

Discovering Denver: The Mile-High City

By RISHAB MEHAN

Much like the gold prospectors who first settled Denver in 1858, many of the twenty second-year planning students on this year's field trip weren't too sure what to expect when they



Outside the Colorado Convention Centre and the famous Blue Bear ("I see what you mean" by Lawrence Argent).

Photo credit: Stanley Woo

reached their destination. Like those first pioneers, we had heard there was gold where it was least expected (though our gold was the urban context rather than the yellow stuff). Unlike those pioneers, however, we actually found an abundance of what we were looking for and returned with an embarrassment of riches in learning and memories.

In a comprehensive four-day trip, booked for some with trips to nearby Boulder for hiking and touring, the Class of 2016 was treated to what felt at times like a utopian world of urban planning. The group, joined this year by Adjunct Professor John Farrow as the faculty representative, convened

in its entirety on Tuesday September 8th. The trip's formal itinerary was kicked off with a biking tour of the quaint university town of Boulder. The tour was led by David Kemp, senior transportation planner for the City of Boulder, who provided an introduction to the city's urban infrastructure and offered a first glimpse of the exceptional regional planning coordination that became a central theme of our time in Denver.

The active start led naturally into a leisurely evening providing the chance for the group to eagerly catch-up on a summer filled with activities all over Canada and the world. The excitement for the trip grew as we sampled the offerings of the city's booming craft brewery scene and smaller groups set out to explore the city's rich variety of urban forms. Our basecamp, Hostel Fish, was centrally-located and offered easy access to the downtown core.

The first activity in Denver proper took us to Mariposa, an affordable housing development led by the Denver Housing Authority (DHA). Ryan Tobin, Director of Real Estate Development for DHA, gave us a personal tour of the award-winning, nationally recognized multi-phased development. The 900 unit development replaced 278 functionally obsolescent public housing units and added new market housing in a massive revitalization project spanning several years. The project drew on a number of city-wide policies including a transit-oriented development initiative that saw billions of municipal, regional and state dollars put into public transportation.

With the displacement issues experienced in Toronto's social housing revitalization work, the group asked about Mariposa's displacement and we were surprised to learn that just under 30 percent of the original public housing tenants stayed in the community. Even more surprising was that this was deemed a success relative to other US revitalization projects where displacement is typically higher. We also learned about the unique funding models used in American social housing development and the central role of private partners and housing authorities working as market-landlords, much of which is supported by Federal housing investment through low-income housing tax credits.

We lived the reality of transit-oriented Mariposa by walking off the sidewalk in the community directly onto the platform for the "RTD" (Regional Transportation District). There we caught a light rail train to the Municipal Building for a talk on Denver's transit system with Senior City Planner David Gaspers. David spoke to us in detail about Denver's unprecedented investment and planning in regional transit through its Transit-Oriented Development Strategic Plan. The strategic plan provides an in-depth model for TOD in the city by creating a series of typologies for different stations in the city and integrating various topological overlays to determine optimal and realistic land use development patterns from the anticipated development growth (the plan is certainly worth a review for anyone interested in TOD).

One of the key messages from David's talk was how regional co-operation led to massive achievements for transit in the city and region. Through a voter-approved ballot initiative called FasTracks, the city and region positioned themselves to launch six new transit lines in 2016 with a seventh expected in 2018. In just a ten-year period, Denver was able to plan and execute a comprehensive transit expansion plan creating nearly 200km of new commuter rail and light rail, nearly 30km of bus rapid transit, 21,000 park-and-ride parking spots and a number of other transit improvements. The plan spans eight counties (or political jurisdictions) with some receiving little direct benefit from the increased investment and higher tax bill.

A thought-provoking morning was followed by an equally rich walking tour of some of Denver's historic neighbourhoods centred on the "LoDo" (Lower Downtown). The tour was led by Ken Schroepel, a professor in Planning and Design at the University of Denver. Ken's multiple roles as a planning consultant, board member of the Downtown Denver Partnership, and academic became clear through the tour as he spoke equally passionately about the unique sight lines created by Denver's angled downtown grid-pattern and the history of heritage preservation as LoDo traversed various periods of economic boom and bust.

Taking a walking break in Congress Park





Density and greenery over Denver's downtown

The tour highlighted Denver's palpable civic pride and took us through the historic Larimer Square area and to a revitalized Union Station, which like many heritage buildings was narrowly saved from demolition to become an exemplary model of heritage preservation. The day's explorations conveniently ended at a local pub popular with UD students. We met with local planning and geography students who were part of the University of Denver chapter of the American Planning Association.

On day three, a compelling lecture with four staff at the memorably named DRCOG (Doctor Cog), gave us more in-depth insights into this important theme of regional collaboration. DRCOG is the Denver Regional Council of Governments, the regional planning agency for the eight counties that make up the Denver metropolitan region of 2.2 million people (compared to the approximately 650,000 people in the City and County of Denver).

Brad Calvert, Metro Vision Manger, introduced the organization and some of the history of its politics. Among Brad's many insights was that Denver's regional collaboration was rooted in the Mile-High Compact, an agreement between the region's governments to support the growth of the region above any individual member's growth.

Regional Economist, Dan Jerrett, showed us that Denver is a national leader in its use of econometrics and data analytics for developing land use plans and strategy. Dan walked us through DRCOG's use of UrbanSim and its own time-series and scenario analysis which allows the region to build comprehensive models of how real estate markets would respond to specific parcel-level policy interventions. In short, the region's modelling uses inputs such as parcels, buildings, household size and employment. Through analysis of demographic trends and well-developed forecasting techniques, the model produces outputs showing employment, residential unit demand and commercial square footages tailored to the specific demographics in the base case.

Matthew Helfant, Senior Transportation Planner, provided a more in-depth view of the FasTracks program and the region's transit growth. Andy Taylor, Senior Planner, gave a brief overview of the region's urban growth boundary and commented on how despite lacking a Colorado state mandate, regional coordination and collaboration ensured that the land use policies were followed by the region's governments. The presentations ended

with the one, now obligatory, mass-selfie of the trip with Nate Currey, Comms/PR Director, doing the honours for the @DRCOGorg Twitter page.

After a lunch sampling the offerings of at least fifty food-trucks in the manicured Congress Park, we were treated to another walking tour. This time we focussed on the public art treasures of the City led by Brendan Picker, City of Denver Public Art Coordinator. Brendan introduced us to some of the City's diverse collection, all unique and purpose-made for the City. The tour revealed the parallel between Toronto's Percent for Public Art program and Denver's policy requiring all government construction projects to contribute 1% of their construction value to same cause. Inevitably, the tour also provided for the "people's choice" in group pictures alongside the iconic Blue Bear.

As was the case throughout the trip, the final day offered yet another set of new insights and a range of topics. To the appreciation of many, the morning lecture was a later start and was hosted in the hostel itself. Jan Harrington, CEO of Colorado Community Land Trust offered us great insights into her organization, providing a candid account of the challenges in leveraging multiple stakeholders to engage in unfamiliar housing and policy models. Jenney Starkey of the Cherry Creek North Business Improvement District rounded out the range of perspectives we encountered on the trip with a private sector view of planning, governance and economic development in Denver.

Between the scheduled activities the group enjoyed the opportunity to explore the city and forge deeper bonds together. The value of exploring planning in a new context and with external perspective was by no means lost on any of those attending the trip. We are all extremely grateful to the Planning Alumni Community for their generous support in funding the trip and continuing to fund the experience as a meaningful component of the Master's program. All who attended would like to express their gratitude to John Farrow for attending on behalf of the faculty and constantly providing insightful questions and valuable perspectives on the planning issues and great spirit in everything else. Lastly, very special thanks must also go to the three student organizers Guilia Ilacqua, Jessica Krushnisky and Stephanie Malcher – thank you for giving up so much of your summers and taking so much care to organize an unforgettable trip.

*Food trucks in Congrees Park and downtown Denver.
Photo credit: Meaghan Maund*

