

case - in - point

Bringing Downtown to the River's Edge: Strategies for the River Landing Project

Introduction

Cities around the world are reconnecting with their waterfronts. Waterfronts offer great potential for commercial, residential, and recreational uses, in addition to connecting the city to the water. Downtown areas which have suffered with the loss of economic activity can take advantage of waterfront redevelopment to help attract people to the city centre. This can help revive the downtown economy, residential base, and range of recreational activity. To be successful, waterfront developments must adopt a strategy, based on proven precedents and principles tailored to respond to the needs of the city. The goals of this project are to assess how well the River Landing strategy reflects best practices and how it is able to bring downtown to the river's edge.



Map of Proposed River Landing Development.,
(Image: www.riverlanding.ca.)

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Proposed Destination Complex (right) and a Hotel and Spa (left)
in a park-like setting. (Image: www.riverlanding.ca)

The River Landing Project

Saskatoon represents an ideal case for investigating urban waterfront strategies. River Landing proposes downtown redevelopment and renewal in conjunction with riverbank enhancement. The project is anticipated to strengthen the image of the Downtown by providing a strong, functional link between the commercial core and the South Saskatchewan River. The project plans include new residential, commercial, hospitality, and recreational opportunities in the south end of downtown while providing access to the South Saskatchewan River.

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Site History

The River Landing site is historically significant in Saskatoon, and has played a key role in the city's history.

The site began to develop after the early settlement of the Saskatoon Temperance Colony erected on the other side of the river. The Barr Colonists temporarily set up a tent city south of 19th Street prior to permanent settlement.

In the first half of the 20th century, more development took place on the site including livery stables, auto retail stores, bicycle shops and boarding houses. The A.L. Cole power plant brought new technology and modern convenience. It has since been decommissioned. (www.riverlanding.ca)

The site used to be home to Chinese immigrants, where they opened shops on 19th Street, creating a Chinatown. The city slowly purchased the land, and eventually approved the construction of Saskatoon's Technical College, known as the Gathercole Building. This building has been demolished, and remnants have been preserved to be included in future development.



Remnants of the Gathercole Building, now demolished, will be used in the River Landing Project. (Image: www.riverlanding.ca)

Today, the new River Landing development is an opportunity to recognize this history and continue to shape the contribution of the site to the city for the future. The strategy for the project aims to reveal the site's unique history by providing guiding principles for the development of interpretation. (South Downtown Concept Plan) The goal is to provide a layer of meaning to the South Downtown that pays respect to the past while looking at Saskatoon's future.

Project History

In 1978, a report by architect Raymond Moriyama presented a plan that provided a balance of conservation and development for the South Saskatchewan River. The plan included a "South Downtown Concept" for Saskatoon, which promoted the development of the riverbank from the Broadway Bridge to Victoria Park as well as the Gathercole site, which was owned and occupied by the Saskatoon Public School Board. It also advocated to respond to the history of Saskatoon, culturally and architecturally.

Since Moriyama's 100 year master plan for the South Saskatchewan River Valley, this area of Saskatoon's Downtown has always been considered a prime location to bring the Downtown to the water's edge. Saskatoon has a long tradition of preserving the riverbank in a natural state, with trails and public access. River Landing would be different, blending hard surfaces with soft surfaces. A mix of urban uses would be brought to the top of the bank and create a major, regional gathering place.

River Landing took hold once the Saskatoon School Board decided to move from the Gathercole Site. This land was sold to the City, which now owns and controls most of the land adjacent to the river, including both sides of the Senator Sid Buckwold Bridge.

In 2003, the new City Council made River Landing their number one priority. In 2004, the City retained CitySpaces Consulting Ltd. to undertake a comprehensive redevelopment and land use plan for not only the Gathercole lands, but to include another undeveloped parcel of riverfront land once occupied by A.L. Cole power plant. Council was determined that the entire site be redeveloped as one, continuous project. After extensive review and public consultation, the South Downtown Concept Plan was approved by City Council in June 2004 and by the Meewasin Valley Authority in October of 2004. The Concept Plan is now the cornerstone and framework for development for River Landing.

Proposed Developments

Hotel Spa & Restaurant

Destination Complex

Performance Theatre

Visitor Centre

Interpretive Centre

Retail Streetfront

Residential

Includes Live/Work Development

Microbrewery/Restaurant

Riversdale Square

Farmer's Market

Community Events and Programs

Commemoration of Immigration Hall

Business Support Centre

Community Park (Riversdale)



The River Landing development is split into 2 phases.
(Image: www.riverlanding.ca)

River Landing Development Strategy

Concept Plan

The River Landing Concept Plan forms the 'vision' for the project. It provides an overview of Saskatoon's downtown and Riversdale community, areas which are anticipated to benefit significantly from the development. The strategy to develop River Landing is a key to Saskatoon's future as a major city in the Canadian context and a desirable community to visit and live. River Landing is expected to change the face of Saskatoon - in the same way The Forks, Granville Island, Byward Market, and other significant urban gathering places do.

The development of the Concept Plan, vision, and strategy for River Landing started with looking at the Moriyama's 100-year master plan for the river valley. Precedents used for this plan included Ghirardelli Square and Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, and Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. After reviewing other successful waterfront projects, five key considerations for good waterfront development have been taken into consideration in the preparation of planning principles and the development of the plan:

- Close contact with the water by pedestrians;
 - Continuous public open space along the waterfront edge;
 - Good connections with the Downtown and adjacent neighbourhoods;
 - Access for all with public space shared; and
 - Land uses and activities that will encourage its use
- (Source: South Downtown Concept Plan, 5)



South Downtown Concept Rendering. (Image: South Downtown Concept Plan)

Twelve land planning principles have also been developed to guide the preparation of the concept plan for River Landing. Each element of the plan seeks to meet these planning principles.

1. Support and strengthen Downtown and Riversdale
2. Plan A.L. Cole and Gathercole sites together
3. Create a distinct identity and sense of place
4. Design to be a destination
5. Design for development viability
6. Appropriate density and building heights
7. Remember the past
8. Provide for special events
9. Ensure barrier-free access
10. Plan for all day and all season use
11. Ensure a mix of land uses
12. Plan for safety and security

The concept plan also includes 8 elements designed to meet the 12 principles. These include:

1. Landmarks
2. Strengthen Connections and Access
3. Mix of Land Uses
4. The Riverfront as a Stage
5. Ambient and Special Event Lighting
6. Heritage and Environmental Interpretation
7. Streetscape and Public Art
8. Controlling Development and Design

(Source: South Downtown Concept Plan, 5)

The Concept Plan also explains current issues and concerns for the site to be addressed prior to development, including poor connections and access, contaminated soil conditions, safety and security, and vacant or underused buildings. These issues are dealt with in the discussion of the concept plan principles.



*Workshop session to create concept plan.
(Image: www.riverlanding.ca)*

Interpretive Plan

An interpretive plan is needed to inform the ongoing work of the City of Saskatoon's streetscape development and Meewasin's work on the riverfront, both of which are key public areas of the River Landing Development. Long term and holistic interpretive planning is also required for the site, which is at various stages of design and development. The purpose of this document is to provide a list of recommendations that will be of use to the Meewasin Valley Authority and the City of Saskatoon, as well as landowners and tenants that develop individual areas of the site. Adhering to the recommendations will ultimately create a cohesive feel to a site that will have multiple owners.

The following steps were taken to create the interpretive plan:

1. Initial gathering of materials and preparatory research.
 2. Tour of site
 3. A visioning workshop with Meewasin, City of Saskatoon, and other stakeholders
 4. A presentation of preliminary findings and directions to a group of invested parties
 5. Interviewing interested parties in Saskatoon, including business groups, school boards, and arts and cultural groups
 6. A design charette with city planners, architects, landscape architects, and interpretive planners
- (Source: River Landing Interpretive Plan, 4)

After an initial visioning workshop and careful analysis of the site and local resources, the resulting stories were recorded and potential media explored. The report provides a layer of meaning to the River landing that pays respect to the past while looking to Saskatoon's future. (River Landing Interpretive Plan)

The contents of this plan can be used as a reference for planners and designers who are looking to add meaning to any River Landing development. The concepts will provide the framework for the content, look and feel of outdoor interpretive signage and clarify the vision for indoor spaces and the cultural centre. (River Landing Interpretive Plan)

Architectural Control District Guidelines & Direct Control District Zoning

The City has created and adopted Saskatchewan's first Architectural Control District (ACD). This requires that an Architectural Design Plan is drafted for the area and then each project reviewed by qualified staff or a Design Review Committee. The plan will address elements such as proportion, scale, massing, style, colour, and relationship to the street. Other municipalities across the country use this mechanism for control for areas which are considered to have special design significance. (South Downtown Concept Plan)

Carried out in conjunction with the ACD guidelines is Direct Control District Zoning (DCD1) Guidelines. DCD1 is known as River Landing. The guidelines contain objectives, acceptable land uses, and requirements for building form and massing. Landscaping, signage, parking and services access area also subject to control. The guidelines also refer to subdivision and approval processes involving the City of Saskatoon and the Meewasin Valley Authority. (South Downtown Concept Plan) These mechanisms will assist in carrying out the objectives of the concept plan.

Community Input

No other project in Saskatoon has received such public interest and scrutiny as South Downtown. The City of Saskatoon invited public input on the preliminary concept plan. Open houses were held on April 27 and 28, attended by 507 Saskatoon residents.

The public could also contribute to the concept plan by picking up forms at City of Saskatoon leisure centres, City Hall, the Meewasin Valley Authority, and the three Business Improvement Districts. The City also developed a web page that allowed citizens to review the plan and provide input. (www.riverlanding.ca)

The result was 364 comment sheets, plus individual presentations, received. Comments and input were also received through a separate town hall meeting held by the core neighbourhood associations and stakeholders. People were asked for their input on everything from what the development should be called, to what should be included on the site. More than 80% of Saskatoon residents approved of the concept plan's eight key elements. (www.riverlanding.ca)

Urban Waterfront Development Strategies

Can River Landing Bring Downtown to the Waterfront?

The principles that guide the design of urban waterfronts are not unique, and can be applied to other public spaces and urban design. (Fisher, 63) In the case of River Landing, it is important to consider those principles which will bring downtown to the rivers edge. Since the project is recently underway, it is not possible to tell how closely the development will reflect and fulfill the principles of the plans. However, the River Landing strategy addresses many best practices in a realistic way. The following is a list of best practices for urban waterfront development, and how River Landing plans to fulfill them.

Build on Historical and Cultural Assets. The plan for River Landing strongly encourages the historical and cultural significance of the site to be integrated into any development. The goal will be to focus on the stories of the site, but also give attention to the city and region. Opportunities to integrate cultural history are at Riversdale Square and the Destination Complex, and the history and nature of the river can be presented along the Riverfront. The history and culture can also be communicated through public art.

Solve Problems of Mixed Use. Mixed use is found throughout the proposed plans for River Landing. Combinations of commercial, retail, and residential are proposed for Phase II of the project, and tourist amenities dominate Phase I. All of these developments are planned to have connections to the river and recreational opportunities.



An example of live/work residence. This type of development is proposed for River Landing. (Image: www.riverlanding.ca)

Include Services and Amenities to Attract Tourists.

Most of phase I of River Landing will cater to tourists, and create a unique destination point for the city. A hotel, spa, restaurants, retail shops, and an art and cultural centre (destination centre) are a few proposed projects that will provide tourists with the services and amenities required. Additionally, access to the riverfront will heighten visitor experience.

Include Recreational Amenities and Bring the Amenity of the Water Inland.

Recreational amenities are essential in creating a successful urban waterfront. River Landing has proposed to accommodate pedestrians, cyclists, and a ferry dock. These recreational opportunities can promote tourist related activities proposed for phase I. (Burayidi, 188). The plans also include visibly connecting downtown to the waterfront by providing unobstructed sightlines to the river, by extending downtown streets.

Plan with careful zoning, historic preservation, architectural and site planning regulations.

The city of Saskatoon has adopted Architectural Control District Guidelines & Direct Control District Zoning, which are key tools in the implementation of the principles found in the concept plan. It will ensure controlled architectural development of all projects and the creation of a cohesive and continuous development.

Ensure a physical, social, and psychological connectedness between downtown and the waterfront. As significant part of South Downtown, River Landing will play a key role in connecting the river to the rest of the city. Physical connections will take place as developments begin to occur in Downtown and Riversdale as they become integrated as part of the River Landing plan. The proposed interpretive centre would provide a good opportunity to link the history of the site to the city. Extending streets from downtown to the site and providing sightlines will increase visibility. River Landing also proposes a variety of commercial, retail, recreational, and accommodation services, commonly found in the downtown area. Including these activities will assist in making a connection between downtown and the river.



The winning design for a landmark fountain: 'Prairie Wind.'
(Image: www.riverlanding.ca)



Recreational trails for pedestrians and cyclists along the river.
(Image: www.riverlanding.ca)

Include open spaces such as parks, plazas, and trails to add economic value. Open spaces such as parks, plazas, and trails add economic value to urban waterfront developments. River Landing has proposed 3 main parks: the riverfront at 2nd avenue, a new riverfront park, and a community park in Riversdale. Linking these features to downtown and each other will also help strengthen the economic value of downtown.

Link the development to key transportation systems and adopt traffic management policies. Transportation routes must be linked to River Landing. Saskatoon is proposing that 2nd Avenue and Spadina Crescent be extended and include traffic circles to accommodate public transit. Underground, surface and street parking will be available. The site will also be accessible for pedestrians and cyclists by extending current riverbank trails and providing access on site and to downtown.

Lessons for Winnipeg

Can Waterfront Drive bring Winnipeg to the River's Edge?

Saskatoon and Winnipeg appear to have used similar urban waterfront best practices in developing a strategy for River Landing and Waterfront Drive. The plans address nearly all of the same issues from architectural controls to traffic management. The following describes what Winnipeg might learn from Saskatoon in continuing to develop its strategy.

Highlight the Cultural and Historic Significance of the Site. Winnipeg has plans to link the development to historically significant areas such as the Exchange District and St. Boniface, but does not mention much history of the Waterfront Drive site. Providing educational elements adds another dimension to the development. Saskatoon will actively integrate the site's history into as many developments as possible and educate people about the site, city, and the river. Waterfront Drive has opportunities to do this as well based on the concepts developed so far.

Improve Connections to the City. Waterfront Drive presents opportunities to connect the river, the Exchange District and The Forks. Waterfront Drive has the opportunity to help the Forks gain better physical connections to the city, and this is one of the key components of the concept plan. River Landing will likely have success in creating these types of connections, due in part to its location and the fact that the river is already easily accessed. However, the plans for connecting Waterfront Drive appear to be well planned, and are similar to those of Saskatoon.

Link to key transportation systems and adopting traffic management policies. In developing Waterfront Drive, Winnipeg has looked to Spadina Crescent in Saskatoon as an example of a successful "waterfront drive." Winnipeg has also planned similar traffic management strategies. Saskatoon has made pedestrian access a priority for River Landing. Better access leads to greater opportunity for commercial, residential, and recreational opportunities, all of which are planned for Waterfront Drive.

Marketing and Promotion. The marketing and promotion of River Landing is proving to be successful. Remai Ventures and Persephone Theatre have arrangements to build on the site, and public input has been extensive. A marketing strategy is available on the River Landing website, and outlines how to promote the development as having "something for everyone" and a "must see" destination.

Civic Responsibility and Leadership. Civic responsibility and leadership are the driving forces behind creating a place like River Landing. The City of Saskatoon has made the project a priority, and has the support of the provincial and federal government.

Waterfront Buildings as a Gateway. Waterfront buildings as a gateway will enhance the visibility of urban waterfront developments. Care has been taken by the City of Saskatoon to adopt architectural and zoning controls which have allowed certain buildings to fulfill this requirement. An example of a building which may act as a landmark and gateway is the proposed hotel, spa and restaurant.

Heighten Awareness of Waterfront. Heightening the awareness of the waterfront is a strongly developed principle for River Landing. In Saskatoon, the waterfront is already very visible and well utilized for recreation. River Landing will enhance this visibility by including the landmark Prairie Wind fountain, and a landmark building, such as the proposed hotel and spa.



Increased visibility by extending downtown streets and providing unobstructed views is planned for River Landing. (Image: www.riverlanding.ca)

Bring Tourists to the area. Waterfront Drive has the potential to link to popular tourism destinations such as the Forks, Exchange District, and St. Boniface. Where the plan appears to need improvement is how to keep tourists in the Waterfront Drive area, rather than using it as a connection to other places. There is opportunities to address this by elaborating on plans for commercial, retail, restaurant, and recreational activity.

Expand the Vision. Although the plans for River Landing are simply concepts, and will not become reality as they are on paper, the strategy is more detailed and extensive than for Waterfront Drive. The main difference is that River Landing wants to be very specific in the types of commercial, residential, and recreational opportunities it wants to provide, and how they relate to the rest of downtown and the city. Winnipeg has been clear on recreational and residential developments it wants to include, and plans for commercial opportunities can be developed in the same way, and connected to similar businesses in the Exchange and the Forks.

What can Saskatoon learn from Winnipeg?

In developing the River Landing strategy, Saskatoon has looked to the Forks as an example of a successful urban waterfront development in many ways. What Saskatoon may learn from Winnipeg:

1. Creating a destination unique to the city
2. Recreational access to the river year round
3. Planning for mixed-use waterfront development
4. More outdoor recreational opportunities on the riverbank, such as including a skating rink.
5. Integrate culture and history of the site into design of public art and interactive landmarks
6. Create more hard surfaces for access to the river

Both cities present themselves as being success stories for urban waterfront development.

Alan Wallace, Senior Planner, City of Saskatoon Community Services. Alan's involvement with River Landing began in the mid 80's, where the City attempted to create a waterfront development opportunity in South Downtown by purchasing a block of land adjacent to the riverbank. His key involvement from the start has been to develop a set of development guidelines known as a Direct Control District for the South Downtown. The DCD1 as they are called combined with the adopted Concept Plan forms the "vision" of the South Downtown.

Site Updates

2005:

- work continued on the landscaping and pathways including the installation of guardrails, sun shelters, streetscape furniture, irrigation, and lighting
- demolition of the Gathercole Building
- more land acquisitions
- subdivision
- relocation of major underground utilities

2006:

- A permanent farmers market will be opened
- A new business incubation centre will open
- Persephone Theatre will begin construction of a new performing arts theatre
- The first phase of the Riverfront park will be opened to the public
- Riverfront features, including the pavilion, waterplay area, amphitheatres, and boat dock are scheduled for construction in 2006 pending budget approvals
- The City of Saskatoon and Remai Ventures Inc. have reached an agreement for the development of a hotel,spa and restaurant on River Landing Phase I. A revised plan for this development will be unveiled. Construction could begin in the spring of 2007.
- A landmark fountain for the site has been chosen called Prairie Wind
- Site remediation on Phase II is nearly complete

Resources

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