

PUTTING PRACTICE INTO ACTION: HOUSING AFFORDABILITY EDITION

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Panel III: Perspectives on affordability



This essay is a critical reflection on the panel discussion conducted by Korkut Onaran (Pela Ona Architects and Urbanists), on October 25, 2019, as part of the conference titled *Squeezed out: Challenges of diversity and affordability in Colorado communities*. The participants in this panel were Tony Chacon (City of Longmont), Fernando Pages Ruiz (Fine Homebuilding), and Peter Swift (Swift and Associates).

Various dimensions play a role within housing and affordability, including displacement, ethnicity, transportation, costs/burdens, and resident services, some of which are often overlooked. This panel took a deep look into these various dimensions and challenges, from a variety of speakers, by looking at their recommendations and best practices, as well as real world project examples.

The primary question addressed during this panel was about the affordability in housing and how different factors within housing, services, transportation, ethnic considerations, and multidisciplinary planning are taken into account when creating addressing housing issues.

The first speaker, Tony Chacon with the City of Longmont, began with a quick introduction on the background of affordability in the US. He described these processes and how they are cyclical issues, supply and demand structures (and how these are not in balance as they should be) and how housing has historically been neglected in the past as a driver of economic development.

His recommendations included looking at projects, cities, and development in a more holistic and broader context, remembering to “think regionally”. Looking at communities in isolation can lead to many issues, and he recommended against this exact mindset that municipalities tend to operate under. Chacon provided direct examples on actions the city of Longmont has implemented regarding housing affordability (comprehensive planning, collaboration with other cities such as Boulder, land acquisitions, and allowances for ADUs), many of which can serve as “best practices” and/or as case studies and examples for other municipalities.

A key recommendation that I think is often forgotten that Chacon gave was regarding calculations on household incomes, and that many other factors need to be regarded. This can include **access** to goods and services, which is often forgotten, and calculating affordability and incomes can be more complex than just looking at yearly household incomes.



The first speaker, Tony Chacon, discusses the City of Longmont's actions in addressing affordability issues in their housing market.

Speaker #2, Fernando Pages Ruiz, began his talk with an anecdote from his childhood, being a immigrant from Argentina, and coming to the USA to New York City, where he and his family found that cultural differences were more than just language and mannerisms, but also architecture. He found that certain parts of his mother's apartment did not fit to the housing that they had back home, and they began making little adjustments that made them feel more at home. This anecdote was the perfect segway for his talk, as Ruiz looks at housing as an expression of culture, and how he began to seek accommodations for cultural aesthetics in his real estate career.

Speaking directly to his work in Lincoln, Nebraska in a refugee resettlement village, Ruiz has worked on home building and remodels as a contractor, tailoring houses to different cultural values and aspects. He began by starting conversations with homeowners, learning to understand what they missed about their old home. He began to see that subtle changes could really change someone's life for the better. He helped created Liberty Village, which housed homes catered directly to groups of Muslims, Southeast Asians, etc. His talk was about how as planners and professionals in the field, we can achieve compatible elements and work through zoning, building codes, and other regulations to create housing in a way that satisfies the people living there and meets code and regulations.



Speaker #2, Fernando Page Ruiz, explaining concepts behind his work on multi-cultural housing and their corresponding design elements.

Peter Swift, with Swift & Associates, discussed transportation and transportation factors that affect housing and vice versa. Swift took a deep dive into how issues within transportation can divide communities, create unfair burdens, and overall how the dominance of engineering over planning has caused issues in our communities.

Using wonderful examples Swift displayed ways in which highways really are, “car sewers” (as he directly likes to call them). Swift also described multiple highway projects that have destroyed neighborhoods and created them to be slums, and how these over-engineered projects have disaggregated urban form and ruined neighborhoods.

After analyzing the criticisms of transportation projects that have led to suburban sprawl, disagreed urban forms, and inequities, Swift gave a handful of solutions that can be translated into best practices using some of his case studies. These included items such as: creating compact, walkable, transit-oriented neighborhood structures, moving highways in economically distressed urban areas, repurposing arterial thoroughfare, and, lastly, creating more multimodal transit opportunities connecting walkable neighborhoods

Most notable case studies to me included Octavia Boulevard, San Francisco, and Lancaster Ramblas Transformation, which was a project based on both Las Ramblas in Barcelona, and old town Fort

Collins, places that I have admired in my own personal travels. The examples provided are ways in which cities that had over engineered and massive highways/roads that were not for people in any way, were then transformed after the fact, almost in the vein of “adaptive re- use” to creating spaces that are better utilized by people, reaping both environmental benefits and economic ones as well. Peter also mentioned other projects all over the US that have considered highway removals, showing a trend towards moving away from these massive projects, which is important in the context of this panel, about land use and dedicated time, space, and planning towards housing and equity.



Peter Swift, the third speaker, shows a strong image of a highway neighborhood as he speaks to the topic of “muscular” highway projects and what they do to neighborhoods.

The key takeaways of this panel included housing overall as the main theme, and how housing has includes many complex factors and processes. All of this should be regarded on a regional scale, incorporating job balance, economic, and bringing in other important factors later such as transportation. Attainable housing, affordability, and lessening burdens in disadvantaged communities and other equity issues were also addressed.

Since housing is extremely multifaceted and complex, it is important to provide different perspectives on the topic, as this panel did. An important key piece that all speakers discussed is regionality, and how attention to detail on a broader scale is important to finding solutions. These solutions cannot come from one area of planning, but need to be incorporated from culture to culture, city to city, and sector to sector.

Other suggestions that came to me as a listener and member of the audience may not have been directly stated during the panel but can be implied from the range of speakers is the importance of working with people from different fields to come up with solutions. Creating programs, projects, incentives, rules/regulations that work need to be worked on by groups from different fields that can bring different perspectives to the table. Learning about the cyclical nature of the economy, cultural housing types, and the over-engineering of projects is all new to me and comes from professions outside of planning. Multi-sector and diverse conversations can help bring us to more well balanced and innovative solutions in housing tribulations.

Regarding the transportation sector and it's conjunctions with housing, many of Peter's points really resonated with me. Over engineered projects, "strong", big and intense highway projects are seen so much in Denver. These types of projects are evidently seen in Denver, in neighborhoods such as Globeville and Elyria-Swansea and Sun Valley for example. Current planning efforts are beginning to create changes to these older, more "strong" highways projects (note, see Colfax Cloverleaf project), helping connect those areas of housing to other parts of the city. These areas have been pushed aside and highways have directly led to health, housing, and other social impacts.