

RIVERFRONTS FOR ALL?

Understanding Canadian Riverfront Plans and Their Responses to Critical Issues

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BACKGROUND

Interest in analyzing riverfront planning came from Winnipeg's use of its rivers in the winter over the last several years, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic when community initiatives led to expanding public space onto the frozen rivers. This research considers riverfront plans in Canadian cities to assess their quality based on their responses to social and environmental issues. With humans longstanding connections to rivers and increasing climate change concerns we must protect these important natural features.



Figure 1. Skating on the river in Winnipeg (Winnipeg Free Press, 2021).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the priorities of riverfront plans in Canadian municipalities?
2. What were the plan engagement and implementation processes?
3. What critical issues facing cities do these riverfront plans address? How do they address these critical issues in their riverfront plans?
 - Have plans aimed to improve public access, interaction and use of the riverfronts and adjacent lands by the public? How have the plans done this?
 - How do the plans address reconciliation as a process?
 - How have climate change impacts such as variable temperatures, more extreme flooding, and threats to biodiversity been addressed in these riverfront plans?

METHODS

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Conducted 16 interviews with public and private sector professionals who had worked on developing, using or implementing the plan.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Critical assessment of riverfront plans in Canadian cities to understand the priorities and their consideration for access to public space, reconciliation and climate change.

KEY FINDINGS

PLAN PRIORITIES

All the plans have a common focus on environment, access, connectivity, culture & heritage and the riverfront as a destination.

The plans divide their riverfront lands into zones, allowing them to identify different uses or priorities within each zone. Winnipeg and Brantford organize their lands based on neighbourhoods, the NCC divides their park into four equal zones. The lands along Mission's river are organized around a node. Edmonton's approach is unique because they use a land management classification system which outlines areas for Preservation (Fig. 2), Conservation (Fig. 3) and Active & Working Landscapes (Fig. 4). The land classification also helps them deal with competing priorities.

Figure 2. Preservation



Figure 3. Conservation



Figure 4. Active/Working Landscapes



Example drawings of the three land classification types (Ribbon of Green SW+NE, 2020).

Other methods used to address competing priorities are:

- Education - to inform the public of why the city makes a decision regarding the riverfront.
- Communication - to help people understand the various perspectives and visions for the riverfront.

ADDRESSING CRITICAL ISSUES

PUBLIC SPACE

- Plans focus on enhancing existing public spaces by improving connectivity between parks, neighbourhoods and pathways, and increasing access to public spaces.
- Ways of improving access noted by interviewees: year-round use, wayfinding/other signage, creating opportunity for people to touch the water (Fig. 5), universal accessibility, viewpoints.

Figure 5. Rendering of the green shores approach that allows people to get to the water level (Waterfront Revitalization Master Plan, 2022).



[The touch the water concept] brings the river to life, [making it] more relevant to the people of the community to interact with as opposed to something you view from a distance.
- Interviewee 13 (Mission).

RECONCILIATION

- Reconciliation not a consideration for older plans, such as Winnipeg or Brantford plans.
- Action toward reconciliation present in newer plans, such as the NCC, Mission and Edmonton.
- Several interviewees shared that from their perspective, First Nations have a lack of capacity. Interviewee 12 (Mission) spoke about a local First Nation only being able to attend one meeting for the plan, stating that *their staff are just strapped [for time]*. Similarly, Interviewee 1 said that *capacity is a huge challenge with any Indigenous engagement on any city project and a lot of communities only have so much time*. Interviewees share similar perspectives or experiences from working with local First Nations.

CLIMATE CHANGE

- All plans had a focus on environmental protection, however there was a lack of discussion connecting why this protection is important due to climate change.
- Newer plans, such as the NCC, Mission and Edmonton have a greater emphasis on climate change mitigation and protection. Interviewee 15 (NCC) described the open space in their riverfront park as: *not just green space available for development, it's an ecologically sustainable land, and it contributes to the fight against climate change*. The NCC's plan enhances and protects the park's open space from development thus making it more resilient to climate impacts.



Figure 6. A mother duck and her ducklings in their wetland habitat in the Mud Lake area of the Riverfront Park (Ottawa River South Shore Riverfront Park Plan, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This research has highlighted the development processes and priorities for riverfront plans in Canada. The findings reveal that newer plans are aware of social and environmental concerns in Canadian cities. As we continue to feel the impacts of climate change and urbanization, we must be open to adapting our planning processes. We can discover new possibilities for our riverfronts through collaboration with Indigenous peoples and other community members. Together, we can create more inclusive, resilient and accessible riverfronts for all!