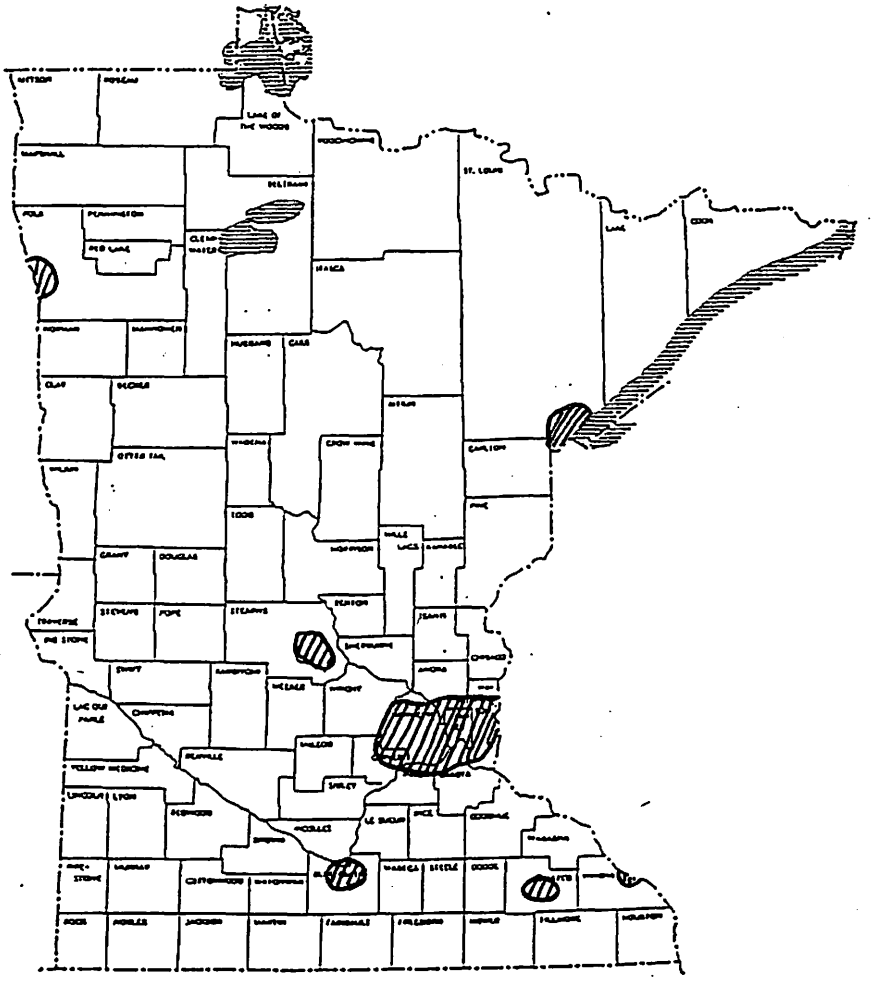
Historic Context:

URBAN CENTERS

(1870 - 1940)



CONTEXT LIMITS

MN SHPO
Preserving Minnesota

URBAN CENTERS, 1870-1940

The urban centers context is both crucial to understanding the history of Minnesota and also problematical in its scope and extent. Certainly urban areas such as Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth, to say nothing of such smaller places as Rochester, have played a vital role in the state's history. But what areas count as "urban centers," and at what historical period do they reach or fall below that threshold? Which properties within a city are best understood in terms of its urban history and which are best seen through the lens of the state's agricultural, mining, or other historical components? The following brief essay will explore these and related issues.

Definition. Our "working definition" of urban centers is intended to be suggestive and functional rather than categorical. We understand urbanization to be a developmental process affecting, and in turn being affected by, political and economic changes and by the advent of widespread mechanization. An urban center, then, is a nexus of economic and political activity that acts as a significant magnet for a widespread hinterland. We do not intend this definition to cover every market town and county seat in Minnesota; these more rural towns did not serve as wide a community, nor was their interaction with the surrounding countryside as distinctive as that of an urban center. In other words, while a rural family might travel to the market center/county seat for routine supplies and basic government functions, trips to Rochester, Mankato, and the like took on more the sense of "special occasions."

Dynamic movements between residence and workplace, between work and leisure, characterize urban centers. While every concentration of people maintains some spatial divisions between residential and commercial districts, urban centers add a significant component of manufacturing to the urban geography. Moreover, urban areas are characterized by more specific attention, historically made manifest in the forms of streetcars, to how people get around within the city, how they move between work and home. Discussion of intra-urban dynamics is paralleled by a consideration of regional patterns of growth and developement. Urban centers, in the rough definitions we are working out, interact with other urban centers on a regional basis as well as with their surrounding hinterland. The dynamics of change in Minneapolis, then, must be seen in terms of what was going on in Chicago, St. Louis, and even Buffalo NY, as well as what was occurring in Wright or Sherburne counties. The same can be said for Mankato, Rochester, or St. Cloud, in terms of how they inter-

act with the larger Twin Cities and with each other, in a way that has not yet emerged in county seats, where the dominant relationship is with the surrounding countryside and perhaps one nearby urban center.

As a further definitional note, it is important to recognize that there are two tiers of urban centers in Minnesota. The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul and the Lake Superior port of Duluth, exist in a regional, even nationwide context of commerce, government, shipping, and transportation. Smaller cities such as Rochester and Mankato are intra-state centers, even though they may have a specialized claim to larger contexts of attention, such as Rochester's medical facilities.

Geographic Concerns. The geographical range of this context is fairly narrow. Specifically, the areas we consider as "urban centers" at one time or another include Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, Rochester, St. Cloud, Mankato, Winona, Moorhead, and Stillwater (in its 19th century phase as a lumbering center). Following guidelines established in John Borchert's essay in Minnesota in a Century of Change, all of these areas except Stillwater qualify by virtue of the presence of a streetcar line. While a streetcar line is symptomatic of urban status rather than being a sufficient condition of urbanness, still, the presence of a streetcar line indicates the need for mass transit of people, one of the important criteria as outlined above. Stillwater during the mid 19th century was a more complicated inclusion in the list of urban areas, and does not reflect a staff consensus. During this period, Stillwater's lumbering industry, and the associated businesses that later developed into farm implement manufacturing, drew population and resources out of the surrounding countryside and built Stillwater as a regional center that at one time rivalled St. Paul and Minneapolis for population. By the second decade of the 20th century, though, the lumber industry's decline had dampened Stillwater's growth until it is now a satellite to the nearby Twin Cities.

Chronological Concerns. The development of urban centers in Minnesota falls roughly into two periods. Within the overall status as an urban center as defined above, early cities were almost always dependent on resource-extractive industries as an economic base. Even St. Paul, which attracted a number of functions and businesses ancillary to its position as the state's capital, was dependent on lumbering and shipping of raw material in its early days. St. Paul's early status as the leading warehouse center and supply point for the region reinforces this point, because St. Paul was supplying materials logging and farming operations, both extractive industries.

Around the turn of the century, though, an economic shift occurred which was to have a profound impact in urban development

in Minnesota. A number of non-resource extractive businesses began to develop, to the point that companies such as Honeywell and 3M, which did not depend on raw material from the rural areas, emerged as central in urban economies after the decline of lumbering and flour milling. Although much more research is needed on this question, the non-extractive industries of a city seem to have a crucial importance in its 20th century development. Witness the decline/stagnation of Duluth, which hasn't fully adjusted to a post-Iron Range economy, and the medical/technical center of Rochester which has kept that city thriving.

The economics of city development play a major role in assessing whether a particular property or site is best understood as an urban context or in one of the other planning contexts developed by this office. Certain properties, such as breweries, flour mills, and food processing plants, seem clearly to belong to the development of the state's agricultural network. Other properties, such as streetcar commercial blocks, neighborhoods of worker housing clustered around a manufacturing center, and properties associated with the development of city services such as fire and police protection, are better understood through consideration of how they reflect the growth of a particular urban area.

Thematic Concerns. The predominant thematic concerns for properties falling under the rubric of the urban centers context are those associated with commerce, industry, and transportation. Properties associated with banking, government services, non-extractive manufacturing and material processing are manifestations of the particular process of development we've called "urbanization." Other properties that are a part of this concern include those associated with transportation such as streetcar blocks and support buildings (shops, etc.) and collections of residential districts that exhibit important patterns of land use and development pertinent to the concentration of people, capital, and services in one urban center.

Research needs and further questions. In the absence of such easily-definable criteria and methods as are avaliable for examination of architecturally significant buildings or properties associated with a clearly-defined context such as agriculture or lumbering, the definition and evaluation of urban center properties is necessarily complex. A solid knowledge of the history of the particular city is an essential first step to determining the overall pattern of economic, political, and spatial change that makes a place an urban center. Once the basic chronological narrative is in place, then individual properties may be assessed to determine wheter they are best understood as part of an urban center or as a component in some other historical and spatial context.

EXAMPLES OF PROPERTY TYPES ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONTEXT OF URBAN CENTERS--1870-1940

Streetcar development
- car shops
- commercial districts explicitly associated with a particular line
- 2- and 3-story apartment buildings that can be associated with streetcar lines

Non-resource extractive manufacturing
- office buildings
- factory buildings/laboratories

Residential centralization
- residential district that can be associated with a specific place of employment for most of the inhabitants

Properties associated with regional networks
- banking centers
- government buildings

Properties associated with City Services
- Police stations
- Fire stations

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY, URBAN CENTERS--1870-1940

Published Sources

Borchert, John R. America's Northern Heartland. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. An economic and historical geography that interprets the growth of the economic functions that tie together the Upper Midwest. Chronicles the growth of the Twin Cities and Duluth as regional centers.

----------. "The Network of Urban Centers" pp. 55-98 in Clifford Clark Jr. ed. Minnesota in a Century of Change. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1989. Summary analysis of the "second tier" centers (Mankato, St. Cloud, etc.) as well as the Twin Cities and Duluth. Focuses on the 20th century and identifies the presence of streetcar lines as a key indicator of "urbanism."

Martin, Judith, and David Lanegran. Where We Live. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. Discusses the growth of various urban residential districts in the Twin Cities using a typology arragned by historical period of development as well as by what has happened in the district subsequently (ie. rehabilitation, etc.)

Olson, Russell, L., The Electric Railways of Minnesota. Hopkins, MN: Minnesota Transportation Museum, Inc. 1976. An enormously detailed examination of the economic and material development of both the urban and interurban lines. Detailed drawings and institutional histoty leavened by many fine photographs.

Westbrooks, Nick. A Guide to the Industrial Archaeology of the Twin Cities. published for the Society for Industrial Archaeology as a field guide for its 1983 meeting. A guidebook to particular locations throughout Minneapolis and St. Paul, with introductory essays of varying length analyzing the history of particular industries.

Unpublished Sources/MHS Files

HPC planning document for Minneapolis

GOALS AND PRIORITIES WORKSHEET

Date: 6/13/90

HISTORIC CONTEXT:

Urban Centers, 1870 - 1940

PROPERTY TYPE (if applicable):

Various

Ranking key:
A = High priority
0 - 2 years
B = Medium priority
3 - 5 years
C = Low priority

IDENTIFICATION EVALUATION REGISTRATION:	Time-table for Completion	Priority Ranking
* Survey and evaluate properties associated with commercial streetcar development in the Twin Cities	FY91 or 92	A
* Survey and assess industrial sites in the Twin Cities with a view to determine which are based on resource processing and which are less directed toward the rural hinterland. The goal is a rough periodization and assessment		A
* Survey of properties under the street (i.e. sewers etc.		A
TREATMENT:		
* Work with the HPCs of Minneapolis and St. Paul to develop a cooperative CLG grant that would investigate the differential rates and sites of urbanization in the Twin Cities, as well as the shared features.		
* Initiate a series of discussions on urban and local history with local/county historical societies in the Metro Council area, particularly Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. The goal is to share information and strategies for further investigation and treatment/education.		