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REVITALIZING MINNEAPOLIS' RIVERFRONT THROUGH CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Introduction

After over 45 years of redevelopment along Minneapolis' riverfront a broadened approach to redeveloping and interpreting our built heritage is being implemented to more effectively engage the community. This includes conducting historical studies and analysis in a way that not only meets high academic standards but also is meaningful to community planners and people who are culturally connected to a place. Using the case studies of Upper Harbor Terminal and Water Works, I will examine the reuse of underutilized properties along Minneapolis' riverfront and how their social and cultural importance to the surrounding communities will be incorporated into the project designs. Studying and interpreting the history of our built environment and social and cultural significance behind that built environment is an important part of understanding our past and ensuring relevance to present-day and future communities. Water Works and the Upper Harbor Terminal are both currently undergoing redevelopment plans by the City of Minneapolis. This presentation will provide some historical background on Minneapolis' industrial history, the reuse and transformation of industrial properties beginning in the 1970s, and how current redevelopment projects are using historical studies and community input in their redevelopment plans in the hopes of creating more inclusive sites.

To understand the geography of the sites and their social and cultural importance I will provide a brief history of Minneapolis' riverfront. Although what visitors see today is a heavily industrialized historic area, for thousands of years prior to the arrival of Europeans, ancestors of the Siouan people (including the Missouri, Ojibwe, Iowa, and Dakota) were living on the land that would later become Minnesota, as documented by Guy Gibson in *Archaeology of Minnesota*.¹ However, their presence is mostly invisible in the built landscape.

Minneapolis Industrial Riverfront

The natural landscape of the Twin Cities, especially the meeting of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers and St. Anthony Falls, attracted early travelers to the area. Prior to arrival of Europeans, native use of the Falls and surrounding lands date back millennia. According to Calvin Schmid's *Social Saga of Two Cities*, in 1821 the strategic location at the confluence of the two rivers led to the construction of the first white outpost at Fort Snelling. Soldiers from Fort Snelling built a sawmill at the Falls in 1821 and the first flour mill in 1823. Many private industries would soon follow with lumber, flour, paper, and wool milling operations. The lumber industry quickly developed in the 1840s and 1850s on the east bank of the Mississippi River due to the proximity of the Falls, which provided power for sawmills, and the river, which provided a network to transport lumber.² Multiple factors led to the decline of the lumber industry in Minneapolis at the end of the nineteenth century. According to the Mill City Museum, a repurposed

industrial site in Minneapolis, many sawmills were converted to, or replaced by, flour and grist mills, and from the 1880s to 1930 Minneapolis was known as the Flour Milling Capital of the world.³

Within the *Social Saga of Two Cities* Schmid also addresses how the decline of flour milling in the early twentieth century in Minneapolis was primarily due to competition from other American cities in the export trade and the development of wheat production and milling in the southwestern United States.⁴ By the end of World War I, the two prime industries in Minneapolis, lumber and flour, had greatly declined. As these industries closed along the riverfront, they were replaced with smaller-scale industries and commercial development, while other properties were shuttered and left to sit – such as the iconic Pillsbury ‘A’ Mill, which historically was one of the largest flour mills in the world and was recently redeveloped into artists’ lofts.⁵

The Beginnings of Redevelopment

In the early 1970s Minneapolis’ riverfront was little more than an industrial wasteland. There were no riverfront parklands or recreation of any kind along the river. The cornerstone plan for revitalizing the riverfront was developed in 1972 by a committee consisting of City of Minneapolis agencies such as the Minneapolis Planning Department, Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Department of Public Works, and Park and Recreation Board. The *Mississippi/Minneapolis* plan laid out a vision for revitalizing the riverfront through historical interpretation and the creation of parkland.⁶

Since 1972 many properties along Minneapolis’ riverfront have been redeveloped, particularly along the west and east banks of downtown Minneapolis, and the north loop. One property currently undergoing the early stages of redevelopment on the west bank of downtown is Fuji Ya, known as the Water Works project. Water Works has a rich industrial history that can be seen in milling ruins, while there are also the hidden stories of Native American and African American communities’ use of the site. While the downtown riverfront and surrounding areas are lined with successful redevelopment projects, such as the Mill City Museum and Pillsbury ‘A’ Mill, until recently, less redevelopment has occurred of underutilized properties along the riverfront in North Minneapolis. This is due to many factors, including a different timeline of declining industry - whereas industry had largely ended in downtown Minneapolis in the 1930s, North Minneapolis is still the home to light industry today. Additionally, downtown redevelopment projects traditionally are more high profile as the area receives regional visitorship while redevelopment outside of the downtown core is more geared towards the local community, and therefore generally receives only local visitors. One such property undergoing the early planning stages for redevelopment is the Upper Harbor Terminal, a currently active industrial site along the west bank of the Mississippi River in North Minneapolis.

Key steps to ensure meaningful redevelopment include identifying what type of resource you are working with, knowing the built environment and its cultural heritage, and inviting stakeholders, particularly culturally-connected communities, into the planning process.

Water Works

The Water Works project area is sited in a sort of no-man's land of crumbled asphalt parking lots and narrow paved trails that is sited near some of the region's most popular recreational sites, Mill Ruins Park and the Stone Arch Bridge. This redevelopment project by the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board and Minneapolis Parks Foundation aims to convey the significance of the on-site mill ruins through the site landscaping and design. In addition, the planning process and design will enable storytelling by culturally-connected communities, primarily Native American and African American, whose stories have often been invisible in the historical record.

Many archaeologists and historians have previously studied the Water Works site, including the 106 Group. According to a recent study by the 106 Group, the site includes the Fuji Ya restaurant (constructed between 1967-1968, with additions in 1973 and 1975) which sits atop and within portions of Bassett's Second Sawmill Engine House (1870), the Columbia Flour Mill (1882), and Columbia Flour Mill Boiler Room (1889). The mill structures are structurally interwoven in the Fuji Ya construction. Other than the Upper St. Anthony Lock and Dam constructed in 1960, Fuji Ya was the first new building to be erected in what was then an abandoned industrial area of Minneapolis surrounded by parking lots. Fuji Ya spurred rehabilitation of other neighboring buildings in the mid-1970s, and heralded the beginning of a riverfront redevelopment period that has continued into the present. Fuji Ya has been vacant since 1990 and it has been prone to vandalism and urban exploring.⁷

Careful deconstruction of Fuji Ya is currently underway and the Minneapolis Park Foundation's redevelopment plans call for the Water Works park to feature green space, exposed historic ruins, native plantings, and a café pavilion on the site of the former Fuji Ya restaurant.⁸ Highlighting the Native American communities' association with this site will be the café, which includes a partnership with the Sioux Chef, an Indigenous-owned catering team committed to revitalizing Native American Cuisine and reclaiming an important culinary tradition. Future stages of work include a plan to extend the Stone Arch Bridge trail upriver by realigning the existing roadway closer to the riverbank.

To lay the groundwork for better understanding the cultural history of the site, in 2016 City agencies and consultants began by identifying the social and labor histories of African Americans and Native Americans through both archival research and preliminary discussions with local African American and Native American community leaders and members. These two communities are the focus of this study because, while they are underrepresented compared to most Euro-American communities in the historical record, they have had a strong presence in or around the project area. In the case of African Americans, they have had a presence for a century and a half living and working on and along the riverfront, and in the case of Native Americans, for millennia, despite historical oppression and continuing issues of inequality.

Through community engagement and research, interpretive themes of the site were developed to support meaningful storytelling. Some community comments were reiterated by many, such as there being no sense of African American history in the state, and the need to convey the good and bad – don't avoid the ugly history, it doesn't go away just because it isn't mentioned. Interpretive themes developed include the

sites historical use as a gathering and meeting place, the history of the transportation networks within the area, and the spiritual significance of the site. The multi-cultural aspect of the Falls as special or sacred places may be emphasized in interpretive materials to welcome culturally diverse audiences, as many cultures—including those that currently have a strong presence in and around the riverfront—consider falls to be spiritually-imbued places. Recommendations have also called for the Dakota language—especially Dakota place names—to be evident, honoring their millennia-long connection to the site, and the return of native plantings—including traditional edible and medicinal plants, to the area.

Upper Harbor Terminal

Another Minneapolis industrial site that has a more recent story to convey is the Upper Harbor Terminal in North Minneapolis. The site is approximately 48-acres that served as an intermodal barge shipping terminal for bulk materials such as grain, coal, gravel, petroleum products, and fertilizer, from 1968 until the closure of the Upper Saint Anthony Falls Lock in 2014, which closed off barge traffic to the site. The City of Minneapolis and Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board's plan for redevelopment of the site includes a combination of riverfront park amenities and private development. One of the primary goals of the redevelopment is racial equity by providing the citizens of North Minneapolis better access to parks and open space. The Upper Harbor Terminal is sited in the Camden Industrial Area, within the Camden community of North Minneapolis. The neighborhood is primarily industrial and commercial in nature, but is surrounded by residential neighborhoods. According to 2010 Census data, the Camden community has more ethnic diversity than most areas of the Twin Cities, with approximately 43% of its citizens identifying as Caucasian, 33% as African American, 11% as Asian, 7% as Hispanic, and 2% as Native American.⁹ Minneapolis has been designated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a Promise Zone. Promise Zones are high poverty communities where Federal Government agencies partner with local organizations and leaders to increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, and leverage private investment. The planned private development portion of the Upper Harbor Terminal redevelopment project hopes to increase economic activity in the Camden community.

Upper Harbor Terminal retains many industrial buildings and structures, such as a warehouse, grain elevator, conveyors, and docks, however it is the four Monolithic Domes on site, the only known structures of their type in Minneapolis, that represent an iconic visual feature of the riverfront and its social history of terminal shipping and industrial storage. The domes, which were built to store fertilizer, are distinctive elements of the neighborhood's former industrial identity and the City hopes to support their long term preservation through adaptive reuse.

The City of Minneapolis has been proactive at conducting historical studies of the site as a baseline for future interpretive and/or reuse of the site as there may be regulations or requirements by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or Department of Natural Resources during the redevelopment due to the setting along the river bank. Previous architectural history studies, including one prepared by the 106 Group, have recommended Upper Harbor Terminal as eligible as a historic district for local Minneapolis historic designation as a distinctive element of Minneapolis' upper harbor, embodying the distinctive architectural

and engineering characteristics of an Upper Mississippi barge terminal facility, and representing Minneapolis' aspirations to realize the dream of becoming head of navigation on the Upper Mississippi.¹⁰

Previous architectural history studies have also recommended the Monolithic Domes at Upper Harbor Terminal as individually eligible for local Minneapolis historic designation. The Monolithic Domes company was founded in 1975 in Idaho by brothers David, Barry, and Randy South. According to Monolithic Domes, the construction of a Monolithic Dome follows a standard process: a circular concrete foundation is poured, a canvas or fabric balloon is fabricated to the desired size and shape, the balloon is attached to the perimeter of the foundation and inflated, a layer of three inches of polyurethane foam insulation is sprayed on the interior of the balloon, and concrete and reinforcing bar added to the interior.^{11 12} Collectively, these four domes represent an iconic visual feature of the Minneapolis riverfront and its history of terminal shipping and industrial storage. Individually, these domes embody the distinctive characteristics of an engineering type and method of construction, following the form and design of the patented Monolithic Dome, and therefore, they have local significance.¹³

Although the identification of known resources is an important step, conducting participatory planning to determine the needs and wants of the community is where the redevelopment process can have the greatest benefit to a community. According to the City of Minneapolis and Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, the Upper Harbor Terminal project started engaging the public during the pre-planning phases of the project, occurring from 2015 to early 2017. Dozens of open houses, community meetings, organization roundtables, and participation in local community events have occurred in order to discuss the project with the community and solicit input on the best uses of the site for the community. Public engagement continued through 2017 and in 2018 has moved into the planning phase with additional community meetings and online forums and polls.¹⁴ By bringing together planning professional, historians, community leaders, and members, a redevelopment plan can meet the needs of a community while highlighting its social and cultural history.

The City currently has many goals for the site including connecting the site into the fabric of the community by providing a riverfront-oriented destination, reflecting the history of the site unique to the specific place, all while including a first-class regional park and private development that benefits the community.¹⁵

The City and the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board have hired a development team, and early in the design process they intend to study the feasibility of potential adaptive reuses for some or all of the existing structures. Past ideas have generally focused on reusing the Monolithic Domes. According to a Minneapolis Star Tribune article from January 2017, the development team has proposed an amphitheater and riverfront park, with private development space for 180,000 square feet of manufacturing, up to 150,000 square feet of office space, no more than 70,000 square feet of retail, and 700 to 1,000 housing units.¹⁶ The project planning process will continue through 2018.

Conclusion

While Water Works and Upper Harbor Terminal are two very different sites with multiple layers of history and use, they offer similar goals of creating inclusive sites that interpret our built heritage and cultural history while redeveloping useful space for broad community use. These sites are doing so by preparing historical studies, even when not required by funding or permitting sources, and conducting extensive community outreach and participation to ensure social and cultural history from many perspectives are addressed.

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