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Geographies of Metropolitan Denver

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### Development in Denver and Kansas City

All across the globe, almost every country is experiencing some level of population growth. The United States is no different. Although population growth in the United States has slowed quite a bit, there are still many cities that have continued to expand. A couple of these cities are Denver, Colorado and Kansas City. Not only have these cities been growing consistently throughout the years, but they both have extensive metropolitan areas that make them unique to other cities of similar size. Kansas City and Denver have similar population trends, but their origins are vastly different. Denver is a fairly new city, while Kansas City has a much longer history. Along with the age difference, the two cities have encountered contrasting issues during development, and the causes for expansion vary greatly from city to city. This paper will take a look at the causes and effects of population growth in each city, and attempt to answer the question, How do the factors that contribute to population growth in Denver compare and contrast with those in Kansas City?

I began my research by simply comparing the baseline growth of the two cities. I wanted to see if the timeline of growth for Denver and Kansas City lined up or not, to see if there were certain international events that may have affected both. The most reliable database that I found revealed that in 1910, Denver and Kansas City both had populations around 200,000 people. By 2019, Kansas City has reached 490,000, while Denver sits at a whopping 715,000. I knew going

into this research project that Denver was far larger than Kansas City, but it was a little surprising to find out that just around 100 years ago they had actually similar sizes. Comparing graphs of population growth from the two cities I confirmed that Kansas City had a greater amount of growth early on, while Denver's is a bit more recent. Both cities had a slight dip in population from around 1970-1990, which Denver recovered from quite quickly, sort of leaving Kansas City in the dust. Once I had a better idea of the timelines of growth, I moved on to considering the “why”.

I decided to look into the early origins of each city, starting with Denver. Denver was very unpopular for a long time due to its poor farmland. Although it was located on the plains, the town received very little rainfall, making it virtually useless. The first signs of growth came from the gold rush. Denver's early beginnings were as a mining town, with people moving there in hopes of finding gold in the mountains nearby. This idea did not play out as planned for most, but by the time they realized this, industries had developed in the city, giving people a reason to stay. Around this time Denver was considered a sleepy cowtown, making it seem quiet and somewhat dead. The development of the title “Queen City of the Plains” turned this humble town into more of an attraction. It built off the cowtown idea, giving the area a certain old western allure that was more attractive. Placemaking is one thing that I noticed was very important in Denver's growth and development. “Queen City of the Plains” emphasized both the old western side of the city while also foreshadowing a level of dominance.

After researching Denver's history, I moved on to the early history of Kansas City. KC has seen many names throughout the years, the earliest being Westport Landing. Fur traders came from St. Louis along the Missouri looking to create a new port city further west. This city

was a success, and was later moved further down the river and renamed Town of Kansas. At this point, the Town of Kansas was receiving quite a bit of foot traffic because of its position on the Santa Fe, California, and the Oregon trail. Many people moving west on these trails ended up stopping in Kansas City and staying. The city's proximity to the Kansas and Missouri rivers also made it an important city for trade routes and such. Another event that brought attention to Kansas City was the civil war. Sitting along the border of Kansas, a free state, and Missouri, a slave state, KC became the location of many battles, such as the Battle of Westport. Slaves also traveled through the city on the way to Kansas in attempts to gain freedom, so when the Union won the war the population of Kansas City expanded.

At this point in my research I reflected back on my findings to search for similarities and differences in the early histories of my two cities. At their times of formation, both towns were located on the plains, and were viewed similarly. Kansas City was initially more attractive because it had better farmland, as Denver was seen as an unusable desert. Lots of Denver's early attention came from potential resources in the mountains. This gave it the upper hand in a sense, because when agriculture in places such as Kansas and Missouri failed, people would take refuge out west where there was rumoured to be gold. Essentially, the two cities had very different attributes early on. Kansas was desirable for its farmland, while Denver made its name in gold.

As I previously mentioned, placemaking has been key for attraction in Denver. The title of “Queen City of the Plains” served Denver well in its early days, but as the city began to develop at an incredible rate it became time for a new nickname: “Mile High City”. This name not only emphasized both the natural scene in Denver as well as its rapid growth. The city’s new name made Denver more of an attraction than it had previously been. One aspect of the city’s

culture that brought a large number of people was/ is Denver's growing art scene. Denver has come to be somewhat well known for some of its museums as well as its public art. The city passed a law in 1991 that said that for every capital improvement project that has a budget of at least one million dollars, Denver's Public Art Program will take one percent of the costs of construction and dedicate it to public art. This policy has led to the creation of a very extensive public art scene in Denver. Having a good art scene is very beneficial to cities, as it attracts the creative class. A city with a large creative class is often considered as having a better economy than cities that focus purely on things such as business and finance. Along with arts, the city of Denver constructed multiple sports stadiums such as Coors Field, Pepsi Stadium, and Mile High Stadium. This promoted a close community around the sports that these stadiums supported, and created a centralized space for all. Most people can relate to at least one professional sports team, so having these stadiums brought in a great amount of tourism as well.

Aside from improving the culture of Denver, the city also expanded outward toward suburbs quite a bit. A big part of this expansion was the annexation of nearby areas. Denver gained population by annexing neighborhoods just outside of it for years, until the Poundstone agreement. This was a law that stated that if Denver wanted to annex an area, the area to be annexed must also approve of the annexation. The agreement put a stop to the annexation spree, and the only area to be annexed after the agreement was the Stapleton area. This suburban expansion was made easier by the new public transportation system in Denver. In the past, the city had a system of streetcars that helped connect the suburbs to the downtown area, making many people's commute far easier, and the idea of suburbia more appealing. The streetcar died out and all were removed throughout the 1950's, but they were soon replaced by a new mode of

transportation: the light rail. RTD (Region Transportation District) was founded in 1969, and consisted of a light rail system that connects suburbs to suburbs, downtown to downtown, and everything in between. This made the plethora of suburbs that Denver had created through annexation more accessible than ever, further promoting the already popular suburb.

Once I had some more information on recent development in Denver, I branched out to find the same for Kansas City. Similar to Denver, KC has invested greatly in the arts. For Denver, this is seen in art museums as well as a great deal of public art, while in Kansas City it is more about the music. Kansas City does have lots of public art, but its roots are in jazz, as the city has always been known for its extensive jazz scene. Kansas City is the only city in the United States that is a member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which just verifies its status as a center for jazz. This makes the city a tourist spot as well as connects it to other sister cities around the world with similar cultures such as Sevilla and Morelia. KC is also known as a very diverse city, especially in comparison to many of its neighbors. 60% of the city is white, with almost 30% black or african american, and a quarter of the population being Latinx. This is an appealing statistic to many people of all races and ethnicities because it makes the city appear more inclusive and welcoming. It also implies greater equality in opportunity of both job and education. The last thing that Kansas City's recent development has in common with Denver's is the improvement of public transportation. Similar to Denver, Kansas City has an extensive system of public transit: Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA). The difference between this and RTD is that KCATA is bus rapid transit rather than light rail, meaning that it travels at higher speeds, and makes fewer stops.

Both systems however have had the same effect of being able to connect different areas of their town in a way that promotes the development of suburbs.

Upon finding the similarities in growth among my two cities, I thought it could be interesting to also look into recent issues in development. With such quick expansion in Denver I know there have been quite a few struggles, and with research I found that Kansas City has gone through similar dilemmas. The first issue that is fairly universal is housing availability and affordability. In both of my cities, housing is becoming more and more limited, causing the prices to go up and up. With such high costs, the people of the cities living with lower incomes are put at a disadvantage. Along with this, both cities have been struggling with gentrification. Since Denver and Kansas City are both historically diverse cities, there are many neighborhoods that are more vulnerable to gentrification, and it shows. In Denver this can be seen in neighborhoods such as Five Points and Globeville, while Kansas City has areas like Beacon Hill and Squier Park that have experienced an alarming amount of gentrification. This and more has led to a growth in anti-growth sentiment in each city.

Finding somewhat few similarities in early development, I was a little discouraged when I began to look into more recent development in my cities, but as seen in my previous paragraphs, my pessimism was misplaced! Between transportation, diversity, arts, desire of suburbs, and more, Denver and Kansas City have had somewhat similar development in the more recent years. Although the cities started for quite different reasons, and even today one has a far larger population, the cities have quite a few factors of development in common.

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