Incomplete Streets: Processes, Practices and Possibilities

Chapter 7: Curbing Cruising: Lowriding and the domestication of the Northside

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Abstract

Today North Denver neighborhoods are gentrifying rapidly. In 2006 the completion of a pedestrian bridge across Interstate 25 connected Highland, a heretofore-isolated North Denver barrio, to Lower Downtown. In a sense, this award-winning span completed the Northside’s now pedestrian/bicycle-friendly streets. These streets currently play a critical role in Highland’s gentrification; however a fundamental question remains; for whom are they (in)complete? Trendy restaurants, funky boutiques, and bike kiosks currently encourage a decidedly hipster/middle-class publicness within spaces that used to be public in very different ways. What animated streetscapes in the late 20th century were playing children, after-church *paseos, cumbias*, rap and mariachi music, neighborhood socializing, and lowrider cruising. This chapter deconstructs the genesis of the gentrification of the Northside. By unpacking focused efforts to eliminate lowrider cruising from public streets and city parks in Denver, I offer insight into the histories of dislocation and displacement that undergirded its rapid socioeconomic change.

Drawing from Lefebvre’s *right to the city* and Cohen’s notion of *folk devils and moral panics*, I examine how official regulations—zero-tolerance policing and pointed changes to traffic enforcement policy—and social sanctions—op-ed articles along with overt public action and braggadocio—functioned in tandem to effectively change legal and commonsense notions of what constitutes a vibrant, safe, and complete street. Relying on both ethnographic and archival methods, I discovered obvious and subtle efforts of the Denver Police Department and Denver’s elite to eliminate low-rider cruising from specific neighborhoods. During one year of fieldwork, I relied primarily on narrative interviews, in which neighbourhood long-timers shared stories of their individual histories and city planners recounted the histories of their decisions. Additionally, I plumbed municipal and media archives to gain insight into the social, political, and bureaucratic conditions of North Denver before it began to gentrify. Weaving together these perspectives, I outline a more complete model of the process of its current gentrification.

Finally, my oblique historical angles on the Northside’s gentrification serve to supplement gentrification theory in general. People dwell in, and are often displaced from private residences;
however, they live in neighborhood public space. Streets comprise a significant portion of this space. More than merely conduct traffic, they frame, facilitate, and often frustrate the formation of everyday, lived spaces. I put forth that the dispossession of these prosaic public spaces remains significant in neighborhood-specific socio-cultural change and is consequently a salient factor in gentrification.