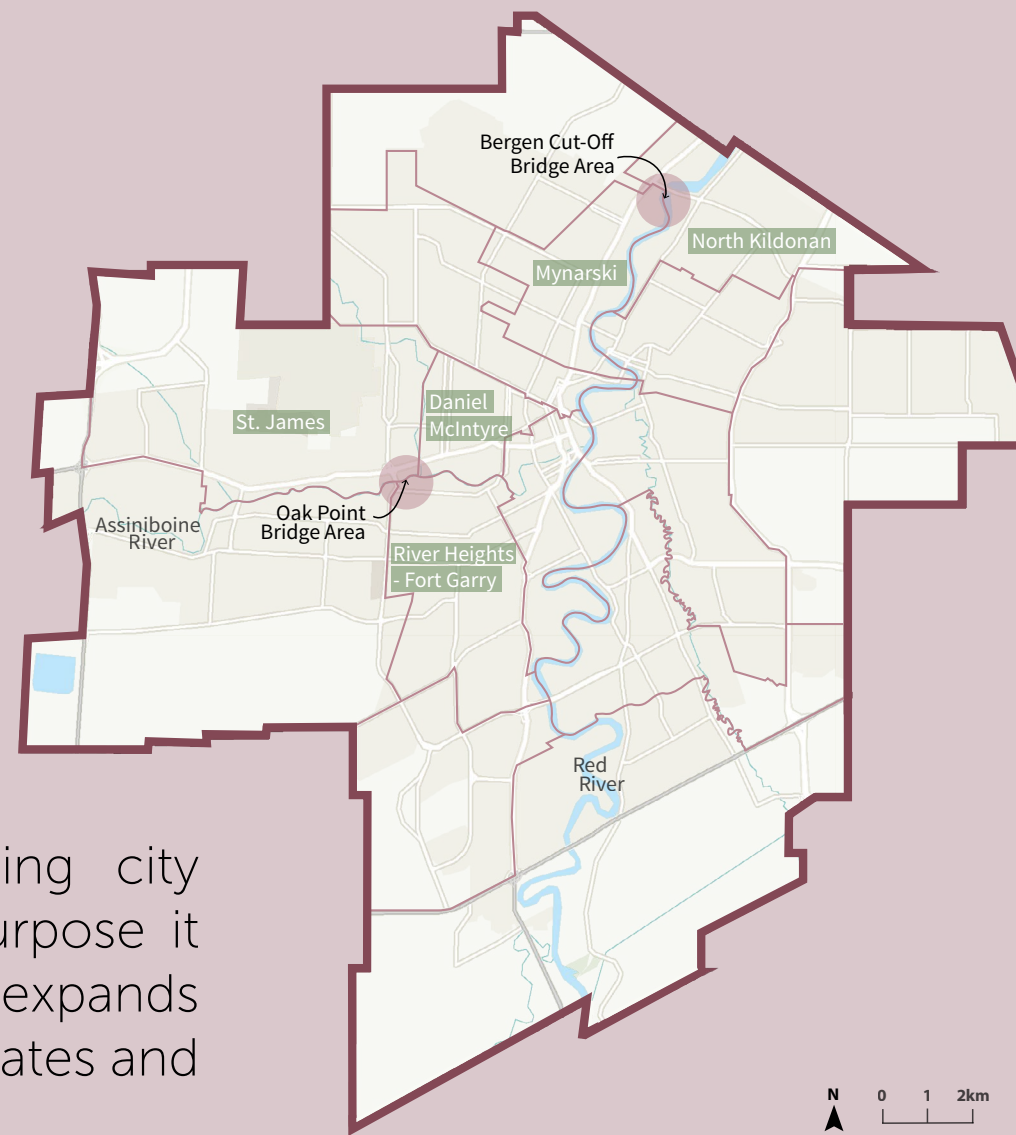


WINNIPEG, MANITOBA'S ABANDONED RAIL BRIDGES: A STUDY OF REPURPOSING FOR COMMUNITY USE

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BACKGROUND

Abandoned rail bridges in Winnipeg provide an opportunity to repurpose significant and historical infrastructure for community use and benefit. Despite being inactive for decades, the Bergen Cut-Off Bridge (Mynarski and North Kildonan) and the Oak Point Bridge (St. James and River Heights-Fort Garry) have remained abandoned. These forgotten structures may be adapted into **active transportation (AT)** bridges and become meaningful assets for the community. This research investigates the preservation and re-use of existing city infrastructure and the potential to repurpose it as a space that connects communities, expands recreation opportunities, and communicates and celebrates the bridges' histories.



CONTEXT



Bergen Cut-Off Bridge

The Bergen Cut-Off Bridge, which spans the Red River, is located in north Winnipeg. The bridge was in operation for 14 years and was subsequently abandoned by the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1928 (Kramer & Goldsborough, 2021). In 1985, private developers bought the bridge (Tizzard, 2007). Despite attempts over the years to repurpose the bridge for different uses, it has remained inactive.



Oak Point Bridge

The Oak Point Bridge, which spans the Assiniboine River, is located in west Winnipeg. The bridge was commissioned in 1907 by the Canadian National Railway and was decommissioned in the late 1990s (Kramer, 2021). The bridge was sold to ViceVersa Developments Inc. In 2004, ViceVersa Developments Inc. was approved by the City of Winnipeg to build condos on the bridge but could not secure provincial approvals (Kives, 2010). No further development activities have materialized since 2004.

References:
Kives, B. (2010, February 11). Streets, trail to close over bridge woes. Winnipeg Free Press. www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/streets-trail-to-close-over-bridge-woes-84096862.html
Kramer, N. (2021). Historic Sites of Manitoba: Canadian National Railway Oak Point Bridge. Manitoba Historical Society. www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/assiniboine_river_winnipeg/
Tizzard, I. (2007, July 7). Dreamer's High: Rail bridge planner patiently continues 20-year wait. Winnipeg Free Press.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the current situational context of abandoned rail bridges in Winnipeg?
- 2 What are the similarities and differences in how municipal planners, stakeholder groups and surrounding communities define, value, perceive and experience Winnipeg's abandoned rail bridges?
- 3 What opportunities do Winnipeg's abandoned bridges present, and what challenges do they face when repurposing is considered?

FINDINGS

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW KEY THEMES

- People Make Neighbourhoods Feel like a Community**
Resident interviewees from North Kildonan, Wolseley and River Heights-Fort Garry expressed their community's strong social ties are positive elements of their respective neighbourhoods.
- Community Pride is Personal**
Resident interviewees are proud of their respective communities for various reasons, such as their neighbourhood's rich history, high degree of tolerance and open-mindedness.
- Recreational Opportunities Are Valuable**
Accessing recreational opportunities (walking trails, cycling paths, parks etc.) are part of residents' regular routines, are frequently used by other neighbours, and act as venues that bring people together.
- Local Rail Bridges Are Not Utilized**
The abandoned bridges retain their value as distinct historical landmarks and are curious structures to look at; however, they currently do not serve any purpose for community members.
- Policy Planning Gaps**
Municipal planners familiar with the City of Winnipeg's planning and policy direction documents acknowledged the lack of specific references to abandoned rail bridges in the planning documents.
- A Repurposed Bridge Can Benefit the Community and Beyond**
Positive benefits of a repurposed rail bridge include greater access to amenities, enhanced social bonds and sense of place, creation of quality pedestrian connections, promotion of active living and a source of pride for all Winnipeggers.
- But There Are Many Hurdles**
Challenges of repurposing the rail bridges include cost, structural integrity, local opposition, bridge ownership, and legal, technical, and administrative issues.
- This Concept May Work Better for Other Bridges**
Some participants felt the barriers to repurposing the two identified bridges were too big to overcome but are open to this concept working for other bridges.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

- Thinking About the Big Picture**
Discussions of reconciliation, social dynamics, neighbourhood values and community perspectives are key to repurposing the bridges for AT.
- Opportunities**
Understanding the various opportunities and possibilities for the bridges helps inform how the proposed use can benefit local communities and Winnipeg.
- Building Momentum and Implementation**
The next steps to move forward with the initiative include building support, gathering momentum, and implementing the concept.

METHODS

Participants

- 4 municipal planners with knowledge of the bridges' adjacent communities (**SSI**)
- 5 neighbourhood resident group representatives in communities adjacent to the two abandoned bridges (**SSI**)
- 1 elected official, 1 municipal staff member and 4 representatives from organizations concerned with connectivity, heritage infrastructure, and green transportation alternatives (**FG**)

Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI)

- Participants were shown precedents of repurposed rail bridge projects
- Municipal planners were asked questions about (1) community planning goals and (2) the abandoned rail bridge(s)
- Neighbourhood resident group representatives were asked questions about (1) place and (2) the abandoned rail bridge(s)

Focus Group (FG)

- Participants were shown precedents of repurposed rail bridge projects
- Questions were asked about (1) the desire to repurpose for AT, (2) challenges and opportunities, (3) the bridge most likely to be repurposed, (4) who is opposed to this proposal, (5) available funding, and (6) next steps

FOCUS GROUP KEY THEMES

- Participants See the Potential**
Participants expressed that repurposing rail bridges will increase permeability, provide an avenue for placemaking, and could be incorporated into a planning vision for the entire city.
- Community Support May Vary**
Some community members may be concerned with increasing connectivity to their neighbourhood. Projects must be timed appropriately to gain community support.
- Structural Integrity and Ownership Must Be Addressed First**
As both bridges are privately owned, and structural integrity is unknown, the first step in the repurposing process would be to coordinate with ownership to assess the condition of the structures.
- Many Organizations Have a Role to Play**
Various organizations could contribute to repurposing efforts, such as the Winnipeg Trails Association, Trans Canada Trail, neighbourhood organizations, Indigenous groups, and adjacent user groups.
- Indigenous Perspectives Should Be Considered**
Conversations surrounding the bridges should include Indigenous perspectives, as the development of the rail industry and its disruptions to land had historical impacts on Indigenous people in Canada.
- How is This Project Prioritized Within the City?**
Prioritization and the associated costs of repurposing are significant barriers. However, the Oak Point Bridge is being considered in the City's Route 90 Improvements Study, which may result in the bridge being used for AT.

CONCLUSION

There are many **merits and opportunities** to repurposing Winnipeg's historic rail bridges for the neighbouring communities and the city.



The **Oak Point Bridge** is currently being considered by the City of Winnipeg to be incorporated as an active transportation path in the Route 90 Improvements Study project, and there appears to be a **high propensity for moving forward** with this initiative.

The **Bergen Cut-Off Bridge** is **less likely to be prioritized** in the short term.

The successful repurposing of rail bridges requires interest and support from stakeholders, structural and financial feasibility, coordination from ownership and most importantly, **political backing**.

