Carolyn Hogg
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The New Suburbia of Denver, Colorado

Traveling by car through Nebraska to Colorado can be great fun as you witness the transition from grassy plains to jagged peaks of rock. I have made this trip myself five times in my life, and I never tire of it. In the midst of Nebraska, flat featureless land stretches around you as far as the eye can see. As soon as you hit the state border things begin to shift. The short grass browns, thins, then disappears, replaced by sagebrush and reddish dirt. Waves begin to form under the earth, transforming the flat landscape into gently rolling hills that grow in intensity as you travel further west. Finally, on the horizon a shadow forms, appearing at first to be clouds but solidifying into the harsh crags of the Rocky Mountains. I can think of no other experience as dramatic as this one.

As you draw closer to Denver, however, your scenic euphoria drops off quickly. Instead of cattle pastures and windmills, housing developments stretch to the limits of your vision. They look much different than the ones common on the East coast and in the Midwest. Instead of small and compact, they sprawl and cover hundreds of acres of land. The natural vegetation of the area hugs the ground, but occasional evergreen trees jut into the sky at predetermined intervals. Houses are large and spacious, with four-car garages a common amenity. They sit on an acre or two of land at the least, five- and ten-acre plots occurring often. The neighborhoods are clean, well-kept and new, but their presence is still overwhelming and unwelcome.[1]

What is this new suburbia forming around Denver, and why is it happening here? I argue

that a number of unique social and environmental factors have come together at this place and time to create a new demand for housing that emphasizes wealth, nostalgia, and a specific visual aesthetic that was not present in the housing tract boom of the 50s and 60s in the eastern US. I will focus on the town of Parker, Colorado, located in Douglas County about 35 miles southeast of downtown Denver, as a prime example of this phenomenon.

Denver's suburban growth has been explosive in the past few decades, with many of its residents traveling into Denver during the day to work. Parker has only been an incorporated town since 1981, but since then its population has multiplied 133 times, from 300 residents at incorporation to 40,000 today.[2] A recent example of just how many of these suburban residents commute into the city for work comes from the US Census Bureau. Another Denver suburb, Aurora, was found to decrease in population by 18.3% during working hours. This was the largest daytime population loss observed in the US for cities with a population between 250,000 and 499,999 people.[3] Denver is host to many high-paying, high-tech companies that create a lot of jobs and draw even more people to it, encouraging the population boom. These people are increasingly choosing the suburbs to settle and live in.

There are many strong reasons why suburban life is such a popular option. The foothills at the base of the Rockies really are beautiful, but the downtown area has been bulldozed flat to accommodate its high-rises. Denver proper is full of green places, with a zoo, a huge botanical garden, and many smaller parks, but none of it can really replace the natural vegetation and gorgeous view of the mountains that the city lacks. The suburbs also provide a small-town feel, with shopping and other amenities nearby but still allowing for neighborhoods to feel close.

Finally, building new houses within the urban core is practically unheard of in recent decades. Families with newfound wealth that wish to build their own new home generally have no choice but to do so in the suburbs, where space is far less limited. These perks to suburban life are experienced throughout the US, though. The Denver area has an additional set of conditions that only encourages this trend, but in new ways that alters the traditional construction of these developments.

One of the biggest differences between the suburb explosion 50 years ago and Parker's unparalleled growth is the shift in demographics targeted. When our World War II veterans returned from abroad and became the baby-boomers, new housing was desperately needed to accommodate all of the new growing families. These people were young, not extremely wealthy, and just starting their lives. Therefore, housing tracts were manufactured as quickly and cheaply as possible to satisfy the demand. In Parker, on the other hand, the situation is just the opposite. With Denver home to many information technology and oil drilling companies, even mid-level employees enjoy upper-middle-class salaries. Suburbs like Parker have therefore worked to draw these established, affluent families to their towns. Houses are larger, custom-built, and much more expensive than the suburb houses of the past. They satisfy a smaller clientèle, but these suburbs are still wildly popular and attract many families to the area. It has apparently worked well, as census information has shown that Douglas County has the highest per capita income of any county in the nation.[4] This emphasis on wealthy homeowners ultimately affects other aspects of the suburban lifestyle as well.

In the 50s and 60s, a push against tract houses grew in size and strength based on a few

general principles. One of the most important was the argument that suburban housing developments consume land area that may have been used for agriculture, forcing cities to import their food from elsewhere.[5] One can argue, however, that Colorado is immune to this issue. Most of the Denver area is dry, rocky, and sparsely vegetated. Very little agriculture could occur there even if given the chance, and would likely require heavy use of irrigation and fertilizers. Without this argument against suburban development, builders and home buyers likely feel no pressure to limit out-of-town settlement, and few outsiders would oppose it. With that, one barrier is removed to the unfettered growth of Parker.

Another unique phenomenon is that the lot size of the average Parker house is substantially larger than those in other parts of the nation. There are a few possible reasons why this is. One possible explanation is this is simply a matter of wealth demanding excess. The high-paying jobs of Denver allow residents to splurge and build large houses on even larger plots of land. The acreage of land they own functions just as square footage of their house usually does - as a measure of material wealth and prosperity. A more romantic argument is that residents of the West recall the days of the Homestead Act and wish to recreate that feeling today. Building a house on their very own plot of land in one of the most picturesque locations in America would certainly invoke nostalgic feelings from its owner of simpler times when the land you owned was your life and livelihood. Everyone enjoys taking pride in their home, just as the G.I.'s did when they returned home to their humble tract houses. Fifty years later that basic American principle has not changed, but the reasons why we feel pride have naturally shifted over the course of time. Either way, the expansion of developments from compact units to

sprawling developments has only been encouraged in the Denver area.

The suburban development of Parker has been such a unique process that it has spawned its own suburban planning strategy. In 2001, Parker adopted an eight-page town ordinance known as the "Anti-Monotony Residential Design Ordinance". Examples of its regulations are "Identical or similar buildings may not be repeated more frequently than every sixth house along the same side of any street in a residential subdivision" and "The front building setback of one (1) lot shall be varied by a minimum of two (2) feet from the front building setback of any house within two (2) lots on either side of the subject lot". All of its rules are as specifically delineated as these, and all are strictly enforced.[6] This is possibly the strongest example of how Parker is a suburb similar to and yet unlike any other suburb in the US. The town attempts to learn from the unpopular subdivisions of the 50s and 60s by creating rules that prevent superficially similar houses from being too close together, as well as regulating everything from the size of trees to be planted in front yards to the minimum width of the trim on the windows.[7] In a way, though, this regulation may in the end only worsen the monotony of neighborhoods. It has become quite common outside Parker for developers to purchase massive tracts of land and fill them with preapproved houses chosen from a catalog by the home buyers. These new houses may fit all of the requirements of the ordinance, but all were designed by the same company and resemble each other strongly in style, if not in shape, size, and color. The ordinance is still an attractive option for growing cities, though, and others across the nation have already begun considering adopting their own version.[8]

The housing tract boom of 50 years ago and the explosive growth of Parker do resemble

each other in many ways. Both signaled a shift of focus from encouraging industry to increase production, with the railroad and the attraction of high-paying jobs to the city respectively, to encouraging buyers to increase their consumption by moving from their big city apartment to a brand new house in the suburbs. Parker's growth has diverged from this precedent, however, with its extensive land use, emphasis on the affluent office worker as opposed to the baby-boomer family, and modernized residential planning schemes. Whether this trend will continue or spread to other cities in the nation is uncertain, but it without a doubt has had a profound effect on the greater Denver and its aesthetics. As time goes on, we will likely find out whether these new developments have had negative consequences for the area's environmental health as well.

Notes

1. For an overhead view of the suburbs of Parker, visit http://maps.google.com, enter "Singing Hills Road, Parker, Colorado", and choose satellite mode. For a comparison to more traditional suburban housing developments, enter in "Aurora, Colorado".

2. Town of Parker, Colorado. "Parker History". Online. http://www.parkeronline.org/community_information/parker_history.aspx. Accessed 11/25/05.

3. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000. "Estimated Daytime Population and Employment-Residence Ratios". Online. http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/daytime/daytimepop.html. Accessed 10/22/05.

4. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000. "Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates". Online. http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/saipe/county.html. Accessed 11/25/05.

5. Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 123-124.

6. City of Greenwood, Indiana. "Greenwood Joint Training Session; May 24, 2004; Residential Design Standards -- Parker, Colorado". Online. http://www.cityofgreenwood.com/departments/planning/pdf_files/Agendas/2004%20Agendas/TS%2005-24-04%20hand%20out%20on%20Parker,%20Colorado.pdf. Accessed 11/27/05.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 2.