

Alexander Docks:

Using short-term design interventions to animate an underused site and generate momentum towards long-term change.

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ABSTRACT

A high-profile Winnipeg site, the Alexander Docks have long been identified as having significant promise for redevelopment; however, the site is complex and contains a variety of challenges. In response to the expressed interest of multiple community groups and organizations, Scatliff + Miller + Murray began a redevelopment proposal for Alexander Docks with the purpose of addressing the interests of the community and accessing federal funding through the Canada Healthy Communities Initiative. Community groups provided strong support letters for a redevelopment proposal.

In creating the proposal, Scatliff + Miller + Murray sought to achieve two goals: 1) explore how the site could be activated in the short-term with a relatively modest budget while achieving desired objectives of the community, and 2) generate momentum towards a future vision, and larger-scale redevelopment efforts.

This case-in-point explores design challenges and considerations of the Alexander Docks site and examines comparable precedents. Informed by discussions with Scatliff + Miller + Murray, this project shares a redevelopment concept proposal and vision for the site.

1.0

BACKGROUND

Located in central Winnipeg, the Alexander Docks site is located in the historic Exchange District along Waterfront Drive on the west edge of the Red River. The site contains bicycle and walking pathways and is considered part of the North Winnipeg Parkway: connecting Kildonan Park from the north down to the Forks from the south. The site has changed ownership through the years: during the 1920s the site was owned by William J. Guest of the Guest Fishing Company, and in 1928 the land was purchased by the Federal Government of Canada for \$2,500. The site is now owned by the City of Winnipeg, while the redevelopment application is owned by the Exchange District Biz¹.



FIGURE 1 | View south from Alexander Dock

History:

The site has long been a significant meeting place. Prior to colonization, the banks of the Red River have long been used by Indigenous peoples as a place of gathering and trade. During the late 1800's and early 1900's, the site was home to Victoria park – a community gathering space and a significant meeting place during the 1919 General Strike.

In the early 1900's, Waterfront Drive included the Winnipeg Transfer Railway – a key connection point between the Canadian National Railway and Canadian Pacific Railway lines. Taking its name from the nearby street, Alexander docks was constructed in 1929 to capitalize on its central location and proximity to railway and infrastructure networks. For many years, the dock was a central transportation hub for river traffic. However, Traffic along the river continued to decrease as rail and road networks improved and expanded; as a result, activities along the river became increasingly concentrated in Selkirk and Gimli and the dock shifted its focus towards recreational activities.

In 2014, the body of Tina Fontaine, a 15-year-old Indigenous woman, was found in the Red River near the Alexander Docks; a memorial was set up on the site in her memory (CBC news). The site has drawn attention to the violence perpetuated against missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. In 2015, the docks were fenced off due to poor structural integrity and safety concerns, and they remain closed².

Many people feel something has to be done with the site and have expressed a wide variety of ideas. In 2006 the City of Winnipeg put a call out for "expressions of interest" in developing the site, and most recently, in 2018, Number TEN architecture held a design competition for the space called 'On the Docks' with over 200 submissions from designers and non-designers³.



FIGURE 2 | view west from the existing parking lot

2.0 / CHALLENGES

The site contains a variety of challenges. Much of the site is located within the flood plain of the Red River. Any structures within the plain are vulnerable to natural processes such as erosion, ice and water flows, and the constantly fluctuating water levels pose technical challenges for construction. Over the years, the dock has suffered significant damage from natural processes, and was permanently closed in 2015 due to reduced structural integrity and safety concerns⁴. The dock, as well as proximity of the site to the river pose additional safety concerns for children on site. Moving forward, any significant future redevelopment will require the dock to either be removed or undergo repairs which will be expensive.



FIGURE 3 | View north along the existing bike trail

There is additional socioeconomic complexity: while recent development in the area is high-end, notably the expensive waterfront condominiums, many people in the surrounding area live in poverty. The site is located within the ward of Point Douglas⁵, statistically the second poorest neighbourhood in Winnipeg⁶.

The murder of Tina Fontaine and the discovery of her body near the Alexander Docks will always be associated with the site and will never be forgotten. Her death is symbolic of the ongoing challenges and discrimination faced by Indigenous women and girls in Canada and in Winnipeg. As such, any future short term or long-term redevelopment of the site must address this event with sensitivity, honour Tina Fontaine's life, and represent a sincere effort towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg.

3.0 / CONSIDERATIONS

To accommodate the objectives of the project, the redevelopment proposal must be limited in scope: modifications must be contained within the land above the flood plain, utilize the east parking lot, and remain around a \$400,000 budget. The redevelopment proposal contains the following additional considerations:

Meeting place: In keeping with the site's history, and the expressed interest of the community, the site should be a gathering and meeting space that supports a diversity of needs. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, public open space has been increasingly valued. Through community consultation, residents identified the site as a gap in the network of public space, and the need for child-friendly space.

Activate the parking lot: The north parking lot was shut down by the City of Winnipeg to reflect efforts to decrease the amount of surface parking in downtown Winnipeg. Given its central and scenic waterfront location, the lot has potential for a variety of non-parking uses.

Basic needs: The site should provide access to food and drink, as well as places for people to use the washroom, either in an adjacent building or on-site.

Portable infrastructure: Portable infrastructure is an opportunity to physically alter the site while keeping costs down, limiting construction of permanent infrastructure, and retaining flexibility for future redevelopment. Portable infrastructure could include shipping containers, wooden structures, picnic tables, as well as a variety of seating.

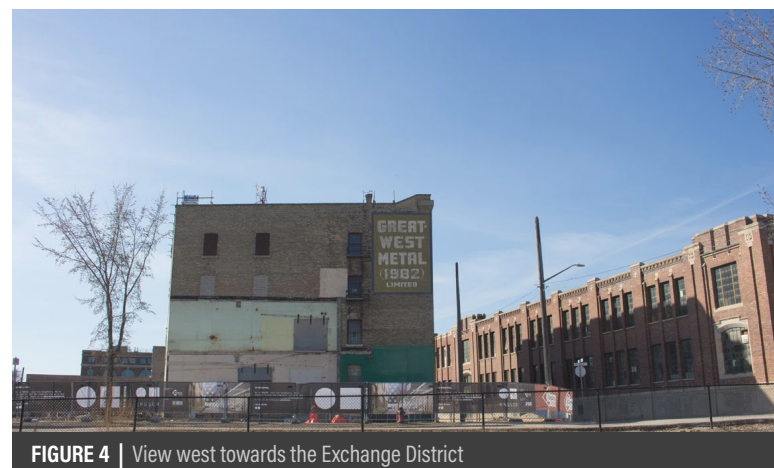


FIGURE 4 | View west towards the Exchange District

4.0 PRECEDENTS

Community partnerships and programming: A variety of community organizations and partners expressed interest in redevelopment of the site, and associated programming. The Downtown Biz expressed interest in activating the north parking lot and connecting future on-site activities to the adjacent Great West Metals building. The Biz is interested in developing a pop-up bar and patio to generate income on-site. Lastly, the Biz is interested in operating programming out of a shipping container kiosk, beginning Exchange District historical walking tours on-site, and supporting other partner in developing their own programming on site. The Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) is interested in developing programming focused on public education, ecological stewardship, and interpretive programming based around the river ecosystem. Lastly, The Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF) is interested in undertaking programming on site.



FIGURE 5 | View west towards the Exchange District

Landscaping: The site could contain light landscaping improvements, and this could potentially align with NCC objectives – such as planting native Manitoba plant species.

Urban beach: There is interest in installing sand on site and developing an urban beach, as a potential low-cost method of creating and activating public space.

Cultural: There is an opportunity for future redevelopment to highlight and connect with the cultural history of the site and surrounding area.

Memorial: The site is valued as a memorial for Tina Fontaine by the community, and this is formally recognized by the city of Winnipeg as critical in part of any new development (the forks).

Bijou Patio | Winnipeg

Located in Winnipeg's Exchange District between Old Market Square and Main St., Bijou patio opened in 2020 as a European style patio. The site was designed to accommodate the Covid-19 pandemic by ensuring seating areas were adequately distanced, and featured food runners – allowing patrons to order from their table. The menu featured food and drink from local restaurants and breweries, supporting the local economy⁷.



FIGURE 6 | Bijou Patio

Canada's Sugar Beach | Toronto

Named after the nearby Redpath Sugar Factory, Canada's Sugar Beach transformed a surface parking lot into an urban beach in downtown Toronto. Now a popular public gathering space, the site supports a range of activities and includes a tree-lined promenade, and a water feature for children and adults to play in, and a sandy beach complete with umbrellas and chairs⁸.



FIGURE 7 | Canada's Sugar Beach

The Beer Can | Winnipeg

Located in what was previously a gravel parking lot along Main St, the Beer Can is a pop-up beer garden and entertainment venue constructed in 2020. In order to address the demand for public space during the Covid-19 pandemic, the site features a range of seating configurations to accommodate distancing. The site demonstrates how portable infrastructure such as wood seating and a retrofitted shipping container can be used to activate a space⁹.



FIGURE 8 | The Beer Can

High Park | Calgary

Located in the Beltline Neighbourhood of Calgary, High Park transformed the underused top floor of a six-storey parkade into a public community space during the Covid-19 pandemic. Branching from a central boardwalk, the park features a variety of 'parklets' including picnic tables and seating - to provide socially distant meeting places. The site demonstrates the use of colour as a unifying design element, and the importance of flexible space in accommodating different seasonal programming functions¹⁰.



FIGURE 9 | High Park

Park Park | Calgary

Developed from a repurposed parking lot, Park Park is a community space designed to challenge the concept of what a 'park' is. A variety of public art installations and interactive structures invite curiosity and playfulness, and portable furniture such as wooden stumps and chairs allow people to directly interact and change the space. The site demonstrates how structure, color, and furniture design can engage and inspire people in a modest space¹¹.



FIGURE 10 | Park Park

Go to the Waterfront Plan | Winnipeg

Go to the Waterfront was a visionary planning study completed by Scatliff + Miller + Murray in 2015. The study's purpose was to develop and share ideas for future development along Winnipeg's rivers. The study highlighted the importance of improving connectivity among different sites, supporting river-based activities in all seasons, developing transportation functionality, and improving environmental sustainability and ecological functionality¹².



FIGURE 11 | Go to the Waterfront - Concept art

5.0

Social: Above all, the site is a meeting place. The site acts as a social hub, supporting a variety of activities and uses. The site features different 'rooms' including the parking lot, the deck, the gathering circle, and the extended beach. Pergolas along the deck, as well as numerous umbrellas throughout the site provide shelter from the elements, shade on a hot day, and a comfortable environment to stop and relax. A variety of seating options are provided to accommodate different preferences including picnic tables, beach chairs, natural stone, and seating logs.



FIGURE 12 | Proposed masterplan

Activity: The site opens to bicycle and walking transportation networks to the north, south, and west – inviting people from the surrounding area to move freely through the space. Interpretive signage helps improve legibility, while open vistas of the river and waterfront drive help people easily orient themselves in the space. The sandy beach provides space for people to move and play freely, and undertake a variety of activities. In addition to the beach, the nature playground near the centre provides different natural wood and stone structures for children to explore within close proximity to the rest of the site. In winter, the site serves as a natural connection point to skating trails along the Red River.

Natural features: The site is designed to optimize connectivity to the Red River. Seating areas are oriented to take advantage of the views, while the beach's meandering form blends within the existing floodplain. There are 3 large perennial gardens located throughout the site planted entirely with native Manitoba plants. The gardens provide colour and beauty, environmental and ecological value, and opportunities for people to learn about and interact with native species.

Materials: Repurposed wood and metal are used to increase environmental sustainability and highlight the industrial heritage of the site and surrounding Exchange District. Limestone is used extensively throughout the site, as a means of connecting to the origin of the river itself.

Adaptability: Different areas, such as the gathering circle, allow the space to be flexible: accommodating different public events during different seasons. Moveable furniture including chairs and log stumps allow for people to interact and dictate the space. Portable infrastructure is provided in the form of four shipping containers retrofitted as kiosks. Container 1 provides a variety of local food and refreshments, container 2 is operated by both the MMF And NNC, and container 3 serves as a pop-up space open to use by additional community organizations. Container 4 is a centrally located public washroom.



FIGURE 13 | North beach



FIGURE 14 | Shipping containers and picnic tables

Programming: The site is capable of hosting a variety of public events throughout the space such as farmers markets, ceremonies, and entertainment. The site is well suited to connect with close proximity events such as the Winnipeg Jazz Festival, Fringe Festival, and Nuit Blanche. Community programming can be operated out of the shipping containers including heritage tours from the Exchange Biz, cultural tours from MMF, and interactive tours exploring the river ecosystem and perennial gardens by the NCC. Interpretive signage in a variety of languages is provided throughout the site sharing information on cultural history and ecology.

Local: The site provides opportunities for local businesses to sell food, drink, and other wares from the shipping containers. The site features work from local artists on signage and murals along the backs of shipping containers. The site provides flexible open space which can be used for farmers markets, art galleries, performances, and other events to support local makers. Lastly, job and volunteer opportunities can be provided for youth and people with barriers to employment through the different programming initiatives and local businesses.

Memorial: Moving forward, any redevelopment of the site will require meaningful consultation with Winnipeg's Indigenous community as well as Tina Fontaine's family. For this project, the ideas put forth are an attempt to contribute ideas to the discussion of how Tina's life can be honoured. The gathering circle acts as a central meeting place where Indigenous cultural events and ceremonies could take place. The 3 native Manitoba perennial gardens include sacred and medicinal plants, symbolize life and rebirth, and represent an effort towards decolonizing the landscape. Economic and programming opportunities are provided for Indigenous artists and makers to share their work and generate income. Programming and signage on-site aim to spread awareness of the issues faced by Indigenous women and girls and highlight Winnipeg's Indigenous cultural history.



FIGURE 15 | View of the Red River from the deck



FIGURE 16 | Main beach



FIGURE 17 | Perennial gardens

6.0 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this proposal is to address the expressed needs of the community with a short-term design solution and inspire more significant long-term redevelopment of the site. The Alexander Docks hold the potential to be a significant meeting place in Winnipeg's downtown core, build on Winnipeg's identity as a river city, promote connectivity and movement, improve ecological function, and contribute to environmentally sustainable urban development. Above all, this site holds the potential to contribute to broader discussions of reconciliation in Winnipeg, and engage all citizens in finding a beautiful, functional, and just future at Alexander Docks.

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Image Resources

Cover image: Google Earth

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2. Nik Friesen-Hughes
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