

A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR ALAMO PLACITA



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A Sustainable Future for Alamo Placita, Denver, Colorado

By Caroline Eaton Tracey

The American West, never a landscape able to support a populace of millions, faces a myriad of environmental concerns. Westerners are lamenting summer nights where the temperature barely descends and winters with lessening snowpacks, watching the prairies devoured by tract homes and reservoir water levels drop. It seems that human exploitation of the finite resources of the West has finally caught up with itself, and we face a drastically different future.

Human habitation currently entails reaching further each year into our planet's "savings account" of resources, never allowing reprieve for the account to replenish. A green neighborhood must effectively, and not wastefully, exist within its landscape. However, to "be green" in the West is a paradox: "You have to get over the color green; you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale¹," western author Wallace Stegner portended. The Western landscape is not green. It is beautifully austere to those who know it well, but splendor in the West, and in the city of Denver, was defined by pioneers who, looking to emulate their familiar New England homes, expanded grass parkways and lawns westward into lands without enough water to support their reality. (Note the fates of watered versus non-irrigated grass: Appendix, figures 2/3). This standard of beauty is a mistake from which contemporary Westerners must backtrack, but a difficult fight as urban dwellers learn to appreciate the natural magnificence of our region.

¹ Stegner, Wallace. "Thoughts in a Dry Land," in *The American West as Living Space*, Wallace Stegner. (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1987.)

Conservation through smart urban planning can sharply reduce unconscious, gratuitous use of resources. A sustainable neighborhood must employ multi-use zoning for access to schools, businesses and jobs with minimal need for automobile transport. It must also debunk the idea of “living large,” using compact, high-density development practices to encourage simple, aesthetic living and the conservation of natural open space. My proposal addresses automobiles, buildings, water use, and open space in the Alamo Placita neighborhood of Denver, Colorado, through the following steps:

- Reduction of bluegrass in neighborhood parks and parkways
- Creation of a Historic Home Green Loan Fund
- Development of “Walkability Corridors”

The city of Denver is making earnest conservation efforts, but has a long way to go before it can claim security for the future. Its keystone sustainability plan, Greenprint Denver, includes increasing city tree canopy threefold, certifying all municipal buildings LEED-Silver, promoting conservation and recycling of water, and supporting green economic development in the city². The plan has bipartisan government support but is not widely known by laypeople. For it to truly affect the future of the city of Denver, the action plan must be able to engage every citizen and cultivate a lifestyle of sustainability over consumption. Smart urban planning, beginning at the neighborhood level, can achieve this end, as its unity of top-down planning and citizen participation inherently fosters the balance needed for monumental change.

² www.greenprintdenver.org

In September 2007, the Glendale-Cherry Creek Chronicle, a newspaper serving neighborhoods in East and Central Denver, published “The De-Greening of Denver,” a misguided diatribe describing environmentalism in Denver:

In these ecologically conscious times the concept that Denver is becoming more ‘green’ is automatically assumed...But the devil is always in the details...In its natural state, [Denver] would be a very “sustainable” city, but also a very brown and desolate one.³

The editorial calls for a return to the “City Beautiful” vision of Denver, initiated by Robert Speer (Mayor, 1904-1912 and 1916-1918), in which “each block would have a surround of tree lawns and sidewalks; large parks would serve the entire city...the whole city would be framed and sheltered by a network of park ways⁴.”

One of my visions in a sustainable future for Alamo Placita is to cultivate an environmentally sound manifestation of The City Beautiful, through which Denverites may take advantage of our prairie landscape in a city that will thrive into the future. Plants native to Colorado have adapted to the arid, drought-prone climate, requiring up to eighty percent less water than non-native bluegrass⁵, the favored tenant of urban green spaces. Greenprint Denver’s 2007 goals called for three park/parkway sites to be changed to native vegetation; by 2011, an additional 100 acres of turf will be converted⁶. Alamo Placita Park is one of Denver’s most vibrant commons. (I once had to explain to a visitor to the city that it was not the Botanic Gardens but a regular park, complete with free admission.) The southern portion of the park (below 2nd Avenue) is marked by colorful beds of flowers, separated by walking paths. (Figure 2b.) The bluegrass within this section of the park is unused for recreation and presents an opportunity for replacement

³ “The De-Greening of Denver,” *The Glendale-Cherry Creek Chronicle*, September 2007: page 3.

⁴ “The De-Greening of Denver.”

⁵ *Greenprint Goals*. 2006, City and County of Denver, http://greenprintdenver.org/environment/environment_goals.php, (Accessed 28 December 2007).

⁶ *Greenprint Goals*.

by native prairie plants. The use of these less vivid plants (such as prairie tallgrass) will emphasize the flowers and provide a unique visual experience for walkers in the park. As the practicality and appreciation of these hardy plants gathers notoriety, Denver Parks and Recreation can expand their use into parkways and areas of parks not used for recreation, saving valuable water.

Conservation biologists have initiated wildlife corridors in many areas threatened by human development. These strips of habitat allow wildlife populations to move between wilderness areas without being susceptible to harm by humans. A second component of my plan applies this idea to humans within a city. Alamo Placita lies on central Denver's gridded streets (see figure 1) and is accessible by foot – my townhouse lies on the same block as the park, two blocks from a deli, three from a grocery store, and five from an independent movie theater. However, neighborhoods that foster walkability through quiet streets and multi-use zoning are islands, separated by dangerous intersections and busy streets. Near the neighborhood is the Cherry Creek North shopping district. Though once within the district, it is easily walked, the busy streets bordering Cherry Creek North make it extremely difficult to enter the area on foot. However, along Speer Boulevard – the Southern Border of Alamo Placita (figure 1) – is the sunken Cherry Creek Bike Path (figure 3), which runs through Denver along Cherry Creek. My proposition, the development of “walkability corridors,” involves harnessing the path for car independence and economic profitability from foot traffic. By improving the existing path and creating outward paths marked by signage, large sidewalks, and

lengthy walk signals across streets, the path will become a highway for citizens on foot, connecting the city through an alternative to asphalt and automobiles.

In 2000, Harvard University pioneered The Green Campus Loan Fund, which provides, from a fast-growing fund of \$12 million, capital for projects that “reduce the University’s environmental impact and have a payback period of 5-10 years⁷.” Departments receiving loans repay the fund through project-related savings achieved by “utility conservation, waste removal or operating costs⁸.” The projects save the University an estimated \$3.8 million per year. A final component of my plan for a sustainable Alamo Placita is the creation of a Historic Home Green Loan Fund. Alamo Placita includes both single-family residences and duplexes, and makes up its own historic district, designated in 2000 by the Denver Landmarks Preservation Commission. Other than a multitude of “pop-tops” – the addition of a second story to a bungalow – there is little new construction (my townhouse complex is an anomaly). Reigning instead are Queen Anne, Denver Square, Arts and Crafts, and Mission Revival styles of homes built between 1889 and 1942, when the neighborhood was originally settled. Owners of historic homes have little incentive to retrofit their homes for energy savings because the up-front costs are high. However, these homes have many sources of energy inefficiency, including drafty windows, uninsulated ceilings and walls, and archaic appliances. The Denver Landmarks Preservation Commission/Alamo Placita Historic District will govern a neighborhood-wide loan fund, based on Harvard’s administration model, making the neighborhood more energy efficient one home at a time. This model

⁷ *The Green Campus Loan Fund*. 2007, Harvard Green Campus Initiative.
<http://www.greencampus.harvard.edu/gclf/index.php>, (Accessed 31 December 2007).

⁸ *The Green Campus Loan Fund*.

could later be expanded to include provide loans for alternatives to lawns (such as xeriscaping) and could be easily expanded (once capital is in place) so that each historic district in the city operates a similar program.

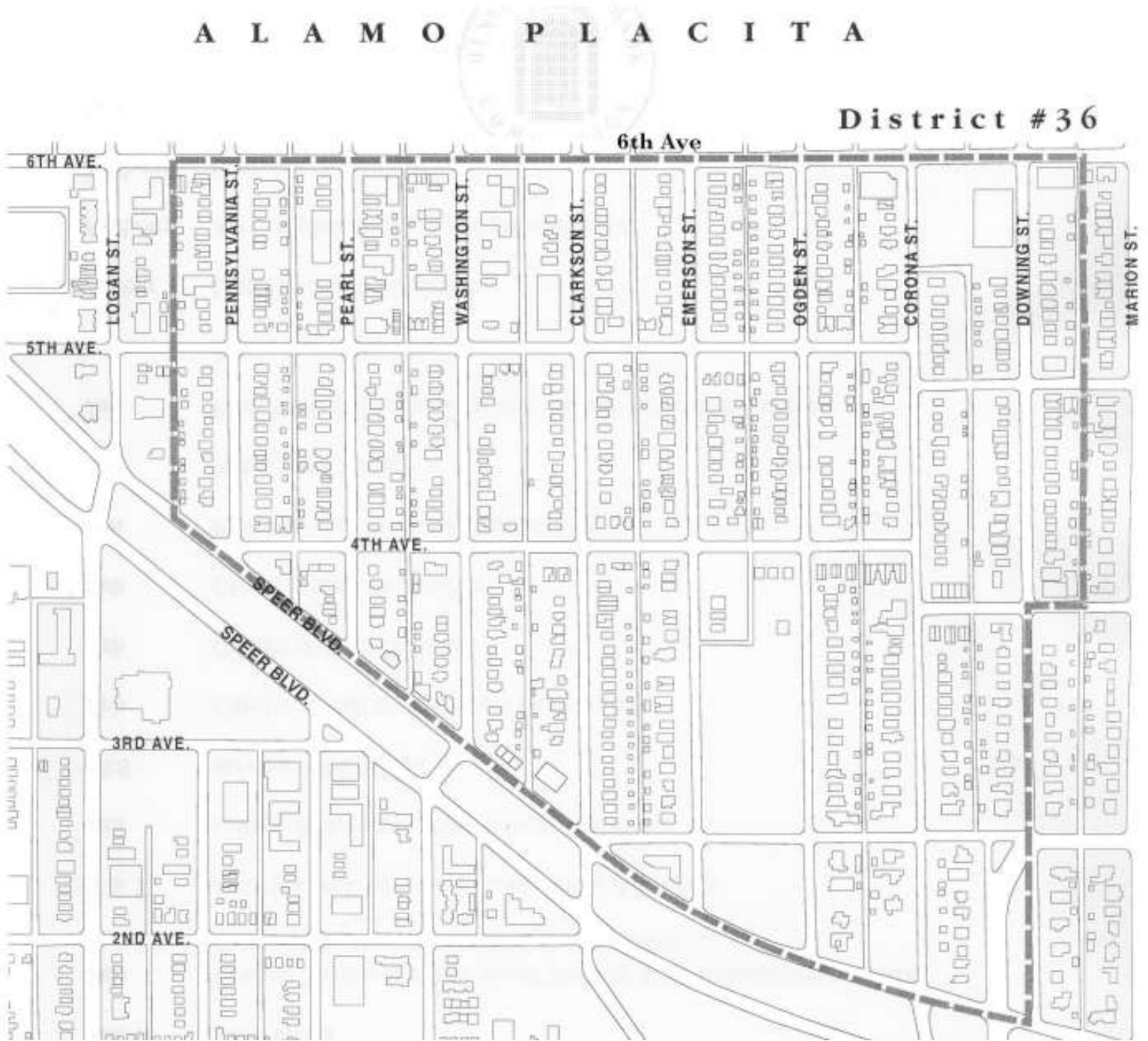
The Alamo Placita neighborhood exemplifies the vision of Denver illustrated in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Animal Dreams*: "I'd seen Denver once. It had endless neighborhoods of sweet old brick houses with peaked roofs and lawns shaded by huge maples. It would be a heavenly place to walk a dog.⁹" Indeed the neighborhood is a welcoming place to live. Its spirit as a Western neighborhood makes it easy for one to see why the region is currently experiencing rapid population growth and urbanization, and why Denver has not escaped the clutches of this "progress." Current mayor John Hickenlooper proclaimed at the Democratic National Convention year-ahead countdown in August 2007, "Denver and the Rocky Mountain region have come a long way since we last held a national political convention in 1908. Our community looks forward to... showcasing the energy, opportunity and diversity of the New West.¹⁰" But if Westerners wish to live up to this epitaph, if we wish to sustain our region into the future, we must first make our cities sustainable, and begin in our own neighborhoods.

⁹ Kingsolver, Barbara. *Animal Dreams*, p. 203-204. New York: Harper Perennial, 1990.

¹⁰ Hickenlooper, John. DNC Countdown speech, Pepsi Center, Denver, Colorado, 8/22/07. View video: http://www.demconvention.com/a/2007/08/governor_dean_d.html

APPENDIX

FIGURE 1. MAP OF ALAMO PLACITA HISTORIC DISTRICT



from Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods: www.chundenver.org

FIGURES 2A AND 2B. ALAMO PLACITA PARK

Looking North across 2nd Ave.



Looking South at Speer Boulevard from 2nd Ave.



from denvergov.org

from denverurbanproperties.com

FIGURE 3. CHERRY CREEK



from http://www.udfcd.org/fhn2005/index_frame.htm

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