

# THE FORKS CASE STUDY

**A Winnipeg, Manitoba Story**

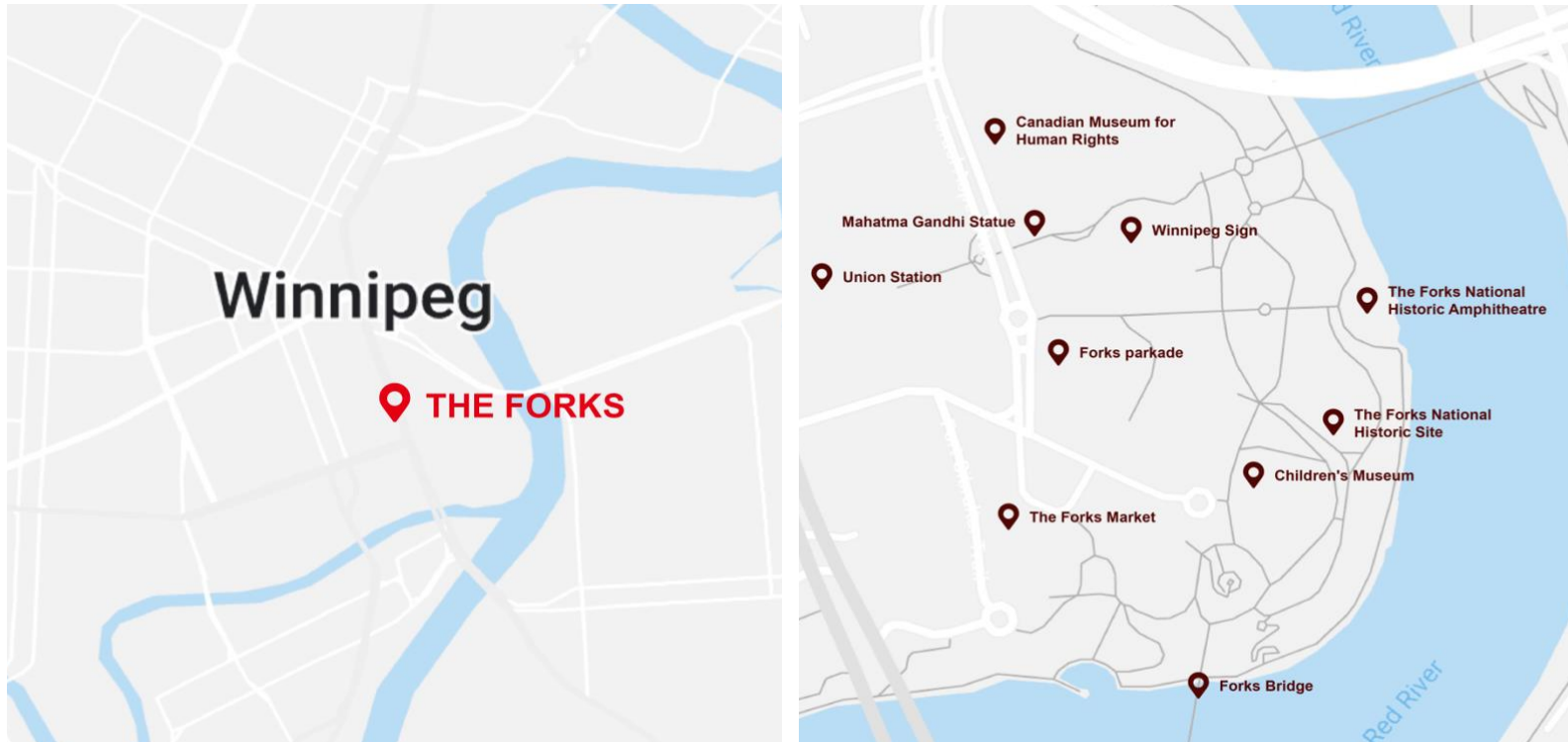
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The Forks

Winnipeg, Manitoba

# INTRODUCTION



Winnipeg is situated on Treaty 1 Territory, the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Ojibway-Cree, Dene and Dakota, and the birthplace of the Métis Nation. At the heart of the city, where the Assiniboine and Red rivers meet, lies **The Forks**. Since the mid '80s, this 54-acre dynamic urban destination — once a burned-out field with empty railway buildings and, before that, a meeting place for Indigenous bison harvesters that was used for over 5,000 years — has been transformed to include beautiful open, accessible public spaces popular with both locals and guests.

The space is a valuable case study for successful destination development, winter tourism, public spaces, environmental sustainability, Indigenous partnerships and community-led initiatives.

The Forks North Portage Partnership developed The Forks with intention. They put the region's residents first, which attracts and supports the guests, many of whom are Indigenous Peoples themselves.

By examining the site's history, its current offerings and its future goals, most of which are summarized below, it's easy to see how The Forks became a best practice in intentional destination development.



# THE PAST

## History

The land under The Forks has been an important meeting place for more than 6,000 years, with Indigenous Peoples travelling through this area to harvest bison and fish from the rivers. It was also a meeting place for the Assiniboine, Cree, Anishinaabe and Dakota Peoples.

In the early 1700s, the first European settlers arrived, setting up forts and trading posts in and around The Forks, and it became a food and resource hub along the transportation route.

In the late 1800s, the Canadian government started inviting immigrants to settle in the area. The Forks quickly became a key site for railway development to and through the Prairies, with Winnipeg commonly referred to as the “Gateway to the Canadian West.”

The site’s vacant railway buildings have been transformed into the amenities and attractions that make up The Forks. With over 6,000 years of mostly Indigenous history, the site continues to find ways to honour the heritage of this important meeting place. A Heritage Advisory Committee has been in operation for close to 40 years, guiding the plans for the heritage components of the site.

By examining the site’s history, its current offerings and its future goals, most of which are summarized below, it’s easy to see how The Forks became a best practice in intentional destination development.



1918 - Union Station and East Yards

# The Forks Indigenous Land Use

Evidence has been found that indicates The Forks site has been a meeting place for at least 6,000 years. Located at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, the waterways were significant transportation corridors creating an opportune location for meetings, trade, and settlement. A major peace meeting was set to occur here between nine First Nations about 700 years ago, according to stories passed down by Elders.

There is evidence of several cultural groups from a wide area being present at The Forks prior to the 1700s. This evidence may represent a meeting of Algonquian peoples from what are today central and southern Manitoba, northwestern Ontario, northwestern Minnesota, and possibly parts of Minnesota and North Dakota along the Red River Valley (Quaternary Consultants in Downie 2002: 7-8). The first Europeans to enter the region mentioned Assiniboine (Nakoda), Ojibwa (Anishinabe), Cree (Nehiyawak), and Sioux (Dakota) living there on an intermittent or seasonal basis, according to the availability of game.

Since 1804 several Métis families also settled at or near The Forks where they worked as commercial bison hunters and contract freighters for the Northwest Company.

*Source: Excerpts from David Hems and Scott P. Stephen, "The Forks National Historic Site: Historic Context," unpublished manuscript (Winnipeg: Parks Canada, 2010).*

## THE FORKS DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

<b>1870</b> Manitoba becomes a Province	<b>1908</b> Union Station Built	<b>1988</b> Forks Renewal Corporation Established	<b>1990</b> Canopy and skating rink opens	<b>1994</b> • Forks North Portage Partnership • Manitoba Children's Museum opens	<b>2005</b> Inn at the Forks opens	<b>2014</b> Canadian Museum for Human Rights opens	<b>2018</b> Niimaamaa sculpture is completed and located in The Forks
<b>1900</b> Canadian Northern & Grand Trunk Pacific Railway	<b>1909</b> Stables Built (now The Forks Market)	<b>1989</b> • Forks National Historic Site Established • Forks Market opens by joining two original stable buildings	<b>1993</b> • Explore Manitoba Center opens in the Johnston Terminal • Oodena Celebration Circle opens but is not fully completed until 2004	<b>1999</b> • Manitoba Theatre for Young People opens • Scotiabank Stage and Festival Park are built for 1999 PanAm Games	<b>2006</b> Skateboard Plaza opens	<b>2016</b> The Common Food Area Opens	

## The Forks North Portage Partnership

The Forks North Portage Partnership was created in the mid-90s through the merger of The North Portage Development Corporation and The Forks Renewal Corporation — both of which had been operating since the early to mid-1980s.

Through The Forks and North Portage neighbourhood, the Partnership, as noted on their website, “provide[s] as many reasons as possible for people to live, work, and play in the downtown.”

Today, The Forks North Portage Partnership are stewards of The Forks while keeping its renewal at the forefront. The Partnership’s **Chief Communities Officer, Clare MacKay**, calls it a “community development corporation at its heart while also being the city’s number one tourist destination.”

# THE PRESENT

The Forks is a financially self-sufficient site, sitting on private property and operating without revenue from any level of government. This allows the Partnership's 10-member board of directors to take chances and pursue collaborative and development opportunities.



## Locals-First Approach

Mackay says the Partnership has sought to create a space that appeals to locals first. This, she says, attracts guests who want to have authentic, local experiences when travelling.

Today, everything that happens at The Forks positively impacts the local community and the natural environment. Mackay notes that The Forks is almost like its own mini city with a positive feedback loop: the site offers interesting things that attract people who spend money, which is reinvested into the site.

In this way, The Forks contributes to the local economy, supports social and cultural development, and keeps environmental sustainability at the forefront of its initiatives, all of which are vital to successful community-led destination development.



## Meeting Place for All

The Forks is commonly referred to as “a meeting place for all,” where there is always something on the go and where everyone is welcome. The team at The Forks makes the most of every season, with attractions and programming to highlight the best of Winnipeg, the deep Indigenous roots in the area and the city’s history of welcoming newcomers and culture.



### Activities, Attractions and Amenities

The on-site activities and attractions have been purposefully integrated with the site and its history. This includes spaces like the Oodena Celebration Circle (*Oodena* is the Ojibway word for “heart of the city”), and the 20,000-sq.-ft. Prairie Garden, which showcases more than 150 examples of tall grass prairie native to the area.

Family-friendly spaces also populate The Forks. These include the Manitoba Theatre for Young People, Manitoba Children’s Museum and The Plaza at The Forks, Canada’s largest urban skatepark. The site houses The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the first museum of its kind, which opened in 2014 and offers programming for families and school groups; and it features CN Stage and CN Field, two event spaces that don’t typically host gated or private events because, as MacKay says, they want to keep the site open and accessible to everyone.

Travel Manitoba’s Visitor Information Centre operates at The Forks, and **Travel Manitoba’s Specialist, Destination Management, Samantha Dawson**, calls it “the best location in all of Winnipeg to be helping people.” Dawson estimates most visitors to Winnipeg end up at The Forks for one reason or another — with one other reason: Inn at The Forks, the first and only hotel located on-site.

Another popular attraction is The Forks Market, home to an eclectic array of more than 40 food vendors, and shops and goods from local makers and retailers. The market was improved further in 2019 with the addition of The Common Patio, a licensed outdoor space.

“They converted a space that people used to pass through into a vibrant outdoor area, kind of like the first community-developed patio, where people like to linger for food and fun,” says Dawson. “You’ll see people from all walks of life gathering to enjoy the riverside patio.”

MacKay noted the importance of art at The Forks, remarking that any project undertaken has an element of figuring out how to make it beautiful. She says the combination of art and limited signage makes the space feel good, even if people aren’t always aware of the intention behind creating the feeling.



## Indigenous Spaces

In recent years, the team at The Forks has focused its work to be more collaborative with, and inclusive of, its Indigenous history, and to build trust and relationships with Elders and Indigenous advisors.

“We have always tried to honour Indigenous stories and perspectives here but have not been great at incorporating them fully,” says MacKay. “We are building some of those relationships now, and we have lots of work to do [within Indigenous communities].”

MacKay notes that The Forks can only move forward in its truth and reconciliation journey “at the speed of trust.” She adds that many portions of The Forks’ site have become important places within Indigenous communities, so the Partnership has adapted and supported this process while keeping the spaces open, accessible and public.

Upon undergoing improvements in 2018, including increased accessibility, The Forks’ space formerly known as South Point underwent a traditional Indigenous naming ceremony. Indigenous Elders Clarence and Barbara Nepinak uncovered the

name Niizhoziibeane, which means two rivers in Ojibway. The space honours the Indigenous heritage in the area and Indigenous peoples’ connection to the rivers, and it offers a place where guests can pause for a moment of reflection.

Much of the public art within The Forks incorporates Indigenous history and culture. *Niimaamaa*, a word recognized as “my mother” by Cree, Ojibwe and Métis peoples, is a stylized sculpture of a pregnant woman standing just over nine metres tall. The 10-tonne granite stone, *Balance of Spirit Within*, is believed to be millions of years old, with symbolic images that speak to the relationship between body and spirit. There is also a graphic retelling of The Forks’ 6,000-year history thanks to the *Wall Through Time*.

Most recently, the Agowiidiwinan Centre opened at The Forks, operated by the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba. *Agowiidiwinan* means “bringing things together” in the Anishinaabemowin language, which is fitting since the knowledge centre brings people together to learn about the story of treaty.



## Seasonality

While making the most of each season is key to The Forks' success, winter programming is particularly important given The Forks' location.

MacKay notes that people have been skating on the rivers in Winnipeg for more than 100 years, a fact The Forks uses to its advantage. Each year, The Nestaweya River Trail, presented by The Winnipeg Foundation, transforms the rivers surrounding the site into a trail where locals and guests can be active outdoors, free of charge. In fact, from 2008 to 2014, the trail was recognized as the longest naturally frozen skating trail by the Guinness Book of World Records. Also, *Nestaweya* (the original Cree name used for the site and the area now known as Winnipeg) means "three points," signifying the way in which Indigenous peoples came together at The Forks from three different directions on the rivers.

"We've added elements over the past couple of years, including a cross-country ski trail, on-site rentals of fat bikes, sledges and kick sleds," says MacKay. "There are also additional access points that the City of Winnipeg is helping to put out and maintain."



In 2009, Peter Hargraves, a local architect, presented the idea of turning an architecture competition into public art through the winter season. In its first year, the *Warming Huts: An Art + Architecture Competition* saw Antoine Predock, the renowned architect of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, design one of the huts that are displayed along the river trail.

Today, the competition sees submissions from around the globe. And to engage the broader community, The Forks added a high school hut with funds provided by Canada Council for the Arts. One high school gets to design and create its own warming hut, while also connecting with teams from around the world to spark conversations about architecture and art. MacKay describes the warming huts as "a place where art and architecture can be discussed while you're walking your dog."



In the summer of 2022, the team at The Forks took a reimagined approach to celebrating Canada Day. MacKay says the team's aim was to provide a welcoming space for all communities in the wake of recoveries of unmarked graves at residential school sites. As those recoveries were made weeks before Canada Day in 2021, and given the site's history, it meant taking time to discuss the recoveries with as many people as possible. Trauma-informed roundtable discussions were conducted with Indigenous Peoples, newcomers and youth to understand how to move forward and offer a space to acknowledge those recoveries while finding space for each other.

"The activities planned at The Forks were participatory, celebratory or reflective, depending on where on the site they were located," adds MacKay. "We built bridges with communities who hadn't felt welcome in the past and plan to build on that in the future."



# THE FUTURE

## Target Zero

In 2008, The Forks began its journey towards Target Zero: zero garbage, zero water waste and zero carbon emissions, with the original target of achievement being 2010. However, MacKay conceded, it was evident early on that the journey would be much longer than originally anticipated.

The first Target Zero initiative took place with an HVAC replacement in The Forks Market. A case was made to the Board of Directors to retrofit the building with a geothermal system to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and heating costs.

The team then installed a BIOvator™ composter, which composts materials from around the site, including food waste from The Forks Market. The composter is quiet, reduces costs and creates nutrient-rich soil that can be used around The Forks.

To support composting efforts and further a holistic approach to recycling that reduces waste at the source, The Forks set up sorting stations at The Forks Market where on-site personnel ensure waste is diverted appropriately and recyclables are not contaminated. Used vegetable oil is transformed into biofuel, which is then used to power some of the site's vehicles, including the Zamboni that clears the skating trails. They've also introduced reusable service ware for food service tenants, built a central dishwashing station to reduce plastic cutlery and containers, and eliminated plastic shopping bags and single-use plastic beverage containers.

The Forks is also home to an urban garden and public orchard, developed after dozens of diseased trees were removed from the site in the spring of 2013. Winnipeg CORE (Community Orchards for Resources and Education) proposed the idea for the space, while a local company (CitiGrow) helped launch the urban garden. Today, guests can pick fresh fruit and berries as they wander the site.

Encouraging locals and travellers to access The Forks using clean means of transportation is another Target Zero initiative made possible through the expansion of bike paths and other transportation options. Those who come by car are told via their parking meters how their parking dollars are reinvested into The Forks.

“One thing that stands out most [at The Forks] are the sustainability choices,” says Dawson. “They are conscious of the land, and they have made a lot of intentional efforts towards reconciliation.”

MacKay says the team at The Forks is constantly looking for ways to refine the on-site waste stream and make environmentally sustainable choices that are also good for the organization. She says they've tried many things, not all of which worked. For instance, they investigated wind power but found the site not windy enough to make that a viable option. In the coming years, they will be looking to expand the geothermal system to support the on-site housing set to be developed.







## CONCLUSION

While much has been accomplished over the years at The Forks, MacKay is confident that the team at The Forks North Portage Partnership will continue its community engagement efforts to ensure they are not staying static.

The organization's strategic plan will guide future projects and developments at The Forks, all with the goal of supporting the mixed-use space that promotes the heritage of the region while at the same time being innovative and impactful for the communities that use the space. And through Target Zero, The Forks will continue to be a leader in sustainable, regenerative tourism for many years to come.

There is no doubt that The Forks has been thoughtfully developed with both locals and guests in mind, contributing to its success as a must-visit destination in Winnipeg.