

1888 Real Estate Map, Englewood

Denver Sunrise, circa 1950

Maroon Bells, Aspen

# Colorado Urbanizing

Introduction and Colorado's Urban History BY MICHAEL TAVEL

Frameworks for Sustainable Urbanism BY KATHLEEN MCCORMICK AND TODD WENSKOSKI

Municipal Green Programs BY KATHLEEN MCCORMICK



City Park, Denver

COLORADO—that rectangle of a rural Western state that is half mountains and half plains—has become a key locus of

**American urbanization.** The southern

part of the American West—Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico—is the most rapidly urbanizing and growing part of the United States. Eighty percent of the region's population, and almost all its growth, is *urban*. This rapid urban growth is projected to continue, with population in the region's major metropolitan areas doubling by 2040. The hinterlands of the

American West, by stark contrast, are decidedly depopulated and are not growing. This distinguishes the region's urbanization from other parts of the country.

Smart planning and smart growth are imperative but must be tailored to the West's uniqueness. From the regional to the block scale, Colorado provides a full range of case studies that show how urbanism can provide great places for people while preserving resources such as the land, water, and environmental systems we value. Colorado provides important examples of regional governance, planning for a sustainable economy and infrastructure, progressive regulations to shape growth, and high-quality urban placemaking, all of which are discussed in this book. Colorado's efforts at smart growth are an important example for the U.S. as the West vaults into a future of greater urbanization.

## Colorado's Urban History

Colorado has a rich history of habitation that includes the Mesa Verde and Chaco Anasazi, the Pueblo Indians, and the Plains Indians. Before the 1820s, Colorado was seen as part of “the Great American Desert”—a buffer that separated the agrarian and urbanizing American colonies from Spanish-controlled Mexico and its presence in Santa Fe. The state’s modern urban development patterns are best traced to 1859 and the Gold Rush in the hills around Central City about 25 miles west of what is now Denver. Prospectors and job seekers roared in from the East, and in 1861, the Colorado Territory was organized, officially becoming part of the U.S. With statehood in 1876, the lands were named Colorado, and became an undisputed part of the expanding U.S.

Over the past 150 years, Colorado’s economic base has evolved from harnessing natural resources via mining, ranching, and agriculture, though many Coloradans still earn their living and take great pride in these ventures. The urbanization of Colorado has been episodic and tied to fluctuations in the value of its natural

resources. These cycles are becoming tempered as the economy diversifies and transforms into producing human resources in a service and knowledge-based economy.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Colorado experienced rapid urbanization, but in boom and bust cycles. Mining was the economic engine. The erratic value of gold, silver, and coal corresponded with new discoveries of ores, and led to dramatic boom-and-bust cycles in mountain towns. Some mining camps became instant towns. Towns servicing multiple mines, such as Leadville, became booming metropolises that would later contract to a fraction of their peak size. In the Rocky Mountains’ foothills, Durango, Colorado Springs, Golden, and Boulder were founded and prospered as service towns for miners. Pueblo would later turn minerals into steel. Denver, as the seat of government and a center for distribution and services, grew the largest though it provided little industrial support.

### Evolution of the Economy and Growth

The first transcontinental railroad built by Union Pacific in 1868 completely bypassed Colorado and instead went through southern



Leadville, circa 1900



Pearl Street, Boulder, circa 1900

Wyoming where mountain gaps were more passable. Denver, “the Queen City of the Plains,” responded by founding a steel industry and constructing the Denver Pacific Railroad. By 1870, fueled by taxes and volunteers, the railroad had connected to Cheyenne and begun a transportation network with Denver as the node. Railroads connected throughout the state by 1890, taking homesteaders to outlying areas while connecting mines via rail to smelters and to the rest of the country. As the last of the Ute and Plains Indians were killed or moved out of Colorado in the 1880s, the ranchers, shepherds, and homesteaders moved in. An open range existed on the high plains for a generation, soon to be closed.

Agriculture in the river valleys of the South Platte, the Arkansas, the Rio Grande, and, on the Western Slope, the Gunnison and Colorado, began to take hold. But agriculture required irrigation, and irrigation required regional cooperation. Where railroads crossed river valleys, colony towns were created in the 1870s and 1880s. These usually involved Easterners forming a cooperative group, buying land in bulk, planning irrigation at a regional scale,

and platting farmsteads and urban lots. Greeley, Fort Collins, Longmont, and, on the Western Slope, Delta, fit this pattern. Later, on the high plains and close to railroads, dry farming techniques were tried and worked somewhat in wet years but not at all during dry years. The painful learning curve on these lands would extend for generations.

From 1890 to 1920, commercial agriculture, water diversion, and high plains dry farming expanded while mining went into decline. Colorado’s population grew, state highways were built, and tourism via rail and auto began to prosper. National parks and forests were established. Colorado’s most urbanized region became the Front Range, where the Great Plains meet the Rockies. With 250,000 residents in 1920, Denver was the largest city; other Front Range cities—Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Boulder, Longmont, Fort Collins, and Greeley—remained roughly a tenth its size.

The Colorado growth rate slowed dramatically during the 1920s and 1930s. Crop prices and coal prices had been in decline for years long before the Great Depression. The drought of the Dust Bowl then caused havoc, overtaking vast



WAGON 16490 LBS OF POTATOES HAULED IN 3 MILES ON STUBBACHER WAGON.  
 WERN. COL. PRODUCE CO. GREELEY. BY H. FRENCHCORN  
 Union Bank  
 Corner 8<sup>th</sup> Ave + 8<sup>th</sup> St



1847 IRRIGATING COLORADO POTATOES  
 PHOTO BY GEORGE BROWN

Colorado's by-rights water feeds the agriculture of its valleys, waters the lawns of its suburbs, and eventually, when scarce, marks the limits of its sprawl.

### Innovations in Colorado Urbanism

**Denver's two urban grids:** The diagonal grid was platted in 1858 in the town of Auraria, with streets running parallel and perpendicular to the south banks of Cherry Creek at its confluence with the South Platte River. A similar diagonal grid was platted across Cherry Creek in Denver City with streets running parallel and perpendicular to the South Platte. The second east-west/north-south grid was laid out east of the first grid in 1864.

**General William Palmer's plan for Colorado Springs:** Palmer founded Colorado Springs in 1871, and planned the city as a high-quality resort community.

**Denver Mayor Robert W. Speer's plans for parks and parkways:** Speer's City Beautiful movement vision for Denver was realized by the city's first landscape architect, Reinhard Schuetze, who enlisted the renowned landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Saco Reinke DeBoeur beginning in the early 1900s.

**Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.'s master plan for Boulder:** In the early 1900s, Olmsted created the city's first master plan, which established a vision for parks, streetscapes, greenways, and mountain open space.

**Denver Mayor Federico Peña's Imagine a Great City program:** Peña's campaign slogan advocating urban reinvestment was realized during and just after his two terms in office (1983 to 1991) with a new airport, a major league baseball team, a grand new central library, a convention center, and restoration of Speer-era parks, parkways, and public buildings.

**Downtown Aspen's plans for infill, affordable housing, and public transit:** The 2000 Aspen Area Community Plan encouraged private-sector affordable housing, commercial revitalization, economic sustainability, and mixed-use development. The city has areawide ride-share, park-n-ride, public transit, employer-based transit passes, and parking incentive programs.

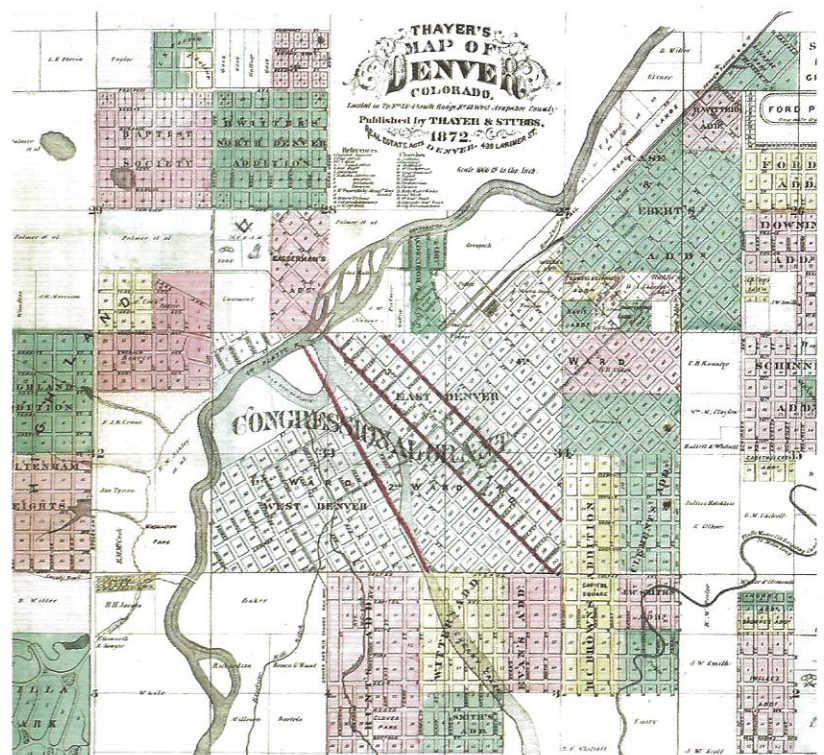
—Kathleen McCormick

high plains dry farming regions in the northeastern and southeastern parts of the state.

Depression-era public works projects began to bring jobs to Colorado. But it was World War II that led to a massive federal investment in Colorado that would spur ongoing population growth on the Front Range from the 1950s through the 1970s. The state's population increased by 200,000 in the 1940s as the war effort sent military bases and arms plants to Colorado while demanding production from its farms. Some 78 percent of this growth was in the Denver area, while mining towns continued to decline. The state's growth accelerated, with 430,000 new residents in the 1950s, and 450,000 in the 1960s.

### The Interstate Highway System and the Birth of Sprawl

The interstate highway system, which arrived in Colorado in the late 1950s, began to lead and shape Colorado's urbanization over the next 50 years. Interstate 25 (I-25) linked the Front Range cities from north to south by the mid-1960s and triggered suburban employment centers like the Denver Tech Center.



Thayer's Map of Denver, 1872

By the early 1970s, Denver became connected to the Western Slope through Interstate 70 (I-70) and the Eisenhower Tunnel. This link opened up Central Colorado to easy national access, spurring the development of numerous ski resorts and causing places like Vail to grow from rural valleys into sprawling resort towns. Colorado's economy in the 1960s and 1970s was led by federal employment and the oil and gas industry, headquartered in Denver. Connected via the interstates, this economy was complemented by the ski and tourism industry, coal extraction, and agriculture.

Planning the interstates encouraged Denver, in 1955, to join the Inter-County Regional Planning Commission, which also included Adams, Arapahoe, and Jefferson counties. Denver area regional cooperation in planning had started in 1918 as Denver Water became the provider for the entire area. An Upper Platte Planning Commission was founded in 1939. But it was not until the late 1950s that the Denver region started collectively planning for diverse infrastructure. The commission could not impose taxes, issue bonds, or legislate, but in 1961, it developed the first Metro Growth

Plan, and soon began transportation planning. Renamed the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) in 1968, it became the region's federally recognized metropolitan planning agency, overseeing water and transportation planning and funding.

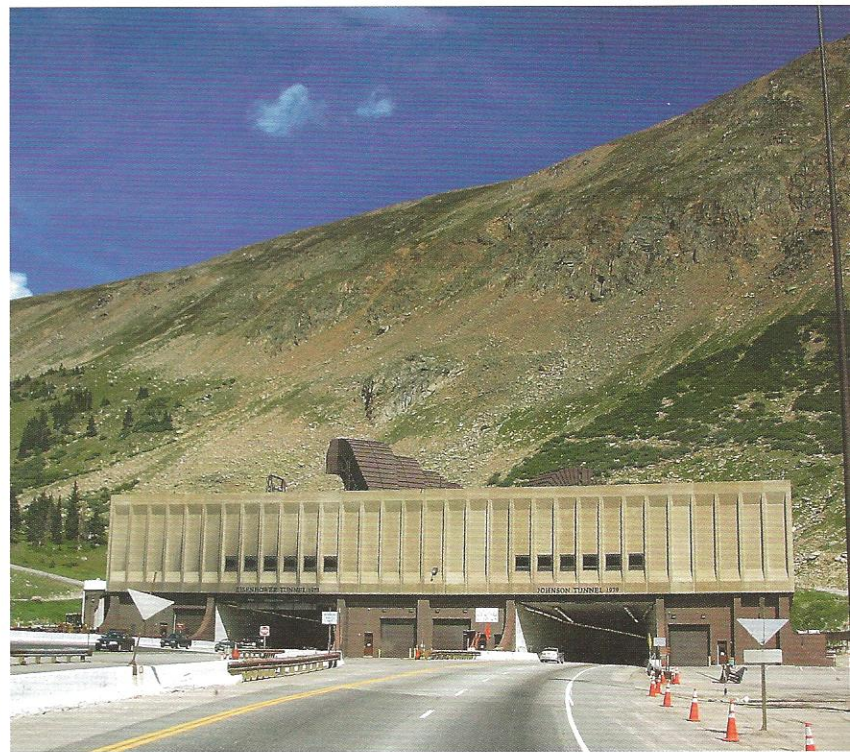
### A Regional Vision

In the 1970s, in the face of unprecedented growth in the form of suburban sprawl, a pattern of failed efforts at regional planning began. In 1970, a state land-use commission drafted the Colorado Land Use Act in preparation for the proposed 1976 Winter Olympics. But the state legislature repeatedly obstructed efforts at regional planning by not funding them. The voters, opposed to transformative development and wanting to preserve Colorado's rural character, passed a referendum against the Olympics in 1972. In the late 1970s, the powers of the State Land Use Commission were increased, and Governor Dick Lamm proposed a Front Range planning entity, but the legislature continued in various ways to block effective regional planning.

Growth slowed dramatically in Colorado in the 1980s as fossil fuel prices dropped and



Bird's Eye View of the Mountains and Plains, circa 1880



I-70 Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel

the shale oil industry halted its grand plans for the Western Slope. Suburban sprawl, however, continued to consume the landscape. Denver suburbs like Aurora and Highlands Ranch grew dramatically. Annexation wars proliferated, while central cities experienced an ongoing exodus. But a regional vision began to be advanced by people like Denver's mayor, Federico Peña, who made plans for a new airport, redevelopment of Denver's Central Platte Valley, and a regional science and cultural facilities district. The Greater

Denver Corporation was founded to advocate for facilities that have since been built: the Colorado Convention Center, Coors Field (outfitted with the Colorado Rockies Major League Baseball team), and Denver International Airport.

### The New Economy and Smart Growth

These investments helped to fuel the rapid urban and suburban growth in Colorado in the 1990s, when the state population increased by over 30 percent to 4.3 million. The "new economy" had come to Colorado with high-tech and knowledge-based jobs. Drawn by the region's natural beauty and the metropolitan area's job opportunities and relaxed and outdoors-oriented lifestyle, people from the East and West coasts emigrated to redeveloping urban locations, boosting city-center populations and spurring a generation of infill. The old Stapleton International Airport was re-envisioned as the new urban neighborhoods of Stapleton. Dead shopping malls and former military sites began to undergo transformations into new urban communities as well.

Governor Roy Romer in 1995 sponsored the Smart Growth Initiative. The goal was to change

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#### KEY URBANIST

### Thomas A. Clark, Ph.D.

Tom Clark is the Chair of the Department of Planning and Design in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado Denver (UCD), where he has been a faculty member since 1982. In Colorado, he advises policy makers and testifies often before the state legislature. He served on the Denver Regional Council of Government's Vision 20/20 Taskforce and Transportation Policy Committee.

Clark directs the UCD Center for Sustainable Urbanism, which is engaged in collaborative research about Colorado and the West's most pressing challenges. "The fastest growing American cities in the next generation will be those of the Intermountain West," says Clark. "We live life here in fast-forward, making us the nation's prime testing ground for a new and better urbanism and fit for the challenges of the emerging century."



Colorado Convention Center, Denver Hiking Gore Range

the subject from pro-growth versus no-growth to promoting regional cooperation and public discourse on how to handle growth. Legislation for smart growth, regional planning, and alternative transit put before Colorado voters in the 1990s usually failed. In 2004, however, Denver metropolitan area voters passed a measure to support FasTracks, a commuter-rail and bus network that would link the entire region. In mountain resort communities, where housing affordable to the middle and working class had become scarce, new urbanism also provided the model for new development.

Smart growth has emerged gradually over the past 50 years as Colorado's culture has changed in step with steady urban growth. The interstates have shaped this growth in patterns: Away from the influence of freeways, population is sparse. But near them, population is much greater, and growing rapidly. Though regional governance in Colorado has not taken hold, smart growth has come to Colorado from a mix of top-down planning and cooperation, matched with bottom-up, market-driven efforts to develop high-quality urban infill linked to transit.

### Frameworks for Sustainable Urbanism

In Colorado, sustainability starts with land use and protecting open space and natural resources. More than a third of the state's land area is publicly owned by the federal, state, and local governments, and much of the privately held land is used as habitat for wildlife and as riparian corridors. Sustainability in Colorado has focused on protecting undeveloped

land and energy in a way that allows for a more diverse economic structure and a more resilient and sustainable

to the built environment. Governor's planning releases. The national standards and building principles expressed in the U.S. Green Building Council's (USGBC) Green Building Initiative (see page 30)

Sustainability efforts, similar to the LEED program, are starting to take root in the region. In the high-altitude, mountain, and valley, new urban development also has



DIA's Elrey Jeppesen Terminal



Coors Field, Denver