

Gene Amole on:



Swinging South Colorado Boulevard

Fred Thumhart photo

Hopes were high and interest rates were low. Your G-I loan and ten percent down would get you into a ten-thousand dollar Hutchinson-Carey house in University Hills. They were two- and three-bedroom Johns-Manville-sided homes. There were four floorplans and a half-dozen or so exteriors. It seemed important then to have a redwood basket-weave fence in the back yard and a flowering crabapple tree in the front.

This was Denver suburbia in 1950. It was also the beginning of the South Colorado Boulevard problem.

The city actually ended at East Hampden Avenue. To the south were pheasant-filled stubble fields waiting for what we thought was progress. There were no telephones in University Hills then, but there was a shopping center. It had a hardware store, Yarbrough Drug and soon was to add a King Sooper's.

There was no Valley Highway then. South Colorado Boulevard was the main thoroughfare to and from downtown Denver. Everybody worked in town. The young men in charcoal-grey suits formed car pools to get downtown and their wives stayed at home and waited for the babies to come.

At first, nobody really noticed what was happening to South Colorado Boulevard. Oh, every now and then somebody would say, "Gosh, would you look at Colorado Boulevard? When we moved out this way, hardly any stores were here." There were some nice homes, though. Set back about a hundred feet from Colorado was a beautiful pink-roofed house that belonged to Hudson auto wheeler-dealer Fred Ward. Not far away was a more contemporary home where Patty and Daureen Weiss lived. It was a quiet neighborhood where you could hear the meadowlarks in the morning.

As University Hills filled and new Denver subdivi-

sions sprawled out to the east, the traffic along Colorado Boulevard got heavier. The University Hills Shopping Center responded to high-density population with a May-D&F and more stores. Soon, there was a University Hills Plaza Shopping Center.

It wasn't long until merchants and developers were fighting for South Colorado Boulevard frontage.

The traffic along Colorado became still heavier. When the Valley Highway finally pushed through, some people thought that would take the pressure off the boulevard. But it didn't. It seemed to make it worse. There were shopettes jammed up against other shopettes. The same kind of thing was happening to the north, where the now-busy thoroughfare crossed Cherry Creek. The troublesome and stubborn little enclave of Glendale became a community of bowling alleys, steak-and-lobster houses, wide-screen theaters and wig salons.

The commercial mix of Colorado Boulevard today is bizarre. There are auto agencies, an undertaking parlor, every conceivable fast-food franchise, savings and loan associations, motels, bakeries, furniture stores, high-rise office and apartment buildings, medical clinics, pancake houses, florists, service stations, everything.

Through the years, Colorado Boulevard has been widened, almost to the very walls of the frontage buildings. There are traffic islands and turn lanes. The traffic lights are regulated to keep vehicles running right at the speed limit. Turning to the left during peak hours is almost impossible.

There was a time when we took a curious pride in this kind of growth. We have always been suckers for the siren call of the "Big Time." We wanted our very own "Strip" and we got it. But the glamor has gone. There is no excitement inching along through

incredible traffic jams. Colorado Boulevard's roller-coaster hills become virtually impassable when glazed with ice in wintertime.

Perhaps the glamor has gone and we have learned to accommodate ourselves to an all-day snarl of Colorado Boulevard traffic. At least, we rationalize, Colorado Boulevard is commercially healthy and has a good tax base for the city. That is right, isn't it?

Not exactly.

Let's take a closer look at Colorado Boulevard from the University Hills South Shopping Center north to Cherry Creek and then west along Cherry Creek Drive to the Cherry Creek Shopping Center. There are 985 acres in this strip of land including all of the land in the main Cherry Creek Shopping Center, which has clearly seen better days.

What else do we find on those 985 acres? In an independent survey conducted for a large real estate concern, it was learned that 835 of those acres were devoted to streets and parking. That's 85 percent of the total land under asphalt and concrete. 105 acres of the land is being used for open space. That's about 10 percent. But virtually all of that 10 percent is along Cherry Creek—The City of Takayama Park on the north bank and the City of Brest Park on the south. There is virtually no open space along Colorado Boulevard from Cherry Creek to 2900 south—2400 long city blocks.

Now, how about the land that is actually being used—land upon which this assumedly high tax valuation is based? The total is only 45 acres—just five percent of the 985 acres which make up the entire survey area.

At the time of the survey, it was found that the average height of the structures along the strip was two stories. The recent addition of three high-rise office buildings raises the average height some.

With all of that concrete and asphalt along Colorado Boulevard, you'd assume that would include sidewalks for pedestrian traffic. Don't count on it. There are some which rarely extend even a block, but some blocks don't have any at all. A pedestrian on either side of Colorado must pick his way through used car lots, service station driveways, along chain link fences and through drainage gutters.

Try to cycle along that boulevard. It's madness. If the exhaust fumes don't get you, the traffic certainly will.

Just how bad is the traffic along Colorado Boulevard? It's worse than bad. During peak traffic hours, there are actually more cars and trucks on that street already than the maximum number it was



designed to handle.

This astonishing statistic surfaced when the Regional Transportation District (RTD) was trying to come up with a mass transit plan for Metropolitan Denver. The RTD Master Plan for Automated Rapid Transit (ART) envisioned a corridor along Colorado Boulevard from southeast Denver to East Colfax Avenue. The ART cars were to have traveled on elevated guideways over the street. But it's not going to happen. Because of negative citizen reaction, plans for the Colorado Boulevard ART corridor have been abandoned.

Who were the opponents who killed the plan? The heaviest opposition came from residents who live in the Hilltop area (which centers around 1st Avenue from Colorado to the east). They argued that the presence of elevated guideways along Colorado Boulevard would cause substantial changes in the character of the neighborhood and would result in a significant loss of property valuation.

Other strong opposition came from a group of merchants in the Belcaro Shopping Center area. A third group against the proposed corridor consisted of Broadway merchants. They evidently felt that if the Colorado Boulevard Corridor was built, Broadway would somehow be next. And there were also those who were in general opposition to the whole mass transit concept.

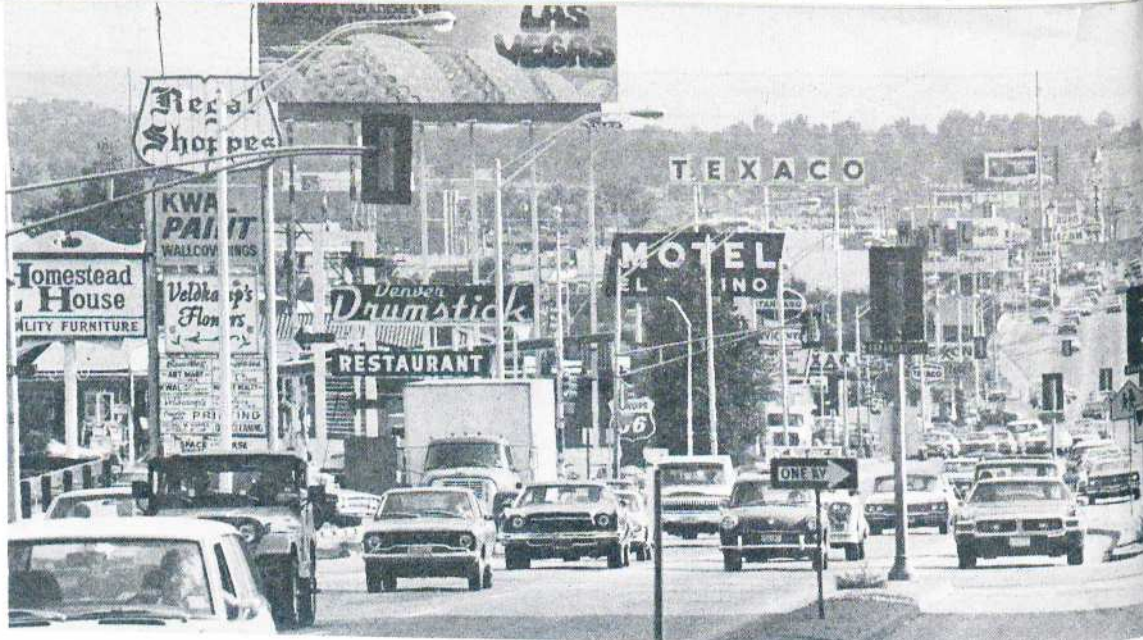
The loss of the corridor is regrettable. It would have helped balance the rush hour traffic from southeast Denver to downtown along the Valley Highway and Colorado Boulevard. The corridor is now planned to run parallel to the Valley, already glutted

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Fred Thumhart photo

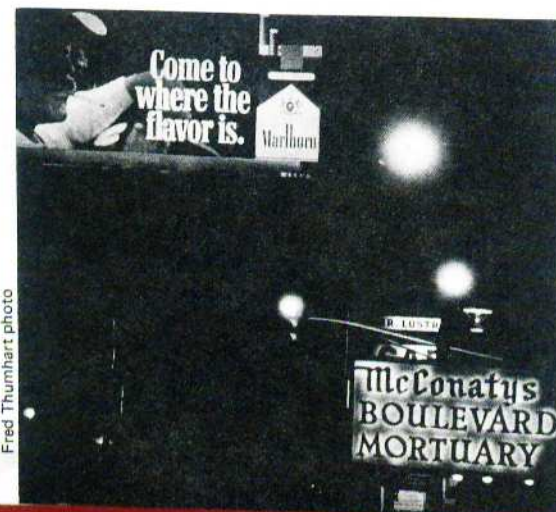


during peak periods.

RTD had also hoped that ART along the boulevard would have given good mass transit service to the University of Colorado Medical Center at East 9th and Colorado Boulevard and to other hospitals in that vicinity. Public transportation is sorely needed by the thousands of low-income families who use the out-patient services of Colorado General Hospital.

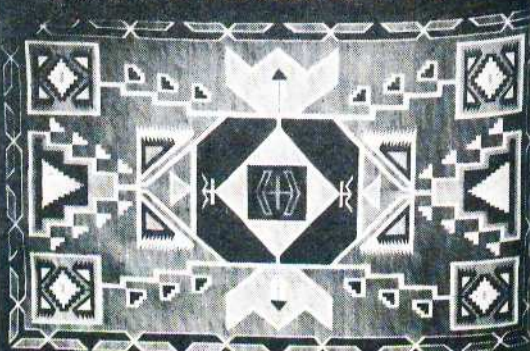
What kind of bus service is RTD now providing along Colorado Boulevard? There is a single bus line—number 15. It runs every 15 minutes during peak hours, every 40 minutes at other times, and every hour on weekends. RTD Director John Simpson says that more busses will have to be added now that ART won't serve Colorado Boulevard, but he has some misgivings about putting more buses on that route. He doesn't like the idea of trying to wedge even more vehicles onto a street that is already glutted with more traffic than it supposedly can handle. And it does raise the question of whether more buses might be counter-productive. Would they become more a part of the problem than they would be a part of a solution?

The RTD Board of Directors has also shelved its original plan for an East Colfax Corridor that would have linked with the once-planned Colorado Boulevard Corridor. The east-west ART guideways that will somehow have to serve Aurora will probably have to be built out near the airport, possibly along Smith



Fred Thumhart photo

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Road. If it works out that way, there will be no ART service in a huge area bounded by Santa Fe Drive on the west, the Valley Highway on the south and Smith Road on the north. Colorado Boulevard will then face even more traffic pressure, carrying many more commuters on the street (with one or two people per car).

The loss of the Colorado Boulevard Corridor leaves no visible solution. The alternatives to the automobile hardly exist at all. Much has been written lately about "The Great Traffic Jam." Where will it be? The "mouse trap" at Interstate 70 and the Valley Highway? Sixth Avenue and the Valley Highway? Spear Boulevard at Lincoln?

A better guess is South Colorado Boulevard.

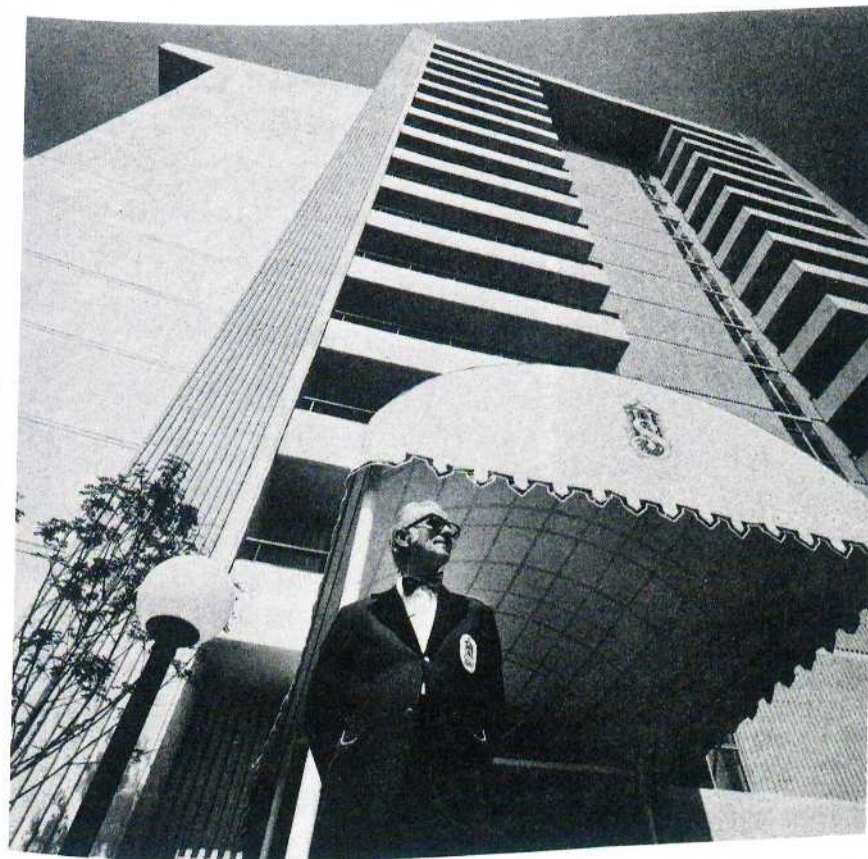
About the future: Is it too late to save Wadsworth Boulevard? Are there sidewalks on East Hampden? How long does Havana have, and Chambers Road after that? Will we ever learn?

Where will the meadowlarks go?

As for University Hills, it's still there. Most of the original residents have moved on. The flowering crabs still bloom in the spring, though, and fresh-faced children troop off to school. The basket-weave fences are getting a little saggy, but people take care of their homes and yards.

It's a nice little community.

Trouble is, someday you might not be able to get there from here. ■■



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