From Ski Town to Global Village: Eighties Aspen Confronts the World

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Introduction

It was 1981, and Stanley Natal was livid. Natal, a self-identified "collective farmer" born in 1918, had lived to see the Pitkin County in which he had lived his entire life become nigh unrecognizable. In a letter to the editor of the *Aspen Times*, written in his trademark clipped style – it is difficult to discern whether this was a result of character limits, idiosyncrasy, illiteracy, or some combination thereof – Natal complained of "deflated prices," unmaintained rural roads, unfair zoning laws, and, most of all, "governmental intervention." Pitkin County, dominated economically and politically by the regional capital of Aspen, was, to the assessment of Natal and others like him, being overrun by settler-tourists who had flocked there in the 1970s. The "local natives" of Pitkin were "going-going gone." If too many of them left, Natal insisted, it would mean "world famine."[1]

Natal's concerns, which he would express in regular columns until his suicide in 1998, represented more than his own views or those of his immediate community. They gestured beyond the Pitkin County limits to a nation and a world in flux, to a world in which family farms, mountain villages, and conferences on world order coexisted with an uncanny snugness. In invoking "world famine," Natal linked Aspen's plight to the precarity

[1] The Aspen Times (weekly) April 23, 1981 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

of the human race as a whole. What was coming for the county in which Natal had lived his entire life was also coming for the world. By the close of the 1980s, Aspen would be transformed into a truly global village.

Writing in 1964, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan coined the term "global village" to describe how the world's civilization was becoming inextricably linked across national and cultural boundaries. "Our speedup today," he wrote, "is not a slow explosion outward from center to margins but an instant *implosion* and an interfusion between space and functions."[2] What intrigued McLuhan was the extent to which, as the Earth shrank in the face of ever-rapidly advancing media technology, margins and centers came to merge as the planet itself began to resemble and function like a single village. But there is a complementary reading of his insight that is more pertinent to Aspen. In the 1980s, Aspen's cultural footprint began to expand beyond its cozy borders to encompass the movers and shakers of American and global taste, finance, real estate, sport, and media. This was an explosion of the margin into the center, presaging a newly networked society with Aspen often at the forefront of many innovations and national trends. In this way, we can characterize '80s Aspen as a village gone global, the inversion of McLuhan's' globe shrunk down to village level'.

In what follows, I will describe how Aspen, over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s, came to inhabit the role of a global village with all its concomitant promises and contradictions. Surveying real estate and architecture, economic shifts brought about by the Reagan administration, the withering away of ranching, the blossoming of the queer and drug cultures, and environmental and technological change, I will demonstrate how

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[2] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT Press, 1964), 92-93, italics mine.

Aspen – as village, as idea – weathered the turbulence of momentous historical change as it sought to balance tradition and innovation, small-town values with global aspirations. Corollary to this, I will attempt to disentangle the multiple “Aspens” at work in any narrative of Aspen’s rise and decline. Such effort is necessary for any coherent understanding of Aspen as a locale of multiplicities and contradictions. I will close with suggestions for further research on areas not covered by this study.

What We Talk about when We Talk about Aspen

As we commence our study, we would do well to establish exactly what the nature of our object (Aspen roughly during the decade of the 1980s) is, how it was conceived of and contested within local discourse, and how it came to be inhabited by those who would simultaneously transform it and bemoan the very transformation that they would effect.

Aspen has the curious propensity of concentrating and magnifying national trends in such a way that even those facets which it ought to have in common with other locales come to seem exceptional. In a manner similar to the bioaccumulation of mercury in the bodies of fish, as one moves up the economic “food chain” of late twentieth-century America, one inevitably encounters every excess of late capitalism on full display within the unassuming borders of Aspen.

This tendency holds true for the ways in which Aspen was spoken about as maturing in the 1980s. In the same way that Americans spoke about their country at the time – as at once at the peak of its hegemonic capabilities even as it faced moral, medical, and democratic decline – Aspenites, as well as outside observers, saw the town teetering on the knife's edge between prosperity and global recognition on the one hand, and the loss of its very soul in a Faustian bargain with alien interests on the other.

In his 1991 exposé *Whiteout: Lost in Aspen*, the undercover journalist Ted Conover astutely observed that pinpointing exactly when Aspen's inevitable decline began acted as something of a town pastime. All such discussions, he found, took "as a narrative model the Book of Genesis, with Paradise created fresh in the late forties and fifties and Innocence lost gradually ever since." Although exact dates vary on when Aspen's Fall became irrevocably precipitous, Conover noted that the 1980s loomed largest in the Aspenite apprehension.[3]

But besides the metaphor of the Fall, Aspenites and visitors often resorted to another, perhaps more primordial metaphor to describe the decay they saw around them: that of the woman of ill repute. For Conover, this woman took the form of an heiress: "childlike, concerned with itself, spoiled with lots of money and attention." Child*like*, but still experienced in matters of worldly pleasure: "a pretty, rich girl with a reputation for being bad."[4] This was a youthful, sexy Aspen whose development, though arrested, was that of a young adult clinging to her teenage years. In 1983, Greg Vaughan, a columnist for the *Aspen Daily News*, invoked an image of Aspen as undergoing a precocious puberty, albeit with less obvious gendered implications: "Aspen had an overactive pituitary in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The little town grew fast but dumb."[5] And Spencer Schiffer, a wealthy real estate lawyer and confidant of Donald Trump, recalled a friend whose feminized image of Aspen differed significantly. At the close of his memoir *Aspen*

[3] Ted Conover, *Whiteout: Lost in Aspen* (Random House, 1991), 248.
[4] Ibid., 6-7.
[5] Aspen Daily News October 26, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

Odyssey: A Long Strange Trip…, Schiffer recounts a colleague's pronouncement looking down from the top of a ski slope: "Aspen's nothing but a worn-out old whore, and anyone can have her for a price. At least we had her when she was young and beautiful."[6] For Schiffer and others in his privileged circle, Aspen was used up even as she continued to "put out." In the global village that was the Aspenite community, the town itself came to figure as the girl next door turned cosmopolitan prostitute.

What all of these metaphors of decay posit in common is a particular vision of unspoiled Paradise, as well as various theodicies which purport to explain the Fall. Much of this report will be concerned with the latter; for now, let us turn to the former. The cases of how two prominent citizens of Aspen – the lawyer Schiffer and Bill Stirling, realtor and Aspen's mayor from 1983 to 1991 – came to reside in the town are instructive here. Their journeys are archetypal of the manner in which many of Aspen's residents came to call the secluded town home.

Both men were born on the East Coast in the 1940s and spent significant portions of their young adulthood in New York City. Both opposed the War in Vietnam and sought methods to dodge its draft: Schiffer entered the Army National Guard in New Jersey and Stirling the Peace Corps in Kenya.[7] It was the counterculture writ large – that motley assemblage of anti-war and civil rights activists, hippies, thrill-chasers, potheads, and musicians – to which both men attribute their love affair with the somewhat novel (for the 1960s) sport of skiing. Enthralled by the freedom of the ski bum lifestyle, popularized by

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[6] Spencer F. Schiffer, *Aspen Odyssey: A Long Strange Trip…* (Dorrance Publishing Co., 2025), 258.
[7] Ibid., 6; Bill Stirling, personal interview, September 27, 2025.

the 1965 novel of the same name by Romain Gary, their fantasies eventually led both men and their then-wives to Aspen.[8]

At that time (1971 for Schiffer, the following year for Stirling), in both men's recollections, Aspen was still hospitable to the itinerant lifestyle of the ski bum. One could work odd jobs – garbageman, teacher, waiter, bartender – and still garner enough time and money to hit the slopes most every day. This frozen Paradise was Edenic in its ability to beget leisure from minimal inputs of labor, and what labor was performed was done so in the company of friends with the same status and aspirations. As Stirling put it to me, he came to Aspen on sabbatical, and the sabbatical was still ongoing some fifty years later.[9] In Aspen, there was no clear distinction between work and play, and a vacation could last a lifetime.

It is curious, then, that both men ascribe their many financial and political successes within Aspen mostly to accident. Schiffer describes himself as an "accidental attorney," an unassuming characterization for someone pulling in a salary of $10,000 a month circa 1982 (about $33,000 a month today).[10] In describing his ascent to mayor, Stirling shared a folksy story of having been cajoled into seeking the position on account of the fact that he "already knew everyone in town." In our conversation, he downplayed the importance of Stirling Homes, Inc., his property management and real estate company founded in 1978, which by the halfway point of his mayoral tenure had grown to be "the second biggest property management firm in Aspen."[11]

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[8] Schiffer, *Aspen Odyssey*, 7.
[9] Stirling.
[10] Schiffer, 5, 153.
[11] Stirling; Bill Stirling | Stirling Peak Properties.

In a common pattern, many wealthy Aspenites who had "naturalized" in the 1970s leveraged their wealth and professional expertise into acquiring positions of politico-bourgeois power by the mid-1980s, while at the same time attributing their successes largely to happenstance and luck. As columnist Greg Vaughan put it in 1983, despite the fact that new "[r]esidents seem to recognize that their own presence contributes to the slow demise of what attracted them here in the first place," many "arrivistes convert to xenophobic nativism, forgetting their roots in a rootless town and proselytizing against the next wave of immigrants like themselves."[12] As we shall see, these acts of distancing from the material conditions and contingencies that gave rise to their assumption of power would serve to blunt the ability of these Eastern émigrés to address their own role in Aspen's purported "Fall."

The Problem of Growth

Ted Conover cogently summed up the character of Aspen's growth management plan, enacted in the late Seventies, as outwardly progressive, but conservative at heart. Measures taken to "preserve" Aspen's footprint for the foreseeable future "instill[ed] an ethic of central planning" and ceded further power to guide the destiny of the town away from those who had inhabited the Roaring Fork Valley for generations.[13] That capability was now in the hands of wealthy outsiders and experts who sought to fix Aspen, not as it had been in the past, but in an eternal present, the horizon of which would be manufactured to always resemble one's first glimpse of the fabled ski town.

[12] Aspen Daily News October 18, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[13] Conover, 242.

On my first and only visit to Aspen in the spring of 2025, this was one of the contradictions that vexed me the most. How, I thought, could Aspen have been bought up by alien capital only in the years *after* the stringent anti-growth measures were put in place? This contradiction, as with all contradictions, eventually resolved itself with recourse to its own immanent logic. Conover put it pithily: “Things looked the same, but they got much more expensive.”[14] Perversely, the effort to preserve Aspen just as it was stymied growth to such an extent that land values exploded, effectively pricing out many locals and delimiting residency to all but the uber-rich.

Adopted in 1977, Aspen’s Growth Management Plan was intended to scale back development and rein in the whims of outside interests in favor of preserving community integrity. The issue, as columnist Greg Vaughan observed in 1983, was that the policy failed to meet community standards for stringency and consistency. Without such guarantees, “every exception can be viewed as favoritism to some special interest, or as an adaptive mechanism that reflects a shift in the underlying goals and objectives.”[15] Money talked, and its voice drowned out the community’s.

“It’s all part of a plan,” Vaughan warned, “and it’s going to get worse.” “Aspen’s permanent housing crisis” was, in fact, “a conscious part of the plans of city and county officials.” Vaughan claimed that the city’s growth management plans had “become national models in the genre.”[16] In doing so, he asserted Aspen’s status as a pioneer in the management of what Conover would later call “semiabandonment:” a “conquest by absentee owners” that would see historic towns literally hollowed out in order to

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Aspen Daily News October 26, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[16] Aspen Daily News October 18, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

accommodate buildings brimming with empty beds for tourists and celebrities alike.[17] The global village was neither expanding nor contracting: it was being evacuated. Here, as ever, Aspen acted as an archetypal model for the changes affecting many small towns across the Mountain West. Extractivism gave way to sports tourism, which gave way to land speculation.

Vaughan recognized that Aspenites' vision(s) for the future were so often "inconsistent … and mutually contradictory." His reporting found that the original 1977 growth management plan did not attempt to "coordinate the overall growth rate desired" with the distinct quotas for growth in residences, commercial buildings, and employee housing. Furthermore, the plan did not address the tourist and skiing industries whatsoever – a glaring oversight given that Aspen's growth would be inextricably entwined with its prestige industries.[18]

It is interesting to consider that much of the pushback against the growth management plan came from a local class of petit bourgeois. For working-class Aspenites, the plan served to drive prices up exorbitantly, on the one hand, but if no plan were in place, they would likely be pushed out by even more development, or at least see the character of their town altered irrevocably. For outside capitalists, the plan posed roadblocks to acquisition and development in the form of bureaucratic red tape, but the major consequence was merely the need to hire an ever-growing fleet of lawyers. Caught in the middle were local business owners and ranchers for whom the plan represented an "elitist" maneuver that would "pav[e] the way to an economic bust by stifling the innovations required" to sustain economic growth at a reasonable pace. Vaughan identified the origin

[17] Conover, 243.
[18] Aspen Daily News October 20, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

of such technocratic modes of governance in the economic planning that emerged in the Depression Era and calcified with the war economy of World War II: “Guidance by the government clasped the invisible hand of corporate competition and collusion to steer society.” Economic strategies developed to shepherd the nation through crisis now came home to roost at the county level in Aspen, where they were subsequently reinterpreted, repackaged, and exported into the global village.[19]

One contingent factor in Aspen’s growth management plan was the ambivalence toward the growth of the downvalley area, which encompasses the rural corridor from Aspen to the nearby town of Basalt to the northwest. The tourist ski village of Snowmass also resides in the corridor. In 1979, county commissioners amended their Land Use Code to include, as a “guideline,” the downvalley area home to many ranchers and commuting workers. By framing the downvalley area’s inclusion in the plan as merely a suggestion, commissioners left open the possibility that any development quotas would simply go unenforced.[20]

Evidence of lax enforcement can be seen in the surging ridership on county buses by the middle of the 1980s. A manager at the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA), Paul Hilts, asserted that downvalley ridership had increased by fifty-two percent between 1981 and 1985. One bus route, the Highlands route, saw ridership nearly double in the same four-year period. This momentous change Hilts attributed to the significant emigration of working-class Aspenites to the Downvalley area in search of cheaper housing, made possible by the unenforced quotas.[21]

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[19] Aspen Daily News October 21, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[20] The Aspen Times (weekly) March 29, 1979 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[21] Aspen Daily News August 6, 1985 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

Even so, local business owners and their employees clamored for a seat at the table when it came to transportation policy. In the peak tourist season many restaurant employees would finish their shifts past one o'clock in the morning, at which point many were forced to hitchhike to their residences because the bus routes ceased after 12:30. In response, the RFTA suggested the formation of a van pool system whereby downvalley residents would rent vehicles in order to alleviate the necessity of later and later bus routes.[22] Such concerns, of owners on the part of overworked, often itinerant, service employees, reflect the ongoing shifts in Aspen's demography and economy. While working at a Mexican restaurant in the late 1980s, Conover gained firsthand insight into these changes. Three of his coworkers were immigrants from El Salvador; they worked grueling fourteen-hour shifts bookended by hour-long commutes. They lived in trailers and sent most of their earnings back to their home country. This was a significant reconfiguration of the working-class demographics of Aspen: "there were fewer Americans, far fewer European illegals, and many more Hispanics, who worked mainly backroom jobs." As new ski bums were priced out and seventies ski bums consolidated their wealth, Aspen came to rely ever more upon a new kind of precariat: immigrant labor of dubious legal status, which resultingly accorded it a high exploitability quotient. This labor, Conover found, was as "indispensable" as it was invisible: a prescient assessment of the economic and demographic tremors that would erupt across the US in the wake of NAFTA's instantiation the following decade.[23]

While rental prices hovered at about the same rate between downvalley and Aspen and Snowmass, home ownership was a goal only achievable outside the bounds of the latter

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[22] Aspen Daily News December 16, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

[23] Conover, 67, 39.

two areas. In the case of Snowmass, only forty-seven percent of its workforce resided within the town limits by 1985. Between 1981 and 1985, the number of Snowmass employees living downvalley increased by forty-four percent, a rate comparable to the increase in downvalley bus ridership. Even with the advantage of a cheap commute and lower housing prices, Snowmass planner Doug Dotson found that many Snowmass employees worked additional downvalley jobs just to make ends meet. Such economic vicissitudes forced Dotson and other planners to concede that their hopes of a workforce able to afford to live in its own community were overambitious.[24]

By the close of 1985, planners recognized that their downvalley conundrum required a genuine solution. The agenda was broad: it included "maintaining rural characteristics, preserving agricultural lands, treading softly on environmentally sensitive areas, protecting wildlife and wildlife habitat, enhancing public lands, discouraging development of downvalley alpine ski areas, upgrading Highway 82 with concerns for aesthetics and safety, and improving transportation to and within the county." Of six plans put forward, the only one immediately rejected was one that called for the rapid development of downvalley areas to act as a pressure valve on swelling Aspen.[25]

But not everyone who would be affected by the plan was pleased. For ranchers, it was "build or die," as Roaring Fork Valley landowner Cleon Griffiths articulated. Ranchers such as Stanley Natal saw efforts to restrict their ability to develop their land as dangerous to their way of life. The logic went that as rural areas were restricted from developing, the land value of owners in those areas would stagnate and eventually fall, forcing them to abandon the very land that the county ostensibly sought to preserve. In the past, such efforts

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[24] The Aspen Times (weekly) October 10, 1985 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[25] The Aspen Times (weekly) December 5, 1985 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

had resulted in little to no compensation yielded up by the county to the landowners.[26] The following year, commissioners would draw up a compensation scheme that granted "development rights" to landowners – essentially vouchers with value equal to the assessed value of undevelopable land, which could then be "sold" back to the county (or to private entities). However, realtors and ranchers alike attacked the scheme as impractical, given that the growth development plan itself would not allow for any profitable building on such plots – not to mention the fact that the county admitted it had no funds with which to buy the rights back from the landowners.[27]

Here, Aspen planners faced yet another contradiction, one Westerners had reckoned with for decades but that in Aspen now crystallized into an archetypal scene. Many of the aims of the growth management plan were environmental: preserving land and wildlife, "maintaining rural characteristics." But the implementation of such a plan, to its detractors, would in fact serve to erase traditional rural lifeways and erect a tourist-friendly façade in their place. In effect, the debates that went on among county commissioners and ranchers were over the very character of Aspen and its surrounding environs: rural or cosmopolitan? – ranching and agriculture or service and real estate? Could Aspen stay local or must it go global?

The foregoing context allows us to revisit Stanley Natal's opening remarks in the light of the growth management plan. Writing in 1981, Natal spoke for many of his class with his invective that "There is no incentive to work land or plan for future land production or land use when government takes land or dictates its use. Without just compensation or where government, through local land use laws, controls or again dictates family

[26] The Aspen Times (weekly) January 23, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[27] Aspen Daily News April 24, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

inheritance beyond state or federal laws."[28] Here Natal pointed to the uncertainties and fluctuations that would be par for the course under any regime of land planning. In a certain way, Natal presaged the critiques that would be levied by various landowners later in the decade: that what was essentially an IOU from Pitkin County would lack a good degree of fungibility.

Natal admitted that efforts at preservation "for future generations look great on paper," but his "most prized issue to preserve is freedom."[29] For him and other ranchers, freedom meant the tightening of a triune bond between rancher, livestock, and land, representative of their vision of the aforementioned "rural characteristics" that ought to be preserved. Natal recalled the time of his youth before "money separate[d] people. It used to be that everybody here was poor. We all had the same entertainment, which was a 10-cent beer. Money makes the decisions now." Most ranchers taking trips into Aspen were either heading for appointments with the banker or the county commissioner. And most trips home carried only the meager collateral of "a promise and a handshake" – neither of which were enough to keep a struggling family farm out of the red.[30] What is often forgotten in the transition to the global village is that not all peripheries could be equitably inducted into the center. That is, even as Aspen folded itself into global networks of finance, influence, and taste, its own peripheries were often pushed even further to the margins. In many ways, by 1990 Stanley Natal's Roaring Fork Valley ranch was now further from Aspen than Denver – further than New York City, further even than some of the states of

[28] The Aspen Times (weekly) April 23, 1981 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[29] Ibid.
[30] The Aspen Times (weekly) May 30, 1985 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

the Global South which now furnished the foodstuffs that would once have been provided to Aspen on the part of local growers and ranchers.

It is clear that Natal and other ranchers resented being lumped in with the real estate development crowd with whom they shared some overlapping interests. Key to this distinction is the ambiguity of the word "development." When spoken into a conversation on real estate or commerce, the word conjured visions of hotels, resorts, Michelin-star dining, and palatial estates. But in the context of farm life, development usually meant expanding the herd, the homestead, and operational capacity. For Natal, it was a "problem" that

> [r]anchers or farmers [were] sometimes referred to as large land owners, who in some cases may have owned their farms for two or three generations; worked long hours, put back into their operations thousands of dollars to improve or maintain their farm values; did not bank every possible dollar; have always paid all bills; have no debt of any nature; never asked or gotten charity; always paid taxes; endured at least one depression; now have no other income such as retirement.[31]

Revealed here is a resentment toward the notion that the rancher had anything in common with the banker, the investor, the mogul. The farms were large, not out of greed but of necessity. Work was for survival, not savings. And growth – as another farmer related above, the rule was "build or die." In this frame, zoning was a matter of life and death rather than profit and loss. In one of his final columns, composed in 1992 as the changes he had observed throughout the Eighties came into their full maturity, Natal signed off with

[31] The Aspen Times (weekly) January 23, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

a chilling warning for Aspen's "NIMBY" (not-in-my-backyard) "masterminded Master Planners." "I firmly believe," he inveighed, "when our day of final judgment comes, some of us need not take our winter clothes."[32]

Trickling Down

Fiscal policy of the 1980s was dominated by what has variously come to be called "Reaganomics" or "trickle-down economics." These terms signify the moves by the Reagan administration to, ostensibly, utilize the principles of supply-side economics to increase tax revenues. In practice, the acts transferred wealth upward via the manipulation of tax policy. In 1981, the Economic Tax Recovery Act lowered the highest marginal tax rates from 70% to 50%, while at the same time slashing estate taxes, capital gains taxes, and corporate taxes. The Tax Reform Act of 1986 lowered the top individual tax rate from 50% to a further 28%, while perversely raising the lowest tax rates from 11% to 15%. Capital gains tax rates were further adjusted to equal tax rates of those on ordinary incomes.

Aspen, as ever, was in many ways ahead of the curve where taxes were concerned. In 1979, the Colorado State Legislature abolished the inheritance tax along with the gift tax and allowed residents over the age of 65 to defer their property taxes "indefinitely."[33] These measures, followed on their heels by Reagan's tax cuts in 1981, prompted the *Aspen Times* to declare in 1983 that they were "aimed at helping the struggling upper class." Nonetheless, the *Times* still offered to share tips with readers on how to make the most of recent changes to the tax code. In particular, the *Times* advocated taking advantage of the Moving Expense Adjustment, a deduction offered to those relocating for the purpose of

[32] Aspen Daily News January 29, 1992 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[33] The Aspen Times (weekly) August 16, 1979 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

work. Thus, the *Times* meant to entice readers beyond the town to move to Aspen for work, bundling multiple deductions, along with tax cuts, into an attractive package for upper-middle-class professionals.[34]

All of these changes combined to produce an explosive effect on Aspen's economic growth throughout the 1980s. By 1986, the year of Reagan's second major tax cut, it was not uncommon to see advertised in the pages of the *Aspen Times* offers such as the following: "LOOKING TO TRADE. Private jet airplane owned free and clear. For a nice condo or home in the Aspen/Snowmass area."[35] Aircraft and real estate were, it would seem, as liquid as cash.

As mentioned above, Aspen's complex growth management plan, combined with its extremely limited supply of land, contributed to its exponential growth in property values and the pricing out of locals beginning in the early 1980s. Spencer Schiffer, the prominent Aspen real estate lawyer, remembered that "[r]eal estate and land use lawyers like Garfield and Hecht were riding the wave" – and what a wave it was.[36] Schiffer would, for a time, work for Garfield & Hecht before moving into the direct employ of one Hans Cantrup, who at the time was considered Aspen's largest land and property holder.[37]

Cantrup, Schiffer recalled, had moved to Aspen from Germany in 1955. His success story was an archetypal one, albeit still extraordinary. Beginning his empire by buying and reselling old miners' shacks, Schiffer parlayed his profits into ownership of a Main Street motel, before constructing the thirty-six-room Continental Inn.[38] But Cantrup's

[34] The Aspen Times (weekly) March 3, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[35] The Aspen Times (weekly) February 27, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[36] Schiffer, 86
[37] The Aspen Times (weekly) January 30, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[38] Schiffer, 75.

groundbreaking coup came in 1979, when he purchased the "major part" of Aspen Mountain for three-and-a-half million dollars. A three-hundred-acre purchase, about half of which was vacant land, while the other half was typically used for skiing. The acquisition of the land, much of which was licensed for skiing by the Aspen Skiing Corporation – along with his venerable holdings in tourist lodgings, would subsequently make Cantrup the "single largest employer in Aspen other than the ski company."[39]

Cantrup's successes, however, came at significant legal risk. By January of 1981, Cantrup had been charged by the city of Aspen with nineteen counts of building code violations, primarily concerned with the "unauthorized construction of five employee housing units" in a dormitory house, as well as the building of double the amount of authorized hotel rooms in his Aspen Inn.[40] The latter of these violations led to the close of that building, and it was the suspicion of many that Cantrup filed for bankruptcy in early 1983 – a move which the *Aspen Daily News* humorously referred to as "the Cantrupcy."[41]

Concurrent to the bankruptcy, Schiffer worked with Cantrup to file multiple lawsuits against the city of Aspen, claiming that three stop-work orders put in place against Cantrup's construction projects were unfounded. The city, on the other hand, argued that Cantrup's proposed buildings had violated the growth management plan in 1978.[42] Seeing "no alternative to suing the city," Schiffer went ahead with the lawsuits, characterizing them as "the only leverage Cantrup would have with the city and, more importantly, with his bankers." Further, Schiffer justified the lawsuits as "necessary to preserve the status

[39] The Aspen Times (weekly) June 28, 1979 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection; Schiffer, 120.
[40] Schiffer, 115.
[41] The Aspen Times (weekly) January 30, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection; Aspen Daily News February 4, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[42] Aspen Daily News February 4, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

quo" in Aspen – the very same logic, turned on its head, that planners within the county commissioner's office wielded to enforce the stringent requirements of the growth management plan.[43]

It is difficult to place Cantrup within any specific economic modus operandi. Schiffer called Cantrup a "visionary" who nonetheless "lived like a pauper" – his thirty-million-dollar net worth apparently devoted entirely to achieving a vision of Aspen as a global player on the world stage and not to the enrichment of his own standard of living. His dream was for Aspen to transcend its status as a mere "playground for the rich and famous" and become instead "a haven for the super-rich willing to spend small fortunes."[44] It was Cantrup who instilled in wealthy Aspenites, in Schiffer and his future clients (including Donald Trump), the notion that "Aspen really needs a five-star hotel to become a world-class resort… a world-class hotel exactly where it should be, at the base of Aspen Mountain, as well as desperately needed employee housing and parking."[45]

This is, of course, a historical argument: it is a line of rhetoric that extends Aspen's future beyond the present and endeavors to realize that futurity in the now – historical because Aspen here is always already historicized and, should these efforts at development fail, Aspen would be left behind to languish in posterity. So Cantrup was indeed the herald of a new vision for Aspen as a global village, rather than a mere sandbox. At the same time, though, Cantrup's downfall in many ways stemmed from his insistence on circumventing growth management regulations for the express purpose of constructing affordable employee housing – a necessity if Aspen were to be able to accommodate Cantrup's

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[43] Schiffer, 138-139
[44] Ibid., 133.
[45] Ibid., 143.

planned influx of luxury tourism. Cantrup also represented an older class of Aspenite: foreign-born but hailing from old-world Europe (much like *Ski Bum* author Romain Gary); the owner of a great fortune produced wholly within the bounds of Aspen; a ruthlessly innovative profiteer with no time to waste on conspicuous displays of wealth. In the narrative of Aspen's Fall, Cantrup emerges as almost the picture of the perfect capitalist, for whom the accumulation of capital is not an end in itself but rather the means to a grand and prosperous New Aspen. Tragic in a Luciferian mold, Cantrup's ambitions outstretched his means, and the Cantrupcy, in this telling, would be what truly opened the floodgates to alien capital and its hostile takeover of Aspen.

In the aftermath of the Cantrupcy, Texas developer John Roberts had acquired much of Cantrup's holdings. Roberts, against the wishes of at least one citizens' group, intended to construct a "$100 million, 480-room 'super-hotel' and condominium project" in downtown Aspen. To pay for Cantrup's Aspen Meadows and Aspen Mountain Lodge properties, Roberts took out a $42 million loan. But while in the midst of multiple demolition, zoning, and renovation projects, all taken on at exorbitant expense, Roberts's mortgages on the property went into default, and his creditors began foreclosure proceedings against him.[46] The first outsider bid at Cantrup's crumbling empire had ended in failure.

1986: enter New York real estate billionaire Donald J. Trump. Trump planned to purchase and develop the six-acre Aspen Mountain Lodge site for $17.5 million.[47] To Schiffer and many other Aspenites, Trump possessed the vision of Cantrup and the gusto of Roberts, fused with a realistic outlook that promised concrete development. Schiffer

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[46] Aspen Daily News February 4, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[47] Aspen Daily News February 4, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

compared Trump to Cantrup, praising him as "particularly prescient" for his prediction that Aspen's future economy would be based in large part on high-end retail – "it went with the character of the town," he recalls Trump musing.[48] But Trump also rhetorically positioned himself as an outsider in love with the spirit of Aspen, and he sought to complement its charms rather than plaster over them. For this, Aspen was "smitten" with Trump, who offered a way forward from the "polarized" hotel and growth debates that had wracked the first half of the decade. Further endearing him to the town was his decision to hire a local architect, Charles Cunniffe, for the project. Trump spoke of the project with the magnanimity that would befit a gift: "I want it to be an icon, like the Wheeler Opera House and the Hotel Jerome, but I want it to fit in, to be a part of the town, to draw the town into it. It doesn't have to look like them, but a modern version… I want to work with the town, solicit public input, make them part of the process, get them invested in this, and I want to provide terrific amenities to the town."[49]

In his characteristic style, with which Americans have no doubt become acquainted in recent years, Trump lambasted all the planners and plans that had preceded his entrée onto the Aspen scene. John Roberts's designs he called "a catastrophe both aesthetically and in every other way": too large and too distant from Aspen's major walkable thoroughfares.[50] However, the changes Trump desired would come at the risk of needing to pass the lengthy process of achieving approval by the city council, planning commission, and zoning commission – processes which Roberts's plan had already gone through.[51] But other local developers and owners were confident in Trump's success. The Hotel Jerome

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[48] Schiffer, 189.
[49] Ibid., 181-182.
[50] Aspen Daily News February 4, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[51] Aspen Daily News February 5, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

partner Dick Butera called Trump "the Einstein of real estate": "the smartest guy in real estate in America, bar none." And even Hans Cantrup, whose very fall had set up Trump's ascent, said, "There's no reason to worry for one second" about Trump's prospects.

Butera, and likely many of his class, saw Trump as a revivifying agent for Aspen's future. The investment, "says a lot about the viability of Aspen."[52] For his part, Trump was not concerned with the ordeal of forging through the approval process, again framing his intervention as one of near-charity: "Aspen badly needs a major luxury hotel of the highest quality… I want to build the best luxury ski area hotel in the world." Trump believed he could outwit the curse that had ensnared both Cantrup and Roberts, saying that "Cantrup had too much money in the site and Roberts had more. Their cost of land was two or three times its value."[53] Here, Trump gestured at what many in the circles of the global elite were recognizing as a truism of the Eighties economic regime: that to be "real estate rich and cash poor" was, functionally (and even in Aspen), to simply be poor in the fast-paced and highly liquid new economy.[54]

As the year went on, Trump's ambitions only grew. There would be an Aspen ice rink, a tramway linking Snowmass Village to Aspen, and a gargantuan parking garage. Described as "flamboyant" in nearly every one of his appearances in *The Aspen Daily News*, Trump clearly had the desire to make his mark on Aspen, a town he had frequented with his family for some years.[55] After a number of speedbumps – including a last-inning ploy by Roberts to avoid having to repay his creditors at Commerce Savings Association the full $42 million worth of property he owed – it seemed as though Trump had secured

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[52] Aspen Daily News February 4, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[53] The Aspen Times (weekly) February 6, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[54] Aspen Daily News April 30, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[55] Aspen Daily News February 26, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

the deal.[56] Commerce Savings, likely through a series of backroom deals involving Trump, Schiffer, and Roberts, would instead purchase all of the land at the $42 million price, effectively buying Roberts out of any future dealings – and handing Trump the key to his now slightly reduced $17.25 million purchase of Cantrup's hotel site.[57]

With nothing seemingly standing in his way, Trump began planning construction for the fall of 1988.[58] He revealed that the process of making the deals to attain the land required going "through a tremendous amount of war, literally. It was no different than going into a war room." But out of those battles would come "something that I think the people of this country and people outside this country are going to enjoy for many years to come," with all of the "really fabulous amenities and concepts" one could look forward to in Europe's great alpine hotels. The hotel was to host 440 rooms – more than the city council had deigned to allow Cantrup.[59]

The planning stages gave Aspenites the requisite time to acquaint themselves with their new "landlord," as the *Aspen Daily News* had it. The paper in June of that year ran a spate of articles called "The Trump Series," intended "to give our readers a look at Trump's background on the East Coast."[60] One of these articles was simply entitled "What Trump Owns." The list included properties throughout New York and Atlantic City, all stamped with his name: Trump Tower, Trump Plaza, Trump Parc, Trump Village. There were five casinos, three mansions, an airline, and a football team. And near the bottom of the list sat "Trump Palace: Durant Avenue, Aspen, Colo."[61] Other than the piece's title, no

[56] Aspen Daily News March 28, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[57] Aspen Daily News April 10, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[58] Aspen Daily News April 11, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[59] Aspen Daily News May 23, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[60] Aspen Daily News June 23, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[61] Aspen Daily News June 23, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

commentary was offered. But the article's content was its form: a list of acquisitions, like so many baubles, with downtown Aspen merely the most recent in a long chain of plunders.

Although Trump and many of his local sycophants heralded him as the town's savior, a Christ to redeem Aspen's Fall, one still wonders what the broader milieu of Aspen's citizens thought of his impending acquisitions. We can gain a modicum of insight from a series of reactions to Trump on behalf of city council candidates in May of that year. The *Aspen Daily News* asked the candidates: "How tough should the city be on Trump?" Bill Stirling, then seeking his final term as mayor, cautioned that Trump was "romancing" the town, and that he (Stirling) was the only politician capable of facing him down. Other reactions ranged from cautiously optimistic to recommending a "very tough" posture, though most candidates advocated for compromise between Trump's vision and Aspen's commitment to regulatory consistency. Some, such as city council candidate Tom Hines, opted for a deal-making strategy not unlike Trump's; Hines felt that Trump should construct a performing arts center for the privilege of being allowed to develop in the town.[62]

Alas, all such discussions would prove fruitless when, on June 26, 1987, Trump's "art of the deal" fell through completely. "At less than ten minutes prior to the deadline," Schiffer recalls, Trump's $17.25 million offer for the proposed site of Trump Palace was trumped by another buyer, the SAVANAH Partnership, affiliated with an attorney and former partner of John Roberts named Alan Novak. Where Trump had intended only to buy the six-acre hotel plot, SAVANAH purchased the entire seventy-two-acre real estate bundle formerly belonging to Hans Cantrup – an all-cash deal of $42,897,263.75.[63] Known to few at the time, according to Schiffer, was that the true figure behind the acquisition was

[62] Aspen Daily News May 1, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[63] Schiffer, 192; Aspen Daily News June 27, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

Mohamed "Michael" Hadid, a Palestinian-born developer who had travelled to Aspen for the first time only weeks prior to placing $43 million in cash on the table for seventy-two acres of its most prime real estate. Throughout the 1980s, Hadid had leveraged close ties, through various thinktanks and corporations, with the Saudi royal family in order to construct an American real estate empire based off of his development of a number of Ritz-Carlton hotels. His ambition was to now expand that empire to Aspen. While Trump played it cool and wished the new buyers "the best," Schiffer, who had managed most of the deal as Trump's lawyer, was suicidal. In his recollection, the very splendor and beauty of Aspen seemed to fade before his eyes as the news sank in. "[I] went out on the deck to get some fresh air and clear my head, but there was no relief from a nightmare I could not have imagined in my wildest dreams. If it had been ten stories instead of two, I might have jumped."[64]

Despite his earlier well-wishes, Trump retaliated two months later with a lawsuit, attempting to wrest control over his planned Trump Palace site. For months, Schiffer worked on a gambit that would allow them to seize the property. When the county rejected a new, higher offer of $18.25 million for the site, Schiffer filed a lawsuit. The last-minute move would come only days after Hadid's first appearance before the city council, and exactly one day before his ownership was to be cemented.[65]

In 1988, while Trump railed against Hadid's 292-room Ritz-Carlton design as "a horror," Hadid had other concerns. Even amidst the lawsuit that seemed to be leaning in Trump's favor, Hadid clarified that "The Ritz is not the most important – the Institute is." Here, Hadid referred to the Aspen Institute, around which he now owned dozens of acres

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[64] Schiffer, 192.
[65] Aspen Daily News August 4, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

of land on its grounds and those of the Aspen Music Festival. “If we lose the Institute, that’s when we lose everything.”[66] In saying this, Hadid set himself apart from Trump, and indeed most other developers, who had rarely, if ever, spoken on the record of the need to foster the Aspen Institute as a major arm of Aspen’s intellectual and cultural cachet on the global stage. Later, Hadid would entertain the possibility of resolving Trump’s lawsuit via a trade in which Trump would acquire Hadid’s Grand Aspen Hotel, to be renovated or demolished in favor of a complex of luxury condominiums. It was clear, then, that in Hadid, Aspen would need to reckon with a new kind of deal-maker.[67]

Midway through the following year, Hadid attempted to make good on his posture of beneficence toward Aspen. His “An Open Letter to the Aspen Community” began, not with “Dear citizens of Aspen,” as one might expect, but with “We, the citizens of Aspen, are at a crossroads in our community.” Immediately, Hadid and his associates positioned themselves rhetorically as members of the community over which they had only recently and covertly maneuvered themselves into landlordship. The letter continued: “’The private sector should work to strengthen Aspen’s economy, it should make a more significant commitment to affordable housing, and it should provide greater support to non-profit organizations and the community as a whole.”[68] Notice the double quotation marks: here, Hadid spoke not for himself, but on behalf of the community’s address *to* himself. The letter, in effect, ventriloquized Aspen’s constituents into speaking for issues and solutions that would garner Hadid the greatest degree of social puissance.

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[66] Aspen Daily News January 4, 1988 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[67] Aspen Daily News April 4, 1988 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[68] Aspen Daily News June 8, 1989 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

Addressing the ongoing legal battles over the construction of the Ritz-Carlton, Hadid pronounced that the lawsuits "against our company and the City Council… continue to hang like a cloud over the community." The "we" and the "community" of the letter dash across registers – now collective, now corporate, now individual – contributing to an overall sensation of schizophrenia regarding the role of Hadid's new business empire in Aspen. No doubt the townsfolk sensed it too: that cloying sensation they'd felt on their skin many times the decade over – the feeling of being *bought*. It appeared that local resistance had asserted itself in some measure against Hadid's plans, however. The letter noted that of the approved 447 rooms which were planned to be built, only 316 would actually be constructed. The letter concluded with something of a threat: continuing to fight against "the future" would only "reignite and fuel the litigious atmosphere" that had roiled the town for the past decade, since Cantrup's initial Cantrupcy from which all other debacles seemed to flow.[69] But recall the earlier Cantrup-Schiffer-Trump rhetoric about guiding Aspen to a prosperous future: Aspen *required* these hotels in order to achieve its global destiny. Hadid was simply the first in a long line of barons to actually succeed. He said as much himself in early 1988. "The only difference," he asserted, between himself and Trump and all the rest who had tried and failed to impress their visions upon Aspen, "is that I own the property."[70]

If this was indeed the only difference between Hadid and his competitors, why did some members of the Aspen community smart so terribly at the prospect of a Hadid buyout? For the answer, it is prudent to turn again to Schiffer's recollections, given his central role in the ordeal. He recalls a spate of resistance to Hadid at the outset, in 1988,

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Aspen Daily News January 4, 1988 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

particularly on the part of other developers and architects. These citizens couched their objections in the rhetoric of care for the integrity of Aspen's "character," though it is just as likely that their overriding concern was for their ability to compete with Hadid's monopoly.[71] Soon, though, the ire seemed to fade, as "the town was finally succumbing to pressures of money and greed, forces that it had valiantly resisted for so long." It is worth quoting the rest of Schiffer's ruminations at length. "A paradigm shift seemed to be taking place. Not many seemed to care about Hadid's reputation or where his money came from, or at least not those whose fortunes were tied to a big new hotel… Whether it was Hadid or Trump, or someone else, didn't seem to matter that much anymore."[72] Of course, this very capitulation belies the fact that Schiffer clearly did believe that whether it would be Trump or Hadid mattered – and a great deal. It is difficult not to be disarmed by the absurdity of a wealthy Aspenite professional being appalled at the triumph of one billionaire over another, nor to be struck by the hypocrisy of believing that a victory for Donald Trump would not have indicated a surrender to "the pressures of money and greed." Then again, we must keep in mind that Schiffer's own fortunes were tied to Trump's success. The exact identity of the architect of Aspen's future development mattered less than did the particular pockets into which their patronage would flow.

Still, it is easy to detect a note of resentment in the attitude of Schiffer and many of his class that likely goes beyond simple functions of class envy and capital expropriation. For as Schiffer looked at the "maddening" development of Hadid, he "began to grow bitter, disgusted at the way the outsider, the interloper, had inserted himself into our town and was

[71] Schiffer, 224.
[72] Ibid., 226.

now being embraced" by those who stood to gain from the coup.[73] "It was infuriating," Schiffer wrote of the feelings harbored by himself and others opposed to Hadid, to see "Aspen's soul slipping away."[74] Hadid's maneuvers – political, capitalist, even propagandistic, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to sway local elections in his favor – all acted as "confirmation for many that their once-egalitarian little utopia was indeed for sale."[75] Such, as well, was all the confirmation that Schiffer's friend Greg Porter required to stand erect atop a slope of Aspen Mountain, survey the town and the "fucking hole in the ground" from which would spring the Ritz-Carlton, and declare that Aspen was "nothing but a worn-out old whore."[76]

One Christmas season in the late eighties, John Denver came to Aspen for the filming of *John Denver's Christmas in Aspen*, a television special for which Ted Conover was cast as an extra. After a performance at the Hotel Jerome, Denver performed to a small group high up on a mountain trail, surrounded by snow and woods. Conover recalled: "In the freezing cold air, warm breath left his mouth as steam." But in the midst of his most recognizable work, "Rocky Mountain High," Denver's mouth shut, his guitar was set aside – and the song kept playing. He was lip-syncing. The moment left Conover ashamed of his own earnestness. "Aspen, I kept forgetting, was about pretending."[77] And Aspen's own favored son now only mouthed the hollow lyrics that had once brought him and the town such fame.

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[73] Ibid., 231.
[74] Ibid., 250.
[75] Ibid., 251.
[76] Ibid., 257-258.
[77] Conover, 73-76.

I place this naked anecdote at the close of this section in order to counter the narrative of Aspen's Fall alleged by the likes of Schiffer and Porter. For quietly, in the background, beneath the bluster of the alien capitalists Trump and Hadid, it is possible that Aspen's soul was indeed trickling away – trickling out of the music, the intellectual culture, the radicalism, and the very breath of those who had made the town what it was known to be. These were Reagan's Eighties; the billionaires would come with their billions and their plans and their lawyers, and there was little recourse to stop them. But if Aspen was indeed a whore, would the billionaire from New York City have been a gentler pimp than the billionaire from Nazareth? In other words, regardless of who prevailed in this game of titans, *was it also necessary that John Denver cease to sing?*

Environmentalism or Greenweenie-ism?

By 1990, the editors of the *Aspen Daily News* had identified a phenomenon in need of a definition: "Greenweenie-ism." This moniker connoted "a sort of trendy, feel-good hypocrisy about being kinder and gentler to the environment," without any notable change in the Greenweenie's behavior. Aspen, as one of the nation's "capitals of conspicuous consumption," marred the earth with a "huge black stain," rather than the bright spot of green its denizens and boosters strove to present to the world.[78] But with their invocation of the new terminology of Greenweenie-ism, the editors apprehended a trend that would come to dominate liberal neighborhoods of the global village in the decades that followed: not conspicuous consumption, but performative environmentalism. The Greenweenie, then, was one who recycled, biked, or adhered to a vegetarian diet, not for its sake, but *in*

[78] Aspen Daily News April 21, 1990 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

order to be seen doing so. The newfound intimacy of the global village had skyrocketed the cachet of local gossip back to pre-industrial levels; as a result, to have the appearance of environmental conscientiousness was much more profitable, in terms of both social and real capital, than to adopt its tenets in a genuinely radical manner.

Looking back through the Eighties, can we discern more examples of widespread Greenweenie-ism in Aspen, or did the town attempt legitimate environmental reform? As is often the case with this town of contradictions, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Examine, for instance, the minor scandal that erupted over Mayor Bill Stirling's alleged illegal authorization of a private jet breaking Pitkin County Airport's curfew on private night flights. The flight was carrying actors Woody Harrelson and Bea Arthur to speak at an anti-fur rally in Aspen, two days before a historic landslide referendum that resulted in the defeat of a citywide ban on furs. Throughout the Eighties, Stirling and his wife, Katharine Thalberg, had devoted themselves to the cause of the Aspen Society for Animal Rights (ASFAR), of which Thalberg was the leader. In the case of this particular scandal, the mayor contravened the testimony of the jet's co-pilot, who alleged that Stirling had authorized the landing. More interesting is the apparent lack of a contradiction between the private jet travel of Hollywood celebrities from Los Angeles to Aspen for the purpose of speaking on an environmentalist cause.[79]

The following month, Stirling would "abdicate" his mayoral post to travel (by undisclosed means) to a Canadian anti-fur forum for the purpose of activism. John Walla, chairman of the board of directors for Aspen's restaurant association, accused Stirling of

[79] The Steamboat Today May 8, 1991 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection; Aspen Daily News March 15, 1990 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection; Aspen Daily News March 30, 1990 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

parlaying his political influence into a "national soap box" from which to vent unpopular views. Speaking for the town, which, as mentioned above, had two months prior handily defeated a ban on fur sales, Walla asserted that "the will of the people" was against Stirling.[80]

But was this the will of the people or the will of the petit-bourgeoisie – and in Aspen, how well could one discern the difference? In the mayoral election of 1991, Stirling chose not to seek reelection after an eight-year (four-term) tenure. In his place rose the restaurateur John Bennett, who promised to reverse many of Stirling's "ultra-liberal" political crusades. Reportedly, these included stances that were "anti-nuke, anti-military, anti-war, anti-fur, anti-smoking, pro-animal rights and pro-women's rights." But the "sea change in Aspen politics," as locals had it, came with the historic defeat of the fur ban referendum – a loss of political capital so tremendous on the part of Stirling and Thalberg that they would apparently never recover.[81]

If we are to accurately assess Stirling's falling-out with the town, we must look, not merely to class, but class performativity: the posture of so-called Greenweenie-ism. We must be careful what images we conjure when we apply the designation of "ultra-liberal" to Stirling's political career; after all, his track record on seemingly "liberal" policies such as increased employee housing was notably ambiguous. For instance, in 1983, Stirling broke with county commissioner Michael Kinsley on the need for new employee housing, calling the proposals "all out of whack with the scale of Aspen historically." Further, he spoke from an owner's perspective when he admitted that the gauge by which he judged the need for increased housing was his lack of difficulty in filling the positions for which

[80] Aspen Daily News April 28, 1990 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[81] The Steamboat Today May 8, 1991 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

he was hiring. “There are plenty of people available here, what there’s really a shortage of is jobs” – ignoring the possibility that job creation itself may be hampered by the lack of reliable housing.[82]

So, if Stirling’s ousting from the office of mayor was indeed a class revolt, it must have been an intra-class revolt, not against economic or developmental policy, but against a species of Greenweenie-ist activism that other members of the petit-bourgeoisie believed threatened the image of Aspen and, subsequently, their profits. As a global village exposed to the world stage, many Aspenites felt the mayor had garnered their town “international bad press” as a result of his activist beliefs and actions. One of those beliefs, vegetarianism, notably resulted in Stirling’s keeping of two dogs, a malamute and a Hungarian sheepdog, on a completely vegetarian diet, a choice which many veterinarians today criticize as dangerous and potentially even abusive.[83]

Such were the issues that, by early 1990, 750 Aspenites (about 15% of the total population) had signed a petition “demanding that Mayor Stirling be removed from office because of their lack of confidence in his leadership for the last six months.” In a campaign ad by mayoral candidate Terry Butler, Butler lambasted Stirling for damaging “the positive image of our friendly, open-minded and gracious community,” for “blatantly” abusing “the trust of the people,” and for “us[ing] the high name identification of Aspen in national media play to further his own political goals and ambitions.” Butler portrayed Aspen at the close of the Eighties as “more highly divided and in need of healing then [sic] it ever has been before in its’ [sic] history.” Adumbrating the future parlance of longtime Aspen man-

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[82] The Aspen Times (weekly) November 17, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[83] Aspen Daily News November 16, 1990 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

about-town Donald Trump, Butler called for the need to "MAKE ASPEN'S CONCERNS FIRST AGAIN."[84]

Others took up the cause with great zeal. In a March issue of the *Aspen Daily News* Bill McDonough & Friends took out two half-page ads dedicated solely to advertising the recall vote. They applied the tried-and-tested collective language of populism in asking questions such as: "Does He Truly Represent Us?" and "Who Is He Really For?" At stake was nothing less than the soul of the community – or at least its ability to attract investors and celebrities who might have been put off by Stirling's commitment to animal welfare. "We," claimed McDonough & Friends, "can show the nation and the world that Bill Stirling didn't speak for us during his most recent personal crusade."[85] What this saga demonstrates, then, are the trajectories made possible by Aspen's evolution from seventies ski town to nineties global hub. Stirling had come to Aspen as a ski bum, risen through its ranks, amassed capital both political and monetary. His error was to believe that his post-1968 social justice framework would have the staying power to weather Aspen's transformation from radical mountain hideaway to playground of the global elite. Hence, the contradiction was papered over by the label of Greenweenie; we might just as easily define the term as denoting one whose environmental and social mores "lagged behind" the economic and political exigencies of helming the neoliberal global village.

For another such contradiction, one could also examine the relative nonchalance over weather-alteration technologies as Aspenites "acclimated" to their usage. By the mid-Eighties, the controversies over cloud-seeding technologies had mostly subsided. Cloud-seeding for the purpose of generating man-made snow had gone on unabated from 1977 to

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[84] Aspen Daily News February 28, 1990 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[85] Aspen Daily News March 6, 1990 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

1987, although of Colorado's many remote ski towns, only Vail applied to renew their permit in 1987. Costing around $50,000 per year, cloud-seeding might immediately strike one as the apotheosis of environmental decadence: altering the very climate to indulge in the wholly unproductive act of skiing.[86] But one must consider as well the necessity of snow for the economies of the ski towns and the workers they employed, whose livelihoods depended on the punctuality of snow each season.

Cloud-seeding also fell out of relative fashion due to the ease and reliability with which ski resorts could produce snow through more traditional means: snowmaking machines. In 1980, the Aspen City Council approved a new ordinance allowing for the sale of city water to Aspen Ski Corp for the purpose of snowmaking. The ordinance purported to only permit the sale of excess water, such that the city would actually net a profit on the sales, and it was stipulated that snowmaking water usage must not interfere with the needs of regular customers. The amount of water to be requisitioned for snowmaking was typically pegged at 1,500 gallons per minute, with an increase to 2,000 gallons per minute during November.[87] For comparison, Denver Water in 2025 released data showing that the average Denver family of four used 200 gallons of water *per day*. Contrast this with Aspen Ski Corp.'s snowmaking practices, which used nearly 3 *million* gallons of water per day in the peak season of 1981.[88] As for the costs, Aspen Ski Co. declined to disclose this information to the press, though they did offer some insight into the mechanics of snowmaking. Snow guns, as the machines were called, functioned by mixing streams of air and water at high speeds, consuming up to 250 gallons of water per minute each. In

[86] Aspen Daily News February 19, 1987 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[87] The Aspen Times (weekly) November 20, 1980 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[88] https://www.denverwater.org/residential/efficiency-tip/how-efficient-are-you-indoors

1985, Aspen Ski Co. produced 170 acre-feet of snow, or 43,560 cubic feet. Also noteworthy for symbolic consideration is that man-made snow conglomerates into identical pellets, while natural snow forms into unique snowflake patterns.[89]

Such desperate measures were likely a response to the drought year of 1976-1977, which saw reduced tourism and subsequent employee layoffs. Buttermilk and Snowmass, in 1977, were the first to take up the practice, followed by Aspen Mountain in 1981.[90] The adoption of snowmaking by the Aspen Ski Corp. presaged the industry's "boom" throughout the West, as Colorado, Idaho, and California once again faced droughts in the winter of 1981. As a result, resorts in Breckenridge, Vail, Keystone, and Copper Mountain all turned to snowmaking in order to keep their customers and their profits.[91]

Despite the fact that, still in the 1970s, the specter of "global cooling" haunted the environmental imagination as much as its opposite, a scientific consensus on the reality of anthropogenic global warming would develop throughout the 1980s, and by the close of the decade, much of the literate public would be acquainted with the broader concept. In 1983, the *Aspen Daily News* reporter Doug Vaughan covered a report by the Environmental Protection Agency warning of the "Greenhouse Effect," the name given to the phenomenon of global warming resulting from heat trapped by carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere. The report predicted that the results of warming might be felt as early as 1990, prompting Vaughan, and doubtless other Aspenites, to ponder the future of an Aspen sans snow. "Once," Vaughan wrote wistfully, "the future belonged to God"; now, Aspenites would be forced to reckon with the understanding that their own consumptive habits might have a

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[89] Aspen Daily News November 8, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[90] Aspen Daily News November 8, 1986 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[91] The Aspen Times (weekly) February 12, 1981 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

direct impact upon the future of the communities and livelihoods. They were planning, Vaughan warned, “for a future that isn’t there.”[92]

Cast in this light, it is interesting to note the generalized acceptance, or at least ambivalence, on the part of ski town citizenry toward snowmaking practices. Aspen, despite its altitude of nearly eight thousand feet, would feel the impact of global warming to much the same degree as a coastal village at sea level would. As the snow melted, it was understood by locals that the economy would drain away, and the cloud-seeding aircraft and snowmaking machines would be forced to chug ever harder.

Aspen’s New World Order

On the sunny and temperate second of August, 1990, President George H.W. Bush sat in a music tent on the grounds of the Aspen Institute alongside UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The president joked, discussed the past, and planned for the future. He praised the weather, thanked his hosts, and commended his guests. And then he launched the Gulf War.

In his remarks, Bush used the fortieth anniversary of the Aspen Institute’s founding to contrast the state of the world in 1950 with that of 1990. 1950 saw the Cold War heat up with the ignition of war in Korea. This era of conflict and tension, Bush contrasted with the changing international order of 1990, characterized by the breakdown of Soviet communism and the promise of a new European unity. Through it all, Bush offered, the “spirit of Aspen” could be seen to have been at work. That spirit “has come to signify the attempt to bridge the worlds of thought and action and, of course, to understand the

[92] Aspen Daily News October 19, 1983 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

tremendous changes taking place around us."[93] In this framing, the spirit of Aspen was a spirit of praxis, the unity of thought and action in the service of advancing humanistic aims.

The bulk of Bush's words were devoted to the topic of military readiness in a new world of shifting alliances, novel threats, and asymmetric warfare. While announcing a war, he thanked the attendees for having "helped lead to a more peaceful world." The following March, at the war's close, Bush spoke to Congress of "the very real prospect of a new world order" governed by the technocratic expertise of an ascendant United Nations. "The Gulf War," he said, "put this new world to its first test, and, my fellow Americans, we passed that test." It is no exaggeration to say that many of the details of this new world order had been hammered out in Aspen, Colorado.[94]

But even as the Aspen Institute had contributed its strategic thoughts on the Gulf War, the town of Aspen also contributed its own reservations and its soldiers. In February 1991, Aspen's Center for Conflict Resolution sponsored an open town hall to "promote respectful, tolerant dialogue" on the subject of the war as it drew to a close.[95] Presumably, many in the town were split over the war's conduct and necessity. Others found in the war the opportunity to cement their love and commitment for one another. In the same month, Aspen resident Mitzi Roberts married U.S. Air Force Sergeant Tom Kadrmas while he was stationed in Saudi Arabia. Kadrmas, a veteran of Operation Desert Storm, attended the wedding virtually, by telephone, and was represented by a proxy groom in Aspen. Kadrmas had also proposed over the phone, and later signed his marriage license after it had been faxed from the other side of the globe. In describing the wedding as "satellite-bounced,"

[93] https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2128
[94] Document: New world order: George Bush's speech, 6 Mar 1991
[95] Aspen Daily News February 5, 1991 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

and highlighting the roles played by the telephone and fax machine, the *Aspen Daily News* pointed to the ways in which Aspen continued to be at the forefront of technological mediation in an ever more interconnected world.[96] Even as Bush proclaimed the birth of a "new world order" heralded by the conference in Aspen, everyday Aspenites responded to such earth-shattering changes in much the way they always had: with a mixture of resilience, adaptability, and gusto.

In an anonymous editorial from 1989, one Aspen citizen took the occasion of a Saudi prince's proposed 55,000 square-foot Aspen palace to interrogate the town's linkages with the troubling prospects of the planet's future survival. "Each day," the author wrote, "we see more news reports about oil spills, ozone depletion, overflowing landfills, global warming, species extinction, soil erosion, and water shortages. The global village is shrinking, and its human inhabitants are slowly, belatedly learning that we are dependent on the health of the earth." Here, the author explicitly connects global environmental trends with the erection of a singular building in Aspen. But that building is composed of "$10 million worth or [sic] stone, cement, copper, fiberglass, glass, timber, mortar, steel, sheetrock" – all "extracted, processed, transported, and shaped" for the benefit of the rich at the expense of the earth. This is the global village taken to its literal extreme: a home the size of a village, composed of materials taken from all over the globe. The planet's shrinking circumference was a result of both its international commercial system and the shared ecological precarity of its inhabitants. Aspen, once a site of resource extraction, was now positioned at the end, rather than the beginning, of inconceivably complex supply chains.[97]

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[96] Aspen Daily News February 16, 1991 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection
[97] Aspen Daily News June 29, 1989 — Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection

But the author does not despair. Extrapolating Aspen's import back into the realm of the global, they write, "Many people still don't believe it's the job of county commissioners or city council to worry about global warming or deforestation. But if it's not their job — or ours — then whose is it?"[98] If Aspen were to meet its aspiration to the status of a global village, it would need to give as well as take, enlarge the world around it, even as that world seemed to slowly implode. Residents of a global village in the double sense, Aspenites would persevere through the tumult of the Eighties to face the new world of the Nineties as a town that was both the wetnurse and the child of the national and global trends that would shape the decade and those to come.

Addendum: Further research on the Eighties

The content of this report was contoured by two major forces: my own historical materialist outlook and the sources that were available to me remotely. Other researchers with other interests and differing degrees of physical acquaintance with Aspen will likely pursue topics distinct from those covered here. As such, I would like to offer some avenues for further research on this tumultuous decade.

Much more might be said in the environmental realm. In this report, I chose to focus on snowmaking and Greenweenie-ism, as I felt those had the most notable socioeconomic and political impacts on the direction of the community. But other debates took place during the 1980s, including those over wood-burning stove regulation and, consequently, air quality. Another avenue I would have liked to explore more fully would be the debates over animal trapping and the production and wearing of fur clothing. I am certain that there

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[98] Ibid.

is an intriguing narrative to be had here that connects eighties Aspen to its countercultural roots in the sixties and seventies.

Of course, there also remains much to be said on the topic of skiing and the ski industry. I did not cover the corporatization of Aspen's ski scene, the acquisition of Aspen Ski Corp. by 20th Century Fox and its subsequent rebranding as Aspen Skiing Company, or the changes to Aspen's iconic Winterskol celebration. This topic I leave to a researcher with both experience and interest in the sport, neither of which I possess in any great measure.

Although I touched on certain cultural developments, further research into this area ought to produce strong works of cultural history. Research in this area should examine the instantiation of drug culture, the blossoming of queer culture with events like Gay Ski Week, and the outpouring of novels featuring Aspen as a locale and/or Aspenites as villains. More salaciously-inclined researchers might also opt for a history of the major gossip-provoking events of the decade, such as the abrupt dissolution of Donald Trump's marriage to Ivana Trump, or the dramatic assassination of cocaine dealer Steven Grabow via car bomb. And in the realm of high culture, further research could focus on incidents taking place in and around the Aspen Institute, or on the architectural battles over the renovation of the venerable Wheeler Opera House.

I had also hoped to incorporate reflections on the advertising ubiquitously present in the newspapers of the time: relentless ads for "exotic" and "oriental" cuisine and pursuits like martial arts; or the constant presence of support groups for cultural woes such as HIV/AIDS, anorexia, and drug addiction. Unfortunately, I could not discern an effective way to work these symptoms into my large narrative of Aspen's socioeconomic transformation; they may be better off given greater due in a dedicated study.

Lastly, and most regrettably, I was only able to conduct one (quite fruitful) interview over the course of my research internship. Future researchers of the decade should prioritize oral history, ethnography, and interviews, as many of Aspen's major players during the time period are now reaching an advanced age.

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