

Cedar Riverside Imaginaries: Makers and Co-opters.
How a History of Competing Community Ideals Influenced the American
Immigrant Experience.

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The United States is a Nation of Immigrants, it always has been, and it always will be. This is a fact that is often lost within the complexity and scope of contemporary American life, yet it is still a reality that is experienced every day for millions of Americans. The history of the American immigrant experience is broad and expansive, with many different groups with vastly different ideals imparting their own influence on the physical and non-physical constructions of American life, urban life in especially. Many neighborhoods across the United States' urban centers were at one time or still are immigrant neighborhoods. Cedar Riverside in Minneapolis is one of those neighborhoods that retains its status as an immigrant neighborhood, initially with Scandinavians and other Northern Europeans in the nineteenth century and most recently with Somalis and other East Africans in recent decades. Despite the persistence of the immigrant character, in the 1960s and 70s two non-immigrant groups sought to impose their own different imaginaries on the neighborhood; sparking a conflict which also bestowed substantial impacts on the construction of the neighborhood imaginary. In the decades following this conflict, the hybridized physical and non-physical constructions of the identity of the neighborhood from all past influences compete for the cooption of the new groups that occupy the space. In this paper, I will discuss how those competing constructions of ideals and imaginaries imparted on the neighborhood by past groups manifest themselves in present reality when interacted with by other groups. In order to gain a better understanding of how those constructions interact with one another to then apply it to institutional practices of immigrant placement and integration.

Starting in the first few decades of the nineteenth century Scandinavian and other Northern Europeans sought to flee the hostile political, social, and economic conditions in Europe and pursue the American ideal of a better life. Many of them ended up settling in the Upper Midwest of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin due to the staunchly similar geography.

Although many of them chose rural destinations, many ended up in urban centers like Minneapolis. Those who chose the Mill City first settled just east of downtown due to the close proximity to the booming mill industry located along St. Anthony Falls in the area we now know as Cedar Riverside (Figure 1). The neighborhood steadily grew and by the early eighteen eighties the Scandinavian immigrants had truly made the neighborhood their new home. So much so that the area in and around Cedar Avenue became known as “Snus Boulevard,” after a tobacco product stereotypically used by Scandinavian immigrants (Brown, 2015). During the next few decades, the neighborhood also became a home for bars and saloons, lovingly bestowed the title of “Minneapolis’ Red-light District.” Drinking became so synonymous with it that “to walk on Cedar Ave” became the local pseudonym for getting drunk. As the downtown milling industry grew, so did the prosperity of the Cedar Riverside neighborhood this so evident that many immigrants viewed it as “steppingstone to a better life” (Brown, 2015). This idea of Cedar Riverside was very popular and by 1910, the neighborhood reached its peak population because of how common it was for immigrant families to move into the neighborhood and subsequently disperse throughout the city within a generation. The prosperity that enabled this was not to last however as the neighborhood expectedly fell on hard times during the depression and never regained its opportunistic image. While the Scandinavian and Northern European immigrants made up a substantial majority of the immigrants in the neighborhood, many other groups such as African Americans, Central and Eastern Europeans, and Eastern European Jews made the neighborhood their home. However, none of those groups left as substantial of a legacy on the built environment and spirit of the neighborhood as the Scandinavians.

In the election season of 1948, then President Harry S. Truman partially ran on a campaign promise of releasing federal funds for slum clearance and affordable housing projects.

Although not signed into law until July of the next year, Truman got his wish in The Federal Housing Act of 1949. These ideas of slum clearance and affordable housing projects fell under the catchall term of “Urban Renewal”. While those were just the intended outcomes of Urban Renewal, the ideological foundation behind the programs sought to inject a new economic vitality through the prospect of increased private investment into urban areas that had seen periods of continual disinvestment (Caves, 2004). An early example of an Urban Renewal project in Minneapolis was in the Gateway District. A former “skid row” sitting near the confluence of Washington and Nicolet avenues which was almost demolished in the fifties to make way for a small amount of high-rise housing and parking lots (figure 2).

Following the success of a privately funded “new town” development in Reston, Virginia and piggybacking on the “war on poverty” initiated by the Johnson administration’s “Great Society” program, certain members of the Urban Planning and development academic communities proposed taking cleared urban land and redeveloping it into idealized communities that offered the “most modern facilities” and to provide a “balance between workplaces and homes” (Perloff, 1966). While they agreed that it would not solve all the problems facing American inner cities at the time, they did agree that the new towns would be a “lever... to transform the total environment of poverty” (Perloff, 1966).

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was almost entirely interested in developing large amounts of low-and middle-income housing. Yet it still required that luxury units were to be added to any new development. As expected, this was a contentious issue, especially among architects who saw it as a useless overstep preventing their utopian ideal from being a reality. This tension led to “several shouting matches” between Rapson and the Secretary of HUD at the time, George Romney. (Brown, 2015)

In a 1965 assessment of the housing stock in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, the authors stated that over ninety percent of the neighborhood's housing stock was built before 1902. A subsequent report by the city of Minneapolis deemed that the neighborhood would become just a district of hospitals and university buildings surrounded by slums and boxed in by the newly built interstates 94 and 35. This led to the conclusion that the neighborhood should be redeveloped.

Both Cedar Riverside and Urban Renewal as a whole are characterized by the ideals held by each stakeholder group. To succinctly understand each camp, I will employ a framework first employed by the sociologist Randy Stoecker in his book *Defending Community*. He describes two key stakeholder groups: one founded in the typical top-down approach to Urban Renewal, "The Growth Coalition", and the other, "the community of opposition", employing the opposite, bottom-up approach.

The conglomeration of stakeholders employing this top-down approach are given the moniker of "the Growth Coalition" by Stoecker. This coalition is the combination of institutions, capital-wielders, and other citizens who hold the mantra of "what's good for business is good for the city". Among this camp are groups like the University of Minnesota, business leaders in the city, and some portions of city government. The primary drivers of the growth coalition, however, were the investor Gloria Segal and her business partner Keith Heller. Sometime in the early sixties, Heller prompted Segal with the idea of investing in real estate as a tax shelter. In a few short years, the partnership, Cedar Riverside Associates, as they called themselves, had bought up "nearly eighty percent" of the developable land, both occupied and unoccupied, in the cedar-riverside neighborhood (Brown, 2015). In 1969, the proposals from the CRA were supplemented by the support of Minnesota State Senator Henry McKnight, a prominent

politician with substantial connections, heavily invested in the opportunities of the new towns program. (Brown, 2015).

The Cedar Riverside Associates were first and foremost concerned with return on investment and McKnight political capital. Although the growth coalition broadly was invested in the city, its institutions, and its social well-being, personal motivations still detracted from societal motivators in the end. They had initially planned to only develop some small apartment buildings on the small parcel of land they bought but were approached by the Dean of the University of Minnesota School of Architecture at the time, Ralph Rapson, to think a little bigger. By 1968, the CRA plan had grown substantially to a full-scale redevelopment of the neighborhood. For this, they sought to utilize resources from the federal government, as part of the new towns in-town program, and the services Rapson, who had built a reputation as one of the definitional American modernist architects. A noted student of Le Corbusier, the massively influential French architect and city planner, Rapson carried over the brutalist “Unite de Habitation” style into Cedar Square West. Characterized by Le Corbusier’s five points of modern architecture, namely pylons for open movement on the ground level, free floor plans for maximum functionality within units, and non-load bearing walls removing the need for light and view impeding structural features. Consistent with other buildings in the “Unite de Habitation” style, multi-colored panels adorn the exterior of the building, providing a stark primary color contrast to the drab gray concrete of the frame and sides of the buildings. Both Rapson and the CRA ideally believed that their project would provide a space for diverse individuals to make a new home while also revitalizing an area believed to be blighted and removable.

Despite their big plans for redevelopment, Segal expressed concern for the residents who would be affected by her plans saying that she wanted "the existing community [to] be

maintained and nurtured" (Bergström, 2023). Sen. McKnight expressed similar concerns to Segal saying that, "the worst thing the developers can do to Cedar-Riverside is to "improve" it to the point where it is no longer any fun. The best thing they can do is to keep it fun while they significantly increase the numbers." (Martin, 1975). Despite the concerns of residents, with a broad coalition of support and an architectural and urban ideal in place, construction on the first phase of the project, Cedar Square West commenced in 1971 and by April 1973, the first residents started to move into units ranging from luxury to studio.

By the mid-sixties, Cedar Riverside had become one of the most important counter-cultural centers in the country. The concentration of bars, performing arts scenes, and the dilapidated housing infrastructure left behind by previous generations. Plus, the recent destruction of Minneapolis' Gateway neighborhood and the close proximity to the University of Minnesota created a space ripe for countercultural community proliferation. Typically thought of as being anarchistic and loosely organized around the opposition to the normative culture that has subsumed the broader society, Cedar Riverside was no different to other countercultural communities of the era.

This transition was evident enough that the neighborhood was lovingly nicknamed "the Haight-Ashbury of the Midwest," after the famous neighborhood in San Francisco. Bob Dylan was even known to play at Cedar Riverside establishments like the 400 club. Even though the neighborhood had already acquired its countercultural character by the mid-sixties, the imposition of Urban Renewal plans to radically transform the physical makeup of the neighborhood by the aforementioned "growth coalition" provided a convenient initiative to organize around and against.

In his Book, *Defending Community: The Struggle for Alternative Redevelopment in Cedar-Riverside*, Randy Stoecker provides an incredibly detailed account of the community opposition to the proposals slated for Cedar Riverside. The marxist framework that he uses is more than just the classic bourgeoisie vs. proletariat. Instead “community becomes the new site of class resistance,” situating the class conflict in a struggle for the commodification and control of land (Stoecker, 1994). Centrally, how those who occupy the spaces often lack the tools and capital to prevent outside interests from taking away their sovereignty.

The community of opposition provides a blueprint as to how groups with non-normative power structures can properly organize to preserve their own community. This organization was centered around specific community institutions, physically The New Riverside Café and the Cedar Riverside People’s center, and politically the Cedar Riverside Project Area Committee. These institutions acted as “sources of community maintenance...[spaces] where the community preserves and develops its particular subcultural values and practices” (Stoecker, 1994).

Contrary to the Growth Coalition, the community of opposition organized itself very informally. There were little to no rules or guidelines to follow, power was decentralized amongst community members, very different from the top-down governmental structures opposing their resistance.

In the struggle for maintaining their own sovereignty, the community of opposition leaned on its community-controlled services heavily. Whether it be the North Country Co-op or the People’s Pantry, volunteer labor and community involvement kept these systems afloat. The New Riverside Café even offered a “pay what you can” model of service. The maintenance of and engagement with these community institutions “defined and expressed the alternative culture

of the new residents" (Stoecker, 1994). A culture that sought not to participate in the standard consumer culture that had so recently subsumed American middle-class culture.

The city initially tried to push through the bulldozing of the neighborhood but was directed by HUD that they had to set up a Project Area Committee according to an amendment to the Federal Housing act from 1954 which required substantial community participation in any urban development project (Stoecker, 1994). Given the newfound influence, community members jumped headfirst into the Project Area Committee which served as the main power base against the redevelopment. Community members used many different forms of protest to block initiatives by the growth coalition from rent strikes to picketing, environmental litigation to attending every publicly held meeting on the future of the neighborhood (Stoecker, 1994).

In the end, the residents of Cedar-Riverside had mixed results in their opposition. While they failed in preventing the construction of Cedar Square West (Riverside Plaza), the community did not give up, they persisted, and eventually prevented all further phases of the development plan, this was not a short process, however. The power of the community gradually increased over the seventies to a point which the city realized that its support of the Cedar Riverside redevelopment plan was no longer viable. (Stoecker, 1994). So, in 1980 the city facilitated a settlement between all stakeholders that killed any remaining steam for the new town development. Part of that settlement guaranteed the community's ability to oversee its own redevelopment plan, along with some of the capital to do it.

Central to any community-based redevelopment of Cedar Riverside was resident input, participatory democracy. It soon became clear that the redevelopment was going to be a "painful process for residents" (Snoose News. August 1981:1). While preservation of the existing built environment was critical, "losing some of the character we[residents] are fond of" became an

accepted reality (Mungavan, 1991 interview). Institutions like the West Bank Community Development Corporation and the Project Area Committee provided the necessary structure for the participatory democracy that the community strived for. This allowed for critical decisions like giving everybody who chose to stay in the neighborhood a guaranteed replacement unit and the proper organization and creation of housing co-ops to ensure their vitality and longevity.

As for the structure of the built environment itself, rehabilitation of the existing, infill housing to increase density, and the implementation of passive solar heating were key priorities of the community-based redevelopment. The implementation of the co-op structure, with the city retaining the title to the land, removed the danger of speculators coming in and raising housing prices. Even though many of the community institutions serving as vectors of cultural expression are no longer serving the neighborhood much of the character of both the built environment and the cultural ideals of the community of opposition still remain in the neighborhood today.

The aftermath of the fight between the community of opposition and the growth coalition set up an initial “failure” of the complex. Seeing the writing on the wall, Keith Heller and the CRA essentially gave up on Riverside Plaza. He stopped paying the mortgage and the gas bill, leading to the eventual foreclosure of the building by the Federal government (Brown, 2015). While the motivations for this lack of maintenance are unclear, it is not unwarranted to speculate that for Heller, seeing that the lucrative future phases of his development were never going to be built, it no longer made sense to treat it as an asset worth investing time and money into. The first few generations of residents of the complex were forced to deal with the consequences of this, they had to live in the reality created by the struggle, torn between two competing ideals of how one should live and culturally identify. They were of all races and incomes, predominantly working-class people who wanted dignified and affordable living close to the amenities of

downtown. Living space patterns began to emerge quickly as many black residents often liked to live in and around one another leading to a concentration in one specific building within complex. The racial segmentation was part in parcel of a wider income segmentation amongst the complex. According to Linda Bryant, a woman who spent a good portion of her youth in Riverside Plaza, E building where she lived, was known to her as the poor building. On the opposite end there was Chase House, which was purported to be the rich building, to which she heard rumors of a fancy amenities that she never got to experience. Another man who lived in complex during its early days, Richard Mork, a pastor at one of the local churches, said that in his time living in complex he got to know the space and community well because he would go door knocking for his church biannually. In that time, he was able to see the true complexity and diversity of the space, interacting with people of all socio-economic backgrounds, family structures, and religions. Because of his access, he had a front row seat listening to the discourses surrounding the development and specifically mentioned the tensions between the people outside of the complex towards those who live within it.

Monk and Bryant's experience with the diversity of the complex's tenants were "in line with Ralph Rapson's vision" for the entire cedar square development (Brown, 2015). However, the disparities in access to services and amenities, the neglect of the building, and the tension with the community opposed to riverside plaza's existence show that although some parts of the ideal were realized, the use patterns and broader background circumstances provide a more complex picture of the success of the development.

In 1975, the United States finally ended its involvement in Vietnam after a decades long struggle resulting in the death of countless Vietnamese citizens. The resulting North Vietnamese reconquest of the previously American allied south led to an initial group of around 125,000

Vietnamese refugees seeking asylum in the United States. By 1983, migration to the United States had leveled off to under one hundred thousand admits per year so by 1990 more than five hundred thousand people had arrived American soil. Although not proving to be one of the main destinations for Vietnamese immigrants specifically, Minnesota still received tens of thousands of Southeast Asian immigrants, notably the Hmong. A stateless minority group from that also fled the destructive consequences of US involvement in the region around the same time. While the Hmong's relocation to Minnesota is incredibly important, their resettlement patterns however concentrated them outside of Minneapolis and thus, too far outside of the scope of this project.

The Vietnamese, on the other hand, concentrated themselves in Minneapolis in the early eighties. Phouc Tran, a Vietnamese immigrant who fled seeking a better life in the U.S., came to Minnesota in 1984. She had heard from some friends who had already relocated to the state that she could receive financial assistance toward a college education. Luckily enough, her friends had a place for her to stay in the city, an apartment in Riverside Plaza.

Tran was not particularly enamored by the apartment; she remembers the slow elevators and cockroaches being quite the nuisance. Importantly for her, a large community of Vietnamese people were already living there, at that time being the majority group occupying the complex. She emphasized the importance of having a community of people with similar back grounds saying, "it was nice to know people like you, it's like your family. You're there to help one another" (Brown, 2015). Close proximity to people with a similar history to one's own is incredibly important when faced with the reality of adapting to a new cultural landscape. Tran leans on this in describing her experience in her first couple years in Minneapolis.

Although critically important to explaining the narrative of Cedar Riverside, the Vietnamese immigrants did not last long in the neighborhood. Operating off of a similar

philosophy of the early European immigrants in the neighborhood, most of the Vietnamese immigrants used the neighborhood as a steppingstone to a better life, opting not to set up a permanent presence in the space. This can be felt today as there are no remaining Vietnamese businesses or cultural spaces, as well as a lack of explanation of their time within the historical record. (Wilhide).

After a decade's long bout of unrest and then the eventual breakout of civil war in Somalia in 1991, a large group of refugees made their way to the United States. A few years after the first arrivals word spread to Somali refugees around the US and in camps in Kenya and Ethiopia that there was a growing community in Minneapolis. By 1996, the city had become the "center of Somalis in America," according to Osman Ahmed, a refugee who first arrived in the US in 1993 (Brown, 2015).

Cedar Riverside, in particular, became the center of Somali culture in Minneapolis. The neighborhood already had built up a reputation as an immigrant neighborhood, so Somali and other East African immigrants setting up shop was incredibly fitting. The neighborhood had a lot to offer its newest round of arrivals such as a close proximity to city services and downtown, a direct link to the university, and most importantly of all, a concentration of cheap housing options, namely Riverside Plaza. Continuing in the footsteps of the Vietnamese immigrants that came before them, Somali immigrants set up shop in the esteemed apartment complex, making it and the broader neighborhood of Cedar Riverside a new home away from home.

Almost three decades on from the proliferation of Somalis into Cedar Riverside (or colloquially, "Little Mogadishu"), the neighborhood reflects the change in the people who occupy the space. While the bars and performing arts centers from previous occupying groups still remain, they are now joined by Halal markets, mosques and other religious institutions, and

a full Somali mall selling everything from textiles to Somali language media. This transition can also be seen through the cancelation of cultural events put on by the remnants of the countercultural groups which were no longer compatible with many of the current residents of the neighborhood. Nevertheless, the Somalis have made Cedar Riverside their own, with most native Minnesotans seamlessly associating the neighborhood with the recent immigrants. Not unlike the previous immigrant groups that have come through the neighborhood, Somalis have started to disperse throughout the wider Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. From city council members to the head of the city's public housing authority, and even the sitting congresswoman from Minnesota's 5th District, Ilhan Omar, Somalis are now an integral part of Urban life in Minneapolis. Cedar Riverside served as both a new home away from home for Somalis and a stepping stone to integration into Minnesota and broader American society.

Throughout all eras of Cedar Riverside's history, the people who occupied the neighborhood have come and gone, some imparting lasting legacies on the space and others not as much. Overtime, those legacies have built upon and added to those who came before to form a distinct neighborhood identity that is still felt and seen today.

In the postwar era, suburban living became incredibly popular for the booming middle class. The ideal of the "American Dream" was forming into a physical reality in the suburbs, relegating the cities to just a place to do business, not live. The American dream imaginary made cities no longer the most desirable place to live, and their built environment suffered the consequences. Wide swaths of the formerly populated city in a lifeless and almost community-less state. The lack of a clearly defined communities in these characterless spaces created a vacuum. In Minneapolis, countercultural groups were the first to take advantage of it, setting up shop in the former immigrant neighborhood of Cedar Riverside. At the same time, a coalition centered

around differing ideas of growth were also attempting to utilize those spaces. Each group sought to impose their own ideal imaginary for the renewal of these spaces founded in completely different imaginaries. Those countercultural groups, who had come to occupy much of Cedar Riverside by the late sixties, built their ideal through the preservation of the existing built environment and the establishment and maintenance of community institutions serving as symbols for cultural expression. Opposing them was a growth coalition, led by a group of powerful investors, politicians, and institutions attempting to ascribe their own ideal, heavily influenced by the high modernist philosophies of planned utopian communities with undefined yet accepted understandings of an individual's participation within normative society. The growth coalition sought to impose their ideal on Cedar Riverside using a top-down methodology while those countercultural groups already living there had built their community from the bottom-up. The competition over the ideals and methodological approaches to renewal and community building sparked conflict between the two and prompted a restructuring around a common enemy within the newly formed community of opposition. They had created a home, and now there was another group that was trying to bulldoze their imaginary with no suitable alternative.

Decades on, both belligerents of this conflict achieved at least some of their goals for the renewal of Cedar Riverside creating a hybridized form of the built environment which remains ever present, specifically the continued existence of Riverside Plaza and the Housing Co-ops. More than just the physical manifestations of this conflict still remain, the ideals and imaginaries promoted and lived by both opposing groups live on in the Cedar Riverside spirit.

Throughout its history, Cedar Riverside has had an immigrant character, from Scandinavians to Vietnamese to Somalis, and that has not changed despite a brief hiatus. For

each group however, the instrumentalization of the neighborhood was slightly different. For the Scandinavians, it was their first home in America and the only place where they were in close proximity to others sharing their experience. It was also a steppingstone at the same time, so gradually their influence on the neighborhood waned. Not only did they leave a legacy on the spirit and instrumentalization of the neighborhood, but also on the built environment, through bars and community institutions tied to their specific cultural identity like Dania Hall and Palmer's Bar. When the Vietnamese came into the neighborhood, they too made it their own, especially in riverside plaza itself. But they came and went quickly, leaning heavily on the idea of the neighborhood as a steppingstone. Their instrumentalization shows itself (or in this case, does not show itself) in the absence of Vietnamese cultural institutions, restaurants, or other businesses. Most histories and references of the neighborhood almost completely gloss over their existence in the space. Effectively confirming the fact that the neighborhood served as a steppingstone and codifying its success. For the more recent groups, the Somalis and other East-Africans, both understandings of the space, as a steppingstone to a more integrated life and as a place to create a home are being utilized.

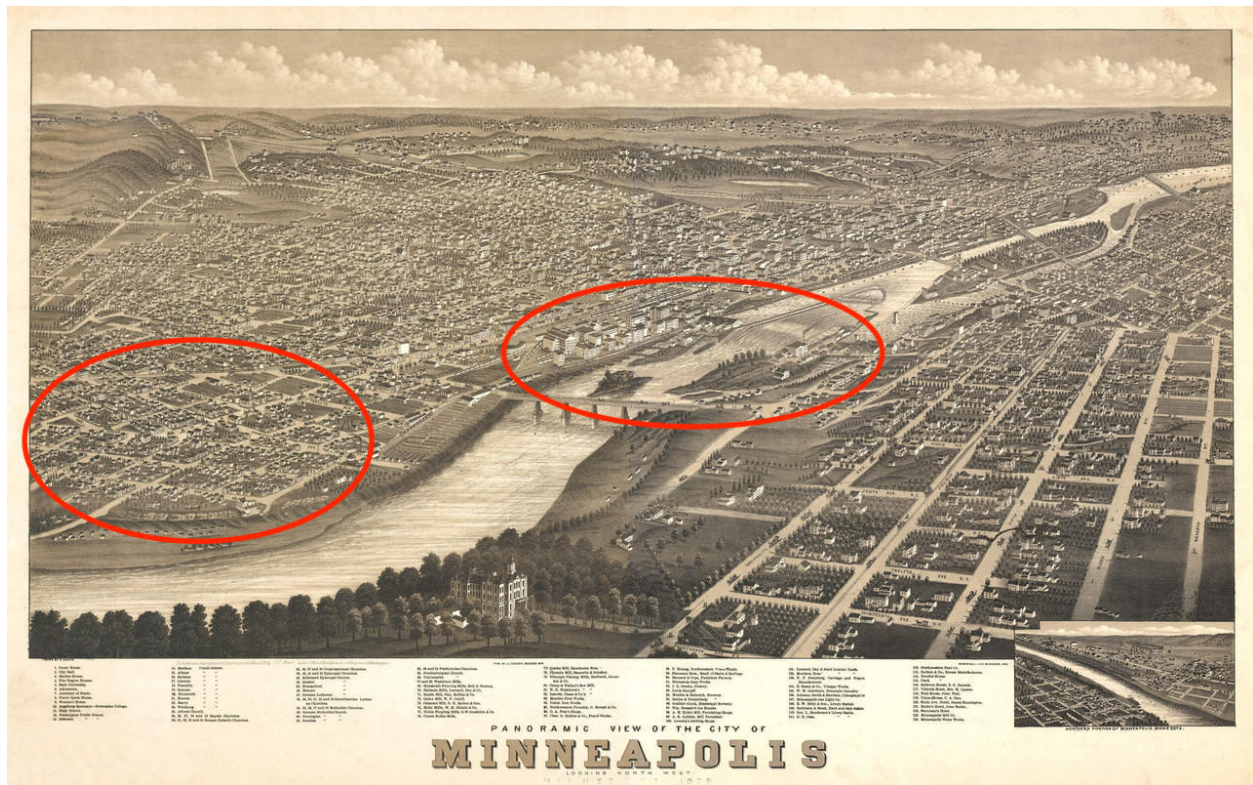
Given the size and duration that the Somalis have lived in Cedar Riverside, their impact on the neighborhood is not surprising. This has also provided ample opportunity to see how the of ideals imparted by previous groups have impacted them. The built environment has changed with new community institutions replacing the old, bars have been replaced by mosques, theaters replaced by Somali cultural centers, the annual neighborhood festival "Cedarfest" no longer takes place (Brown, 2015). This change in the built environment exemplifies the instrumentalization of the home creation spirit of the neighborhood by the Somalis. That is not to say that the steppingstone spirit does not live on either, with many Somalis also dispersing out

into different areas of the city and metro. The non-physical manifestations, like cultural production through community institutions, non-normative structures of power, and participatory democracy also are seen within the Somali Community in Cedar Riverside and its relationship with broader Minneapolis.

What each group imparts on the space while they are occupying it has not left, and remnants of every group remain present across the whole neighborhood. Throughout all of the transitions of Cedar Riverside there has been a marked consistency within the spirit of the neighborhood. The groups that have occupied the neighborhood since the conflict show how the imaginaries associated with the neighborhood identity impact those who now occupy the space. For better or for worse, some felt the tension of the conflict more than others. Some have had tensions with some of the constructions of the neighborhood from previous groups. The Vietnamese, the first people post conflict, and the Somalis serve as examples of how different groups with different contexts chose to interact with the neighborhood identity that has been created. In that, the Somalis, specifically, have had the largest impact of the three groups mentioned. Their long-term presence is contributing to a new story being imparted on Cedar Riverside, one that seeks to blaze a new trail while still following the example of the previous trailblazers.

Figures

Figure 1



Map of Minneapolis, 1879. Right Circle – St. Anthony Falls and Milling District. Left Circle – Cedar Riverside Neighborhood.

Figure 2



Left – Minneapolis Gateway District c. 1918. Right – Site of the former Gateway District c. 1970s

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