

Lifeblood of Our City: Reflections on Community Partnerships and Minneapolis Riverfront Vitality

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After years of decline and disinvestment, the Minneapolis Riverfront has seen a renaissance over the past few decades. Once the heart of industrial and commercial activity in Minneapolis, the riverfront suffered as the city endured post-war deindustrialization. As automobiles succeeded railways and mills were closed and razed for parking lots, the downtown riverfront became a bastion of squalor, crime, and vice. Since the 1980s, however, concentrated efforts by public and private interests to reclaim and restore this once storied area have begun to revitalize the riverfront. Thanks to the advent of amenities and the preservation of historic landmarks, the riverfront now acts as a cultural hub and symbol of the city. Various public, non-profit, and private stakeholders have taken leadership in this revival through collaborative plans, such as the “Above the Falls: A Master Plan for the Upper River in Minneapolis” (1999), offering far-reaching visions for the riverfront and its role in moving Minneapolis forward.

Last spring, the Macalester College Urban GIS class collaborated with the Minneapolis Riverfront Partnership (MRP) and the Community Development Department of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis on a community-based geographic information systems (GIS) project to study the state of the Minneapolis Riverfront. MRP, a Twin Cities non-profit, advocates for a vibrant Mississippi River and focuses on four revitalization goals for the riverfront: a healthy ecosystem, exceptional riverfront parks, world-class history and culture, and a vital, livable community. The semester-long Riverfront Vitality Indicators Project established a baseline for examining the ways in which the riverfront shapes the surrounding neighborhoods and the region as a whole. For our part, our class paid particular attention to the economic and social development indicators that shape a designated study area along the riverfront.

Our study examined riverfront vitality indicators within four broad categories: employment and investment, commercial, residential, and accessibility. Each group was tasked with devising research questions and selecting the most appropriate variables as indicators of riverfront vitality. As part of the group studying residential indicators, we were most concerned with the following questions:

What are the characteristics of the housing market along the riverfront and how do they compare to trends in adjacent neighborhoods in Minneapolis?

How has development along the riverfront affected the strength of the residential market?

Does proximity to the riverfront have a stabilizing effect on the housing market?

What can be discerned about social equity along the riverfront? Are certain groups benefitting more than others from redevelopment projects?

To answer these questions, we focused on three facets of residential vitality: demographics, housing stability, and investment in the housing market. For our specific indicators, we selected diversity, median household income, owner-occupancy rate, estimated market value (EMV), change in EMV, residential vacancy rate, foreclosure density, access to affordable housing, new residential construction permits, vacant residential parcels, and sales. To supplement more traditional definitions of residential vitality, e.g. owner-occupancy rate or

EMV, our group included several social justice-oriented variables like diversity and access to affordable housing to garner a more nuanced portrait of the riverfront. With guidance from MRP and our own GIS backgrounds, our project shed light on the riverfront housing market and the extent to which the river stabilizes residential vitality. More importantly, perhaps, it also offers potential implications for social equity presented by both of these trends. This article highlights the research completed by the residential group for the Minneapolis Riverfront Partnership.

Reflections on Community-Based Research

Over the course of the semester, the project enhanced my cartographic abilities and challenged my understanding of community-based research on several fronts. First, the project pushed me to consider both its utility to our community partner and the level of reciprocity between our two groups. Working with our community partner also solicited discussion of responsibility and representation, as our class grappled with our accountability to communities along the riverfront and the voices our research overlooked. Finally, the project raised questions of sustainability, as we tried to develop a project that our community partner could replicate for future research.

In developing the project with MRP, our class sought to produce research that was useful for the community partner and ensure reciprocity within the partnership. By collaborating with local community organizations, the Urban GIS course challenges students to apply their cartographic and spatial analysis skills to a real-world scenario. Because the course partners with a new organization and tackles a different issue each year, each project functions as an experiment, in which no one involved knows how things will unfold over the course of the semester. This pedagogical approach encourages problem solving and stimulates critical thinking, yet the real-world implications of our research meant our project needed to simultaneously serve our interests and those of MRP. Meeting with organization representatives throughout the process allowed us to understand their goals and vision for the project and articulate our own interests. During a midterm progress presentation to MRP and the Federal Reserve, for instance, I not only learned which variables they found most enlightening but was empowered to offer perspectives they had not previously considered. Ultimately, the process yielded a collaborative resource document accessible to community members and policymakers alike.

Another challenge we faced involved our responsibility as researchers to the communities we studied and whose voices would be represented in our research. Though Macalester prides itself on its geographically diverse student body, our class was surprised to discover that none of us hailed from the Twin Cities. While this presented an opportunity for us to learn more about our adopted home, it also meant that we were outsiders and approached the project with admittedly limited knowledge of the study area. To integrate local knowledge and community input, our class communicated with MRP throughout the semester and enjoyed access to a handful of neighborhood liaisons with expertise on various portions of the riverfront. Despite this access, I found it challenging to consistently connect with community members and felt like voices were being left out of the process. As a transplant to the Twin Cities, I wrestled with my accountability to the communities living along the riverfront, questioned my ability to properly represent the interests of people with more intimate knowledge of the riverfront, and worried that our research could be used to further marginalize communities. To confront this challenge, my research group adopted a social equity lens; though we utilized traditional

indicators of residential vitality, e.g. owner-occupancy and vacancy rates, we incorporated broader interpretations of vitality, including access to affordable housing, foreclosure density, and socioeconomic diversity. Admittedly, it would be misguided to assume that our intentions reflect the interests of those living along the riverfront simply because we promoted social equity and equal access. Given more time and resources, further engagement with community members and other community organizations could enrich our understanding of riverfront vitality. However, we hope this sentiment of inclusion will persist and expand as the process moves forward.

As the semester neared its end, our class faced the additional issue of the project's sustainability. When MRP approached our class with the Riverfront Vitality Indicators Project, the organization imagined our collaboration would establish a baseline that could be updated annually. Though the software serves as an invaluable research tool for spatial analysis, GIS incorporates considerable amounts of jargon and comes with a learning curve. To ensure our research could be replicated and used by community members and organizations, our class had to present our findings in an accessible medium and explain our work in a straightforward manner. After presenting our final results to representatives from MRP, the Federal Reserve, and other community organizations, our class shared our maps, data, and the processes we completed to examine each vitality indicator. Throughout the research process, final presentation, and post-presentation discussion, I was inspired by the community partners' engagement with our maps and findings as well as their genuine interest in the trajectory of the project. Presenting the final product to our community partners as we overlooked the Mississippi River from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis underscored the real-world implications of our work. By offering both our findings and the reins to the research, we launched a project that will outlive our class. As MRP continues where we left off, I am excited to see how inclusion of additional voices through forthcoming community forums and discussions will continue to shape the project.

Ultimately, the community-based Urban GIS project was a gratifying experience. Over the past year and a half, I have had several encounters with GIS, both in and out of the classroom. Though I have applied GIS to interesting projects in classes and at a few community organizations, I sensed myself becoming slightly disillusioned with the software and the disengaging amount of lab time it demands. In fact, after working on a GIS project that had me analyzing social and economic justice issues impacting communities across Minnesota from behind a computer monitor instead of in the field, I found myself frustrated and questioning the impact and accountability of my research. However, the Urban GIS course restored my faith in the software and reinvigorated my desire to yield its potential. It demonstrated that GIS does not need to be and should not be an insular and detached process but instead one of inclusion and collaboration. Discovering how the vitality indicators we chose interacted and shaped conclusions and then sharing our findings with community members and organizations was enriching and affirmed the countless hours in the lab. Unlike most courses I have taken, this one directly engaged the greater Twin Cities community and provided it with meaningful research. Contributing to this project expanded my understanding of civic engagement and public service and has whetted my appetite for further exploration of community-based research. Moving forward, I am especially eager to build upon this experience and continue to learn the ways in which scholars and community members can collaborate to find innovative solutions to our collective challenges.

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I would like to express my deepest appreciation for Professor Laura Smith and GIS Lab Instructor Ashley Nepp of the Macalester College Geography Department. Their patience, flexibility, and dedication to our class and to our development as students, geographers, and citizens made the countless hours spent in the lab worthwhile. I would also like to thank my peers in the course for their commitment and camaraderie, as well as the Minneapolis Riverfront Partnership and the Community Development Department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis for their interest and support that made the final report possible.

References

City of Minneapolis. 1999. *Above the Falls: A Master Plan for the Upper River in Minneapolis*. http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/www/groups/public/@cped/documents/webcontent/convert_273327.pdf.