

# Learning from Aspen

Jenny Stuber

07/14/2021



## Learning From Aspen

By: Jenny Stuber, Ph.D

Aspen, Colorado, an elite resort community in the Rocky Mountains, has one of the largest affordable housing programs in the nation. So what can other resort communities that face a shortage of affordable options learn from Aspen? My recent ethnographic book, *Aspen and the American Dream*, addresses how the City of Aspen and Pitkin county have tried to meet the needs of working locals; I also show why it may be difficult to apply these lessons to other communities.

Founded in the late-1970s, the [Aspen-Pitkin County Housing Authority \(APCHA\)](#) maintains 3,045 units, within a town of 7,400 and a county of 17,767 residents; of these units, 1382 are available for rent and 1663 available for ownership. With sizes ranging from studio apartments to 4-bedroom single-family homes, prices start at \$50,000 for a studio apartment and top out around \$1.5 million. Two-bedroom townhomes carry a price-tag of about \$250,000. On the rental side, studios start at \$538, and three-bedroom apartments top out at \$2425 per month (all prices depend on income). The primary eligibility requirement is that residents work 1500 hours each calendar year within the county and occupy the unit for a minimum of 9 months. Because of locally exorbitant housing costs, even those earning \$307,650 per year may qualify for the program (provided they have a 6-person household). Such a program is necessary in a community where the median home price hovers around \$4 million and even a trailer homes sell for well over \$1 million. Despite the relatively large number of units in the program and high threshold for qualification, the program has limitations, which is

especially evident in the fact that the supply of affordable units never satisfies the extensive demand.



What makes Aspen's affordable housing program work is a complex set of intertwining factors, which together comprise its *place-based class culture* (an idea developed with Boise State's Krista Paulsen). In short, local understandings of social class and class differences lead to extensive ideological and cultural support for the affordable housing program; at the same time, social policies institutionalize the collection of revenues that make it possible. In terms of belief systems, many locals and visitors hold tight to the notion of *Aspen Egalitarianism*: an origin story that purports, in the words of former Mayor John Bennett, that when Aspen had its renaissance as a resort in the 1950s and '60s, it "was just about the most class-free place" one could imagine. Journalist Jesse Hanks (pseudonym), a New Yorker who arrived after graduating college in the early 1970s, described Aspen's social milieu this way:

I was pumping gas on Main Street and, you know, I was a grease-covered kid, but some of the same people who would drive in, I'd pump gas for them and then I'd wind up seeing them at parties in the evening and they were, you know, some of the more well-established, well-to-do people in town. But there was tremendous mixing across all the different—I'd say across different social divisions, but there really weren't so many social divisions. It felt like the kind of a town where everybody was sort of, you know, equal is a hard thing to say, but there was a level of equality.

Today, locals and visitors can rightly be skeptical of the degree to which such egalitarianism still pervades Aspen's class culture. It is, after all, one of the most unequal communities in the U.S., when comparing the incomes of the top 1% and everyone else.

Equally embedded into the Aspen ethos is the belief that locals matter; that locals—whether the bar tender pulling your pint of IPA, the person giving your kids a ski lesson, or the construction worker-cum-artist renovating your kitchen—are interesting, and an invaluable part of the landscape. Katrina DeVore, a Millennial-aged, third-generation Aspenite, articulated this sentiment in describing her work as a ski instructor: "I have a lot of really high-end people flying into Aspen from all over the

world... they come to Aspen because it's different, and they want to get involved with the locals and they want to know what the locals are into."

The notion that locals matter and that their needs should be attended to is not mere lip service: these beliefs have been inscribed into how the town works. Accordingly, a second component of Aspen's *place-based class culture* is the way that class interests and the rights of locals have been institutionalized. Aspen's political framework has its origins in the early 1970s, when Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson and a number of progressive seekers made their way to Aspen. Since then, local officials have aimed to fulfill their legacy and socially engineer a town where growth is managed and locals matter. For example, the Aspen Area Community Plan—the comprehensive plan that guides development—states that “a strong and diverse year-round community and a viable and healthy local workforce are fundamental cornerstones for the sustainability of the” local community. Given this goal, urban planning tools have been used to preserve local character, create a retail mix that serves locals' needs, and extract extensive fees from developers. High mitigation rates on development stem from the philosophy, as stated in the AACP, that the “private sector development should not place a financial burden on the tax-paying public, and impacts should be fully offset through various forms of mitigation.” With these principles in place, the town imposes some of the highest mitigation rates in the U.S, some of which fund employee housing. In addition, local voters have repeatedly renewed the Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT)—a 1.5% tax on new real estate transactions—which also significantly funds the development of affordable housing. The institutionalization of these policies is made possible, in part, by the fact that those passing the tax levies are working locals and those paying the taxes are often wealthy out-of-towners (who purchase vacation homes or develop commercial



projects).

So how might these insights be appropriated by other resort communities facing an affordable housing shortage? First, support for successful affordable housing programs is built on the belief that working locals are valued and, ideally, are seen as contributing to the local character. In

Aspen, these beliefs are supported by the fact that the person serving your beer or providing your ski lessons may very well have attended Dartmouth or University of San Diego—just like you! The fact that most of the visible workers are white and many of them from relatively affluent backgrounds and are drawn to Aspen for its unparalleled recreation, creates a sense that working-locals are *like us* and deserve support through affordable housing and other programs that center their needs. In communities where working locals are considered an *other*—either racially or culturally—there will likely be less support for affordable housing programs. Speaking of race, I believe that whiteness and a sense of racial similarity act as a resource that preserves Aspen's “mountain-town character” and generates support for working locals.

In addition, other communities can expand their affordable housing programs to the extent that they have political and economic tools that institutionalize the needs of working locals. Many of Aspen's political forebearers came to the town in the early 1970s in search of a countercultural lifestyle; their progressive orientations laid the foundation for policies that—at least in theory—thwart development and developers and foreground the needs of locals. It would be hard to implement some of the policies today; the foresight of Aspen's officials, however, has meant that affordable housing has faced less of an uphill climb as compared to other municipalities. The Real Estate Transfer tax, which partially funds new affordable housing, would be hard to replicate elsewhere. Colorado passed the Tax Bill or Rights (TABOR) in 1992, which makes it virtually impossible for communities to impose new taxes. Anti-tax policies or sentiments on other municipalities will make it difficult to identify a funding stream that is as large and as consistent as the taxes generated on real estate transactions in the city of Aspen.

Some readers may take exception to my characterization of Aspen as a place that offers a successful model for affordable housing and would, instead, argue that Aspen has plenty to learn from other communities. This is surely the case. As affordable housing pressures have grown, communities that have entered the game more recently have experimented with newer models, including those that harness the efficiencies of market-driven principles and public-private partnerships. I, too, have critiques of Aspen's approach to affordable housing: from my standpoint, local decision makers value views of the mountains more than the need for more workforce housing. This leads to repeated rejections of projects that they perceive as having mass and scale that puts them out of step with local development patterns. While I do not know where the line is between serving local's needs

and respecting the value of Aspen's natural amenities and small-town character, I know that everyone has a vested interest in a lights-on community where workers are valued and able to contribute to civic life.

There is no magic bullet for solving a community's affordable housing problems. In fact, Aspen has not fully solved its own problems; indeed, the success of its program has both mitigated and exacerbated its housing needs. If other communities want to make inroads in providing more affordable housing, they will need a social and cultural appreciation for working locals; the political will and courage to extract mitigations from developers; and a spirit of innovative that approaches old problems new ways.



**Jenny Stuber, PhD** is a Professor of Sociology at the University of North Florida. After growing up in Minnesota, she received a PhD in Sociology from Indiana University; she also holds degrees from Northwestern University and Brown University. Her work focuses on the cultural aspects of social class inequality. By looking at the cultural underpinnings of class inequality, her research asks questions about how people understand, enact, and use social class in their everyday lives. Her book, *Aspen and the American Dream*, explores how one down deals with extreme inequality. It looks at local efforts to resolve the seemingly disparate class interests of the locals who live in Aspen and the uber-wealthy individuals who visit and live there part-time