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Brian Page & Eric Ross

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Legacies of a Contested Campus: Urban Renewal, Community Resistance, and the Origins of Gentrification in Denver

Brian Page and Eric Ross

Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Colorado Denver, Campus Box 172, Denver, CO, USA

ABSTRACT

The postwar urban renewal experience varied among US cities according to the result of local social contests pitting those imposing their power to transform urban space against those resisting it. In this paper, we examine the role of one such contest in shaping urban renewal outcomes in Denver, using the case of the late 1960s Auraria project. The project sought to remove a poor, Hispanic neighborhood in order to build a new downtown college campus, generating community opposition from the inner city neighborhood residents, leaders of the city’s Chicano Movement, and historic preservation activists. We demonstrate how resistance actively shaped the ultimate form and character of the project, and how the legacies of this urban renewal contest extended—in unforeseen ways—beyond the immediate struggles of the time. We argue that these legacies provide the essential context for understanding planning practice, redevelopment strategies, and gentrification dynamics in the city today.

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, a protest was staged along the major roadways that ring the Auraria Higher Education Center in Denver. Located in the heart of downtown, Auraria is Colorado’s largest college campus by population. It serves 48,000 students and houses 3 separate institutions: the University of Colorado Denver (CU Denver), Metropolitan State University of Denver (Metro State), and the Community of College of Denver (CCD). As commuters drove to work or school that morning, they encountered the unusual sight of hundreds of placards planted in the grass medians, stuck to fence posts and light standards, or being held aloft by demonstrators. These signs—emblazoned in the black and gold of CU—expressed outrage over a recent CU Denver decision to locate an international student housing complex in the adjoining La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhood, a move that was seen to signal the university’s intent to colonize a large piece of neighborhood land and thereby eliminate much needed affordable housing. The protest was organized and carried out by an organization called the Displaced
Aurarians, along with the student group Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan (MEChA) de Auraria.

That afternoon, we asked students in two undergraduate classes what they thought about the protests. Did they know what the issues were? Did they understand the motivations of the protestors? Did they agree or disagree with the message or the tactics? The response was a collective shrugging of the shoulders, backed up by nearly complete lack of knowledge of campus history. Not one student in these classes knew that 40 years earlier, the Auraria campus had been created through a process of urban renewal that displaced an entire neighborhood of people against their will. They were not aware that the old Auraria neighborhood on Denver’s Westside had been largely Hispanic or that it was a center of Chicano activism in the 1960s. None, therefore, could appreciate the degree to which La Alma/Lincoln Park residents felt threatened by the university’s incursion into their neighborhood; none could share in the demonstrators’ powerful sense of déjà vu.

This loss of social memory is somewhat surprising given the fact that the Auraria campus is filled with prominent remnants of the old neighborhood. The former Tivoli brewery—the campus’ most identifiable landmark—is now the student union. Original turn-of-the-century houses along 9th Street serve as department and faculty offices. The former St. Cajetan’s church is a lecture hall, while St. Elizabeth’s church still houses a central Denver Catholic parish. But despite these clues littered across the landscape, students—and other members of the campus community—don’t know much about how their campus was formed or why it looks the way it does. Rather, the Auraria landscape is simply taken for granted, acting as a placid backdrop to daily activity that remains unaffected even by the ripple of an occasional protest.

What this state of affairs indicates, ironically, is that the existing university landscape fails to teach us anything meaningful about its own history. It does little to help us remember the social process that eradicated the original district and gave birth to the campus. Instead, through either intent or indifference, it keeps this process hidden from view. In this sense, it is like so many other ordinary urban landscapes: though formed through social contest, the end result “fully mystifies that contentiousness, creating instead a smooth surface, a mute representation, a clear view that is little clouded by considerations of inequality, power, coercion, or resistance” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 113).¹

In this paper, we probe beneath that benign veneer to uncover and examine the historical dynamics that gave rise to this unusual college campus in the middle of the city. The focus of our inquiry is the deeply contested process of urban redevelopment that occurred in downtown Denver in the postwar years. On one side of the process was the federally sponsored urban renewal program implemented by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) and backed by downtown’s political and business elites. On the other side were community members that stood in the path of, or disagreed with, DURA’s plans. Such conflict was particularly evident in the case of the Auraria urban renewal project, which was developed by DURA in concert with state education officials in the mid-1960s. The intent of the project was to provide a site for a new college campus that could meet the rapidly increasing demand for higher education in metropolitan Denver. The downtown Auraria neighborhood was selected as the preferred location for the campus, and in 1968, it was brought under the jurisdiction of DURA and scheduled for removal. Fierce objections to this plan emerged from a number of
different groups in the community, including the area’s residents and business owners, activists within the city’s Chicano Movement, and advocates for historic preservation—leading to a public debate about the costs and benefits of urban renewal and an intense political struggle over the fate of the neighborhood.

Our focus on social contest is informed by an engagement with the literature on postwar urban renewal in the United States (Fogelson, 2001; Hirsch, 1983; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Sugrue, 1996; Teaford, 1990). Across the country, businesses, jobs, and people relocated from the city to new suburban areas, leaving behind deteriorating built environments and increasingly impoverished populations. Faced with this circumstance, city leaders attempted to counteract metropolitan decentralization and protect the core city’s position as a center of office employment, retail trade, and cultural facilities. Wielding policy tools enabled by the US Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954, these downtown interests used federal funds and the accompanying powers of eminent domain to condemn “blighted” areas of the city and tear down the old buildings to make way for new private housing and commercial redevelopment projects, as well as parks, convention centers, and other public sector improvements. Their goals were to revitalize downtown areas, boost city tax revenue, attract the white middle class back from the suburbs, and restore civic pride. One result was the demolition of old industrial districts, aging commercial areas, and working class neighborhoods leading to the loss of historic urban landscapes. Another was the widespread displacement of low-income and minority communities, who often suffered rough treatment at the hand of local renewal agencies and were routinely rehoused in ways that reinforced, rather than improved, entrenched patterns of racial segregation.

While affirming these broad assessments, new research demonstrates that urban renewal was not a juggernaut that played out the same way in every city. There was no single urban renewal policy, no common model of redevelopment, and no uniform experience that reverberated down through the urban hierarchy; rather, there was “abundant variation in the postwar urban renewal agenda, its application, and its outcomes” (Wakeman, 2014, p. 402). One source of this variation has long been established: the intent of federal legislation was to help cities acquire and clear blighted areas for redevelopment, but the legislation left all of the key decisions about which areas to clear and what to do with the land afterward to local redevelopment authorities, whose motivations, objectives, and capacities—deeply rooted in local political and economic circumstances—varied widely across the country (Friedman, 1968; Kaplan, 1963). A second source of variation involves critical differences in the aims, scope, and abilities of the oppositional forces arrayed against local redevelopment authorities. The existence of local community resistance has been noted in the literature for many years, but it is only recently that scholars have begun to pick up the threads of the pioneering work of Hartman (1974, 1984) and Mollenkopf (1983) by situating those opposed to urban renewal as central actors in the process of urban transformation rather than as mere victims pushed aside by a hostile group of bureaucrats, politicians, and private business interests (Highsmith, 2009; Holliman, 2009; Klemek, 2011; Self, 2003; Zipp, 2010). As a result, we now have a much better appreciation for how a wide range of urban renewal outcomes emerged as products of place-based political struggle and compromise between those imposing power and those resisting it.
In what follows, we document this process of struggle and compromise as it transpired surrounding the Auraria project by examining (a) the evolution of urban renewal planning in Denver, (b) the formation of opposition to the Auraria plan, and (c) the course of the social contest that ensued. Building upon the local activism and resistance literature, we show how resistance actively shaped the ultimate form and character of the project, and how the legacies of this urban renewal contest extended—in unforeseen ways—beyond the immediate struggles of the time.

The urban renewal era, according to one recent observation, was a distinct moment in American urban history, replete with triumphs and disasters. For better or worse, this moment brought irrevocable changes in the texture of urban life in the United States. Although we might, in this day and age, renounce the big intentions of urban renewal, and reject its sweeping, top-down interventions on the landscape of American cities, we cannot dismiss the impact of its implementation (Avila & Rose, 2009, p. 344).

We concur. The book should not be closed on this period of our urban past because there is much to be learned by tracing its effects forward in time. In Denver, the legacies of the contest over Auraria urban renewal ramify into the present to shape both physical form and social relationships in the city, providing essential insight into not only the campus, but also the wider process of downtown transformation that churns around it.

**The Auraria urban renewal project**

In the postwar decades, the Denver metropolitan area emerged as a “sunbelt city” on the basis of rapid growth associated with energy development, federal government activities, and various technology sectors (Leonard & Noel, 1990). This boom in employment and population occurred mostly in outlying areas such as the Denver Tech Center to the south of downtown and the Federal Center to the west. New suburban areas flourished, but downtown Denver declined.

Plans to revitalize the city core emerged in the mid-1950s, led by Downtown Denver Inc. (DDI), a business community advocacy group (Denver Planning Office, 1957; Downtown Denver Inc., 1955). DURA was established in 1958. As in other US cities, the early years of federally sponsored urban renewal in Denver involved contention between those advocating downtown redevelopment and those who sought to improve impoverished neighborhoods through the rehabilitation or construction of low-income housing (Fogelson, 2001; Holliman, 2009). But, from the beginning, the DURA Board of Commissioners was dominated by representatives of downtown-based financial, commercial, and real-estate interests who set the agency’s program priorities (Judd, 1983). DURA’s first large-scale effort was the Skyline project, beginning in 1964. Skyline targeted 26 blocks in the heart of downtown for complete removal. The area bordered the 17th Avenue financial district to the south and east, and the Auraria district across Cherry Creek to the west (Figure 1). The intent of the project was to transform the dilapidated district into an attractive area of modern apartments, office buildings, and retail stores while simultaneously eliminating Denver’s notorious skid row (DURA, 1965). Though it faced stiff public opposition, voters ultimately approved the Skyline project.
Project in 1967. Land acquisition commenced immediately and demolition of the area began in 1969, leaving a huge swath of empty land at Denver’s core—a nearly blank canvas upon which an entirely new urban landscape slowly took shape over the next two decades (McEncroe, 1992).

The Auraria project followed close on the heels of Skyline. Since the mid-1950s, the state legislature had been grappling with the problem of insufficient higher education capacity in Colorado, particularly in the fast-growing Denver metropolitan area. Planning to expand higher education ensued. Metropolitan State College of Denver was created in 1963 and officially opened in rented space downtown in 1965. In response, CU began the process of converting its downtown Denver Extension Center into an independent institution. Both grew rapidly and it became clear that existing facilities were not adequate (Abbott, 1999).

The same 1963 plan that first envisioned the Skyline urban renewal area also contained preliminary plans for a downtown college campus (Downtown Denver Master Plan Committee, 1963). Soon thereafter, a 1965 Denver Planning Office report concluded that the Auraria neighborhood was the “likely ultimate location” for a downtown campus (Denver Planning Office, 1965). The following year, the Denver Planning Office formally evaluated nine possible sites in the city for a new Metro State campus, concluding that the Auraria site was best (Denver Planning Office, 1966). Also in 1966, a study led by DURA in the aftermath of the devastating 1965 flood produced

Figure 1. Downtown Denver: The Skyline and Auraria urban renewal areas. Base 1955 Aerial Imagery © 2009 Colorado Aerial Photo Service. Used with permission.
detailed renderings of post-flood Platte River/downtown redevelopment featuring a new college campus occupying the Auraria neighborhood site (City and County of Denver, 1966). In 1967, the Trustees of the State Colleges of Colorado conducted their own site selection study for a Metro State campus with funding from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE). The study examined 17 locations in Denver and surrounding suburbs. The Trustees formally recommended the Auraria site in February 1968; the CCHE approved the site in March (Abbott, 1999) (Figure 2). DURA was consulted on this matter and concluded that “based on existing conditions the Auraria area would be eligible for urban renewal action involving total clearance and redevelopment” (DURA 1967, p. 2). In early 1968, DURA designated a 38-block portion of the Auraria district as an urban renewal area, established the eligibility of the site for urban renewal funds, and applied for federal support for land acquisition and clearance (McEncroe, 1992).

Campus-site selection revealed fractures within the group of state actors involved in the process. Some Denver City Council members preferred sites in their own districts and lobbied hard for these alternatives. The same was true for many metro-area state legislators, who pushed for less expensive sites in their districts, far removed from the city center. Another group of legislators opposed the Auraria site because of its higher acquisition costs for the State of Colorado relative to some other sites and even threatened to withhold funds if Auraria was chosen. There was also considerable
disagreement about the recommendation of Auraria within CCHE leadership, a rift which, in turn, reflected simmering competition, animosity and mistrust between Metro State and CU. The University had fought against the creation of Metro State in 1963 and now sought to use its considerable influence at CCHE and the state legislature to thwart the new college by opposing the Auraria site, or for that matter, any permanent state-funded home for Metro State downtown that would threaten enrollment at the Denver Center (Abbott, 1999; Bowen, 2015).

Against these interests, the Auraria site had strong support from the majority of City Council, the Mayor’s Office, the Denver Planning Office, DURA, and the downtown Denver business community. In a critical step late in 1968, the CCHE, in consultation with DURA, was able to overcome CU opposition by developing a new shared campus concept that combined the Denver Center, Metro State, and the newly created Community College of Denver on the Auraria site (Abbott, 1999). Having assumed for many years that the new campus would be reserved for their use exclusively, the Metro State community found the new plan to be “disappointing and quite a letdown” (Bowen, 2015, p. 182). However, given ongoing resistance to the college’s growth and development in the state legislature, Metro State leaders reluctantly signed on to the shared campus plan, believing it to represent their best option to secure state funding and acquire permanent facilities.

For downtown interests, the Auraria site represented a victory against urban decentralization and the acquisition of a significant new employment base. For DURA specifically, it provided the opportunity to undertake another high visibility, large-scale urban renewal effort in the heart of downtown, one that sat directly adjacent to its signature Skyline project: “This site is of strategic importance as a flanking element to the Skyline Urban Renewal Project, and presents an opportunity to extend economic and environmental upgrades of that project” (Denver Planning Office, 1966, p. 39). In November 1968, a feasibility study conducted for CCHE produced the first design concept for the mega-campus. The design was based on the assumption that the district’s existing built environment (streets, blocks, buildings) would be completely removed and replaced by a comprehensive new campus layout (Kelsey, 1968; Figure 3).

Auraria’s vulnerability as a target for those promoting downtown redevelopment was long in the making. In the 1940s, the area was already being described as “blighted” in studies conducted for the Denver Housing Authority. A 1941 report used the term blight to describe both the physical condition of Auraria’s housing stock (84% was classified as substandard) and the social characteristics of the neighborhood (high levels of poverty, juvenile delinquency, and infant mortality). Its authors portrayed blight as a danger to the public welfare, concluding that “a program should be worked out to the end that rehabilitation of blighted areas may be accomplished and the spread of blight to other sections of the city may be prevented” (Conrad & Carmichael, 1941, p. 43). The 1949 report added a racial component to this definition of blight, noting that 64% of the city’s Spanish American population lived in substandard housing (i.e. blighted areas) as compared to just 21% of Whites (University of Denver, 1949). Thus, in Denver, even before the 1949 Housing Act and the advent of the federal urban redevelopment program, the term blight as applied to Auraria signified a minority-filled urban space that was poor and deteriorating, yet capable of overrunning the rest of the city if left unchecked.
A 1954 city report extended this rhetorical strategy. It documented that while blighted areas near downtown (including Auraria) contained just 10% of Denver’s population, they were the source of 50% of crime, 70% of fire calls, 80% of juvenile delinquency, 80% of narcotic cases, 50% of Denver General Hospital cases, 50% of families receiving welfare assistance, 50% of Visiting Nurse Service calls, and 20% of Community Chest expenditures. As with the 1940s housing studies, the term blight was used to connote physical dereliction and poverty in a minority area, but in this report, blight also came to represent the city’s primary source of crime, vice, and disease, as well as a massive drain on the city’s budget. The report issued dire warnings about how the spread of extreme blight represented a “cancerous” threat to the health of the city and recommended that it be addressed through “surgery” rather than rehabilitation (City and County of Denver, 1954).7

In this way, the label “blight”—packed with a potent combination of stigma and fear—became firmly affixed to Auraria; so much so that by the time of the campus-site selection process in the mid-1960s, the area was widely viewed as socially and economically irredeemable. In his executive summary of the 1966 campus location study, the Denver Planning Board Chairman wrote that the Auraria site would cost about half as much as any other urban sites under consideration “due largely to the fact that the existing development in the area is marginal in character and in need of renewal to overcome present economic stagnation” (Denver Planning Office, 1966, p. 5).
In fact, Auraria was old and deteriorating. It was originally established as a gold-seeking settlement on the banks of Cherry Creek near the confluence with the South Platte River in 1858 (see Figure 1). Auraria was the first permanent settlement in the region, though the fledgling town was soon absorbed into the adjacent city of Denver (Leonard & Noel, 1990). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Auraria district became one of the city’s principal industrial areas, sandwiched between the central business district to the east and the main railroad corridor in the Platte Valley to the west. Auraria industries included iron and steel works, railroad repair shops, machine shops, flourmills, bakeries, and breweries. The compact district had extensive warehousing capacity, as well as commercial streets and residential neighborhoods (Etter, 1972; Page & Ross, 2015). It was an excellent example of what Kenneth Jackson calls the pre-streetcar “walking city”—a place where factories, warehouses, homes, stores, churches, schools, and shops sat in close quarters, and sometimes altogether on a single block (Jackson, 1985) (Figure 4).

In the 1930s, the district entered into a period of extended economic decline. By the 1960s, its commercial and industrial buildings were run down and outdated. So, too, its housing stock was shrinking. In 1940, there were 823 residential dwelling units in the area, but this number dropped to 684 in 1950, to 386 in 1960, and to 235 in 1970—a decline of 71% over 4 decades. There were several interrelated reasons for Auraria’s residential demise. One was zoning. As early as 1925, the entire district was zoned for industrial land use. The revised zoning ordinance of 1956 prohibited any new housing

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Figure 4. Auraria District in 1924. View is to the southwest. St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church is in the foreground on the right. Mountain States Telephone company photograph collection, Ph.00287, Scan #10027380, History Colorado.
construction from that point forward (McEncroe, 1992). Another reason had to do with the age and condition of the housing stock. Of the surviving residential structures in 1969, 95% had been built prior to 1910 (DURA, 1969a). The 1960 Census of Housing classified 75% of the area's dwelling units as “deteriorating” or “dilapidated,” while only 24% were considered “sound.” The poor condition of Auraria housing, in turn, owed much to the fact that most units were owned by landlords (80% in 1960) who put very little money back into their properties (US Census Bureau, 1960). Moreover, a large number of the buildings that had originally been constructed for occupancy by one family had been converted into multiple family residences in order to maximize rental income (DURA, 1969a). The postwar years thus witnessed a downward spiral wherein buildings progressively fell into disrepair through overuse and neglect, became no longer fit for occupation, and were condemned by the city.

Auraria was also one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. As Denver's first residential district in the 1860s and 1870s, its housing reflected the full social gradient of the new city, from the poorest citizens to the most affluent. But with the development of horse car lines and then electric streetcars in the late 19th century, wealthier residents moved to new areas located further from the urban center where they could escape the crowded, noisy, and increasingly polluted streets of the industrial district. As a result, by the early 1900s, Auraria was primarily a working class area, serving as the first point of arrival for a series of impoverished immigrant groups seeking employment in the surrounding area. In the 1920s, Auraria's neighborhoods became increasingly Hispanic as a result of migration from rural areas in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. This Hispanic population grew to become the majority group in Auraria in the 1950s (Gallegos, 1985).

There were 840 people living within the boundaries of the Auraria urban renewal area in 1970 (US Census Bureau, 1970). A 1969 survey conducted as part of DURA's initial relocation planning found that 89% of Auraria households were Hispanic. Nearly three quarters (73%) of the households rented their homes. A large majority (83%) of heads of households worked unskilled or semiskilled jobs. A similar number (82%) of heads of households had not completed a high school education. Average income for family households was $3,978 per year; by comparison, average family income for nonfarm households in the United States in 1970 was $13,270. Over half of the households in the neighborhood (51%) were eligible for public housing assistance (DURA, 1969b). Based upon our analysis of the survey results, we calculate that over half of Auraria households fell below the 1970 poverty line.

In 1968, DURA field inspectors went looking for blight in the Auraria neighborhood. They found all seven of the social and environmental conditions used to confirm its presence and therefore established eligibility for urban renewal funds: overcrowding, excessive dwelling unit density, conversions to incompatible uses, obsolete building types, detrimental land uses and conditions, inefficient streets, and inadequate public utilities or community facilities (DURA, 1969a). For contemporary observers of urban policy like Lawrence Friedman, this would have come as no surprise, for “Finding blight merely means defining a neighborhood that cannot effectively fight back, but which is either an eyesore or is well-located for some particular construction that important interests wish to build” (Friedman, 1968, p. 159). Indeed, in most respects, Auraria was the type of urban space that city planners across the country wanted to eradicate; its
The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) approved DURA’s 169-acre Auraria urban renewal plan in early 1969. HUD estimated DURA’s total cost of land acquisition, clearance, and relocation to be $24.2 million, of which the State of Colorado would be responsible for $5.6 million in purchase costs for the cleared land. The balance of $18.6 million was to be shared by the City of Denver ($6 million) and the federal government ($12.6 million). Denver planned to raise the $6 million through general obligation bonds, which required voter approval. The State of Colorado refused to commit any money to the campus until this local match was in place. The fate of the project thus depended on the outcome of the bond election.

Community resistance to the Auraria urban renewal plan

Auraria residents and the Chicano movement

The new campus received a great deal of publicity in 1968: CCHE announced the results of its site selection process in March, released a detailed description of the shared campus concept in September, and presented the Kelsey feasibility study and concept plan in November (Abbott, 1999). As campus planning unfolded, residents of the Auraria neighborhood were neither consulted nor kept informed about key decisions.
Some residents claimed that they had never even heard of the urban renewal plan until DURA began to circulate informational flyers about the relocation process in 1969 (Gallegos, 1985, 1991). This high degree of insularity perhaps explains why residents did not voice any concerted objection to the plan until September of 1969, 3 years after Auraria was first publicly identified as a likely campus site, and just 2 months before the bond issue election. When residents did band together to resist destruction of their neighborhood, they based their efforts at St. Cajetan’s Catholic Church, the center of Hispanic community life in Auraria. The anti-bond campaign was led by the assistant pastor of the church, Father Peter Garcia (Figure 6).

During the fall of 1969, Auraria residents brought the debate about the future of their neighborhood to the wider public just as the rising tide of the Chicano Movement swept through the city. The Movement, with its message of cultural pride and self-determination, found fertile ground in Denver, where the Hispanic community chafed against police violence and persistent discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Led by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales and the Crusade for Justice, an urban Chicano Movement emerged in Denver and gained national prominence, hosting the landmark 1969 Chicano Youth Liberation Conference. Hispanic youth activism spiked that year. In March, a West High School protest against racist comments by a teacher led to solidarity walkouts in schools across the city and violent confrontations between students and police. During the summer, Hispanic youths took over swimming pools in affluent white areas to protest funding cuts and pool closures in their inner city neighborhoods. In September, on Chicano Liberation Day, over 3,000 Hispanic college

Figure 6. Left: St. Cajetan’s Catholic Church late 1960s. The Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, C Photo Collection 56. Right: Waldo Benavidez and Father Peter Garcia delivering 2,000 petitions against the Auraria Urban renewal plan to Lt. Governor Mark Hogan, 28 October 1969. Getty Images. Used with permission.
and high school students walked out of school to join a massive demonstration downtown. One Black Beret and two Brown Beret youth organizations were founded that summer and fall, reflecting the increasingly militant character of the student protests (Esquibel, 2015; Gould, 2007; Vigil, 1999).

The fight to save Auraria further galvanized the Movement in Denver. A number of activist Chicano organizations joined together to support Auraria residents under the umbrella of the “Preserve the Westside Committee.” This group was chaired by community leader Waldo Benavidez and was based at Centro Cultural, just a few blocks from the urban renewal boundary. Westside groups opposed the displacement of Auraria residents but were also concerned that the campus would bring in a large student population, drive up the price of the housing that remained in the area, and dramatically alter the character of surrounding neighborhoods. Westside groups were joined in this effort by the Eastside-based Crusade for Justice, and by Chicano student organizations at both Metro State and the Denver Center (Abbott, 1999; Gould, 2007; Lee, 2012; Rivera, Lucero, & Castro, 1998).

Auraria residents and their advocates held public meetings, wrote to the newspapers, and sought out the help of local, state, and national politicians in their efforts to convince people to vote against the bond issue. In the campaign, they seized upon the Movement’s central message of Chicano self-determination, emphasizing that (1) it was wrong that people in the neighborhood had never been asked if they wanted to move, or consulted in any way on the urban renewal plan—a situation that reflected the longstanding political marginalization of Denver’s Hispanic community; (2) despite being labeled “blighted,” the residents valued their neighborhood, and in particular, St. Cajetan’s church—a vital and thriving focal point of Hispanic social life on the Westside and the oldest parish serving Spanish-speaking Catholics in the city; and (3) it was unjust to destroy this deeply held sense of community—displaced people might find a house somewhere else but could not recreate their community once scattered through the city (Denver Post, 1969d, 1969g; Rocky Mountain News, 1969a).

The campaign also tied the removal of the Auraria neighborhood directly to the progress of the Chicano Movement. For community leader Thomas Archuleta, Auraria urban renewal represented “a deliberate attempt to destroy the growing potential of Mexican-American unity” (Denver Post, 1969h, p. 37). According to student John Roybal, “Hispano people have been repressed and degraded for 250 years. The Auraria question is something around which we can get together as La Raza and beat” (Denver Post, 1969d, p. 19).

Supporters of the bond issue marshaled a well-organized campaign led by DURA’s executive director, the DDI, the Mayor’s office, and Metro State students. It was supported aggressively by the local media (Abbott, 1999; Bowen, 2015). The main message of this campaign was straightforward: Auraria offered the most central and accessible location for the campus and thereby provided the greatest benefit to the community overall. But other messages were equally important. To counter the argument that the neighborhood was worth saving, proponents constantly emphasized its blighted character. In answering questions about the issue, Mayor McNichols made it clear: “Auraria is a deteriorating area. That’s not an indictment against the people in the area; it’s a plain fact” (Rocky Mountain News, 1969b: 5). To counter the argument that displacement was unfair, proponents pointed out that of all the potential campus sites,
Auraria required the relocation of the fewest number of people and that residents would be assisted in finding equal or better housing (Denver Post, 1969b, 1969c). Perhaps, their most important message emphasized how the Hispanic community itself would benefit from the new campus. Speaking directly to Auraria residents, one member of the DDI stated that the campus “is an opportunity for a fine education complex for you, your children, and your children’s children.” (Denver Post, 1969d, p. 3). A Metro State student went further: “If blacks and Hispanos of Denver—and of the whole nation—are ever going to gain an equal footing in this society, they will need doctors, lawyers, businessmen and other professionals to enrich and serve their community (Denver Post, 1969e, p. 12).

The educational argument presented Hispanics with a challenge that ultimately split their community in two and undermined the anti-bond issue campaign. The main goal of the Chicano Movement was self-determination and it was widely believed that this goal could only be achieved through improved access to education. So, on the one hand, Auraria residents and other Westside activists could hold the Chicano banner high in their fight to determine their own future. But on the other hand, other groups could wave the same banner in support of the new campus. Throughout the campaign, Hispanics were told that the 4-year Metro State College would have an “open door” admission policy more typical of community colleges (Denver Post, 1969d). On this basis, prominent Hispanic leaders endorsed the campus plan. Paco Sanchez, the State Representative from Colorado House District 7 (which contained the Auraria neighborhood) and a DURA board member stated: “This is a tremendous opportunity for my people. I don’t want the college to go anywhere else. My young people will be within walking distance of the college, in the heart of the city, only blocks from their homes. I am for it. You cannot replace education.” State Senator Roger Cisneros also supported the plan: “the opposition’s protest is valid, but in the long-range plan of progress, there has to be some inconvenience” (Denver Post, 1969f, p. 33).

Efforts to save the neighborhood suffered further damage a week before the bond election when the Catholic Archbishop, James Casey, made public his support of the campus plan without consulting Father Garcia or the St. Cajetan’s parish community. Casey’s letter of support, written to the entire Denver Archdiocese, stated: “One of the special aims of the project is to provide these facilities for minority and disadvantaged groups who might not otherwise be able to afford the expenses of a college education” (Denver Post, 1969a, p. 28). The Archbishop encouraged all Catholics to vote to fund the new campus.

Undercut by their church and political leaders, the neighborhood effort fell short. On 4 November 1969, the bond issue passed 53% in favor to 47% against. The margin of defeat was under 4,000 votes; only 29% of Denver’s registered voters participated. Even the Auraria voter precinct was closely divided with 690 votes for the bond and 678 votes against (Denver Post, 1969i; Johnston, 1969b). Metro State students had a huge impact on the outcome. In the weeks leading up to the election, over 1,000 mostly white students canvassed 20,000 homes and collected 8,000 pledges to vote yes. At a post-election gathering, the Mayor and the head of DURA personally credited these students with having saved the bond issue (Bowen, 2015). The bond election locked in the city’s commitment to the project. Soon thereafter, the state approved funds for land purchase and campus development.11
**Historic preservation**

While the contest over the fate of Auraria played out loudly in public during the fall of 1969, another form of community resistance to the project was operating behind the scenes. This resistance came from citizens seeking to save neighborhood buildings from urban renewal.

Across the nation, historic preservation activities escalated in response to urban renewal, leading to the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966. In Denver, a local layer of protection for historic buildings was added through the 1967 City of Denver Preservation Ordinance. This ordinance was a direct reaction to the Skyline urban renewal project and its plan to raze 26 blocks containing some of the city’s oldest and finest examples of 19th century architecture (Noel, 1996). The ordinance created a policy framework supporting the creation of historic districts and the designation of individual landmarks to be overseen by the new Denver Landmark Preservation Commission (DLPC). The DLPC was empowered to recommend structures or districts for designation to the City Council for approval. Most importantly, alteration or demolition of officially designated buildings was subject to DLPC review.

The first significant preservation effort in Denver occurred within the boundaries of Skyline, but before the passage of the NHPA or the formation of the DLPC. In 1964, Larimer Square Inc., a private firm, was formed to purchase and renovate the 1400 block of Larimer Street. The firm’s President, Dana Crawford, touted Larimer Street’s frontier heritage and emphasized how preservation would enhance the city’s overall downtown redevelopment strategy. Crawford was able to gain some support from civic leaders but her Larimer Square concept faced stiff opposition from DURA, which planned to demolish the area. After extended and tense negotiations, DURA begrudgingly incorporated the preserved block into the Skyline urban renewal design, but ongoing conflicts led Crawford to ultimately align with the DLPC and seek historic district designation for Larimer Square, even though she was wary of the public commission’s involvement in her private enterprise (McEncroe, 1992; Morley, 2006).

The term “historic preservation” was deployed by different actors for different purposes. Crawford focused on using historic buildings as the basis of profitable real-estate development, while the preservation activists behind the creation of the DLPC were concerned more broadly with saving the city’s architectural heritage. This eclectic group of volunteers included Helen Arndt, the group’s leader who served as the commission’s first chairman and was the first woman to sit on the Denver Planning Board; attorney Stephen Hart, a long time leader of the State Historical Society who was appointed as the first state historic preservation officer (SHPO) in 1967; architects Alan Fisher, James Sudler, and Edward D. White; Colorado Poet Laureate Thomas Hornsby Ferril; and Phillip Milstein, founding member of the DDI and member of the DURA Board (McEncroe, 1992; Noel, 1996).

The DLPC, created the same year that Skyline was approved, had initially endorsed the project but conflicts beyond Larimer Square soon appeared. In November of 1967, the DLPC identified seven additional buildings within the Skyline boundaries that were deemed worthy of landmark status. Most of these, however, were located in areas slated by DURA for complete demolition, to be replaced by new superblock development. DURA officials vehemently opposed DLPC’s late involvement in Skyline, arguing that
individual building preservation would disrupt the overall redevelopment design concept and that the City Council would be contradicting itself if it approved the buildings for landmark status after having previously approved the Skyline redevelopment plan. The City Council agreed with DURA (Ditmer, 1969; McEncroe, 1992).

The DLPC role in Skyline had been limited because of its late arrival into the process, but at Auraria—which contained a large number of historically significant buildings—the commission was an early entrant. In January 1968, it recommended the first three buildings for Denver landmark status, all of which were approved by City Council. One of these buildings was the 1876 Emmanuel-Shearith-Israel Chapel in the Auraria neighborhood—the oldest standing church in Denver. Landmark designation for the chapel occurred just weeks after the CCHE approved the Auraria campus site. In April of 1969, soon after federal approval of the Auraria urban renewal project, another neighborhood building, St. Elizabeth’s Catholic Church, was approved for Denver Landmark status.

In the fall of 1969, as the city debated the future of the neighborhood, a very different type of preservation plan for Auraria emerged that was independent of the DLPC. Responding to concerns about the social impacts of the new campus, the CU Planning Office assigned architect and CU Boulder faculty member John Prosser the task of developing an alternative campus plan with the goal of retaining part of the Hispanic neighborhood (McEncroe, 1992). In Prosser’s design, “existing satisfactory and redeemable housing and community facilities were incorporated” into the campus (Prosser, 1972, p. 25). These included St. Cajetan’s church and school, the Ave Maria Health Clinic, the Tivoli Brewery, and many homes in the vicinity of the church. In addition, Prosser called for the construction of new homes on the north side of the site that would house displaced Auraria residents, and for a new neighborhood shopping center just to the south of the campus. Thus, for Prosser, “historic preservation” meant not just saving old buildings and the city’s architectural heritage, but saving the Auraria community itself.

This alternative plan—which essentially intermingled the campus with the existing community—was presented to DURA leadership in September and to neighborhood residents in late October. The Auraria community responded positively to the Prosser plan (Aragon, 1969; Denver Post, 1969c). Community support for the plan represented the possibility of an alliance between preservationists and the Hispanic community. However, it appears that residents first saw the plan in late October—meaning that an alliance did not have time to form before the bond election. After the election, DURA rejected the idea, claiming that the site was simply not big enough to keep significant elements of the community in place and also meet the needs of the three educational institutions.

The Prosser community preservation plan quickly faded from view, but architecture-based preservation activities persisted. A week after the bond issue election in November 1969, the DLPC recommended both St. Cajetan’s Catholic Church and the Tivoli Brewery complex for landmark designation. Historic preservation presented problems that DURA had not faced for Skyline and now hoped to avoid for Auraria (Figure 7). Because it was using federal funds, DURA was restricted by provisions of the NHPA from demolishing buildings eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Places without first entering into an extended evaluation process. Buildings in
the area that were designated as Denver Landmarks were also protected from demolition through DLPC review. In particular, DURA leaders found it politically difficult to fight landmark designation for neighborhood churches. St. Elizabeth’s was still an active church, and the effort to save the building had been led by its parishioners, even though they no longer lived in the neighborhood. Likewise, the Auraria residents pushed hard to preserve St. Cajetan’s church, despite that fact that the building would cease to be an active church after redevelopment (Rocky Mountain News, 1969a).

The case of the Tivoli brewery was much more contentious. The DLPC recommendation for landmark designation was denied by the City Council in February 1970 after the council consulted with DURA. DURA leadership sought to prevent landmark designation for the Tivoli because they wanted to demolish the entire complex. The brewery was large, and keeping it would throw a wrench into the campus-site planning process. DURA argued that the only financially feasible way for the Tivoli to be restored was through private commercial development, but that such an approach was prohibited by DURA’s contract with the federal government, which specified that all buildings in the urban renewal area were solely to serve higher education purposes. DURA was also responding to pressure from downtown business interests who did not want to see any commercial competition develop across Cherry Creek on the Auraria site (Abbott, 1999; McEncroe, 1992).

In 1972, after a sustained effort, the DLPC succeeded in gaining landmark status for a major part of the 15-building brewery complex, halting DURA’s demolition plans. With the survival of at least a portion of the complex now ensured, DURA had no
choice but to purchase the buildings and work with the Auraria Board (which governed the new higher education center) to find a repurposed use for the buildings. The Auraria Board represented a new state actor in the campus development process, one with its own interests and imperatives. The Auraria Board determined that it was too expensive for the State of Colorado to redevelop the buildings for educational use and came to an agreement with a private firm to redevelop the complex for shops, restaurants, and a movie theater (Abbott, 1999). Again, DURA objected on the grounds that any commercial development within the project boundaries was not allowable under the terms of their federal urban renewal contract. DURA took the case to court where the judge ruled against them, noting “that any decisions concerning what is necessary, accessory, or supportive of higher education lies with the Auraria Board not DURA” (McEncroe, 1992, p. 557).

Conflict between DURA and the Auraria Board intensified over the preservation of one block of Ninth Street between Curtis and Champa streets, an effort spearheaded by the new nonprofit organization Historic Denver Inc. Founded in 1970, Historic Denver, represented a coalescence of different parts of the city’s emergent preservation community. Its core group included Ann Love, wife of Colorado Republican Governor John Love; Barbara Sudler, wife of architect James Sudler; Dana Crawford; and Don Etter, a partner in the law firm of Steven Hart (the SHPO at the State Historical Society) (Abbott, 1999; Chandler, 2006; Ditmer, 2005; Morley, 2006).

In 1972, Etter and Ken Watson, a photographer and Historic Denver’s first director, proposed that the 1000 block of Ninth Street be preserved, with its buildings converted into campus administrative offices and the street turned into a park. This block had been part of the failed Prosser preservation plan; once again, DURA paid no heed to the idea and proceeded to put out bids for demolition of the area. Historic Denver then appealed to the Auraria Board, which approved the Ninth Street preservation plan over the objections of the board’s vice president Milstein, who was also executive director of the DDI and a member of the DLPC. DURA also objected fiercely, arguing that it was far too late in the process for such a major alteration to the redevelopment plan (Abbott, 1999). But while this argument worked to hold off preservation efforts in Skyline a few years earlier, it did not work at Auraria. In the intervening years, the historic preservation movement had matured, and new organizations like Historic Denver had arisen to complement the efforts of the DLPC, and to mobilize an increasingly preservation-minded citizenry. Working on a very tight schedule dictated by the Auraria Board, Historic Denver was able to develop a Ninth Street restoration plan and raise nearly $1 million to carry out the work, most of which came from a single anonymous donor. Fourteen buildings were saved on what became the oldest surviving residential block in Denver (Historic Denver, 1976).

**Legacies of the Auraria contest**

**Legacies of community resistance**

Despite community resistance, DURA prevailed in the fight over the Auraria urban renewal project. In the early 1970s, it removed residents and businesses, demolished the neighborhood except for the protected historic structures, and then transferred
ownership of the site to the State of Colorado. Construction of the new campus was underway at a fast pace by 1974.

Resistance to the Auraria project did not stop neighborhood demolition, but it did have a number of important and lasting effects upon the city and its residents that should not be forgotten. First, resistance served to extend community organization and collective action in Westside Hispanic neighborhoods. In the wake of the bond election, 155 Auraria households formed the Auraria Residents Organization (ARO). Even though they had lost the fight to save their neighborhood, that process demonstrated the benefits of working together for a common cause. Under the direction of Father Garcia, the ARO became a watchdog for residents’ rights in the relocation process. In January 1970, the group conducted its own detailed household survey of the area, finding many more people eligible for relocation support than DURA had found in its survey a few months earlier. DURA later adopted the ARO data for official use. The ARO fought against early tenant eviction (an action which made tenants ineligible for relocation payments) and successfully lobbied for cash payments to renters as well as homeowners. They also rallied to promote the idea of gaining landmark status for St. Cajetan’s church.

More broadly, Auraria resistance propelled the Denver Chicano Movement and its civil rights and social justice goals. The Westside Coalition was formed in the immediate aftermath of the bond issue election. The Coalition solidified cooperation among a dozen organizations that had worked together on the Auraria fight under the banner of the Preserve the Westside Committee. Spurred on by the urban renewal struggle, the Westside Coalition organized to protect community interests and make its voice heard at City Hall in the 1970s. They sought funds to build low-income housing, subsidize home purchases, and rehabilitate deteriorating homes. They secured funds to establish a neighborhood health clinic. They contested city zoning and land use planning that directed high-volume, heavy-truck traffic through the center of their neighborhood. They advocated for fair treatment of area youths by police. Together with the Auraria Board, they formed the Westside-Auraria committee to oversee campus–community relations. And, their leaders began to enter electoral politics, chipping away at the longstanding political marginalization of Hispanic communities in the city and state (Abbott, 1999; Gould, 2007; Rivera et al., 1998).

The Westside Coalition disbanded in 1975 due to a combination of external conflict with the Crusade for Justice and internal strife among its member organizations. Yet, its model for gaining increased community control over neighborhood development lived on through the work of the New Westside Economic Development Corporation (NEWSED). So, too, its focus on incremental political reform survived and thrived: the Westside became one of the places where the Chicano Movement successfully translated itself into the Democratic Party, leading to the election of Hispanics to the state legislature, the formation of the Chicano Caucus at the state house in the late 1970s, and the election of Federico Pena as Mayor of Denver in 1983 (Gould, 2007).

Second, resistance from Hispanic residents and their allies in the Chicano Movement set in motion shifts in urban renewal practice that dramatically altered DURA’s role in Denver’s planning process. After Auraria, DURA could no longer dictate urban renewal
outcomes on its own terms but instead was forced to take community interests into consideration. Planners and politicians admitted that it had been a mistake to exclude neighborhood residents and business owners from the process and considered this to be one of the key lessons learned for urban renewal moving forward (Abbott, 1999; McEncroe, 1992). But more community involvement meant more questioning of the DURA approach. In particular, projects that required the widespread demolition of existing areas faced increasingly broad and well-organized opposition as people threatened with removal learned from the Auraria experience.

One such case was the Eastside, or “Arrowhead,” urban renewal project located at the northeast edge of downtown. The 1974 project was intended to clear 23 blocks for redevelopment, but resident groups fought back and altered the plan: several historic structures were saved and the overall density of new housing was reduced. DURA received unprecedented criticism throughout the Arrowhead redevelopment process, ranging from complaints about the agency’s lack of transparency to its “bulldozer” mentality, its failure to deliver on the promise of mixed-income housing, and the very low quality of construction produced by its private sector partners (Morris, 1978). Community challenges to DURA culminated in the rejection by City Council of two high-profile urban renewal clearance projects—the 25-block Arapahoe Place project in 1980, and the 19-block Civic Center, or “Golden Triangle” project in 1981. Mayor McNichols had initially supported both projects but withdrew that support when business owners from each area organized vocal public opposition (Judd, 1983; McEncroe, 1992).

Clearly, the broader context was a critical factor in these events given that federal funding for urban renewal declined significantly after the mid-1970s, leading to a national contraction in program activities. Without the inducement of huge amounts of federal dollars, civic leaders in Denver had less reason to support DURA’s aggressive, land clearing style of redevelopment or its top-down, heavy-handed approach. Still, mounting local resistance undoubtedly hastened the program’s demise. Accordingly, DURA’s role was diminished. In 1984, its staff was cut nearly in half. In 1986, it officially entered a new era as a city agency rather than the local extension of a federal program. In that new role, DURA continued to focus on redevelopment, but at a much smaller scale, using local and much more limited funds, and with a much greater emphasis on collaboration with community partners and other city agencies.

Third, community resistance to the Auraria project established historic preservation as a permanent feature of Denver redevelopment, and in the process altered the intended form and character of the new campus. In some cities, urban renewal planners adopted historic preservation as a renewal strategy early in the postwar period and, in fact, were far more responsible for successful preservation efforts than were historic preservation organizations (Ryberg, 2012). In Denver, however, the opposite was true. DURA opposed the inclusion of historic preservation in Skyline and Auraria; it mostly prevailed at Skyline but was politically outflanked at Auraria by a rising local preservation movement. After Auraria, DURA was forced to accommodate historic preservation interests as part of the more general shift toward greater community participation. By the mid-1980s, a new Downtown Area Plan under new Mayor Federico Pena codified historic preservation as the single most important element in the city’s urban
revitalization strategy, and DURA—in its new, more limited role—came full circle to embrace and promote the concept (McMahon, 2012; Morley, 2004).

For Auraria, DURA’s original intent had been to completely clear the 26-acre site and then transfer it to the state for redevelopment as an entirely new campus landscape characterized by a central cluster of large, high-rise buildings connected to each other and to downtown via a network of above-grade causeways (see Figure 2). This plan is evident in the original Kelsey feasibility study of 1968, and it continued to be the primary working design concept through the completion of Kelsey’s master plan in 1971 and the Hatami and Associates urban design study in 1972. This grand vision of the new campus was undermined by successful preservation efforts that forced DURA to retain several significant elements of the old neighborhood within the campus site. Kelsey’s 1971 design proposed moving some of the historic structures so as not to interfere with campus development, while Hatami’s design kept the historic buildings in place but wrapped the high-rise cluster of new buildings around them (Hatami, 1972; Kelsey, 1968, 1971).

When prominent Chicago architect Jacques Brownson was hired as Director of Auraria Planning and Development in the fall of 1972, he deemed previous plans to be unworkable and immediately set about developing a new campus master plan. Brownson’s 1973 plan created a seamless way to integrate the historic structures into the campus by abandoning the idea of a completely new campus layout and instead used the existing city street grid and its underlying utility infrastructure as the basic organizational framework for redevelopment (Figure 8). This plan reflected Brownson’s experience—and that of his mentors at the Illinois Institute of Technology—repurposing urban neighborhoods without wiping the slate clean. It was cost-effective, and it dovetailed with historic preservation realities on the site (Abbott, 1999; Blum, 1996; Miller, 1976).

Compared to the earlier design vision, Brownson’s practical approach placed very modest-scale two- and three-story buildings on portions of the site after those areas became available as part of DURA’s staged demolition process. In this way, the Auraria campus gradually took shape on the bones of the old district after 1974. By the time the campus was dedicated in 1976, it could not have looked more different than the original Kelsey plan. The street grid was intact, and several major automobile thoroughfares still ran directly through the center of campus. Surface parking lots occupied much of the space. A handful of low-rise modular brick buildings were scattered across the site, along with a few historic structures (Figure 9). This piecemeal campus landscape retained a few elements of the old neighborhood, but as an educational institution, it lacked both a strong connection to the adjacent downtown area and a well-defined urban architectural identity—the very qualities that earlier design studies had emphasized and that the public had endorsed (Hatami, 1972).

**Legacies of neighborhood removal**

First, *neighborhood removal displaced 250 businesses, 330 households, and a number of social institutions.* DURA made relocation payments to businesses, homeowners, and renters. It provided home-finding assistance to both types of residential households. DURA was obligated to ensure that all displaced persons were “rehoused in safe, decent
and adequate housing, and in a manner which will not be detrimental to any of the families involved” (DURA 1969d, p. 3). DURA records indicate that the majority of displaced households found replacement housing in Denver neighborhoods directly to the north and west of Auraria.

Because no research was conducted at the time, it is difficult to assess the impact of displacement on individuals and families; however, many years later, a large number of former Auraria residents expressed a clear sense of grief for the loss of their homes and neighborhood (Gallegos, 1991). It should also be noted that a large body of research conducted from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s documented very high social, economic, and psychological costs paid by people displaced by urban renewal projects in the United States. This research found that the displaced were often rehoused in areas that were classified as blighted and considered to be slums, that they often paid significantly higher rents for new housing (putting severe strain on household finances), and that they struggled socially and emotionally with the challenges of losing their community and the support that it provided (Abrams, 1965; Fried, 1966; Gans, 1966; Maris, 1974).

Second, neighborhood removal initiated a long-term process of gentrification in Downtown Denver. While acknowledging the wide-ranging debates that characterize the study of gentrification in urban geography and allied fields, we define it here as the
class-based transformation of urban space involving (a) reinvestment of capital, (b) social upgrading of locale by incoming high-income groups, (c) urban landscape change, and (d) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (Lees, Slater & Wyly, 2008, 2010).

In Denver, the demolition of Auraria worked in tandem with the concurrent removal of the Skyline district to raze a contiguous 64-block area of the aging urban core that represented the city’s highest concentration of poverty (US Census, 1974). On this vast tract of nearly empty land, the new Auraria campus developed quickly, opening officially in January of 1976, while Skyline redevelopment progressed more slowly. Federal funds and matching local funds were used for demolition, infrastructure provision, and site preparation at Skyline, but construction of new buildings depended on private investment, which did not arrive en masse until the late 1970s and early 1980s (DURA, 1983). Ten years after its 1967 inception, the Skyline area consisted mostly of undeveloped blocks occupied by surface parking lots.

Because of this timing, the Auraria project was Denver’s first significant gentrification experience. In one stroke, it removed a population of low-income people living in the urban core and replaced them with a population of more educated, higher income people working on the campus. In turn, many campus employees sought to live in older residential areas adjacent to downtown, initiating a secondary wave of gentrification in the Baker and Curtis Park neighborhoods in the late 1970s (Clark, 1984, 1985; Schill...
and Nathan, 1983; Schuster, 1997). Skyline soon followed suit. Early phases of the project had removed 970 people from SRO hotels and rooming houses, and some 500 transients from skid row on Larimer Street. By the early 1980s, they were replaced by affluent apartment dwellers and office tower workers as part of the long-awaited build-out of the new Skyline district (McEncroe, 1992).

Over the next several decades, further gentrification of the downtown area radiated out from this initial base, affirming influential Denver Post writer Dick Johnston’s 1969 assertion that Auraria redevelopment was “the key” to checking the long-term decline of downtown Denver (Johnston, 1969a). Gentrification spread first to Lower Downtown (LoDo) in the late 1980s and after that to the Highland’s neighborhood and the Central Platte Valley, among many other areas (Figure 1).

LoDo redevelopment was particularly important because it acted as a bridge between DURA’s early obliteration-style redevelopment at Auraria and Skyline and the historic preservation-minded, infill-oriented approach that was initiated by Mayor Pena in the 1980s and came to dominate city planning after 1990. As the redevelopment of Skyline accelerated in the 1980s, there was pressure to extend that model of land clearance-based office and residential tower development into the adjacent LoDo area. A protracted political battle ensued. On one side of this battle was the historic preservation community, which aligned with the entire city planning apparatus, including a downsized DURA. On the other side were owners of property in the area. Historic preservation interests prevailed when the City Council approved the DLPC application for a LoDo Historic District in 1988. Over 60% of property owners objected to the historic district designation—they had hoped to sell their land and old buildings to high-rise developers (Morley, 2004; Weiler, 2000).

Overall, this redevelopment process unfolded in fits and starts due to the cyclical pattern of economic growth in the region. It operated as a self-reinforcing cascade, with the successful social and physical transformation of one part of downtown leading directly to increased capital investment, physical upgrades, and social displacement in adjoining areas. Careful planning guided the process and knitted the various parts into an increasingly integrated whole, while strategic public investments in transportation infrastructure, historic districts, cultural facilities, professional sports arenas, riparian restoration, parks, and other public spaces set the stage for profitable private commercial and residential projects. Downtown office space and housing expanded dramatically on this basis through a blend of new construction and old building conversions. Young, educated people—responding to the growth in professional employment opportunities —poured into these new high-density urban neighborhoods, as well as nearby older neighborhoods, in order to live close to work and within walking distance of a wide array of shopping, entertainment, and cultural activities. In this way, and by most measures, the gentrification momentum that began with Auraria has transformed downtown Denver into a national model of urban “revitalization.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us consider the implications of Auraria urban renewal and its aftermath for scholarship in urban geography. First, this case contributes to our understanding of the American urban renewal experience by demonstrating that the
outcomes of renewal projects were not simply dictated by local coalitions of politicians, planners, and business interests; instead, community resistance to these local “growth machines” was capable of playing an important role in the process. In Denver, resistance to Auraria urban renewal established historic preservation as a key feature of downtown redevelopment, dramatically altering the intended form and character of the new campus as a result. So, too, it galvanized community organizing and collective action on the Hispanic Westside, propelled the rising Chicano Movement and its social justice goals, and thereby set in motion shifts in local urban planning practice that resulted in a fundamental change in DURA’s role. In this way, community resistance had both an immediate impact on a specific urban renewal project and lasting ramifications for city planning and politics.

For urban geographers, this suggests that an adequate account of the unfolding of urban renewal in any city should take into consideration the agency of social resistance in shaping that city’s process of redevelopment. Of course, community resistance to urban renewal looked different from one city to the next in terms of key actors, goals, organizational capacities, levels of coordination, degrees of effectiveness, and so forth. Tracking the formation and mobilization of these diverse resistance movements, understanding their internal dynamics and broader community linkages, and examining their conflict and negotiations with renewal proponents can reveal much about the evolution of local planning practice and the variegated social, political, and architectural results of urban renewal across the country.

Second, the Auraria case contributes to our understanding of the broad sweep of American urbanization since 1950 by demonstrating that the effects of urban renewal cannot easily be consigned to the past; instead, interventions into downtown landscapes that occurred as part of public renewal programs had important long-term consequences. In Denver, the contest over Auraria represents a pivotal moment in the postwar reshaping of the urban core. Despite resistance, DURA carried out the Auraria plan and demolished a poor and physically deteriorating neighborhood that stood at the heart of downtown. In doing so, it removed an enormous impediment to wider downtown transformation, unleashing a dramatic process of social and spatial change that continues to this day.

For urban geographers, this suggests that some rethinking might be in order concerning the role of state-led initiatives in actively enabling and sustaining private market gentrification in US cities overtime. Within the gentrification literature, the role of the state was largely de-emphasized in the protracted debates over which set of actors—property developers seeking to exploit “rent-gaps” or housing consumers seeking cultural expression—were the true drivers of neighborhood change (for summaries, see Lees et al., 2008, 2010 and Brown-Saracino, 2010). In contrast, the role of the state is predominant in more recent research that documents the rise of neoliberal urbanism, in which entrepreneurial municipal governments pursue gentrification as a key feature of market-oriented local urban policy (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Hackworth, 2007; Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007; Theodore, Peck, & Brenner, 2011; Wacquant, 2014). In the United States, neoliberal urbanism emerged after 1990 as a direct response to the demise of federal programs and the withdrawal of subsidies, and for this reason, analyses tend to (a) decouple the era of neoliberal management from the Keynesian era of federal support for local urban redevelopment
that preceded it and (b) assign responsibility for actively facilitating gentrification to the former but rarely to the latter. This, however, creates a truncated view that discounts the role of historic urban renewal projects in enabling early gentrification and setting the stage for its dramatic expansion in the decades that follow. While we agree that it is important to demarcate these two periods of postwar urban governance and articulate their many critical differences, it is also important to recognize the threads that connect them together, and thereby acknowledge the continuity of state action in directing urban redevelopment through time. The Denver case presented here echoes some of the earliest and most important research on gentrification, particularly Neil Smith’s work on Society Hill in Philadelphia and Chester Hartman’s studies of San Francisco, by tracing it back to urban renewal roots (Hartman, 1974, 1984; Smith, 1979, 1996).

Indeed, there can be no doubt that the common element in downtown Denver’s transformation has been the guiding hand of state policies implemented by a range of state actors over the decades. This guiding hand has been deep and continuous. As discussed, gentrification in Denver did not begin with the “pioneering” in-movers to old inner-city neighborhoods; rather, these gentrifiers followed in the wake of huge downtown urban renewal projects. Moreover, the process of social transition in these first gentrifying neighborhoods was incubated by the city via the distribution of housing rehabilitation funds provided by HUD programs and via the establishment of state-sanctioned historic districts (Judd, 1983). After the 1970s, when the high tide of federal subsidies receded, state action continued to direct ongoing private reinvestment downtown through the device of local government—reflecting the broader national shift toward neoliberal urban policy, but building upon a strong foundation established during the urban renewal era. In Denver, the city’s activities have centered on (a) bonds and taxation to support significant infrastructural improvements including a new airport, a new convention center, a new light rail system, new sports arenas, and new downtown parks and streetscapes; (b) comprehensive rezoning to facilitate downtown redevelopment land use priorities; (c) direct subsidies to private developers on strategic downtown projects, carried out particularly through tax increment financing; (d) public–private partnerships to coordinate the overall strategy of downtown redevelopment; and (e) a pronounced step-up in policing and public surveillance that have cleansed new downtown landscapes of the poor and homeless, creating the perception of safety for employers, employees, and middle and upper class residents and consumers (Langegger, 2013; Langegger & Koester, 2016).

Combined, these efforts have solved the “downtown problem” that so plagued city leaders in the immediate postwar period. But successful state-led gentrification of the urban core has occurred alongside the intensification of other urban problems, particularly the lack of equitable development in the city. For instance, poverty in the city of Denver has increased since the time of the big urban renewal projects. The overall poverty rate in 1970 was 13.7%, but rose to 19.2% in 2010. The number of people living in poverty in Denver increased by 64% over this period, rising to a total of nearly 116,000 individuals in 2010. For Denver Hispanics, the poverty rate increased from 24% to 30% from 1970 to 2010, and the number of Hispanics living in poverty increased by 222%, rising to a total of almost 61,000 people in 2010 (City and County of Denver, 2011; US Census Bureau, 1974).
Those in poverty and other low-income people are being pushed away from the revitalized city center by state-led gentrification and associated increases in housing costs. Between 1990 and 2013, Denver gentrified at one of the fastest rates in the country, and as a result, a ring of gentrified or gentrifying neighborhoods now surround the downtown area.\textsuperscript{21} With strong downtown professional employment growth and continuing in-migration of young, educated people, housing costs in these neighborhoods have skyrocketed, putting them out of reach for most lower income households. But the housing problem extends well beyond these areas. Between 2007 and 2015, average rents in the Denver metro area increased by 32\%, while median household income and average wages remained stagnant. Between 2011 and 2015 alone, the average price of a single family home increased by 41\%. As a result, housing cost burdens are nearing historic levels at 35\% of median income (Svaldi, 2015).

The push of the poor out of the urban core is one of the reasons for the rapid growth of suburban poverty in the Denver metro area since 2000, a national trend that represents an inversion of the traditional geography of class relations in US cities (Ehrenhalt, 2012; Kneebone & Berube, 2013).\textsuperscript{22} And, as poverty has spread to the suburbs, it has increasingly become concentrated in high-poverty neighborhoods just as it has in the city of Denver.\textsuperscript{23} So, while middle and upper class residents enjoy an enviably urban lifestyle in the city center, poorer citizens face displacement, a crisis of affordable housing, and shrinking housing options that consign them to geographically marginal and economically distressed areas.

This outcome is a legacy of the Auraria contest; but so are the voices seeking more equitable development. The groups that protested the CU Denver plan to build student housing in La Alma/Lincoln Park were direct outgrowths of the Chicano Movement that inspired the fight to save the Auraria neighborhood. NEWSED, a by-product of post-Auraria community organizing, continues to advocate for low-income housing on the Westside and throughout the city. Displaced Aurarians and others who participated in the original urban renewal contest are speaking out against gentrification in Denver neighborhoods, including in La Alma/Lincoln Park where development is spreading around a new light rail station near the campus.

It remains to be seen what role the campus community will play in this renewed contest. One would think that social activists would find common cause with the student body. In 1969, in exchange for their compliance with the neighborhood removal plan, Hispanic residents on the Westside were promised that the new campus would benefit their families and community by providing local access to higher education. Now, one or two generations later, that benefit has become less obvious, given that so many Hispanic residents are being pushed further and further away from the city center, but the educational legacy of the Auraria contest lives on: Hispanic students now account for 17\% of all students at CU Denver, 20\% at Metro State, and 25\% at CCD. Despite these demographics—and as we noted at the outset—students remain generally unaware of the position their campus occupies in the ongoing process of downtown transformation that surrounds them. Perhaps if Auraria’s history and legacies were more purposefully activated rather than concealed within the campus landscape, student engagement with critical urban issues would increase, and the potential for the campus itself to serve as a vital teaching and learning resource would be fulfilled.
Notes

1. Contrast this circumstance to Avila (2014), who documents the commemoration of Hispanic resistance to 1960s Los Angeles freeway construction in the form of public art, which to this day preserves local memories of community destruction and spatial injustice.

2. Title I of the 1949 Housing Act provided funds to help cities acquire and clear “blighted” land for redevelopment. Aid was restricted to land that was “predominantly residential” and redevelopment was likewise intended to focus on predominantly residential use. The federal government paid two-thirds of the net cost of land acquisition and clearance—called the “write down”—and local authorities were required to provide the remaining one-third. The 1954 Housing Act altered the scope of the program to (a) cover rehabilitation of existing buildings in addition to clearance and (b) more easily include non-residential redevelopment projects. In parallel fashion, the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act subsidized the construction of downtown freeways, which also resulted in the destruction of inner city areas.

3. These were areas where massive new investment converted cheap land on the urban fringe into modern built environments of sprawling low-density housing tracts, automobile-oriented shopping centers, thoroughfare retail developments, and pastoral office complexes. On postwar urban decentralization, see Walker (1981), Jackson (1985), Beauregard (2006), and Teaford (2006).

4. From a national perspective, Denver was late in seeking federal support for urban redevelopment because many DDI members opposed the very idea of federal aid. It was only after early efforts failed that these leaders—urged on by the Urban Land Institute—shifted course and began to lobby for the creation of an urban renewal authority that could compete for available federal funds and coordinate public and private redevelopment efforts. New York City-based developer William Zeckendorf, who had significant investments in downtown Denver, played a particularly important role in convincing the local business community “to get on the urban renewal bandwagon” before permanently losing out to other US cities (McEncroe, 1992, p. 104).

5. Denver residents were first asked to approve matching funds for the Skyline urban renewal project in 1964. They voted a resounding “no,” following the lead of several City Council members who opposed any bond issue and the increase in property taxes it would require. At that moment, the prospect of success for the Skyline project seemed slim, but salvation came in the form of an amendment to the 1965 Housing Act—initiated by downtown Denver boosters, including the publisher of the Denver Post—that allowed cities to use existing capital improvement expenditures in lieu of the required one-third match. Under the provisions of this amendment, the Johnson administration allowed Denver to use the costs associated with its newly built exhibition center as the local match for the Skyline project. Despite the fact that no new funds were required to move forward, the Skyline project still faced a vote in the form of a referendum organized by opponents on the City Council (Judd, 1983; McEncroe, 1992).

6. The University’s support for this new combined Auraria campus concept turned out to be short-lived. After the Auraria site was endorsed by Denver voters in the November 1969 bond issue election, the President and the Regents of the University reversed course and mounted an aggressive political campaign aimed at convincing the state legislature to halt all Auraria campus funding. The University was concerned about the effect that building the new campus would have on the legislature’s ability to finance “all higher educational capital needs in the state,” particularly at its flagship Boulder campus (Abbott, 1999, p. 69).

7. According to the 1954 report, blight was defined as “an area which has become an economic and social liability to the community because of dilapidation, lack of sufficient open space for residential occupancy, coexistence of incompatible land uses, unhealthful living conditions, lack of residential amenities, presence of
environmental nuisances, and general neglect through improper enforcement of zoning, building, and sanitary codes.” A slum was defined as “an area which is in advanced stages of blight, accompanied by disease, crime, and delinquency, where structures have become unfit for human occupancy and where social and economic assets are being destroyed to the extent that there is no hope for rehabilitation except by eventual clearance and fresh redevelopment of the area” (City and County of Denver, 1954, p. 6).

8. DURA used assessor’s records to estimate that there were 134 dwelling units within the urban renewal boundary in 1969 (DURA 1969c). Block data from the 1970 US Census—which was not yet available to DURA staff in 1969—established that number to be 235. We constructed our historical comparison using block data from several census dates (US Census Bureau, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970).

9. Auraria population estimates varied widely. In September 1969, a DURA survey estimated there to be 563 people living in the area (DURA, 1969b). In April of 1970, DURA put the population of the area at 468 (DURA, 1970). In January of 1970, the Auraria Residents Organization conducted its own survey and estimated the total population to be 823, a number very close to that later established by the 1970 US Census (ARO, 1970).

10. The DURA survey data generally align with demographic data for the broader Westside area. In 1970, the Auraria population represented 4% of the Westside population overall. The US Census Bureau defined the Westside in 1970 as a low-income area made up of five contiguous census tracts. That area was 46% Hispanic. About 75% of households rented their homes. Over 60% of residents had not completed high school. Average annual income for family households was $6,874. Over 30% of households fell below the poverty level, which, in 1970, was $3,748 for a nonfarm family of four (US Census Bureau, 1974). Thus, compared to the Westside overall, Auraria had a much higher percentage of Hispanic residents and much lower average household income.

11. Auraria business owners mounted their own challenge to the bond issue, arguing that their properties were being illegally confiscated. This group filed a lawsuit against the city in early 1970, but the State Supreme Court confirmed the legality of the bond issue in 1971. There appears to have been very little coordination between Auraria residents and the group of business owners. This lack of interaction occurred in part due to the fact that the majority of Auraria residents were renters, but it was also due to very different outlooks among the membership of the two groups: one business owner publically referred to the planned campus as “Slum University” (Denver Post, 1970, p. 12).

12. The NHPA established a federal system through which important cultural and historic resources could be identified and protected, and featured the National Register of Historic Places, the first comprehensive program for preservation designation (Tyler, Ligibel, & Tyler, 2009).

13. Gallegos (1985), Summers (2003), Gould (2007), and Lee (2012) each indicates that the anti-bond campaign was led by the Auraria Residents Organization (ARO) based out of St. Cajetan’s church. However, surviving ARO documents in the DURA archives held by the Denver Public Library clearly state that the organization was established only after the bond election in order to help neighborhood households with the logistics of relocation (Auraria Residents Organization (ARO), 1970).

14. Similarly, in Oakland, Flint, and Atlanta, the fight against urban renewal engendered solidarity among poor people in African-American communities and spurred articulation with the wider civil rights movement of the 1960s (Highsmith, 2009; Holliman, 2009; Self, 2003).

15. These organization included Auraria Community Center, Baker Junior High and West High School faculties, Centro Cultural, GI Forum Mile High Chapter, GI Forum Skyline Chapter, Greenlee Elementary School PTA, Inner City Parish, St. Joseph Parish Council, UMAS Metro State, UMAS University of Colorado Denver Center, Westside Action Ministry, and Westside Improvement Association (Rivera et al., 1998).
16. The Coalition and the Crusade had been allies in the Auraria urban renewal fight, but afterward, their relationship became tense and a rivalry intensified. In contrast to the Coalition, the Crusade eschewed the two-party system and advocated revolutionary social change—a stance that brought them into confrontation with local law enforcement and the FBI (Vigil, 1999). Their respective leaders were also in competition for broader leadership within the Chicano Movement and were hostile to one another. When the Crusade began to organize on the Westside after 1970, an extended period of intra-ethnic violence erupted, doing significant damage to the progress and reputation of the Chicano Movement in Denver. Internally, the Coalition broke apart over competition for Westside leadership that also devolved into intra-ethnic violence (Gould, 2007).

17. NEWSED is a community development corporation established in 1975. The nonprofit organization’s main focus has been stimulating neighborhood revitalization along Santa Fe Drive, the Westside’s primary commercial corridor (George, 1999).

18. The post-Auraria shift toward more community involvement in DURA projects occurred at the same time that city officials were attempting to implement the citizen participation requirement of the US HUD Model Cities Program. Denver was selected for the Model Cities Program late in 1967 and funding was first committed in January 1969 (McEncroe, 1992). No Westside neighborhoods were included in the program by the city’s Community Development Agency (Rocky Mountain News, 1969a).

19. Between 2007 and 2012, the net migration of young adults ages 25–34 (millennials) to Denver was the highest in the nation (Shah, 2013). Denver also had the largest percentage increase in adults with college degrees between 2007 to 2012 among the nation’s largest 25 cities (Guo, 2014).

20. Downtown Denver is booming. For 2014, Coldwell Banker ranked Denver as the top commercial real-estate market nationally among the 80 cities that were ranked. Markets were measured according to percentage changes in vacancy rates, rental rates, population, and unemployment (Coldwell Banker, 2015). The Downtown Denver Partnership, an outgrowth of the original DDI, carefully tracks core city transformation. There were 16 projects completed downtown in 2014, representing $1 billion invested. There are 20 projects under construction in 2015, representing an additional $2 billion invested. Many of these new projects provide office space; downtown employment has increased by 11% since 2000 with energy, health care, and technology firms leading the way. New construction, however, is dominated by residential rental apartment projects. The number of people living downtown increased by 164% between 2000 and 2015, to nearly 19,000 individuals, and thousands more housing units are currently being built. The average age of downtown residents is 34 years, and the average size of downtown households is just 1.4 persons. These households are overwhelmingly nonfamily, affluent, and white (Downtown Denver Partnership, 2015).

21. A recent study examined gentrification by census tract in the nation’s 50 largest cities. To be eligible to gentrify, a tract’s median income and median home value needed to fall within the bottom 40th percentile of all tracts within a city at the beginning of the study period. Tracts considered to have gentrified over the course of the study period recorded increases in the top third percentile for both inflation-adjusted median home value and percentage of adults with bachelors’ degrees. From 1990 to 2000, Denver gentrified at the third fastest rate in the country when 32% of eligible tracts gentrified. From 2000 to 2013, Denver gentrified at the seventh fastest rate, when 42% of eligible tracts gentrified (Maciag, 2015).

22. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of metro Denver residents living below the federal poverty line doubled, rising to 332,000 people. Two-thirds of these people lived outside the city of Denver. The growing number of poor in the suburbs is tied to household relocation from the city in search of affordable housing, as well as to shifts in the broader labor market resulting in an increasing numbers of low-wage jobs and stagnant or falling
wages for middle and lower skill workers (Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Pollack & Kneebone, 2013).

23. Kneebone’s (2014) analysis shows that in 2012, 64% of Denver city residents living in poverty lived in high-poverty census tracts, defined as those with 20% or more of the population below poverty level. In 2000, it was 39%. In 2012, 32% of Denver metro suburban residents living in poverty lived in high-poverty census tracts. In 2000, it was just 8%. Cortright and Mahmoudi (2014) define high-poverty census tracts as those with 30% or more of the population below poverty level but arrive at similar conclusions when comparing the growth of high-poverty census tracts in Denver from 1970 to 2010.

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ORCID

Brian Page http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7450-1578

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