

Context 8 - Preservation of the Recent Past Time Span – 1956 to present

A Controversial Topic

The issue of how to treat the recent past is one of the most often discussed topics in the preservation world today. In strict practice, the field of historic preservation has a “clear line” — when the National Preservation Act of 1966 was adopted, it included a 50-year lookback in order to assure historical perspective and to avoid judgments based on trends or fads.

However, the post-World War II era has proved to be a prolific period in both architectural design and community development, and any number of cases have arisen to challenge the fifty-year designation. From the significant works of Frank Lloyd Wright to eminently fragile examples such as the 1960s diner, many resources have achieved exceptional significance or been deemed worthy of protection. The topic has become a large issue in preservation circles, fostering a number of articles and publications, attention from the National Trust and the American Institute of Architects, and even a dedicated non-profit association, the Recent Past Preservation Network. Even the venerable National Park Service has added a National Register criteria covering the topic — “Criteria G: Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Last Fifty Years.”

On a smaller scale, preservation of more current resources has become of major interest to communities in our fast-moving current world. Many people can remember their neighborhood as it was when they were growing up, or enjoy their parents’ recollections. When our everyday life changes too rapidly, we quickly lose what we value in our community to “progress” — and all too soon realize what we have lost. Preservation of our vital past, from the movie theater to the gas station to the dome home, has become of particular importance to quickly-expanding communities such as Chaska.

Recent Past in Chaska

The City of Chaska should be especially cognizant of its recent past, and make efforts to preserve it. In some instances, preservation of the elements will reflect local pride, such as The Chaska Cubs and the levee. In other instances, such as Hazeltine Golf Club, the resource is of statewide significance. In particular, however, Chaska needs to tread carefully in how it treats Jonathan, an important element of national history and development.

Jonathan

Jonathan is part of the American “New Towns” movement. “New Towns” are defined as new communities, usually built from scratch in an undeveloped area, intending to be self-governing and self-contained units. These communities included a mix of residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional facilities, as well as parks, public facilities such as schools and community centers, and other shared space. While Washington, D.C. might be considered the country’s first “new town” under this definition, the general movement did not begin until the middle of the twentieth century. The first American examples were the Levittowns of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey in the late 1950s, though these were privately built. The modern “New Town,” built as part of federal government planning, began in 1963 with Reston, Virginia, followed by Columbia, Maryland.

This planning model was particularly receptive to the political and social considerations of the period. The 1970s began in the United States with many of the same sentiments that had been dominant in the 1960s — civil rights and social change. The civil rights concept, however, had expanded from race-focused turbulence to equal rights movements for women, students, homosexuals, and the poor. President Nixon began a domestic approach titled The New Federalism, in which urban development, housing, energy efficiency, civil rights progress and the elimination of poverty were considered priorities.

As part of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1970, the federal government became far more involved in a new-town development program. The legislation built upon the New Communities Act of 1968, and provided developers with a comprehensive package of financial aid — including infrastructure grants and guaranteed construction bonds — designed to ensure return on investment and thus encourage extensive new town construction. In return, the developer was to: provide an alternative to disorderly urban growth, demonstrate that the new town had a viable economic base, provide for low / moderate income housing, and incorporate advanced technological design, including energy efficiency.

At the same time, the federal government was completing the first phase of the Interstate Highway System, first authorized by Congress in 1944. Finally, the State of Minnesota made a major advancement in urban planning when the state legislature began discussing the Fiscal Disparities Law, in which Twin Cities communities participated in tax-base sharing under the Metropolitan Council (the act finally passed in 1974).

Into this perfect situation, Jonathan was born. The community had originally been envisioned by Henry McKnight, a former state senator and heir to a milling and logging fortune. McKnight’s main interest, however, lay in community development. His Utopian models were the European New Towns, especially those in Britain such as Stevenage and Milton Keynes. These towns were built from scratch and designed to control the post-WWII suburban expansion. They were envisioned as self-sustaining, ecologically friendly, and economically diverse.

McKnight's dream was to be anchored by a central "mega-center," in which residents could catch a light rail line to the Twin Cities. A total of five villages, with 10,000 people each, would surround the main core, each with 30% of their land set aside for parks, trails, playgrounds, and other common areas. Reduced construction costs and the unique industrial parks ringing the main area would provide more jobs and a stronger tax base. There would be a small shopping center and ecumenical worship center for each village, and a rapid transit light rail departing from a large central shopping area directly to the central downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The houses would be technologically advanced, including energy conservation models and communication devices that would allow telecommuting to work and school as well as remote control of the homes' appliances and heating/cooling systems.

Unlike stand-alone New Towns, Jonathan was envisioned as part of the Chaska Community, much like the planned Cedar-Riverside development in Minneapolis.

Jonathan became the first of thirteen communities nationally to receive new town assistance; Cedar-Riverside Towers in Minneapolis also received funding under the program. Construction of Jonathan began in 1970 with great attention from national press. Homeowners moved in from all over the state and the country, lured by the idealism of the project. The community, with its nod to history in naming itself after early area explorer Jonathan Carver, was moving enthusiastically into the future.

Jonathan was planned in the Radburn tradition (also harkening back to British "garden cities" of the 1800s), with the principal of connecting urban residences to the rural countryside, encouraging community use of open spaces, separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic. Houses were built on small lots, fairly close together, in order to make the most efficient use of infrastructure such as sewer and other utilities. They then shared a generous amount of common space, green space that provided "the backbone of the community." The first two neighborhoods of Jonathan included sixteen miles of trails running behind the homes (all of which still exist), a wetland meadow, a central lake, wooded ravines, several playgrounds, and a circular basketball court/amphitheater. A school and a community center were also planned.

The architecture, ranging from basic to extensive, reflected the unique design trends of the 1970s. A Jonathan sales brochure claims that a variety of styles was the goal, though "good design is... encouraged...drawing national attention for its pioneering in completely new types of housing." The ideal was to mix affordable and market-price housing, single and multi-family, for a community as varied socially and economically as it was physically.

Many of the homes feature modernist lines, exposed wood siding, neutral tones, varied shapes and rooflines, and super-graphic house numbers. Some residences, such as Rapson's Idea House and the "Treeloft" townhouses (built into a grove of trees, with various levels connected by wooden bridges and stairways), were particularly distinctive, and the first village center was conceived as a contemporary take on a traditional barn.

Socially, Jonathan was also a grand experiment. Many moved from far away just to be part of the experiment, and quickly formed a community. “The street partied continuously,” recalls one resident, “we were always getting together.” There were street dances, consciousness-raising groups, childcare cooperatives, and ice cream socials. Organizations, from the Renaissance Festival to the North Star Ski Club, got their starts at Jonathan. Another benefit to the entire Chaska area were the upgrades in utilities and infrastructure, included as part of the HUD program.

However, the tide quickly turned. McKnight died suddenly in late 1972, and in the beginning throes of the Watergate scandal, President Nixon ended new federal funding for housing; HUD was slow to pay the money already allocated, and the housing market had collapsed under the recession. Jonathan, in the middle of its first stage with 1,500 residents and about 30 small industries and commercial ventures, stayed afloat for another few years, but HUD foreclosed in 1976. The complicated legal structure, along with a friendly yet sometimes unclear relationship to the City of Chaska government, led to confusion about the governance and maintenance requirements for the development.

Jonathan did continue to grow and foster a sense of community. Today, it is still composed of a loose association of numbered neighborhoods, though few of these later additions bear resemblance to the originally envisioned developments. A few of the neighborhoods, especially Neighborhood One and Two, are representative of the original ideals, and some businesses and industries still remain.

In addition, two houses of Chaska brick pre-date the new neighborhoods of Jonathan. These two homes, the Karen House and the Eitel House, instill a sense of rural ambience and demonstrate early settlement patterns of the community.

Finally, the parks, trails, and infrastructure present a unique and important preservation challenge. Jonathan is still remembered as the one of the best examples of the New Town movement in the United States, and is an especially important example of the physical elements and social ideals of that influential period. It is also an example of how New Towns pre-date the New Urbanism movement of today.

Hazeltine Golf Course

At first glance, nothing would seem more opposite to the egalitarian goals of Jonathan than the exclusive, members-only Hazeltine Golf Club. However, the two actually developed nearly simultaneously, sharing many of the early infrastructure costs such as sewers, water, and other utilities. Hazeltine reminds us that it is more than a historic downtown or residential structures that define a community’s history. Its recreational opportunities are also an important part of its past, particularly as they bring in visitors and prominence to a city.

In 1955, Minneapolis' premier Minikahda Club was threatened by nearby development and began to envision a new course. When plans for that course were abandoned, club member Totton P. Heffelfinger identified the area around Lake Hazeltine as an ideal place for a new premier golf facility, and began planning the course with pre-eminent golf course designer Robert Trent Jones in 1959.

Marked by runway-styled tees, wide-open, undulating greens, and Jones' "Hard par, easy bogey" philosophy, the private club opened for play in 1962. The club was originally envisioned as a link in a chain of exclusive clubs targeted toward mobile executives called the "Executive Golf Club," but response to the theme was unenthusiastic, and it soon was renamed simply "Hazeltine National Golf Club" after nearby Lake Hazeltine, which had in turn been named for Susan Hazeltine, the first schoolteacher in Carver County.

The club was awarded the US Women's Open in 1966 and soon after, the US Open in 1970. Response to the difficult course was poor, with pro golfer Dave Hill quipping that all the course lacked was "80 acres of corn and a few cows."

In 1977 the US Women's Open returned, with the historic 1991 US Open played on the course as well — following yet another redesign, this time by Rees Jones, the son of the original designer. The 1991 Open was marked the first of several tragic lightning strikes to hit major golf courses that summer. The strike at Hazeltine, at a tree near the sixteenth hole, injured five and killed one spectator.

Hazeltine is still considered one of the best clubs in the country, and will host both the PGA Championship and the Ryder Cup in the early 2000s. Most importantly, it is a reminder to the community that history can have many faces, including those of some of the club founders, who still play the course weekly. The course's design has changed substantially over the years, but it has hosted some of the most important moments in the history of US professional golf.

Chaska residents are also likely to use the Par 30 course, maintained by the City of Chaska after the Jonathan foreclosure.

Other Elements

Though the river's importance to the development of the City of Chaska is discussed more extensively in Context 5, the levee is a more recent development. Construction began in 1952 with work completed as recently as 1998 as part of the Flood Damage Reduction Grant Program.

The levee has a very discernible impact on the City of Chaska. Thankfully, it has eliminated the flooding issues. It has provided a beautiful, park-like walking area, and allowed for the construction of new public

buildings ranging from pump houses to the new Carver County Courthouse complex. But it has changed the relationship of residents to the river. The levee eliminated the uncertainty Chaska residents faced about town flooding. Prior to the levee the low-lying areas were virtually uninhabitable, with no new construction permitted and severe municipal limits on remodeling. This significantly stalled development near the river.

As time goes by, it will become clearer how the levee affects the city, and to respect and preserve the new infrastructure it creates, without losing any more of the historic development pattern of the town.



Pumping Station constructed in 1995

Another important part of the city’s recreational history are the beloved Chaska Cubs, and the athletic park. Though the current stadium dates only from 1950 (the Cubs began in 1929), it provides a home and a context for local amateur athletics and the role they play in community identity and pride. The athletic park serves an important civic and recreation function.

Property Types

Note: Because “recent past” is a context that encompasses a time period rather than a building style, the kinds of properties it could include are very broad. Any significant property constructed within the last fifty years could conceivably be included. For the purpose of exemplifying these contexts, we have tried to identify examples of the particular areas described above.

Within Jonathan:

Particular residences:

- Idea House
- High-end homes on King’s Lane
- A-frame and other standardized homes
- Karen House
- Eitel House

Former Commercial and Industrial Areas

Original Signage

Trails and Ravine System

Common Areas

Hazeltine Golf Course:
Original Greens
Clubhouse

Other potential sites:

Levee
Stadium
Diners
Gas Stations
Motels
Automobile Showrooms
Bowling Alleys
Bus Stations
Movie Theaters and Drive-ins
Drive-in Restaurants
Dome Homes
Quonset Huts
Other Modern Residential – Lustron, ranch homes, etc.
Fairgrounds
Television and Radio Stations and Towers
Bridges and Other Transportation-related Elements
Stores and shopping experiences
Roadside Icons
Themed Experiences: Tiki, cowboy, space-age, etc.
Par 30 Golf Course

Recommendations and Future Actions

1. The City of Chaska should inventory all of the properties associated with the original Jonathan development (through 1976, the year foreclosed upon by HUD).
2. Based on its national significance, the City of Chaska should pursue designation of parts of Jonathan to the National Register under Criteria G: Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Last Fifty Years. This nomination is particularly time-sensitive due to the rapidly expanding developments in the immediate area, such as Clover Ridge, which complicate and may compromise the original landscape.

The inventory suggested above would provide the best information for these nominations, however as a starting point the Associates would recommend particular consideration to the following invaluable resources:

- King's Lane in Neighborhood Two, particularly Ralph Rapson's Idea House. Many of these homes are still in excellent condition and demonstrate some of the best remaining examples of the Jonathan ideals.
- Parts of Neighborhood One as a more modest neighborhood. These properties should be identified through the inventory.

- Karen House and Eitel House, as the only remaining examples of pre-Jonathan development. These properties are integral in demonstrating why the area was chosen by McKnight for development, and how the community was envisioned.
 - Remaining commercial structures, such as the childcare center.
 - The trails and common spaces in the original infrastructure.
3. Because the governmental relationship between the City of Chaska and the Jonathan Association is unclear, special care should be taken to ensure that preservation issues in Jonathan be collaboratively addressed.
 4. The City of Chaska should work with Hazeltine Golf Course to identify associated resources to target for preservation. The course and the City could work together to promote its unique history.
 5. The City of Chaska should consider local designation for the levee and the Cubs athletic park.
 6. Because of the unique value of these recent resources, the City of Chaska should ensure that they are comprehensively included in preservation efforts and interpretation, though they may not be the most obvious elements.