

# THE CHANGING FACE OF EAST COLFAX

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MCNICHOLS PARK



A RUSTED TRUCK ON AN EAST COLFAX SIDE STREET.

**JENNY HIGGINS USED TO CALL IT "CRACK ROCK PARK."** Growing up in the East Colfax Neighborhood, that was how everyone she knew referred to McNichols Park at the intersection of 17th and Syracuse.

A lifelong East Colfax resident, Higgins has witnessed many changes to the neighborhood. Where there is now a shaded canopy surrounded by moms with strollers there used to be a pay phone that was the focal point of drug deals and prostitution. "We would get ice cream from Dairy Queen and eat it at the park, until the prostitution got so bad. I remember finding syringes in the sandbox, and blood on the playground. So I couldn't cross Colfax anymore," Higgins says, remembering her late 1980s childhood. Higgins still lives in the neighborhood with her husband and twin nine-year-olds.

Denver neighborhoods have seen many changes over the past two decades. The Northside became the Highlands, the blocks of warehouses near the train tracks in Five Points and Globeville became RiNo, even Park Hill is now North and South Park Hill. It's tough to argue that block parties, picnics in the park, and well-lit streets aren't an improvement over gangs, drugs, and high crime rates. But how does a neighborhood become safer without squeezing out longtime residents and losing its culture?

## EAST COLFAX? OH SURE, I LOVE PETE'S KITCHEN AND THE BLUEBIRD

Before we go any further, let me clarify that when I say East Colfax I am not talking about Greektown: the strip of Colfax around East High school in the City Park and Congress Park neighborhoods. I am referring to the small, working class neighborhood nestled inbetween the shadows of Lowry and Stapleton. I am talking about East of Quebec, between Montview and 10th Avenue, what some people call DNA (Damn Near Aurora): East Colfax.

In the late 1850s a branch of the Smoky Hill Trail lead pioneers west from Kansas in search of gold. These gold seekers began to arrive by horse and wagon, which eventually lead to farms and houses popping up along the trail. Many of these original farmhouses can still be spotted in East Colfax. On the Southwest corner of the McNichols park is a two-story, red brick farmhouse that originally owned all of the park and much of the surrounding blocks. After World War II many of these larger farm plots were bought and houses were built for GIs to which the government gave subsidies for families to buy.

During the 1950s US Highway 40 (Colfax Avenue) was the main thoroughfare approaching Denver from the East. Colfax and the surrounding neighborhood were bustling. In those years Colfax was lined with restaurants, gift shops, service stations, and everything else to serve tourists visiting the Mile High City and the Rocky Mountains. The shady motels lining this stretch of Colfax today were once simply roadside motels.

The construction of I-70 in the early 1960s brought change to the face of this booming avenue. Tourists no longer supported business along Colfax, which affected neighborhoods like East Colfax. So began the legacy of strip clubs, gritty motels, and abandoned lots.

In addition to the shady motels, this neighborhood is also known for delicious Mexican and Central American cuisine and growing refugee and immigrant populations from Mexico, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Burma, Thailand, China, Korea, and, more recently, Nepal. According to the 2010 Census this one square mile of East Colfax is home to some 10,191 people: 32 % European American, 27 % Latino, 24 % African American and 11 % Asian.

"This neighborhood has made me a better person," says Higgins, "growing up here wasn't always pretty but it gave me a different perspective on life." In regards to the more recent flux of immigrant and refugee populations, Higgins says "Living here is important for me because I want my kids to be understanding of everybody...It was amazing when we first

moved onto this block there were all different people, wearing beautiful clothes and speaking different languages who would walk down our street.”

#### IT STARTS WITH A NEW NAME

Back when Stapleton Airport and Lowry Air Force Base were new, East Colfax was pretty much off the map: a home to mostly working class families. In recent years residents have started noticing their neighborhood being referred to as “East Montclair” and “East Park Hill,” a labeling coined by real estate agencies to try to drive up the neighborhood’s value on the housing market. According to maps of Denver neighborhoods, neither “East Montclair” nor “East Park Hill” exist, although if you were to stroll the streets of this part of East Colfax, many real estate brochures and flyers would tell you differently.

But it is more than just a name change. Housing trends and gentrification are not exclusive to working class or low-income neighborhoods. Middle class people who grew up in Park Hill now find the streets full of luxury vehicles and pop up houses. Unable to afford the neighborhood they grew up in, many of these thirty-somethings are now buying a little further east: East Colfax.

Along with the real estate trends come the small changes residents start to notice. The field where the pop football league used to practice is now home to a Stapleton tee-ball team. Empty dirt lots now have sprinkler systems and green grass. It would appear that long-term residence are excited about the positive changes they might see: Daniel McQueen, a 24-year resident thinks “They should continue doing what they are doing...they have gotten rid of a lot of riff raff...it’s positive.”

While newer residents are also excited about an increase in safety and a decrease in crime, they are equally concerned about the neighborhood losing its flavor. Colfax Jack, a local resident and Colfax historian states “I think the motel culture is such a strong part of this neighborhood’s history, that I’d hate to see neighbors fight against it just because of the motel’s recent reputations. I think they’re great examples of a certain style of mid-century architecture and the fact that we have so many of them concentrated in such a small area is part of what makes our neighborhood unique and gives it character.”

Still, change is slow. December 2013: two bodies found at

19th and Trenton. August 4th, 2014: mother shoots 14-year-old girl in response to bullying at 11th and Rosemary. August 15th, 2014: multiple cars’ back windshields are broken in the alley at 13th and Xenia. As with any community in transition, burglary and crime remain a constant. While some blocks are changing for the better, the stretch of Colfax Avenue that runs through this neighborhood continues to remain the same: rampant with prostitution and drug dealing.

#### HOW DOES A NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVE WITHOUT DISLOCATING ITS POPULATION?

According to Pastor Jeetendra Singh and Dave Shelpuk of Naya Life Community Church, it is possible for a neighborhood to see growth without losing its history—but the change will not come easy. Pastor Jay (as people call him) and Shelpuk run various programs to support the refugee populations in East Colfax and Aurora. Shelpuk refers to East Colfax as “a section of town that has denied revitalization for ages. Over the last 20 to 30 years Denver has been revitalizing neighborhoods, but one consistent area has resisted renaissance and it’s East Colfax.” Shelpuk and Pastor Jay believe that the refugee populations that they work with are the next big leaders in this community. They believe if we truly want change, we have to create it within the communities that live here. And if we truly want to change the East Colfax neighborhood, we have to change Colfax Avenue.

#### THE LEGACY OF SATURDAYS

At almost the exact center of this neighborhood, on Colfax Avenue between Valentia and Verbena, sits what used to be Saturdays. For those unfamiliar with it, Saturdays was an all-nude strip club that had graced Colfax for many years. The building was originally Famous Chef’s Restaurant, but after the construction of I-70 the location eventually devolved into Saturdays. More than just a strip club, Saturdays has been the focal point of a local drug trafficking scene, prostitution, crime, and assault. It was described by one online reviewer as “just the place where you could start a side business dealing meth.”

For many neighbors, Saturdays was emblematic of East Colfax’s larger problems. Pastor Jay and Shelpuk’s dream was to buy Saturdays and turn it into not only a place of worship but also a community center for refugee populations—but last month Saturdays was purchased by PT’s, a larger business that owns a chain of strip clubs in the Denver Metro Area.

When asked if the recent sale of Saturday’s changed his plans for the neighborhood, Pastor Jay said it didn’t. The plan is still to create a place for women’s groups, boy scouts, girl scouts, ESL classes, and job training, and Pastor Jay hopes that someday he can still take over the strip club. In the back parking lot, where drug deals and prostitution went down over the cracked city asphalt, Pastor Jay and Shelpuk dream of building an astro turf field to bring the area’s diverse communities together through not only religion, but the other thing they share: soccer. Pastor Jay says of the renovation dreams, “It has to be this building...if I get this building, I am crazy I have so much passion. I chose my future and my future is Colfax. When I get this place—people will recycle their lives. The recycling company for human life.”

#### WHAT IS NEXT?

From talking to residences of East Colfax it seems the same as any neighborhood: residents want to feel safe, but they also want to maintain their neighborhood’s culture and diversity. They do not want Taco Mex to become Chipotle or Ranch House Café to become T.G.I.Fridays. “There are certain restaurants, like the pupuseria at Colfax and Yosemite that absolutely need to continue to be part of the fabric of our neighborhood,” says Colfax Jack. Hopefully neighborhood involvement can lead to changes that benefit local residents, not real estate companies. Change can come one park, one soccer field, and one shady strip club at a time. ■

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THE OLD SATURDAYS, NOW PT'S ALL NUDE II.