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Above the Falls Minneapolis, Minnesota



Minneapolis owes the fact of its settlement to the terrain—more precisely, to the Mississippi River and the Falls of St. Anthony. The falls were important to Minneapolis because they generated power that could be captured to mill the lumber, then the flour, that the city gathered from across the Great Plains then shipped east.

The terrain has also been instrumental in shaping development along the reach of river just upstream from the falls, an area whose long-term future is the subject of the *Above the Falls* master plan. Here, the west bank lies low, just a few feet above the wide, strong river, giving way to a plain that rises gradually up to an escarpment created by glacial outwash. The area developed with river-related industries, such as sawmills, foundries, brick works and breweries.

Just a generation ago, the industrial future of the Upper River seemed secure. Minneapolis officials, convinced that the area could supplant St. Paul as the head of navigation on the Mississippi and be an economic engine for the city, enlisted the help of former Senator Hubert Humphrey and secured federal funding for locks that allow barges to be lifted around the falls.

Today, the Mississippi still figures into the city's future, but in a vastly different way. The river, the lakes and the habitat surrounding them are regarded as interconnected resources—visual, recreational and environmental—that are critical to making the region healthy, distinctive, desirable and successful. Throughout Minneapolis and St. Paul new connections to the water are being made, new residential, commercial and cultural developments are emerging along the riverfront.

Thus, the plan—crafted under the guidance of city, county and state agencies and approved by the city's council and mayor two years ago—seeks to direct the public and private transformation of the Upper River district into mixed-use communities and waterfront amenities. Jurors praised its approach to building on Minneapolis' parkway traditions and using environmental factors to shape urban form in a strongly articulated manner.

Above: Henry Lewis, *St. Anthony's Falls in 1848*. Courtesy Minneapolis Institute of the Arts. Gift of Mr. E. C. Gale.

Opposite left: Numerous upper river industries are dependent on barge traffic.

Opposite right: Proposed urban neighborhood along the river's west bank.



The plan rests on the premise, still controversial to some people, that barge-related heavy industries are economically obsolete and that housing, workplaces and public spaces are the natural successors. It proposes shifting barge activities downriver and replacing heavy industry with housing, shops and offices, riverfront parks and promenades, while retaining space for light industry, particularly operations that support downtown businesses.

The plan draws much of its power by building on Minneapolis's open space traditions, particularly its Chain of Lakes system of parks, boulevards and riverfront parkways, which was conceived by Horace Cleveland 125 years ago and still forms the backbone of the city's park system. Most recently, the Minneapolis Park Board has completed a parkway section along the downtown riverfront that connects from the dramatic gorge below the falls, skirts an emerging downtown warehouse-residential district and leads to the Upper River area.

The parkway and open spaces proposed in the plan would connect that network upstream to an existing regional park and wetlands area, reinforcing the connection between the city and its lakes, the river and regional landscape and habitat patterns. The plan also proposes a more localized, urbanized set of connections, via trails along seldom used railroad corridors (including two bridges across the river) and other new pedestrian infrastructure, to upland neighborhoods, whose residents are largely working poor or new immigrants.

The urban pattern would be structured by no-build zones that provide for stormwater drainage and establish corridors for river and downtown views; and by a parkway and street grid that connect to adjacent city districts. A state-of-the-art environmental restoration plan integrates water filtration parks with wetland plantings, proposes riverbank stabilization through soil bioengineering techniques, and calls for a recreated oak savanna ecotype in this place where the western prairie meets the northwoods and the Mississippi.

Finally, the plan suggests how Minneapolis can take advantage of the unusual condition of flat, buildable land along the west bank of the river, which elsewhere is separated from the city by bluffs. It proposes dense residential

and retail development with a pedestrian promenade right along the water's edge—a pattern of development and open space that would break with Cleveland's standard pattern of river, trail and open space, and parkway—and which aroused controversy when the plan was debated before its adoption.

Moving Forward

Above the Falls' main accomplishments have been to win public acceptance for the notion that barge-related industry's time has passed, to propose new and somewhat provocative strategies for integrating this last reach of Minneapolis riverfront into larger ideas about the city's open space system, and to offer solid advice about how infrastructure, stormwater management and environmental restoration can be handled to wrap private development in a particular sense of place.

Indeed, one outcome of the plan may have been to staunch the expansion of heavy industry. The plan was initially triggered when a scrap metal company announced plans for a new metal shredder in the area and a cement company proposed a new silo. The city imposed a moratorium on industrial expansion while the plan was being prepared, and it initiated legal action to stop the shredder. Even though the city lost its case, and even though the moratorium has been lifted for two years, neither proposal has moved forward. "It will be interesting to see if heavy industries really do invest in the Upper River, or if their own business decisions continue the gradual decline that our economic panel suggested would happen," said Barry Gore, author and lead land-use planner on the project for URS/BRW.

Building new urban neighborhoods is a tougher proposition. The history of large-scale master plans of this sort has been fraught with false starts and slow execution—especially when the costs involved in acquiring industrial land, reclaiming it and creating new public infrastructure are to be borne by the redevelopment program, as they likely would be here. As a result, such plans often resort to large-scale development schemes that take years for the market to absorb, and are built through processes that make it difficult to incorporate qualities of landscape,

urban space, architecture and community activity that feel rooted in the place.

The path to implementation of *Above the Falls* has allowed for quick, opportunistic actions, mostly initiated by the private sector, while longer-term, public arrangements for infrastructure and regulatory frameworks are still falling into place. The Grain Belt Brewery, an architectural landmark on the east bank that had fallen into city ownership, was converted into architect's offices. Adjacent to the brewery and across the street, more than 250 town homes are planned, and another 169-unit housing development is underway nearby. A manufacturer with a plant in the area has moved its headquarters there as well, and a sign company is opening a fabrication shop in the light industrial district, diversifying the employment base.

On the public side, there have been early victories as well. The Metropolitan Open Space Commission has won designation of the entire riverfront (except for the barge terminals) as part of the regional open space system, which means that the city can tap regional funds for acquiring land and making it usable. The Minneapolis Park Board has already purchased two-thirds of the land in the proposed Skyline Park, where an amphitheatre would have the downtown skyline as a backdrop, and the agency is moving its headquarters into a vacant building along the Upper River riverfront.

While the Minneapolis Community Development Agency is, for now, opposing the key recommendation for creating an Upper River Development Corporation to oversee the project, it has set up a citizens advisory committee that will weigh in on development and planning strategies. MCDA is also hiring an ombudsman to help public agencies and local businesses keep in touch about their plans for the area.

Important hurdles remain—among them changing the zoning and assembling the \$160 million needed to acquire the land and put in public infrastructure. But the key is that the long-term vision is in place, and the private and public sectors are taking steps in that direction, Gore said. "The plan promotes the inherent urban design potential of the riverfront, and communicated that vision to the city council in a manner that gave it the courage to accept the plan and undertake a very ambitious redevelopment concept."

Jury Comments

Hood: I was turned away from this at first because the imagery didn't look that specific, but I don't think that's the strength of this plan. The fact is, it's very well done, bringing us up to date with what we know about good planning, whether it's high-density development, getting access to the river, reusing stormwater, establishing wetlands gardens. There is a section on riverbank restoration, one on soil bioengineering; there is proposal for a water filtration park, citing a project that won an EDRA/Places Award two years ago as an example of wetlands gardens. It's all here.

Jacobs: The plan is really aggressive. It's a long site, some of it is historic, the uses vary. You have industrial problems, railroad problems, circulation problems, access and boating problems, natural vectors problems, water problems, and they all get worked out. That's impressive. In so many of the plans we've looked at, there is no necessity to deal with the really difficult stuff like this.

Hanraban: There is a principle here, from the outset, that there are two sides of the river. Gantry Plaza State Park is similar in that regard, in trying to engage both sides of a river, but this plan takes all sorts of steps.

Jacobs: I'm also excited about the plan because it leads to other things, making a place that starts to create part of the city rather than to sit here alone in its setting.

Griffin: There are very legible diagrams. The actual traces of the analysis read through the diagrams, or the diagrams read them, and I think that's a very good, difficult contribution.

Above The Falls: A Master Plan for the Upper River in Minneapolis, Minn.

Clients: Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (Judd Rietkerk, Rachel Ramadhayni), Hennepin County (Larry Blackstad), City of Minneapolis Planning Department (Fred Neet), Minneapolis Community Development Agency

Planning, urban design, landscape architecture: URS/BRW, Inc. (Steve Durrant, Dave Showalter, Barry Gore)

Associated consultants: Wallace Roberts & Todd (Ignacio Bunster-Osso, Ferdinando Micale, Paul Tookwood; planning, urban design, landscape architecture), James Miller Investment Realty Company (commercial navigation analysis), Robbin B. Sotir & Associates, Inc. (soil bioengineering), Anton & Associates, Inc. (economic development analysis).



Above left: Aerial view of planning area.

Above middle: Figure ground of planning area.

Above right: Summary of planning proposals.

Below left: Open spaces proposed in the plan would connect to a historic, citywide network that connects numerous lakes and the river.

Photos and graphics courtesy URS/BRW, Wallace Roberts & Todd.

- A. Recreated oak savanna landscape
- B. West River Parkway extension
- C. Pedestrian deck and grand staircase
- D. Stormwater retention and filtration
- E. Riverfront promenade
- F. "Living Machine" wetland garden/ water filtration park
- G. Skyline park and amphitheater
- H. Light-industrial district
- I. Restored riverbank and trail extension
- J. Marshall Street boulevard
- K. Pedestrian/bike boardwalk along Burlington Northern bridge
- L. Grain Belt Brewery area
- M. Arts Park