions held by the developer to collect community feedback about their development project.

focus groups, and observational research⁴. Sociologists, urban planners, and architects often evaluate the same social and environmental problems from different perspectives, and many previous sociologists have observed great potential for collaboration that has not been actualized (Guttman 1975, Buttimer 1971, Blau 1991). Throughout the early to mid-1900s, when the “city beautiful” movement and garden city movements were in full force, urban planners and sociologists believed that good architecture and exemplary city planning would lead to a healthier, safer, more moral society.

However, Sanyal (2005) argues, the evolution of urban planning in the United States reflects a gradual shift away from collaborative, social driven processes toward a more institutionalized and technocratic approach in the “golden era” of planning (mid-1940s to mid-1960s). While early urban planning was deeply intertwined with public health and social reform efforts, mid-20th century planning became increasingly influenced by federal policies and large-scale development agendas that prioritized efficiency, economic growth, and regulatory structures over participatory and community-based perspectives. This shift contributed, gradually, to the theoretical division between urban planning and urban sociology. As urban sociology became more influenced by critical theories emerging from social movements and the civil rights era, urban planning remained largely embedded within bureaucratic, financial, and political structures that often constrained its ability to integrate sociological critiques and grassroots perspectives.

This same dynamic persists in contemporary urban planning, though internal debates and growing pressures for inclusivity have challenged its previous top-down approach. Yet, as many sociologists argue, planning decisions remain dominated by overtly structural and often lacking

⁴ See Buttimer 1971 for a thorough comparison and discussion of the relationship between the two fields.

adequate space for individual and community agency⁵. This disconnect is evident in how planning processes unfold today. As Forester (1989) has argued, planning is not just a technical exercise but an inherently political process shaped by negotiations, power dynamics, and the narrative framing of public problems. However, many key actors, such as community activists and many underrepresented populations are often absent from the discussions that shape the built environment. While urban planning decisions are made through extensive negotiations between city planning departments and the development firms, sometimes for years, before the public gains access to early drafts of proposed projects through mandated public hearings and review processes. This exclusion from early decision-making stages limits the ability of certain communities to influence the trajectory of development in their cities while often leaving room for more entrenched development interests.

Once the proposed development's plans have passed the early reviews by the city urban planners, they enter the next stage of the review process: the public review phase. In this stage, the plans are socially stress-tested by two political entities and the public throughout each step. Susskind (2011) emphasizes that this conflict is often not an obstacle to planning but rather than essential and productive component of the process. He argues that planners must learn to act as mediators who integrate technical and local knowledge through participatory engagement, rather than treating community involvement as a procedural requirement. However, the existing public review mechanisms often fall short of meaningful participation.

Often this review process begins with a public presentation to a local Planning and Zoning Commission; such commissions are sometimes separated by specialty, depending on the size and growth of the city. For example, in Broomfield, due to the number of projects being

⁵ Similar claims have been made against the work of Robert Sampson (2012) to be discussed later and the structural-functional theories of Talcott Parsons (1951).

evaluated yearly, the Neighborhood Board of Adjustments reviews smaller, while the Land Use Review Commission (formerly the Planning and Zoning Commission) addresses larger projects including variances, zoning changes, and the development's purpose and fit within the existing city plans. Alternatively, in smaller cities, the local city council may serve all three roles: planning review, zoning review, and political review. These commissions and the city councils are composed of city residents.

While these entities provide an avenue for public input, their composition and function often reinforce existing power imbalances. As Susskind and Forester highlight, the dominance of technical experts and career officials can sideline broader community interests, especially when participatory mechanisms are not designed to accommodate genuine public engagement. Often, commissioners are selected for their expertise in relevant fields, including local, often practicing or retired architects and urban/regional planners. According to Anderson and Sass (2004), this preference for career professionals and the availability of mostly retired experts potentially adds a white-collar, professional, or institutional bias to the commission's decision-making. Still, many commissioners may be general citizens interested in serving the community and have a personal interest in the city's future, like members of the local city council.

These citizens' boards are often advisory, with the city councils reserving the right to override their decisions. Still, research has found that they can impact local policy and are often trusted sources of perspective for the local council (Houghton 1988) making them an important locus of power for local residents. Unfortunately, public participation is often constrained by inadequate training, limited transparency, and procedural barriers that prevent community voices from meaningfully shaping urban development plans (Forester 1989). Additionally, the commissions and boards frequently suffer from poor training, volunteer turnover, or unfilled

seats due to a lack of participation or poor management (Baker 2006, Dougherty and Easton 2011). The result is that commissioners and public participants are more likely to be white, older/retirees, be homeowners, and have higher incomes and educational attainment than their communities (Verba et al. 1993, Dougherty and Easton 2011). Ultimately, public review entities function as forums for public grievances, discussions, and debates about the future design and experience of the city, but they do so within structures that often reinforce existing inequalities. As Susskind and Forester (1989, 1999) both suggest, addressing these limitations requires planners to move beyond procedural participation and embrace a more integrative, conflict- and politics-aware, and deliberative approach that can bridge the gap between technical expertise and community agency.

Separate but similar to the planning and zoning commissions, the public is the next major actor in urban development planning. Throughout each of the steps mentioned in the previous discussion of public boards, commissions, and councils, acting almost as a third-party independent review. The public is usually limited to public speaking times or submitting pre-written comments, but any citizen can present comments, proposals, opinions, and even voice opposition to a project. The hearings of the review entities are required to be public, often streamed online or held at the local city hall, and the presenting public's thoughts often weigh heavily on the shared decision-making process. Any city resident or interested party can participate in these discussions. Still, much like the review entities themselves, the bulk of public comments are often provided by an unrepresentative subsection of the larger community led by strong neighborhood organizations such as homeowner's associations, church groups, or other community-based interest groups. To be upfront, most public urban development public hearings often have few public attendees, leaving only the developers as the presenting speakers on many

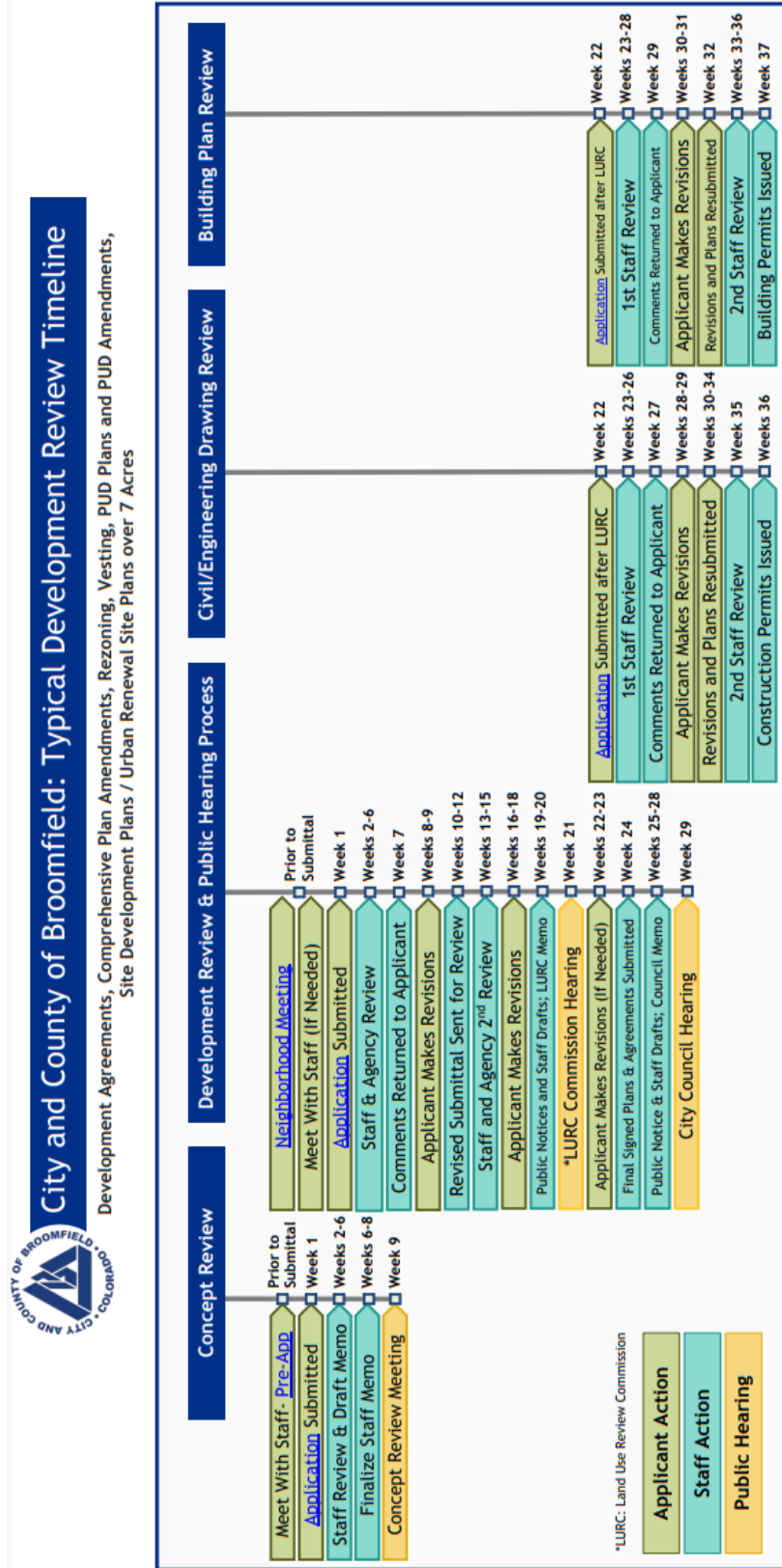
projects⁶. Community organizations often only attend—and attend in numbers—when they have significant opposition to projects which can lead to protracted public battles between laypersons and developers’ “experts” because of the communication gaps between these groups (Day 1997). Matejczyk (2001) found in St. Paul, MN, that these neighborhood organizations often succeed in getting review entities to deny zoning changes or negotiate design changes at public hearings. However, more oppositional community organizations may lose credibility with the review entities, leading to their opinions being disregarded more often and potentially worse development outcomes in the future (Matejczyk 2001). It is important to note that these groups are often classified in literature and popular culture as NIMBYs or YIMBYs organizations. NIMBY meaning “Not in My Backyard”, and YIMBY as “Yes in My Backyard”, are delineated by their positions within the public debate. The lines between these groups are often broken down by political inclination (liberal vs. conservative), racial identification, age cohort (boomer vs. millennials) (Holleran 2021), and income/wealth (Brunes et al. 2020). While NIMBY has often been used as a pejorative against those who oppose low-income housing projects, these terms can and are being applied to various groups who oppose or support certain types of development in these public review processes.

At this point, various actors, some with special interests or expert knowledge, are often set in opposition to one another within their communities as they regularly interact throughout community development processes. Community development is a process by which these actors design and develop the future of their community. Throughout any project's development, each

⁶ This is another reason city councils and urban planning department’s rely heavily on the opinions and thoughts of the planning and zoning commissions they appoint. Without regular public input on these decisions, the planning commissions are expected to serve as community experts *and* development experts when deciding what is best for their communities. City Councils often only step in when there is significant opposition to a project because commissions are also limited by the law in their ability to deny projects that have already undergone significant legal and planning reviews by the city’s community planning department.

actor weighs the potential project's social, economic, and environmental impacts through their subjective lens and past experiences. These interactions give the sociologist an insight into the values of the individual and community. These values, potentially, become manifested as a physical object at the end of the process when it is constructed. In total, this presents to the sociologist an opportunity to study the built environment as a physical emblem of the social values and interactions of the past, which are directly impacting the current lived environment and experience of place and are guiding the ongoing community negotiations for what the next future city will be. Thus, evaluating the social interactions between these various actors is necessary for improving the current development processes and producing more health-conscious development outcomes. By further researching these sociopolitical processes of urban development, the results will help communities to address the current housing and public health crises by evaluating and improving the development processes that design our cities today.

Figure 1 - CCOB, Department of Community Development “Typical Development Review Timeline” (Sourced 10/2022)



Disclaimer: Times are typical development review timelines. The typical timeline could be extended if a third review is required to address staff comments, if additional time is needed to make revisions prior to submittal, or if final plans/agreements are not provided in advance of the intended public hearing dates.

City Planning: A Brief Summary of Maps, Plans, and Zones

“We don’t want a plan based on land uses. We want a plan based on experiences. Who visits downtown to see land uses?”

Mitchell Silver, Urban Memory in City Transitions (Cheshmehzangi 2021)

Urban planning is a catch-all term that describes the multiplicity of political, architectural, engineering, and civic practices that result in the construction or redesign of urban environments. The heart of the urban planning process is traditionally recognized as the *comprehensive plan*, the central document where all planning begins. Almost every city has one, with one major exception, New York City. These documents are often more accessible than neighborhood plats⁷, planned urban development schemes, and extremely confusing zoning maps. Cities have crafted them into a public messaging item and a vision for the future of the city. The comprehensive plan is developed over months, sometimes years of community engagement, stakeholder discussions, and planning meetings. Some cities update them every decade. Others might still rely on the same old, tired document created decades ago. When tasked with evaluating proposed development projects, city councils, planning departments, zoning variance boards, and planning development commissions all ask the central question: Does this proposal meet the vision of the comprehensive plan? These comprehensive plans are truly comprehensive as well. They include simplified zoning maps and architectural renderings of new neighborhoods and parks, and they can drive urban development towards a different, potentially healthier urban design. Unfortunately, these visions are often only glimpses of a potential urban future that does not unfold.

⁷ Neighborhood Plat maps a large visual document that outlines the zoning of a designated neighborhood area and the individual plats within the designated area. This document also contains written regulations regarding the architectural design, sidewalk requirements, parking requirements, and other neighborhood characteristic requirements that are required for all current and existing development within the designated space.

Whereas comprehensive plans are visions, city zoning maps are overly complex and technical. Comprehensive plans are designed specifically for public consumption. They are essentially layperson’s documents that provide existing city images and simplified renderings of future developments. Alternatively, city zoning plans are complex and technical; they are designed specifically for urban planning and city legal experts. Zoning maps and the zoning codes that they are designed to visualize often only have two areas of policy consideration: land use and density. “Land Use” can be summarized as what types of businesses, residences, or industry can be placed within the city limits and are commonly designated by an “R” for residential, “C” for commercial, and “I” for industry, and “A” for agricultural. These land use regulations are supplemented by density regulations designated by a subsequent number. For example, R-1, R-2, and R-3 represent increasing levels of density allowed within a residential land use zone. See Figure 2 for the “Example Municipal Zoning Code” from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA).

Figure 2 - Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) Example Municipal Zoning Code - Article III, Section 3.3 - Zoning Districts and Boundaries (Sourced 12/22)

SECTION 3.3 ZONING DISTRICTS AND BOUNDARIES

3.3 Zoning Districts and Boundaries

- A. Zoning Districts.** In order to carry out the provisions of this Code, the Town/City is divided into the following zoning districts:
- | | |
|--------|--|
| DR | Developing Resource District |
| A-1 | Agricultural District |
| A-2 | Agricultural District, with Animals |
| E-1 | Estate District, Large Lot |
| E-2 | Estate District, with Common Open Space (Conservation Subdivision) |
| R-1 | Residential District, Single-Family |
| R-1A | Residential District, Single-Family, Small Lot |
| R-2 | Residential District, Two (2) Family and Multi-Family |
| R-3 | Residential District, Multi-Family |
| MU-R | Mixed Use Residential District |
| MU-C-D | Mixed Use Commercial-Downtown District |
| MU-C-H | Mixed Use Commercial- <u>State Highway</u> District |
| MH | Manufactured Home Park District |
| MFH | Manufactured Housing Development District |
| B-1 | Business District |
| C-N | Commercial District, Neighborhood |
| C-C | Commercial District, Community |
| BLI | Business/Light Industrial District |
| I | Industrial District |
| P-E | Public Established District |
| H | Hazard Overlay District |
| PUD | Planned Unit Development (PUD) Overlay District |

Ultimately, zoning is just one tool in the urban planner's toolbox, but one that has significant effects on the social experience of our built environments. At their core, zoning plans are created and implemented through social processes by which those in or with access to power, whether policymakers, developers, or influential interest groups, shape decisions about who can build what and where. As Forester (1989) argues, planning is not just about technical expertise but also about navigating power dynamics and distorted information that can obscure the broader social impacts of land use decisions. This process creates and perpetuates the unequal distribution of built environment resources. Residents largely do not understand how the zoning code of their town or city is designed or implemented, nor are they aware that it is the continuation of race- and class-based exclusionary policies embedded into the laws decades ago. Forester's insights into planning as a communicative and deliberative process highlight the importance of transparency and public engagement in the decision-making process. The key is to recognize that zoning has two main properties: it controls population density and land use, both of which alter the social experience of a place and can affect public health along multiple causal pathways. Much of the social, resource, and land-based wealth inequality we live with today is the result of land use policies shaped not only by technical planning decisions but also political struggles over power and control. A more equitable approach to zoning and land use reviews requires acknowledging these power imbalances and fostering greater public participation to ensure that urban development serves diverse communities rather than entrenched interests.

U.S. zoning codes were largely unheard of before the early 20th century, and city design was largely decided by easy accessibility to work and home, especially before the introduction of the automobile. The first cities to adopt a zoning code were Berkeley, CA, and New York City, both in 1916. Gray (2022) notes that while NYC's zoning code introduction largely "gets all of

the attention,” Berkeley’s code more closely resembles the current zoning regulations we know today. The power elite of society advocated for these early zoning codes and often used them as tools to restrict the development of immigrant communities and protect wealthy enclaves. In Berkeley, this was done by regulating land use, to prevent Chinese immigrants from opening laundries that could be considered “fire hazards”. Framers of the new zoning ordinance, the Berkeley City Council, complained that Chinese owned laundries brought “negroes and Orientals” to the communities they were constructed in (Cheney 1915). The earliest examples of zoning codes and land use regulations were often “de jure” forms of racial and class segregation that sought to protect and lock away wealthy, white enclaves.

Surprisingly (or possibly not), zoning codes like Berkeley’s were upheld in state courts and the U.S. Supreme Court. In *Village of Euclid vs. Ambler Realty Co.* (1926), the Court determined that local authorities and the state had the authority to dictate how an individual could use their land, even at great costs to the property owner. From there, the federal government under then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover began a massive push to spread zoning codes across the country, with the Standard Zoning Enabling Act. These codes spread like wildfire and were used as new tools to segregate cities in the south, control immigrant community growth in the Northeast and West, and lock millions of neighborhoods in historical amber. Even after the Supreme Court struck down racial covenants within these laws and Congress passed the Fair Housing Act of 1963 banning racial segregation, these zoning laws largely held strong and remained at the core of the urban zoning plans of almost all American cities.

People often confuse zoning with urban planning. Urban planning is much broader than zoning; it involves the entire built environment from roadways to architectural flourishes on

buildings. It is urban planning that so often changes our experience and sense of place because of how detailed the requirements, review and evaluation process for urban development can be. Based on the historical evidence presented above, the argument for eliminating zoning is strong, and Gray's call for the "abolition of zoning" (2022) is squarely on the mark. But changing zoning will not change the urban planning process, which can affect much more than just how much housing is built and where. If we are to advance human health and improve the social life in our communities, changes to any one process will necessitate changes in the overall urban planning paradigm.

Community planning and city zoning codes are growing in public awareness because of the growing housing crisis spread across the U.S.. Popular examples include the recent city-wide removal of single-family zoning restrictions in Minneapolis in 2018 in their Minneapolis 2040 comprehensive plan (Mervesh 2018, Kahlenburg 2019), which made news across the country. The change spurred debates amongst urban planning and academic circles, but more interesting was the significant amount of misinformation regarding the zoning change that hit the news shortly after the change was finalized. Some argued that this would upend entire neighborhoods by making single-family homes illegal, cause displacement because of density, or negatively impact the environment; the last item in fact led to a lengthy court battle prior to the implementation of the plan (Braussel 2022, Ionescu 2022). Ultimately, zoning cannot do this. Zoning laws have little authority to change the urban environment and often have been more reactive to urban environmental changes than proactive. Zoning ultimately affects two built environmental characteristics: density and land use. Both can profoundly affect public health, but this often has gone largely unexplored. M. Nolan Gray's (2022) recent book, *Arbitrary Lines: How Zoning Broke the America City and How to Fix It*, elucidates the history of zoning and

ultimately calls for the end of zoning in all U.S. cities. While Gray's critique of zoning's often restrictive sociopolitical effects largely focuses on the urban planning process, the same critiques can be extended with a public health lens and lead down the same path towards a call for an end to the city zoning codes as we know them today.

Contrary to the zoning codes, which have specific limitations, much of the built environment's design and social potential is developed through the winding, confusing community planning processes that develop the future of the city, the neighborhood, and even your house. Urban planning is where most angry NIMBYs should take up arms because, as we have seen, zoning is typically already working in favor of the NIMBYs because of its power to restrict urban development. While some of these maps, such as the comprehensive plan, may be a vision for the future of a city, others, such as the zoning maps, are tools that keep the past alive. These tools perpetuate a specific type of social experience of place, often that of the single-family, white picket fence, two kids, and middle-income family home. Without critical analysis of how these tools are being used or enforced, the same systems of inequality built in the early and mid-20th century will be perpetuated for decades to come.

This dissertation examines the current sociopolitical theories of urban development, embarking on a comprehensive exploration that traces its historical evolution from the early roots of urban sociology to the contemporary era of "place-making" practices. The study explores Castells' contrasting perspectives of "spaces of flows," which cater to the global elite, and "spaces of places," which are imbued with the values and essence of local communities. Amidst this backdrop, the roles of political actors, urban planning boards, and community groups are carefully scrutinized, revealing the intricate dynamics that often lead to conflicts between diverse and sometimes competing interests. Moreover, the dissertation examines the emergence

of "green" development, associated with health narratives, despite the well-documented neighborhood disparities in health outcomes. This critical analysis underscores the need to understand the nuanced relationship between social life, the built environment, and how the public perceives and experiences health within urban spaces. By unraveling these complexities, the research aims to provide insights into the profound impact of urbanization and the multifaceted purposes that urban areas serve, acting as a gateway to unveil the sociopolitical tug-of-war between collective social power, economic forces, and individual aspirations within the urban landscape.

THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE OF PLACE

"We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us"

*Winston Churchill*⁸

Social scientists often emphasize analyzing the *invisible* social structures that guide our cultural and political experience within society. Concepts such as class, institutions, and culture, are widely recognized as the unseen forces—or barriers—constraining human interaction, expression, and connection. Unfortunately, sociologists have struggled to interpret and engage with the much more visible social structure that is in place. Sociologists often leave the examination of physical structures to the fields of urban planning and architecture by decontextualizing the social world from the physical. The sociology of place shuns this turn by explicitly acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between the physical world and our social experiences within those spaces. Similarly, place-making within urban planning and architecture

⁸ After the British Parliament was severely damaged in 1943, Churchill demanded that it be reconstructed in the same rectangular, oppositional interior design. He believed that the designs of the parliamentary building itself was part of the essence of British politics and promoted confrontational, lively, robust, but intimate political debates. (UK Parliament Website 2023)

acknowledges and attempts to build community life through the built environment. Places are areas where social interaction and life occur and much like obscenity, you know it when you see it (Jacobellis vs. Ohio, 1964). Place is where you can bump into a neighbor and have a casual conversation. Place is where collective community experiences happen such as festivals or live music performances. Place is also key to building that collective identity and agency that allows groups of individuals to act or feel like a community. Places do not exist without the social experience of the physical and are often designed intentionally with the social indicators of community values embedded into the concrete and bricks of the built environment.

Over decades, many have tried to reintroduce the importance of place to the realm of the sociological (See examples from Gutman 1975, Korllos 1980, Stimson 1986, Blau 1991, Gieym 2000, Logan 2012, Delitz 2018), but place appears stuck in the exploratory theoretical realm rather than being given its due. In the first section, we examined how the built environment is the product of thousands of social interactions and architectural imaginations, the total of the social contributions and compromises of residents, planners, politicians, and architects. This social process results in the construction of a place, with the community's values and signals embedded into the architect's concrete, brick, landscape, and exacting measurements. In this section, we will explore some of the most important examples and theoretical contributions to our understanding of the sociology of place and architecture and examine the social constraints and collective empowerment of the highly *visible* social structure of the built environment.

The best and most famous example of how social values become embedded into humans' physical environments was written in 1968 by Pierre Bourdieu, "*The Berber House or the World Reversed*". In this translated excerpt, Bourdieu described and provided diagrams of the typical Berber home and explored how the Berber community's social institutions and traditions became

embedded, symbolically and physically, in their housing design. In this local-scale ethnography, of the previously nomadic, rural Berber society in Algeria, Bourdieu noted how the home represented the community's values and concretized within the physical space their division of the symbolic and the social world into binary categories such as life and death, man and woman, light and dark, and the physical production of the spaces inside, outside, and around the home often reflected their values. The men often worked outside the home, in the light, and were seen as the protectors of the house. They slept outside the house, while the women would sleep in the darkest parts of the home, protected from the “light”, which represented men in society. The women, whose femininity represented the “dark” and the moon, often worked inside the house, producing the food, and raising children; they could usually be found weaving (a symbol he notes gets used in their wedding ceremonies as well). Everything about the home, including the house's framing, dividing walls, fireplace, food storage, and workspaces were not only imbued with but also reflected the social structures that guided the Berber cultural story. Bourdieu's analysis of the reflective relationship between social structure and physical structure continues to shape architecture and urban planning but seems to be less influential in sociology, where his other observations on social capital and habitus have dominated. We will explore those concepts later, but Bourdieu noted that expressions of social structures, such as class and culture, could be observed and identified in physical environments.

Zooming out from the scale of the architectural project to the urban project, Jane Jacobs (1961, 1969) and her subsequent acolytes identified similar patterns in the larger urban environments outside the home. At the amorphous neighborhood level, expressions of social structures, such as class and culture, can be observed and identified in physical environments, such as with common architectural features and investments in collective goods such as parks,

public transportation, or community centers. In her observation of the rapidly changing (sometimes disappearing) experience of community among NYC residents, Jacobs described a phenomenon she named “border vacuums” these occur when urban fabric appears to have been torn apart or divided intentionally by highway construction, large imposing buildings, or even community parks. The projects drew clear lines between or emphasized the class and cultural divisions within a city by physically separating one community from another. To Jacobs, these “border vacuums” were an architectural and urban planning nuisance that intentionally used infrastructure or public amenities to cut apart the social fabric and sunder the street life of urban environments. In 2023, it is easy to tie the creation of such border vacuums as examples of the intentional construction of physical and social boundaries during the socially and culturally tumultuous 1960s. For example, Denver’s I-70 viaduct, built in the 1960s, had severed the minority-majority neighborhood of Elyria-Swansea from the rest of Denver and has recently been the topic of fierce debate when the \$1.2 billion cap and cover project was proposed by CDOT (Bliss 2017). Like the concept of the “wrong side of the tracks,” another physically dividing structure that Jacobs might have called out, “border vacuums” imply knowledge of which side is “right” and which side is “wrong.” Such knowledge comes from cultural socialization and in the mid-20th century was often created intentionally by the corrupt zoning laws and practices. These practices, often called redlining, were physically manifested with the construction of highways, government plazas, and new business districts through or adjacent to traditional black or minority neighborhoods (Congress for New Urbanism, 2021). The continued existence of these midcentury infrastructural projects are remnants of the cultural and societal attitudes of the past and perpetuate those visions today. The upshot, though, is that Jane Jacobs identified how the physical environment imposes psychological and sociological taxes or

benefits on communities and individuals, and, particularly now, decades later, we have the benefit of hindsight to see how the social values of the day sturdied themselves through physically altering the urban environment to express and represent those same values.

In the recent residential segregation literature, researchers often refer to the impacts of redlining as “spatial stigmatization” and have connected these spatialized social divisions to racial and population health disparities. For example, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2013) have demonstrated that racial discrimination and stigmatization affect the health of individual residents living in segregated neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and both Sampson (2018) and Keene and Padilla (2018) discuss how the stigmatization of entire neighborhood spaces might further exacerbate residential segregation. Much like black families are discriminated against by realtors who steer them away from particular neighborhoods, as described by Massey and Denton (1993), residents of poor and minority neighborhoods may experience health-harming discrimination from others because of where they live, resulting in a loss of opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility. Similarly, neighborhood stigma may make medical facilities less accessible to residents if such facilities are located in “better” neighborhoods. Other services, such as grocery and healthier food stores, label the areas as too poor and unprofitable to start a store in, thereby reinforcing the social stigma of such neighborhoods by their absence. Even if government services try to fill the gap, government investment may only further stigmatize the neighborhood as deprived or problematic over time (Sampson 2018).

As we move away from the direct observation by Bourdieu and Jacobs of how the physical environment reflects and impacts the social experience, Oldenburg and Brisset (1982) introduced a purer examination of social life within place to our understanding of the sociology

of place as the “third place.” According to Oldenburg and Brisset, home is the first place, emphasizing privacy, the family social unit, and limited interaction with the community. Work or the office is a person’s second place because individuals spend significant portions of their life at work, interacting with coworkers who may be strangers or acquaintances but often not socially valued at the same level as the family. Additionally, the second place is often separate from the local community, still largely private and acting as a social island for labor. Moreover, the “third place” blends the characteristics of the first two; places that foster an environment like home but also furnish the social benefits of public life. All “third spaces,” according to Oldenburg and Brissett, have common characteristics: these spaces are a “neutral ground,” neither home, the first place, nor work, the second place (Oldenburg 1989). At first, one might imagine the public square as a third place as described in Weber’s *The City* or Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, but the third-place concept bridges the public and private spheres of social life described. A third place is more like a pub, a public library (Montgomery and Miller 2011), or your local coffee shop: it exists in the public sphere but often with identifiable “homeliness” characteristics (Oldenburg 2001). These third places often have regular visitors identifiable to only one another. They are social environments where conversation and conviviality are the norms, and distinctions of social class are to be left at the door. Some characteristics of this 1980s version of the third place appear to have been lost with American society's rising inequality and market segmentation, but new third places have evolved as technology, and social life moved on. For example, in my hometown of Buffalo, NY, a working-class city, residents commonly consider Starbucks an upper-class coffee shop compared to a more working-class Tim Horton’s, both publicly available third places catering to and situated for different segments of American society.

A simple review of Oldenburg and Brisset's third places might imply that anywhere outside the home and work environment can be a productive social space. Alternatively, Carmona (2010) offers an overview of the contemporary public, third, and private space debate and notes the rise of commercial interests in the spaces and the new level of control over the spaces these corporations exert, diminishing their value as community places. A common example would be the lack of public restroom facilities offered to patrons in these spaces, which would violate Oldenburg's original concept of the third place in that these spaces are not accommodating the full needs of the patrons or acting as a true "home away from home" experience. The strong influence of commercial interests and perhaps the severance of the political and commercial interests within these public spheres/third places is a detriment to the social fabric of a community. Carmona notes that it is not unexpected. Overall, the interaction between the private and public spheres through the creation of the third places appears important for maintaining and establishing third places. Still, it is undergoing significant social and economic upheaval, leading some researchers to identify these third places through digital media and virtual reality (Soukoup 2006, Delamere 2013).

Overall, a thin strand of research on the social experience of place, over the last few decades, has waxed and waned in sociology. The importance of place and its ability to reflect, shape, and reinforce social structure extends the social influences regularly discussed in the field. The social structure becomes actualized in space through place-making, urban, and architectural design processes, much like how the words on a book page can capture an author's experience and the influences from one unique moment in history and place. Some may critique the sociology of place and its systemic implications on social life and public health as overly deterministic or tautological. Ultimately, it cannot be doubted that we can observe social values,

read histories, and experience the effects of the past through these constructions. However, as with all social structures, the connection between the built environment and the social environment is often invisible without first applying the critical lens of the sociological imagination.

The Neighborhood Effect: How Where You Live Shapes Your Life

Neighborhood effects research on health emphasizes that understanding health disparities is best when studied from a population level rather than an individual perspective. This “population perspective” (Institute of Medicine 2002) postulates that we cannot fully understand an individual’s risk of disease or disease outcome without contextualizing their experience within their society. These include national healthcare systems, cultural foods and customs, and poverty prevention programs, which vary widely across nations, cities, or neighborhoods. Within these populations, most individuals will be average, with few at the margins of high or low health risk. This allows researchers to evaluate the differences between social policies, cultural factors, and other societal mechanisms that increase the population's average. While the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a unified set of “core health indicators” for all countries, other more subjective health-related criteria, such as standards for clinical signs of depression and anxiety (Kirmayer 2001) and even living standards (Dowrick and Quiggin 1994) continue to vary across and within countries. Secondly, this variation between and within populations is a cause of and is caused by the second item: the naturally clustered nature of health risks within discrete social places such as nations, provinces, cities, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. The unequal distribution of resources at the neighborhood level, such as fruits and vegetables (food environments) or higher concentrations of certain goods like fast

food outlets, alcohol, and cigarette retailers, create unique environments that can alter health risks and outcomes.

To best understand neighborhood effects, we must differentiate between the context and composition of the places under examination. Neighborhoods are naturally associated with residents' health because communities are composed of individuals with different health risks. This means these types of effects, compositional effects, result from poor people living in poor places. Compositional effects rely on the idea that individuals are driving the outcomes seen at higher levels of analysis. Alternatively, the neighborhood effect is specifically an effect where residence in a “poor neighborhood” negatively affects all residents' health over and above the individual experiences of poor health and poverty. The free market allows businesses, particularly grocery stores and companies that make up the food environment, to determine where it is best to locate. As a result, poor neighborhoods have been shown to have lower access to grocery stores with healthy foods (recognized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as “food deserts”). They may contribute to higher rates of Type II diabetes and obesity in these neighborhoods (Beaulac et al. 2009, Block et al. 2018). Ultimately, this shows how neighborhood effects research on health takes a strong structuralist viewpoint by evaluating how the constraints of our environments and the places where we live, work, shop, and play can change our health risks and health outcomes. Health researchers recognize these factors as the “distal” causes of disease or risk, factors that are outside of the direct biological or individual contributors (proximal causes, see Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model of human development).

Sampson (2012) notes that critics of his book and neighborhood effects say that these studies are overly deterministic and structuralist, leaving little room for individuals to control the

outcomes of their lives. This free will to change one's circumstances, known as "agency," in sociology, would say that individuals within these neighborhoods can change their health habits, quit smoking, or drive further to shop at healthier food stores. Ultimately, the agency represents the variation among individuals. On the other hand, neighborhood effects are the structural constraints placed on an individual's autonomy or agency, as posited in the "healthy lifestyle" theory (Cockerham 2005). Sampson (2012) poses another unique concept in response to these critiques, saying that neighborhoods have a collective form of agency, collective efficacy, and the ability to change or act as a community and socially control our environments. Ultimately, the collective efficacy of places shows the fourth fundamental tenet of neighborhood effects research: social places also have characteristics such as sensitivity to risks, variability, and resilience, much like individuals do.

Finally, the current neighborhood effects research is pointing towards a more significant role and need for understanding collective efficacy and forms of social capital to explain the role of neighborhoods in health disparities. While negative aspects of society such as residential segregation, racism, stigmatization, and socioeconomic inequalities are reliable indicators and factors creating adverse neighborhood health effects, these factors do not help explain why specific poor, segregated neighborhoods have better than expected aggregate health outcomes. Collective efficacy is the combined ability of "residents to control group-level processes" or change results through collective action (Sampson 2012). For example, the trust one has in neighbors is a typical indicator of collective efficacy and is positively associated with self-rated health (Kawachi et al. 1999). To generate collective efficacy, sociologists turn to how individuals within communities and organizations tap into various sources of social capital or create new networks to access more social capital across spaces. Carpiano (2006) takes issue with the

traditional view of social capital as an organizational-based resource as popularized by Putnam as bowling leagues, churches, unions, etc. (2000). Alternatively, they propose that we need new measures of social capital that can capture how residents experience social capital and collective efficacy in a way that is adapted to a more mobile and rapidly changing social environments. For example, Forrest and Kearns (2001) advocate for a more flexible definition of “community,” matching the methodological call by Duncan (et al. 2018, et al. 2018). Instead of viewing neighborhoods as discrete spaces, these authors advocate for recognizing the significant variation in lifestyles, consumption patterns, and dispersed connections that residents have, which may extend their “neighborhoods” far beyond the standard census tract neighborhood units.

Even so, collective efficacy can be influenced by the built environment’s conditions that inhibit or encourage the creation of new social bonds and experiences. After controlling for social disadvantage, the nearness of parks or green spaces has been associated with increased collective efficacy, whereas alcohol establishments have been associated with reduced collective efficacy (Cohen, Inagami, and Finch 2008). For example, a suburban single-family neighborhood may be a largely socially isolating experience with less access to supportive community amenities, requiring the extension of the neighborhood beyond the expected physical and social boundaries as advocated for by Forrest and Kearns. Alternatively, mixed-use middle to high-density neighborhoods may address more diverse social and economic needs, connecting residents and strengthening bonds within those places from repeated interaction. The social experience of place, in either “isolated” or “connected” neighborhoods with their differential access to specific social and economic amenities, may address some of the theoretical capacity to create social capital and collective efficacy and impact community health outcomes but is likely still subjective.

This contextual approach to evaluating a social experience is certainly not new. In *Suicide*, Emile Durkheim (1897) first noted the spatial relationships between social characteristics and health issues when tallying the number of suicides in each European country. Suicides are always unique and specific to individuals, but Durkheim revealed that national suicide rates were relatively stable. He organized an early theory that associated suicides with each society's characteristics (Wray et al. 2011). Durkheim called these peculiar trends “social facts,” ways our context seems to dictate or guide our individual lives. Just over twenty years later, at the newly founded University of Chicago, Park and Burgess, along with many notable authors, would contribute various papers emphasizing the role and character of neighborhoods in Chicago and how communities could be important sites of research (Park and Burgess 2019). Context is essential in evaluating the social world because social facts are situated in places. The spatial relationships and socioenvironmental impacts, particularly those of neighborhoods, matter significantly but lack thorough examination.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLACE AND HEALTH

As much as we complain about other people, there is nothing worse for mental health than a social desert.

Charles Montgomery, Happy City, 2013

By now, you likely understand that your city's current zoning map is only a more distorted and complicated version of the city zoning maps first created in the early or mid-20th century. These codes and maps were designed for different times and purposes, yet these social creations still influence and impact the lives of their residents today. As was said before, Zoning controls the density and land use; how does this simple method radically alter our social experience of place? How can living in one place result in radically different life and health outcomes than a neighborhood down the street? Because zoning has frozen the built environment of neighborhoods in time, the same social systems of inequality, segregation, racism, and classism are perpetuated where we live. In this final section, we explore the impacts of place on population health. First, we review the historical perspectives on the health impacts of place.

First, dense urban spaces have long been viewed as unhealthy, dangerous areas for unwanted populations. The American bias against urban life and dense housing, especially in the legal and political sense, can be attributed to founding father Thomas Jefferson's vision for America. The *Jeffersonian Vision* (Nestor 2013) was a quiet farm for each American, living and producing off the land and only coming together for the common defense of freedom. The elites of American society largely perpetuated this political and social bias, just as it was in Europe. David Harvey's book, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (2006), explored the 19th century in France and the complete restructuring of the built environment of Paris. Haussman's slum removal and the creation of grand boulevards and promenades in Paris would become an example of urban modernity, even as it displaced thousands of lower-class citizens. These same urban planning

visions would be carried out in America as the City Beautiful Movement of the late 19th and early 20th century (one heavily criticized by Jane Jacobs). The demolition of dense lower-class housing and the creation of grand urban parks and sprawling plazas was done in the name of public health and sanitation. When zoning and urban planning took off in the early and mid-20th century, it adopted this vision from the City Beautiful Movement and carved it into the legal foundations of our urban environments. Lay on top of this, a distaste for apartments and denser urban housing, the racism of these times is the near illegality of all forms of multifamily housing units. Historically, it is hard to know if the movement to improve cities' public health and sanitation was truly independent of the effort to remove the undesirable races, ethnicities, and impoverished. Ultimately, the single-family house, white picket fence, and two-kids ideal were perpetuated and repeated for decades, forming much of the urban environment and housing crises we know today.

Fortunately, we were knocked off this path of urban social destruction by those who observed the city for what it was, a home and life regardless of class, race, or background. Jane Jacobs was recognized as the true urban community visionary who challenged the urban planning establishment. Her advocacy and ethnographic writing efforts throughout the 1960s and 70's changed our perspectives, started a movement, and potentially altered the entire study of urban life. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and *The Economy of Cities*, she recognized that the city, as we imagine it, cannot exist without density. Through Jane Jacobs's eyes, we saw how density allows the shopkeeper to live above or down the street from his business, with watchful eyes on the street below, protecting his belongings and neighbors. To Jacobs, density allows for creating social support systems based on access and social commitment to a place. Sociologists discuss this later as collective efficacy, but in her writing,

we see how the physical design of a place, including the much-maligned urban density, contributed to what made that collective efficacy possible and the pro-social environment successful. At the same time, Herbert Gans, a sociology graduate of the University of Chicago at Columbia, wrote an ethnography of the West End of Boston in the *Urban Villagers* (1962). His book details the story of a neighborhood that would be demolished to build better, more expensive housing without regard for the existing social systems of support that were the bedrock of the immigrant community there. It is important to note that these stories are similar, but maybe due to the influence of social psychology at the time, Gan's story of Boston's West end lacks the same thorough examination of the built environment's impact as Jacob's books. In either case, the story of urban life and urban density began to change.

Georg Simmel produced possibly the most pessimistic sociological analysis of the city in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1902, republished 2012). His concern for the potential growth of anomie or social disconnection, mental defensiveness, and extreme individualism in the highly dense urban environment, but this perspective does not match the quickly growing body of literature and theory positing the positive socioemotional, population health, and societal benefits of urban life. The "Creative Class" theory of Richard Florida is the most widely recognized and criticized. In his books (2002, 2017), Florida emphasizes the ability of the city to generate new connections between people, allowing these people to be more creative and productive. These agglomeration effects create new social spaces for creativity, new places of business, comfort, leisure, and profit that benefit all of society, including those outside the city. Much like the social impact of the internet, where any unique individual can find their community, to Florida, the city does this in the physical world by bringing people closer together and efficiently compiling resources to make their lives more social, creative, and productive. In *The Triumph of the City*

(2011), Glaeser expands upon Florida's exhortation of urban living even further. His data-centric approach summarizes the ability of the city to generate less pollution (including lower greenhouse gas emissions than most rural and suburban environments), increase accessibility to housing, improve economic mobility, and, again, provide individual and societal benefits from the consolidation of resources and people into efficient built and social environments. Urban density may have been considered a blight in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but Charles Montgomery's book, "*Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*," provides the clearest counterpoint to Simmel's concerns about dense urban life. Even if we may have doubts about it, when designed well, the city can produce great societal benefits and improve the health and well-being of the urbanites.

How Do Neighborhoods Impact Health?

Social and health research has emphasized studying individual-level characteristics, outcomes, and processes, especially in the U.S.. This focus is not surprising given that the American cultural narrative strongly emphasizes individualism, the "bootstraps" mentality of individual success through hard work. Over the last three decades, a growing amount of research has pointed back toward context, networks, and collectivity as key independent factors influencing our socioeconomic status, health risks, and weight (Christakis and Fowler 2007). Robert Sampson, in *The Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (2012), calls explicitly for a renewed focus on the way our environments, neighborhoods, cities, and societies are subtly affecting our individual choices and risks. For a while, after the "Moving to Opportunity" (MTO) policy experiment results started coming in, many researchers thought that neighborhood effects research seemed fruitless. After participating, most of the families who had received the Section 8 housing vouchers with requirements to move to low-poverty

neighborhoods had moved back to the same impoverished communities they had previously left (Clampet-Lunquist and Massey 2008). The MTO moves had a negative association with the mental health of mothers and young boys and only a small positive association for young girls (Katz et al. 2001). Similarly, Sanbonmatsu (et al. 2006) could not identify improvements in reading or math scores or behavioral improvements. Since then, research on urban environments, neighborhoods, and our lived context has been considered important but often takes a backseat role in social science and health research.

Over the past few decades, a substantial amount of research has been done on neighborhood effects research with varying conclusions. Several authors have developed theoretical models for neighborhood effects since the turn toward the social determinants of health, some with more evidence than others. For example, in the 80s, 90s, and even 2000s (Chang et al. 2009), “broken windows” and social disorder-based theories became prominent in criminology, sociology, and public health. Ross and Mirowsky (2001) attributed the relationship between worse health outcomes in disadvantaged neighborhoods to neighborhood disorder and fear of crime. Such theories were popular, mainly because early theoretical work also drew links between the adverse health effects of stress through psychosocial pathways, particularly for people of color living in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Cassel 1974). Jargowsky’s (1997) *Poverty and Place* and William Julius Wilson’s (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged* made it clear to policymakers and social researchers at the time that there was a significant problem with concentrated poverty and that concentrated poverty was a problem particular to neighborhoods with higher numbers of racial/ethnic minorities. While the links between stress and low socioeconomic status would be justified by research, the connection between social disorder and health came under significant fire as it reinforced racial stereotypes and has not been able to

explain health outcomes after controlling for other factors such as poverty levels, access to healthcare, and education (Sampson 2018). After social-disorder theories fell out of fashion, much research turned towards residential segregation and concentrated poverty issues, which had more support.

On top of daily implicit or explicit racism stresses, residential segregation remains significantly high within U.S. cities. Residential segregation is associated with worse health outcomes and risks if left unchecked. Cassel's (1974) work showed how racial discrimination through biological stress pathways could lead to worse health outcomes for black women and children. Today, the black maternal mortality rate is still higher than all other races in the U.S. (CDC 2019) and worse than in many other developed nations. The perpetuation of residential segregation is likely a contributing factor to this issue. For example, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model of human development discussed how early childhood development in the context of extreme poverty would have long-lasting adverse health effects creating "chains of disadvantage" that extend across generations (Umberson et al. 2014). As mentioned previously, Krieger's (2014) ecosocial model of health and racism is tied together with the many pathways by which racism affects health outcomes. In particular, residential segregation, an active and ongoing process in the U.S., can result in networks of concentrated poverty, poor housing quality, overcrowding (particularly relevant as the coronavirus has spread more rapidly among families living in intergenerational households), higher levels of environmental toxins, lack of access to goods and services, and furthering the political disempowerment of minority groups living in segregated spaces⁹. Current evidence points towards a significant relationship between residential segregation and higher rates of cancer (Landrine et al. 2016), worse pregnancy

⁹ See Krieger 2014 in *Social Epidemiology* (edited by Berkman et al. 2014) for a comprehensive literature review on racial discrimination and health.

outcomes (Ncube et al. 2016), and higher rates of obesity (Chang et al. 2009, Wen and Maloney 2011, Corral et al. 2015).

Residential segregation is recognized as a result of the land use and zoning decisions locked into local law throughout the mid-20th century. Some of the impacts of residential segregation might also be attributed to what has been called “environmental racism,” wherein the local land use and zoning policies have contributed to higher rates of exposure to noxious land-use options such as manufacturing, oil refineries, and petrochemical facilities (Richmond 2014, Richmond-Bryant et al. 2020), which create high levels of air, soil, and water pollution (Njoku 2021). Because of current land use and zoning policies, these communities are more likely to be low-income, underserved communities of color, and their continued exposure to these health-harming environments are examples of environmental racism as seen in Flint, Michigan (Denchak 2018) and “Cancer Alley” in Louisiana (Pasley 2020). These communities, often because of the historical discrimination and continued negative impacts of such discrimination in the land-use policy, are less able to develop the collective efficacy to garner political action or resources on the health issues that face their communities. Additionally, these communities often lack the financial resources to move their families from these areas of harm into safer, healthier places. Alternatively, whiter, wealthier communities often perpetuate social systems and provide community amenities that may promote collective efficacy and prevent incursions by more noxious, health-impacting land use options.

Neighborhood effects research is a theoretically and methodologically difficult research area. The focus on the individual in both academic inquiry and as a cultural narrative has heavily tinted prior research. Many theories pointed to the shared environment as a critical factor. Yet, even today, the field lacks large-scale surveys (longitudinal and cross-sectional) with data

collection strategies suited for neighborhood effects research, and the methods of analysis still have considerable flaws. Many have asked why to bother doing neighborhood effects research when the resulting standard errors are so high, or the results are so prone to incisive statistical critiques. Sampson (2012) provided the most persuasive argument, which is that we know neighborhoods matter, especially for our social, mental, and physical well-being and, therefore, even if we are not able to find the exact answers, setting out the path for future neighborhood effects research will continue to be necessary. Just like the early research disappointments that came out of the MTO experiment. Even while all the debates around issues of selection bias, residential mobility, and a lack of sophisticated longitudinal data collection were all still factors, Chetty (et al. 2016) found that by connecting the MTO information to new sets of data with innovative methods, years later the young children who had moved in the 90s to higher-income neighborhoods were more likely to go to college and had higher incomes as adults. Even the short-term exposures to socioeconomically healthier communities appeared to have some significant effect on the life trajectory of the youngest participants. Twenty years later, these minor changes in neighborhood environments were positively changing lives. Neighborhood health effects research has enough evidence to say they are real and matter.

Constructing Healthy Neighborhoods: A Case Study of TOD

“First life, then spaces, then buildings - the other way around never works.”

Jan Gehl, Cities for People, 2010

Getting Americans out of their cars and onto public transportation has not come easily for American cities. The Northeast U.S. supports the highest rate of public transit usage (25%), largely due to the northeast corridor (Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC), which has long valued and heavily invested in public transit systems. Overall,

public transit ridership for bus and local transit (train systems of varying sorts) has declined across the U.S. Only Seattle has successfully turned the tide, reducing single-occupant motor vehicle commutes to below 50% (Brookings 2017), and Houston has seen modest increases in public transit usage due to an overhaul of the transportation system. The largest barriers to public transportation development and usage have been the car-centric built environment, outdated transportation system strategies (wheel/spokes method), and lack of political will to invest in and adapt cities to the needs of the 21st century. Urban planners and architects have focused on developing concepts and plans for “Transit-Oriented Development” (TOD) to combat these issues. This type of development focuses on developing the areas around transit stations and building transit into the design plans of the new housing, business, or shopping centers (Renee 2009). Unfortunately, these types of developments are often illegal by most zoning codes or require significant variances to allow them under current law.

Transit-oriented development has been discussed in the academic and urban planning literature for over three decades and has been analyzed and shown to improve many of the negative externalities that urban areas experience. Three main factors give TOD its advantage over traditional development methods: increased density, innovative design strategies, and diverse land use planning (Renne 2009). When these three aspects are found in a neighborhood with transit, residents are less likely to own and drive a car regularly and more likely to use public transit, including walking and biking, to get around their neighborhoods (Renne 2009). For example, one study in Washington D.C. and Baltimore found that people living in TOD zones, 14 years after they were zoned as TOD, were driving 38% less in DC and 21% less in Baltimore when compared to their non-TOD resident counterparts who lived nearby (Nasri and Zhang 2014). Another team of researchers found that differences in public transportation

commuting in New York City also depended upon other neighborhood characteristics, including sociodemographic characteristics, station characteristics, and intermodal viability (Loo et al. 2010). Overall, the current research points towards a need for further research into population and neighborhood characteristics that drive public transportation usage and where there is a mismatch. Some neighborhoods either want but lack public transit access or have transit but lack population characteristics that support public transit usage.

Discussions of TOD are happening in every city around this country, and TOD has become a valued architectural framework for improving urban environments. The only issue is that very few cities are following through on implementing TOD. Boarnet and Compin's 1999 study of the TOD around the existing San Diego Trolley system described a slow and “incremental” investment in TOD zones in San Diego. Fast forward 20 years later, and San Diego is still struggling to implement TOD and continues to battle ever-increasing traffic and expanding suburban environments (Brausell 2018). Similarly, Hess and Lombardi (2004) point out that most TOD is not happening in inner-city neighborhoods around the country, areas that likely need the most capital influx and improved amenities and services. Alternatively, the areas receiving the most TOD are becoming more expensive and exclusive because of the relative lack of TOD throughout most U.S. cities (Renne et al. 2016). Similarly, in Buffalo, NY, where the transit system has been operating for over 30 years, property values around transit stations increased the closer they were to a transit station (Hess and Almeida 2007). Altogether, because of the difficulty in receiving permitting or exemptions for TOD in urban environments and zoning plans that are not designed to emphasize TOD or expensive investments with little profit return, developers may be building “transit-adjacent developments” or simply not developing in transit-rich areas at all (Guthrie and Fan 2016).

In the end, TOD depends on a significant shift in development and architectural designs, infrastructural funding, and American cultural values that devalue public transportation and higher density living. Denver's 2004 "FasTracks" program, a massive infrastructure investment in light rail laying 1464 miles of new tracks, has actively encouraged more TOD throughout the metropolitan area (Ratner and Goetz 2012). Unfortunately, the ideas of TOD design strategies are not valued equally across the country, and some regions may experience more difficulty implementing these strategies without local support (Yang 2008). Regional and urban planners need to better understand demographics and local attitudes towards public transit if TOD and expanding public transportation systems want to receive the support and funding necessary to adapt U.S. cities to their 21st-century needs (De Vos et al. 2014).

America is a decidedly car-centric culture. 76% of us drive in a car to work each day alone (ACS 2021). Our daily commutes are racking up costly externalities for the whole country. Just a few of the negative associations linked to commuting by car alone are increased carbon emissions and local pollution (Barth et al. 2008), increased stress and incidents of road rage (Jackson 2003), increased body mass index (BMI), and cardiovascular risk (Brugge et al. 2013), and hours of slow-moving traffic resulting in lost productivity across the country (Sweet 2011). Although switching from cars to public transportation might seem daunting, convincing Americans to switch from a car-centric lifestyle might be easier than we expect. While many Americans wish for an alternative way to get to work, in many cities, the urban planning dreams of the past constrain their decisions. Americans expressed support for expanded investment in public transportation. Recent public elections and polling have showed that Americans view

public transportation systems positively, favoring train-based systems¹⁰ (Jaffe 2015, Hansher and Mully 2015, American Public Transportation Association 2022). This stems from their belief that public transit creates positive societal changes, including improved air quality, reduced carbon emissions, reduced commute costs, and mobility options for vulnerable (elderly, young, disabled) populations (Bhatta and Drennan 2003). Their beliefs are not misplaced either. In Denver, CO, researchers have shown that improvements in public transportation reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions (Bhattacharjee and Goetz 2012) and that investments in the light rail system of Charlotte, NC, could save the city \$12.6 million in health care costs.

Besides the benefits many Americans are already (rightly) convinced that public transportation provides, the development of an expanded public transit system in urban areas around the U.S. has multiple benefits that many of us do not consider. Recent research has associated public transit usage with other benefits, especially health. Shepard (2008) showed that public transportation that included short walks or bicycling improved cardiovascular and respiratory health from “active commuting” and reduced pollution. Similarly, public transportation users added value to their commute by using commutes to complete work tasks or enjoying reading a book (Jain and Lyons 2008). While Americans rightly view public transportation as an aid to vulnerable populations, transit also gives needed access to jobs for low-income neighborhoods without the prohibitive costs of car ownership. Even with the few studies showing the benefits of public transportation in the U.S., the lack of comprehensive public transportation systems in the U.S. means that researchers have only described the many

¹⁰ It is important to note that Hansher and Mully (2015) identified that public transit systems with trains were mostly favored due to prior poor experiences with bus-based transit systems. Jaffe (2015) calls out the poor levels of existing services across the U.S. as one of the major culprits of why Americans are more likely to invest in trains. Altogether, Americans still appear to be largely supportive of public initiatives to expand and support public transportation initiatives even when they are currently offered poor service.

social benefits of public transportation in theory, not quantified in practice. Similarly, the popular concept of social capital has been connected to the same types of neighborhoods that support public transit usage.

Walking or biking to work may not be considered a traditional form of public transportation usage, but it is supported by the same infrastructure investments and neighborhood design that makes public transportation commuting possible. Neighborhoods with higher density, improved walkability, and less dependence on car transportation have shown improved social ties between neighbors and residents (Leyden 2003). Neighborhoods that support walkability are often described as Transit-oriented development places and are an important part of making public transportation a viable option for many more urban Americans in years to come.

Conclusion

Current social science and medical research are recognizing the boundaries of healthcare and medical treatment. Because of a strong and growing social determinants of health research literature, practitioners recognize the need for preventative and public health approaches to major diseases and chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, mental health, diabetes, and respiratory health. Urban planners and the community planning process are situated at the forefront of the future city or community and have the opportunity to drive the development of healthier communities. Community planning processes, including development reviews, commission, and council hearings, often are required by CO state law and evaluate development proposals based on the project's consistency with existing comprehensive or community master plans, which are developed to "guid[e] and accomplish a coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development of the municipality and its environs which will, in accordance with present and future needs, best promote the health, safety, order, convenience, prosperity, and general

welfare” (CRS § 31-23-207). Many of these processes struggle to appropriately address the requirement to “best promote the health” of the community because health factors are largely not included in the development review process. Health disparities are largely exacerbated and sustained by social inequality, which are often visible within and connected to the lived experience in and exposure to the built environment. The built environments that make up our neighborhoods and the urban planning processes that design them play an important role in mediating the relationship between the social environment and public health outcomes.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL & METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

“Neither cities nor places in them are unordered, unplanned; the question is only whose order, whose planning, for what purpose?”

Peter Marcuse

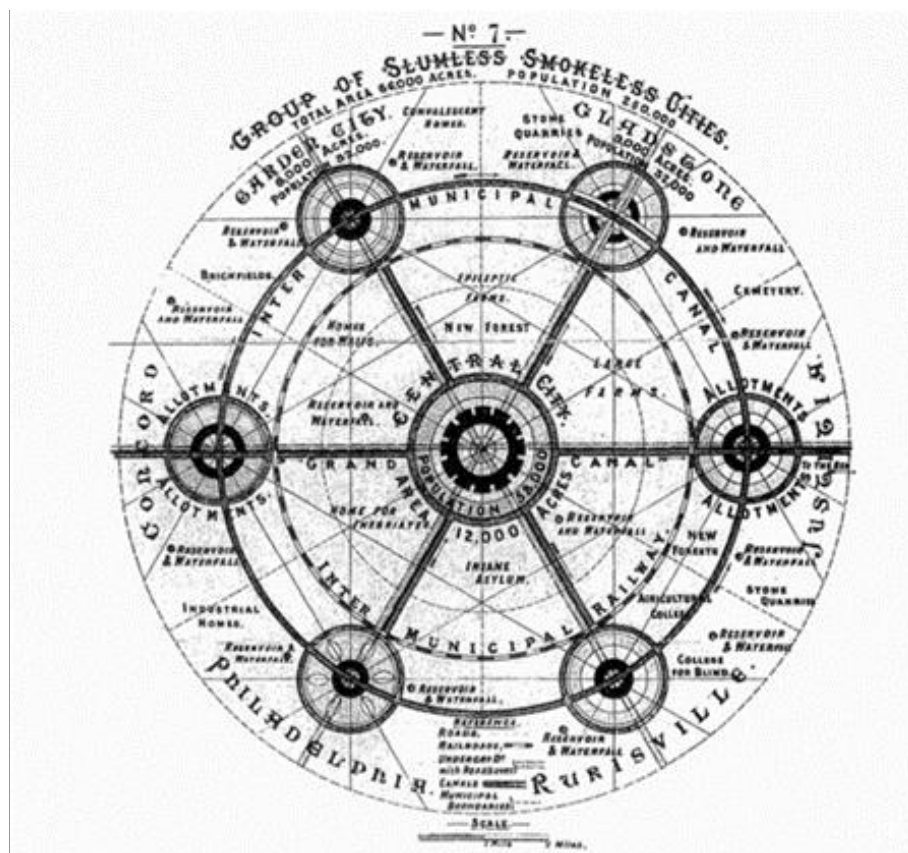
THE SOCIOPOLITICAL THEORIES OF (SUB)URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Urbanization has long been a focus of sociological inquiry, with early Chicago School scholars examining how cities reflect and shape social life and community well-being. As cities have expanded and evolved, so too have the theories and policies that inform their development, often balancing competing values and priorities such as public health, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. This study examines how urban planning and design processes navigate these tensions, exploring ways in which local communities, political actors, and development interests shape the spaces in which people live, work, and interact. By tracing the historical evolution of the sociopolitical theories of urban development and their present day applications, this research highlights the forces that influence urban development and assesses whether contemporary planning processes truly reflect the needs and values of the communities they serve.

The foundational texts of urban sociology from the 1920s (Park and Burgess 1925, 2019) pushed researchers to study local social problems and evaluate urbanization as an everyday experience. As the cities grew, the social research and urban development theories grew in scope as well; eventually to include theorizing about the growth and development of entire cities. Alongside these urban theories, the centralized planning regimes and grand visionary urban designs would take hold in the mid and latter half of the 20th century forever changing the urban landscape for decades. These grand designs were often explicitly tied to the local and national public health and social goals such as in Ebenezer Howard’s “1898 Garden City” (see figure 3 &

4) that would be “smokeless, slumless cities” (Badger 2012). Howard’s “three magnets” (see figure 4) outlines the benefits of an exacting, replicable garden city urban design. His vision merged the city and rural life to provide the economic and social benefits of a city with the environmental and public health ideals of the countryside. These “traditional” public health narratives would continue to influence the development of urban planning and urban sociology well into the late 20th century.

Figure 3 - Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City Diagram (1898)



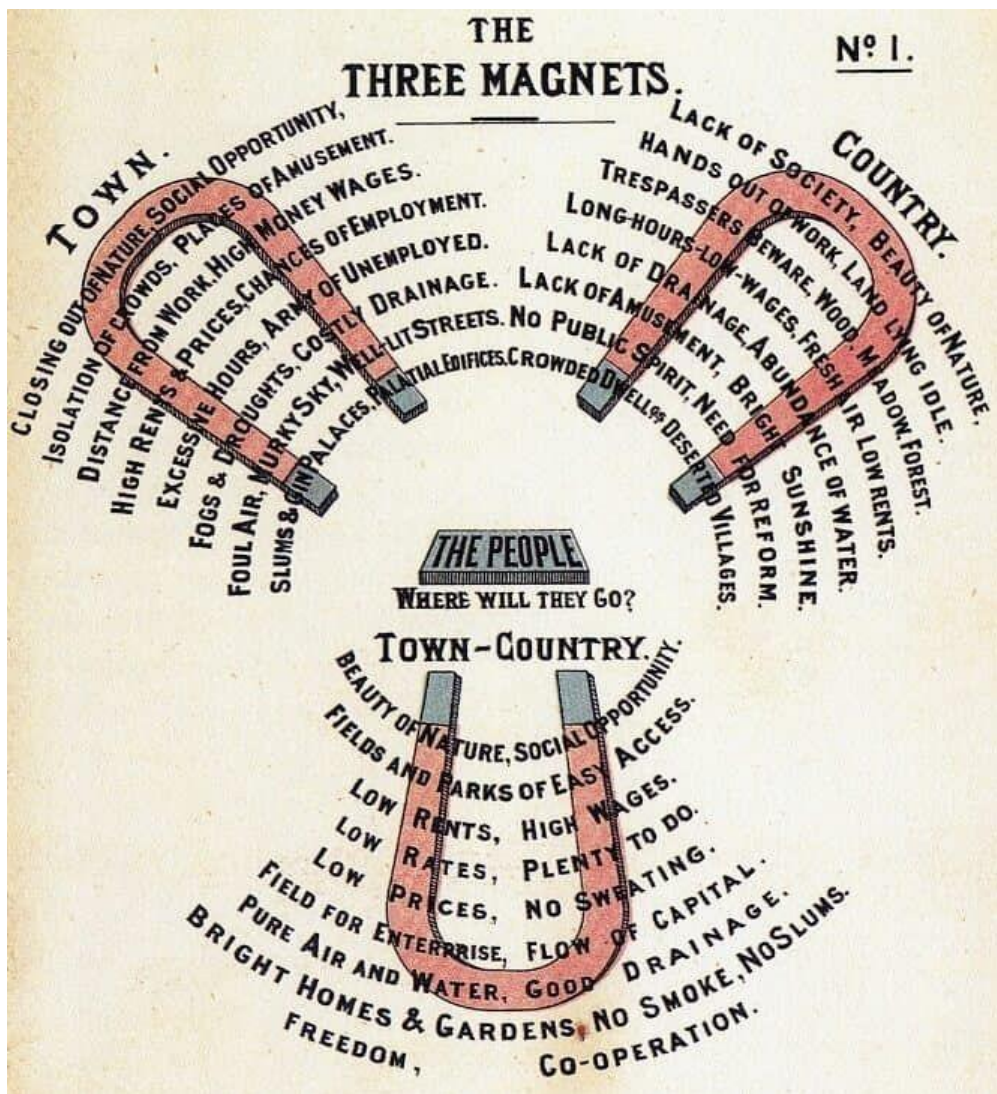
By contrast, the current literature, especially within urban planning, has begun to re-emphasize the need to study how to create a local experience through design and development, often referred to as “place-making” (McCann 2002, Project for Public Spaces 2007, Jones and Evans 2010, Pantic 2021). This 21st century return to the roots of the earliest urban sociology methods are a pendulum of contrasting research perspectives that represent a larger “chicken or

egg”, agency vs. structure debate about the social impact of the city (Aravot 2002). As urban planners return to the neighborhood level place-making process from the strong structuralist perspective of large-scale urban interventions, sociologists have similarly turned away from driving urban structuralism and towards a focus on the unique histories and social processes occurring at the neighborhood level (See Benson and Jackson 2012 for an example). The process of urbanization and the purpose of urban spaces and how both are not only negotiated by citizens, architects, and planners but also, and necessarily, continuously reorganized and rebuilt to meet the current population’s needs is the focus of this project.

A few recent authors have wrestled with the place-making process and the interplay between the structural influences of the built environment and agentic reaction of its residents. The built environment plays a crucial role in shaping what Setha Low (2000) refers to as public culture, the shared practices, values, and meanings that emerge in public spaces. Elements such as public art, street design, and wayfinding signage not only provide functional purposes but also contribute to an overarching atmosphere that informs how individuals experience and engage with a space. Ben Anderson’s (2009) concept of affective atmosphere captures this interplay, emphasizing that these atmospheres are shaped by both the material features of the built environment and the social interactions occurring within them. These atmospheres are not confined to physical spaces; they extend across time, objects, and the broader urban landscape, creating a shared sensorial experience that can evoke emotions and foster a sense of collective identity. Public culture and affective atmospheres are thus co-constitutive. Humans are influenced by the environments they inhabit while simultaneously reshaping those environments through their behaviors and perceptions. In this circular process, the built environment becomes both a canvas and a product of communal experience, reinforcing or challenging cultural norms

through its design and use. Thus, this research seeks to connect the social theory and everyday experience of built environments through analysis of what is being planned or reviewed for the future. Particularly in urban spaces, which are evaluated and designed by numerous community representatives, political actors, and technical experts that influence the final form of development projects. The question remains if such review processes, that aim to represent communities' collective will and character, are achieving that goal best.

Figure 4 - The Garden City Movement's "Three Magnets"



In the design and development process, communities face conflicting goals, such as: expanding access to urban housing, protecting green spaces, reducing pollution, increasing sustainability, creating new job opportunities and industrial activity, and providing quality public services, all while keeping development costs financially viable. Each community has a unique vision for the future, requiring that researchers use methodologically detailed approaches to document local issues and community values while keeping an eye on the regional, national, and global forces influencing the city. Combining these features has led to a discussion of “*glocalization*”, coined by Roland Robertson in the Harvard Business Review (1980), and, later, to the proposed “*grobalization*” (Ritzer and Ryan 2002, Ritzer 2003, 2007). These terms identify and theorize how globalizing forces make cities more similar even as city planners and community members develop paths towards differentiation and specialization in local economies, national industries, or global markets. To address these issues, urban sociology, as a field, needs to go global and hyperlocal simultaneously. Large and small urban environments are being influenced and restructured from both directions. For this reason, this project examines the political and social structures that influence the creation of new urban environments while also emphasizing the unique sociopolitical tug-of-war that occurs between the collective social power of neighborhoods and citizens and the economic powers of growing cities, neither of which fit neatly into either the category of global or local forces in all circumstances. In so doing, this project pushes urban sociology as a field to evaluate the community social life and impacts of urban design from a systems perspective that evaluates global and hyperlocal perspectives simultaneously.

To understand the interplay of the political, social, and economic forces involved in local development, this project engages with Stone’s (1993) urban regime theory (originally referred

to as urban regime analysis¹¹). Urban regime theory takes a middle ground approach between pluralist and structuralist views of power; it posits that in this middle ground, the strong forces of the market economy (structuralist) combine with the organizational power of government to coordinate social interests. Stone and subsequent supporters of urban regime theory have argued that effective governance in cities depends not solely on formal government authorities, but also on the ability of these authorities to forge stable, often informal partnerships between public officials and private actors. Within urban regime theory, these coalitional movements mobilize the financial, social, and political resources necessary for achieving their shared urban governance or development goals.

A central idea of urban regime theory is that legal authority alone is inadequate to implement significant policy changes. Instead, urban governance relies on coalitions, or networks of public and private actors who coordinate efforts to influence decision-making. Such coalitions often evolve over time through negotiation and exchanges of resources. The private sector, particularly development interests, plays a critical role in this process because cities, in a market economy, depend on private investment for economic development. As a result, business interests often shape the government and determine which issues receive attention from the government—or not. However, Stone later acknowledged that not all effective coalitions require private investment. Different types of coalitions can emerge, including ones centered on social reform or progressive politics rather than just economic development.

¹¹ Stone (1993) originally described his ideas as an analysis. From there, other authors began to refer to it more commonly as Urban Regime theory but Mossberger & Stoker (2001) note that the ideas are less of a theory and more of a model for understanding urban governance. The difference in terminology is due to the different foci of authors. When using Stone's ideas as a means to understand a specific context, the model or analysis appears to apply. Whereas, when using Stone's ideas as a theoretical explanation of the structural constraints of a given city, the term theory more aptly applies.

In urban regime theory, what is politically possible is determined through negotiation and coalition-building, meaning that the composition of a governing coalition significantly influences the outcomes of governance. Urban regime theory introduces a unique view of power by emphasizing “power to” rather than “power over” (Stone 2006). Rather than viewing power as a struggle between competing interests to control systems of power, the theory highlights how actors collectively generate the capacity to achieve shared goals. These actors' preferences are not fixed but are in fact shaped by their social interactions with others, and by the general feasibility of a particular proposal. This perspective contrasts with traditional pluralist models that assume all actors enter the political arena with predetermined interests.

Urban regime theory is not without critics. Mossberger and Stoker (2001) argued that the concept lacked precision, making it difficult to identify and apply consistently across cities and contexts. Similarly, Pierre (2005) noted that the theory was not ready for use in international contexts because of its focus on U.S. politics, in which local governments do often rely on private partnerships due to their limited fiscal autonomy. Another shortcoming of urban regime theory, and one that Stone acknowledges, is the theory's limited ability to explain change (Rast 2014). Rast points out that the theory does not offer clear insights as to how regimes are disrupted and suggests an inclusion of ideas about friction and disorder as drivers of change. Finally, the early theorization by Stone also failed to fully address the role of and inclusion of more marginalized voices within communities (Mossberger and Stoker 2001, Davies 2002). As such, urban regime theory runs afoul of Forester's (1989) primary critiques of the current urban development system. Stone (2006) arrives at a similar conclusion to Forester about the need for improved inclusion of marginalized voices in the development or urban governance processes but does so through their inclusion in the coalitional governance model. Though scholars have

challenged the theory's limitations, urban regime theory still offers an instructive lens for understanding how planning decisions are made amid growing challenges and competing stakeholder interests.

As the number of influencing entities has grown, urban planning and zoning complexity have grown, demanding ever greater technical expertise from even small communities. Policy and urban planning decision-makers balance these influences while simultaneously upholding local community interests and values. Often these demands push community discussions about future urban development in separate directions because of the unique social and economic factors that drive each party involved in the development process. Urban regime theory helps explain how these diverse actors, each with distinct interests and resources, form coalitions that shape development outcomes, highlighting the informal arrangements and power dynamics that guide decision making outside of formal governmental structures. Additionally, as technical planning becomes more complicated, community planners become more dependent on larger, more globalized (or at least nationalized) firms, which can navigate the complex legal and technical regulations of the built environment. This reliance often shifts influence toward private sector actors within the urban regime, reinforcing the theory's emphasis on resource exchange and negotiated governance between public and private actors. Furthermore, the political actors may be constrained by their lack of urban planning knowledge and the cacophony of community, business, and social interests that expect to direct their decision-making.

For many political actors, urban design and planning review boards become necessary features of the design process because the politicians can appoint community members with the technical expertise and knowledge necessary to navigate both the community conversations and development technical debates. As board appointees, these residents become a representation of

the urban regime's current structural and pluralistic coalition. Together, they work to maintain the collaboration between the varied interests and engrain the coalition's ideas into municipal policy and the construction of the built environment. Additionally, these boards can fulfill Jane Jacobs's (1961) urban planning vision, which emphasizes the importance of community voice in development, as board members must be citizens of the cities where they are making decisions.

Unfortunately, as discussed in the "urban regime" and "urban growth machine" political theories, these political commissions and neighborhood groups often do not actually have significant technical development knowledge. Their decisions are often based on the highly loaded ideas of what the "character" of a given place should be. Without technical knowledge, planning boards become instruments of protecting the status quo of the current built environment and cultural expectations thereof (Forester 1989). Additionally, these small organizations of residents may not be statistically representative of their neighborhoods but still control the design or development process and aesthetic choices through the political commissions or area associations. Other times, community values-driven plans conflict with bureaucratic requirements and funding realities. Planning, zoning, and design boards, whether controlled by citizens or neighborhood associations, can be quickly co-opted by business and elite interests. Or they can be the tools for participatory democracy and community values-driven planning processes that, as Jane Jacobs hoped, would allow citizens to participate in meaningful and representative ways. Ultimately, as discussed by Stone (2006) and Forester (1989), the urban development review process is the nexus of the social influences representing various concentrations of collective social and economic power. Because this development process can expose the relationships between these interested parties, it is a prime site for studying the social dimensions of urban planning.

Understanding these planning tensions also requires situating them within a broader framework of spatial transformation, where local places are increasingly being shaped by the demands of global capital and elite mobility. The often stark socioeconomic and political divides between and within communities and across expert and elite interests speaks to Castells' (1996, 2nd edition 2000, as published in Susser 2002) theoretical division of the design of spaces into two categories: "the spaces of places" and "the spaces of flows". Castells describes flows as the globalizing forces that wash over certain sections of a city, allowing the global urban elite to pass through a locality seamlessly, experiencing nothing different from their usual. Such spaces of flows are recreated in cities around the world, making the urban environments a homogenizing experience, often economically supported by and designed for a certain class of globalizing society. Often, the spaces of flows are recognizably different because businesses that follow this elite class of global citizens co-locate to provide the services demanded by this unique population. In these neighborhoods, one can often find the glass-filled, clean, and bright modern architectural style¹², adorned with abstract art, with chain restaurants and businesses that provide familiarity across geographical distances by the sameness of their style, menu, and goods. For most Americans, who often only take an occasional yearly flight to see family, they might not notice the Wolfgang Puck restaurant in every major airport, the exacting similarity of each hotel chain with brand loyalty rewards¹³, and the overpriced, over-stylized restaurants that cater to a

¹² Castells clearly identifies the current "modern" architectural styles as spaces that often feel overly hygienic, lacking in the historic character that comes with an old town center. Alternatively, in recent years, the rise of "industrial chic" architecture and interior design appears to be the counterbalance style with rougher wooden edges, exposed piping, and brick walls; an intentionally "incomplete" design. This design stems from the "start-up" business mentality with a focus on the quality product and need for cheap industrial space for new breweries or shops but the design has been co-opted by the wealthy elite in many spaces and have instead become identified as signatures of gentrification and difference.

¹³ Brand loyalty rewards like the exclusive fee-charging credit cards, are designed to exclude the general public and provide direct benefits to the wealthiest of participants. In 2010, Schuh, Shy, & Stavins, estimated that cash-paying households contributed about \$150 towards offsetting credit card costs. With the average credit card using

wealthier, transient class. Because of their clientele's transient life and their physical and social disconnection from the locality, these developments spark more controversy leading to debates about gentrification and displacement.

Alternatively, in most local development processes, citizens emphasize the need for creating “spaces” that feel like “places”; in other words, making public spaces feel like “home.” The process can be as simple as choosing brick buildings over sleek glossy modern styles or designing public squares with water features and moveable seating rather than concrete plazas with uncomfortable seating. These spaces of places feel more permanent and demonstrate a commitment to the local community. Examples range from the local dive bar to the hometown restaurant your parents take you to whenever you visit home. These businesses, amenities, and the services they provide are unique to the city they are in, often so much so that there is no carbon copy to be found anywhere else in the world. To the transient global class, these places may appear run-down or rustic, but to the local citizens these spaces of places are where the community is strengthened through regularity, ritual patterns of activity, and social interaction that weave together the social fabric of a small town or city.

To Castells, this divide in design preferences leads architects or wealthier, globalizing citizens to design “spaces of flows” rather than the “spaces of places” that local citizens prefer. The built environment and the design of it becomes the center battleground between the global elite and the local, the rich and the poor. This project moves away from the abstract theory of place and space and towards the fundamentals of how the built environment is designed and tells the story of the people who design it. Castells’ “spaces” deeply informs how a community

households benefiting to the tune of \$1130. While credit card use has risen over the past decade, the income and credit card use are positively correlated resulting in a system that transfers wealth from the poorest Americans to the wealthiest.

experiences urbanization in everyday life and undergirds the analysis of the political processes and meetings where the design and development of health-promoting spaces are created.

Some may argue that slight changes to the urban machine are simply the results of “interest convergence” (Bell Jr. 1980) or the urban elite seeing personally accruable benefits to altering the growth machines' politics to meet the needs of marginalized out-groups. However, the sociology of urban social movements and “new urban politics” (Cochrane 1999) describes how resistance to the growth machine politics appears to be co-occurring or phasing in and out of existence. For example, Castells (1983) describes how, in San Francisco, Latino and LGBT social and political organizations led independent urban reorganization coalitions that maintained their independence from elite politics for several years.

In the same way, many environmental or green social movements organized and controlled alliances separate from the elite growth machines and have made significant gains through equity-building processes. For example, local citizen groups passed Denver’s green roof requirement into law by ballot initiative against substantial opposition from the elite business and development companies. As such, many authors throughout *The Urban Growth Machine: Critical Perspectives Two Decades Later* (a collection of essays expounding the urban growth machine theory, edited by Jonas and Wilson 1999) and Castells believed that environmentalism might be one of the ways to create resistance to the growth machines or urban regimes in cities. Nevertheless, there is also considerable evidence (Dilworth and Stokes 2012) pointing towards the co-optation of green projects by machine politics, as predicted by the original theory. Thus, it leads to a plausible concern about green gentrification being the newest version of the urban growth machine, benefiting from the popularity of environmentalism in urban spaces while holding tight to many of the original growth tactics. Gould and Lewis (2017) describe these

changes as a possible transition phase from the neoliberal growth machine to a green growth machine via a “neoliberal green growth machine”.

The Green Growth Machine theory allows us to draw a larger connection between the loss of the traditional public health narrative in urban planning and the rising influence of “green” development. The “greening” of urban development has become associated with or possibly serves as a proxy for, the “healthfulness” of urban design. Often, these health narratives are popular myths constructed from decades-old associations between preferred lifestyles and the forms of politics that re-emphasize those preferences. For example, most Americans believe that single-family suburban land-use developments are more environmentally and public health-friendly than their more urbanized counterparts. Due to their reliance on private automobiles, the lack of shared resources (down to the walls shared in an apartment building), and the vast tracts of land redeveloped to construct resource-intensive suburban developments, these neighborhoods have significantly higher carbon and air pollution emission. Small green interventions make suburban development appear to be a “healthy” development pattern. The simple veneer of a green lawn, a few trees, and ornamental gardens and bushes leads many to believe these neighborhoods are health-promoting spaces. Researchers have found that as you go further into the suburbs, there are higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Jackson 2002, Ewing et al. 2014) and a deficit of social connection, often leading to poor mental health and loss of social support. The green veneer that upholds the green growth machine as a health narrative perpetuates poor health behaviors and harms millions of Americans' mental and physical health.

This project seeks to explore further the relationship between the symbolic and norm-inducing standards ingrained into the built environment by exploring Castell’s (2000) “spaces vs. places” concept of values-based development conflict through on-the-ground evidence seeking.

Additionally, the study seeks to compare and contrast the ongoing theoretical conflict between Molotch's (1976, 1979, Logan and Molotch, 1987) "Growth Machine" and the pluralistic urban regime theories of development politics to see if such theories continue to explain the politics of urban development in small suburban communities. Additionally, by interpreting the green growth machine theory as a public health narrative that describes the public experience and political interpretation of health in the built environment, this study can explore, in the same contexts, the role of public health narratives in the contextual and experiential gaps between the modern urban planning process and the lived experience of the place.

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Evaluating how place impacts health outcomes has been difficult, partially explaining why it has been understudied. However, a new focus on the "social determinants of health" has emphasized the need for a fuller understanding of how our neighborhoods and environments interact with individuals to create unique health outcomes or risks (Berkman and Kawachi 2014). Our society has undergone a paradigm shift as we begin to recognize that the social determinants of health are directly linked to the significant changes in mortality causes over the last century due to substantial improvements in healthcare and medical knowledge, such as the widespread use of vaccinations addressing many of the proximate causes of mortality. This has been called the "epidemiological transition," or, more simply, a transition from dying from viruses and bacterial infections to chronic diseases of old age. For example, in 1900, in the U.S., the top five causes of death included enteritis and gastrointestinal infections (due to poor sanitation), tuberculosis, pneumonia, heart disease, and Bright's disease (a specific classification of kidney disease) (CDC 2000). Alternatively, chronic diseases now top the mortality charts, with heart disease as the top killer in 2019, closely followed by cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases,

cerebrovascular diseases, Alzheimer's, and diabetes (CDC 2020). With this change, the social constraints of place, constructed by social processes and reflecting people's values, are now the key mediating factors of our population's health.

With the shift away from proximate causes, the role of one's environment and its effects on health across the life course became the prominent determining factor. Link and Phelan's (1995) fundamental cause theory provided a framework for evaluating the changes in mortality through social metrics. Their work highlighted that socioeconomic status and access to resources (such as money, knowledge, power, and institutional services) enable those with higher statuses to live healthier lives. Therefore, even though the causes of mortality have changed, the poor are still more likely to die than the rich for almost every major cause of death in 1900 and 2019. Multiple studies have demonstrated this relationship. Link (et al. 1998) showed how years of education were positively associated with mammogram screenings for women. The now-famous Whitehall study showed that as employment grades increased (and subsequent worker independence and pay grades) all-cause mortality decreased (Van Rossum et al. 2000). The key to this fundamental cause theory was that the wealthier, more powerful members of society could address more of the proximal and distal causes of disease than lower socioeconomic status groups or individuals. Medical services left the environmental and individual risks unaddressed, and policy changes had significantly worse effects on the poor. Link and Phelan's fundamental cause framework creates the theoretical relationship between socioeconomic status and multiple health outcomes, including hypertension, heart disease, cancer, etc.

Fundamental cause theory provided a framework and early evidence that the individual-level data could no longer explain the variance in health effects. As with the Whitehall study, the social stratification of society by issues common to sociology, like class, race, socioeconomic

status, and gender, gives us an indication theoretically that group-level phenomena, such as neighborhoods, may also explain the health risks. Neighborhood-effects health research has moved the analysis of the determinants of health from a purely individual-level study to a community or institutional level, connecting the sociology of health to public health, epidemiology, and demographic research. Neighborhood-effects health research emphasizes five areas: the population perspective, the clustered nature of health and risk, differences between contextual and compositional effects, the characteristics of social places (such as sensitivity and resilience), and the importance of a life course perspective or longitudinal impacts. All these concepts have proven difficult to identify, quantify, and theorize, especially when the goal is to translate these ideas into real-world policy changes.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

Denver is a relatively large city, ranked 21st largest in the U.S. if you only count the approximately 727,000 people within Denver County (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Denver slides up the rankings to the 19th largest, home to over 2.9 million people, if you count the five counties that constitute the Denver Metropolitan Area defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. As such, Denver proper is home to a minority of the total residents of the Denver metro area, meaning that significant community development, political concerns, and public health issues arise outside of the regional center. Traditional and contemporary urban sociological research on the relationship between people and the built environment of their local communities has overemphasized the experience of the largest U.S. cities (Ocejo et al. 2020), such as New York (Smith 1996; Wynn 2010, 2011), Chicago (Park and Burgess 1921, Sampson 2014) or Los Angeles (Davis 1992; Dear 2002), supporting theoretical outcomes that do not align with the experiences of smaller cities or recognizing that there may be significant variation within these

cities at more local levels. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the surrounding suburban cities of Denver, such as Broomfield, Arvada, Centennial, and others. Working from a broad city-level perspective, down to the individual level, this dissertation starts with a content analysis of city comprehensive plans, moves down to the public decision-making processes at urban planning commissions, and then does an ethnographic deep dive with community representatives. By focusing on these cities outside of Denver proper, this dissertation aims to contribute a new perspective on urban development and growth to the existing literature that emphasizes the experience of small urban communities. It will help evaluate the various social concepts and community values in these areas associated with urban design and development.

These communities' various and unique land-use and zoning laws and social and demographic histories constitute a regional approach specific to the DMA. The metro cities are considered “commuter” communities in many ways but are also relatively economically and socially independent from the city of Denver. These communities contribute a sizable portion of the downtown Denver workforce and highway traffic. As such, each of these communities takes cues from one another and the City of Denver when establishing or amending planning and zoning policies. Additionally, each city is a part of the Regional Transportation District (RTD), a taxpayer-funded, independent state entity that provides public transit throughout these sites but has also been a source of considerable tension and debate. In these cities, specific neighborhoods or development zones have been identified by the research participants for ethnographic research because of their unique built environment characteristics, histories, or demographics. The research includes “walk and talk” interviews with interview participants to allow individuals to highlight key aspects of the neighborhoods they selected and gain a deeper understanding of the personal stories and connections such places have to the residents and local community leaders

who participated in this study. Additionally, the investigator spent time in the identified neighborhoods to speak to residents who were out in public and make visits to local businesses and establishments.

Urban Ethnographies: A Brief Review of a Sociological Tradition

This project proposes using multiple common research tools, including semi-structured interviews and field site observations, to produce a holistic, ethnographic narrative of the communities' experiences and discourses around health and urban development. The urban ethnographic tradition has many famous examples, including the ethnographic tales of Boston's North End by William Whyte's *Street Corner Society* and Herbert Gans' *The Urban Villagers* and the thought-provoking and critical analysis of urban planning by Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Urban ethnographies sometimes take on specific political or social issues of the times, such as the national eviction crisis, as seen through the Midwest cities in Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*, Sudhir Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day*, an ethnography of gang violence in Chicago, or Eliot Liebow's heart-breaking exploration of homeless women's experiences in *Tell Them Who I Am*. Neighborhood or local area ethnographies provide researchers insight into the local experience by allowing them to live and spend significant time observing their surroundings and engaging with residents. Neighborhoods are particularly suited for ethnographic techniques, given the workable size and unique variation within communities in the DMA cities. For this project, ethnography is the central feature for analyzing the difference between the built environment's current features and the original plans evaluated by citizens and community planning entities. The ethnographic methodology seeks to build on the strong sociological legacy by telling the story of the history and civic participation in the production of neighborhood-wide development projects that have community-wide impacts. The ethnography

homes in on the procedures and policies for city planning, zoning, and development, how community members participate in these processes, and how these communities instill their values into the built environment.

Another major benefit of ethnographic research is that the research can explore systems of power and give voice to community members who may not have access to or the ability to participate in the power structures in the modern community development framework. For example, Nader's (1972) essay on "studying up" greatly influenced the field of anthropology and called for researchers to focus on investigating systems of power rather than the consequences of social policy failures or topics that today we might deride as academic poverty porn¹⁴. While it is still important to study and understand the lives of the impoverished, the results of housing segregation and the current housing crisis have been created by the current systems of power.

Traditional urban ethnographies have gleaned insights about the city as an organic social unit from the stories of the marginalized. But often, looking back, such research has been criticized for disregarding the power structures that created the social circumstances of those communities. Later, aptly shown by Whyte (1943) and Gan's (1982) ethnographies of Boston, sociologists began to analyze and criticize power structures and social structures by observing and documenting the lived experience and stories of communities that were ignored by or looked down upon by powerful city planning or city political machines. This study attempts to investigate spaces of power, particularly the power systems within urban development processes,

¹⁴ In *Slums: A History of a Global Injustice* by Alan Mayne (2017), he addresses the poverty porn critique of his work on "slums" across the globe. In his book, he pushes back on some of these critiques by emphasizing the origin from which he is discussing the issues of poverty and poor housing in global slums, *the people of the slums*. His work takes a truly bottom-up approach to understanding poverty by looking at the systems that created slums and emphasizing a perspective of the slum from the person who lives in the slums. To him, academic poverty porn lacks this strong critique of past wrongs or historical background on how these neighborhoods ended up as they are today. His ethnography not only gives voice to those who live in these neighborhoods but exposes how people thrive in communities often derided by those with social standing and privilege.

and the citizens and representatives who influence those structures to shape the future of their communities. These planning commissions often decide what is or is not allowed within a community, and as we noted in the literature review, the voices on these commissions are often unrepresentative of the communities they serve. More research on these processes is needed to explore these invisible social structures and processes that enact forms of social control and construct community efficacy through the built environment. Ultimately, neighborhood ethnographies provide, for this project, a way to observe and write about real-life experiences of a place holistically.

Ethnography is a combination of methods “triangulating” the insights we develop as researchers (Low 2023) which is potentially better than any one method alone. The in-depth historical and social perspective that ethnographic research provides, much like the first examples provided by the Chicago School, gives the researcher and reader insight into the daily experiences of each place and connects that experience of place with the larger social structures and political processes that influence each community. The development plans and architectural renderings are readily accessible in government documents in each city. This mixed-methods ethnographic approach pairs interviews with community representatives and observational data to analyze the intangible experience of spaces and places, ensuring that researchers’ results give voice to the community but also can distinguish between the idealized stories and the reality of life in the communities under study.

CHAPTER IV: PLANNING FOR HEALTH: PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE FUTURE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN SUBURBAN CITY COMPREHENSIVE PLANS

Cities are at the very center of the many challenges we face – climate change, poverty, job creation, public health, sustainable energy, and inclusive development

Richard Florida, The New Urban Crisis, 2017

INTRODUCTION

U.S. cities began implementing zoning codes and plans in the early 1900s to improve public health, welfare, and morality, among other goals. As noted by Gray (2022), by dividing cities into zones and relative specializations, health threatening or nuisance activities such as industrial work could be separated from residential and light commercial developments. Early adopters though also used land use planning and zoning as a cudgel for racial or ethnic segregation. Since those early days, across the U.S., comprehensive plans, zoning, and land use maps have become guiding documents and the basis for all development reviews in each locality (with a notable exception, NYC, which to this day does not have a comprehensive plan).

Colorado state law requires comprehensive plans and other planning documents be used in planning decisions to promote “public health, safety, and welfare (CRS § 31-23-207)”, but how do these documents discuss and consider the built environment's impact on public health? The previous literature review shows that planning and zoning directly impact health. For example, in neighborhoods with high-traffic and high-speed roads there are often more pedestrian and bicyclist deaths (Tefft 2013, Vargo et al. 2015). In isolated communities with less access to a variety of neighborhood amenities such as grocery stores, recreational spaces, green spaces, etc., there is often more single-occupancy vehicle traffic and fewer active mobility options such as biking or walking, which reduce heart disease and improve respiratory function (Shepard 2008). Additionally, comprehensive planning that still allows for the development of

isolated neighborhoods that may lack access to parks or healthy food, potentially further damage the health of long-term residents (Beulac et al. 2009). Ultimately, the lack of strong public health metrics in land use planning and comprehensive plans may lead to increased heart disease and diabetes risk, and worsen respiratory function (Saelens, Sallis, and Frank 2003, Beulac et al. 2009, Block et al. 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant flaws in U.S. public health infrastructure and urban planning strategies; it also drew attention to the inequities in the current system of access to safe, health-promoting and protecting environments. Worse still, the continued economic turmoil post-pandemic, particularly the rise in inflation coupled with a hike to national interest rates, has reduced the opportunity for additional residential development, further exacerbating the national housing and cost of living crisis. As such, topics such as land use reform and new planning guidelines are becoming part of a new public discourse as evidenced by recent remarks in the 2024 presidential campaign,

Trump has pledged to tackle zoning and other construction regulations in order to accelerate housing production, though his platform doesn't go into details. Harris is proposing a \$40 billion fund to spur local governments, which control zoning laws, to streamline their regulations in order to cut down on the time it takes for builders to get projects cleared and completed. (Associated Press 2024).

Including public health metrics in the comprehensive city planning processes could be the key to addressing the current and future public health and housing issues simultaneously. This project is important because the ongoing U.S. housing crisis only limits access to healthy environments and does not appear to be waning. Instead, it will likely only worsen in the future as the Denver Metropolitan Area (DMA) population continues to grow. Evaluating the suburban cities' comprehensive plans gives us insight into what policy changes and built environment outcomes we might be able to expect soon.

This chapter evaluates ten small, largely suburban, city comprehensive plans from across

the DMA to better understand the urban planning priorities of small cities and their future vision for the built environment. The analysis of over 1500 pages of public documents was conducted in MAXQDA and resulted in over 120 identifiable themes and subcodes across more than 24,000 coded segments. The analysis and discussion focus on how concerns about public health are included in these plans but exploratorily analyzes and summarizes the key themes found within the plans overall. Ultimately, the analysis finds and highlights four common patterns: inclusion of public health in comprehensive planning, integration of land use and transportation planning, the role of environmental stewardship in development politics, and rising concerns about fiscal sustainability as related to land use policy within these small suburban communities. The results indicate that comprehensive plans do appear to be guiding cities towards the construction of healthier and more equitable neighborhood environments.

LITERATURE & THEORY OVERVIEW

Comprehensive plans are at the heart of urban planning, serving as visionary documents that guide a city's growth and development. While much of urban development is driven by zoning laws and technical regulations, comprehensive plans offer a broader, more accessible view of what a city aspires to be in the long term. These plans are created through months of public engagement and stakeholder input and represent a city's overarching goals for the built environment and are often updated every 10 to 20 or more years, providing a blueprint for how a city will evolve over time. Unlike zoning codes, which are focused on regulating land use and density, comprehensive plans are forward-looking documents that outline priorities for

transportation, housing, green spaces, public health, and social equity¹⁵. They are often filled with renderings of future parks, street layouts, and even new neighborhood designs, presenting a vision that is meant to inspire both residents and policymakers. This section examines how comprehensive plans relate to urban development and public health, tracing the evolution of planning theory and highlighting the key concepts that inform contemporary urban planning.

Many city comprehensive plans tend to solely focus on land uses or policy positions tangential to land use. Mitchell Silver (as quoted in Cheshmehzangi 2021) critiques this tendency and argues that planners should shift their attention toward the lived experiences of residents, asking how people move through and interact with urban spaces. Silver’s assertion— “Who visits downtown to see land uses?” —challenges the conventional approach that views land as a static commodity. Instead, he suggests that comprehensive plans should reflect how people experience the city, considering elements like social interaction, public health, and a sense of place.

Although these plans are intended to be forward-looking and visionary, the reality is often more complicated. Big cities and small suburban cities, alike, may have grand aspirations for their future but face significant hurdles in realizing them. Economic constraints, political and popular resistance, and shifting priorities can all impede the implementation of a comprehensive plan’s vision. Even when these plans are drafted, they often represent only a snapshot of a possible urban future, one that may never fully unfold because of their possibly overly broad goals and strong focus on land use development policy. Such broad strokes, particularly in small

¹⁵ For a great summary of the common parts of a comprehensive plan see Rojas-Rueda & Morales-Zamora (2023). Their paper gives a clear summary of the common sections of a city’s comprehensive plan with a focus on promoting health equity. More on their paper’s recommendations in this chapters discussion section.

suburban cities with fewer professional staff, may benefit from clearer metrics of analysis, including public health metrics, that could aid in the implementation of each city's vision.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that comprehensive plans should incorporate public health considerations. It is well-documented that the built environment—encompassing everything from parks and sidewalks to housing and transportation infrastructure—has a profound impact on public health. Issues like obesity, heart disease, mental health, and social well-being are all influenced by the way cities are designed (Jackson 2003; Ewing et al. 2003; Ewing et al. 2014; Brugge et al. 2013). Comprehensive plans offer a unique opportunity to create environments that promote healthier lifestyles by emphasizing walkability, green spaces, and access to essential services. Urban planning professionals often have a significant understanding of the relationship between basic public health outcomes and the built environment. Unfortunately, professional planners often get only small opportunities to influence public health through urban design. The comprehensive planning visioning process only occurs (in most cities) once every ten years, sometimes even less. For example, the small DMA city of Glendale, current home to the author of this paper, last updated its comprehensive plan in 1996, three years after the author was born. This highlights the challenge of ensuring that public health priorities remain central to urban planning, as long gaps between updates can leave cities struggling to address evolving health and environmental needs.

Comprehensive plans can serve as a guiding urban design framework by suggesting changes to the way we build neighborhoods that then structure/influence the lives of residents. For example, Montgomery (1998) highlighted the importance of urban design principles and the inclusion of diverse urban forms that serve various populations. Montgomery argues that cities can provide a neighborhood-level built environment framework that encourages both economic

vitality and physical activity by emphasizing compact, high-density neighborhoods with small city blocks and mixed-use areas. Saelens, Sallis, and Frank (2003) further established the link between neighborhood walkability and health outcomes; their research found that individuals in walkable areas were more likely to incorporate walking and cycling into their daily lives, leading to reduced risks for conditions like heart disease and diabetes. This indicates that comprehensive plans that take public health into account can make a profound difference, particularly when public health professionals are involved in the planning process.

While urban planners do sometimes have significant training and understandings of the relationship between health and the built environment, leaving public health experts out of the decision-making rooms is a profound missed opportunity for driving healthier behaviors in urban and suburban environments. Indeed, Perdue, Gostin, and Stone (2003) argue for the active involvement of public health experts in land-use decisions to ensure that health considerations are integrated into the development of urban environments. Healthier and more inclusive urban spaces are more likely to be developed and to reflect community needs by collaborative planning that brings together multiple stakeholders to make decisions (Healey 1998).

While it is now widely recognized that the built environment affects health outcomes, comprehensive plans often fail to provide specific strategies for addressing these issues. For instance, a plan may highlight the importance of parks and trails but neglect other key determinants of health, such as access to affordable housing or safe transportation options. The lack of in-depth attention to public health in comprehensive plans reflects a broader gap between the aspirational goals of many comprehensive plans and the reality of our current built environments (Lewyn 2015). These goals include promoting walkability and reducing automobile dependence as opposed to the reality of an inherited, entrenched, low-density zoning

and car-centric infrastructure and urban fabric. Bridging this gap is crucial for realizing the public health, equity, and affordability benefits that well-executed urban planning can provide. Such gaps reveal that, when public health is mentioned in comprehensive plans, it is often an afterthought rather than a vital component of the plan.

Further, comprehensive plans frequently mention public health only in relation to parks and recreational spaces. While this at least acknowledges the importance of green spaces as community health assets, it only scratches the surface of the complex relationship between urban environments and public health. Given the overarching vision that comprehensive plans set out for the future of a city, the inclusion of public health across various sectors such as transportation, land use planning, and other common sections provides a profound opportunity to impact the health of residents. Similarly, Setha Low (2021) critiques this limited focus on green spaces, noting that simply “plopping” a park into a neighborhood is not enough. Urban spaces need to be thoughtfully designed with community needs in mind, fostering not just physical health but social well-being as well. To be sure, green infrastructure, like parks, is a critical aspect of sustainable development, offering solutions for both environmental and public health challenges. It is also true that the preservation of green spaces in cities is increasingly difficult as urban density grows, given that these spaces provide essential benefits for both mental and physical health by reducing urban heat, offering spaces for recreation, and improving overall well-being (Haaland and Konijnendijk 2015). As cities expand, balancing urban growth with green space preservation becomes a greater challenge, but these areas are vital for the sustainability and health of urban populations. In the Denver metro area, green and open space preservation is often top of mind for residents. The proximity to the Rocky Mountains and strong cultural connection to outdoor and nature-based activities drives a serious counterpoint to

sprawling urban development strategies. But, with the appropriate tools and policies, urban planners in the region should not shy away from these, often, contentious debates but rather reframe new urbanist development strategies or even light intensification as opportunities to protect green and open space lands that their residents value so highly.

The concept of green spaces also overlaps with less visible “green infrastructure”. Green infrastructure includes essential city functions like stormwater management, tree canopies, and air pollution controls. Many comprehensive plans fail to fully integrate sustainability principles, particularly in terms of these services (Berke and Conroy 2000). Woodruff and BenDor (2016) stress that planning should include more actionable policies to protect natural systems and support urban resilience. The authors argue that cities must adopt robust green infrastructure strategies to adapt to the increasing threats posed by climate change, particularly in vulnerable regions like the U.S. Gulf Coast (Le & Tran, 2023). Overall, green infrastructure has significant relationships to community health outcomes but also appears to not receive the appropriate level of attention within comprehensive planning.

As mentioned before, residents of the Denver metro area value the natural environment in a unique way because of their proximity to amazing, preserved lands in the Rocky Mountains. Additionally, the growing concerns over regularly worsening drought conditions on the Front Range provides an in road for green infrastructure based urban development policies to begin addressing not only the climate crisis, but housing and public health crises as well. Green infrastructure and development strategies that compound well with the protection of the natural environment, either for environmental sustainability or for leisure and recreation, may be able to sway previously hesitant residents who may be averse to neighborhood changes.

Social Theories of Urban Planning

A critical aspect of comprehensive planning that is often underexplored by practitioners in urban planning is the built environment's potential to shape social interactions within cities. Sociologists suggest that successful urban environments are those that promote regular, positive interactions among strangers and between residents of diverse backgrounds. Comprehensive plans can play a critical role in fostering these environments by encouraging a diversity of uses in public spaces, promoting walkability, and supporting mixed-income housing developments. However, planners must balance the aesthetic and functional aspects of urban design with the social goals of inclusivity and community engagement. Theories from urban sociology, particularly those put forward by Richard Sennett (1977), Erving Goffman (1959), and Elijah Anderson (2011), emphasize the importance of public spaces in facilitating social connections between people from diverse backgrounds. Anderson's Cosmopolitan Canopy theory describes urban spaces—such as markets, parks, and public squares—where diverse groups temporarily suspend racial and class tensions to engage in civil interactions, fostering social trust and cross-cultural exchange. The concept highlights the role of public spaces in promoting cross-cultural interactions, which can reduce social tensions and foster a sense of community.

Comprehensive plans, by their very nature, are tools for creating these kinds of public spaces. Parks, plazas, and community centers frequently appear as central elements in these documents, but their success depends more than just on their physical presence. As Low (2021) argues, these spaces must be designed with intention, considering the cultural and social needs of the people who use them. A community swimming pool that is difficult to access or restricted to only HOA residents, or an arts or cultural center that does not resonate with the local community may fail to deliver the promised benefits, even if it looks appealing in the comprehensive plan's

renderings. Urban planners often face the challenge of distilling the complexity of the city into actionable strategies. As James C. Scott (1998) would argue, planners can sometimes fall into the trap of oversimplifying the city, focusing too narrowly on technical elements like zoning codes or land use regulations. In his book, “*Seeing Like a State*”, he presents a story of state foresters aiming to maximize the productivity of forests by organizing the natural chaos, cutting down unproductive trees, and planting only valuable lumber. By this, the foresters were truly missing the forest for the trees and harmed the natural biodiversity ecosystem that helped protect and promote the forest’s (and subsequent lumber gathering opportunities) health. In the case of the built environment, city planners can unwittingly fall into the same trap. They are like the state-on-high, deconstructing the forest to maximize whatever short-term goal the city may have, be it property tax values, commercial sales taxes, or valiant attempts to address the housing crisis. In the end, planners may not realize how they are reducing the complexity of the city in the process.

Scott’s key points arrive at the same conclusions about the city as the Chicago School’s early ecological theories: that perhaps the complex socio-ecological experience and human construct that is a city is oversimplified and harmed when planning focuses too much on specific goals or ideas rather than working with the “natural” flows of urban development. This chapter argues that comprehensive plans, despite their broad scope, can suffer from this same tendency. The result is often a document that looks comprehensive on paper but does not fully engage with the complexities of social life, public health outcomes, or the economic realities in the city.

Scott’s critique is particularly relevant when considering how comprehensive plans are developed. Although these plans are created through extensive community engagement processes, the voices of certain groups may be underrepresented. Planning processes can sometimes favor the most vocal or powerful stakeholders, leaving out the perspectives of

marginalized communities. This can lead to a plan that reflects the interests of a select few rather than the broader public.

Despite their limitations, comprehensive plans have the potential to drive meaningful change in cities, particularly when it comes to issues of equity and social justice. In recent years, cities like Minneapolis have used their city comprehensive plans to challenge long-standing development patterns and promote more equitable urban growth. The Minneapolis 2040 comprehensive plan, for example, made national headlines for its decision to eliminate single-family zoning, a move aimed at increasing housing density and affordability (Mervesh 2018; Kahlenburg 2019). These kinds of bold policy changes reflect the growing role of comprehensive plans in addressing some of the most pressing challenges facing cities today, from housing crises to public health disparities. Yet, as Gray (2022) points out, comprehensive plans alone cannot solve these issues. While they can lay out a vision for a far more equitable and healthier city, the real work happens in the implementation. Without sustained political will and community support, the lofty goals outlined in these plans may never materialize.

METHODS

Comprehensive plans are more than just technical documents that outline zoning changes, land use policies, and infrastructure priorities. They are rhetorical and political texts that reflect the values, assumptions, and power structures embedded within the planning process (Ryan 2011). This study applies a content analysis framework informed by Ryan's perspective on "Reading Through a Plan" to examine not only the explicit policies and priorities outlined but also the underlying patterns and potential ideological influences that shape the final products. Following this approach, the analysis considers comprehensive plans as multi-layered documents. Documents that communicate both information and implicit meanings shaped by

political, economic, and social structures to persuade various audiences, including policymakers, developers, and a city's residents. The ways in which public health is included (or overlooked) in these plans provide insights into broader planning priorities for the Denver metropolitan region and the extent to which these cities recognize health as a core urban planning concern.

Data Collection

This study conducted a content analysis of comprehensive plans from 10 cities in the Denver Metropolitan Area (DMA) with Statutory or Home Rule Authority under the Colorado State Constitution. The cities included in this study are Arvada, Broomfield, Centennial, Englewood, Lakewood, Littleton, Northglenn, Thornton, Westminster, and Wheat Ridge. The largest city was Lakewood with approximately 156,000 residents (ACS 2022) and the smallest was Wheat Ridge at approximately 31,800 residents (ACS 2022). The average population size for the cities was 86,500. The median was nearly 91,000 with Broomfield and Centennial being the middle values. The cities were selected based on their proximity to the City and County of Denver, with full city boundaries falling within the Denver Metropolitan Area. Other cities were considered including Aurora, Greenwood Village, Lakeside, Edgewater, Golden, Commerce City, Brighton, and others. All other cities were excluded, except for Greenwood Village¹⁶, because of their distance from Denver or due to small/large population sizes. After evaluating seven comprehensive plans, the analysis reached substantive and overlapping patterns, the coding and analysis took over 75 hours.

These comprehensive plans, which serve as guiding documents for city development and planning, were selected to examine the extent to which public health is integrated into the

¹⁶ At the time of this study, the author was unable to verify Greenwood Village's Statutory or Home Rule Authority constitutional status but in hindsight it could have been included.

planning processes of these cities. The comprehensive plans of each city were publicly available online and included documents ranging from 70 to 360 pages in length, with an average length of 160 pages. Overall, the comprehensive plans had an approval date ranging from 2009 to 2024. The formats, sections, and organizational structures of these plans varied, but several cities shared overlapping sections, which can be partially attributed to state regulations that mandate the inclusion of specific topics such as “tourism” (CRS § 30-23-206). Two of these plans, Wheat Ridge and Westminster, are currently undergoing review processes (Fall 2024 with updated versions expected next year) and one, Broomfield, is undergoing review of amendments (Ordinance No. 2222 passed in July 2024) which are also expected to be proposed next year (Broomfield Voice 2024). All comprehensive plans are expected to be changed soon due to recent state law changes. Five bills were introduced and passed in the Colorado state legislature in 2024, with more that were attempted and died along the legislative process. HB 24-1007 has prohibited residential occupancy limits. HB 24-1304 placed restrictions on minimum parking requirements. HB 24-1152 puts a prohibition on local laws banning Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). HB 24-1313, by far the most contentious, was modified multiple times¹⁷ but its final product promotes the development of transit-oriented communities in areas serviced by local transit authorities. Finally, SB 24-174 required housing plans to be developed for all cities within metropolitan planning associations (which includes every large city in Colorado). This list represents only the beginning of state level regulatory changes to urban planning in Colorado and already results in many cities having to make changes to their comprehensive and zoning plans.

¹⁷ Note that HB 24-1313 originally had much more punishing measures such as stripping localities of their highway funding if they failed to meet the new development requirements. This proved to be too unpopular and was stripped out of the bill before passage. In 2023, a much more comprehensive regulatory and state housing initiative was attempted and failed but the number of successful legislative bills in 2024 seems to point to a new fervor for state level intervention into urban development issues.

Therefore, this study represents a snapshot of what comprehensive plans looked like prior to this new level of state regulatory engagement and potentially national political focus.

Coding Framework

The content analysis was conducted using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, to systematically code the text of each comprehensive plan. Sentences were coded according to common topics that emerged across the documents, with a specific focus on identifying references to public health and the built environment. Topic codes were categorized under larger thematic areas such as "transportation planning" (including subtopics like "roads" and "commuter rail") and "city services" (including "open spaces & trails" and "government/civic facilities") with topical codes being derived, when possible, from the exact language used in the comprehensive plans. Public health references were the only code that was predetermined before analysis (as "public health"). The final subcodes for public health included items such as "fitness & wellness programs", "hospitals & medical facilities," and "food accessibility" all of which were created directly from the common themes found in the documents that related to public health policies or goals. Alternatively, some other codes could be subjectively considered public health related, including "police & public safety" or the very general "quality of life". Both such codes were more often not related nor connected to specific public health discussions and therefore were placed under separate themes or subcodes, more on that in the results section though.

The coding process was designed to align closely with the language used in the documents themselves, with most topic codes derived directly from the text to minimize deviation from the terminology and framing used by the cities. One example of this was "environmental stewardship", which included a variety of subcodes (from "air quality" to "urban

tree canopy”) that varied quite significantly across cities and was initially difficult to pin down into a single coding structure. The ambiguity of the phrase “environmental stewardship” was, at first, unfamiliar and confusing as compared to “environmental sustainability,” “sustainable design,” or “carbon reduction,” but its vagueness allowed other similar codes to be encompassed within a broader framework relating to environmental sustainability and city services, while retaining their individual meanings.

Overall, from 24,636 coded segments, 110 unique codes were developed; many of which overlap because the segment contained multiple themes, subcodes, or sub-subcodes. An additional 14 codes were markers of specific “sections” found within comprehensive plans including some sections on “urbanization & historical development”, “annexation”, or other legal compliance items that were not relevant to the results. For 28 of the codes, this chapter will refer to them as “themes” from this point on as they are the overarching categories within which the other 82 codes typically fell. In summary, patterns are made up of themes and reflect the broader sociological inferences made from the results of the content analysis. Subsequently, themes are composed of subcodes and sub-subcodes and are derived directly from the text of the comprehensive plans (see figure 5 as an example). In the interest of simplicity, subcodes and sub-subcodes are a third or fourth level distinction made within the coding but for of this results section, will be treated no differently than their higher up subcodes. This results section will highlight a few of the major patterns found by the content analysis that are relevant to this dissertation.

Analytic Process

The analysis began by coding the oldest comprehensive plans and proceeded chronologically, working towards the more recent documents. This approach was used to capture

any shifts in planning priorities or language over time, as these comprehensive plans are typically drafted for 10–20-year periods with few major amendments between new versions. A “coded” segment included a maximum of 1-2 sentences, or a larger image or bullet point list of items that could be considered a sentence or two in length at most. If a bullet point list was significantly longer, which was common, the series of related bullet points would be coded together or separately if they had little relationship to the other bullet points on the list. After reaching code saturation (where no new codes were being added upon the review of additional information), the researcher did a second pass on all documents to align the coding method and ensure all documents received the same coding structure. Finally, where appropriate, the subcodes within each theme were then coded to match the overarching theme. For example, references to “high density” housing were double coded into the theme “density/intensity”.

Alternatively, within the “transportation planning” theme, subcodes were not regularly part of the overall theme or sections so the subcodes were not recoded under the overarching theme. Rather, subcodes such as “public transportation”, “walking”, or “biking” were often discussed in entirely different contexts such as “parks” or “open spaces & trails.” For example, within the context of transportation planning, walking, and biking are means of mobility. Whereas, within the context of green and open spaces, walking and biking are social and physical activities not purely a means of movement from one place to another. Overall, this strategy allowed the analysis to group the subcodes under the larger themes for a more visually comprehensible analysis while also keeping distinct subcodes unique (where applicable). The analysis paid particular attention to mentions of public health impacts, baseline health measures such as heart disease rates (which were rare), and any direct references to the public health implications of green spaces, parks, or recreational areas (which were more common). Based on

existing literature and exploratory analysis, this research anticipated limited references to the direct relationship between the built environment and public health. However, further analysis found that some city comprehensive plans did address the connection between public health and built environment designs.

RESULTS

At the start of the content analysis, there were initial concerns that the quantitative variations between cities and comprehensive plans might taint the results. Therefore, it was necessary to rule out whether a potential relationship exists between the length, contents, or themes of a city comprehensive plan and characteristics of the city (e.g., population size). Some themes derived from the comprehensive plans were expected, such as “land use planning” or “transportation planning”. Often these items are so core to the urban planning practice that to find a comprehensive plan without these sections would be concerning. Outside of those core topics, city and comprehensive plan characteristics and themes were completely unrelated. For example, the length of each document was drastically different between cities and bore no relationship to the city characteristics or the explicit themes found within. Alternatively, the content analysis revealed four patterns less explicitly discussed that are highlighted in this section.

First, public health was a significant topic but only in a few instances, and not in the expected way. Secondly, the comprehensive plans talk a lot about integrating land use planning and transportation planning, but their final products reveal a large gap between the two. Third, “Environmental Stewardship”, or what may be more commonly referred to as environmentalism or sustainability, does play a large role in many cities plans but not in a way that might spark claims of “green gentrification”. Lastly, city comprehensive plans highlight a concerning fiscal

sustainability problem that drive the plans towards additional, often also fiscally unsustainable commercial development.

Another important factor in the analysis was the period during which comprehensive plans were drafted and approved by each city. With the significant disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the analysis focused on public health to see if the pandemic altered the conversations being had at the local level. While there is some correlation seen in the results, ultimately, the uniqueness is explained by alternative factors covered in the public health section of the results. Overall, the contents of the comprehensive plans were not correlated with either the period in which the plan was written or the population size. Additionally, comprehensive plans drafted during or after the pandemic, regardless of city size showed a minor positive correlation to an increase in public health language.

What was not surprising, however, is that the comprehensive plans are reflective of the unique circumstances of each city's current built environment, the constituents, elected officials who participate in the drafting process, and external factors such as the development of a light rail line by RTD or other taxing authorities. Cities drafting comprehensive plans are given a significant amount of flexibility by the Colorado Revised Statutes to reflect the interests and will of their communities (again, note the one exception being a requirement for tourism). That flexibility results in plans that are unique, tell the story of each community, and set up their vision for the future of their built environments. Even across such unique settings and complex political environments, the analysis derived common patterns that weaved together reoccurring themes with more complex subtextual meanings than the explicit topics discussed in the comprehensive plans. Among these recurring themes, one particularly significant pattern

emerged—the role of public health in shaping urban planning decisions, which is explored in the following analysis.

Pattern #1 - Public Health in Urban Planning?

Prior to the study, the content analysis procedures identified only one theme ahead of time which was “public health”. The research plan held no expectations that any of the cities would even include specific references to public health or related topics when going into the coding. In Colorado, the work of protecting public health, along with corresponding outreach and advocacy is rarely a municipality-based initiative. Alternatively, public health agencies are often set up at the county or inter-county level, making public health a limited aspiration or poorly connected discussion in relation to local-level concerns such as comprehensive planning or urban development. Five subcodes (# of instances) were identified within the “public health” theme, including “Hospitals & Medical Facilities” (88), “Pedestrian & Bicyclist Safety” (81), “Food Accessibility” (90), “Active Healthy Lifestyles” (79), and “Fitness & Wellness Programs” (18). See Figure 5 for a hierarchical model of the public health theme and subcodes with example quotes. Most subcodes often were co-coded with the theme “public health”. Only “Hospitals & Medical Facilities” was more often associated with other themes and codes including the “Employment & Employers” theme or the “Commercial Development” subcode within the “Land Use Planning” theme.

Figure 5 - Public Health Hierarchical Model with example coded segments

Public Health	Hospitals & Medical Facilities	“According to the 2014 Englewood Community Profile, the City’s top three employers include Swedish Medical Center with 1,705 employees...” (Englewood CP, Section 2-10 p. 34)
	Pedestrian & Bicyclist Safety	Major regional vehicular travel corridors with heavy travel volumes, routine traffic congestion, and pedestrian and bicycle safety issues will benefit from improvements to increase road capacity and safety for all transportation modes. (Wheat Ridge CP 2009, p. 77)
	Food Accessibility	What is missing from our food environment that could positively influence healthy food consumption? What role can the city play to advance access to and consumption of healthy foods? (Northglenn CP 2023, p. 40)
	Active Healthy Lifestyles	Building infrastructure, such as complete streets with sidewalks and providing educational and recreational programs that support active lifestyles, is a key issue for Arvada residents. (Arvada CP 2014, p. 4 -3)
	Fitness & Wellness Programs	Action Step CS-E.4.1: Develop and implement programs to increase community awareness of health and wellness promotions that address prevention and education, such as smoking cessation, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, obesity, nutrition and exercise. (Broomfield CP 2016, p. 114)

One example of the disassociation between hospitals and public health is from the Englewood comprehensive plan which extensively used variations of this phrase throughout the plan.

Strengthen the retail market by partnering with the hospitals to invest in programs to rehabilitate older housing and offer down payment assistance for homes in ready walking distance to the Hospital complex to attract more of these salaried employees to live in Englewood. Cleveland Clinic housing partnership program, a forgivable home loan based on length of employment, could be a model. (Englewood Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. 3-37)

One unique result was that Northglenn was the only city to have an entire section dedicated to outlining public health goals for the city, which was unique from all other documents. Northglenn’s comprehensive plan even spoke directly about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, not only on the process of developing their plan but associating it with other recent economic, social, and environmental challenges that all cities are facing.

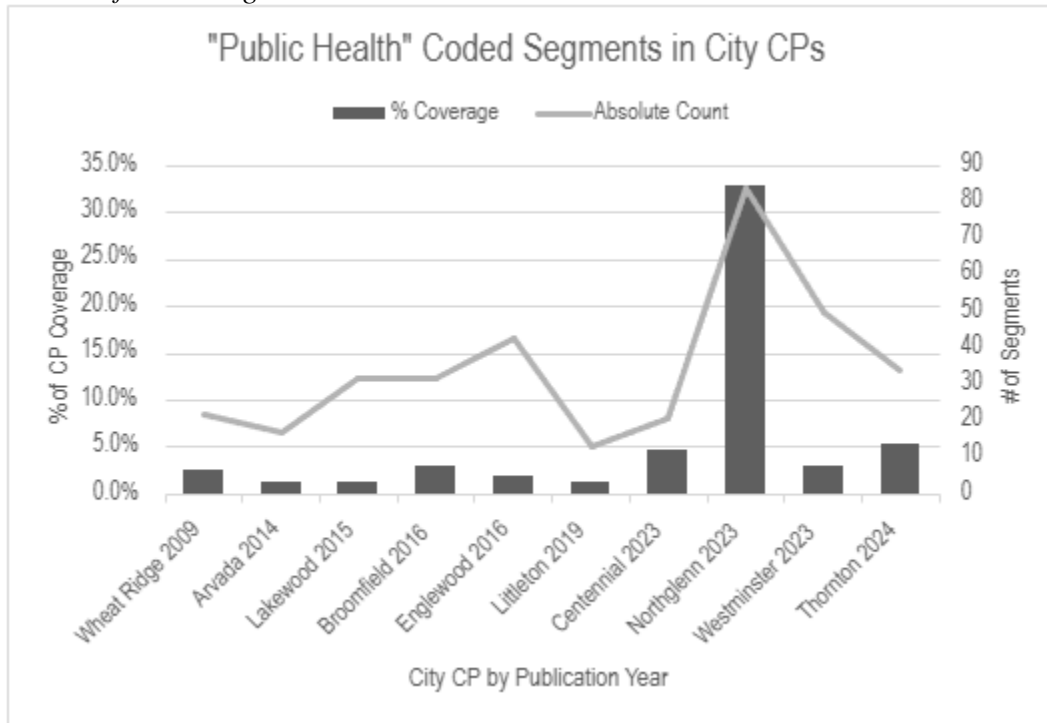
The current comprehensive plan was updated in 2010, and since then the economy rebounded from a major recession; the demographics of the city shifted; the impacts of climate change have become more apparent and detrimental; calls to address the systemic issues that negatively impact many underrepresented groups, people of color, and other vulnerable populations have grown louder; and most recently a major global pandemic struck and is still affecting us today. (Northglenn Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 8)

This quote was uniquely compelling to see in an official city comprehensive plan because it documents what has been a societally ground-shifting experience that is fundamentally changing our relationship to and experiences in the built environments and neighborhoods within which we reside. Additionally, it is important to note that Northglenn has only a few small clinics and emergency centers located within its city boundaries. Other city plans such as Lakewood, Broomfield, Westminster, and Englewood include major hospital locations but, in the text, few linked accesses to such health services directly with public health goals.

The Northglenn Comprehensive Plan had the highest absolute count of segments coded for public health and the highest percent coverage of public health segments within their total document. Figure six presents these findings with absolute and % coverage for all the included comprehensive plans because Northglenn's was the smallest comprehensive plan out of all ten. Northglenn's comprehensive plan noted that much of the "community health" section was related to goals derived from or related to a resolution to "join the Colorado Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Cities and Towns Campaign". The resolution was passed by the city council in 2014, establishing a citizen driven HEAL committee¹⁸. A professional planner from the city presented information from their county public health organization and discussed the relationship between the built environment and health to inform the task force's discussions.

¹⁸ This committee was also composed of largely city residents with a small budget. According to their website, in 2024 the committee is now called "Live Well Northglenn" and now includes "social and mental health, and safety"

Figure 6 - Public Health Coded Segments in City Comprehensive Plans by % of document coverage and absolute count of coded segments



Members¹⁹ of the task force chose the sections that went into the city’s final comprehensive plan. Overall, the inclusion of a specific comprehensive plan section, dedicated to public health with over seven pages, including six detailed goals and multiple informational figures, was a completely unexpected find. Northglenn’s unique result may be the unintentional result of a non-profit, donor-funded initiative²⁰ that encouraged municipalities to consider and enact changes at the local policy level to create healthier built environments with access to healthy foods. Northglenn’s choice to join that program, receive funding, and include HEAL

¹⁹ It is important to note that the task force did have membership overlap with the planning commission but included additional members from the HEAL committee and other specialty areas too. This information was not provided in the Comprehensive plan but was learned through follow-up calls with city staff.

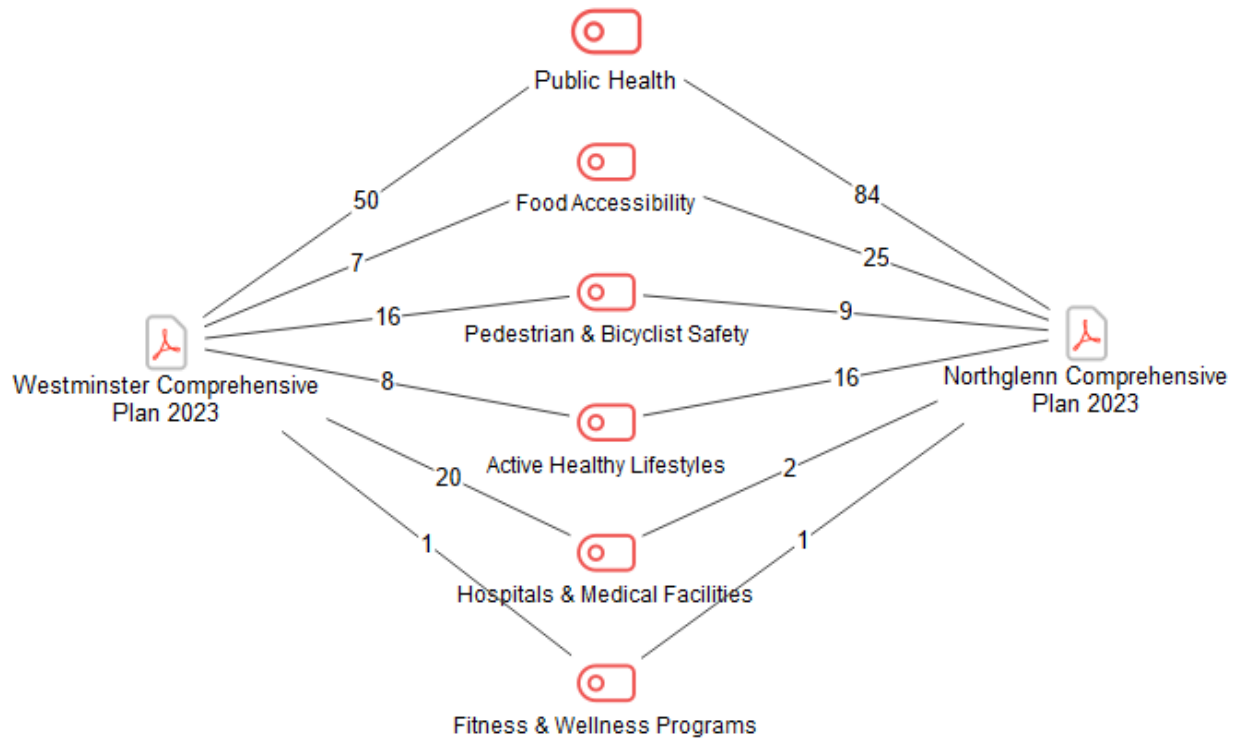
²⁰ The original program was called “Live Well Colorado” which was rebranded in 2020 as “Nourish Colorado”. The program was called HEAL Cities and Towns, which stood for “Health Eating & Active Living”. The organization has turned its focus to ensuring equitable access to food and “transforming food systems”.

committee members on the comprehensive plan update resident task force created a unique result not seen in the other comprehensive plans analyzed.

The city of Westminster's comprehensive plan, which was also updated in 2023, proved to be a useful comparison to Northglenn's. Westminster's comprehensive plan had the second highest absolute number of references to public health identified. In total, 50 segments (52 if subcodes are aggregated) were assigned to the public health theme but 38.5% of such segments were related to "Hospitals & Medical Facilities" and 30.8% coded as "Pedestrian & Bicyclist Safety". Alternatively, eight segments were coded as "active healthy lifestyles", seven as "food accessibility", and one for "fitness & wellness programs". By contrast, Northglenn had 84 coded segments with "food accessibility" leading at 47.2% and "active healthy lifestyles" at 30.2%. Additionally, the most common co-occurring code for the public health theme in Westminster's plan was: 1) "police & public safety" theme (#10 for Northglenn), 2) "Demographics" theme (#14 for Northglenn), and 3) "Recreation & Amenities" (#9 for Northglenn). Overall, these two plans demonstrate two quite different approaches to public health within urban planning happening shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic. This comparison highlights how cities prioritize public health differently in their comprehensive plans, reflecting distinct local needs, policy approaches, and community priorities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(see Figure 7 on next page)

Figure 7 - Number of Public Health Coded Segments and subcodes in the Westminster & Northglenn Comprehensive Plans



Westminster’s comprehensive plan includes multiple examples of the common ways public health is discussed within the urban planning field specifically. Overall, this language is more general and has a stronger focus on creating “healthy places”, which makes public health into a “cross-cutting theme” within the document rather than a specific goal or section. For example, the connection to “Police & Public Safety” was dominated by references to public safety in general, most likely parroting the state statute’s “public health, safety, and welfare” which is often used as a justification for urban planning decisions made in each city even if the connection to public health, safety, and welfare is extremely vague at best (CRS § 31-23-207).

The Westminster plan is driven by an urban planning perspective on public health, while the Northglenn plan has been shaped by a public health perspective on public health. Thus, the Westminster plan focuses less on health outcomes and the social determinants of health than the Northglenn plan. This is not to say that the Westminster plan does not identify key aspects of the

relationship between the built environment and health, including some that readers may claim are important and missing from the Northglenn plan.

Overall, the Northglenn comprehensive plan offered a view of what it might be like to have explicit goals and planning for public health built into a city's comprehensive plan as guiding purposes that should shape built environment choices. The Westminster plan makes a similar argument but without significant details on the public health outcomes and goals. Instead, Westminster focused on the specific built environment means and urban planning concepts that should result in improved public health outcomes without clear definitions on what those outcomes should be. The two plans appear to offer two different interpretations of the state statute's goal of protecting and improving public health, safety, and welfare through comprehensive planning. Northglenn sets out a vision for community health with fewer details on how the built environment will help them achieve it, whereas Westminster sets out a vision for a new built environment with fewer specifics on what public health will look like after its built.

For example, the Westminster plan discusses the "8/80" frame that has been popular within urban planning circles, though the language does not always make its way into other fields:

The concept of 8/80 cities are becoming increasingly popular around the world. The 8/80 paradigm espouses that if communities are designed to work well for an 8-year old and an 80-year old, then wellbeing for the greater population can be achieved. 8/80 cities improve the quality of life for people in cities by bringing different populations together to enhance the built environment, resulting in more vibrant, healthy, and equitable communities. (Westminster Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 75)

This 8/80 discussion is incorporated into the "neighborhood unit" idea proposed within the "Community Design & Built Form" section. The focus on the 8/80 concept explains the connection between demographics and public health segments noted previously.

Pattern #2 – Land Use vs. Transportation Planning

The second key theme that was consistently seen across the comprehensive plans was an ardent desire to integrate transportation planning and land use planning. However, this goal lacked actual integration within the document itself. Explicitly, land use and transportation sections, while common, are separate and do not strongly discuss the other in each part. With exceptions made for transit-oriented development, land-uses of various types rarely discussed how people get to the businesses and homes in those parcels. They infrequently discuss the types of roads or transit opportunities nearby the land-uses, likely because many land-uses are biased towards auto-centric design strategies. Transportation planning is defined by the U.S. Department of Transportation as, involving “the development of strategies and policies for managing transportation systems, including roadways, public transportation, bicycling and walking infrastructure, and freight transportation networks” (2023). Figure eight provides a breakdown on the “transportation planning” topics found in the comprehensive plans and its various subcodes²¹. Alternatively, land use planning often focuses on common topics of density and applicable “uses” such as commercial or residential. The integration of these two planning domains is key to the future success of any city but the analysis shows that the two may as well be in their own plans entirely.

Sections on “land use planning” (theme) were often separated from the transportation planning sections and came in at the 8th most frequent code co-occurrence though all other codes in the top 10 were related to transportation planning such as #1 - “Streets & Highways” and #2 – “walking”. Discussions of transportation planning were found most often within the Arvada Comprehensive Plan (2014) with 37.7% of the document coded as “transportation planning” and

²¹ It is important to note that one city comprehensive plan did discuss freight rail routes in their transportation planning section. The total count was less than 10 and, therefore, was folded into the transportation planning total.

205 unique coded segments (excluding subcode coverage). Arvada's focus on transportation planning was largely driven by planning for the RTD Gold light-rail line that was still under construction until it opened in April 2019. It should be noted though that many cities have separate transportation plans such as "Lakewood Moves" and so transportation planning may be underdeveloped in a city's comprehensive plan, which may instead simply reference transportation plans that the city has already drafted.

In figure nine, the cluster code map shows distinctly the extent to which land use planning and transportation themes/subcodes are quite distant from each other. Each circle on the map represents a unique theme or sub-code. The distance between the two codes indicates how often the codes overlap within the comprehensive plans. The size of the circles indicates, relatively, the number of segments marked with that code. The lines between the code circles are also scaled relative to the strength of the connection between the two codes. Connections between nodes with less than 25 overlapping segments have been excluded for visual clarity.

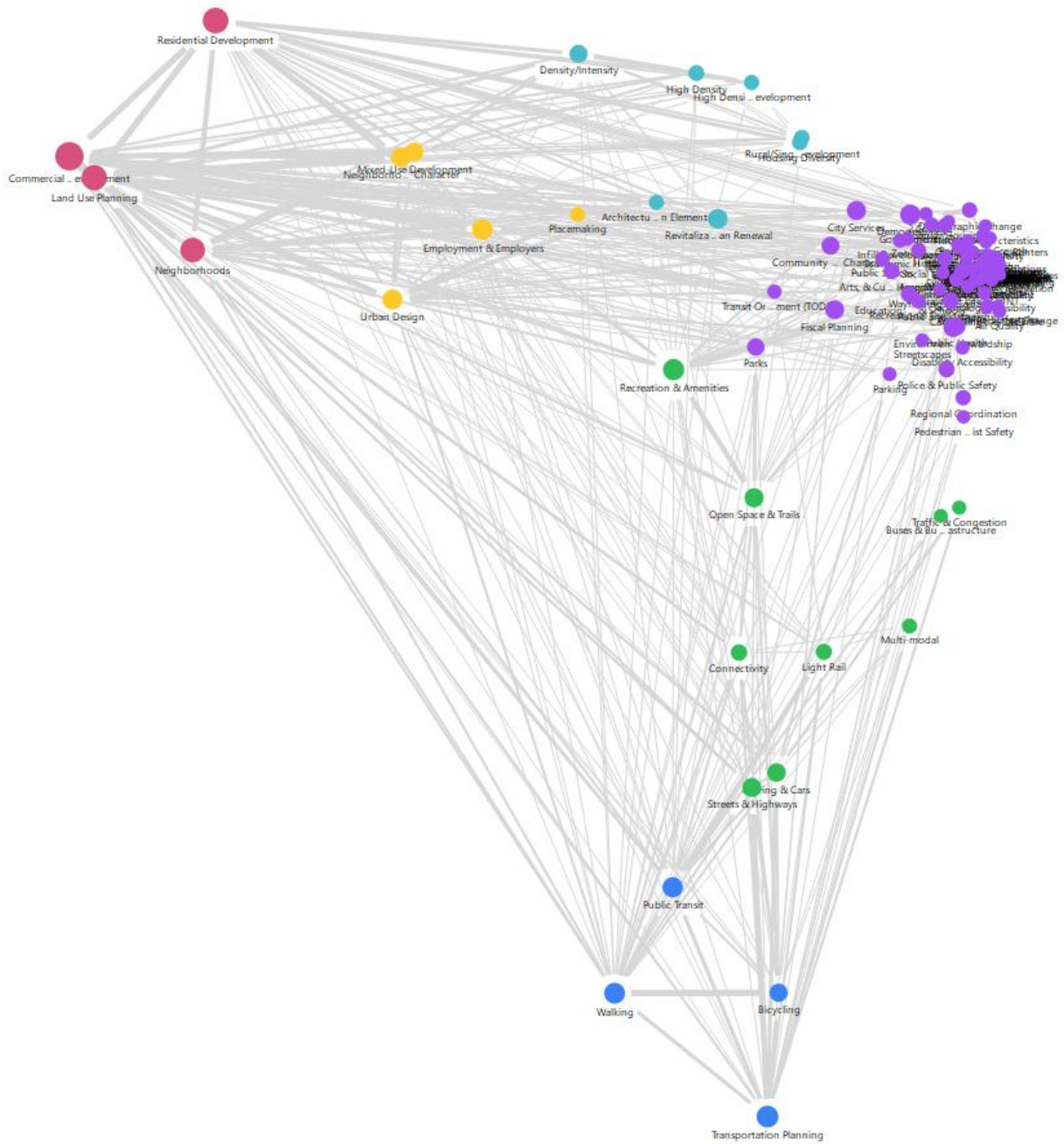
(See Figures 8 & 9 on the next pages)

Figure 8 - Transportation Planning Hierarchical Model with example coded segments

Transportation Planning

Streets & Highways	POLICY CC-3.2: View Corridors - Arvada will identify and maintain appropriate view corridors from public streets and other public places as new development occurs. (Arvada Comprehensive Plan 2014, p. 2-13)
Multi-Modal	A connected transportation system with multi-modal options reduces dependence on the personal automobile, therefore contributing to improved air quality and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. (Wheat Ridge - Comprehensive Plan 2009, p. 84)
Public Transit	A shortage of affordable, accessible rental units, ideally located along major corridors with easy access to public transit. (Lakewood Comprehensive Plan 2015, p. 67)
Buses & Bus Infrastructure	Goal Move-4: Develop shared transportation options. Objective Move-4.1. Communicate with residents and businesses about shared transportation options such as the art Shuttle as alternatives to the private automobile.. (Englewood Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. lv)
Light Rail	In the future, the areas around Lakewood's West Rail Line stations will provide another layer of identity and sense of place with mixed-use and walkable nodes of activity. (Lakewood Comprehensive Plan 2015, p. 43)
Driving & Cars	KEY ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS: [bullet point four] Transportation network overloads from a largely vehicle-dependent land use pattern. (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 48)
Carpooling, Rideshare, & Carshare	Mobility hubs and shared-use mobility options (e.g., Uber and Lyft) are growing in popularity and serve a valuable role in closing first- and last-mile connectivity gaps. (Broomfield Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. 63)
Traffic & Congestion	POLICY T-3.2: Traffic Solutions to Reduce Congestion - The City will consider arterial street widenings and construction of missing segments, traffic signal timing and progression projects, intersection improvements, grade separations, and other measures to help reduce traffic congestion. (Arvada Comprehensive Plan 2014, p. 3-5)
Parking	Suburban character areas have noticeably less intensive use of land, with open and green spaces balancing – or, in Estate areas, exceeding – the extent of land covered by structures and paved surfaces. (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 23)
Bicycling	For example, increasing the amount of bicycling and walking that occurs (thereby increasing physical activity levels, social networks, and positive health outcomes) and decreasing driving (reducing per capita air pollution and frequency of traffic crashes, and thereby further reducing some of the barriers to active transportation). (Northglenn Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 41)
Walking	While the existing street grid is a good base for the pedestrian and bicycle network, there are opportunities to expand walkability and transit use by allowing a greater and denser mix of land uses in certain areas. (Englewood Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. xxxix)

Figure 9 - Code Map: Color by Cluster produced by MAXQDA – codes are aggregated by subcodes



The land use planning theme is clustered with “commercial development”, “residential development”, and “neighborhoods” on the top left of the visualization. It is interesting to note that “mixed use development” got pulled into the yellow cluster. This means mixed-use development was more often overlapping and related to the yellow category items, including “neighborhood character”, “employment & employers”, “urban design”, and “place-making”. This cluster shows how mixed-use development brought in topics from a variety of themes really driving its own cluster separate from land-use development generally. Overall, it still falls far from transportation planning like the other land-use planning codes.

Alternatively, transportation planning fell into the blue cluster and includes “walking”, “bicycling”, and “public transportation” on the bottom right with other transportation codes, like “light rail”, “streets & highways”, and “driving & cars” being drawn up closer to the more central green cluster. This clustering is likely due to the cities aiming to improve walking, cycling, and transit infrastructure around their cities. Even here, we can see how automobiles and driving take a back seat rhetorically and figuratively in the comprehensive plans vision for the future of the cities. Interestingly, the green cluster also included “recreation & amenities” and “open space & trails”. In some cases, this appears to be driven by the relative distance most open spaces lie from city neighborhoods, with more dedicated open space occurring as you go further west. Nonetheless, it is interesting to find that “recreation & amenities”, “open space & trails”, and “parks” are nearest the center of the cluster plot, emphasizing their centrality to the comprehensive plans in the Denver metro suburbs overall.

One final note on figure nine, the lines between blue and red nodes on the code map indicate that there is still some overlap between land use planning and transportation planning,

but the overall distance between the nodes indicates a significant disconnect between land-use planning and transportation planning overall within the comprehensive plans.

The few times when discussions addressed both land use and transportation policy together were when transit-oriented development (TOD) was brought up (128 identified segments). Interestingly though, “transportation planning” was rarely explicitly discussed in TOD sections. Notably, the city of Thornton had the highest coverage with 3.1% and 41 coded segments. Sections on TOD more often emphasized it as a unique land-use (135 code co-occurrences), which often co-occurred with mixed-use development (74 times), commercial development (61 times), and residential development (55 times). The comprehensive plans TOD coded sections emphasis on proposed land uses may be a result of the rapidly expanding accessible RTD public transit that was planned to occur. Additionally, such future transit would require a more pedestrian friendly urban design that many TOD designs focus on. This reflects a relatively narrow scope of planning for new TOD districts, that may lack the details necessary to allow these new neighborhoods to thrive in the long run. TOD centers were often limited to only the immediate parcels around an upcoming light rail station. This limited scope of design often sets them apart from nearby neighborhoods in both design and character, which may drive future divisions between the neighborhoods.

Overall, TOD is still rare or discussed for very few parts of each city’s comprehensive plan (just Thornton and Arvada contained most references to TOD). The result is a missed opportunity to further connect transportation and land use planning, especially since many current land-uses are not considered for TOD. Ultimately, TOD is a distinct feature of select future neighborhoods in the comprehensive plans. Further including TOD style urban designs

may provide a potential guide to integrating urban design, transportation planning, and land use planning.

A second relationship that the analysis uncovered highlighted a potential connection between land use planning and transportation planning through “Recreation & Amenities”. In figure nine, the code map identified a cluster relationship between the theme “Recreation & Amenities” and transportation planning’s subcodes. Walking and biking—especially on “open spaces & trails” (a unique subcode of recreation & amenities)—was regularly identified, co-occurring 91 and 75 times, respectively. Additionally, open spaces and trails segments were co-occurring with land use planning (89 times), connectivity (77 times), neighborhoods (68 times), residential development (62 times), and transportation planning (58 times).

Figure 10 - Recreation & Amenities Planning Hierarchical Model with example coded segments

Recreation & Amenities	Community Gardens & Urban Agriculture	Objective Shop-3.2. Maintain and expand locations for, and encourage support of, community gardens, such as within schools or City parks (Englewood Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. 2-32)
	Parks	Public plazas and pocket parks provide green space amid the Urban environment and a place to gather and host community events, along with periodic street closures. (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 37)
	Recreational Facilities	Policy OP-E.2: Establish strategic partnerships with surrounding communities and nonprofit entities and schools to provide for shared facilities and specialized-use facilities and parks that serve existing neighborhoods (Broomfield Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. 92)
	Open Space & Trails	This project also established a trail facility that connects this area to McKay Lake to the west, providing access to recreation. (Westminster Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 97)

This shows a bias towards walking and biking as mere leisure activities rather than recognizing them as true forms of transportation. This suggests that active transportation is often framed within the context of recreation rather than as a viable, integrated mode of everyday mobility. The underlying connection between the two themes may point to a stronger connection

between transportation planning and green space planning than one might assume from just reading the comprehensive plans. For example, greenways such as the High Line canal which passes through or by Littleton, Englewood, Centennial, Greenwood Village, Denver, and Aurora may provide significant connectivity to improve the usefulness of any pedestrian or cyclist route. Such park and trail connectivity is unique to active transportation methods and may make them more viable over automobiles for some trips.

Finally, another common land-use and transportation planning pattern identified throughout the comprehensive plans was language that suggested (or explicitly stated) a turn away from an automobile-centric model of urban development towards something that was regularly referred to as “multi-modal;” a subcode within transportation planning. Multimodal transportation was often discussed as an all-of-the-above approach to planning and seemed to be a way to avoid any discussion of prioritizing one form of transportation over another. But the avoidance of expressing a preference for any one mode of transit was not the case in all instances, in fact there are several examples where cities made explicit statements about moving away from the automobile as the primary means of transportation and towards other methods such as walking, biking, and public transportation.

Multi-modal refers to travel options, including automobile, public transit, bicycle, and walking. As is the case with most cities and suburbs in the western U.S., automobile travel has historically had a primary influence on Arvada’s transportation system, and roadway improvements will continue to be needed. However, Arvada and its partners have placed an increasing focus on alternative transportation modes. (Arvada Comprehensive Plan 2014, p. 3-2)

Broomfield’s plan included several policy goals for “Livable Streets” that continuously emphasized improvements and safety focused on slowing vehicles down and encouraging transportation alternatives such as “enhanc[ing] walkability”, “buffered bike lanes,” and “review[ing] and enforc[ing] appropriate speed limits.” All these options (and others not

mentioned) would result in slower vehicle speeds, less space for parking, and a step away from the current speedy car-oriented design.

Policy TS-D.1: Design streets to be safe for all modes of transportation. Minimize traffic volumes and unsafe travel speeds on neighborhood streets through traffic management and traffic mitigation. (Broomfield Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. 78)

Similarly, Wheat Ridge’s comprehensive plan takes aim at short vehicle trips which may be the most easily targeted reduction. Such trips often occur because of a lack of pedestrian infrastructure on the routes or because the pedestrian and cyclist routes become more circuitous as they wind around vehicle traffic and major roadways which get priority access to the destinations. Their plan explicitly states that the city would like to:

Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections between neighborhoods and activity centers and corridors to reduce reliance on the automobile for short trips; (Wheat Ridge Comprehensive Plan 2009, p. 83)

In the Westminster comprehensive plan, parking was more often characterized as detrimental to neighborhood character with the plans calling for “below grade”, “screening”, or having parking “located away from public view” in sections that were coded as both “driving & cars” and “neighborhood identity & character”. For the city’s proposed mixed-use activity center developments, the plan goes as far as to outright ban “auto-oriented uses and new standalone uses with drive-throughs” (Westminster Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 38). The Thornton plan also seeks to reduce vehicle speeds and traffic like neighboring Broomfield.

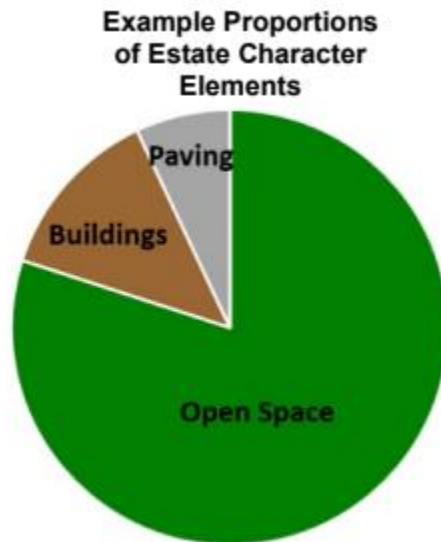
Policy SHC 1.3 - Traffic Calming. Encourage and evaluate the use of speed reduction programs as well as physical traffic calming measures such as roundabouts, speed cushions, or others as appropriate to discourage speeding and excessive traffic in neighborhoods. (Thornton Comprehensive Plan 2024, p. 3.45)

Alternatively, Littleton’s comprehensive plan was a marked contrast to the others in this study. Their plan downplayed the automobile centric nature of suburban development while overemphasizing the car infrastructure in more urban or high density/multifamily unit developments. The Littleton plan organized their land use types by “auto-oriented” vs. not and

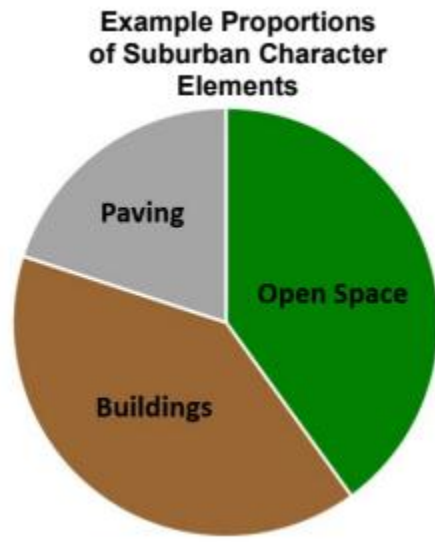
gave a pie chart estimate of the total “paving,” “buildings,” and open space” within each land use type. The Littleton comprehensive plan’s land-use categories were starkly different compared to their peer cities. The categories often seemed to intentionally reverse the expected narratives of car-centric development in favor of automobile transportation. It is important to note that, in the Littleton comprehensive plan, the term “open space” in the pie charts appears to describe any public or private land that is not built upon or paved for automobile use, which was not how the term was used in the rest of the comprehensive plans. Suburban residential developments (figures 13 & 14) were characterized by:

Less noticeable accommodation of the automobile compared to more intensive auto-oriented areas, especially where residential driveways are on the side of homes rather than occupying a portion of the front yard space and where garages are situated to the side or rear of the dwelling. (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 26)

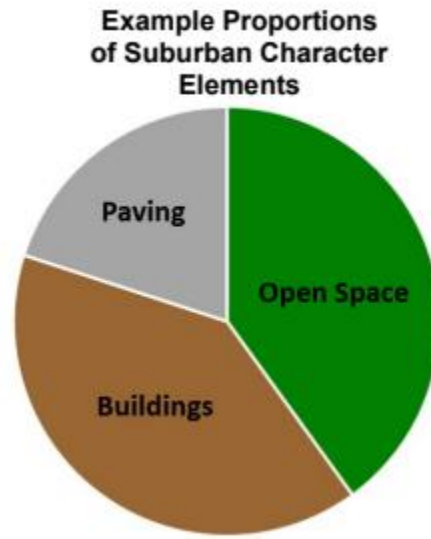
Figures 11 & 12 - Littleton Comprehensive Plan Estate Residential Land Use & Pie Chart



Figures 13 & 14 - Littleton Comprehensive Plan – Residential Suburban Land Use & Pie Chart



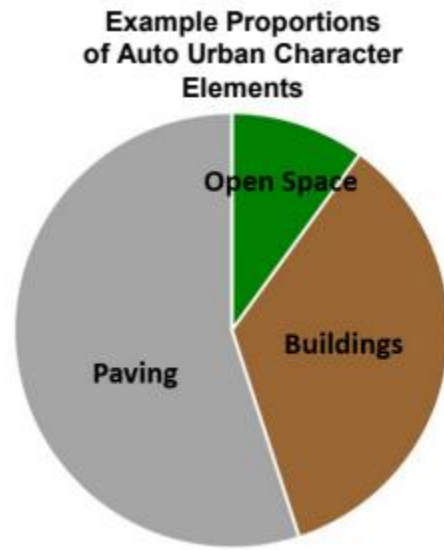
Figures 15 & 16 - Littleton Comprehensive Plan – Suburban Residential Multifamily Land Use & Pie Chart



Whereas, “Auto-Oriented Residential” (as seen in figures 17 & 18) was described as:

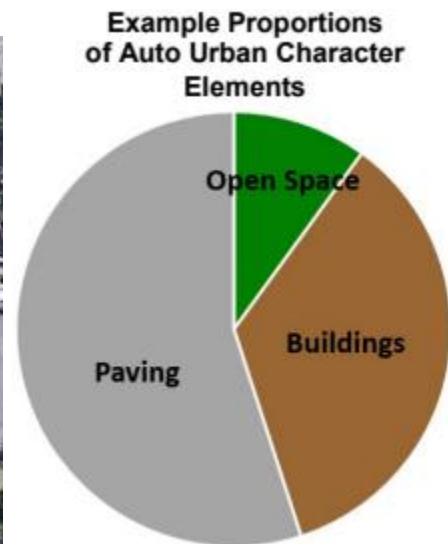
“Auto Urban character, especially where driveways and front-loading garages dominate the front yards and front facades of homes. This can be offset by landscaping, “anti-monotony” architectural standards, and limitations on “cookie cutter” subdivision layouts characterized by straight streets and uniform lot sizes and arrangement.” (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 30)

Figures 17 & 18 - Littleton Comprehensive Plan – Auto-Oriented Residential Land Use & Pie Chart



Furthermore, “auto-oriented residential multifamily” land uses were described as “a subset of the Auto-Oriented Residential category, Auto-Oriented Residential Multi-Family has the same characteristics.” (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 32)

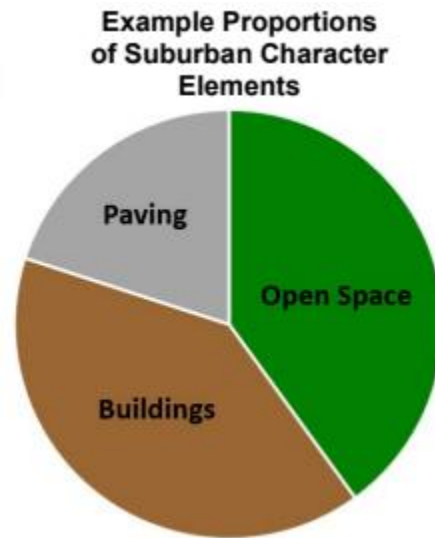
Figures 19 & 20 - Littleton Comprehensive Plan – Auto-Oriented Multifamily Residential Land Use & Pie Chart



For commercial properties, the lower intensity “Suburban Commercial” land use was described as “Suburban character primarily from reduced site coverage relative to most auto-oriented

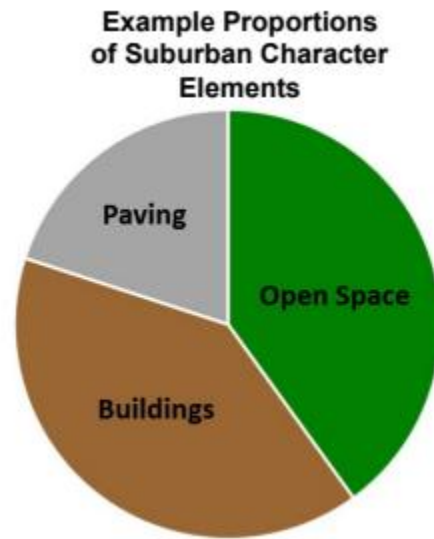
commercial development” (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 35) and “Encouraged at key community entries and along high-profile roadway corridors, may also involve other criteria to yield less intensive and more attractive development outcomes relative to auto-oriented areas, including higher standards for landscaping (along street frontages and within parking areas), signs, and building design” (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 35).

Figures 21 & 22 - Littleton Comprehensive Plan – Suburban Commercial Land Use & Pie Chart



Further, Suburban Business Parks were described as “Suburban character, typically in a campus-style setting featuring reduced site coverage and increased open space, together with enhanced building design” (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 37).

Figures 23 & 24 - Littleton Comprehensive Plan – Suburban Business Park & Pie Chart



Littleton’s comprehensive plan includes more land uses such as mixed-use versions, attached residential, and urban downtown that are not included in the figures here. The more urban land use designations often emphasize walkability, limited parking, and an “urban character” that is described as “multi-story structures”, “vertical mixed used, promote retail viability, support transit ridership, etc.” Throughout the land use section, the primary factor that determines how a land use is classified is how visible automobile use and infrastructure are in comparison to the amount of visible “open space” with little attention paid to the actual influence the land use design may have on automobile usage. This seems counter to the city’s action plan to amend their zoning regulations by:

Add new or amend current provisions that are directly linked to actions in other plan sections related to housing attainability, neighborhood conservation, business retention and attraction, leisure and lifestyle related land uses, transit support, a more pedestrian- and cycling-friendly community, and park and open space protection – and consider incentive-based techniques for guiding development applicants toward desired outcomes. (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 49)

The Littleton comprehensive plan flips the narrative on what it means to be car-dependent neighborhood designs. The plan describes denser neighborhoods, which are likely

closer to public transportation²², as the automobile centric designs and infer that they are the land-use problem for their city. Whereas the lush, green, spacious outer edge neighborhoods are the ideal neighborhood design. Littleton's ideal neighborhoods are by any standard the most likely residential and commercial spaces to require residents and patrons to entirely rely on a car for all transportation needs. Ultimately, it is unclear if this plan is truly representative of a professional urban planning vision for a city or if politics had swayed the plan in an entirely unusual direction.

In the end, the integration of transportation planning and land-use planning seems farther off than one might hope for. Additionally, the plans were surprisingly more explicitly anti-car than anticipated. While often the language was couched in softer tones of multi-modal transportation, many of the goals and policy proposals throughout the plans were explicitly aimed at reducing vehicle usage, speeds, and increasing the safety of bicyclists and pedestrians. Littleton's comprehensive plan appeared to try to blend the discussion of transportation planning and land-use planning the most by explicitly tying them together in their land-use classifications. But the outcome appeared to result in contradictory statements and land-use categories that do not reflect the true impact of the relationship to car-centric development. This highlights the ongoing challenge of aligning policy intentions with practice outcomes, suggesting that while there is a push towards reducing car dependency, the structural inertia of car-centric development remains difficult to overcome.

²²It is fair to note that RTD does not always provide the best service to these suburban communities. So even in denser neighborhoods where one might expect to find some public transit service, RTD has often failed to deliver quality services that would drive the possible ridership.

Pattern #3 – Environmental Stewardship vs. Recreation & Amenities

Within the coding structure overall, two themes emerged that were slightly harder to pin down and organize. First was “Environmental Stewardship”, the title of which this study changed multiple times until the analysis was able to identify a common phrasing within the comprehensive plans. Environmental stewardship sections focused on sustainable development strategies such as electrification, tree canopy, or biodiversity efforts. The second theme was "Recreation and Amenities", which included public spaces such as trails and open space, gyms and sports facilities, and parks. These two themes were often co-occurring, but when viewed independently they tell two different stories about the values of each community.

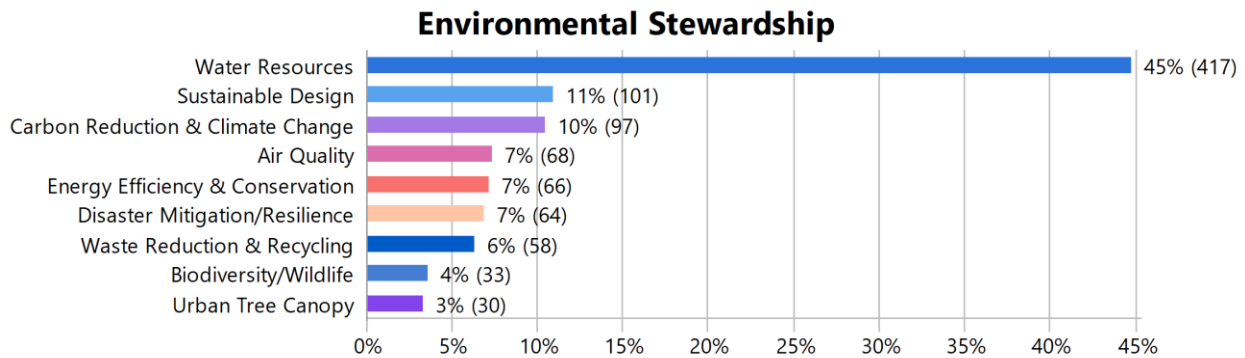
The Environmental Stewardship theme incorporated a variety of subcodes and demonstrated how cities across the region were striving for multiple environmental goals at the same time. Most common among these concerns were “water resources”, which was given an additional sub-sub code “flood plains & stormwater management” due to its sheer volume of mentions. Broomfield (59), Littleton (57), and Westminster (57) had the most segments coded under water resources. But Northglenn again, with its distinctly concise plan, also had water resources coded segments at 11.07% coverage, followed by Broomfield at 6.51% and Littleton by 5.15%. When aggregating all the subcodes, including water resources, under environmental stewardship, the pattern remains the same with Northglenn pushing to nearly 18% coverage and Broomfield with the highest absolute frequency at nearly 250 coded segments. This continues to highlight Northglenn’s plan as an outlier. The bottom-up driven process with ordinary citizens drafting significant chunks of the language. Ultimately, the Northglenn plan seems to reflect the broader will or desires of their citizens in a much clearer and more concise manner.

Interestingly, the high absolute frequencies found in Broomfield are a function of two unique features. First, Broomfield, as previously mentioned, is both a city and a county like the City and County of Denver. This means that, as a county, Broomfield is responsible for its own water resources, stormwater management, etc. and this is reflected in the results; no other cities included in the study have such state mandated responsibilities. Second, the city and county's relatively new status (founded in 2001) means that many of these services are still being developed. Since water rights and the high potential for drought in the region are well known, it is not surprising that Broomfield includes securing water rights and maintenance/growth of their system to be a key item in their comprehensive plan. Finally, likely also related to its recent founding, Broomfield's comprehensive plan is cited as the driver of two following sustainability plans on "zero waste" and "greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction targets" passed in 2020. Therefore, in the case of Broomfield, the comprehensive plan was truly a visioning document that was intended to drive forward with the city's new independence and ensure a sustainable future for itself.

The existing sustainability plans of multiple cities were supplemented or summarized by their respective comprehensive plans. For example, in Lakewood, the city's sustainability plan is 190 pages of detailed policy planning and information. The two plans were passed in the same year, 2015, and so it was intentional that Lakewood does not have a significant amount of sustainability included in their comprehensive plan. Northglenn had a "Risk and Adaptation Advisory Report", but its citizen-driven writing seemed to result in more explicit statements about air-quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and other potentially politically controversial statements that were discussed more delicately in other city plans. Alternatively, cities with the fewest identified segments such as Englewood, Centennial, & Thornton have other sustainability

plans, sometimes multiple. Altogether, it seems unwise to evaluate a city's commitment to sustainability based upon their comprehensive plans alone.

Figure 25 – Environmental Stewardship Theme Subcode Statistics across all plans



The second theme was called “recreation and amenities”. (Refer to figure 25 for the breakdown of this theme’s subcodes.) While it may seem obvious that a city plans for the development of its recreational amenities, this study placed the theme under the “City Services” theme. While the analytical preference was to avoid themes within themes, Green Spaces (such as parks) and “Open Spaces & Trails” were often a part of the services that each city offered. A few cities did have a relationship with a “parks and recreation district”, such as Lakewood and Englewood, which serves as a special taxing district that oversees a substantial portion of the green spaces and open spaces making them technically not part of city services provided by city resident taxes. The language was not always super clear within the comprehensive plans as some cities would refer to parks and protected undeveloped land as either green space or open space interchangeably. Further, as seen in the results section on Littleton’s land use section, open space there was used to describe any land without a physical structure, including landscaped areas, medians, lawns, etc. Overall, this variability in the use of the terms may be connected to the same factors that reduced the amount of the Environmental Stewardship theme found in the analysis. Many cities have a currently active and valid open space, trails, and/or parks master

plan that provide significantly more details on opportunities for recreation and other amenities within each city. Therefore, this category may be of diminished importance depending on when each plan was passed.

Environmental stewardship's most common theme co-occurrence was with "recreation and amenities", followed by transportation planning, and land use planning. For the "water resources" subcode, its most frequent co-occurring themes (excluding environmental stewardship) were "City Services", "Recreation & Amenities", and land use planning. Eight out of ten cities had co-occurring segments between city services and environmental stewardship pointing to a focus within comprehensive plans to make city-provided services more efficient and environmentally friendly. Such services ranged from a solar panel field on Broomfield city property to power Broomfield city buildings, to Arvada's program to support water efficiency like xeriscaping or shower faucet replacement opportunities.

POLICY P-4.2: Natural and Drought-Tolerant Landscape - The City will promote and educate the public about the use of xeriscape and "water-wise" landscaping for new parks. The City will also use drought-tolerant landscape materials and convert nondrought tolerant landscape turf wherever possible. (Arvada Comprehensive Plan 2014, p. 4-18)

When the "recreation and amenities" and "environmental stewardship" themes did overlap, it often highlighted interesting combinations of public or private spaces being used to achieve environmental goals. Segments on parks and open spaces often referred to their further development as opportunities to protect local water resources such as creeks or rivers. Additionally, segments on recreational facilities often discuss water preservation efforts on their fields or in their facilities. Often properties designed near naturally occurring lakes, ponds, or rivers must account for the drainage in these spaces already, so adding in recommendations to preserve land and designate park areas with environmental protection in mind matches well with the political desires of constituencies as well as the development process. An additional benefit

in some cities may be that such policy directions drive potential land donations from developers to the city to expand their park and open space inventory.

Alternatively, the most common theme co-occurrences with “recreation and amenities” were “neighborhoods”, land use planning, and commercial & economic development. The difference between co-occurrence patterns points towards different values being assigned to different types of development. In this case, city services in the recreation and amenities area seem to be the target of environmental sustainability goals, while the actual development of those recreation and amenity areas is targeting an improvement in economic growth. Setting aside this divergence in target prioritization, overall, these co-occurrence patterns track the values of the communities generally well. The citizens’ and cities’ connection with the natural environment, viewable from almost every street (i.e., the Rocky Mountains) appears to be a major driver of the importance of both environmental stewardship and recreational amenities.

The valuing of environmental stewardship may be a driver for the development of recreational amenities but such amenities may actually be at the expense of environmental stewardship if their purpose is to further sustain and drive new development. While “Green Gentrification” is something one can only truly identify afterwards (like most gentrification) we can identify some of the justifications or relationships that might explain why green infrastructure (which varies from sustainability plans to actual parks and trails) might be able to be used as a cover for the growth machine (i.e. the green growth machine) particularly for mixed-used developments which appear to be on the rise. For example, in Thornton the intent of mixed-use development spaces is using recreational and green space amenities to attract more business and individuals to high density residential spaces:

Intent: Develop areas that attract people from Thornton and the surrounding region. These should include large format office, retail, services, and recreational attractions. (Thornton Comprehensive Plan 2024, p. 4.20)

Similarly, in Wheat Ridge, the plans for transit-oriented developments, which are often mixed-use developments by design, often focused on how community amenities should be used to draw in more commercial and employment opportunities:

Use community assets such as access to transportation, recreational amenities, proximity to major energy research laboratory and university, and workforce housing affordability to market development opportunities located in the Transit Oriented Development Employment/Commercial Center area and other key primary employment areas. (Wheat Ridge Comprehensive Plan 2009, p. 36)

Lastly, these quotes from Lakewood and Northglenn even draw in how the environmental benefits of green and open spaces result in environmental benefits as well as economic benefits:

In addition, a strong parks and recreation system increases property values, draws new businesses to the city, and provides environmental benefits such as improving water quality, preventing flooding, and improving air quality. (Lakewood Comprehensive Plan 2015, p. 80)
Create regulations that consider universal design and environmentally sustainable measures that further incentivize the redevelopment and revitalization of underperforming commercial development. (Northglenn Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 27)

These examples give substance to the divergence between environmental stewardship and recreation & amenities. It can be simultaneously true that environmental stewardship is taken seriously by these cities and recreation & amenities seem to be used as drivers of economic growth. But this may result in recreation & amenities running, at times, counter to the goals of environmental stewardship in many ways. In such cases, the comprehensive plans discussions of environmental stewardship appear to be an attempt to reign in the costs of development by doubling down on the sustainability aspects of recreational amenities such as park land and open spaces.

Altogether, these themes were difficult to pin down within the comprehensive plans from the start due to their expansive nature and the high likelihood that the cities have already developed other plans that provide significantly more detail on both environmental stewardship and recreational amenities. The analysis found no direct evidence of environmental sustainability or sustainable design practices being used as an explicit driver of the growth machine concept

discussed by Dilworth and Stokes (2012) & Gould and Lewis (2017). Dilworth and Stokes emphasize sustainable design techniques, such as LEED standards or high efficiency appliances as the selling point for the continuation of the growth machine but there is very little, if any, evidence for that in these plans. At least in the cases of these suburban cities which may be reaching the end of their greenfield development stage, the green growth machine theory appears like a boogeyman of environmental cooptation rather than a theoretical framework that helps explain the changing development landscape. At first glance, the green growth machine, when accounting for recreation and amenities alone, might infer that the theory is true but without accounting for the sustainability plans and other environmental goals of each city, the plans overemphasize the connection.

City services were the largest drivers of environmental stewardship, due to the efficiency benefits and cost savings that these investments provide to cash-strapped cities. In the end, the strong cultural and social desire to be close to nature in the Denver metro area is better suited to explain pro-environmental sustainability policy goals and strong demand for recreational services in these cities. As many reusable tote bags have claimed, “the mountains are calling, and I must go” (John Muir, a letter to his sister, 1873), these plans seem to try to accomplish the opposite by bringing the mountain experience to the city. This interplay between environmental preservation and recreational development underscores the challenge suburban cities face: fostering economic growth while preserving the natural environment their communities deeply value.

Pattern #4 – Fiscal (Un)Sustainability

Fiscal planning was an easily identifiable theme within the comprehensive plans. Small cities in Colorado often only have two sources of tax funds to provide the litany of services expected of them. First are property taxes which have mostly been cut back in recent years by the state government because of complaints due to recent inflation-and-pandemic-driven property value increases. Secondly, there are sales taxes which are related to the macroeconomic climate but also to how much each city can attract and maintain businesses within their boundaries.

The fiscal planning theme was most often found in the Littleton (81), Westminster (76), and Wheat Ridge (64) comprehensive plans. Percent coverage of the comprehensive plans yielded Thornton at the top with 17.48% of their plan relating to or discussing fiscal planning, followed by Littleton (13.39%) and Westminster (7.87%). The discrepancy between the percent coverage and actual coded segments is due to Thornton's inclusion of a fiscal impacts appendix and a land incorporation fiscal impacts assessment in their comprehensive plan. These appendixes were largely composed of charts and tables which inflate the percent composition number. In another interesting outlier case, Northglenn takes the lowest spot in absolute frequency and coverage, again, likely due to their unique citizen driven process. Lakewood's comprehensive plan provided the clearest summary of why fiscal sustainability may be discussed in a city's comprehensive plan:

Sales tax revenue is an important component of the City's budget, as this revenue is the single largest contributor to the general fund. Therefore, it is vital to continue to strengthen the city's retail market and encourage new sales tax producing businesses to locate in Lakewood.
(Lakewood Comprehensive Plan 2015, p. 102)

Commercial land use drives sizable portions of the city budgets and, therefore, was also the theme that co-occurred most often with fiscal planning. This is because commercial developments and the businesses they contain are often subject to both a local sales tax and the

property taxes whereas residential properties are only subject to the property taxes, which are often also lower than commercial property tax rates. In fact, Colorado's average property tax rate of .51% is the third lowest in the nation in comparison to relatively high local sales tax rates, averaging at 4.91% (Jaijongkit 2025). Land use planning in general took second, followed by city services and residential development. Westminster's plan gave a detailed outline of the relationship between land use planning and the fiscal sustainability of a city:

Because land uses have different impacts on municipal finances, a balanced mix of land use types is needed to ensure future resiliency. An analysis of the Land Use Diagram was conducted to model net revenues or deficits resulting from build out. This analysis identified a positive revenue position for the city. The model separately considered a "stress test" scenario with only residential development occurring with no new commercial development; this scenario was roughly neutral with neither a positive nor negative fiscal outcome. For this reason, the Land Use Diagram balances both residential and commercial character types in support of greater future resiliency. (Westminster Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 27)

Even more interesting is the push and pull between residential development that generates significantly fewer tax dollars in comparison to commercial development. Average residential taxes in Colorado, again, are the third lowest in the nation. This means that cities often must find revenue in other areas such as commercial development to boost sales tax revenues. Because of this, even in a housing crisis, many of the cities appeared to be focused on attracting businesses and increasing sales tax revenues, which can lead to significantly underdeveloped residential development plans. Homelessness was mentioned only 16 times across all ten comprehensive plans, and three plans did not discuss it at all. Even though homeless shelters are often provided by local municipalities, and not by the state. More positively, affordable housing was mentioned 139 times across all the plans, and every city recognized that housing affordability is a growing problem within their communities. The problem is that every solution presented to fix the housing crisis requires city funds to implement, or asks that some other organization pay the cost:

Develop incentives for developers to include affordable housing in residential developments. (Lakewood Comprehensive Plan 2015, p. 69)

POLICY N-3.5: Retaining and Maintaining Existing Workforce and Assisted Housing - The City will develop programs to retain existing affordable and assisted housing, especially near transit stations. If such housing is lost due to future projects, the City will pursue replacement housing as feasible. (Arvada Comprehensive Plan 2014, p. 4-7)

Coordinate with Wheat Ridge 2020 and other groups to upgrade or rehabilitate existing multi-family properties and dated housing types, and to develop new housing types to attract a range of income levels (Wheat Ridge Comprehensive Plan 2009, p. 55)

Action Step HO-B.1.6: Consider a formal housing authority to allow increased opportunities for engagement and investment in public and private partnership. (Broomfield Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. 131)

Action H&N 16: Work with local and regional not-for-profit groups, such as Habitat for Humanity Metro Denver, to increase the supply of affordable housing. (Littleton Comprehensive Plan 2019, p. 55)

Unfortunately, rebuilding the sales tax base to get more funding to mitigate the effects of a housing crisis appears to be just as difficult for these cities. For nine out of ten cities, there is extremely little greenfield development available, so, instead, efforts that could be classed under the theme “Revitalization, Redevelopment, & Urban Renewal” came into play. This theme included the subcode “infill development”. Infill development is a type of redevelopment strategy that focuses on underutilized urban spaces in already developed parts of a city. Often this includes small parking lots or abandoned commercial spaces and aims to increase the density and diversify the use of the space to help it be a more sustainable and functional part of the nearby community. The revitalization, redevelopment, & urban renewal theme’s most common co-occurring theme was commercial and economic development, followed by neighborhoods and residential development. The prevalence of these themes infers that many of the cities appear to be struggling with underperforming strip malls, actual malls, or large box commercial developments that have gone vacant in recent years. Unfortunately to revitalize these commercial centers, most strategies proposed will also require either additional tax dollars or placing

additional costs on developers because of aging infrastructure such as water lines, sewers, and roads:

3.3 Encourage the redevelopment and improvement of older commercial areas by investing in public infrastructure, offering incentives, and facilitating environmental mitigation as necessary and appropriate. (Westminster Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 67)

B. Enter public/private partnerships and facilitate the use of tools such as Tax Increment Financing through an Urban Renewal Authority, special districts, and other tools to share infrastructure development costs (Wheat Ridge - Comprehensive Plan 2009, p. 39)

Establish a Urban Renewal District at the Belleview Kmart site, which likely meets blight criteria, to offer powerful incentives to attract new investment. (Englewood Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. cxiv)

The least costly solution to the combined housing affordability and need for economic growth is often simply changing existing land-uses to encourage a higher density, mixed-used development to replace underperforming commercial properties. Additionally, this strategy brings potential shoppers to these underperforming commercial centers to better support retail in the area. This strategy appears to attempt to address both the housing crisis and the fiscal planning issues at the same time:

Policy EV 3.3 - Commercial Revitalization. Encourage reinvestment in old and underperforming shopping centers by allowing additional uses, including residential uses where appropriate. (Thornton Comprehensive Plan 2024, p. 3.21)

POLICY ED-4.1: Promote Redevelopment of Underutilized Commercial Areas - The City will promote through incentives and infrastructure investment, new development, and reinvestment in designated "redevelopment areas" to retain or attract businesses and repurpose areas for retail, office and a diversity of housing types, as may be appropriate. (Arvada Comprehensive Plan 2014, p. 2-10)

The focus of comprehensive plans is obviously on land use planning. It does take up a considerable chunk of space in every plan, but fiscal sustainability and planning is closely related to a city's proposed land use goals. One example is in Broomfield where proposed developments that would alter their current zoning, particularly in lots previously zoned for commercial, must include information on the potential lost sales tax and other revenues the city may have gained. Such forecasting and statements included in opposition to the changes inherently support the

status quo even when the forecast revenues are dubious in the fact that the land is vacant and not producing any value for the city. Ultimately, the connection between land use planning and fiscal sustainability is real and apparent in the comprehensive plans but its expression through the actual planning process is even more troublesome than the focus it's given in the comprehensive plans.

Most cities are struggling to develop a consistent, sustainable tax base that can support the needs of a city, especially following the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. These plans are plainly optimistic as they are focused on the future and striving to make the cities better places to “live, work, and play”. However, the areas or neighborhoods that are considered for redevelopment are limited and the costs of redevelopment are remarkably high. At a time when every city on the Front Range is experiencing a housing crisis and has no room left for uninhibited growth, each is at a crossroads where a meaningful change in policy, land use preferences, and neighborhood character might be necessary to achieve fiscal sustainability while building healthy communities.

DISCUSSION

City comprehensive plans are visions for the future of a city and the plans examined in this dissertation typified that approach. Each of the plans contained a significant number of ideas for how to change the built environment of the city as well as many policy proposals or statements that seemed to look beyond the current political environment.

One concern for this study was that the comprehensive plans would be too focused on economic or political problems of the day but, overall, the results found that this was not true. The oldest documents, such as Wheat Ridge's comprehensive plan did still have references to the 2008 recession and did have a strong focus on economic growth and development, but the

recession did not seem to be the only driver of Wheat Ridge’s desire for growth and change. Similarly, newer comprehensive plans, specifically those developed and published after or during the COVID-19 pandemic, did have more references than older plans to public health and the pandemic, but these topics did not appear to be a central driver of planning conversations. The study’s analysis led to concerns that these larger macro-societal shifting influences would drive the local conversations, but each plan is well tailored to the desires and goals of the individual communities. For example, Arvada’s plan had extremely detailed discussions about what would become the G-Line light rail that RTD was building back when their plan was being developed. Broomfield’s plan tackles problems that are unique to a combined city and county government. In the end, the analysis and results demonstrate that these comprehensive plans, while still limited, are good representations of the visions each city has for the future of its built environment, and each plan is unique to its community.

One of the most significant findings of this study was the plans’ inclusion of meaningful public health discussions and policy implications. General messaging about public health was evident but one specific planning focused, health supporting theory was the 8/80 planning paradigm. The 8/80 planning theory emphasizes the need to develop built environments that support both the youngest “8” and oldest “80” citizens of a city through environmental mechanisms. Such design considerations include safe streets and play places for children, senior-friendly housing designs, or integrated transit and bike friendly transportation networks that allow kids to bike to a friend’s house or a senior to get their groceries without driving. Another, similar, public health topic found across comprehensive plans, “aging in place”, represents a possible pathway and political motivation for addressing public health more explicitly in the future. Aging-in-place has become popular with the urban planning field of recent and aims to

allow seniors or even more vulnerable elderly to continue to live in neighborhoods or communities that have been a part of their life, often for decades. Often, discussions of aging-in-place focus on adding more diverse housing choices, such as independent living facilities, or single-level, ranch-style ADUs to allow seniors to stay in or near their long-time homes while benefiting from more protective and supportive built and social environments. Combined with the 8/80 urban planning concept, the narrative appears to be a powerful change agent but lacked depth in the comprehensive plans. This is especially true since Colorado’s recently retired state demographer, Elizabeth Garner, in some of her last presentations emphasized that with a declining birthrate and declining or even flat net migration, the Colorado population is rapidly getting older and retiring which strain the economics of the state and requires significant shifts in housing policies at the local level (State Demography Office 2024).

With this aging population, six of the city plans, including Arvada, Wheat Ridge, Broomfield, Littleton, and Westminster (but not Northglenn) discussed a common issue of “aging in place²³”. “Aging in place” was described by Broomfield as “the ability to live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably” (Broomfield Comprehensive Plan 2016, p. 22). But the Arvada plan went further to suggest specific means to achieve these goals by saying:

...seniors prefer to remain in their current hometown, which may mean retro-fitting housing, facilities, and city infrastructure in order to accommodate a population that may live alone, have limited eyesight and hearing, shrinking social structures and mobility, and increasing health issues. (Arvada Comprehensive Plan 2014, p. A-14)

Westminster’s plan was the most explicit in connecting the need for improvements in the built environment’s form (“urban design” theme) and function with these demographics and,

²³ “Aging in Place” was identified as a third level code, i.e., a subcode of “Demographic Change” which was a subcode of the theme “Demographics.”

therefore, with the desired health outcomes mentioned at the outset of the plan. For example, their transportation goals included “1.1 Implement safe and connected access for all users, regardless of age, ability, or mode of travel, as described in the Complete Streets policy in the TMP”. (Westminster Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 53) “Complete Streets” being defined as:

streets designed and operated to enable safe use and support mobility for all ages and abilities, regardless of whether they are travelling as drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists, or transit riders. The concept of Complete Streets encompasses many approaches to planning, designing, and operating roadways and rights of way with all users in mind to make the transportation network safer and more efficient. (Westminster Comprehensive Plan 2023, p. 30 - 31)

Ultimately, the comprehensive plans showed that the cities had a variety of policy prescriptions to address the aging Colorado population, but it was still a significantly underdeveloped discussion. Giving the 8/80 planning theory and aging-in-place conversation more room within the comprehensive plans may be an entrance to developing a stronger public health focus within city planning.

Given that the analysis for this chapter was exploratory, it was pleasantly surprising to see that public health was being addressed, at least in some small ways in every plan. Even when discussions of specific neighborhoods with medical or health facilities occurred, they did not focus solely on what those buildings looked like or how much space they should be allocated. Instead, the plans connected such facilities with improved health outcomes, set goals for improving accessibility to the facilities, and even recommended policy proposals for coordinating with hospital groups or RTD to improve local public health and access to healthcare providers.

Urban planners and urban planning have a key role to play in improving local health outcomes, and that is strongly evidenced by the Northglenn plan. Developed in 2023, the Northglenn plan included ideas and feedback from members of the Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) commission and members of its county level public health organization. It was

unthinkable before this research that a small non-profit, donor funded program such as the HEAL cities and towns would create such a powerful snowball effect over 10 years, resulting in a comprehensive plan that specifically discussed the social determinants of health, food deserts, active transportation, and more. While there is still room for improvement, such as the checklist recommendations in Rojas-Rueda & Morales-Zamora's 2023 publication, including the identification of communities or neighborhoods with existing health disparities or displacement issues and targeting policies to mitigate or protect such vulnerable community members. Overall, the Northglenn comprehensive plan was still the strongest public health comprehensive plan and that was likely driven by the HEAL program, the involvement of the county level public health organization, and its uniquely community led drafting effort.

The HEAL program and Northglenn's success indicates that in the absence of a city-level public health organization driving local change, local residents or the state government could drive change by requiring a public health section to be included in the comprehensive plans. Given the statutes focus on "public health, safety, and welfare", simply providing more explicit guidance to localities with minimal requirements could provide each city with the impetus to partner with their county level public health organization like Northglenn did. Currently, state law only explicitly requires the plans to address tourism which, after experiencing the largest public health crisis and the on-going housing crisis, seems to be an outdated concern at best. Even then, cities appear to duck the state level mandate on tourism by simply claiming that the whole plan or specific sections fulfill the mandate without dedicating much space to the topic. Instead, following Rojas-Rueda & Morales-Zamora's recommendation of identifying and targeting policies towards neighborhoods experiencing significant health disparities may provide

a more tangible, urban planning friendly regulation without significant additional staff time or funding needed.

A second major finding of the study was that city officials' acknowledge a lack of integration between land use and transportation, but the comprehensive plans still failed to thoroughly integrate the two planning areas. Approaching the conflict between land use and transportation planning from a sociological lens really highlighted the contradictory and sometimes fraught language throughout the comprehensive plans. The results focus extensively on the Littleton comprehensive plan because of how the language, the images, and the visualizations all seem to contradict traditional planning narratives by placing the automobile centric model of development at the center of the city's assessment of good development strategies. This resulted in a plan that was a significant outlier and highlights how comprehensive plans, in general, represent societal conversations about car-dependence and preferences for, now luxurious, spacious, single-family developments. The comprehensive plans express a need for supporting transportation alternatives but appear bogged down by the societal inertia of car-dependent single-family neighborhoods. Reading these plans, one might think that the Denver metro is striving to become a public transportation, walking and biking haven in an automobile-centric country; however, as many residents would attest, the metro is far from being even close to transit-friendly. Comprehensive plans are too optimistic at times on this issue and fail to provide explicit implementation plans for neighborhood designs that would support public transportation. With the results showing that the comprehensive plans tend to favor increasing public transit usage, it is surprising that traffic or parking concerns are frequently allowed as justified opposition to proposed developments (as will be discussed in Chapter V).

The third pattern to emerge from the study was the unexpected role environmental stewardship played. First, each communities' citizens clearly support environmental stewardship to address a community's sustainability concerns in this climate crisis age. Secondly, environmental stewardship strategies also serve to enhance city service efficiencies, potentially reducing pressure on already strained city budgets. Lastly though, environmental stewardship goals act as a mediating tool, often slowing down development. As mentioned in the results, the study's findings on environmental stewardship and green/open spaces do not seem to point towards any support for the green growth machine theory amongst the authors of the comprehensive plans. The cities are not using comprehensive plans to further development through environmental greenwashing. Instead, they propose environmental goals in comprehensive plans that are focused on improving city services and reducing costs for taxpayers. This indicates that the green washing of developments is not, in practice, occurring, as a function of the need to feed the growth machine.

For this reason, this study leans more towards urban regime theory as the driver of urban planning and politics in smaller suburban communities. The variation of topics covered, sections included, policies proposed, and goals set in comprehensive plans are likely driven by whoever happens to be on the city council or planning commission when the plan is due to be revised.

This is not to say, however, that growth machine politics are not present at all in the comprehensive plans examined in this research. The fourth pattern of the study found that fiscal (un)sustainability was a subtextual concern of many cities. The concerns for enhancing fiscal sustainability in the suburbs appears to be driven by the growing cost of low-density neighborhoods and the rapidly changing economic landscape. The suburbs previously relied on malls or successful strip malls to drive sales tax revenues, but with online shopping becoming

more prominent, more of these locations are closing or moving. The fiscal unsustainability of the cities seems to be a result of the prior decades of growth machine politics. For example, when greenfields were readily available for these communities and their boundaries did not collide with one another, the growth machine had been an obvious political choice. By incorporating additional land, and building out new neighborhoods, cities could grow their tax base at low costs and be a part of fulfilling the American dream for their residents. Today, however, all the cities appear to be at a tipping point, as available greenfields have been used up and city boundaries collide, and their plans reflect this. Conversations around fiscal sustainability are now clearly driven by the need for improved commercial development that is not as car-centric and reliant upon the assumption of unused land as decades past. This indicates that if the growth machine is going to continue, it will need to turn in a direction that is entirely unfamiliar to these communities. Such a turn in the growth paradigm will be a stark shift in the neighborhood character and traditional suburban experience most residents have grown accustomed to.

One clear indicator the change in the development paradigm was how the specific sites (which often included images or were easily googled) mentioned in the plans were aimed at transitioning them to more mixed-use developments or transit-oriented developments. A second indicator was that neighborhood retail (more often the lack thereof) was a common concern in single-family neighborhoods but few plans offered clear strategies on how to better integrate even small commercial development into the fiscally unsustainable single-family neighborhoods. Alternatively, the comprehensive plans appear to favor selecting small portions of the city to undergo significant change, such as the newly urbanizing built environments popping up in small subsections of the city that were previously dead or dying car-centric commercial spaces. The concerns and statements made, in what are visionary and optimistic plans, was reminiscent of

what might as well be a mantra for Chuck Marohn of Strong Towns, “Our problem was not, and is not, a lack of growth. Our problem is 60 years of unproductive growth -- growth that has buried us in financial liabilities. The American pattern of development does not create real wealth. It creates the illusion of wealth” (Charles Marohn, *Thoughts on Building Strong Towns*, Volume 1). The analysis of the comprehensive plans in this study clearly support a similar “illusion of wealth”. Even if the cities are not currently raising red flags, the signals are visible in each city and the need to address the fiscal sustainability of the suburbs will force changes to our built environment, whether city residents want it or not.

Overall, the results indicate that researchers can identify common community values expressed in the comprehensive plans. The sociological finding was particularly evident regarding the study’s findings on environmental stewardship, which showed how the community focus on protecting the natural environment was acting as a modifier or possibly a control mechanism against the growth machine politics of the recent past. To address the fiscally unsustainable plans of the past, cities should adopt stronger narratives on environmental stewardship and public health. By embedding these priorities into policy frameworks, zoning regulations and community engagement efforts, cities can encourage sustainable growth patterns, promote walkability and green infrastructure, and foster a shift in public expectations toward healthier and more resilient built environments.

The study found that comprehensive plans offer a significant opportunity for cities to address health disparities while building more resilient communities through the planning of neighborhoods that promote positive social interaction and connection. Particularly important was the focus a vast majority of the plans gave to the integration of land use and transportation planning, with a heavy emphasis on improving modes of transport other than automobile-centric

patterns that can lead to isolation within communities. Littleton's comprehensive plan was the outlier highlighted in this chapter and appeared to miss the mark on the integration of land use and transportation planning. In Littleton's plan, the common narrative and language around land uses such as green and open spaces, and automobile centric designs were possibly intentionally reversed without an apparent justification or clear explanation. Alternatively, the subtext of nearly all plans seemed to express a desire for more walkable, bikeable, and denser neighborhoods. But comprehensive plans, while valuable, may be overly focused on a broad number of goals rather than on adapting each city to the often inevitable macroeconomic and demographic changes that are natural to the growth of any city. The breadth of the plans examined reflects the attempts of the ten cities to be inclusive of all viewpoints. But as such, the plans become too broad and too unwieldy for any city council or staff to accomplish in just ten years; this means that in putting the plans into effect, cities are commonly forced to water down goals or ideas that may support residents from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, the all-encompassing nature of the plans might be an attempt to appease the most active and vocal portions of the citizenry, which can create contradictory goals and weaken the ability of plans to address the actual social and planning ills of a city. Altogether, comprehensive plans are a useful tool that provides researchers with a baseline on the values and goals of a city, but they still fall short of truly including the goals and values of underrepresented or marginalized communities within the cities.

In the end, the comprehensive plans offer a unique, almost retrospective, and simultaneously introspective, insight into what communities value and what they believe their futures should look like. This project found that a detailed reading of these comprehensive plans, which are unfortunately often left unread by residents within these communities, can provide

insights regarding the nature of local politics and the community's social, cultural, and economic priorities. This chapter supports an argument that such plans are a truly untapped source of knowledge within the literature, not only for researchers, but for local activists, community organizations, and regional or state planning groups.

The depth of detail in each comprehensive plan, combined with the absence of state guidance and regulation in their drafting, allows these documents to tell the unique story of a city—its past, present, and future. Given this, future urban ethnographers and urban studies researchers would benefit from beginning their work with a careful analysis of these public records. The vast amount of information and ideas in comprehensive plans, along with related documents such as neighborhood sub-plans, sustainability strategies, and mobility frameworks, provides both a wealth of knowledge and a foundation for action. Residents and community organizations can use these plans as tools to advocate for and directly influence the development of their built environments, ensuring that future growth aligns with their needs and values.

LIMITATIONS

While comprehensive plans are a reliable source of information on the future of and values of a city's population, they are far from the only source. Sub-area plans for neighborhoods, parks and recreation districts, transportation master plans, or sustainability plans reduce the level of detail available in the comprehensive plans. Therefore, some comprehensive plans may lack specificity in those areas because entirely different plans and policies have been drawn up at separate times. This study found that one limitation of using comprehensive plans as source material for a sociological study is that many of the comprehensive plans also regularly referred to several other city plans and subplans. There was significant variation across the comprehensive plans in what other documents or subplans they referred to which makes it more

difficult to include these alternative documents in future studies. Some comprehensive plans offered brief summaries of other documents and referred the reader to those documents. As a result, the comprehensive plans with such references lack specificity in particular sections making them less useful or informative than other plans with similar topic areas.

Another limitation of using comprehensive plans in research is that the length of the comprehensive plans requires that a significant amount of time be allocated to conducting a thorough coding analysis (over 75 hours was spent on this chapter alone). In the future, with a larger analysis team covering an entire metropolitan region may be possible logistically and methodologically. However, because such an analysis might lead to a surfeit of data, it would be beneficial for researchers to narrowly target the types of data, or the subtopics, they look for while coding. This study employed a broad, theory-based content analysis to ensure the results were representative of the region and the included cities, but it resulted in multiple patterns, many of which were discarded. Alternatively, a narrow focus on sustainability or transportation planning may reveal sufficient results for a similar study.

It is worth noting that with continued improvements to large language models (LLMs) often used in what is popularly being called generative AI technology, future qualitative studies may be able to vastly expand the scope of this study to include all relevant city documents without making the scope too unruly for one human's eyeballs (of which mine were quite tired at the end of each day).

One final note for future researchers is that zoning maps and codes do not always directly align with the comprehensive plans of each city. In some ways, city zoning regulations may be more important to the on-the-ground development process. As will be discussed in the next chapters, professional planners rely more on zoning regulations when working with developers

and planning commissions to evaluate potential projects based on their compliance with zoning and building regulations. If more time were allocated to this study, a thorough analysis of these zoning and building regulations would further improve the holistic procedural understanding of these results. Given the importance of these topics, the constant updating and changes made to these documents, and the innumerable variability between localities across cities, states, and regions, there is certainly room for improvement and growth in the literature in the future.

CONCLUSION

Comprehensive city plans play a fundamental role in shaping the future of urban spaces. As suburban areas in the Denver Metro continue to evolve, comprehensive plans will remain central to shaping how cities navigate current and future challenges, offering both a record of past aspirations and a roadmap for future development. Public health was more prominent than expected in the comprehensive plans and Northglenn's example gave a strong justification for its further integration into planning through community driven efforts. The integration of land use and transportation policy was a major area of concern for all of the cities but was significantly hampered by the status quo of the existing built environment. Interestingly, environmental stewardship as expressed through a desire for improved green infrastructure acted as a mitigating force against development interests, interests often spurred on by the precarious financial position of many of the suburbs. A plain reading of the facts of each comprehensive plan would not make these patterns obvious but as Ryan (2011) recommends, reading between the lines is a key part of understanding the true concerns, problems, and hopes for each cities' future.

In cities across the U.S. and the Front Range of Colorado, comprehensive plans provided a window into the past priorities and aspirations of the cities that developed them. As many of these plans are up for review either this year or soon, future research can expect to identify these

changing priorities in the next versions. Some plans, such as Lakewood's, often lacked significant ideas or mentions of today's most popular land use policy topics such as accessory dwelling units and transit-oriented developments. Similarly, cities, including Thornton, Arvada, and Wheat Ridge, that were planning for the development of the Regional Transportation District's (RTD's) light rail lines and will now have an opportunity to see how well those plans worked and adjust their policies to improve the neighborhoods further.

But comprehensive plans are not just a retrospective guide for researchers; in fact, they primarily serve as visionary documents that guide cities toward achieving long-term goals beyond the immediate pressures of political or economic fluctuations. This has been clearly evidenced by the ones analyzed in this chapter. Each comprehensive plan is unique to its city but, as this study shows, their combined content demonstrates the broader cultural and urban planning trends across an entire region. Wheat Ridge's plan, while coming out of the 2008 recession, aimed for more than just economic recovery with transformative transit-oriented neighborhoods and economic centers. Similarly, Arvada's plan detailed ambitions for transit-oriented growth with the introduction of RTD's Gold line. Lakewood and Centennial's plans represented their unique history, as once unincorporated neighborhoods came together under a single city name and sought to build a stronger, unified community identity. These documents reflect the diversity of challenges and aspirations unique to each community, offering a window into local politics, culture, and the vision for future development.

The picture for the future becomes even clearer when these varied comprehensive visions are pulled together through the research process. The plans demonstrated an increasing recognition of the links between urban design, walkability, and health outcomes (such as those highlighted by Saelens et al. [2003]) and the pattern underscores the importance of

comprehensive planning in building healthier communities. All the comprehensive plans analyzed in this study address public health in thoughtful and integrated ways. Whether through goals that promote accessibility to healthcare facilities or by discussing the social determinants of health, planners in cities like Northglenn have acknowledged their responsibility to contribute to healthier environments. The momentum created by initiatives like the HEAL Cities and Towns campaign demonstrates how local action can influence policy. Northglenn's HEAL committee's influence made it stand out uniquely on the topic of public health. It juxtaposed a more traditional urban planning public health framework portrayed in the Westminster comprehensive plan. Either way, Northglenn's plan demonstrates how the comprehensive plan can act as an intermediate step towards bringing public health data and problems to the planning conversation.

The integration of land-use and transportation planning into the comprehensive plans of suburban cities surrounding Denver emerged as a significant theme in this study. The content analysis revealed a gap between the vision and practical implementation of a more integrated land-use/transportation planning model. This gap reveals the tension between each communities' desires for sustainable mobility and the entrenched car-centric culture and infrastructure that continues to dominate American cities. Many plans advocate for reducing car dependence and encouraging transit alternatives, reflecting a broader shift in urban thinking. However, the lack of clear implementation strategies is notable. Walking and biking was often relegated to a leisure activity rather than a means of mobility between places. Transit-oriented designs were limited to the immediate vicinities of new stations rather than being integrated into the communities. Cities, in the Denver metro, are frequently described as striving toward transit-friendly, pedestrian-

oriented futures, yet these goals remain aspirational without the structural changes, in both process and policy, needed to make them a reality.

The plans frame environmental sustainability and green infrastructure goals as tools for reducing costs and improving services, rather than as part of a growth machine logic. The growth machine pattern of suburban development and the impetus for growth at all costs has reached its physical and political limit in these cities. Additionally, sustainable development practices and the protection of open spaces often act more as limitations on growth rather than a justification for more. This result could be unique to the region, Colorado, or cultural and sociopolitical climate of the cities. Overall, the fiscal unsustainability of the prior growth model and the current built environment is in tension with the regions environmental stewardship goals.

Thus, the comprehensive plans reveal that the cities of Colorado's Front Range are at a crossroads, where traditional growth models are no longer sufficient. Overall, the plans examined in this study suggest an increasingly localized, possibly regime-driven, approach to urban planning related policy will drive more successful outcomes. Without a strong community engagement driven process the plans become reflections of the existing development interests and economic development agendas. Alternatively, through bottom-up participation and idea generation in the plan's drafting and reviews, comprehensive plans are more likely to include practical benefits for taxpayers such as environmental sustainability initiatives and take strong positions on social and political issues including public health.

While comprehensive plans offer ambitious visions for the future, the challenge lies in aligning these visions with actionable strategies that address issues of environmental and fiscal sustainability, mobility, and public health.

CHAPTER V: THE PARKING COMMISSION: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PLANNING COMMISSION PUBLIC HEARINGS IN TWO CITIES

It is unfair to have cities where parking is free for cars and housing is expensive for people.

*Donald Shoup, author of *The High Cost of Free Parking*, 2005*

INTRODUCTION

City planning and zoning commissions are the most common citizen advisory boards in U.S. cities across the country (Dougherty & Easton 2011). The commissions play an important role in advising the city's elected officials and sometimes city planning staff on what projects should be approved or rejected, and why. Often, these commissions are created with the goal of offloading the particularly onerous task of reviewing complex city planning documents, petitions for development, and detailed amendments to property plats, zoning, and official development plans to an appointed commission of local citizen experts. Historically, these commissions have served to control the development growth of a city and protect the city's residents from displacement, poor construction, and various other health and safety risks. Unfortunately, academic literature often lacks interest in the mundane procedures and discussions of these powerful city commissions and their decisions. This chapter conducts a case study on the public hearings of two Colorado planning commissions in the Denver metropolitan area, examining the dynamics between citizen participation, commission decision-making, and the proposed developments. Over 40 hours of public hearings were transcribed and coded in MAXQDA to discern the common discussion themes and problems the commissions find in their review processes. The results reveal a complex interplay of NIMBYism and YIMBYism sentiments that shape public comments, often focusing on traffic, safety, and building heights. Additionally, the analysis finds that the two planning commissions are relatively weak as defined by Houghton (1988) and their discussions focus overwhelmingly on automobile-centric designs. The results

and discussion offer insight into a system that likely perpetuates systemic inequalities in the built environment and often relies on volunteers to restructure decades old political structures and regulations to enact change. Ultimately, this chapter leads to more questions about the effectiveness of current planning review processes, advocates for clearer evaluation criteria, and potentially revised roles for city planning commissions.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

City planning and zoning boards, sometimes called commissions instead of boards, are a central public figure of local urban development processes. In fact, they are the most common board or commission found in American cities (Dougherty & Easton 2011). For the purposes of this chapter, such entities are referred to as planning commissions to keep the language consistent throughout the chapter. Planning commissions are composed of local citizens, usually on a voluntary basis and occasionally with small financial or meal stipends, and hold regular quasi-judicial public hearings on proposed developments in their city. In this case, quasi-judicial describes the deliberative practice of hearing evidence on a petition, more often referred to as a development proposal, and rendering a decision in the affirmative or negative, with or without conditions. Planning commissions are not given legislative authority, rather they uphold the existing rules and regulations by deciding if a proposal meets the city's criteria. The proposals often include exceptions to the rules, called variances, or amendments to existing plans that require additional layers of approval.

Planning commissioners are selected and appointed by their city council and often are selected based on their expertise in relevant fields such as urban planning or architecture. This selection process can lead to an overrepresentation of certain groups and a lack of representation from others. For example, Anderson & Sass (2004) highlighted the higher number of retirees

from urban planning and architecture related fields. Alternatively, the authors also noted that planning commissions tend to be composed of more white-collar employment individuals with higher incomes, business owners or executives with related experience, or individuals with pro-development interests which could include real estate, financial lending, or construction.

Desantis & Hill (2004) noted that the bias towards retirees or older citizens may be because of the lack of political experience of younger citizens or lack of leisure time for those in their prime working years. Similarly, McCabe (2013) found that homeowners were more likely to participate in all forms of civic engagement, including serving on voluntary city commissions. Anderson & Sass note that these preferences lead to an “unbalanced” selection for planning and zoning commissions, especially since states and cities often have no restrictions on professions or associations that should be excluded from service on the planning commission. Ultimately, the authors recommend that planning commissions, and likely all appointed citizen advisory boards undergo training to avoid bias in their decision making.

Given this likely bias in planning commissions from their conception, why do we have such voluntary planning commissions with important decision-making power in the first place? The simple answer is because they can be effective alternatives to making a city council do everything. Citizen advisory boards and commissions provide and collect important feedback for city councils to use when making the final decisions on the numerous topics that come across their desks. Houghton’s study of nine citizen advisory boards in Kalamazoo, MI (1988) analyzed what made for an effective board. Their study found that commissions do have power but often fail to use it. Houghton emphasized that citizen advisory boards need to be independent, seeking out information, and building support for or against projects with citizen participation. Often this meant challenging the city staff’s recommendations, even when it could potentially harm the

relationship between city staff and the commission. In Houghton's view, the most effective commissions were acting as independent oversight entities, almost like mini-city councils with specific tasks set out for them by their elected officials. When a board or commission was not doing all of this, they often acted more like a "rubber-stamp" for the city staff and have little impact on the programs or policies of their city.

Secondly, planning commissions hold the statutorily required public hearings on development projects in their cities. So, again, by splitting this work off into a planning commission, it reduces the burden of review placed upon city councils, while also handing off the work to a group of local citizens who usually have more expertise in the specific area than a typical city council member. Moore and Caporale (2023) found that statutory public hearings do impact commission and council opinions in a study of Canadian municipalities. The impact was not as strong in every city they analyzed. For example, the authors noted that the impact was stronger in central cities with ward-based elections but weaker in smaller, but growing, suburban cities. They noted that such effects may be generalizable to suburban U.S. cities, but additional studies were needed. Ultimately, Moore and Caporale found citizens who spoke at the hearings were able to influence the decision-making process. This goes double for planning commissions who serve as the first line of decision-making for local development projects. Often a planning commission holds one or multiple public hearings on a given project as it undergoes multiple reviews and amendments throughout the review process. Therefore, the planning commission acts almost like a distillation of public comments, sorting through the evidence provided at the public hearings and giving a recommendation to the city council for final approval. As Houghton noted, these commissions and boards usually have an opportunity to sway the direction of a

project if they maintain their independence from city council, city staff, or other citizen coalitions.

Public hearings though lead the planning commission into a hurricane of often opposing or conflicting public interests which have in recent years been distilled down into two camps: NIMBYism and YIMBYism. To keep it simple, the NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) phenomenon refers to residents' opposition to development projects in their neighborhoods. The core concern for residents is the negative externalities that residents fear they will experience from land use changes (Matejczyk 2001). Einstein et al. (2019) argue that NIMBYs, who they refer to as neighborhood defenders, often employ a range of political and legal tactics to hinder development, often using expertise, organization, and credible threats of lawsuits. Similarly, they note that there is a positive relationship between the number of housing regulations and lawsuits and a negative relationship between lawsuits and the share of multifamily housing permits in the cities they studied. As a result, Glaeser (2011) (also discussed in the Bruner et al. (2020)) argues that NIMBYism hinders the construction of new housing, increases costs, and makes cities unaffordable.

On the other hand, you have YIMBY movements (Yes in My Backyard), which are often pro-housing development and tend to brush aside many NIMBY concerns as unreasonable. YIMBY groups are typically younger, often highly educated interest groups that advocate for increased housing density and infill development. They see the political space as currently controlled by older, non-representative groups and are attempting to gain a foothold through local government processes. Interestingly, Holleran's 2021 article busts up a myth about all NIMBY's being older and wealthier. Rather, they find that NIMBYism and YIMBYism can extend to different demographics and likely is dependent on local economic and social

conditions. YIMBY political positions often focus on increasing infill development, creating more affordable housing, regardless of the advocates racial/ethnic, class, or cultural background.

Planning commissions most often serve as a middle ground between these two opposing social forces. Given the quasi-judicial nature of the planning commission's design, commissioners are tasked with finding a balance between the prevailing needs of the community as a whole and the concerns of residents who are nearest the developments that are being proposed. In fact, Matejczyk's study found that neighborhood organizations that establish reputations for consensus-building with developers have more influence with zoning commissions, and those who are more oppositional face more noxious projects in the future. This could be a result of developers pushing for larger developments that they know will face opposition and using the planning commission's focus on balance to settle for what they would have originally proposed if they had stronger partners in the local community. Similarly, planning commissions, being composed of local citizens can have similar effects on developers. So ultimately, planning commissioners hold an important but likely strenuous role of hearing and balancing the concerns of such disparate community interests, from NIMBYs to YIMBYs, to city staff, city council, and the developers who will ultimately construct what is approved.

All of this comes down to what Levine (2017) describes as the "Paradox of Community Power", in which they outline how different definitions of community lead to conflict. As groups will define what constitutes "the community" differently, such as what is or is not a part of their neighborhood, what fits in with the neighborhood character, or what their "community" will accept on behalf of the larger city's "community" which can lead to conflict. One example of this occurs at a linguistic level. In a 2020 study by Yoder, the author found that homeowners tend to use different language during public comment periods. Specifically, homeowners who

spoke at public hearings were more likely to discuss topics such as traffic, environmental protection, and historic preservation. These topics often revolved around protecting their already invested interests such as property values and property rights. Alternatively, renters were more likely to discuss policing and community programming. Yoder found that this trend was consistent across cities included in their study. Ultimately, this leads their discussion to question whether historical U.S. policies to encourage homeownership may both mitigate and perpetuate economic and political inequalities.

Altogether, the literature collectively paints a complex picture of citizen involvement in local governance, particularly in the context of zoning and development. Firstly, when it comes to citizen advisory boards, including planning commissions, they need to be independent and assertive to be truly effective. An independent planning commission will likely question local planning staff, apply conditions to projects, and even at times reject the recommendations of local staff, complicating the fragile relationships. Secondly, we should expect to see organized neighborhood opposition to specific projects. Public comments do impact decision making at the council level, so one would expect it to impact on planning commissioners decisions as well. The most effective opposition will seek out consensus but there are an array of opposition tactics and consensus is not always a guaranteed outcome. Since most civic participation comes from homeowners, we would expect to see that topics about traffic, environmental protection, or historical preservation will be common. Most planning commissioners are homeowners too so possibly the same topics may arise out of their questions and comments. Ultimately, planning commissions do have a significant amount of power to influence planning decisions made in their cities. The question becomes whether they are able to effectively wield that authority to improve their community's built environment in the interest of topics such as environmentalism,

public health, and safety, or if they will fall back on the protection of property values and the interests of a select few of the city's citizens?

METHODS & DATA

This study focuses on the public hearings held by city planning commissions in Broomfield and Westminster. These cities were selected based on the researcher's familiarity with the cities, their unique neighborhoods, and the studies focus on ethnographic analysis of specific communities within the two cities. The Broomfield and Westminster planning commissions (Broomfield Land Use Review Commission and Westminster Planning Commission, hereby referred to solely as planning commissions) adhere to common practices across the metropolitan area in their use of Robert's Rules of Order for governing the public hearing processes, both are unpaid, voluntary commissions composed of local citizens appointed by the city councils, and both regularly see and recommend approval/denial of proposed developments that include rezoning, parcel/lot amendments, and architectural design. Planning commissions are required to assess the compatibility of proposed developments or amendments with the existing comprehensive plans or other city requirements and provide a recommendation of approval or denial to the city council based upon their findings at the public hearing. It is important to note that planning commissions are not the final vote on approving proposed development, rather they are often the second to last step before a proposed development is voted on by the city council. Therefore, the recommendation of a planning commission, which is often, but not exclusively, composed of current or former architects, urban or regional planners, developers (or other educational/career specialties related to such fields) is taken seriously by city council members.

While the Broomfield and Westminster planning commissions do have much in common, there are notable differences that should be raised. Broomfield’s planning commission originally oversaw both the approval of proposed developments and minor variances. Such minor variances have been shifted to a new commission called the Neighborhood Board of Adjustments. Alternatively, in Westminster, such minor variances are often adjudicated by administrative review. Both methods are common across Denver Metro municipalities but substantially align the content before the two commissions. Another notable difference is that Broomfield is both a city and a county, whereas Westminster is only a city. The study kept this in mind to see if there would be substantial differences between the themes or materials presented to the commissions, but no such findings were made. Lastly, the Westminster City Council introduced a set of “standards” for approval of: (1) planned unit developments (PUDs), preliminary development plans and their subsequent amendments, (2) official developments plans (ODPs) and subsequent amendments of ODPs, and (3) final plats (respectively, sections 11-5-14 through 11-5-16 of the Westminster Municipal Code). Broomfield does not have a comparative version of such standards, nor anything else that is used comparatively. In one such case these standards were discussed in a public hearing, but ultimately the analysis found that the introduction of such standards did not significantly alter the discussion, content, or themes of the public hearings.

Due to the pandemic, many of the planning commissions, across the Denver Metro area have continued to be live-streamed or recorded online (most often YouTube or an audio recording), so the researcher did not have to attend every meeting to keep up with local events. Over the selected data period, April 2023 through July 2024 (the official closure of all data collection for this dissertation), all meetings for which public records could be found were collected. In total, the Westminster Planning Commission held 14 meetings and Broomfield held

19. Some meetings contained a single public hearing while others contained multiple. In total, 46 public hearings were included in the 33 meetings. In Broomfield, the average meeting was 1 hour and 6 minutes long, with the shortest at 19 minutes and the longest at 3 hours and 15 minutes. For Westminster, the average meeting was 1 hour and 23 minutes long, with the shortest at 28 minutes and the longest at 3 hours and 29 minutes. Proposed developments varied significantly from affordable housing to cell towers, large residential developments to small commercial operations. Westminster's planning commission regularly saw a unique project that was broken up into multiple parcels called the Uplands residential development resulting in a potential abnormal variation in their data, but no meetings or public hearings were excluded for consistency. Audio recordings of the meetings were collected from the City and County of Broomfield's archive and the City of Westminster's YouTube Channel²⁴. These files were then uploaded to Otter.AI for transcription services, manually cleaned to identify speakers and achieve more accurate transcription and finally loaded into MAXQDA for coding and analysis. In total, the data cleaning and analysis process took approximately 60 hours for transcript cleaning and 40 hours for analysis.

Coding in MAXQDA started initially with identifying and coding by paragraph all speakers by city planner, public speaker, developer, or commissioner. The paragraph was chosen as the appropriate level of analysis due to the brief nature of questions and comments often made by commissioners who were the focus of this study. Alternatively, city planners and developers often responded to commissioner questions and comments with brief or mid-length responses and were given substantial presentation time at the beginning of each public hearing. Each

²⁴ Information for any striving PhD student, YouTube transcripts are messy and unorganized. Instead, even the uninitiated can use a brief python script to download copies of the videos or free online programs to download audio only copies of the public videos.

commissioner question/comment was then coded by themes that were developed out of the material. Each statement was reviewed twice for accuracy and coded once by topic to produce the results. After the first round of review and coding, common themes arose, some smaller themes were merged with similar themes, and in the second round such themes were used to validate all existing paragraph coding.

RESULTS

Public Comments

This chapter focuses on planning commissions as an entity of the city, but previous literature has focused more often on the use of the public comment periods in these type of city meetings. As such, it felt appropriate to make sure that the planning commissions evaluated here do not vary significantly from what we would expect to find if one randomly selected a city planning commission and analyzed their meetings. The existing literature has generally found that public comments are often negative or against proposed developments (Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2018) and participation is often low (Desantis & Hill 2004). The results appear to substantiate these findings in Table 26 (next page) showing the coded sentiment of the public comments, along with their frequency by meeting and total frequency across all meetings. In total, 69 comments were recorded across the 19 meetings of the Broomfield LURC and 68 comments were recorded across 14 meetings of the Westminster Planning Commission. Since the total amount of meeting time was nearly even (21.08 hours for Broomfield & 19.43 for Westminster), it was surprising to find the number of public comments nearly proportional. Broomfield was more likely to have meetings with no members of the public speaking (avg. = 3.6 but 11 meetings without comments) whereas Westminster had more regular public participation (avg. = 4.9 but only 1 meeting without comments). In Broomfield, the average was

really brought up by just two meetings on July 24th, 2023, and Dec. 11th, 2023, with 20 and 31 comments respectively. Interestingly, Westminster would occasionally play some public comment voicemails they received which boosted their overall public comment numbers but also ensures that the public knows their comments are being heard and taken seriously. It is important to note that both cities have websites where members of the public can submit questions and comments in advance of the hearings. These online comments are not read publicly but are provided to the commissioners in advance of the hearing to review.

Table 26 - Count (Frequencies and %) of Public Comments at Public Hearings

	Broomfield Land Use Review Commission		Westminster Planning Commission		TOTAL	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Negative	44	63.8%	32	47.1%	76	55.5%
Neutral	15	21.7%	26	38.2%	41	29.9%
Positive	10	14.5%	10	14.7%	20	14.6%
Meetings w/ comments	8	42.1%	13	92.9%	21	63.6%
Meetings w/o comments	11	57.9%	1	7.1%	12	36.4%

Negative Public Comments

The results show that over half (55.5%) of all comments were negative or against the proposed development. The top co-occurring code for negative comments was for “cars & driving” (40 occurrences) which naturally overlapped with comments about traffic (30) and parking (18). The second most common negative co-occurring code was regarding “Crime and Safety” (25). It is important to note that many times though, safety was focused on vehicle and traffic safety, sometimes bringing in pedestrian and bicyclist (13) safety in relation to said vehicles. The third most common theme was “Building Height”, found in 14 of the 76 comments. MAXQDA’s sentiment analysis would often categorize profoundly negative comments as mostly positive or positive because such comments were often couched in

compliments or kind language followed by profoundly negative language like this statement about a proposed affordable housing project that would include reserved spaces for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD):

So, I'm about a block away from this proposed development. You've redone the design on it, which I applaud, and it does look a lot nicer than what it was. But it's still in no uncertain terms, a human warehouse, you're putting 40 residents in there. And combined space that's not designed for that many people. I agree that there should be housing that is affordable for all groups of people. The traffic in and out of this project is going to be about 100 trips, minimum per day, you go to work, you come home from work, you go out for groceries, you go to the doctor, you got friends and family visiting, you got support staff. (Broomfield LURC 20231211)

Or, on the same project, this statement about the proposed height of the building that would have extended 5 feet over the existing R1 regulations for the neighborhood, but the public pushback resulted in a restrictive condition being placed on the project that likely would make the project financially unfeasible:

I'm in favor of bringing low-income housing into the neighborhood, but it's zoned for families, the people who live along that edge. I mean, had the presumption that this could turn into four family homes, not that it would turn into this like Mega Plex of apartments. And, and so I think that it's inappropriate to change the zoning to allow something like this, even though that's really not what the neighborhood is built on. You wouldn't let me build a three-story home on my lot. And I don't think that they should be able to do that either. (Broomfield LURC 20231211)

Particularly for Broomfield, negative comments came in large waves and were often significantly disruptive to the public hearing process. Westminster also had a few moments of interruption but often it was because of a lack of understanding about the rules whereas interruptions in Broomfield were often caused by members of the public who were blatantly disregarding the rules. During the public hearing on the affordable housing proposal, with reserved units for IDD individuals, there were only three interruptions that were promptly dismissed by the chairperson. Alternatively, at the other, possibly even more contentious hearing in Broomfield on a city proposal to install potable and non-potable water tanks, there were at least nine interruptions to the hearing process.

Neutral Public Comments

Next, 29.9% of comments were coded as neutral or as having no sentiment. Often these types of comments were strictly asking a clarifying question such as “How many acres is this on?” (Broomfield LURC 20231211) or a longer statement like:

Good evening. My name is [removed]. I'm also a resident in the Broomfield Arista area. Thank you for changing the proposal from more buildings to less buildings. And thank you for giving more room to the Broomfield open space that we really appreciate that. I'm curious if there's any plan in terms of just thinking about evacuation of the current prairie dogs who's living on that land right now. As I understand, typically, their approach is either to relocate them or to gas them, I would like to hear if there's any salt in that process. I'm also curious on the exterior of the buildings, which I hear from the proposal is going to be glass, glass tend to have an impact in in terms of interaction with birds, it confuses them, they tend to hit the glass and die. So I'm curious if there's any kind of design thinking into that. Thank you. (Broomfield LURC 20230410)

Now in some cases, one could have swung these “neutral” statements either towards the positive or negative side, but the coding methodology favored clear, defining words for or against a project to move them into the positive or negative category. But one view of these public hearings is that they serve as a function through which the public can get more information on a project. Both the Broomfield and Westminster Commission acted on this vision in multiple occasions, particularly because the planning commissions are not the final vote for or against any of the projects reviewed in this study. Often, the commissioners would directly re-ask the questions posed to them from the public to the developers, regardless of sentiment or relevance to the oversight authority of the commission itself.

Positive Public Comments

Finally, only 14.6% (total count = 20) of public comments were explicitly in support of the proposed development. Most often, these positive comments were focused on the creation of more housing, particularly affordable housing. Following that, positive comments mentioned access to pedestrian or bicyclist infrastructure or schools. Now a few of the proposed projects in

these meetings were for small school expansions or new infrastructure. Often the positive public comments associated with the schools came from parents of students or staff at the school who were advocating for their schools.

In contrast to the earlier negative comments, this mother of an IDD child came out to advocate for the proposed development. She first spoke of the former IDD community that had existed nearby the property and how her son “thrived” when he was able to live on his own until the program was shut down and the new concerns that brought their family:

...[W]ith my husband and I getting older, it's crucial that [my son] and others like him find that community and a safe, affordable, and sustainable place to live. My husband and I are approaching 70. We lay awake at night thinking what is going to happen to [our son] when we are no longer able to have him living in our family home. He thrived living in Broomfield. Broomfield was welcoming to him. I implore you to consider supporting The Grove at Cottonwood and opening Broomfield again to people like [my son], people with IDD who deserve a place to live independently supported and in an affordable environment (Broomfield LURC 20231211)

This project drew in four the twenty positive public comments, with families in similar situations to this woman speaking out on behalf of their child. Even the director of the local IDD community support center, also a mother of an IDD son, stepped up to defend the project. She tried to explain that the 25% cap on IDD restricted housing units was required by the Fair Housing Act but the rest of the units could go to anyone who needed affordable housing. Another mother, whose daughter, she explained, had autism, stepped up afterwards saying:

I don't really see where the parking is going to be an issue. My daughter just is going to be using FlexRide. She's going to be using her electric bike. She's going to be using her walking, she's going to be using Uber. She does not have the ability to drive. But when you're in a community like that, you partner up and you help each other. And I'm hoping that with the very bottom floor of 25% of the units being IDD. I'm hoping it goes up. And I'm hoping that the seniors that move in there and the other families that move in there, provide that natural community support and truly, truly see the value in my child and other individuals IDD (Broomfield LURC 20231211)

Alternatively, Westminster saw several housing projects being reviewed during the study period. The one affordable housing focused project went largely unopposed at its public hearing.

More interestingly, young adults were submitting comments talking about the unaffordability of their community and the need to build more housing so that they could stay and live in the community they grew up in. First, this soon to be married Westminster woman:

I've lived in Westminster my entire life, and my husband and I are looking to buy a house after getting married, and because of the lack of affordable housing in Westminster, we are being forced to move up to Windsor near Fort Collins, Colorado, because the housing is much more affordable. So I just wanted to leave the message that we support the Berkeley Homes community at Semper Gardens, and are looking forward to that housing development so that we can move back to Westminster soon. (Westminster PC 20230808)

Then at another hearing on 40 proposed townhomes, after a lengthy discussion by the commission and other negative public comments concerned about the increase in traffic, a young man who grew up a block away from the proposed development got up to speak to the commission:

So I am in favor of this proposition, because I am 21 years old. I have lived in Westminster my entire life. I believe that without more housing, without more development, and there is, generally speaking, no future for a community. It... a community needs to be able to grow and developed and be able to be lived in. I would like to keep living here, but if there's no appropriate fit housing or anything like that, I might have to move somewhere else. (Westminster PC 20230523)

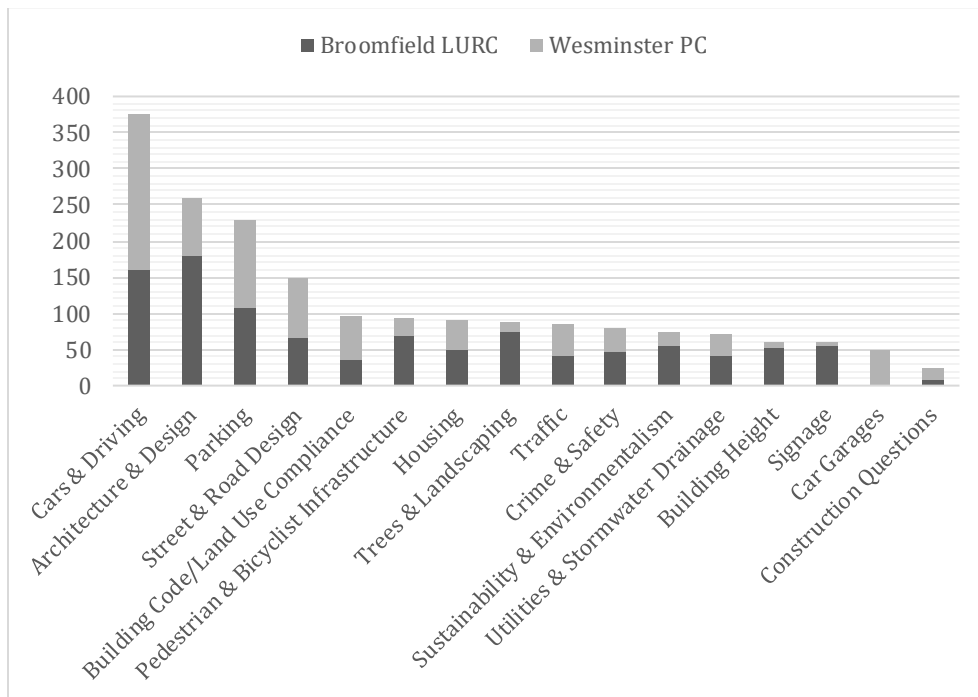
The proposed project was a new proposal for a site that had already been previously approved for 40 apartments. The Westminster traffic engineer had expressed multiple times that there would be no significant change in automobile traffic between the previously approved apartments and the new townhomes multiple times. Additionally, the traffic engineer emphasized that their office uses the highest values possible for residential traffic counts just to be sure.

Planning & Zoning Commissioners' Comments/Questions

While public comments are generally limited to 3-5 minutes per person and were not as common, city commissioners ask many questions and rarely use their position as a soapbox. Because of this, a sentiment analysis does not help us understand the way commissioners use their authority to review and approve proposed developments. Instead, for the 1335 questions

and comments put forward by planning commissioners, we can find common themes that reveal their priorities and visions for the future of their communities. In both cities, commissioners, particularly the commission chairs, often use their time to bring up questions or items talked about in public comments. Additionally, though, the results show that commissioners have regular topics or “pet projects” that they emphasize when evaluating a proposal. One example of a pet project might be one Broomfield commissioner’s focus on bicycling amenities. This commissioner regularly asked questions about bicycle racks, bicyclist safety, and in general was always the first to bring up considerations for bicyclists in each design. This is reflected in the higher proportion of comments being themed as about “Pedestrian & Bicyclist Infrastructure” in Broomfield than Westminster by a 3:1 margin in Figure 27. Additionally, figure 27 lays out the most common themes found in the commissioners’ questions or comments.

Figure 27 - Comparison of Common Themes by # of Codes by City Commission



Automobile Centric Design

Cars, traffic, parking, and the design of roads and streets nearby proposed developments regularly dominated the questions and comments made by commissioners in public hearings. Figure 27 drastically underemphasizes the degree to which the focus of the discussions was on automobile centric designs. While discussions of “Cars and Driving” were the most common code at 377 instances, just “Parking” (229 instances), “Street & Road Design” (148 instances), “Traffic” (79 instances), and “Car Garages” (50 instances) totaled together is 511 instances. Many of these codes overlap with “Cars & Driving”, specifically, 101 times for parking, 52 times for traffic, 41 times for street & road design, and zero for car garages which was more often discussed in terms of architectural features. If instead, the codes were all merged under cars & driving, 694 or 52% of all commissioner questions and comments would have been coded as focusing on cars. Certainly, some of this result was driven by public comments, which also heavily focused on cars, driving, and traffic, making commissioners feel obligated to respond to or get answers for such concerns.

Overall, Westminster’s commission was more dominated by discussions of automobile centric design standards. Broomfield’s commission was not far behind but themes such as car garages were never discussed and architecture & design themes including signage, trees, and landscaping were more regular in their conversations. In Broomfield’s public hearings, the commissioners acted on multiple occasions to verify that proposed developments were complying with a newly implemented regulation requiring a minimum number of electric vehicle charging parking spots. These discussions naturally raise the number of times parking was discussed in Broomfield hearings but in an entirely unique way to their commission. EVs and related charging stations only came up 38 times in all the public hearings, but 30 of those were in

Broomfield. Alternatively, in Westminster, the chair would only sometimes ask if residential garages would be outfitted with appropriate electrical wiring for future electric vehicle charging. The Broomfield EV charging requirement was strictly enforced by its commission and in one case, they conditioned an approval upon the developer coming into compliance with the new regulation. Overall, this was consistent with the Broomfield commission's heavier focus on "Sustainability & Environmentalism" and they regularly asked more questions about trees and landscaping, solar power, and electric vehicles than Westminster's commissioners did.

In Westminster's public hearings, sometimes parking or traffic became a cudgel in the public hearings. In the July 23rd, 2024, meeting, this divide came to the surface when one of the commissioners had expressed multiple complaints about the proposed residential development being allowed to build only one car garages versus the required two under the Westminster building code. Additionally, the commissioner complained that street parking was being counted in the total number of parking spaces provided by the development.

Developer: Going to the A5 parking to walk through this one as well. So, for the single family attached... 73 units will require 146 garage spaces. We're providing 146. For the SFD enclosed or required per 93 units to provide 186. We will provide those 186 via garages. The driveway spaces, as denoted when we just talked about A1, will have zero as they're alley loaded, and we provide 147 on street parking spaces. ...And then we're providing an additional 18 right of way spaces in that teal color along West 88th and due to the way that right of way tapers, we can only provide those on street on 88th where they're located.

Commissioner #1: So, explain that to me. So, on street parking is not allowed on 88th Street on the south side from that point to the east?

Developer: East of Hooker Way to Federal.

Commissioner #1: And that's because of turn lanes or something.

Developer: Yeah.

Commissioner #1: Okay, wow. So, all of those people that front on to 88th all those single family homes. What is there? 2, 4, 6, 8, 10. There's like 20 of them. They have somebody come and visit them. Say they have visitors. Where are they supposed to park?

Developer: Internal along West 87th they'll be parking ... along Hastings, Grove Street and Green Court, as well as along Irving and 87th.

Commissioner #1: That's a long ways away for grandma to walk to visit. Okay... I think that kind of proves my point, actually, that that concerns because, you know, it's not just how many spaces you have. It has to do with the proximity of where those spaces are to where they're needed. I see a real deficiency in that upper north edge. (Westminster PC 20240723)

Alternatively, another commissioner (#2), who had rarely expressed discontent or disagreement with their fellow commissioners pushed back hard on commissioner #1 in an interesting way. To try and refute commissioner #1, they began a line of questions towards the City Planner on staff who was overseeing the proposed development. They focused on Westminster's comprehensive plan goals, the diversity of housing, and the unique residential layout that was being proposed. The design was specifically focused on being a "car-lite" development, with fewer parking spaces, smaller roads, and heavier emphasis on walking, biking, and access to public transportation (specifically a proposed Bus Rapid Transit line that is to be implemented in the near future).

Commissioner #2: My next question is for [the city planner]. So I'd like to draw your attention to the 2040 comp plan. It says that we want to be focused on providing a balanced mix of housing opportunities for a range of incomes, age groups and lifestyle choices. So if we get rid of units, how does that fit with the comp plan?

City Planner: I don't think the comp plan specifies a minimum requirement of units on most of the designations.

Commissioner #2: Not a number of units, it says. It says there's a cornerstone focused on providing a balanced mix of housing opportunities for a range of incomes, age groups and lifestyle choices. If we get rid of units, how does that square with the comp plan?

City Planner: Would getting rid of units be because of parking? Or is this in...

Commissioner #2: Yes, it would be. In this case, it would be trading away units to get more parking. Would you say that that is in keeping with this cornerstone from the comp plan?

City Planner: I would say that that cornerstone from the comp plan is broad, large, reaching across many different aspects of planning. And I don't think that necessarily one site plan thought process... broadly, broadly said. I think that we can accomplish the goals of that regardless of this specific unit count.

Commissioner #2: Okay? And then I have more or less the same question about strategic priority one, access to opportunity. If we were to have fewer units and more parking, would that advance access to opportunity and prosperity for all in Westminster, through diverse housing choices, increased mobility options, safe and walkable neighborhoods or strong social networks?

City Planner: Probably decrease our compliance with that strategic goal.

Commissioner #2: Okay, thank you.

(Westminster PC 20240723)

Commissioner #2 had begun a thoughtful pushback by using the comprehensive plan's goals to refute, even contradict the complaints made by commissioner #1. Interestingly, this was done in the line of questioning so as to bring the discussion in front of all of the commissioners to consider. It should be noted that city planners try their best not to influence the public hearings, instead they provide information in a very dry manner and a predetermined recommendation from their office. In this case, while the city planner was able to successfully evade the first question, they were forced to admit that the second goal would likely be diminished. Much later in the conversation, after many more questions were asked about the reduced parking plan proposed for this residential development, commissioner #1 showed that her strong preference on parking was largely based on her personal experience.

You know, I keep going back to the parking and that one parking space, and, you know, you guys have built, you know, Uplands has built a lot of homes and, and I'd like to think that, you know that some people want one car garages, but I just have a lot of experience with people that have two car garages. My son, for instance, townhome, he's got a two car one side he parks his car, and the other side he's got a True Fit little gym thing working out. There's three people on my street alone that are younger, and their whole garage is a True Fit thing. They pull their cars out and they work out in them. So, I can't imagine someone wanting a one car garage. I'm sorry. This is just my wisdom of a person that has a two-car garage and I only park one car in it already. So, I'm thinking that there there's a need for two car garages.

(Westminster PC 20240723)

Commissioner #1 was unusually adamant about the number of parking spaces in almost every development they were part of the review for. In several previous public hearings, they would recommend that the developer find room for 3-4 more parking spaces. In this case, likely because of the proposed developments focus on a "car-lite" design, there was more pushback from other commissioners and a rift was opened which showed in the final votes. Ultimately, Commissioner #1 would push for additional parking to be included at the final approval setting off a series of motions and debates that extended the discussion for an extra hour. Commissioner

#1's motion died and was reformulated by a third commissioner as a condition that, "city council [understand] the Planning Commission's concerns with the parking methodology". (Westminster PC 20240723) This condition was vague enough that some of the other commissioners changed their votes to approve the proposal with the new condition. Commissioner #2 and one other commissioner stood opposed. This proposal was one of the only proposals where the final approval was not unanimous.

Outdated Building Codes

Another common theme that appeared in both Broomfield and Westminster was the commissioners' frustration with the existing building codes. Commissioners are more often than not, experts in the field. Even commissioners who do not come from a background in architecture or urban planning often catch on to the major themes after some time on the planning commission. Alternatively, some commissioners have adjacent experience (one example is a Broomfield commissioner's experience with managing and developing multiple chain restaurants), and some are just community members. Therefore, the specificity of the requirements on new developments (set by city councils in their municipal codes) often make projects seem like they are regularly breaking the rules because almost every single project has at least one variance request. Often these variances are required just to make a project successful from a cost perspective but many times they are also necessary because of the unique elevation of the plot, poor siting of existing infrastructure, or the proposed development's uniqueness (such as a cell phone tower which often need height variances).

For example, as mentioned in the previous section, Westminster requires most newly built single-family homes, duplexes, and town homes to have two car garages. Alternatively, many new developments are focused on developing non-car dependent residential neighborhoods

because of the rapidly rising cost of living (in both rent and for purchase housing) and emphasis by the state government to develop “car-lite” transit-oriented developments across the metropolitan area (HB 24-1313). The Uplands development which was brought to the Westminster planning commission multiple times during the study period regularly had to request multiple variances to reduce the number of parking and garage spaces in their developments because of their focus on a “car-lite” transit-oriented design. Similarly, the Uplands developments were consistently requesting a variance to the slope of their roofs which prompted the following discussion:

Commissioner #3: Okay, got it and ... I know you're talking about the 5 and 12 roof slope. That might be a question for staff. Is there a rationale for that building, since we that would be why we would have a 5 and 12 max requirement or ... minimum requirement versus a 4 and 12?

City Planner: I believe it was a style preference that the city chose, and the City Council approved that with the original design guidelines that they probably enacted, I want to say in the 2000 mid 2000s and it's a carryover from those design guidelines into the design standards that were adopted in 2018.

Commissioner #3: Okay, so, so it's just kind of an arbitrary there's no life or safety issue.

City Planner: It is not a life or safety issue. It's mostly an esthetic, style thing, in order to ensure you get like a presence of a rooftop in a neighborhood, just purely esthetic, yeah. (Westminster PC 20230725)

These types of “arbitrary” design requirements and the overly restrictive nature of city building codes bog down the development process and make it harder to address the housing needs of a city.

Another common variance request in the public hearings was regarding setbacks. For the uninitiated, setbacks are the distance from a property line any permanent physical structures must be. Often setbacks are put in place to reduce fire risks or restrict the buildable area to increase open space or green space nearby each building. One homeowner came to the Westminster commission wanting to replace his garage that was old and dilapidated with a new one. Because of the required setbacks, a new garage of the exact same size and shape would not qualify under

the current regulations. This homeowner had to have a public hearing at the planning commission and explain how he had hired an architect and evaluated six different designs, trying to comply with the setback, only to realize that to not have to tear down part of his house and still have a garage they would need special variance approval to keep the footprint of their existing garage. This homeowner's predicament exemplifies how older or more traditional development styles, common in many neighborhoods across the Denver metro area are often illegal to rebuild or construct as new under their cities current design and building standards.

Now this small-scale example is symbolic of the larger scale Planned Unit Developments (PUD) that were regularly reviewed in both Broomfield and Westminster. The proposed IDD supporting affordable housing project discussed in the public comment section of this chapter was proposed as a PUD. PUDs are often used for larger proposal of entire neighborhoods or multi-unit developments because they allow a developer to set up their own land use regulations, essentially bundling all the variances together. Broomfield, having only been founded as a city and county unit in 2001, is still using holdover zoning and land use planning from the surrounding counties, making their zoning and land use regulations a mishmash of pre-2000's land use planning and recent chunks of updates made by recent city councils. As such, the PUD process is quite common and even supported as a means of developing unique communities and neighborhoods throughout Broomfield (and avoiding the various legacy land use regulations). Altogether though, without the PUD process and a commission/city council that has culturally accepted that PUDs would be the norm for proposed development, much of Broomfield would not and could not have been built the way it is today.

The last of the variance issues seen at the public hearings was regarding a requirement that all large developments include a median in the roadway entrance to developments in

Westminster. One commissioner in Westminster brought up how many developments were asking for an exception to the requirements that entrances to residential neighborhoods include an island median. Instead, developers would ask for a variance to place the signage and plantings on the corner of the entrance instead. These variances were all approved for various reasons such as the need for a water main in the center of the road or other infrastructure that would not be compatible with an entrance median. The city staff said that the variance was common because of these issues and that the median was only required in the building code because it was a useful means of traffic calming to reduce speeding and vehicle accidents.

Commissioner #3: ... And I guess the other one is for staff. And it seems like this. You know, some of these exceptions are ... very minor, but we keep getting the exception for the entrance median. It just seems like ever... if everybody gets an exception. Why... Do we need to update our code to just get rid of the entrance medians? Because we've had those on half a dozen projects recently...

City Planner: ... So, I would say that our standards are generally written for larger green field development and a more suburban pattern we've seen, and I think we'll see a lot in the future of development that's more redevelopment, smaller infill sites and not having as much space to take up those on other neighborhoods in Uplands, they are providing those entry medians. They are good speed control mitigation, at intersections, and they also allow pedestrians have a place to pause. So, this project, just being the size of it, given that their entrance is directly, straight into a parking lot, we don't think it's appropriate or necessary for them to provide one on this side. (Westminster PC 20240709)

Ultimately, these are just some of many examples of how outdated building codes, land use plans, and zoning regulations result in an overly burdensome process. This process makes these public hearings longer and happen more often than necessary and likely increase the total cost of new developments.

The (Limited) Power of the Planning Commission

The Broomfield and Westminster planning commissions are significantly less powerful (in their current form) than their big city peers that are heavily analyzed in the existing literature. It is worth reiterating some evidence of this presented in prior chapters. First, small city planning

commissions often rely on volunteers making it difficult to recruit and retain educated professionals with significant knowledge in urban planning or architecture. In Broomfield, one volunteer regularly referred to his architectural background, while other commissioners drew upon their experience in business, regional planning, or engineering. A few commissioners had no relevant experience outside of previously having served on a different city's planning commission. All around, Broomfield's commissioners rely on their intimate knowledge of their community and their personal experiences to guide their evaluations of proposals. Similarly, in Westminster, some commissioners would refer to their experience in semi-related fields such as civil engineering but again were more often reflective of average citizens of their communities. One might say that this means these commissioners are a good reflection of their communities (setting aside the higher number of homeowners, higher incomes, and greater likelihood of having a college degree or higher education) and therefore should be able to represent their community's interests well. Notably though, the variation of projects seen in this study ranged from the expected, such as large residential developments to small commercial projects, to extremely specific proposals such as wireless cell phone towers to municipal water supply tanks. Such volunteers cannot be expected to have the vast range of knowledge needed to evaluate the sheer variety of projects that are brought before the commission.

Secondly, the Commissions follow a modified version of Robert's Rules of Order (RRO), a standard practice in U.S. politics and governance. But members of the commission are often unfamiliar with their commission's bylaws and the general practices with RRO which leads to a lot of confusion when making motions or attempting to modify/add a condition to the proposal. Such confusion often leads to lengthy discussions on clarifying the condition with staff, ensuring it is enforceable, or simply vague and uninterpretable conditions like the parking condition

discussed earlier in this chapter. Such conditioning was seen in both cities, though Broomfield's commission has a higher tendency to seek consensus on conditions for proposals than Westminster's (five projects approved with conditions vs. one), often with a goal of addressing public comments. City lawyers or planning staff often play the role of a parliamentarian without specific practice or knowledge on how to conduct these public meetings. Even worse, city planners often feel obliged to stay neutral during the proceedings and therefore do not feel empowered to step in and guide the process. Altogether, this results in varied practices across the two cities and inconsistent application of the bylaws.

For example, Westminster allows commissioners to ask questions immediately after the city staff and developer presentations, then goes to public comment, and then back to commissioner questions for a second time. Alternatively, Broomfield includes public comments immediately following the city staff and developer presentations and commissioner comments are only done once at the end of all of the comments. In both cities, this procedure was occasionally disrupted by accident, such as a chair forgetting to close a public hearing and therefore having to allow additional public comments. Sometimes such variations in procedure were on purpose, as in the case where Broomfield's chairperson allowed a second round of public comments after the developer was allowed to respond to the first. In Broomfield's case, this appears to have been a strategy to allow for an airing of public grievances against the project and potentially lower the temperature of the attendees but was this fair to the developer? Also, often instead of such additional comment time lowering the temperature of the discussion, it instead appeared to only inflame the responses and prompt significantly more interruptions from unruly public participants.

On a less important but dutiful researcher's note, the whole point of RRO is to allow individuals to speak uninterruptedly and ensure that all voices are heard equally. On both commissions, it worked well in the city staff and developer presentations, and even the public comments, but the process immediately breaks down in the commissioner questions/comments section. Commissioners, developers, and city staff (and occasionally unruly public participants) were regularly talking over each other or interrupting each other mid-thought, such that, particularly for some individuals, their transcripts would be uninterpretable without following the entire line of questions and answers provided.

Finally, commissioners on multiple occasions would emphasize to the public that they are not the final vote on a project. Refer to Figure 1, in Chapter II, to see that Broomfield's commission does not review or vote on a project until at least Week 21 after submission of the project to the city and after two rounds of review and edits between city staff and the developer. This does not include the potential other board or commission hearings that also occur prior to the planning commission's review. Similarly, in Westminster, the commission's review of a project is the second to last stage prior to a final decision by their city council placing it at the near end of the review process entirely. By having such important reviews at the near end of each project, commissioners often can only make recommendations to developers in their comments and try to avoid placing conditions on projects. Even when a majority of the commission appears to be unhappy with certain aspects of the project, they are reluctant to slow down the process or make changes that might entirely prevent the development from happening at all. To each city's credit, they have developed some policy mechanisms to address this dilemma.

First, in Broomfield, developers have the option to seek a "concept review" prior to submitting their project to the city. These concept reviews are often held at the city council for

large projects to collect public feedback. Broomfield's commissioners are encouraged to attend such meetings and provide feedback as well. These concept reviews allow a developer to adjust a project before they even submit a proposal and do seem to encourage significant alterations. In Westminster, their process allows for a preliminary development plan (PDP) and an official development plan (ODP) which gives the planning commission two chances to review each project before finality. Additionally, any smaller projects (less than 10 acres) with only amendments or entirely new ODP's can bypass public hearings and be administratively reviewed by city staff. But, in both cities, with outdated building codes and arbitrary municipal requirements, the proposals are often forced back into the public hearing process to get approval for variances.

Overall, while the public may believe that a city planning commission has significant authority, each of these issues serves to restrict the effectiveness of the commission. In both cities, and others in the Denver metro area, the planning commissions are given the authority to review and revise key planning documents such as the comprehensive plans and building codes to suggest changes but neither of these came up in the study's review period. Instead, planning commission public hearings appear to be little more than a time sink and public theater that protects the status quo of a city's built environment rather than the driver of a steady but inevitable change for the better.

DISCUSSION

Planning and zoning public hearings appear to be broken. Though representative of a great tradition of democratic inclusion, from what we can see in these two small case studies, the process for getting development approval proves to be onerous, subject to the personal whims

and preferences of volunteer citizens, and largely disorganized. How should the power of commissions be reorganized to better serve the community?

Planning commission hearings appear to be moving in one or two directions. First, the hearings can serve as a means of collecting and distilling public sentiment about a proposed project. Or, second, the public comments are not really contributing information to the actual factors that should legally decide whether a project should be approved or not and therefore public hearings are less necessary than tradition may lead us to believe.

If the hearings are going to be focused on distilling public opinion, the processes of the commissions need to lean into that by making meetings more accessible and making public comments the primary focus. In our case studies, both cities have implemented an online feedback mechanism which was not directly addressed in the public hearings themselves. But neighborhood meetings held by the developers appear to draw little attendance, the documented mailed public notices frequently were questioned by members of the public likely because both cities require a relatively small area (often only businesses and residences within approximately 1000ft of the project boundaries) to be informed in comparison to what the public may perceive to be a part of their neighborhoods. Bolstering these neighborhood meetings and expanding public notices with pre-arranged volunteer lists for each neighborhood may solicit feedback from a more diverse section of the affected community. Alternatively, Broomfield's concept review process, which happens months before the public hearings and before a proposal is even submitted might be an easily replicable process and benefits from early public input.

If not the first option, then a public hearing on the proposals may not be necessary at all, which might be self-evident by the lack of public comments being received on many projects already. Instead, planning commissions could act as a democratic internal review body for the

work of city planning departments by working in conjunction with city staff and developers throughout a review process. Additionally, such internal review bodies could focus on improving local public policy by acting as a legislative development commission, preparing municipal legislation ideas, and suggesting changes to the city council by working with city staff. Cities such as San Jose, CA (Vera 2024), Bethesda, MD (Bethesda Magazine 2025), and Vancouver, BC (Richter 2024), have already started experimenting with ending public hearings in specific cases such as infill developments, affordable housing projects, or projects run by public/non-profit builders. Since the results noted multiple instances of commissioners finding regular or re-occurring variance requests, there appears to be more room for the commissions as a policy development body that could help lighten the legislative work placed on small city councilmembers. Additionally, commissioners could help find the appropriate balance of growth and change in their communities because of their often long tenures in their communities. Addressing these unnecessary regulatory barriers and creating more “by-right” development approvals would reduce the administrative burden on city staff and planning commission volunteers. Hopefully, no homeowner would ever have to endure a public hearing to simply rebuild a dilapidated garage.

Regardless of the prior reforms suggested in this discussion, there is a dire need for clear evaluation criteria for planning commissioners. Westminster has 17 different extremely vague statements by which development proposals may be evaluated that provide essentially no actual, specific, measurable guidance to the planning commission. These criteria are an improvement upon state regulations, as should be expected, but when differences arose between commissioners, they did not provide clear guidance on whether or not the project should be approved. Rather, the regulations proved to be so vague that a project could fulfill one of the

criteria but fail another set of criteria and still be approved. This study had hoped to find evidence of discussions of public health in the public review process for small city developments but sadly none were found. Public health could play a major role in devising clear metrics for proposed developments. For example, an area with high rates of asthma or respiratory illness could prompt restrictions on drive-thrus or automobile centric developments. Alternatively, areas with higher rates of cardiovascular disease could require inclusion of alternative forms of transportation and access to amenities that improve physical fitness. A planning commission might be given the authority to propose such planning and zoning regulations, acting as the intermediary between public health advocates at the county level and city planners at the local level. Such policies would still need approval by city councils but would much more clearly act to protect the “health, safety, and welfare” of neighborhoods and communities overall.

Urban Regime & Urban Growth Machine Theories

Again, the evidence from this chapter provides a clearer pathway to support the urban regime theory of planning processes than the urban growth machine. Commissioners have “pet projects” or topics that they regularly bring up in questions or comments. Often, they do appear to represent the interests of their community, with commissioners sometimes even acting as planning enforcement for newer regulations on electrification and sustainability initiatives. It appears that smaller cities are less prone to regime takeover though because of the voluntary nature of the commissions. Such commissions are an amalgamation of whomever the council could get to sign up, rather than a takeover by a specific group of actors driven by specific policy goals. While no explicit regime was seen in Broomfield or Westminster, the system is inclined to benefit the status quo, whatever that may be. Volunteer commissioners often do not have the expertise to question developers or city staff. So instead, they emphasize pet projects like

bicycling infrastructure or electric vehicle ready homes but lack the authority to propose or even recommend significant changes to the city's planning policies or process.

The Urban Growth Machine theory seems to lack tangible evidence other than the fact that an overwhelming majority of proposals seen within the data were approved. The growth machine logic seems more applicable to cities with large greenfield developments that are still available. In Westminster's case, the Uplands development was a prior greenfield, but it was well known by the city that it would eventually become its own neighborhood and is likely one of the last large greenfield developments available to the city. Instead, in these cities the growth machine has already bulldozed over the available lands and now they are left with the need to economically grow and change to sustain the existing community infrastructure and programs. Often commissioners were happy to see examples of adaptive reuse or infill development in existing neighborhoods. The new wave of development does continue the same capitalistic logic of development growth in pursuit of economic growth, but such projects are now necessary to maintain the prior unsustainable developments that the growth machine placed in the communities. The only change now is that these small suburban communities must prepare to remake themselves as they use up the last of the greenfields available to them.

Following that, the Green Growth Machine theory suggests that the cooptation of sustainability and environmental movements are used as a form of health symbolism or health narrative to help push along the growth machine. In practice, evidence for the theory might be found in overlapping discussions of green spaces and health-related activities or outcomes. Instead, communities and their commissions appear to be the drivers of environmental goals and enforcers of environmental standards. This was most notable in Broomfield, with city requirements for electric vehicles or regular questions from commissioners in both cities about

solar ready or solar installed housing and businesses. This is not to say that there are not bad faith actors who are greenwashing developments to continue profiting but in Broomfield and Westminster, the city's, the commissions, and the citizens appear to be drivers of the greening of development. Developers seemed more inclined to do the bare minimum sustainability measures necessary in the interest of keeping construction costs down and therefore housing costs down. Westminster's example of greenfield development, the Uplands project has several sustainability focused and vehicle-light focused design choices that center on public amenities and pedestrianism/transit usage over a traditional car-centric growth machine type logic. But the developer's only regular claim to sustainability and environmentalism was making the homes, EV and solar ready, and including high efficiency washers and dryers. In both cases, neither the developers nor the commissioners appear to be connecting health narratives with environmental sustainability. If anything, the potential for health improvements appears to be a potential outcome that neither side even really considers.

In both cities, housing affordability remains a problem, and commissioners regularly acknowledged and even tried to get information from developers on what they could do to help. For the time being, both cities appear to be struggling with the status quo of the growth machine because it is likely the only way to continue housing development until city policies or planning are significantly reformed. City ordinances and cash-in-lieu fees assessed on new developments are clearly insufficient to drive housing affordability, which was regularly complained about by one commissioner in Broomfield. When affordable housing projects come up, opposition often comes from the nearby neighborhoods (i.e., Broomfield IDD housing development). Citizen opposition to larger developments (even ones with affordable housing which many said they support) often come because of concerns about traffic or parking, which is also represented by

the dominance of the automobile in questions and comments made by commissioners. In the end, these results raise the question about whether a green growth machine (not a co-opted version but a literal green driven growth machine) may be the only option to address housing affordability and sustainability? It could be one answer, but one hopes that a clear dividing line on what is good for the community's health would be less controversial and easier to codify into local laws.

LIMITATIONS

The study focuses on two cities in the Denver Metro Area using their public records. While the study gives us insight into the specific discussions, concerns, and thematic focuses of the planning commissioners, they are by no means representative of all planning commissioners or even the planning processes of all Denver metropolitan area cities. In the future, studies could choose to include a larger number of cities to strive for improved generalization or hone more specifically into one specific city's planning process.

CONCLUSION

In examining the role of planning commissions in local urban development, these bodies, composed of local volunteer citizens, hold a central role in shaping the future of their communities. Although planning commissions do not have legislative authority, their quasi-judicial role often involves making exceptions for unique cases or altogether amending previously approved plans. More often though, the planning commissions serve to uphold the existing regulations, especially if the individual volunteers knowledge of planning and development is low or they are unwilling to contradict city staff's recommendations.

Public participation in these processes is critical, yet often limited. The planning commissions public hearings serve as an important avenue for citizens to voice concerns, but they are frequently characterized by negative feedback. Older, wealthier homeowners are more likely to serve on the planning commissions and more likely to provide feedback, leading to a natural bias in the processes. Additionally, while public feedback has been previously found to be effective in swaying the decision-making processes, institutional and regulatory structures often prevail even in the face of stiff opposition.

Even though pre-hearing engagements between the city staff, developers, and residents often significantly determine the projects design and scope prior to public hearings, the influence of the planning commissioners remains significant when they decide to act. Without legislative authority, commissioners often rely on their personal and professional experiences, as well as personal preferences, when deciding on a project. Their questions and comments often emphasized specific aspects of a project such as parking, bicycling infrastructure, or traffic concerns that either reflected the received public comments or appear to be personal “pet projects” instead of heavily relying on existing planning documents such as the city comprehensive plans. Commissions also, through their regular exposure to the types of variances requested and design styles proposed, appear to be the best qualified to suggest changes to local building and zoning codes but do not have the authority to do so.

The analysis and results suggest that the evaluation criteria for development projects is often unclear or too complex, resulting in commissioners falling back on personal preferences or the status quo to decide on project applications. A clearer, often smaller, set of evaluation criteria could better guide the commission’s decisions and ensure a more consistent application of the regulations. Additionally, public health considerations were entirely absent from the discussions

but could provide a helpful framework for assessing proposals. By focusing on factors that influence neighborhood health, safety, and well-being, planning commissions could more easily discern good from bad with reliable metrics while serving as a stronger link between community health priorities and urban development.

Finally, further research is needed to understand how these processes play out in different localities. Westminster and Broomfield's planning commissions had significant variation in their regular processes and even more so when including intentional and unintentional variations chosen by the commissioners themselves. By expanding the scope of the study, it would be possible to see if these findings are applicable in other settings or explore how alternative institutional policies and practices impact the outcomes of planning reviews. The political and institutional context of each city will inevitably shape the nature and effectiveness of planning commissions. Ultimately, further understanding of these nuances will be essential for the continued improvement of local governance and urban planning practices in the future.

CHAPTER VI: EMERGENT FINDINGS ON PLANNING AND PUBLIC HEALTH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOCAL COMMUNITY LEADERS

INTRODUCTION

While there is no standard definition of a suburb, Pew Research (2020) estimated that 43% of Americans live in suburban areas. Additionally, the suburbs of large metropolitan areas are often home to significantly younger and older (65+) populations, with urban core areas being more popular with young adults and early career professionals (Pew Research 2020). As American suburbs age along with their residents, many are experiencing significant shifts in land-use policy, such as infill or transit-oriented development, to meet growing housing demand and to maintain the suburban cities' tax base. This trend has been further exacerbated by the flight to the suburbs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Frey 2024). As the suburbs undergo these significant transformations, the challenge of balancing growth with community well-being intensifies. The suburban cities in the Denver metropolitan area, home to approximately 75% of the metro area population, are no exception to these trends. Limited vacant or greenfield land has sparked new approaches to development in the Denver suburbs reshaping both the built environment and social experience of residents. This shift in community needs and land-use policies offers unique opportunities to rethink the relationship between urban planning, public health, and community engagement.

This chapter seeks to document how local leaders, including elected officials, professional planners, and appointed planning and zoning commissioners experience the public planning process and think about the relationship between the built environment and public health. Interviews and neighborhood “walk & talks” with local leaders provide insight into how to improve development review processes to protect collective efficacy while improving health

outcomes. Additionally, the neighborhoods observed through the walk and talks were selected by the interview participants. Through the walk and talks, this chapter examines a new development and an older established neighborhood through on-the-ground observation, identification of the urban design characteristics discussed by Jane Jacobs, and by talking with the residents who live in these neighborhoods. Altogether, this study provides insight into the experiences and perspectives of local planning leaders on the relationship between the built environment and health through a traditional ethnographic lens, benefitting from interviews and neighborhood observation and visual sociological techniques.

As discussed in the literature, strong social connections between neighbors, established civic organizations, and participation in civic processes usually indicate an engaged community which may indicate higher levels of social capital and collective efficacy within the community. Communities with more collective efficacy and social capital are more likely to have positive health outcomes due to increased safety, social support, etc. In this study, the participants speak to the challenges, successes, and pitfalls of the current public planning process that at times helps or hurts the community's collective efficacy. Furthermore, the results show that many local community leaders generally understand the connections between green spaces, sidewalks, air pollution, and public health. However, they may not know the full health impacts of such spaces, especially not the health impacts of non-green built environments such as denser housing, larger sidewalks, and easy access to various community amenities. Additionally, local leaders ascribe and associate health or "healthiness" to certain architectural and urban planning features especially in the realm of active transit such as walking and biking.

METHODS

Thematic Analysis & Purpose

This chapter draws primarily on insights derived from semi-structured interviews, neighborhood walks, and ethnographic observations conducted in participants' selected neighborhoods. The participants' backgrounds varied significantly; some were planning commission appointees, others elected officials, and some were professional city planners. As such, interviews were adapted to align with each participant's knowledge, expectations, and professional experience. While the questions followed a consistent structure, their open-ended format allowed participants to speak freely and highlight aspects most relevant to their expertise. For example, elected leaders often spoke to their experiences trying to change local land use regulations while planning commissioners focused on their thought process during the development review hearings.

This approach generated a diverse and exploratory dataset that outlines potential policy problems and solutions. Accordingly, the chapter relies on thematic analysis and contextual evidence from the site visits to generate theoretical insights. This method allows patterns, concepts, and problems to emerge organically from the data, stories, and experiences gathered for this study. The results and discussion of this chapter are additive and emergent, offering further context to previous chapters. They deepen our understanding of the comprehensive planning issues discussed in Chapter IV and provide a more holistic view of the public hearing processes examined in Chapter V. While the findings here may not stand alone, the narratives and insights presented reinforce and expand upon the trends, challenges, and potential solutions identified in the previous chapters.

Interviews: Community Representatives

Interviews were a primary source of data collection for this chapter, with unique interview protocols and processes developed for each set of potential participants. Additionally, the researcher completed the analysis of the city comprehensive plans before starting the interviews to better understand the regulatory framework that was guiding each city's development. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Zoom and Otter.ai for transcription services. The interviews were conducted with community leaders, including city planners, appointed planning commission members, and elected city council members from across six DMA cities. Participants were invited to participate from each city from the original ten included in Chapter IV's analysis, but participation was lower than expected. The total number of interviews attempted to balance the composition of interviews by the participant's professional experience and by what city the participants were associated with.

One methodological highlight unique to this project is the inclusion of visual sociological methods as a means of data collection to provide further insight into the community representative's unique social perspective. Grady (1996) described visual sociological methods as a "sub-field of qualitative sociology" with an emphasis on an ability to use technology, such as cameras and videos, to collect details that were previously expressed mostly through interviews as symbols or "icons". Grady calls it "doing sociology visually", but ultimately, the use of technology enhances the communicative description of a place or experience, much like the phrase, "a picture is worth a thousand words". In this study, visual sociology methods help enhance and clarify the experience of place by elucidating the often-difficult details about the place that can be overlooked in a simple explanation. For example, as with Bourdieu's (1970)

description of the Berber house and his use of visual representations, images provided by participants can give deeper insights into their preferences, perspectives, and values.

As such, interview participants could volunteer to meet in-person for unstructured interview time spent in a neighborhood or community area of their choice. These follow-up sessions occurred in multiple cities where the participant and the researcher would conduct a “walk & talk” around the neighborhood, taking pictures of buildings or areas of note to the participants. These “walk & talks” contributed to the larger ethnographic methodology of the project. Other times, participants who could not attend a second follow-up would often recommend a neighborhood or specific site for the researcher to view that they considered significant or they would conduct a “photo scavenger hunt” on their own time and send the pictures back to the researcher. In the end, the researcher visited at least one neighborhood in all ten cities, taking photos and engaging in the everyday experience of the places recommended. Similarly, the researcher attended some of the cities’ planning commission meetings to observe and advertise participation in the study. Attending the local meetings helped to establish a presence and connection with local community representatives, which provided a small number of additional opportunities to observe the public hearing process and recruit additional participants to improve data depth of the project.

These interviews provided insight into how the community entities review and construct plans for the built environment’s future. Most importantly, the interview questions focused on how community representatives consider whether the built environment promotes or inhibits positive health behaviors or whether it promotes health generally through their design, planning, and zoning decisions. Questions within the interviews focused primarily on the experiences of the planning and design review process from the perspective of the individual and how their

leadership role participates in the decisions. The interview questions were informed by prior observation of these design and review entities. The questions are also geared towards a better understanding of how these community representatives experience their roles and their potential to influence urban development, which helped to provide further insight into the theoretical questions proposed by the urban regime and urban growth machine theories. Interview participants were compensated with a small gift card to encourage higher participation rates and to recognize their time supporting the project.

Since the participant pool for “community representatives” included a variety of potential individuals who were solicited by the researcher for participation in the study, interview protocols were adapted specific to the professional background for each participant: one for planning commissioners, one for local urban planning department staff, and one for the elected officials. The interviews used a semi-structured interview protocol with opportunities for open-ended discussions to build a formal but flexible research relationship with interviewees. The interviews allowed for both the focus on the specific research questions presented and for interviewees to discuss specific questions or issues that they believed were important for the results to include. Many participants are or were becoming experts in their city, so it was not uncommon for some themes to overlap between participants but also have very particular perspectives or motivations. For example, one participant was both a community representative but also an employee at a public health office.

Interviews were conducted in one of two formats: An online or a “walk-and-talk” interview in which both the researcher and participant walked through the participant’s selected neighborhood while going through the interview protocol. Regardless of format, each interview began with a review and discussion of informed consent, the research intent and purposes, and

potential harms or values to the participants as required. This “walk-and-talk” interview design is intended to familiarize the researcher with the resident’s neighborhoods and gain insight through what they highlighted during the extended interview period. Along the walk, participants deviated more often from the standard questions to discuss experiences and thoughts about specific built environment features, social histories, and personal experiences in their neighborhoods and sometimes were prompted by the researcher to describe what they were experiencing or feeling about the spaces. Other topics within the semi-structured interview protocols include personal backgrounds, community involvement with the design review processes, and questions about the history, issues, or other events or places of significance in the community. With this design the average interview time was 1.25 with walk-and-talk interviews being the longest interviews at 2-3 hours. The participants brought substantial knowledge, expertise, or experience to the discussion, which provided the depth that represented the often complicated and sometimes fraught community conversations that happen within cities and neighborhoods when designing future environments.

The interview protocols were thoughtfully designed to aid in the ethnographic exploration of health's construction(s) in the built environment. The flexibility of the interview process not only helped to develop rapport between the researcher and participants but also connected the researcher with the products of the visual sociological methods and the communities of study more substantially.

RESULTS

Power & Influence in the Current Planning Process

All the participants expressed a common sentiment that the current planning process was largely doing its job. In general, participants were happy with their current planning commission

and planning process but had concerns. Council members emphasized that planning commissions serve as the local experts to guide their decisions on proposed projects or revising policy. In some cities where it was more common for the city council to send public policy questions to the planning commission to study, such council members felt that their planning commissions worked well with their city planning staff to address the questions and produce policy solutions. Similarly, professional planners generally were happy with their commissioners, finding them thoughtful and taking the process seriously even though many are only regular citizens with little background in urban planning. All around though, regardless of position, participants felt they had small pockets of influence to direct development in their city but that it was extremely limited. Often it was more limited than they let on. Every participant seemed to feel that their best avenue for influencing the development path of their city was through the decennial comprehensive plan updates. Ultimately, what arises from their statements is a system in which nobody truly has influence or power over the direction of their city's development except for the rare comprehensive plan rewrites or attempts to overhaul municipal codes prompted by new city councils.

Commissioners themselves felt like they were fulfilling and important public service even if they did not always feel like they had much space to enact change or advocate for their communities. In cities that do not have city councils that send policy questions to the commission, the commissioners felt like they had the least influence. In fact, commissioners often spoke of those opportunities as the highlight of their roles, helping to solve public policy problems on behalf of their community and getting to utilize their expertise to benefit their community (while reducing the workload of the city council). Ultimately though, the analysis finds that commissioners often spoke like they had the least influence. Often, they attribute this

to the fact that their decisions are only recommendations to the council and planners often do most of the work with developers before a project arrives at a public hearing. In the first quote here, the commissioner expressed some concern about whether their oversight at public hearings really produced any results:

I don't know what happens if we give some feedback, because we know the developer is going to continue working with the planning staff as they get to the build stage. And are they making any tweaks to their project based on comments that they hear from the planning commission members? I don't know.

Alternatively, this commissioner tried to speak highly of the process and focused on what they had learned they could influence. But the qualifiers placed on their statements about influence really show how they had expected the commission to be able to do much more to sway the direction of future developments:

Now some of it, you can have some influence around the edges, in terms of making sure that whatever proposals are brought before you ..., from developers or from whatever is happening, that you can make sure that they're stringently following what the guidelines are and making sure that whatever variances are requested are not going to be onerous to the community. So I mean, ...you can really do a lot. Not quite as much as I thought you could, but you can.

Professional planners and council members responded similarly. Planners often emphasized a public duty to uphold a neutral stance on any projects while enforcing the city's regulations and expectations written in documents such as the comprehensive plan. Council members emphasized the need to have a strong code and comprehensive plan that would best reflect the vision of their community. In the background though, neither the comprehensive plan nor the code appear to be the true source of influence and power for both planners and council members. If they have the support of their council members, the planners expressed greater latitude to negotiate with developers. Often planners attempt to get more of what they believe the city's residents and council want through trade-offs like variances and amendments. As a result, council members see their professional planners as advocates for their communities even if much of their work is done in the background and not at public hearings.

This ultimately led to a question about the usefulness of strong plans and codes though. For example, in Westminster and Broomfield, it was common for developers to request a Planned Unit Development or PUD. PUDs are generally used to propose unique planned neighborhoods or sometimes relatively small developments, where the uniqueness is driven by variances to the plans and codes. One participant raised these PUDs as counteracting the entire purpose of the plans and codes but also providing significantly more leeway for negotiations between a city and a developer.

We allow PUDs even in mixed use and commercial areas, as opposed to just housing, which is where you see it most frequently elsewhere. And that zoning is very much founded on being able to negotiate, assuming that whatever standards we have as a city, they need to tweak them for whatever reason. Well, if we never get any conventionally zoned projects, whether it's residential or commercial, that can develop per your code, as we frequently do. Then it begs the question, what's the point of having any conventional zoning and some people at the city would argue that we shouldn't, we should just negotiate everything, but it would be much better to not so repeatedly have to reinvent the wheel... There should be a good workable baseline where at least some projects can develop per the standards that we already have outlined, as opposed to constantly having to ask for exceptions.

In the end, it appears fair to say that no one, not city council members, not the planners, and not the planning commission, really feel like they have a way to adequately influence future development in their city outside of rewriting their comprehensive plans and codes. And once those plans and codes are locked in, deviating from them risks lawsuits against the city. With the current system, influence over the future can only happen through negotiations on individual projects and combined efforts to answer policy questions which may point to procedural solutions for a better planning process in the future.

Many participants did recommend some changes to the public planning processes, and public hearings really felt incomplete to almost all participants. Some participants emphasized that collecting feedback is important, but the public hearing and council hearings are often too late in the process. Alternatively, even with the public hearings and community meetings, many

participants felt it was still a challenge to reach certain populations such as renters and racial/ethnic minorities, while the existing public hearing system often were dominated by wealthier, white, homeowners, often retired citizens who had the spare time to sit through hours-long and tedious hearings. And even then, participants are often only hearing from, most often, opponents of the projects. As such, commissioners and council members alike feel they get a lot of hate for voting for things that are largely finished and meet all the city's requirements. This quote from one of the planners aptly summed up the experiences of many of the participants:

Public participation is the main thing that comes to mind. And this one's very tricky. It is understandable why it's important to get people from all sorts of... I mean, it's their community, right? And they should have a say, and planning has had a historic problem for centuries... At the same time, the public participation, the way it is set up right now can become incredibly burdensome... I mean, it's a team of the city staff plus the applicant staff, plus all of the external entities like the powerline companies, the cable companies, the school districts that come together, that are trying to make everything work. And then it gets presented to the public, via notices that go out saying, hey, this project is happening, please give us your input. No one ever gives their input at that point. Or I shouldn't say no one, very rarely does anyone get input at that point. So you have to go along with the process at that point. And so you go all the way up to when it's ready to go to city council. And then that's when everybody gets involved and starts saying ... How dare you put this forward, I haven't been considered. And there's something to be said about it's impossible to make everybody happy all the time. But the public participation process is broken and that it's something that needs to be addressed.

Ultimately, the participants all see value in the current process even if very few felt they had influence or power within the current process. Planners often expressed feeling tied to the comprehensive plan or other city regulations but did feel like they could push developers for more community benefits such as improved community spaces or improved infrastructure. Often this restriction to the letter of the law helps prevent lawsuits against the city and ensures that city staff are not accused of bias by community members or developers. Interestingly, the projects where developers sought significant variation from the existing codes and likely spent significant time negotiating with community members, commissioners, and city planners were often the neighborhoods highlighted by professional planners.

For example, in the following photos, this neighborhood was part of a walk & talk interview and was expressly built using “new urbanist” styles and planning philosophies, integrating for purchase and for rent units, intentionally blending community, commercial, and residential spaces, with significantly reduced setbacks and a variety of communal public spaces. In figure 28, see how the landscaping comes right up close to the sidewalk and the buildings vary by just a few feet in their distance from the sidewalk. The setbacks were significantly closer than normal with almost no properties having a large front yard space. The landscaping across the neighborhood was dense with nearly every property having a front porch to engage directly with foot traffic. As the participant and researcher walked through the neighborhood, we could casually ask questions and compliment the blooming flowerbeds of neighbors out enjoying a glass of lemonade in a rocking chair on the warm summer day. Even for rent units and townhouses came equipped with large balconies or small frontages, all facing the common street (figure 29). In the apartment complex, the buildings were laid out in a rectangular pattern with most parking, trash, and cars hidden behind the apartments. As we walked around, each corner of the neighborhood had a small, uniquely designed pocket park where children’s toys seemed strewn about the sandboxes and fields. In figure 30, we stumbled upon a soccer goal and some other toys left in a small park field. In each case, it was clear that the kids and families felt ownership over the spaces and must be there regularly enough that simply leaving the equipment behind was fine. After the meeting, while waiting for a ride at the nearby sports bar, the local bartender said that it was common to see familiar faces from the neighborhood arriving there to watch the Denver Broncos games. To be fair, the neighborhood was not perfect, there were still some vacant commercial lots, and the nearby local highway and strip mall had lots of traffic. But within that neighborhood, the traffic felt miles away and the residents felt closer.

Figure 28 - A side view of two homes with small, varied setbacks and thick landscaping in front of front porches as seen from under a large tree on the local sidewalk



Figure 29 - A Photo of Rowhomes or townhomes with large front facing balconies and small low-fenced frontages, note the small, planted pots and chairs in the front of each home.



Figure 30 - A children's sports net left in a nearby pocket park unattended.



Another walk and talk interview took place in an older neighborhood. Set between a traditional single family suburban neighborhood and a city owned golf course, this neighborhood was unique because of its duplex, triplex, and sometimes even fourplex homes, often called “missing middle housing”, which the participant emphasized were significantly more affordable for their elderly residents. On top of the affordability, many of the homes did not have stairs, making them more accessible (figure 31). As the researcher and participant walked around, we remarked on the small community gardens put together by volunteers and little pieces of personality outside each home’s entrance (figure 32). The participant noted how such neighborhoods were rare in the Denver metro these days, with much of the land being restricted to single family homes only. They expressed concern about the future of the community, with so many elderly residents on fixed incomes, keeping up with maintenance was challenging, it would

be hard to keep the community affordable in the long run. The neighborhood struggled through with small repairs here and there, not helped by damage from errant golf balls. The shared walls, shared mailboxes, and shared community room and pool (figure 33), according to the participant helped them get to know their neighbors.

Figure 31 - The stairless entrance to a home with a rocking chair looking out towards the street, with two golfers and a golf cart just behind the trees.



Figure 32 - A small decorative community garden put together by volunteers in front of two buildings, with one home entrance of each building facing each other and out towards the street



Figure 33 - The neighborhood community room and pool, with a worn sidewalk and lawn with small dead patches being watered.



These two neighborhood walk & talk interviews showed two sides of the current planning processes, one of a past that was being forgotten and another of a future planning paradigm being tested. In the case of the new urbanist neighborhood, the PUD process allowed the developers, with the support of the planners, to rewrite the rules on planning and zoning and create an entirely new design aimed at fostering a stronger, more resilient, more connected community. Alternatively, the older, affordable neighborhood complex of missing-middle housing is now all but illegal to build under most cities zoning and regulatory systems. On one hand, the highlighted new urbanist development had to break all of the rules to create a new kind of community. On the other, an essentially forgotten pattern of development, in danger of being lost, would need the same number of variances and rule changes to be built again.

In the end, it is worth re-emphasizing that no one involved in the planning process feels that they have significant influence in the current planning process. As a result, city representatives are left putting all their hopes and ideas into the comprehensive plan drafting process and trying to do overhauls of a complex regulatory framework. Neighborhoods that participants highlighted either run afoul of the existing regulations or utilize the PUD system to get around the existing rules. The current purpose and practices of the planning review process are in dire need of a thoughtful revision to empower local leaders to achieve the goals their citizens set for them in the comprehensive plans. Without an updated process, cities will not be able to take advantage of one of their most powerful tools for addressing the housing crisis and the fraying social fabric of our communities.

Regime Change in Lakewood – A Theoretical Insight

The most unique case was Lakewood, where, according to participants, the public hearing and planning process had evidently broken down. According to every participant from Lakewood, in the recent past, the planning commission and the city council was largely a coalition of anti-growth, anti-development individuals. The commission was said to have not really judged projects based on their compliance with the code or comprehensive plan but rather based on their political ideas of what development, if any, should be happening in their city. At the same time, the commission had a lot of anger towards the city's planning division and professional staff that was sometimes "personal". Even though in their local government model, which gives staff more power to approve projects, people thought they were hiding things or doing illegal stuff.

We had members of the planning commission, who were opposed to development. And were also very critical of City staff and the planning department, very critical of members of the city council. And we had a very, very divisive City Council previously ... A lot of the arguments on the planning commission, on City Council were very uncivil and very personal. And there is a small element of the public that continues to kind of bring that vitriol to our various bodies.

That vitriol occurring in the planning process, as one participant noted, became a city-wide problem when in 2019 the city council passed a ballot initiative to limit new development that was approved by 53% of Lakewood residents (Kenny 2024). Shortly, thereafter, in 2023, the state legislature passed HB23-1255 which prohibited such limitations on new development which will force sunset the Lakewood ballot measure in 2026 (conveniently shortly after they are expected to have a new comprehensive plan and zoning changes approved). The political turmoil of this period that put Lakewood in the news seems to have led to significant backlash whereby in recent elections, many of the prior city council members have lost office and their appointed planning commissioners tenures have expired.

According to the participants, the current chair has worked to counteract this past culture, after new elections swept out many of the anti-growth coalition and their planning commission members turned over. The planning commission's approach appears to be a philosophy of radical government transparency, which takes significant time and effort for the volunteer-based commission, but the participants emphasized how they felt this was the only way to fix the broken relationships between city staff, the community, and the planning commission.

One of the things that we've done in the last eight months has been to dramatically increase transparency and public engagement. I've ended the study sessions and made everything we do a part of our regular public hearings. The effect of that is if it is agenda for us, then there's a public comment opportunity on that particular agenda item. Secondly, we're trying to put information out there available.. I've been trying to get all of that out two weeks in advance. We're only required to have it out 24 hours in advance. The third thing, and this has been an interesting experiment... is whenever someone comes to provide public comment, we allow a dialogue between commissioners and that individual ... It's not unusual to have a far lengthier dialogue back and forth. Which the people who appeared before the Commission have really appreciated. So those sorts of engagement and transparency are helpful.

Lakewood's experience is a good example of the urban regime theory but seems to be an outlier as no other participants mentioned similar experiences. The sweeping decisions made by prior city council and planning commissions and the more recent change in ideology expressed by participants prove that pluralistic takeover is possible when there are enough motivated individuals coordinating in a specific locality. But their stories indicate that such regime changes might lead to significant backlash and harm to the planning process overall.

Representatives on the Built Environment & Community Health

Regardless of experience, age, or role in the planning process, community leaders had a much stronger understanding of the relationship between the built environment and health than expected. It was evident in every interview that public health was a concern and that the built environment was one way to influence public health outcomes. In the urban development process, all the participants saw room for public health considerations, but not necessarily how to

integrate it into the current practices. Professional planners would emphasize the need for metrics but did not firmly know how to connect those health metrics into the planning process.

Yeah, the health kind of stuff seems like it would be more challenging to evaluate. It's easy to evaluate things like if overall vehicle miles traveled VMT in your community have reduced because of x, y, and z. The health outcomes seem a lot more challenging to measure as they relate to the built environment. I mean, I know people measure it and it can be measured ... it just seems not so easy.

Even so, every planner acknowledged and could speak to the relationship between the built environment and health.

Similarly, council members wanted more public health data or information to help make decisions. But if the city planners expressed not knowing what data to use or how to use it, it is not surprising that such data is not presented to city councils. Council members expressed a desire to improve public health through planning but also felt influenced by the political environment and where money was being made available. Sometimes those political winds shift too much, even within public health, making it hard for local council members to get to the root of the problem before the funding dries up.

So my district, a tiny part of it, is considered qualified for the Justice 40 initiative as part of the IRA and I have no idea how they did that. I don't know what the community health surveys the federal government did to say that, why this particular area? ... Do we have to start doing pollution surveys in that part of town to be able to prove that there is air pollution, air quality problem... so that people can breathe cleaner air in that area. I don't even know how to begin to find that information.

Commissioners often had the least ability to say how public health could impact their part in the process even though they agreed it was important. Commissioners' expressed how the development review process only focused on the variances from code or changes to the existing zoning, so even if a project would be blatantly unhealthy for local citizens, they would have no legal means of intervening on behalf of their community. Commissioners said their only opportunities to include public health in the process were when they were included in policy study sessions which would pass their recommendations up to their city council for enactment.

But, as noted before, few commissions are given much opportunity to influence policy by their city councils, or, when they do, it's only on the comprehensive plan that gets amended once every 10-15 years (or less).

The connection between transportation and health was by far the biggest topic that came up. Commissioners, planners, and council members alike all emphasized a need to move away from Euclidean zoning and car centric designs, for multiple reasons. Many, knowing the study was focused on health, mentioned the health benefits of more mixed-use zoning and designs, but council members were more likely to bring up the economic health of the city as benefiting from a more urban-lite, mixed-used design philosophy. Interestingly, public transit use was also often highlighted because of its connection to other means of active transportation.

We are seeing neighborhoods or developments pop up that are connected with sidewalks that are wide enough to accommodate at least two people. When we see an emphasis on maybe less parking requirements and more about livability, I think we've really started to see that transition, and making the case that some of those decisions can be really impactful. I also think public transportation is a really positive health indicator. And when we see our public transit being used, and we see a lot of people on our trains, and on buses, that tells me that we're keeping people off the roads too. And that's a really healthy behavior for a lot of reasons for physical and environmental health.

Every participant had a surprisingly strong grasp on the basics of the relationship between the built environment and health. Only one participant had prior public health training, but many participants discussed social determinants of health (not always using the exact phrasing) as being connected to the built environments. The connection is particularly strong in certain areas, like the importance of walking, biking, access to green spaces, and policy goals to minimize food deserts. Altogether, the participants demonstrate that there is not a lack of knowledge or even a lack of support for public health. Alternatively, there may just be a lack of “how to” and a lack of integration between land use policy and public health that keeps cities from using the built environment to improve the health of their citizens.

On the social impact of the built environment, many struggled a bit more with connecting strong social bonds with the built environment. One participant emphasized the need for schools and other public institutions to play a larger role in fostering community. Another noted that strong neighborhood associations or homeowners associations made for better social connections. One common theme was that many participants expressed surprise at how parks, even ones that were poorly maintained, often played an important social role in building community and connecting neighbors to one another by just being a space where BBQs or birthday parties could be held. As one participant uniquely emphasized, social connectivity was a means to achieve public health. To them, connectivity was about feeling a sense of ownership over space.

Well, maybe the foundation of public health, and all aspects [of public health]: safety, mental health, etc. is connection. So, connection to people, connection to place, connection to transit and to where they want to go, and to healthy places like parks. And if that's your underlying element, you are planning for that ... and then it also comes to light when you're thinking about how you program public spaces and parks. Because you're trying to facilitate connection, people want to feel connected to one another. They want to feel connected to their place that they live and you're physically trying to facilitate that ...

They went on to describe the importance of programming spaces with the nearby community in-mind such as supporting culturally relevant events in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations. The example they provided talked about how they had just by chance visited a new part of their own town and found worn-down recreation facilities in a park crowded with locals. Regardless of the quality of the space, it was clear to the participant that the neighborhood had a space to come together there and the city needed to do more to support that in the long run.

Altogether, the policies that many participants saw as answers to the public health challenges of each city may simultaneously be the answers to social problems such as isolation or loneliness. Continued work towards building more physical connectivity within communities,

through mixed use zoning or avoiding car-centric design philosophies can help bring residents together. From there, social connection may naturally flourish, or cities can help give it a push by supporting local associations or culturally relevant programming. Ultimately, this two-for-one deal, improving public health and social connection through the built environment appears strongly related to the same policy solutions, just ones that have proved to be a challenge to enact.

Common Threads for Change

A desire for change was the common thread in every interview but what changes to make is where every participant seemed to get lost. There was one question that everyone was in clear agreement on though, training. Every commissioner and council member felt there was not enough significant training on urban planning theory or just the basics of reviewing a development to be able to make informed decisions. Professional planners often noted that they were reliant on their city council's to appoint knowledgeable individuals to the commission. While city staff could provide such training, often suburban cities have small departments with a backlog of developments to review and approve already, so providing training to council and commissions often falls down the priority list. One participant said that it might be because many planning commissions are composed of real estate and development professionals, who do not need the training.

I think [the city] had a culture of people who were mainly real estate people for a good 20 years, and so that's why there wasn't a whole lot of land use development or urban planning sort of things, because these developers already knew what they wanted to do with the city, or they were friends with the people who knew that ...

Without a baseline of training being provided, everyday citizens who get elected or volunteer for a commission may feel out of place or underprepared. Regional, state, and national organizations can play an important role in providing training as many participants referred to

trainings offered by the Colorado Municipal League (CML) or the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) or other national associations. Such trainings help connect local council members with others in similar positions. Planning commissioners do not seem to have similar options available to them though which means that either the local planning department or local organizations need to coordinate training for commission members.

Everyone, commissioners, council members, and planners feel like they have small bits of influence over the future of their city. Some more than others, particularly when they have an opportunity to amend the code or comprehensive plan, but often many people felt like a rubber stamp. Additionally, planners feel like they cannot speak out on issues because it could make them appear biased and they truly want to produce what is best for the city. Planners negotiate with developers in the background for improved infrastructure or better designs but still are often enforcers of sometimes outdated comprehensive plans and codes. One solution that was raised was moving the public review process much earlier into the development cycle, which some cities already have a version of, and others are still developing. Cities with early review processes, like the Broomfield and Westminster concept reviews (Centennial might also be moving in this direction), feel like they have more influence over the development than commissioners and councilmembers who only get the vote towards the end of the process. That is because these concept reviews act as early feedback mechanisms and community engagement opportunities for developers to pitch their projects before they have committed too much time or money.

Lastly, community education and information seemed to be the biggest obstacle all participants face. Every participant emphasized how they wished more of the public would participate in the process, particularly at earlier stages such as community meetings held by

developers or online feedback mechanisms provided by the cities. At the same time though, citizens are often not as informed about the challenges of development today. One participant emphasized how people also appear to support walkable neighborhoods but then do not want the building height that usually comes with those designs to make the projects feasible.

You need a lot of residential percentage to support commercial, a lot more than people think, especially the type of commercial that would be around residential. So in all these places where you have shopping centers, that have a grocery store, and a dry cleaner, and a nail salon, and a hair salon, and all these other services. It takes a lot of people to keep that going... I think that's the challenge, that the margins have gotten so much smaller for every business... a higher threshold of residential is what it takes to really support the intense expense of redevelopment of infrastructure.

At the same time, community members often get upset when new projects go in on land that is developable, but people believe it to be open space²⁵. Sometimes these types of developments occur across city boundaries or on county land leaving city councils and planning departments dealing with angry constituents for developments that were completely outside of their jurisdiction.

Local Control & State Intervention

Given the relative absence of the state in urban planning in decades past and the sudden influx of state policymaking in the last few years in Colorado, although the topic is tangential, the study would be incomplete without at least exploring the role of the state in local city planning. Of the participants who commented (some opted out of the question or felt they did not

²⁵ An interesting side note here is that in the Chapter 5 public hearings and in the interviews, commissioners and interview participants alike did not feel that residents were to blame in such cases. Rather, many believe that realtors or rental property management groups do not properly inform potential buyers and renters on what development may occur on nearby properties in the future. Often, large developments occur and are approved over phases that may take years. With realtors selling the early properties to continue to fund the rest of the development. Commissions and interview participants really felt that realtors were focused on getting the sale and not on properly informing their clients about future development.

know enough to comment) there was more variety than initially anticipated. One council member typified the local control vision of city planning:

Fundamentally, the Colorado Constitution protects local control in land use decisions. It's been already decided in court. We have all the precedent we need to argue and to state that local control for land use is imperative, and the state currently is just overriding that at every chance again. And it's not just in Colorado. It's happening across the country, and doesn't matter if it's a red state or a blue state ... Where you buy your home and where you decide to raise your family is probably one of the most personal decisions you can make. If you lose local control, and you have the state involved, it becomes less and less personal ... It's always been communities that have come together and either built the school or built the town hall or built something ... that brought their community together. It wasn't some outside person that came in, traditionally speaking, it's local people who have built local things ... That's where we should be, because no two communities are the same, and no two homes are the same. So, the state initiative of trying to tell people you don't deserve to have unique, is kind of a slap in the face to local people who put their heart and soul into building a home for their family.

But surprisingly, state level intervention was perceived as good in some ways and more mixed by others. The best statements mostly came from council members though a few planners also touched upon the idea. Often the local politics make it hard to make big changes in a city's comprehensive plan, building code, or zoning regulations, but at the same time the strategies the state employs are sometimes viewed as too onerous with reporting requirements or threats to take away highway funding. For example, this council member spoke the most positively about state-level intervention but later chided the state governor for being too heavy handed with his proposals.

From my perspective, I welcome it. Because here's the thing. Local elections, like the only the people who primarily vote are more affluent people who own houses in this area ... The people we hear [from] are the people who are frustrated whenever we try to make the city more inclusive, by adding some density by allowing smaller lot sizes so that you can buy a less expensive house ... I believe this and I know this is not a popular thing to say. I do not believe that council fully represents the actual electorate. I think it is skewed in again, that more affluent kind of direction, that status quo direction. And that is something that the state can bypass, I think, so, I welcome their intervention ... I do not believe that, as the council, we are going to be able to make the changes that are needed by ourselves, unless we actually get more people, more low income people, more young people, more people like that voting in local elections, which would be great. But until that day comes we're going to need the support of the state.

In the quote, the representativeness and communication issues that urban planning experiences show up again but this time in the form of a political status quo that can make it challenging for even elected officials to overcome. As the results noted in previous sections, planners, commissioners, and council members alike highlighted communication to the public as one of the biggest obstacles to better urban planning in the future. In a similarly positive take, this council member also highlighted how the current local planning process lacked a diversity of voices. While amenable to state intervention, they felt that it may be easier to start with a more regional approach to planning, especially because city boundaries in Colorado are particularly wonky.

On the one hand, like zoning and how cities have been planned are rooted in racist principles of exclusion, right? And that's just a huge history of zoning, right? And so to me, the idea that cities should have complete control, when I live in a part of the city where we touch three cities and everybody's decisions impact each other, I do think there have to be some levels of regional approach that go beyond like the richest or the people who actually vote in municipal elections... At the same time, I don't think that the like deregulation attitude of that is driving the state's economic philosophy around how affordable housing will be really going to help anyone either... California, where they're updating a lot of these types of regulatory frameworks has a state planning agency. They're thinking about this in a different way. We can't be taking bills from other states, imposing them without funding, and with TABOR, you know, if we're told to do things or things change, and we don't get the money for it then that becomes a challenge... I think that there is a state role in taking it out of these very polarized and very unrepresentative conversations around zoning, and there need to be some kinds of regional approaches...

If the state is to intervene, local representatives believe the state should focus on small incentives or focus on protecting individual property rights to drive change at the local level. For example, the state level ADU legislation, HB24-1152 pushed forward the conversation on ADUs by ensuring that, regardless of the bylaws of an HOA, if a property owner lived in an area where ADUs were allowed, that right could not be revoked. As such, the state can make small incremental changes to land-use regulations such as the ADU policy that can have a large impact over time without losing the support of local municipalities. At the same time, organizations like the Colorado Municipal League (CML) and Denver Regional Council of Governments

(DRCOG) may benefit from having a more lenient stance towards state intervention, especially in areas where local politicians feel the fight is too polarized or would require them to do too much research to craft good local solutions. Further, CML and DRCOG could help organize regional planning associations and train local leaders on how to address pressing urban planning issues their cities are facing.

In the end, the results showed more favorability towards state intervention than was expected. In some ways, it may be the relatively stuck status quo of the planning process and lack of influence over the system that allows some participants to see value in state intervention. Alternatively, if the participants in the planning process had more resources, knowledge, training, and influence over the outcomes of development, it is fair to wonder if state intervention would get as many positive responses.

DISCUSSION

The results of this chapter describe a paradox of influence in the local planning processes. Despite their best intentions and overall positive opinions, participants across various roles (city council members, professional planners, and planning commissioners) generally feel they have limited influence over the outcomes of the planning process. Comprehensive plans became a focal point in many of the interviews when the topic of influence came up. Comprehensive plans and other similar documents such as sustainability plans or transportation plans, are seen as the most significant avenue for influencing a city's development path. However, the plans and (sometimes) the codes are updated only every so often and through great effort by each city's staff and elected/appointed officials. Often city representatives appeared to be hamstrung by such plans and codes rather than supported by them. Instead, influence often occurs by a city and its representatives setting themselves up well for negotiations with developers who want to build in

their communities. Planners, in particular, emphasized their ability to negotiate with developers, and often they sought to do so to achieve more of their city's planned goals set according to the comprehensive plan. Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) are a contradictory model in which proposed development is essentially fully negotiated with the city and often given significant variances from the current plans and regulations. Even though these PUDs appear to undermine the purpose of the plans and regulations, they might also be the process by which city representatives can best negotiate and guide future development. Alternatively, early feedback processes which shift the public discussion of a new development into an earlier phase of the process, may have more influence over development than the standard late-stage public hearing process.

It should also be noted that there is a strong disconnect between the desire for public participation and the actualized benefits of public participation. All the interview participants valued public participation and emphasized a need to continue to improve participation with the planning process. At the same time, participants noted that the public often have significant misunderstandings about the purpose of planning review processes. Even worse, the public participation often comes significantly too late in the process when most of the project has already been set in stone. The interviews emphasized that public participation is also challenging in that those who do attend are not always representative of the city. Certain populations, often racial minorities, low-income households, and renters are much less likely to have the time or patience to attend often mundane and long public hearings. The participants seemed to hint at two directions being possible for the future of public engagement. First, cities could take a stronger stance on educating residents about the planning processes and the challenges of development today. Such education work may yield benefits in improving the current planning

process but may not address the unrepresentativeness of current participation. A second option is to improve transparency all around, which is best exemplified in the unique case of Lakewood. In Lakewood's example, increasing efforts towards transparency and public engagement have helped fix broken relationships between the public and the city, but also between the city staff and city representatives themselves. Altogether though, it appears that the public hearing process is broken and that significant changes are needed to make it into the effective oversight mechanism that residents seem to want.

The results do show that public health and social well-being are popular with local leaders. Community leaders are aware of the health impacts of the built environment but struggle with how such concerns can be integrated into the planning processes that exist. Local leaders emphasized a need for data and guidance on how to integrate actionable metrics into the planning process to shape a healthier built environment. At the same time, participants were aware of how the current transportation system negatively impacts the same public health goals and outcomes. In the interviews, participants emphasized the need to move away from car-centric designs and promote more development that is mixed-use and incorporates active transport methods. Alternatively, local leaders involved in the planning process were less clear about the social impacts of the built environment. The results often showed that local leaders knew that there were some significant relationships but often relied on common public amenities such as parks and schools as ways to improve the social fabric of their communities. Though one participant did, possibly accidentally, touch upon the importance of the feeling of ownership and belonging as a key aspect of improving both social connection and public health.

Each of the previous discussion areas re-emphasize the importance of local knowledge or what James C. Scott (1998) refers to as "Metis". To Scott, metis is the practical, experience-

based knowledge that support successful social or economic systems. The example of the PUDs enhancing the negotiating power of city planners, the need for improvements to the public hearings, and even the surprisingly strong knowledge of public health that local leaders have, all support Scott's idea of metis. Unfortunately, even at these local levels where local knowledge could be applied practically to solve problems, the current planning systems that are used today are largely adopted from previous national projects (refer back to M. Nolan Gray's (2022) "Arbitrary Lines" discussion in the literature review). The current planning practices have hamstrung local leaders and community members from applying their metis to the practice of community development. Gray's (2022) advocacy against the current planning and zoning practices is a push against the regulatory regime of legibility and control that Scott emphasizes as a key feature of state projects. Taken together, both authors want to give power back to local leaders and citizens to make decisions about what is best for their communities and the path to doing that is likely a wholesale reconstruction of current planning practices at the local level.

Finally, there is a clear need for further research in a few areas such as the role of the state in local planning processes, the training and knowledge gaps of local leaders on common planning practices and processes, and the potential future planning paradigms. For example, Healey (1998) and, later, Wolfram (2015) both emphasized the need for building "institutional capacity" and "transformative capacity", respectively, at the local level. Both authors emphasized a need for strong social networks, utilizing both formal and informal knowledge bases, to support place-based urban development. Wolfram's research even focused on applying it specifically to improving the sustainability of cities. But without clear policy-based examples, local leaders will continue to struggle with reform. Sociologically, the role of social networks and political leaders ability to use both economic and social capital to sway the design of the

future built environments is clear. But how to build such strong social networks within communities, at a time when they are fraying, and be inclusive of a variety of local knowledges and power sources is less clear. Furthermore, encouraging such networks of knowledge to engage with the planning processes, even if they are reformed, is a much steeper challenge.

On the role of the state, the dataset was small but significantly varied; more varied than expected. The results point towards a potential role for the state to get involved through making smaller incremental changes to land-use policies that may have larger effects over time without creating additional regulatory burdens that often hinder new development. These resulting ideas are similar again to the lessons learned from Scott (1998), where grand schemes for development will almost inevitably fail because of resistance to what will be viewed as authoritarian power grabs. Instead, the smaller, incremental changes at the state level should be driven by “bottom-up” style governance practices, possibly setting minimum standards and minimum expectations. In some ways, the state will see less resistance and support its housing goals by supporting broader individual property rights and curtailing local authority when it comes at the cost of the citizen’s autonomy.

This is further supported by the polarization of U.S. politics, which appears to have invaded even local land use politics such that even local leaders do not always feel they have the political capital to make changes that they believe in. The best example was in Centennial’s ADU policy which was similar to the later state policy on ADUs. Centennial crafted their policy first, but the state went further to protect individual property rights by banning homeowners associations from interfering in the right to build an ADU if all other conditions were met for the property. There is potential that the state could encourage more regional approaches to planning and development but, culturally, there does not seem to be a strong value placed on the

development of public goods, even within the cities themselves. Instead, residents are often too focused on impacts to their individual experiences sometimes at the cost of developing a stronger, more resilient community overall.

Similarly, either at the state level or regional level, possibly with help from similarly distanced organizations such as CML or DRCOG, training was an area that every participant felt needed significant improvement. Commissioners and council members clearly stated that they were not receiving enough training on common planning practices and theories, while professional planners felt like they had to just accept whoever was appointed to the commission and hope for the best. Since there was already noted a significant disconnect between the public's understanding of the planning process, it is an obvious first step to invest more time and effort into the training of new planning commissioners and city council members. Such training may result in a more efficient and driven local planning process and reduce the need for further state intervention as well.

Lastly, while this chapter's data and results are limited, it points to three future directions for improving our understanding of the future of local planning politics. First, the PUD process and the new urbanism-based neighborhood is an example of a planning process that works more through negotiation and goal driven development. This unique planning mechanism does appear to throw away a majority of the existing regulations in favor of empowering local planning staff to work with developers towards new and unique neighborhood designs, particularly ones that may be more resilient and socially connective. Also, this example was reminiscent of more YIMBY-esque policy approaches to the current housing crisis. Alternatively, the older missing middle neighborhood showed how the current planning paradigm has all but banned more traditional forms of housing development that play important roles in creating affordable housing

opportunities for diverse populations. This older missing middle housing and its advocate bore resemblance to the Strong Towns approach to urban development which also received several mentions by the participants. While the two new paradigms are not mutually exclusive, they do focus on two different sets of policy prescriptions for the current ills of American development today.

LIMITATIONS

Participation in this portion of the dissertation was limited, but participants did come from an adequate variety cities and leadership backgrounds in politics, urban planning, and the planning commissions. Getting additional participants would help with the generalizability of the results but does not hinder the rich, in-depth data provided by those who did participate. In the future, limiting a similar study to focus on only one of the three leadership groups included in this study may provide more generalizable results but still poses significant challenges due to the low participation rate. Alternatively, further limiting the scope of the study and increasing the participation rewards to match the expertise of the participants may be beneficial.

CONCLUSION

The results and ideas from this chapter emerge from a thematic analysis that has allowed insights to develop organically from the data, stories, and experiences of the participants. The interviews and neighborhood walks conducted with city council members, professional planners, and planning commissioners provided a new depth of detail about the experiences of local leaders involved in the development process, which was informed by their unique experiences and perspectives. Participants expressed a strong desire for transformative change in the built environments of their cities, including more walkable, accessible spaces; a public transit network

connected to an active transportation-friendly network; and fiscally sustainable growth for their cities. Their experiences and knowledge offer both a critical assessment of current planning practices and a roadmap for future policy directions. The findings add significant context to both the analysis of the comprehensive plans provided in chapter IV and the discussion of planning commissions in chapter V; thus, the findings presented in this chapter reinforce broader trends, challenges, and potential solutions explored in previous chapters.

The participants' thoughts on the Planned Unit Development (PUD) process and the development of new urbanism-styled neighborhoods demonstrated that adapting existing regulations can empower professional planners to negotiate with developers and align projects with community values and comprehensive plans. By entrusting city staff to advocate for their cities and collaborate with developers on unique neighborhood designs, municipalities can create more resilient, socially connective, and sustainable suburban environments. More flexible development processes, including the PUD model, can also help address the urgent need for affordable housing—adopting a YIMBY-oriented approach that preserves each community's distinct character while proactively creating unique developments and neighborhoods.

However, allowing for more PUD-oriented processes and empowering local leaders necessitates reforms to the public hearing process by which developments are approved. Particularly in areas with fewer residents, such as city commercial centers, developing the comprehensive plan's vision is a good first step. The abstract level of the comprehensive plans makes them unsuitable for such large-scale, infill style developments that significantly change the experience of a place. Additionally, the lack of immediate residents in struggling commercial areas means the current notification requirements, such as mailings and signs, are unlikely to attract much community participation. Alternatively, planning large scale redevelopments with

neighborhood plans and moving the public hearings to an earlier part of the review process could allow for more meaningful community participation in the design of new developments, as they are proposed. Early and deliberative community participation could help reduce resistance to larger growth initiatives while also creating places attuned to the local needs and characteristic preferences.

Such a process would not only empower citizens to bring their experiences and knowledge to the table but also strengthen the purpose of the review by planning commissioners. Currently, as seen in Chapter V and as described by Forester (1989), the planning commissions often have little power to enact change on behalf of residents and instead serve as legitimizers of pre-determined planning outcomes. Ideally, planning commissioners would act as the communities' experts by offering critiques of proposed plans and ideas to better connect a new development to the communities' values and goals. Such an empowered planning commission acts as a check on the power of professional planners (Houghton 1988), who often work with developers, outside of the public view. While this process is not entirely new to any of the cities included in the study, it offers a clear policy path towards the meaningful inclusion of local knowledge and influence in the planning processes. By embracing the messiness of public debate and discussion, cities can create a more responsive, resilient planning process that reflects the needs and aspirations of residents, rather than reproducing the car-centric designs and pre-planned development ideas of a likely outdated comprehensive plan.

At the same time, cities must critically assess how the current planning paradigm—including the zoning laws, building regulations, and planning review processes—have effectively banned traditional housing types such as duplexes, three stacks, and quadplexes. These “missing middle” housing forms have historically played a crucial role in maintaining and expanding

affordable housing options, allowing for incremental, organic growth in both historic and emerging neighborhoods. This kind of gradual, community-led growth is exemplified in the Strong Towns approach, which was referenced by some participants. The Strong Towns approach emphasizes incremental development, prioritizing small, low-risk investments that respond to local needs. It advocates for financially resilient growth by making better use of existing infrastructure, improving walkability, and allowing neighborhoods to evolve organically over time. As a bottom-up approach to the planning process, the Strong Towns approach helps reduce local resistance to development by integrating the immediate residents' knowledge and vision for their neighborhoods into the plans. This type of neighborhood-level planning may be the first step towards rebuilding the types of social networks and collective efficacy but was largely absent from the comprehensive plans discussed in Chapter IV.

Importantly, these two approaches, YIMBY-style large-scale redevelopment and Strong Towns-style incremental growth, are not mutually exclusive. In the participants' stories, one can find support for the integration of both new planning paradigms. Each may be appropriate in different neighborhoods and cities, and at different times. Older, established neighborhoods may benefit from the small-scale, incremental changes advocated for by the Strong Towns approach, whereas a struggling commercial center may require a bold influx of new activity, residents, and investment. Both planning approaches will be reliant on building collective visions for the future of each neighborhood in a city. As such, building each city's institutional capacity to incorporate knowledge and experiences from residents is a key aspect necessary for success. For citizens to have a stronger voice in the development process, cities, and possibly the state, need to put more support behind organizing communities of interest. Such interventions would need to build inclusive community planning practices and long-term place-based organizations, interrupting

the predominance of status quo participation by wealthier, often white, homeowners having the most voice in current planning practices. Examples of this include registered neighborhood organizations, homeowners' associations, identity- or social movement-based community centers, or any other social network-constructing entities that can act as a conduit between the individual resident and the city government. Currently, such neighborhood-level institutional capacity is weak and often only becomes strong when proposed developments incite significant opposition from residents. By flipping this dynamic, bringing residents together proactively to solve development challenges rather than only being mobilized in opposition, cities can strengthen the bridges and bonds between residents and foster a shared sense of ownership over the built environment.

In sum, local leaders must take action to break free from outdated, restrictive planning practices and embrace more adaptive, inclusive approaches to suburban growth. A one-size-fits-all strategy will not work. Instead, cities should develop comprehensive, flexible frameworks that protect community values and incorporate a variety of expertise and community voices, while also accommodating both large-scale development and incremental growth. The key to this is in building institutional capacity at the city and neighborhood levels to act as a funnel for the collection of local preferences, experiences, and knowledge. The policy challenge ahead is not merely to tweak existing regulations and planning review processes, but to fundamentally rethink how our planning processes can more effectively incorporate local knowledge to evolve cities and ensure that they remain livable, affordable, and resilient for future generations.

CHAPTER VII: BEYOND THE GROWTH MACHINE: RECONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT POLITICS

The study of suburban contexts is still relatively unexplored within sociological literature. As mentioned before, current research often focuses on the central cities or primarily urban experiences and often understudies the suburbs where most Americans live today. Lacy (2016) highlights three key trends in the sociological study of suburbs: the suburbanization of poverty, the migration to the Sunbelt, and the rise of new immigrant destinations. While these trends provide a strong theoretical framework for understanding contemporary suburbanization, this study found that applying them to the Denver metropolitan area poses some significant challenges.

First, the Denver metro does not align with the traditional understanding of the Sunbelt as described in the literature and in popular culture. Unlike the rapidly expanding cities in the Southeast and Southwest, Denver's population growth has already begun leveling off. According to the Biernacka-Lievestro and Fall (2025) of Pew, the population is expected to grow at a slowing but relatively stable rate of less than 1% through 2050. Meanwhile, states like Texas, Utah, Nevada, Florida, and Georgia, have experienced significantly larger relative growth and will continue to grow at a similar pace to Colorado's prediction. Second, Denver is not considered a "new immigrant destination" as commonly identified by demographers as being in the Midwest and Southeast U.S. states. Marrow (2005) described the Southwest, including Colorado, as seeing slowing immigration due to stricter enforcement in the region. Additionally, new immigrant destinations include more rural parts of the country which does not apply to the focus of this study. Lastly, Denver has not experienced a clear pattern of suburbanized poverty, especially one correlated with significant black and Hispanic migration out of the central city. In fact, Denver is approaching minority-majority status, with much of its new racial diversity

coming from within U.S. migration patterns and remaining concentrated in the city and county of Denver itself rather than dispersing outward into the suburbs.

Politically and culturally, Denver's suburbanization pattern resembles those found in the Midwest or Northeast more than the Sunbelt cities. However, this alone does not fully explain the region's distinctive resistance to growth and density in the suburban communities, but it does help explain the low diversity and struggling economies of these suburban areas. One obvious explanation is residential segregation, which remains a prominent feature in Denver's suburban history, particularly with the development of "executive-level" (Chapter VI) housing in suburban areas, like Broomfield, following patterns of white-flight. Denver's residential segregation pattern and historical urbanization patterns appears to relate more to patterns observed in the Midwest and Northeast than those seen in Sunbelt cities. Instead, Denver's recent demographic shifts might be better summarized as a migration pattern characterized by wealthier, predominantly white newcomers who have been drawn to the region by its perceived lower cost of living and connection to the natural environment. This environmentalism- and recreation-driven migration aligns more with a class-based trend than with patterns of racial and economic displacement seen in other metropolitan areas.

The Denver metro area's unique development trajectory is further underscored by its political and social context today. For instance, the recent immigrant bus transfer campaigns by Republican Governors in southern states reinforce its theoretical divergence from the traditional southern regional culture and experience. This dynamic, when combined with the prior historical insights, highlights Denver's evolving identity as a political and cultural crossroads within the broader American landscape.

As a result, Denver's suburbanization reflects complex interactions between historical context, demographic trends, and developmental constraints unlike many of the other regions and cities examined in previous studies. Historically, Denver's urbanization process aligns more closely with the Los Angeles model of fragmented urbanization (Dear 2002) than the traditional Chicago School ecological model of concentric development. This blend of a Midwestern or Northeastern suburbanization segregation pattern, the LA decentralized urbanization pattern, and cultural distinction from each of the surrounding regions creates a theoretical outlier that warrants further investigation. The outlier experience of the Denver metro area is largely due to Denver's inability to annex additional land after 1974, limiting the city's capacity for outward growth and fostering a more fragmented suburban landscape.

The findings of this study suggest that dominant sociological theories such as the suburbanization of poverty, Sunbelt migration patterns, and new immigrant destinations are less applicable to Denver's metropolitan development. Instead, suburbanization in the Denver metro appears to be more strongly tied to class- and environmental-based concerns. For example, the suburbanization of poverty appears to be connected to the aging population (highlighted in Chapter IV). Across the Denver metropolitan statistical area, the 65+ age group is the fastest growing demographic (Census Bureau 2010, 2022). This trend reflects a population of older residents, often living in large properties with limited retirement incomes that may struggle to keep pace with the rising costs of living. As explored in earlier chapters, environmental stewardship heavily influences local policies, including growth limitations (Chapter VI), environmental regulations (Chapter V), and a regionally strong emphasis on green and open spaces (Chapter IV & VI). These environmental values, while beneficial in many ways, have also contributed to the previously explored tensions in suburban redevelopment and politics.

The redevelopment of Denver's suburbs exemplifies a cultural clash between class-based expectations of suburban environments and urban planning needs. Efforts to preserve environmental values and maintain neighborhood character often come at the expense of working-class families, young professionals, and retirees who struggle to manage the rising costs of housing and transportation. This tension underscores the need for a more inclusive planning process that balances environmental concerns with social equity, ensuring that Denver's growth does not deepen the existing inequalities but instead fosters healthier, more connected communities.

What the results of each chapter seem to imply is that, deep down, urban planning, particularly within the Denver metro suburbs, is experiencing a crisis of meaning. The mid-century vision of the nuclear family with a home in the suburbs with the wide green lawn just cannot be replicated again. Nor is that vision fiscally sustainable. As evidenced by the comprehensive plans and comments from the local politicians, the suburbs are overbuilt in the Denver metro to a point where the infrastructure costs for repairs and updates cannot be maintained without exorbitant development fees or higher taxes or both. This is the result of the growth machine politics described by Molotch (1976) that was meeting the cultural moment. But the growth machine has nearly completely run out of land to absorb, at least in cities adjacent to the city and county of Denver.

The community values of the region, as identified in the comprehensive plans, place a premium on open space, green space, access to nature, and sustainability that are now at odds with that original growth machine development model. And while, yes, the local governments continue to be a facilitator of growth and place a higher value on economic growth in the comprehensive plans, the case study of the commissions showed how commissioners instead

ignored the city's fiscal models. Additionally, commissioners were more concerned with the use value of land than its exchange value, often directly raising concerns of residents and advocating for unique specific conditions on development that have nothing to do with increasing the value of land. Taken altogether, the growth machine model and the associated goodness of economic growth seem to have little evidence in the day-to-day experiences and documents of the current planning processes in these suburbs. Instead, the cities appear to be striving towards simply balancing budgets and improving the use and exchange value of lands that were previously constructed under the growth machine model of development.

Alternatively, the green growth machine might have been a theoretically viable idea in other areas of the country but the comprehensive plans and commissions of the metro area here appear to be on an entirely separate track of green growth than the green growth machine. Each of the chapters analysis and results, while not definitive, leaned away from both the growth machine and green growth machine conceptions of what drives development in cities. While some small sections of the comprehensive plans do point towards and overlap between green spaces and health, the overlap is largely due to their natural role as spaces of recreation and active transportation. The connection expressed in these sections does not feel forced, nor is it really a central concept in the sections on environmental stewardship, transportation, or land use. Generally, if health or conceptions of health are discussed in the comprehensive plans, it has a separate section which emphasizes active living and healthy eating and the importance of strong trail networks.

Similarly, in chapter V, the planning commissioners and developers rarely discussed health or green spaces at all, and more often they aimed to enforce their city's environmental sustainability efforts. When parks or green spaces were discussed, transportation was more often

the topic of concern. Specifically, parking accessibility and safety for pedestrians and bicyclists. Narratives of health or healthiness were entirely absent in the review process if you exclude the safety concern for pedestrians and cyclists. The insights from Chapter VI do show that local leaders do connect parks and green spaces with healthiness but in limited ways. The interviews showed that leaders see built environment development as almost entirely separate from the green and rarely consider the health benefits of trees in new developments or other superficial green infrastructure as furthering the health of their communities or a justification for approving new developments.

Instead, with the failure of this originally potent growth machine model of development, the community awaits a clear successor, or rather, wages a cultural battle over its successor. These cultural battles, to which the experience of Lakewood and small sections of the debate at the planning commissions speak to, are more emblematic of the urban regime theory of urban development. Within the suburbs though, organizing a strong pluralistic takeover of the mechanisms of urban development seems nearly impossible. Even in the case of Lakewood, the new regime of the anti-development coalition seems to have been swept out as quickly as they were voted in.

As Forester (1989, 1999) argues, planning is not a neutral exercise, but a process embedded in power relations, where those with greater access to information, resources, and political influence are better positioned to shape urban outcomes. The comprehensive plans that the cities have today reflect this dynamic, vaguely incorporating perspectives of all who participate in their renewal yet ultimately end up constrained by the status quo. While they appear to be open forums for debate, Forester's concept of informational power suggests that these processes often privilege those who already have institutional knowledge and access (as

seen in Chapter VI). This results in a vision shaped not by deliberative, democratic engagement but by the inertia of existing power structures. In the suburbs included in this study, this idea is particularly potent as a majority of the comprehensive plans and commissions seem to be relying on that inertia, rather than developing new policy mechanisms or acting as forums of community building.

With so many differing opinions, the outcome is a fragmented vision that is both burdened by competing interests and shaped by the pressures of political liability rather than clear strategic planning. Without a clear vision for the future, small portions of the city become necessary sacrifices to the goal of fiscal sustainability, either through urban renewal schemes or significant upzoning, while the rest remains frozen by political inaction in a kind of zoning amber. This aligns with Forester's critique of planning as a process often hijacked by dominant actors who use technical expertise and procedural rules to control the scope of public participation. Citizens, often uninformed or disengaged due to the complexity of the planning jargon and bureaucratic processes, expect that their councils or their planning commissions will lead the change. Yet as Forester highlights, these hearings frequently serve as mechanisms to legitimize predetermined outcomes (Chapter V) rather than true democratic engagement. The planning commissions' public hearings are largely impotent exercises of performative public participation, rubber-stamping replications of the existing development status quo rather than fostering genuine deliberation.

The results in Chapter IV on the comprehensive plans show how stakeholders can selectively interpret planning documents to support vastly different visions for the future, reinforcing Forester's point that planning debates are as much about shaping narratives as they are about technical standards. Like the debate between commissioners in Westminster, the same

standards and values expressed in the comprehensive plan and in the municipal codes' regulations can be leveraged to attack or defend conflicting visions of potential urban developments. While these debates, whether over four parking spaces or broader land use policies, may seem symbolic, they reflect deeper struggles over who gets to define the future of the built environment.

As seen in Chapter VI, professional planners frequently expressed frustration with the public feedback process, desiring more engagement yet struggling with the reality that few residents have the time or energy to meaningfully contribute. Even fewer want to step forward, as commissioners have, to lead in such cultural debates, lest they have their reputations and livelihood attacked in the process. In these contested political spaces, Forester's (1989) argument that planners act as mediators, becomes particularly relevant. Planners become not just technical experts, they become negotiators, navigating tensions between competing interests. In an era saturated with information, planners must recognize that misinformation, strategic framing, and exclusionary practices shape whose voices are amplified and whose concerns are dismissed. At the same time though, a process in which everyone must be included in the drafting of the future built environment is more prone to be watered down or include bits of each epistemic community's vision with no substantive meaning.

This lack of a clearly defined vision or planning paradigm that can guide the development of comprehensive plans, paired with bits and pieces of alternative epistemic communities allows individuals to retreat to their unique ideological corners without settling on a common future. Instead, in waves of pluralistic takeover, as discussed in the urban regime theory of local governance, epistemic communities seek to install their version of the future by capturing available bastions of power. And through those positions of power, as Forester reminds us, they

begin to shape the narratives, structure public discourse, and define what is seen as rational or legitimate. The stories from Lakewood are by far the best example of this process.

The planning commission and planning process, rather than serving as vehicles for shaping a shared vision, have instead become fortresses of liability protection, shielding decision-makers from political risk instead of enabling transformative change. When a rare strong pluralistic wave conquers the fortress, professional planners are left scrambling to maintain a semblance of non-partisan public service, lest they become the target of the community's ire. Forester's (1989) description of the politics of planning, with planners navigating political spaces steeped in conflict and misinformation, seems to aptly apply to the experiences documented in this research.

Yet this struggle over planning is not occurring in isolation. Rather, it is embedded within broader spatial and economic transformations that echo Castells' (1996) distinction between the spaces of places and spaces of flows. At first glance, this crisis of common meaning appears to mirror the tension Castells describes, where entrenched local communities, rooted in place both physically and culturally, resist the expansion of globalizing forces that reshape the built environment to reflect elite preferences. One of an exploitation and encrustation of the upper class into new spaces, recreating their culturally preferred environments, while those who are tied to their place (both figuratively and literally) watch as their preferred cultural expressions of place and community are eroded by these rapidly expanding globalizing forces. The dynamic at play in both theories is one of exclusion and displacement, as regulatory and economic structures favor new development paradigms that often prioritize capital flows over localized cultural continuity.

Alternatively, if we push this logic further, the takeover by the places of flows can be understood not just as an external force of disruption but as an indicator of the current broken planning paradigm. Stripping away the globalization element of Castells' (1996) theory and focusing on the local context of this dissertation, we can see how the breakdown of the prior model of urban development (the growth machine), one that has led to widespread affordability crises, has left many communities unable to adapt. In this context, the arrival of large, well-resourced development interests (the spaces of flows), whether in the form of state-driven initiatives or private development, represent not just an imposition but an inevitable response to a planning system locked for decades in regulatory and cultural amber. Building and planning requirements such as minimum parking spaces, large setbacks, and stringent height restrictions limit the buildable space on any given lot. In such regulatory contexts, combined with the high land value costs, developers are encouraged to maximize the square feet of any building to maintain a project's fiscal sustainability while also limiting what plots of land may be available for innovative or alternative housing designs.

For example, in the case of Broomfield, in the Bal Swan suburban residential neighborhood, building 40 units affordable housing for intellectually or developmentally disabled individuals (IDD), was met with significant, sometimes vitriolic, backlash that attempted to kill the project²⁶. The proposed development was five feet above the existing height restriction on the lots and would minimally increase local traffic. In this neighborhood, the only other proposed development project listed by the Broomfield Community Development Office

²⁶ The project was ultimately approved by the Broomfield City Council in Jan. & Feb. of 2024 without the building height condition recommended by the Land Use Review Commission. A similar number of oppositional public comments were voiced by the neighborhood at the city council meetings as well. The key themes of the oppositional public comments was the building height and concerns about increased traffic and parking. But at the city council hearings, there were significantly more supportive public comments, likely driven by F.R.I.E.N.D.S. of Broomfield, a community non-profit organization that advocates for individuals with IDD, and the Broomfield Housing Alliance.

was a temporary emergency accessibility ramp for a person with a wheelchair. This small, largely amenable, project, funded by the newly independent Broomfield Housing Alliance, was believed to be a threat to the neighborhood's character and safety. Alternatively, in a currently unnamed neighborhood, a similar IDD-supportive residential project by the same developer was proposed later in a previously vacant parcel near a few smaller industrial use spaces and received no opposition. This alternative neighborhood is also where eight other currently approved or under review projects are located. This type of neighborhood opposition contributes to the condensed flow of capital into specific neighborhoods where growth is deemed acceptable, likely because it is further away from the traditionally single-family home neighborhoods. This one example highlights how current planning restrictions and residential opposition contribute to the concentration of where growth can happen and further intensifies the value of land, increasing the costs of any future development.

The result of the current lack of development and largely frozen-in-amber suburban neighborhoods leads to large amounts of money pouring into any crack in the zoning amber to be financially profitable or at least break even. Additionally, because of the egregiously long review and approval processes, the regulatory restrictions, and neighborhood opposition, the global flows of capital are often necessary for projects to survive. Worse yet, the capital gets funneled into specific spaces without those barriers continuing the prior growth machine pattern of development as seen in developing exurbs or new suburban-style developments on the edge of the metropolis. Add on the onerous development fees and requirements existing cities place on new developments to shore up fiscally unsustainable infrastructure networks developed in decades past, and it is clear why such sudden and rapid intensification is often the only viable product.

Instead of attending to how this intensification of development is the result of structural and policy factors within their local contexts, sociologists, like Lloyd (2016), examine gentrification as a product of the YIMBY attitudes that promote New Urbanist styles of design. Citing his own 2011 paper, Lloyd implies that cities in the southern U.S. are not compatible with the New Urbanist style of development because the people who are migrating from northern cities to live in places like Atlanta are primarily Black people who have “arts and cultural” expressions different from the predominantly white and middle class people who promote the New Urbanist design philosophy. This speaks to Barton’s (2014) argument that the lack of consistent metrics and definitions of gentrification can lead residents, local elites, and sociologists to use the charge of gentrification as a cultural pejorative rather than a defined urban problem that needs to be addressed through policy.

The sociocultural experience of gentrification becomes the change in architecture and cultural characteristics of a neighborhood, rather than the actual displacement of residents²⁷ which should be the major social concern. The result is a planning system, as seen in the comprehensive plans and the planning commissions, that avoid cultural shocks and that promotes the status quo development methods. As explained by one interview participant in Chapter VI, developers design each rare development opportunity to be fiscally viable in the few

²⁷ It should be emphasized that this popular consensus of what is “gentrification” is not always wrong. In fact, Lloyd may be appropriately identifying gentrification in the specific contexts of their studies. But the sociological literature’s and popular culture’s fusion of the racialized and architectural components of gentrification leaves out the wider class-based, global-capital-infusion-based explanations offered by Castells and fails to account for the structural and political factors undergirding the new architectural experience. This is especially true for the suburban city’s in Denver’s metropolitan area which are all 74% or more, white (ACS 2023) in comparison to the focus of Lloyd’s 2016 paper on the experience of southern cities. To end this footnote on a more positive note, while I disagree with Lloyd’s characterization of New Urbanism as a “one-size-fits-all” policy prescription, I do agree with their result: design principles “must be examined in terms of the actual cities where they take root and the distinct challenges posed by specific urban histories that may offer up relatively uncongenial environments within which to enact new cultural and design strategies”.

neighborhoods that have been allowed to change. That design philosophy is often bigger, higher, and less ornate than what residents desire and has been assigned new sociocultural meanings. Even though a “high rise” of 4 or “5 over 1” mixed use project may be fiscally responsible for both the city’s budget and the developer’s wallet, it is not in-line with the residents’ (regardless of race) previous neighborhood character or architectural experience of place. This chicken and egg development conundrum results in only further backlash from residents who find the intensity of such proposed developments to be too much for the traditional character of their neighborhoods or cities, continuing and intensifying the development of spaces of flows.

At the same time, technology has changed, our communal values have changed, and our willingness to engage collectively in the societal project seems to have diminished. In the face of informational turmoil and political upheaval at the national level that never appears to wane, it seems that local control and visions for the future have lost their potency. The local politicians, planners, and volunteer commissioners are either the unfortunate fools or the valiant stalwarts of this chasm between planning paradigms. In the face of such vitriol from community members and confusion from the lack of training and direction, it is amazing that cities are able to continue to rely on the unpaid labor of volunteers on numerous commissions and boards. Though it is no surprise that the level of reflection and thought provided by the commissions is often not critical of current plans and does not go beyond their initial personal values and interpretations as a result. The planning process itself appears to be fundamentally broken with none of the participants feeling they truly have a say over what happens in their community. The result is a system that is subject to the spaces of flows and has lost its capacity to create spaces of places, even when the citizens and representatives express a desire for those unique community assets.

In this gap, two new planning paradigms seem to be vying for control. First is the Strong

Towns approach which emphasizes slow, incremental, but broad development shared in each neighborhood across entire cities. Second, is the YIMBY approach which is spurred on by the feeling of crisis emphasizing a housing first approach, with deregulation and the need for big change anywhere anytime. The YIMBY planning paradigm benefits from the spaces of flows to address the current housing crisis, whereas the Strong Towns planning paradigm attempts to protect the spaces of places at the cost of today's dire housing needs. Neither of the proposed solutions is perfect, and recently the Strong Towns founder, Charles (Chuck) Marohn, participated in a discussion with one of the California YIMBY leaders, M. Nolan Gray (author of *Arbitrary Lines*) to hash out some of their similarities and differences (Marohn 2025). Instead of trying to develop a perfected policy framework and social movement, the results of this dissertation offer two balancing mechanisms that may minimize the downsides of each proposed paradigm while achieving their goals: public health and environmental stewardship.

First, is the option to include public health in the planning process, the focus of this dissertation. This would involve developing new planning processes to include the various metrics and values of public health as a common standard and language for the creation of new places. In each chapter's results, public health appears to have a social bridging effect. In Chapter VI, the local leaders of each community are aware and largely knowledgeable about the potential for the built environment to address public health concerns. The comprehensive plans of Chapter IV already include small but significant nods towards the importance of considering public health in the future of the built environment. The problem lies in the integration of public health into the planning process as evidenced by its near total exclusion from the public hearings in Chapter V. Which is ironic given the statutory requirement for the consideration of "public health, safety, and welfare" in comprehensive plans, review procedures, and project approvals.

A key opportunity to advance this integration lies in the concept of “activity spaces” (Cagney et al. 2020). These are the geographic areas where people conduct their daily routines, such as commuting, shopping, recreation, and socializing. By analyzing activity spaces, planners can better understand how residents interact with their built environments and identify potential barriers to healthy behaviors or social connection. For example, fragmented sidewalk networks, poor access to parks, or inadequate transit options may reduce the size and diversity of an individual’s activity space, limiting their opportunities for physical activity and social connection. Integrating activity space analysis into planning efforts would allow policymakers to identify and address these obstacles more effectively.

Public health can serve as the common language, values, and metrics for the new adaptation age of the suburbs if it is given more influence at the local level. By incorporating activity space data into planning processes, planners can tailor their strategies to expand access to health environments that support stronger social networks, active lifestyles, and overall well-being. City Councils will need to amend local regulations, planners will need to learn how to incorporate public health data into their reviews, and commissioners will need even more training on how to evaluate the potential impact of a new development on public health outcomes. The result could be a process that allows these leaders and the city’s citizens to engage in a process of collective action to decide what is best for their city, not just write a plan and hope for the best. This could empower professional planners to negotiate for changes to projects, not just in the interest of fiscal sustainability, but on the long-term values and goals of each community written out in the comprehensive plans. With the enormous potential that public health conversations could bring to the decisions on the future of the built environment, its inclusion seems not a question of if, but a question of how and when.

The second overarching and broadly popular option (at least in the Denver metro area) is to double down on the influence of environmental stewardship in the development process. In the conversations with local leaders and in the comprehensive plans, each communities' commitment to and fervor for the protection of green spaces, open spaces, and environmentally friendly development techniques was clear. The citizens of the Denver metro area express a strong cultural commitment to the environment. This was not a surprising result because of Coloradoans nearness to the Rocky Mountains and highly accessible national parks, forests, and protected lands. But concerns over water resources in the drying mountain west and the extremely limited greenfield space left for these cities allows environmental stewardship to take on a new role in the planning narratives. As seen in the comprehensive plans (Chapter IV), the communities' premium on environmental stewardship acts as a mitigant against uncontrolled development and may even address some fiscal sustainability issues that resulted from the prior decades of growth machine driven development. Currently, environmental stewardship only acts as a shield against unmitigated development, but the results also pointed towards these values as an opportunity for reshaping future development. To address climate change and the excesses of the growth machine, environmental stewardship values offer support for infill developments, transit-oriented developments, and other alternative models that may replace the current over-consumption- and growth-based suburban development models. With environmentalism already being strongly represented in the comprehensive plans, city codes, and values of the communities, it may be the easiest way to begin to shift cultural narratives and build new citizen-driven coalitions to change what future developments will look like.

While the results of this dissertation pointed to a much weaker position on public health than was expected, it also provided significant hope. Nothing was more surprising than

Northglenn's stand out approach to the inclusion of public health in their comprehensive plan. Nothing was less surprising than the entire lack of public health considerations in the actual design and development review processes. Given the cities' leaders already well-founded knowledge of the relationship between public health and the built environment, further research on implementation strategies and the forging of new connections between the public health and environmental movements may provide new opportunities, new narratives, and new development models for these suburbs in decades to come.

CHAPTER VIII: A SOCIOLOGICAL REMEDY: REIMAGINING SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES IN AN ERA OF DISSENSION

This dissertation is a small step towards fully understanding the current processes and politics of suburban development patterns in the United States today. The initial goal was to document the existing spaces where public health influences suburban planning documents and processes and to assess whether the conclusions of current urban development theories apply to these smaller experiments in urbanization that are happening in suburban settings.

Urban sociology has a long tradition of documenting and analyzing the growth and transformation of U.S. cities. From its origins in the Chicago School's ecological model of urbanization and ethnographic studies of place (Park and Burgess 1921, Bulmer 1984); to contemporary analyses of major metropolitan centers such as New York (Smith 1996; Wynn 2010, 2011), Chicago (Sampson 2012), and Los Angeles (Davis 1992; Dear 2002); the field has focused too much on the largest cities and their unique challenges (Ocejo et al. 2020). This focus on only the largest U.S. cities limits the theoretical influence of sociology and fails to align current social theory with the experiences of the smaller cities where most Americans live today (Pew Research 2020).

The findings of this study, especially those shared in Chapter IV, suggest that there is new theoretical ground to be explored in the suburbs. While this dissertation only evaluates the most public facing aspects of the urban development process, it demonstrates that such areas act as outlets for the contestation of cultural ideas about the built environment. The design of this study limits our ability to truly test either urban regime or urban growth machine theories because of the variety of undocumented steps in the urban development process. For example, this study does not include the stories of why developers select specific sites, nor does it discuss the broader understanding each city has of how market forces are influencing their policy

outcomes. Nevertheless, these two theories help us interpret the current power structures within the urban development process in small cities in the Denver metro area. Additional studies and insider knowledge would be needed to truly test, critique, or refine such overarching theoretical narratives of urban governance and development.

Current theoretical explanations of urban development are being challenged by the profound cultural and societal-wide shifts in suburban development patterns going on in U.S. cities today. Theories such as the urban growth machine and its environmental variant, the green growth machine, appeared far less applicable to suburban contexts included in this dissertation than expected. Instead, the narratives, observations, and policy documents from the Denver metro suburbs suggest that we need new theoretical models. This is a moment in which urbanists, professional planners, and sociologists can reshape the power and politics of urban development toward a new paradigm. By expanding the sociological lens beyond the largest cities, we can better understand and influence the future of suburban growth, ensuring that planning processes are more inclusive, sustainable, and reflective of the communities they serve.

As suburban development undergoes this transformation, the tools cities use to shape their futures must evolve as well. Each of the chapters in this dissertation emphasized the important, if possibly diminished, role that comprehensive plans play in deciding the future of the built environment. Chapter IV's analysis of the comprehensive plans demonstrated how they are essential tools for guiding urban growth, offering cities a framework for addressing issues like public health, social interaction, and equity. While these documents present a vision for the future, their effectiveness depends on how well they engage with the complexities of urban life and the social determinants of health. To make these documents more effective, city planners and elected officials must move beyond aspirational language and ensure that their plans are

actionable, enforceable, and inclusive. As Lewyn (2015) noted, there is often a gap between the ambitious goals laid out in comprehensive plans and their practical implementation, particularly when plans must contend with entrenched zoning laws and cultural resistance to density.

Chapter IV has shown that as cities continue to face growing challenges, comprehensive plans will play a pivotal role in shaping not just the physical landscape but the social experience of urban spaces. For these plans to truly improve the quality of life for all residents, planners and city councils must make them vehicles for attending to more than the technicalities of land use; they must also consider the broader social and health impacts of the built environment. To truly serve as tools for improving urban life, comprehensive plans must be developed with a nuanced understanding of the social fabric of the city. This requires planners to look beyond simple metrics like density or land use and consider the broader social dynamics at play. Local leaders must recognize that cities are not just physical spaces but complex social environments where people from diverse backgrounds live, work, and interact.

In contradiction to the hope that Chapter IV provided, Chapter V and VI showed how the current planning review processes in Denver suburban cities are broken. The results reflected the same negative sentiments expressed in Forester's (1989) "*Planning in the Face of Power*": that the planning system acts as a political interest battleground in which conflict has often trumped compromise, favoring the maintenance of the status quo. This is opposed to Forester's more optimistic (1999) "*The Deliberative Practitioner*", in which he recommends moving beyond bureaucratic neutrality and towards a way out of today's planning conflicts through fostering genuine, solutions-driven, deliberative policy making.

Findings from Chapter V agree with Forester's assertion that the planning commissions we have today are often a performative process designed to give legitimacy to the existing

development interests with little actual ability to encourage change. This research confirmed that public health concerns almost never make it into the public hearings even though it is one of the clearest mandates in the state statute. For example, the analysis found that planning commission conversations in Broomfield and Westminster were largely dominated by discussions of existing car-centric designs, even when new projects attempted to veer away from that entrenched structure to promote healthier, walkable neighborhoods. Chapter V also found that citizen participation at the public hearings was often limited, only seeing brief flare-ups when projects were believed to be a threat to the existing neighborhood's character or identity. Altogether, the commissioners used what room in the rules they could to provide space for public concerns and ideas but were often hamstrung by the momentum of the projects with only one project out of 46 receiving a denial. The disconnect between public participation and stated purpose of the planning review processes, "to best promote public health", highlights a critical fault in the decision-making process. One where the process and the resulting built environment continues to prioritize entrenched development patterns over community well-being. By fostering more meaningful public engagement that explicitly integrates health considerations, cities could create spaces that promote the walkability, social interaction, and overall well-being that are already described in their comprehensive plans.

This result was further supported by the interviews and stories shared by city planners, city council members, and planning commissioners in Chapter VI, where even the most optimistic participants expressed little ability to influence the planning process. Outside of the rare opportunity to participate in rewriting their city's comprehensive plans, each of these groups of local leaders were limited by the current political structure of the planning process. The local leaders recognized the connection between public health and the built environment, and

sometimes shared substantive planning or policy ideas to make the built environment encourage better public health outcomes. But they also expressed how the lack of data on the current state of public health, vague municipal code standards, and the building code's emphasis on design quality excludes such important topics from being considered.

These challenges are not unique to Colorado; rather, they reflect a nationwide struggle as cities of all sizes grapple with the limitations of current planning structures and the need for more inclusive, data-driven decision-making. The expansion heavy pattern of suburban development has reached its max potential in most U.S. cities. Hopefully, other cities across the U.S. will recognize similarities in the stories shared here and will adopt existing solutions or create new policies to address their unique contexts. As cities begin their planning transition from growth machine logic to redevelopment and reinvestment in community, addressing the challenges of shifting to a new development model will be difficult and require unique solutions for every city. This study focused on the experiences of small suburban cities in the Denver metro region, which resemble a significant majority of the places where most U.S. citizens live today. Many of the solutions offered in this dissertation do not require anyone to be an urban planning expert or sociologist to implement them. Rather the results emphasize a need for citizen participation to evolve the current planning processes and suggest relatively easy ways for everyday people to get involved and support the planning of their city.

Both urbanists and urban planners have a crucial role to play in shaping their cities, but both sides need to engage in a more proactive approach to modernizing the urban planning process. Urbanists need to move beyond reactive opposition to certain development projects or policies and towards regular, active engagement with the systems we have today (even if they are broken). This study provides some evidence for the power of activism and community agency.

The results speak to how small policy bodies like Northglenn's HEAL committee (a story that cannot be repeated enough) can have snowball effects on future policy decisions. All the participants emphasized how much they desired more public participation, especially in the drafting and revising of each city's comprehensive plan. The key takeaway for anyone who cares about the design, functionality, or future of the built environment is that your city is ready for your help.

Additionally, the comprehensive plan in your city already has evidence and support for many of the pro-urbanist policies that many organizations, Strong Towns and YIMBY alike, would like to see passed into law soon. Additionally, some cities do include their planning commissions in the policy development process for local zoning and building regulations, or at least the revisions of the decennial comprehensive plan. Both Chapter V and VI reiterated that getting involved when the public hearing comes around is already too late. Without local advocates though, the status quo of car-centric design standards and entrenched development interests will prevail in most cases because that is how the system is designed. Urbanists need to get involved, now, at these local levels to help advocate for change and work with the local council and city staff to help make change happen.

However, while local advocates play a crucial role in pushing for change, the responsibility does not fall on them alone. Urban planners, who often find themselves balancing multiple roles in the development process, also need greater support and authority to effectively shape the future of their cities. Planners are playing the role of mediator, advocate, negotiator, and citizen all in one job. As Susskind (2011) notes, many of his students want to do more activist types of work to improve their cities and the cities appear to be at a fiscal and social breaking point where that might be necessary. One policy solution to the current ills of urban

planning that planners could consider advocating for is their own power and separating out some of their many roles. Professional city planners need some space and power to be the advocate, to be the negotiator who can step in on behalf of the city's residents. From there, planners can begin to address the much needed updates to the planning process itself.

One problem that likely only urban planners can solve is to supplement the comprehensive plans with neighborhood-specific, community-driven visions for the most development intense parts of a city. Right now, the plans are too technical, too broad, and act more as a pitch to developers rather than a reflection of the city's citizens' desires for the future. Comprehensive plans will remain a key part of the process, but their scope needs to simultaneously reduce the level of unnecessary detail in some areas and increase actionable metrics in other areas, like public health. Additionally, the citizen engagement aspect of that process needs to be bolstered even further like Northglenn's HEAL Committee's inclusion. Comprehensive plans, as discussed in the plans themselves, often have the strongest, most inclusive public engagement process of any part of the planning experience. Therefore, it seems appropriate to allow citizen-led commissions, committees, and boards to have the most say in making the plan reflect their community's vision. Similarly, using the plans to align standards, municipal codes, and evaluation metrics is key to allowing citizen input to drive development. Westminster's standards for evaluating development plans do not seem to align with the values summarized in their comprehensive plan. Instead of attempting to detail every land use option into the zoning regulations, allow the city's vision and simplified criteria to drive what development is allowed in the city and be enforced by the planning commission and city council.

With a more citizen-driven, localized plan and metrics for evaluating proposed developments, the next step is to make planning commission public hearings for development

reviews a truly deliberative process as well. First, as evidenced by the confusion and sometimes disruptive experience at planning commission hearings, cities need an actual parliamentarian to oversee these public processes. In the most contentious hearings observed in Chapter V, interruptions from the public were regular, and commissioners do not know the rules for running a deliberative meeting, let alone feel they have the power to enforce such rules. While some professional planners might have the necessary knowledge to handle the duties of a parliamentarian, that only continues the pattern of adding additional roles to the planner's job. Along with a parliamentarian, the public hearings either need to be moved to significantly earlier in the process or split into two phases. A few cities already have implemented early public hearings for "concept reviews". These act essentially as a developer's opportunity to pitch a project to the community and incorporate the feedback they receive before an official development application has been submitted. This allows the second public hearing to serve as a check on the work of the professional planning team and a check to ensure developers are incorporating the feedback they receive. Without the first changes to the comprehensive plans and evaluation metrics though, this process does not mean the community is getting what they want. So, nobody should forget step one.

In the future, a values-driven policy framework and a detailed, yet not overly technical, comprehensive plan developed with inclusive and broad public feedback will allow planners to handle the back-end work of development. Shifting responsibility to the community to decide their criteria and decide what projects are appropriate for their future built environment is another step in reducing the burden on professional planners. Yes, a values-driven process means there is more potential for bias, but that bias is from the elected and appointed officials of the city, chosen to represent the city. Unfortunately, this also opens the planning process to more

pluralist, urban regime like takeovers. Examples like Lakewood may occur, where there might be significant backlash against new development but if that is the true sentiment of the city (which in Lakewood's case does not appear to have lasted long), that result is what a deliberative democratic process should result in. The results will not always be good or bad or what everyone wants, but it will reflect the city and its unique character.

By analyzing the comprehensive plans, talking to local leaders, and performing a detailed thematic analysis of two cities public hearings, this dissertation revealed larger patterns that challenge existing urban planning and sociological theories and offered insights into suburban politics and development dynamics. Through analysis of 10 city comprehensive plans within the Denver metropolitan region, Chapter IV found regional trends just like how Ryan (2011) was able to make larger temporal inferences through analysis of the same city's plans over multiple decades. At least for the Denver metro suburbs, the growth machine theory of urban development does not apply well because of limited greenfield space. In these cities, redevelopment and a rethinking of the urban planning paradigm has become necessary because of the prior model's fiscally unsustainable growth goals. Additionally, the green growth machine theory of urban development did not apply well either because commissioners and cities are driving environmental policies often beyond what a typical developer might want to incur in their costs of development. In the comprehensive plans, environmental sustainability topics acted more as a restriction on development because of the high value and priority citizens place on open space and green space protection in the Denver metro.

Alternatively, urban regime theory was the most appropriate explanation of local suburban politics, but more evidence is still needed in specific cities and specific instances to fully support that claim in the future. The dissertation provides evidence of an almost overly

distributed power structure, one in which almost no participants feel they have influence over the final outcomes. This was like Forester's (1989) description; the planning commissions in suburban areas and their public hearings are reflective of the status quo of development, with public participation lacking in meaning, city staff often having too much work, and commissioners lacking the appropriate knowledge or tools to carry out a meaningful, deliberative planning process. Additionally, the public hearings are far too late in the process to allow for meaningful revisions by either the public or the commissioners, but some cities, like Broomfield and Westminster have already begun that shift and their examples should be studied more. Overall, this evidence reflects the distributed nature of planning and development power of the urban regime theory but also one that is inherently broken without strong community coalitions to control the various levers of power.

Table 34 - Table comparing Urban Regime Theory and Urban Growth Machine Theory

Feature	Urban Regime Theory	Growth Machine Theory	Dissertation Evidence
Primary Actors	Informal coalitions of diverse actors who have access to governmental authorities, including planning commissioners.	Coalitions of elites who prioritize economic growth and increased land values (e.g., developers, business owners).	The literature notes that planning commissions often include citizen volunteers, aligning more with a broader set of actors than just elites. Chapter V observed commissioners raising diverse concerns, sometimes reflecting community interests beyond pure economic growth.
Focus	Governance and policy implementation through collaboration.	Land development and economic expansion.	Chapter IV analyzes comprehensive plans which include a broad range of topics beyond just land development, such as social life, green spaces, and transportation. Public hearings in Chapter V often involved discussions of design aesthetics, traffic, and neighborhood character, indicating concerns beyond simple economic growth.
Goals	Governing the city through cooperation and achieving shared, often pragmatic, goals.	Driving economic growth and increasing land values.	Chapter IV found that fiscal sustainability was a subtextual concern for many cities, which could align with growth machine goals. However, environmental sustainability and public health were also identified as priorities in some comprehensive plans, suggesting goals beyond just economic growth.
Power Dynamics	Pluralistic, with various interest groups negotiating policy outcomes.	Hierarchical, with elites holding significant power to shape development outcomes.	Chapter VI suggests an overly distributed power structure where almost no participants feel they have significant influence, which could be seen as contrasting with a clear elite-dominated growth machine. Chapter V notes that planning commissions often act “weakly”, limiting the power of a potential growth machine through this channel.
Policy Area Example - Environmentalism	Selectively incorporated based on the regime’s goals and values.	Environmentalism may be co-opted as “greenwashing” to facilitate growth. (e.g., Green Growth Machine Politics)	Chapter IV found little evidence of greenwashing in the comprehensive plans. Environmental sustainability was often presented as a genuine priority for planning commissions in Chapter V.

As any good study should do, more questions have been raised by this dissertation than answers provided. While this research provides valuable insights, there are still gaps in our understanding of how planning processes function at the local level, particularly regarding the political power structures and regulatory influences. Urban regime theory was the most appropriate explanation of power in the urban development processes across the chapters, but that evidence was only pointing in that direction, not a clear indicator. There needs to be a targeted approach to specific development projects, cities, councils, and commissions to truly understand how a regime takes hold of a planning process for its power and utilizes it. Lakewood was the best example, but many people have already been voted out or left their positions on the commission. Additionally, the city, with some push from the state, is being taken in an entirely different direction; one that feels more in-line with the status-quo expectation for public planning.

Secondly, there is an opportunity for a clearer understanding of what gets included in a comprehensive plan and what does not. Sustainability plans and parks and recreation master plans were popular with some of the cities in the study which may have limited the studies ability to speak to those specific areas. Currently, the state only requires tourism to be included, and many cities just claim that the entire plan is in support of tourism. A follow-up study on the various sections included and topical areas that get excluded because they have other supplemental plans may provide even more insight into the values each community holds.

Similarly, more study is needed on zoning and building regulations, which impact how comprehensive plans get enacted. One interesting note made in the analysis of the comprehensive plans in Chapter IV was how little zoning regulation is discussed in each plan. As many of the professional planners in Chapter VI discussed, these regulations are essentially a

mediating force that could harm or propel a city to achieve the visions they set out in their plans. This potentially serves as another barrier between the public and the urban planning process, especially if comprehensive plans are serving as the key public input tool. Finally, the results of this study all around point to a dearth of public health considerations being made in the current public planning processes. More policy research needs to be done to provide a clear pathway for smaller cities and their community development staff to be able to integrate public health considerations into their plans. This includes access to data, coordinating partnerships, and possibly even updating state laws on comprehensive plans. Rojas-Rueda & Morales-Zamora's (2023) checklist for including public health in comprehensive plans is a good example but lacks the necessary details policy makers and professional planners will need to easily integrate these goals into their workflows and review processes.

To create healthier, more equitable, and better-connected cities, urban planners and sociologists must bridge the gap between fields and reimagine the future of the suburbs. A sociological lens is critical for understanding how power and inequality shape the urban planning process, exposing the challenges that cities face and identifying potential solutions that prioritize collective efficacy and social well-being. The disconnect between sociology and urban planning that we see today, that emerged in the late 1960s (Sanyal 2005), is a continuation of the crisis that urban planning has faced before. Sociology's focus on inequality and the dynamics of power can provide the necessary tools for understanding planning's current crisis and improve the generalizability of current sociological theories of urban development politics.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is the future of both research and practice. Sociologists bring a deep understanding of inequalities and power dynamics, while urban planners can translate these insights into actionable policies that will shape the built environment. Together,

these fields can create planning processes that are not just technical exercises but meaningful pathways to healthier, more inclusive, and more resilient communities. By integrating sociological insights into planning and ensuring that planning decisions prioritize social connectivity and public health, we can redefine what cities are and who they serve. The challenges ahead demand that urban planners and sociologists collaborate as partners in shaping the built environment of our cities.

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