

Boom and Decline: When Greenways Link Low and High SES Neighborhoods

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Abstract

Social and economic inequalities in American cities mean that “booming cities” all have neighborhoods that are not thriving, and “declining cities” are likely to have some areas that are booming. Disadvantaged urban neighborhoods with high numbers of people living in poverty exist in all cities, but they are more pervasive in declining cities. Greenways, linear features in the urban landscape, cut across neighborhoods with varying levels of socioeconomic status (SES), depending on their design and place-specific characteristics. Where greenways link wealth to poverty, interesting concerns, issues, and opportunities arise. This paper reviews existing research on phenomena associated with this particular aspect of urban greenways: connections that greenways make between boom and decline, between wealth and poverty, between advantaged and disadvantaged neighborhoods. Factors specific to greenway planning in low SES neighborhoods are identified, and a greenway planning framework for addressing inequalities is proposed. Examples of specific greenway projects where high SES to low SES linkages occur and have been documented are provided.

Introduction

Cities are heterogeneous landscapes. Expanding, contracting, booming, and declining - these words can be used to describe different parts of the same city. Even a recognized boomtown like New York City has areas that are in decline. Complicating an assessment of these measures is the ambiguous nature of city boundaries. Do we mean center city or metropolitan area? In either case, areas of boom and decline and areas of expansion and contraction occur simultaneously. Booming and expanding parts of a city have higher real estate values than parts of the city that are declining or shrinking. This means that booming areas typically contain more higher socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods than parts of the city that are in decline. Cities that are declining and/or contracting overall typically have a greater percentage of low SES neighborhoods.

Urban SES spatial heterogeneity is significant for the planning and design of linear recreational and/or conservation corridors, otherwise known as greenways. The linear extension of these facilities across an urban landscape means that they will likely cross areas of wildly differing socioeconomic conditions. This means that greenways have the potential to link wealthy and poor neighborhoods. Is this positive or negative, and in what ways and for whom? What considerations do greenway planners need to take into account when planning facilities that link booming and declining areas of a city? This paper addresses these questions.

Background and Literature Review

The greenway movement can be traced back to the origins of the profession of landscape architecture, but it gained momentum in the United States beginning in the 1990s. It is now an international planning and design strategy of significance (Fábos and Ryan 2004). Fábos (2004) identifies three main types of greenways: ecological corridors, recreational trails including water trails, and corridors of cultural and historic resources. The type of greenway that is the focus of this paper is the urban multi-use recreational trail.

A highly cited review of “human dimensions” of greenways is Gobster and Westphal (2004). Regarding people’s perception and use of greenways, they identified six values to be considered in greenway planning: “cleanliness, naturalness, aesthetics, safety, access, and appropriateness of development” (2004, 147). While this list was developed through a series of studies in the Chicago region that included different populations, justifying the generalizations made, Gobster and Westphal note that results could vary substantially by location and culture. Social equity is not a significant component of the Gobster and Westphal paper. In the article, equity is only mentioned twice, both in relation to access. Since 2004, however, interest in the relationship between greenways and equity, including low SES neighborhoods and concerns over gentrification, has steadily increased.

Over the last decade, there has been a proliferation of signature greenway projects or what Rigolon and Németh call “large green infrastructure projects” or LGIPs (2018, 71). For example, in 2008 the first segment of the Atlanta BeltLine opened, and in 2009 the celebrated High Line made its premiere. These high profile projects caused public officials, philanthropists, and the general public to rethink the idea of greenways. The success of these projects affirmed the connection between greenways and urban revitalization, and cities around the world now seek to replicate this type of infrastructure and design. Concerns over environmental gentrification (Immergluck and Balan 2018; Rigolon and Németh 2018) have accompanied the rise of these city-structuring greenways. Environmental gentrification occurs when urban sustainability, seemingly a progressive idea, is used to create conditions for gentrification, with associated land value increases and displacement of low income residents. In this context, the need for a greenway planning process that actively addresses linkages between boom and decline and areas of expansion and contraction is more important than ever.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of this paper is to define a greenway planning framework that addresses the issues raised when urban greenway projects connect neighborhoods of varying SES. The objectives are to (1) review recent academic literature to determine issues and opportunities regarding neighborhood-level impacts of urban greenways, (2) develop a list of critical factors that should be included in the greenway planning process to address, especially, the needs of low SES neighborhoods, and (3) identify case study examples of greenways that link low and high SES neighborhoods.

Methods

The method employed in this paper is a systematic review of the literature to identify issues, opportunities, and critical factors of concern for greenway planning processes when low and high SES neighborhoods are linked. The database, Web of Science, was searched using the following keywords: greenways or

linear trails in combination with disadvantage, social equity, amenities, community participation, environmental justice, neighborhood, and race. Cited references and citing articles were also reviewed.

Results

The results will be presented in three sections. The first is an overview of neighborhood-level impacts and issues of urban greenways. The second details a framework for greenway planning that includes critical factors for sensitivity to SES issues. The third presents case studies that exemplify the concepts.

Neighborhood-Level Issues and Impacts of Urban Greenways

When cities make infrastructural investments, especially amenity development investments, they are often focused on parts of the city that already have advantages, such as central business districts and other areas of wealth concentration, such as the suburbs. This is why planning researchers have investigated the distribution of, and *access* to, parks and other recreational facilities (e.g., Gobster and Westphal 2004). Korver-Glenn et al. (2017) point out that much of environmental justice research addresses placement of negative types of development, like polluting land uses, within low income communities and communities of color. When more beneficial land uses, including environmental amenities like greenways, are proposed for disadvantaged communities, this is generally perceived positively. However, positive sentiment on the part of the local community depends on the extent to which neighborhood residents are included in the planning process. Korver-Glenn et al. emphasize the importance of engaging the affected population, especially racial minorities, to maximize the benefits of the investment. For example, the perceptions of potential greenway users should be incorporated into the planning process to encourage use and “ownership.” Greenway benefits, including health benefits, can be maximized by increased usage, but usage cannot be assumed. Benefits are more likely to result when there is active engagement of the community before the greenway is built.

In contrast to issues of access, the potential for a greenway project to create environmental gentrification is a possible negative effect. A recent study of land and housing costs within one-half mile of the Atlanta BeltLine indicated that housing values increased by approximately 18 to 27 percent between 2011 and 2015 (Immergluck and Balan 2018). Rising land and housing costs exclude low income residents, and greenway planning should take this possibility into account in advance. Provisions for affordable housing can accompany revitalization plans that include greenways.

Rigolon and Németh (2018) caution that nonprofit organizations, funded through private philanthropy, increasingly control greenway planning, especially in the case of signature, city-structuring kinds of projects. These nonprofits do not generally have the history and practice with community engagement that public agencies do, and therefore these kinds of greenways may be built with little regard for disadvantaged communities. One approach would be for parks departments to form coalitions with housing organizations to advance balanced approaches to redevelopment.

Framework for SES-Sensitive Greenway Planning

The assumption by greenway advocates is that “everyone benefits.” Eagerness to extend the mileage of a greenway system often overwhelms attention to the needs of neighborhoods through which a greenway will travel. Greenway planning should be SES-sensitive and acknowledge that communities may be skeptical about the intent of planners. Race and socioeconomic factors should be considered. This position is supported by a recent study by Palardy et al. (2018). They found a disparity in perceptions between

black and white residents living along the Atlanta BeltLine, with white residents being more favorable to the greenway, but they also found that the factors contributing to favorable opinions were the same among both groups. Frequency of use, perceived mental health benefits, and perceived economic benefits drove the positive associations of both black and white residents. The authors suggest that these perceptions are dependent on resident engagement in the planning process, and they also note that more research needs to be done in this area.

A framework for SES-sensitive greenway planning should address the following factors:

- Access to greenway amenities and distribution across a city
- Assessment of vulnerabilities based on spatial locations of environmental stressors and correlation with vulnerable populations (Fernandez and Wu 2018)
- Cross-sectorial governance (public, private, nonprofit)
- Scale of the proposed greenway - LGIP across multiple neighborhoods or smaller?
- Potential impacts on land and housing prices, with attention to affordable housing in low SES communities
- Explicit attention to issues of crime and fear of crime
- User outreach to reach diverse constituencies (age, race, gender, ability, ethnicity)

Case Study Examples

Denver, Colorado is an example of a booming city with an impressive network of greenways. Located just west of downtown, though, is the poorest neighborhood in Denver (and, by some accounts, the poorest in the state), Sun Valley. Located in an isolated pocket of land just south of the Mile High Stadium and separated from downtown by the South Platte River and an interstate highway, Sun Valley residents have a median income under \$10,000 and an unemployment rate that is over 80% (Jackson 2018). The crime rate is nearly six times the citywide average. Environmental gentrification is a significant concern for area residents, as the neighborhood is being called “Denver’s next big thing.” Three greenway trails converge in the neighborhood: the award-winning South Platte River Greenway, the Lakewood Gulch Trail, and the Weir Gulch Trail (**Figures 1, 2, and 3**).

Since 2011, the City of Denver, primarily through its housing authority, has engaged in a HUD-funded proactive planning process to create an inclusive, equitable future for Sun Valley’s low income residents. The greenway plan that immediately preceded the housing planning (Greenway Foundation 2010), however, does not contain the word, *equity*, anywhere within its 76 pages. It is unfortunate that these planning processes are disconnected. **Figure 3** shows the percentage of residents living below the poverty level in neighborhoods surrounding Sun Valley. Greenway trails link Sun Valley to wealthier neighborhoods in Denver’s urban core and in the suburbs.

Another case of a greenway that connects areas of boom and decline, low SES neighborhoods to high SES neighborhoods, is the Atlanta Beltline. With sections in use for over a decade and a length of 33 miles, encircling the urban core, the Atlanta Beltline has had a profound influence on Atlanta’s urban form. Two detailed studies, one on land and housing costs (Immergluck and Balan 2018) and one on users (Palardy et al. 2018), have recently been completed on this greenway.

Bloomington Trail (The 606) in Chicago, which broke ground in 2013, is the subject of two recent studies, including Rigolon and Németh (2018). It is located on an old elevated rail line, and runs 2.7 miles through

dense urban neighborhoods of varying SES. Harris et al (2018) studied the effect of The 606 on crime in the surrounding neighborhoods and found that crime declined in areas closest to The 606, compared to more distant areas within the same neighborhoods.

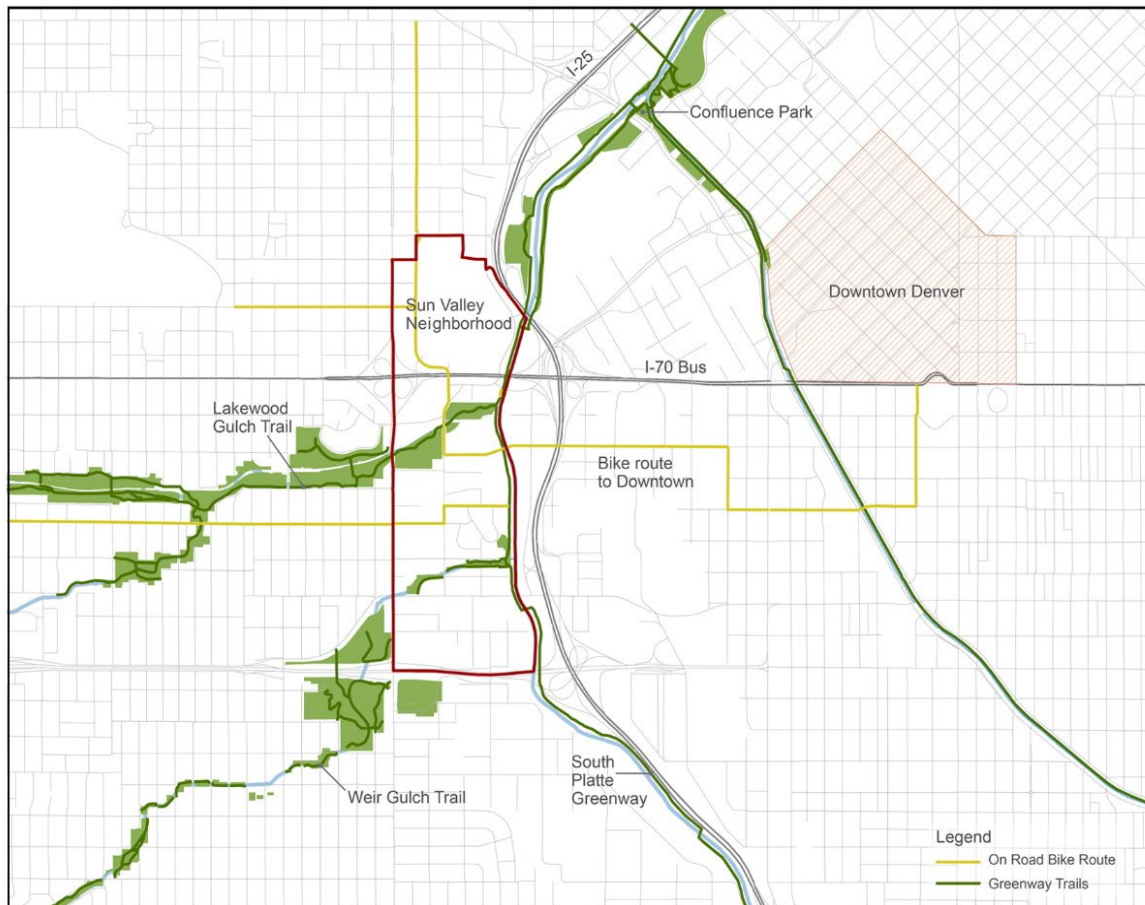


Figure 1. Sun Valley neighborhood's greenway and on-street bike route connections

The final example of an urban greenway that links low and high income neighborhoods is the Lafitte Greenway in New Orleans (Fields et al. 2017). Many of the neighborhoods along the Lafitte Greenway are disadvantaged, and the greenway planning process involved neighborhood coalitions with substantial opportunities for resident input.

Discussion and Conclusion

The linear character of greenways is a contributing factor to their success in communities around the world. Linear corridors connect habitats and allow for species movement. Linear corridors provide opportunities for humans to recreate by walking, running, biking, or other forms of active transportation. Linear corridors can connect historic and cultural resources that might otherwise be separated in the urban fabric, thus allowing for their enjoyment by people using the greenway. Linear corridors also connect disparate things, including low SES neighborhoods with high SES neighborhoods.



Figure 2. Views of the Lakewood Gulch Trail looking west (on right) and east toward Downtown (image credit: M. Margaret Bryant)

When neighborhoods of different socioeconomic status are connected through greenway trails, concerns over issues such as crime are often raised. Studies have shown, however, that such fears are unwarranted. Often not considered, however, are potential negative effects on low SES communities when an “amenity” is placed in their midst. Greenway planners need a process for taking into account the concerns of low SES communities about environmental gentrification. They also need a process for building a greenway user base within the low SES community so that the positive mental and physical health benefits of greenways, as well as the economic benefits, can accrue to urban residents who most need these amenities.

The popularity of signature greenway projects like the High Line and The 606 is creating a new era of greenway planning, one where nonprofits and private philanthropy are taking the lead in many cases. Decades of planning experience with community engagement in the public sector have not yet translated to this new model. As greenways are extended into low income neighborhoods and communities of color, they have the potential to bring great benefits, but they also can have an exclusionary effect. Sensitivity to disparities in the SES status of neighborhoods and to the differences in perceptions of value by neighborhood residents will lead to better outcomes for all neighborhoods along the greenway.

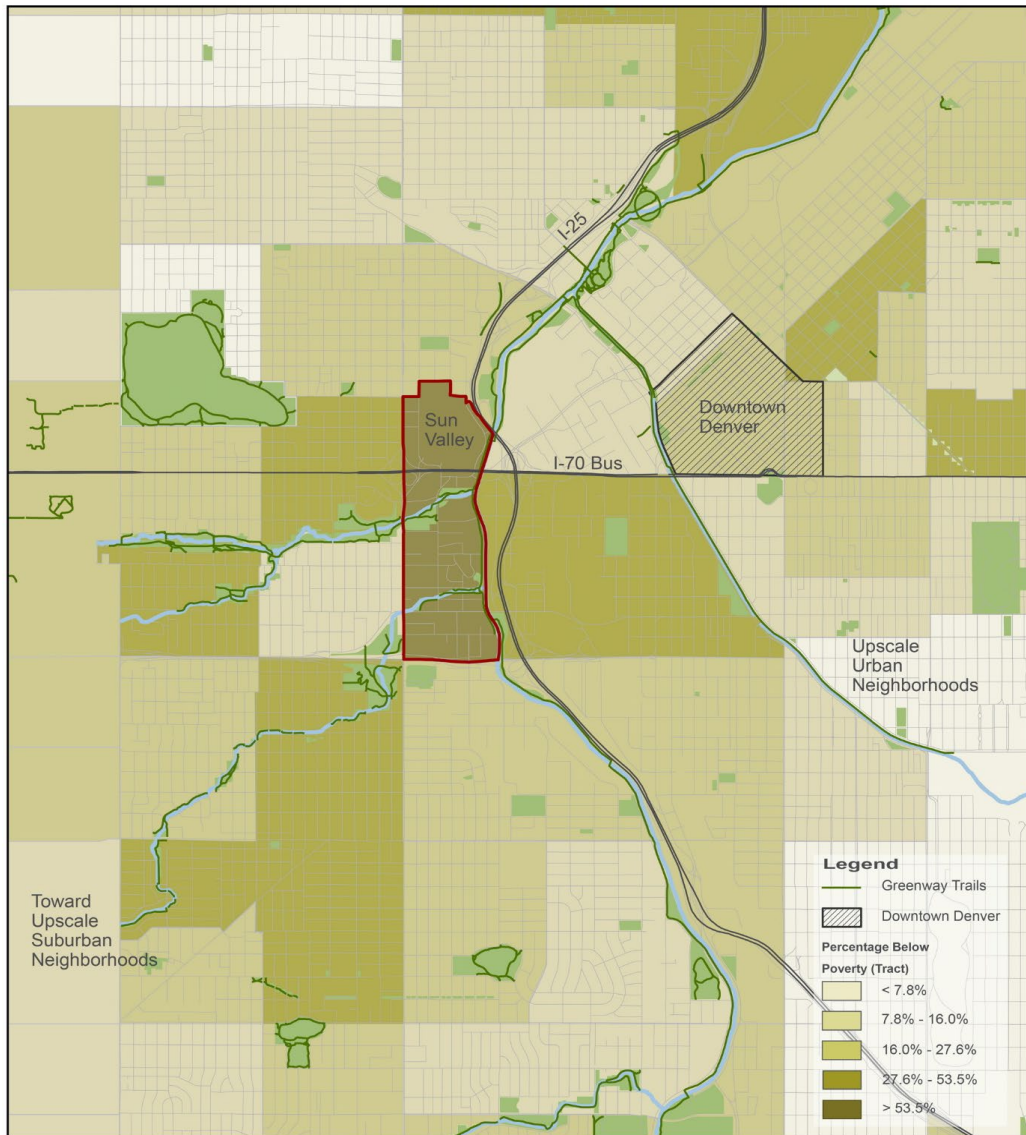


Figure 3. Percentage of population below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau tract-level data)

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