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COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS



Emerging Cultural Corridors Along the Green Line

By Jay Walljasper

The opening of the Green Line light rail will not only inaugurate a long-awaited Twin Cities transportation corridor but will also foster a cultural corridor that highlights local diversity, brings communities closer together, and boosts neighborhood economies.

The rail line's 11-mile route along the Central Corridor from downtown St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis travels through some of the region's most distinct cultural districts including:

- **Little Mekong**, home to many Southeast Asian immigrants (Western Avenue Station)
- **Rondo**, St. Paul's historic African-American hub (Victoria Street Station)
- **Little Africa**, a growing cluster of immigrant businesses (Snelling Avenue Station)
- **Creative Enterprise Zone**, the new name for a longstanding community of artists and artisans (Raymond Avenue and Westgate Stations)
- **Prospect Park**, a neighborhood bordering the University that hosts many student, faculty, and cultural institutions such as the Textile Center (Prospect Park Station)
- **West Bank**, another campus neighborhood known for its theater, live music, unique restaurants, and large Somali population (West Bank Station)

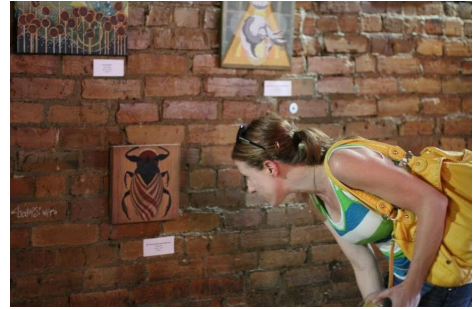
"Each of these districts represents a part of the richness of the Twin Cities," says Kathy Mouacheupao, Twin Cities LISC's cultural corridor coordinator. "We know that arts and culture connect people, so we want to maximize the opportunities provided by the light rail to leverage culture in these neighborhoods and strengthen economic development. This effort isn't just about what's happening in each individual district. It's about connecting and coordinating projects along the whole corridor."

That's actually the mission of the new Central Corridor as a Cultural Corridor (C4) program supported by LISC. "There's tension around gentrification in the Central Corridor," Mouacheupao explains. "We're interested in doing work with a community, not imposing work on a community. We believe in supporting the artistic identity of the people living there. We want to ensure that they can continue living there, enjoying the benefits of development."

Lisa Tabor, who founded Culture Brokers to promote cultural inclusivity and who participates in the African-

American Leadership Forum, says, “It’s an important and sophisticated way of thinking to invest in people at the same time you are investing in transit so residents don’t have to leave.”

With funding from the Central Corridor Funders’ Collaborative, the C4 program supports six community-led organizations along the Green Line with training, technical assistance, and direct grants. Those grants can support planning and implementing programs, as well as collaborative strategies to draw attention to the cultural assets found along the corridor as a whole.



A West Bank culture spot

One part of the project is forging a peer network in which each group can learn from the others. Jun-Li Wang, an artist organizer at Springboard for the Arts and an advisor to C4, says, “This puts people around a table that didn’t exist before. They’re sharing ideas, they’re learning from one another, they have a shared language. This is the basis for building a stronger community outside C4.”

C4 plans for the corridor

Little MeKong, St. Paul

The Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA) has big plans for Little Mekong--already a center of Southeast Asian culture with restaurants, groceries, non-profit organizations, and a large immigrant population. AEDA wants to add a traditional Asian Night Market, arts events, a public plaza, new housing, aesthetic and pedestrian improvements, and a Pan Asian Cultural Center featuring a theater for the Mu Performing Arts company.

“Because of C4, we’ll be able to implement arts activities like our Summer Arts Series, which will supplement and promote the business activities here,” says AEDA Director Va-Megn Thoj. “Our bottom line is making sure families here have the opportunity to start a business or have a living wage job.”

Rondo Arts and Culture Heritage Business District, St. Paul

The construction of I-94 ripped out the commercial center of Rondo, St. Paul’s African-American cultural hub, but it did not kill the community’s spirit. An inspiring initiative from the Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation seeks to regenerate an economically vital business district that will showcase African-American culture for the entire region.

Little Africa, St. Paul

African immigrants have already opened 20 restaurants, shops, and other businesses in the area around Snelling and University Avenues. C4 has given a planning grant to African Economic Development Solutions (AEDS-MN) to support cultural events that stimulate even more businesses and attract more customers. AEDS Director Gene Gelgelu states, “Our interest is to revitalize the area with entrepreneurship and economic development. Little Africa will become the place where you go for food, dance, and music. Everyone will be able to taste, smell, see, hear, and feel Africa.”

Creative Enterprise Zone, St. Paul

Straddling University Avenue, this district is already alive with artists, graphic designers, potters, architects, toymakers, costume designers, artisans, and unique light industrial businesses. One example is Midwest Floating Island, which recycles used carpets into habitat for marine animals in ecological restoration projects as far away as New Zealand.

But there is a fear that rising rents around light rail stations will drive these kinds of creative enterprises away. That's why the St. Anthony Park Community Council launched the Creative Enterprise Zone Action Team. According to Executive Director Amy Sparks, the goal is to "strengthen these businesses so they can better withstand higher rents". The team's strategy is to better connect artists and artisans with one another so they can discover opportunities for sharing space, trading ideas, pursuing opportunities together, and generally looking out for one another. "Our mixers are like a cross between happy hour, show-and-tell, and a TED talk," Sparks notes.

Prospect Park 2020, Minneapolis

Strong community engagement led to this neighborhood's 2020 vision for redeveloping the Prospect Park station area into an example of sustainable 21st century living with an emphasis on arts and culture. An important anchor institution is the existing Textile Center, which has plans to expand by creating a new arts center near the new light rail station. The 2020 plan is part of a larger redevelopment effort, the Prospect North Partnership, that aims to define a new "city" within a city by leveraging the neighborhood's rich assets and the intellectual capital and creative energy of the nearby University of Minnesota.

West Bank, Minneapolis

The West Bank has always been a lively spot, starting with its origins as a Scandinavian entertainment district and later as the Haight-Ashbury of the Upper Midwest. Now it's a place where people from all walks of life cross paths: students, African immigrants, theatergoers, music fans, and devotees of its unique shops and restaurants. The neighborhood business association is accentuating the West Bank's image as an arts center through stronger marketing and adding more visual arts to its plentiful music and theater offerings.

"Our vision is that people all over the region will think of riding the Green Line for fun, stopping to see all that's going on around these stations," says Mouacheupao. "Dining in Little Mekong and enjoying their dynamic street life, learning about the history of Rondo, shopping in Little Africa and in artisan studios in the Creative Enterprise Zone, touring the Textile Center and Surly Brewing Company in Prospect Park, and seeing a play or music show on the West Bank."

Life along the Green Line will soon offer a colorful array of unique experiences that make the corridor a destination in itself--giving an economic boost to neighborhood businesses large and small. □

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