

The Forks Urban Revitalization Project

The Forks/North Portage Partnership

As cities and their economic purpose are being transformed in Canada, planning opportunities arise to manage the renewal or reconstitution of industrial sites into popular city venues. Winnipeg's revitalization of a site that became known as The Forks represents the adaptive reuse of the old main rail yard in the City's heart into a vital urban centre. This case study examines the process of how The Forks evolved and the principles and concepts that were developed to sustain it.

Background

The junction of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers, commonly known as The Forks, has been a gathering site of people for over 6,000 years, and includes native peoples, Metis, and fur traders. In its early days, its name changed from Fort Rouge, to Fort Gibraltar and finally, Upper Fort Garry. It was also an important arrival point for European immigrants heading westward to settle.

During the 1860s, a group of traders constructed several buildings in the area and these developments soon evolved into the City of Winnipeg. The introduction of rail facilities after the City's incorporation in 1874 saw The Forks transformed into an urban industrial site. With the rapid industrial expansion of the early 1900s, Winnipeg's residents turned their backs on their major natural assets, the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, and quickly allowed the once-bustling and accessible waterfronts to become the forgotten backyards of a busy city.

Located behind the Union Station in the heart of downtown Winnipeg, The Forks is a 56 acre waterfront redevelopment project. Its East Yard Area delineates over 90 acres (36 hectares), situated between the CN main rail line and the confluence of the two rivers. Redevelopment of this area has been pursued actively since the early 1970s.

In 1987, the Federal and Provincial Governments and the City of Winnipeg approved the development mandate for The Forks Renewal Corporation. The Forks then produced the Phase I Concept and Financial Plan, a 20-year plan which directed the first five years of The Forks' development. The Phase I Plan was completed in 1992. Discussions are continuing with the three levels of government regarding future plans for The Forks.

Planning and Design Issues

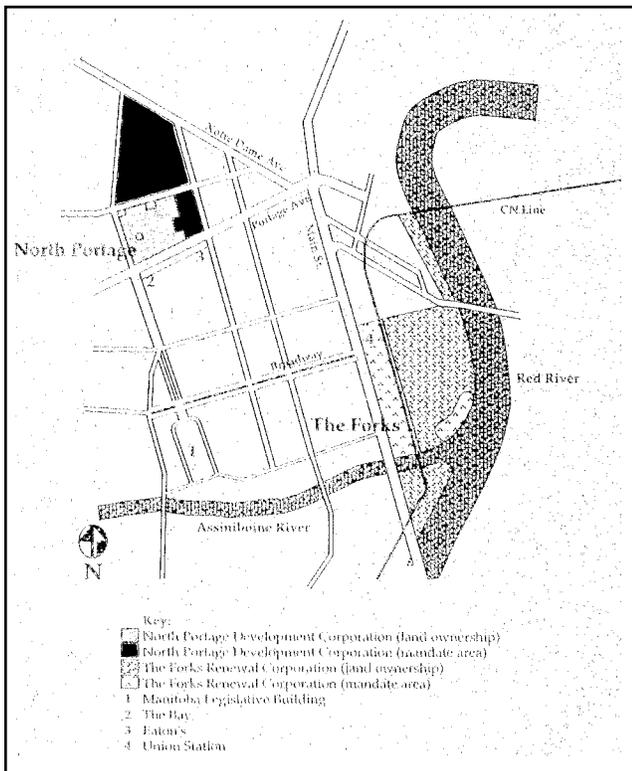
Efforts in the mid 1980s had been geared toward creating public access to the site's historic and scenic riverfront elements:

- The Canada-Manitoba Agreement for Restoration and Conservation Program (A.R.C.) had opened the way for Parks Canada to develop a nine-acre riverfront National Park across the river from the St. Boniface Basilica, by the Fall of 1988.
- The tri-government Winnipeg Core Area Agreement led to the eventual acquisition of the remaining private sector properties.
- The transfer of Union Station to VIA Rail opened up new opportunities for the redevelopment of this historic facility.

These separate initiatives underlined the need for an effective overall plan for redevelopment of the entire East Yard Area. Officials at all levels of government acknowledged the need to build on Winnipeg's natural assets as a means of enhancing its livability. The decline of grain traffic to the terminals at Thunder Bay meant that the East Yard site was gradually becoming under used by CN Rail, providing an opportunity for the revitalization of a significant central urban industrial site that could be reclaimed for public use and enjoyment.

Actors and Stakeholders

An East Yard Task Force was established in March 1986 by the Municipal, Provincial and Federal Governments to initiate preliminary steps leading to a major, multi-purpose development of the site. Eight months later it recommended a preliminary concept and financial plan to be carried out by the newly-established Forks Renewal Corporation and its Board of Directors. The Corporation's purpose was to own and redevelop this major riverfront site and to coordinate redevelopment of the surrounding East Yard Area.



Public consultation and evaluation of this project was conducted with developers, community groups and organizations, and individual members of the public to obtain responses, ideas, suggestions, and proposals related to the redevelopment of The Forks.

Planning Goals and Objectives

The Board determined that The Forks should be redeveloped as a "meeting place"; a special and distinct all-season gathering and recreation place at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers. The "Meeting Place" theme was intended to evoke many themes including:

- The Forks as Canada's Crossroads,
- the meeting of old and new,
- the meeting of diverse peoples,
- a place for people to meet, work, and play throughout the year.

Organizational Framework

The conceptualization and implementation of The Forks Project was divided into two phases:

The Unanimous Shareholder Agreement of July 29, 1987 provided a Preliminary Concept and Financial Plan to guide the Corporation's activities, and required a Phase 1 Concept and Financial Plan to be submitted by November 12, 1987 after completion of an initial public consultation. The Phase I Plan also included a requirement that a Phase II Plan, providing direction for continued renewal of the site over the next five year period (1993 - 1997) be submitted for approval by three levels of government.

The public participation processes for both phases was based on the following principle:

Stewardship - the role of the Board of Directors as stewards of the land have a responsibility to consult the people on whose behalf the resource is being developed.

Phase I Public Participation Process

The Board recognized that the development of the Forks would proceed in several phases, supported by public consultation, and concluded that a mix of recreational, historical/cultural, residential, institutional, and supportive commercial projects should begin during Phase I (1987 - 1992). This process stimulated the desired activity at the natural gathering places throughout the site, allowing subsequent phases to proceed as infill.

The program included:

- preparation of brochures, pamphlets, and other briefing documents to ensure public and developer participation,
- an initial public meeting at the site to "Discover The Forks" which was attended by some 150 citizens and groups,
- newspaper advertisements, extensive mailings, and participation in radio call-in programs to solicit public comment and responses,
- review of responses to a "Call for Developer Inter-

est” sent to a wide range of local, national, and North American private, public, and institutional organizations,

- four public meetings in June, July, and September 1987 to hear briefs from over 60 community groups, proponents, and interested individuals,
- a special heritage group meeting with over 20 groups in July to discuss heritage and cultural aspects of site redevelopment,
- over 20 individual meetings with developers, proponents, and government groups interested in specific projects for the site,
- consultation with a number of government agencies, institutions, and leading development consultants,
- review in late October 1987 of the Board’s initial conclusions with groups that had participated in the program to date,
- on site visits to inspect and analyze downtown waterfront development projects in other North American cities,
- review and evaluation by technical consultants of certain aspects of the Phase 1 plan.

Participants were presented with the following statements which summarized the general objectives and site planning principles for the site:

“Development of ‘The Forks’ should involve a partnership between the public and private sectors. It should create a special and unique place for Winnipeg that complements and strengthens the entire downtown area, celebrates the historic nature of the site, and provides for public use on a year-round basis.”

The following components were proposed for inclusion in The Forks redevelopment strategy:

- historical and cultural projects,
- a riverbank park,
- festive, cultural, recreational activities,
- market housing,
- office and commercial development.

The Board then asked each participant to address the following specific questions:

- How should The Forks be a special and unique place?
- How can The Forks strengthen the entire downtown area?
- How can we recognize and celebrate the historic nature of the site?
- What can be done to provide for public use on a year-round basis?
- What relative priority should each development component receive?
- What other components should be considered?

Options for Action and Their Evaluation

The public use components proposed during Phase I included:

Public Food Market - re-use of the existing buildings near the rail-line for a lead project to provide an indoor specialty public food market serving Winnipeg throughout the year.

Assiniboine Riverfront Quay - a multi-use and open area public waterfront development for the North Assiniboine area to stimulate year-round recreation.

All-Season Leisure Centre - a new structure designed to provide a mix of year-round recreation, leisure and fitness activities, including indoor waterpark facilities and indoor and outdoor public gardens.

Archaeological Developments - Public excavations at the Fort Gibraltar II/Fort Garry I site.

Multi-Cultural Centre - a facility involving the participation of all Manitoba cultural groups, involving a major year-round public meeting area.

Historical/Cultural Interpretive Facilities - Development of modern interpretive and audio-visual facilities to provide historical/cultural and tourist-oriented interpretive activities.

Red River Marina - a multi purpose, leased summer dockage/public service marina.

Native Centre - developed under native direction as a centre for the local and/or national native community that could serve as a national meeting place, national archives, or Manitoba native heritage centre.

Phase I also included the potential development of 500 to 1,100 residential units through selective market analysis. It also provided for significant institutional and other commercial projects on the Corporation’s central lands adjacent to York Avenue and the CN main rail line, including a regional broadcast and performance centre and various educational and research and facilities.

Phase I Implementation Strategies

The Development Corporation focused on carrying out Phase I activities involving clearing and relocation, road access, utilities, parking development, landscaping, riverbank and site enhancement, major function assistance, property ownership and maintenance, development programming, and administrative activities. Specifically, special heritage, public programming, consultation, and preliminary activities were identified with Phase I:

- retain an archaeological heritage advisor to work under the direction of the Board,

- work with an appointed heritage advisory committee,
- reserve an area for reburial, if so desired, of remains from graves found during development,
- plan and consult with appropriate authorities on Heritage Resources Act matters subject to the Corporation's funding,
- establish a planning advisory committee to encourage excellence in design and planning,
- develop programming to encourage the public to discover, use, and enjoy The Forks,
- continue regular public consultation through an annual public meeting.

The other key component in the implementation strategy was the development of a financial plan to achieve eventual financial self-sufficiency after estimating a required \$100 million in private, institutional, and other investing within the project's first five years, to complement the \$20.6 million in committed tri-level government funds. The following aspects of the Financial Plan were considered necessary for economic self-sufficiency:

Project expenditures and shareholder contributions - initial shareholder funding will be fully required in the first three years to meet essential lead obligations.

Project and component funding - some Phase I components including many of the historical/cultural and recreational activities will require significant capital funding assistance.

Land Leases for each project - the Corporation's land-carrying costs should be transferred to developers and proponents through land leases, to defray the balance of its costs.

Future financial support by Governments - the Phase I Plan assumes that the Federal, Provincial, and Municipal Governments will match the funding from CN for use in meeting the Corporation's future operating and other costs.

Borrowing authority - the Corporation requires a reasonable borrowing authority of up to \$10 million to carry out the Phase I Plan.

Relationship with other tri-government development agencies - incomes derived from the ongoing activities of other downtown development agencies owned by the three governments could help to finance the longer term public development emerging at The Forks.

The tangible results of the Phase I Plan for The Forks was a vital urban site and included The Forks Archaeological Education Centre at Johnston Terminal, The Forks Historic Port, The Forks National Historic Site,

The Forks Public Market, and The Johnston Terminal warehouse.

Phase II

A total of 500 interviews were conducted using a random sampling from the City of Winnipeg telephone book, between June 8 and June 19, 1992. Survey respondents consisted of Winnipeg residents 18 years of age or older who had been living in Winnipeg for six months or more. Only those respondents who had heard of or had visited The Forks were included in the sample.

After the gathering of public opinions, several specific development options were explored. The Options Conference brought together all advisory committees to review planning materials and to select preferred courses of action determining the following conclusions:

- a) broad consensus for key elements of a long term planning framework:
 - coordinated planning of City and Forks Renewal Corporation lands,
 - a summer/winter indoor park system,
 - an extension of the river park,
 - an indoor/outdoor festival park,
 - layered above ground parking west of Pioneer Street,
 - a heritage priority.
- b) support for the following Phase II priorities:
 - Aboriginal centre on the South Point,
 - indoor/outdoor meeting place,
 - The Forks Plaza,
 - layered above ground parking west of Pioneer Street,
 - completion of Phase I components in progress,
 - outdoor festival and riverpark areas,
 - transportation/shuttle services to/on site,
 - enhanced heritage interpretation.

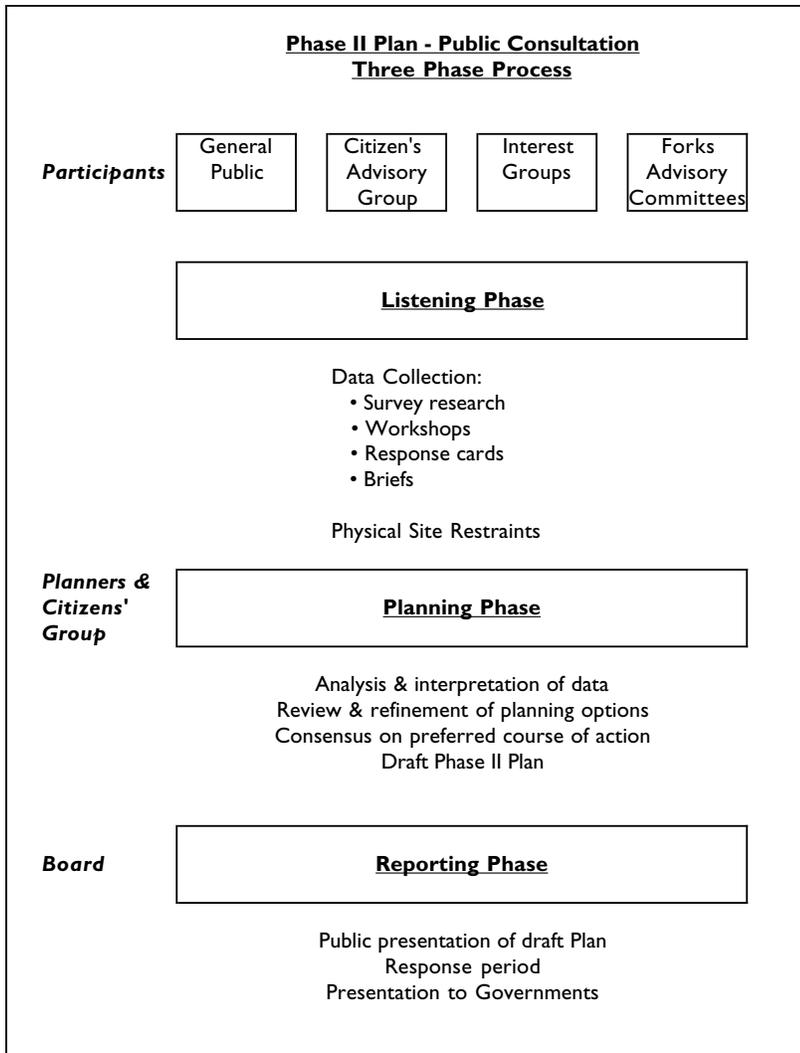
Phase II Public Participation Process

Several consultation models were examined for Phase II, in particular, the one used by the City of Winnipeg in 1992 in the preparation of "Plan Winnipeg". The chosen Phase II Public Consultation Process encompassed several public information and feedback elements ensuring that all views could be heard.

The three phase process is included in the accompanying chart:

The four key questions asked were:

- In your opinion, what are the strengths of The Forks site as it is currently developed?
- In your opinion, what are the weaknesses of The Forks site as it is currently developed?



Other developments include:

- The Forks has had an Aboriginal Planning Committee overseeing all Forks development of an aboriginal nature since 1990. The Committee is examining the concept of a time tunnel theme around developments associated with refurbishing the Historic Rail Bridge connecting the Forks "South Point" and the main Forks site. This would include themes depicting the year 1492 at the South Point and contemporary aboriginal themes on the main Forks site.
- The Forks/North Portage Development Partnership recently signed a letter of intent with television station MTN, so that MTN would redevelop and lease the steam plant at The Forks.
- a letter of intent was also signed with the Manitoba Theatre for Young People, so that its new theatre production and theatre school facility can be built at The Forks by mid-1997.
- plans to improve public access to the site before the Pan Am Games in 1999.

Planning Results and Lessons Learned

In 1993, the International Downtown Association chose The Forks over 60 Canadian, U.S., Caribbean, and South African cities for a special achievement award, calling it "the front porch of Winnipeg... a jewel in the crown of riverfront and green space."

- What is your long range vision of what The Forks could and should become?
- In your opinion, what changes should occur over the next five years?

Phase II Implementation Strategies

In 1994, The Forks Renewal Corporation was merged with the North Portage Development Corporation to form The Forks North Portage Partnership to further this mandate, and is governed by a ten member Board of Directors. Three members are appointed by each level of government and the Chair is unanimously selected. This merger was intended to consolidate the Boards, staff, and costs of both organizations.

The Forks/North Portage Partnership tabled its Phase II Business Plan in early 1996, and expects approval from the three levels of government in June 1996. The Plan aims at creating a greater level of self-sufficiency for The Forks.

The Forks required the marshaling of numerous resources to work with many publics, government, and the media. The planning process for The Forks reflected the importance of partnerships and the necessity of clearly defining public objectives. This can cause difficulties, however, in trying to work through so many groups to finally decide and act upon the determined planning objectives. Often, the result is a compromise that is not satisfactory to all parties involved, and not the best long-term decision. Consequently, the decision-making process and very public nature and prominence of the site invites criticism.

Another major concern realized through this process was that good ideas do not suddenly become financially viable. The tri-level government shareholders have expressed concern about The Forks' self-sufficiency and the amount of government funding required to sustain the Phase II Plan. They were particularly concerned about the financial self-sufficiency and the ability to

sustain the site's management over the long-term by The Forks Renewal Corporation. The current financial structure is not viable over the long-term because governments' equivalency payments to The Forks will soon end.

Complicated by the fact that the local economy in Winnipeg is stagnant, it is difficult to manage and plan for a downtown whose focus is on business recruitment and retention. This is unlike the growth opportunities that are being experienced in cities such as Calgary and Vancouver.

Nevertheless, surveys have indicated that Winnipeggers hold overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward The Forks and are very supportive of the development that has taken place on the site to date. It appears that Winnipeggers have taken "ownership" of The Forks and are extremely interested in how The Forks is developed in the future.

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This planning case study series has been financed by the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) and the Association of Canadian University Planning Programs (ACUPP) to provide national exposure to innovative planning practice in Canada.

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