A Place for Planners in Heritage Preservation:
The Resurrection of Upper Fort Garry, Winnipeg

Pamela Elias with Cindy Tugwell,
Executive Director of Heritage Winnipeg & Board Member of the Friends of Upper Fort Garry

Abstract:
In collaboration with Heritage Winnipeg’s Executive Director, Cindy Tugwell, this article examines the unlikely preservation of Downtown Winnipeg’s once neglected and seemingly forgotten Upper Fort Garry historic site. When faced with the threat of being buried under the weight of a much-needed high-rise housing complex in 2007, a boisterous public outcry, backed in part by private finances, persuaded local government to rethink the site’s development. This paved the way for the Upper Fort Garry Heritage Park and Interpretive Centre, currently under construction.

The process that lead to this outcome is viewed with an aim at gaining insight as to how to better protect sites of historic value from future destruction. While delving into the bigger issues surrounding heritage theory is beyond the scope of this study, it does attempt to touch upon an idea of what we preserve, and why.
Background:

The original Fort Garry located at the site was built in 1821 but demolished shortly after due to the flood of 1826 (Heritage Winnipeg, n. d.) It was later replaced by a new structure, entitled Upper Fort Garry. The historic footprint of the new fort’s settlement lies at the edge of Downtown Winnipeg, on Main St. between Assiniboine Ave. and Broadway and is commonly considered to be the original birthplace of not only Winnipeg, but of Manitoba. Strategically located adjacent to the transportation and trade hub created by the meeting of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, it was constructed from 1835 to 1837 by the Hudson Bay Company (HBC). It acted as the company’s administration centre and was a gathering place for early settlers of the Red River Valley. It was also the location from which the HBC governed over the region, which, at the time was part of their holdings (FUFG, 2008).

The fort was surrounded by stone walls, five metres high, with bastions at each corner and spanned approximately eighty metres on each side. The impressive exterior structure was intended to convey to the people of Rupertsland, the power and control the company had over their lives (Heritage Winnipeg, n. d.). Contained within the exterior boundaries were a number of structures. Included were the Governor’s house, HBC staff and officers quarters, fur trade, general, and liquor stores, and fur and pemmican storage buildings (FUFG, 2008). Overcrowding soon occurred from an influx of British soldiers and the fort was extended northward in 1853, and surrounded by a wooden wall (Heritage Winnipeg, n. d.). Due in part to deteriorating conditions, by 1882, the fort was decommissioned. The buildings were demolished for material, and the land was sold at auction (Selwood, 2011).

A number of events have taken place at this location that have helped direct the development of Manitoba and Winnipeg. In addition to being a critical junction point for the trade of goods, it once housed followers of Louis Riel and acted as the base for his provisional government. Here, under Riel’s leadership, a bill of rights was presented to Canada, which latter became the Manitoba Act of 1870 (CBC, 2009). It also imprisoned those opposed to the government’s authority, including Thomas Scott, who was executed on the grounds in 1870 (MHS, 2010).

Over the last century, the site has been used for a variety of purposes. In recent years it has housed a gas station, curling club, and parking lot. The only visual reminder of the once impressive fort that remains is a wooden gate located on the north side. This gate and the land on which it sits were donated in 1897 by HBC to the City of Winnipeg, as a “public park forever” (FUFG, 2008). Upper Fort Garry, for the most part, was
largely forgotten until the city began to consider selling the property for redevelopment.

Facts of the Case:

A large portion of Upper Fort Garry’s footprint resides at 100 Main St. In 2006, under the ownership of the city, Council began to consider the possibility of declaring the land as surplus and put on the market. The city’s aim was to use the funding from the sale to finance a new building on Pacific Ave. This goal was conceived to help consolidate city employees and reduce costs as recommended by the Public Works/Water and Waste Facilities master plan (Executive Policy Committee Minutes, 2006). After receiving approval from the Executive Policy Committee and Standing Policy Committee on Downtown Development, Council adopted the plan to sale and proceeded forward (Council Minutes, 2009). This was done despite an awareness of the significance of the sites history. It may also have been influenced by the lack of serious interest in highlighting the sites heritage factors. An expression of interest was released, prompting responses from Crystal Developers and from the Friends of Upper Fort Garry (FUFG).

Crystal Developers submitted a proposal to buy the site for $1.2 million and to construct a 25-story apartment complex upon it. Despite also receiving a business proposal for the site by FUFG, the Crystal Developers deal was accepted by the city in October 2007. This action led to strong negative feedback that echoed through the media and community, which stalled the sale. Due to the support shown, it was clear the vision communicated by the FUFG resonated with the public.

Likely due to this public response, in December 2007, the city granted FUFG an opportunity to purchase the property providing it fulfilled a list of requirements. The city required the organization to raise 80% of its required financing needed for its plan, amounting to $10 million. They also had to secure the rights to the adjacent property used at the time by the Grain Exchange Curling Club (Ibid). With only a short time span given, the challenge seemed unlikely to be achieved.

The well-organized FUFG moved fast. On January 24th 2008, they launched the Create a Future for Upper Fort Garry campaign with the goal of raising $3.5 million by the deadline of March 31st (FUFG, 2008a). The Manitoba Métis Federation, a major stakeholder, publically expressed their approval and support of the project and pledged $1 million dollars (CBC News, 2008). The Forks North Portage Partnership also agreed to provide “$900,000 in planning and project management services over five years” (FUFG, 2008b). In addition, all three levels of government agreed to support the project with the city offering to donate the land, and the provincial and federal governments
agreeing to supply $1.5 million each (Rollason, 2010). The province later aided to the project by working out a deal to buy and donate the property, located on the northeast corner of the block, from Petro Canada, who sold at less than half of market value. In addition, the province offered to grant the site provincial park status and provide annual maintenance funding (CBC News, 2009).

By the March 31st deadline, an impressive $8.2 million had been raised. While this fell short of the $10 million originally required by the deal, the city agreed to grant an extension of two years (FUFG, 2008c). This decision was dependant on Crystal Developers, who would have gained legal claim, but decided to walk away from the property if favor of possibly developing a different Downtown location at a later date (CBC News, 2008a).

On June 1, 2009 FUFG officially gained ownership of the property, and its remaining gate for the purchase price of $1 (FUFG, 2009).

Conclusions and Outcomes:

After taking ownership of the property, demolition began and plans for the Heritage Park and Interpretive Centre were drafted and released to the public during an open house in May 2010. Designed by Hilderman Thomas Frank Cram and Cohlmeyer Architecture, the site's layout highlights the foundations of the original buildings and the surrounding fortress walls. It is intended to act as an interpretive history and sculpture park that provides a green link between Broadway and Bonnycastle Park. It will include a “23,000-square-foot building, which will house an interpretative centre, theatre, library and offices” (Rollason, 2010). Excavation work is also under way by local archeology students, and construction is slated to begin this year (Ibid). On June 17, 2010, the Upper Fort Garry Provincial Park Act was presented. Once passed, this Act will provide legal recognition of the sites significance, its need for preservation, and will establish an advisory committee (Province of Manitoba, 2010).

Crystal Developers also struck a deal to buy city owned property on Assiniboine Ave., just down the street from the Upper Fort Garry location. Their plans are to construct over 200 units, split between apartments, condos, and townhouses (CBC News, 2010).

Much of a planner’s role is about moderating the needs of various groups, often in conflict with one another. In this case, it appears that everyone won. If their plan goes forward, Crystal Developers will construct more core housing, likely increasing their profits, from which the city will gain from additional tax revenue and from the sale of the property. Downtown will receive more housing and residents, and
current and future generations will gain a wonderful new park that pays homage to an important piece of our heritage.

Lessons Learned:

While Winnipeg has gained from the preservation of many valuable heritage spaces, many others are lost or threatened. The process used to preserve Upper Fort Garry provides lessons that may be transferable to such sites. Likely the most important lesson from this case study is the value that can be gained from creating and affectively communicating a vision of what a heritage space could be. This was wisely done early on in the process, giving the general public time to examine an alternative choice while there was still a chance to do something. This may be why FUFG were successful when previous discussions regarding the possibility of highlighting the heritage value of the site went nowhere.

FUFG have shown they are skilled at communicating with the public. The organization has been effective at using the media to express their viewpoint, and kept citizens informed as events unfolded. In addition to using traditional news sources, they put together an informative web site, complete with videos, as well as a Facebook page. They actively invited the public to get involved, and highlighted whenever possible how important Upper Fort Garry is to our heritage. These acts may have helped people foster an emotional connection to the space.

Another important lesson that can be learned from this case is the importance of reaching out to key stakeholders. FUFG was able to work with, and gain the support of important organizations and businesses such as the Manitoba Metis Federation and the Forks North Portage Partnership. Getting the backing of such groups can likely be a valuable tool to gaining additional support that would not have been possible otherwise. The organization also reached out to Heritage Winnipeg, which was able to provide added resources and expertise.

In addition, the successful preservation of the space was made easier because the property was originally held by the city, instead of by a private owner. It would have been much less likely that a private owner would have been able to donate the property to the organization and be as flexible with their timeframe. Creating a relationship that is beneficial for both a property owner and heritage preservationists can often be a difficult task, leading to conflict.

Lastly, FUFG was able to tap into public funding. They also had a clear plan as to how the space was to be managed and maintained once in operation, as well as the funds required to do so in place. This is an important step in creating a viable, long-term strategy that will aid in achieving long-term success.
Bibliography:


City of Winnipeg. (2006). Executive policy committee minutes: June 21, 2006


