

THE NEXT WEST

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[A B R I D G E D S A M P L E]

The problem of the West is nothing less than the problem of American development ... What is the West? What has it been in American life? To have the answers to these questions is to understand the most significant features of the United States today.^{2,3}

— Frederick Jackson Turner, 1920

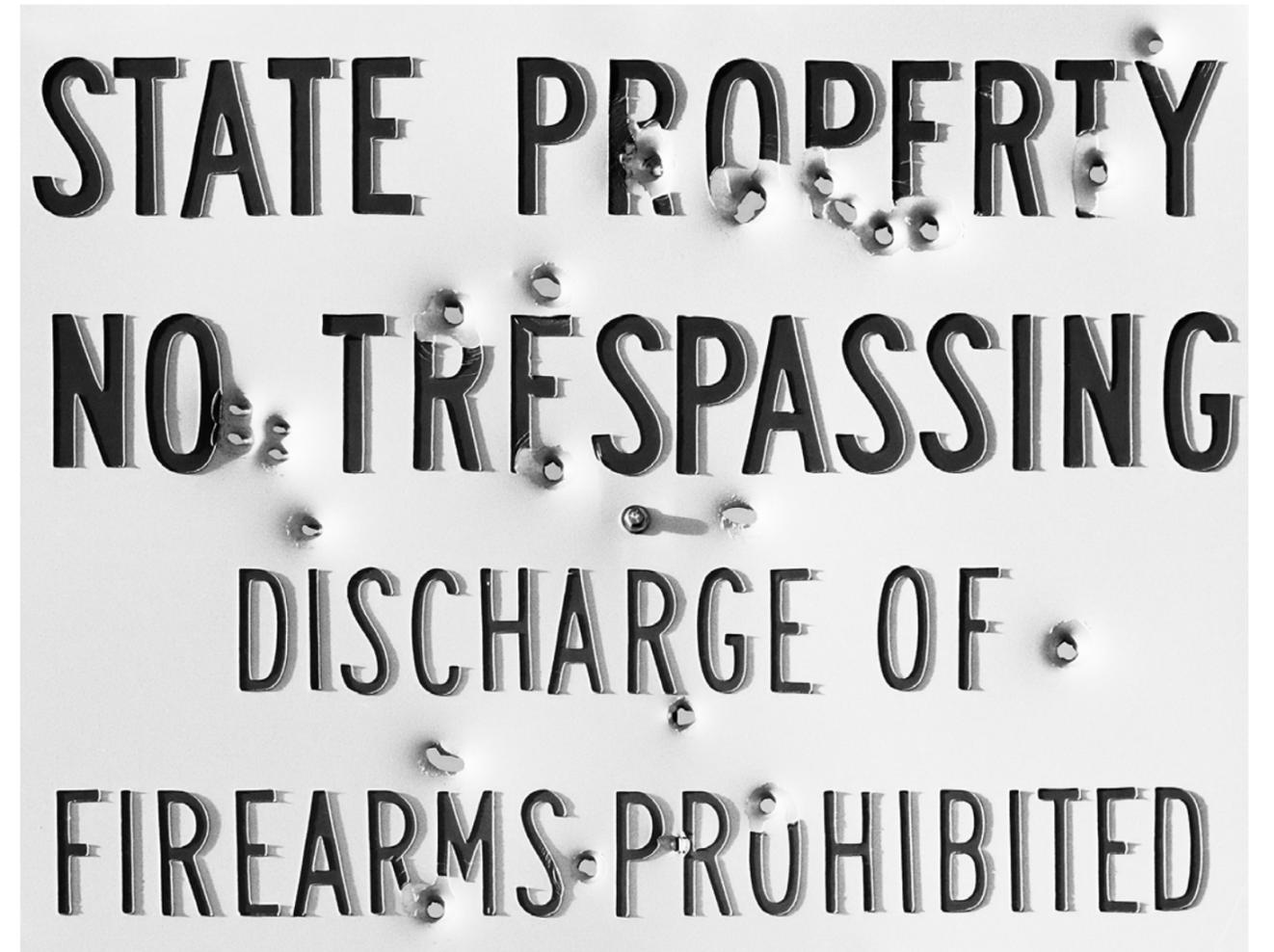
² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier In American History* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 1920), 205.

³ See the “Behind the Scenes” section starting on page 93 for further commentary on this and other content.

Approximately 50% of the American West is publicly owned.⁸ In Nevada, this proportion rises to almost 85%.⁹ This fact, when tossed in the blender with the Western myth of rugged individualism, has been known to give birth to a certain degree of conflict.

⁸ William Riebsame, ed., *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.



SIGNPOST, NEVADA (1999)

“Can you still hear me?” asked the saguaro.



SAGUAROS, TOWERS, PHOENIX, ARIZONA (2002)

“Places like Vail, Park City, Tahoe, Sedona, and Steamboat Springs report that up to 70 percent of their housing is owned by non-residents, most of it not rental property but rather sitting empty until owners can get away to enjoy it. Entire ‘ghost’ subdivisions may be empty during the off-season, and use may be brief even in winter at ski resorts; and these houses are heated, cleaned, and the driveways cleared of snow by an army of house-watchers and maintenance workers.”²⁵

“Second homes take up large amounts of land in Colorado mountain resort areas where developable land is already in short supply. As a result, the second homes’ values and the land surrounding them rises above that normally paid for worker housing. As their numbers increase, and the land available for development decreases, a dilemma is created. Second homes have generated the need for more workers, but the rise in property values and subsequent housing costs have made it difficult for the workers to live within reasonable distance of their place-of-work.”²⁶

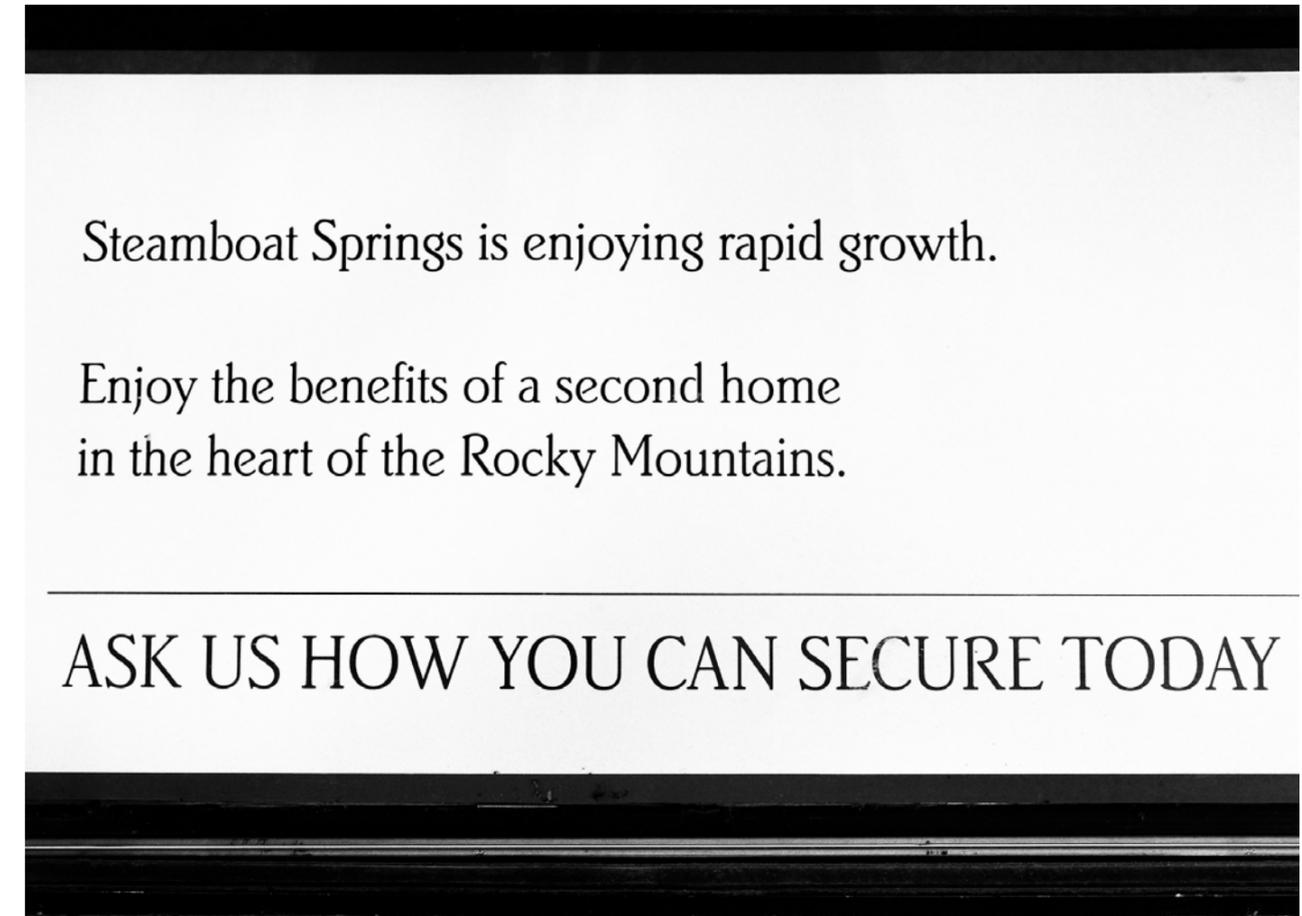
**CAN YOU ENJOY A
SECOND HOME TODAY?**

The particular combination of text in the window of the real estate office in Steamboat Springs represents but one of 10,888,869,450,418,352,160,768,000,000 possible arrangements of the 27 words that appear on the page. Here’s one alternative:

**Can you enjoy a second home today?
Ask us how Steamboat Springs is enjoying
the rocky benefits of rapid growth
in the secure heart of the mountains.**

²⁵ Rielsame, *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, 104.

²⁶ Linda Venturoni, *The Social and Economic Effects of Second Homes: Executive Summary* (Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, June 2004), 5.



REAL ESTATE OFFICE WINDOW SIGN, STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, COLORADO (2001)

To see and be seen.



GOLF COURSE MANSIONS AND TRAILER PARK, EDWARDS, COLORADO (2002)

In his philosophical treatise, *On Bullshit*, former Princeton University philosophy professor Harry Frankfurt notes that the realm of advertising is “replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept. And in these realms there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who ... dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right.”³¹

Alas, even the best stumble on occasion. Lest unwelcome truth shatter the illusions that fuel prospective sales, the sign disappeared faster than a block of butter under a sizzling summer sun.



PRAIRIES END, BACK ROADS BETWEEN FORT COLLINS AND BOULDER, COLORADO (2001)

³¹ Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22.

Finally, Heaven Is For Sale!

Can you imagine the size of the realtor's commission?

A parody presented at a mining convention in the 1920s captured the essence of those times, as western entrepreneurs rushed to stake claims across the region and then convince a gullible public to invest in often questionable enterprises:

There are mines that make us happy,
There are mines that make us blue,
There are mines that steal away the tear drops
As the sunbeams steal away the dew.
There are mines that have the ore chutes faulted,
Where the ore's forever lost to view,
But the mines that fill my heart with sunshine,
Are the mines I sold to you.³²

One can imagine an early 21st century revision:

There is real estate that makes us happy,
There is real estate that makes us blue,
There is real estate that steals away the tear drops,
As the sunbeams steal away the dew.
There is real estate on which the owners defaulted,
Where the investment's forever lost to view,
But the real estate that fills my heart with sunshine,
Is the real estate I sold to you.

Or, tracing the industry to its roots on Wall Street, one might prefer to replace the words “real estate” with “interest-only negative-amortizing adjustable-rate subprime mortgage.” Many on Wall Street would embrace both the obfuscation and outcome alike.

We have mined the American West for its beaver and its bison, its forests and its grasslands, its minerals and its water. All too often we have acted on a false premise of limitlessness. The natural beauty of the West may be the last resource the West has to offer.³³ Aided and abetted by the hallelujah chorus of Wall Street, and pressing on with the tools of house and subdivision, we are consuming the natural beauty of the West with limitless abandon. And yet the underlying premise remains false.

**Finally, Heaven Is For Sale!
Sold.**



FINALLY HEAVEN IS FOR SALE, SALT LAKE CITY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH (2005)

³² Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something In The Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 123.

³³ An idea that originates from conservation biologist Richard Knight.

“Jesus here. Can you hold please?”

“This is Jesus. Can you hold please?”

“Hello, this is Jesus. Can you please hold?”

The help line had been ringing off the hook all afternoon. Jesus hadn’t even had time for food or drink. The bread lay unbroken. And God had been pretty clear about the rules regarding turning the water into wine during working hours. Would this day never end?

The clock ticked. And tocked. And ticked. And talked. “Five minutes to five,” it announced aloud.

“Thank God,” thought Jesus as he placed another caller on hold. He might be able to wade through the final inning of calls, but the backlog of supplications was going to have to wait. There simply wasn’t enough time in the day to deal with the quagmire in the Middle East, much less the situation in the American West. Whether Middle East or American West, land – the thorny rose of God’s creation – was proving the source of too many calls.

Pleasant Valley Ranch was to be its title. The landowner filed two proposals with the county in the mid-1990s, each envisioning approximately 200 homes clustered on 1,000 acres of a 6,900 acre agricultural tract in a sleepy community known more for its cows than its cars.

The Department of Health and Environment determined that the proposed development would violate air quality standards and cited the plan for lacking sufficient infrastructure to meet water and sanitation

requirements. County engineers expressed concern over the potential impact of traffic associated with this spate of new homes. Locals formed a citizen’s coalition to fight the development.

The proposal eventually lapsed, and the large agricultural property thus passed undeveloped to the next generation, who chose to continue a commitment to bovines over bulldozers.

Less than a decade later, large homes began appearing on subdivided lots adjacent to the agricultural property. In response, the next generation offered a message on a milk truck for all to see.

On the weekend of July 4, 2005, in keeping with a long history of explosive land use confrontations across the American West, mysterious forces blew the milk truck to kingdom come.

Jesus called it a day and punched out at 5pm. God napped on the front porch in the diminishing light of a crimson Colorado sun. The help line offered callers a polite recording: “Divine intervention is currently unavailable. Please call back during normal business hours. In the meantime, we encourage you to work it out amongst yourselves.”



JESUS SAVE OUR PEACEFUL VALLEY FROM THE DEVELOPER, COLORADO (2000)

DEVELOP

v. developed, developing, develops

1. To build on or otherwise change the use of (a piece of land), esp. so as to make it more profitable.
2. To cause to grow or expand.
3. To begin to exhibit or suffer from.
4. To cause to mature or evolve.
5. To bring out the possibilities of; bring to a more advanced, effective, or usable state.
6. To process (a photosensitive material), especially with chemicals, in order to render a recorded image visible.

In “New West” terminology, the concept of “develop” focused entirely on Definition 1. This led to cities, suburbs, and exurbs that followed Definition 2... until Definition 3 caused inhabitants to pause and reassess the driving process behind Definitions 1 and 2.

Having spent the better part of two centuries working through Definitions 1, 2, and 3, the American West was thus offered ample opportunities for Definition 4. And while Definition 1 still drives many of today’s land use decisions, it now finds itself increasingly in competition with an alternative viewpoint as provided by Definition 5.

And so when this 1,700 acre property went up for sale, despite a name that the marketing department of any residential housing development firm could fall in love with, The Nature Conservancy emerged as the eventual buyer. Known as “Phantom Canyon,” its name arose from the fact that as you travel across the flat expanse of grasslands in its direction, you do not expect to arrive at a canyon of such magnitude. It lies hidden until you stumble upon its very edge.

Since 1987, staff members and volunteers have actively developed this property by reestablishing natural ecological processes of grazing and fire; by restoring the prairie through seed collecting, planting, and invasive weed management; by providing habitat for such species as black bears, mountain lions, bobcats, golden eagles, red-tailed hawks, and the rare Larimer aletes; and by tearing down fences, both literal and figurative, to create partnerships with neighboring ranches and the larger community.



PHANTOM CANYON, COLORADO (2002)

This is not a state park.
This is not a pristine wilderness area.
This is not the view from a national park.
This is a portrait of over 4,000,000 people living within
the folds of the landscape. And it's still beautiful.



PHOENIX METROPOLITAN AREA, ARIZONA (2009)

There are multiple ways of looking at the American West. One is through the electrical towers of the Hoover Dam. A complex web of individual elements connected to and supported by one another, the structure of the towers says as much about electricity and engineering as about the nature of a region with choices to make between autonomy and independence, between embracing connections and attempting to live in segregated isolation, whether through wealth, politics, origins, or any number of other attributes. The choices determine whether the towers stand or fall, perched as they are at precarious angles to the depths below.

When the lines of the grid submit to the curves of the land; when the East rediscovers the high ideals that animated the founding of the nation; when the Grand Canyon is the standard of measure; when recognition of the present replaces nostalgia for the past; when state property and guns can peacefully coexist;

When we break our addictions; when rights are balanced by responsibilities; when warnings of cause and effect are heeded in advance; when we differentiate between what is right and what is wrong in agriculture; when there is a new view from the strip mine;

When visitors see both sides of the park; when the photograph of a degraded landscape is not beautiful; when we recognize the wonders of the locations in which we actually live; when we acknowledge both sides of the state; when wilderness is wilderness;

When the saguaro represents more than just a saguaro; when we embrace authentic hope instead of a cheap substitute; when we can hear the voice of the cacti; when the arrows point in a different direction;

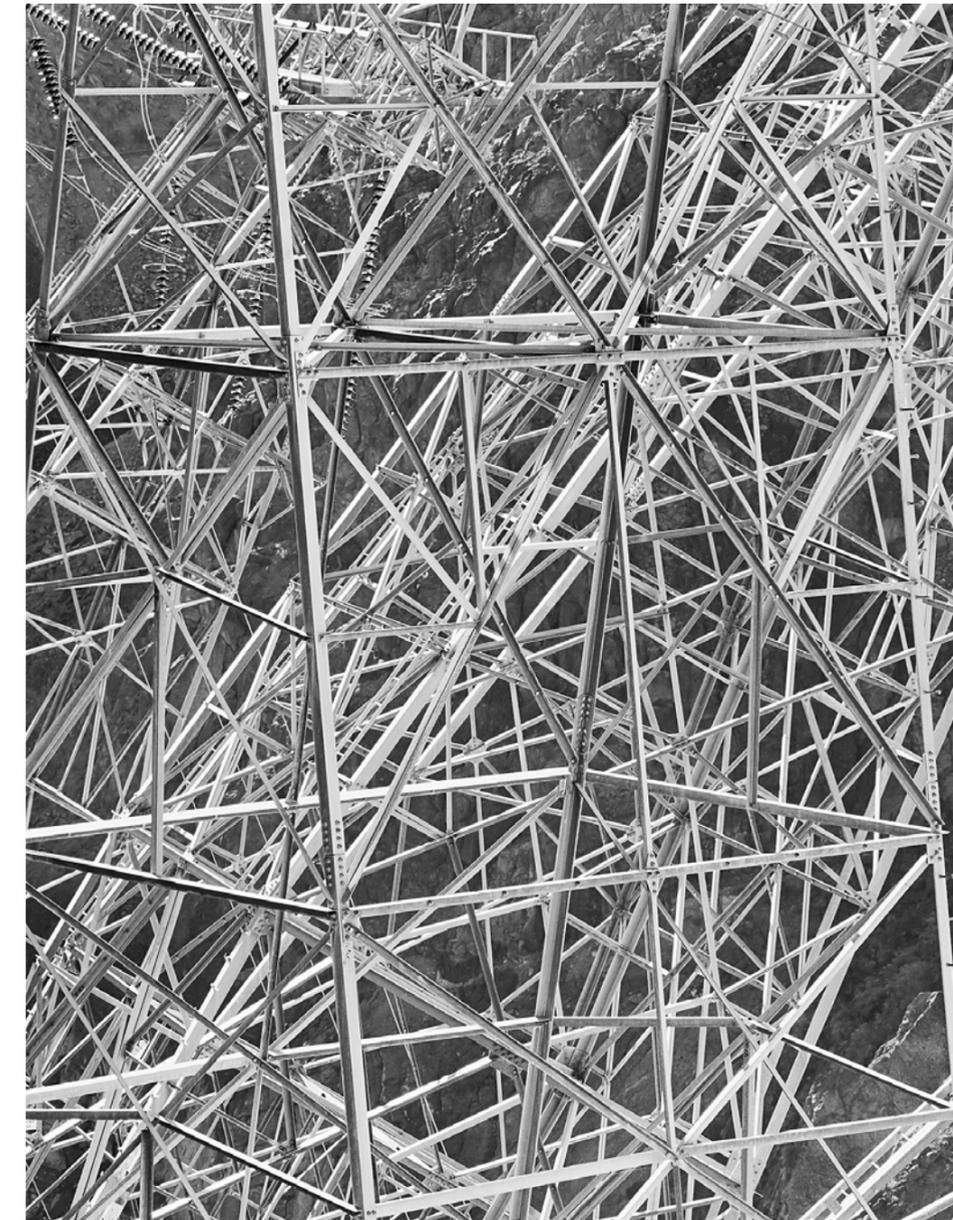
When the homes embrace the individuality of the inhabitants; when we arrange the words in a different order; when it's more about seeing than being seen; when the failed photograph is omitted from the collection; when the words of a master architect aren't misappropriated for a lesser cause; when the places we build live up to the names with which we label them;

When the Earth looks less like Mars; when the bullshit gives way to honesty; when the sports pages are back on the wall; when Heaven is not for sale; when the malls accentuate the human instead of the automobile;

When dialogue replaces calls for divine intervention; when we emphasize the fifth definition of the word 'develop'; when we see beauty amongst our millions; when we develop a relationship with the land; when we recognize our interconnectedness and choose cooperative autonomy over isolated independence;

When we have done all of this, we will have created the Next West.

There are multiple ways of looking at the American West. One is through a collection of black and white photographs.



ELECTRICAL TOWERS, HOOVER DAM, NEVADA (2001)