

GEOGRAPHIES OF PLACE, ENVIRONMENT, AND COMMUNITY IN SOUTHWEST DENVER

DENVER COUNTY

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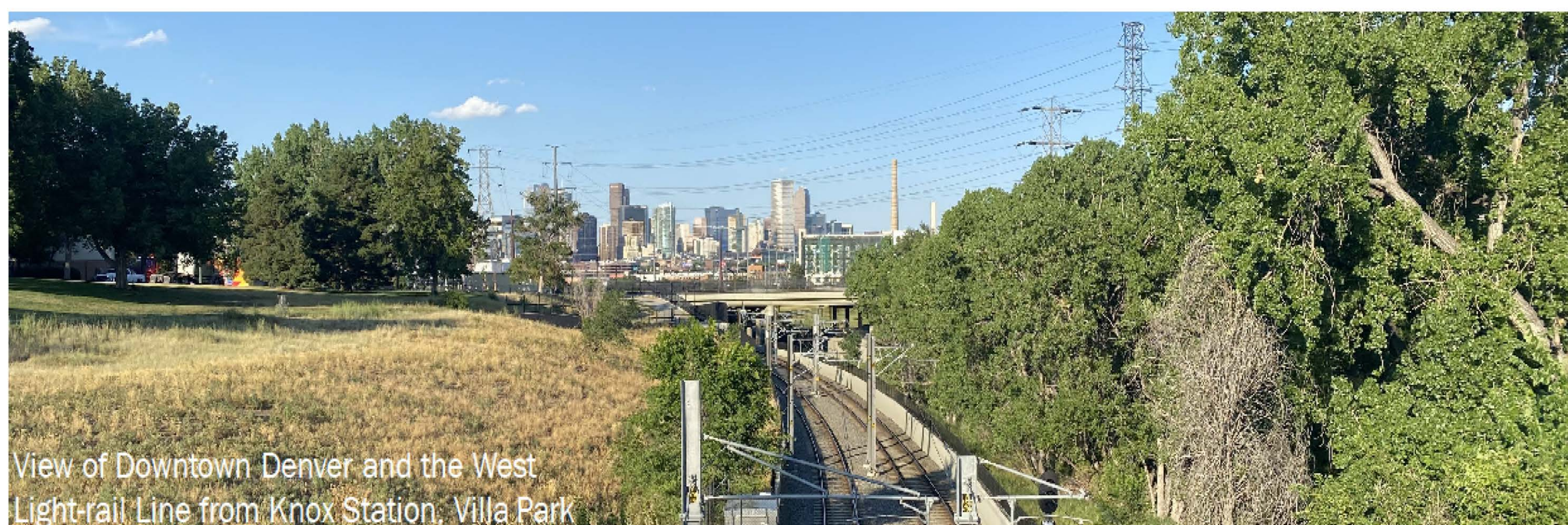
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PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Mar Lee, a predominately Latinx neighborhood in Southwest Denver, I experienced changes in the urban landscape, such as shifting neighborhood demographics, increased cost of living, and construction of new apartment buildings. Southwest Denver is not alone among areas in the city experiencing rapid transformations due to urban development and gentrification.

Existing academic research on the urban geographies of Denver has tended to focus on other neighborhoods including Northwest Denver (e.g., Highlands, Sloan's Lake) and North Denver (e.g., Five Points, Elyria-Swansea, Cole)[†]. Like those areas, the neighborhoods of Southwest Denver include disproportionately lower-income, racially and ethnically diverse, and immigrant populations. Yet, Southwest Denver has not received as much attention from the broader public, non-profit agencies, political organizers, and university outreach.

Pushing the boundaries of research on gentrification and urban development in Denver in and beyond Mar Lee and other Southwest Denver neighborhoods demands that we center the voices of residents directly impacted by these issues. As an academic researcher with deep roots in Southwest Denver, I am in a unique position to fill this dual research and advocacy gap.



View of Downtown Denver and the West Light-rail Line from Knox Station, Villa Park

INTERNSHIP GOALS

The goal of this internship was to engage community members in significant research about their well-being in relationship to rapid transformations taking place in their neighborhoods. Specific topics of interest included community organizing; housing issues like gentrification and displacement; environmental racism; and food justice. During the internship, I learned qualitative research skills including training in human subjects research and in methods including (auto)ethnography, interviews, personal reflection, and videography.

The internship more broadly aimed to enhance CSU Extension's community development and outreach in Southwest Denver. To accomplish these goals, I interviewed eight community members and stakeholders to listen to their experiences, including people working at local organizations, such as Re:Vision, a non-profit aimed at overcoming food deserts in Southwest Denver and the Office of Children's Affairs of the City and County of Denver, the leader in opening the Youth Empowerment Center in Valverde.



Little Saigon Business District on South Federal Boulevard

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO MY EDUCATION?

As an Interdisciplinary Liberal Arts student, I am pursuing studies in Geography and Journalism to share the stories of people's lived experiences in hopes of highlighting underrepresented voices. This internship has helped me get field experience in developing ethnographic research important for understanding people's geographies.

WHAT I DID

I reached out to community organizers, members, and business owners to have a conversation about the current issues in their community. During the semi-structured interviews, I asked prepared questions and follow-up questions based on their responses. I was able to learn through the interviewees' elaborate discourses. Dr. Chennault and I also read peer-reviewed research articles about the history and current trends of gentrification, development, and displacement in Denver. These articles helped us build background knowledge on the broader context of gentrification and what patterns may be occurring in Southwest Denver today. I also regularly attended team meetings with intern mentor Dan Goldhamer and Denver County Extension staff to learn about the role of Extension in community outreach across the city, including outdoor education programs, community gardening, and food bank outreach.

Interviewed Community Members



From left to right: **Lizeth, Valverde Elementary administrator; Yuri, Re:Vision Re:Own Program Director; Rodolfo, resident; Uyen, resident**

WHAT I LEARNED

The people most vulnerable to displacement are those who rent their living spaces, with differences in housing security for households that own versus rent:

My family, we're almost about to own this home entirely. I feel safe, I'm secure but for everyone else I feel like it's such a scary place to be.

– Uyen, Resident of Athmar Park

While renters face uncertain futures, most interviewees described feeling safer now regarding crime and violence than when they moved to their neighborhood. Yet, one interviewee, Rodolfo, feels less safe due to hearing more gunshots and sirens in his Westwood neighborhood.

Housing security also connects to food. Access to food is limited to corner stores and fast-food restaurants. Residents often drive outside their neighborhoods for healthy foods and produce. Yuri said that many families cannot afford healthy foods and must choose between healthy foods and paying rent.

Community members additionally expressed concern about diminishing student enrollment in K-12 Denver Public Schools, impacted by gentrification:

Estas familias grandes se estan llendo y las estan remplazando una pareja que pueda pagar los impuestos en la area. (These large families are leaving and are being replaced by couple[s] that can afford the taxes in the area.)

– Lizeth, Administrator at Valverde Elementary

If schools close, residents would like for these spaces to benefit the community as recreation centers and added capacity for overcrowded school campuses.

Lastly, asking directly about the needs of the community is the best way to help:

La comunidad siempre esta diciendo... un recurso que nos ayude con abogados, con asistencia legal. (The community is always saying... a resource that can help us with lawyers and legal advice.)

– Yuri, Re:Own Program Director at Re:Vision

Based on these findings, an important way that Extension can serve Southwest Denver is to develop new resources, programs, and advocacy around the stated needs and desires of the community of the present and future.

NEXT STEPS

- Advocate for what the people of this community want and need.
- Create a documentary featuring the stories of our respondents as well as paint the diverse landscapes of Southwest Denver.
- Consider whether future studies and outreach will put the community under a magnifying glass. Will attention popularize and gentrify the area?

References

[†]Sig Langegger, "Right-of-way Gentrification: Conflict, Commodification and Cosmopolitanism," *Urban Studies* 53, no. 9 (2016): 1803-1821; Brian Page and Eric Ross, "Legacies of a Contested Campus: Urban Renewal, Community Resistance, and the Origins of Gentrification in Denver," *Urban Geography* 38, no. 9 (2017): 1293-1328; Joshua Sbicca, "Urban Agriculture, Revalorization, and Green Gentrification in Denver, Colorado" in *The Politics of Land* (2016): 149-170; Sabrina C Sideris, "Participation Without Power: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Community Meetings in North Denver," *The Assembly: A Journal for Public Scholarship on Education* 3 (2021): 72-99.