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Urban Farm, Not Toxic Harm: East Phillips Urban Farm and the Indigenous Right to the City

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Indigenous, protest, urban planning, environmental justice, urban farm, geography, production of space

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Abstract

The East Phillips neighborhood in South Minneapolis has been planning to transform an abandoned warehouse into an indoor urban farm for nearly a decade. When the city of Minneapolis announced it would demolish the warehouse–releasing arsenic from the soil into the community–and use the land for a public works facility, a fierce battle over environmental justice and the right to produce space (a theory popularized by Henri Lefebvre) ensued. East Phillips is a geographically significant place: It has the largest urban concentration of Indigenous people in the country, and it is the birthplace of the American Indian Movement. Indigenous land defenders led the community in a series of protests over the span of 2022 and 2023 that halted the city's plans. This initiative is an excellent case study to examine who gets to determine how space is produced, how marginalized communities push back against colonial planning practices to create counter-spaces, and what successful community-led planning initiatives can look like. This paper will explore the history of the contested land as abstract space, East Phillips as a marginalized place and hot spot for community organizing, the production of space and the Indigenous right to the city, environmental justice, and community-driven planning initiatives as a tool for resistance, healing, and growth.

Keywords: Indigenous, protest, urban planning, environmental justice, urban farm, geography, production of space

Introduction

On February 21, 2023, protestors camped outside in the snow on an abandoned lot in East Phillips, Minneapolis. Their goal was to stop the city from demolishing the Roof Depot building, which stood on a contested 7.6-acre piece of land contaminated with arsenic. Minneapolis wanted to expand their public works facility, which residents said would increase pollution. The residents instead wanted to create an indoor urban farm, reduce pollution, and keep the arsenic in the ground. As the protesters camped around a large red tipi, Indigenous leaders lit fires and held ceremonies while everyone braced for a snowstorm. Some of the protestors wore patches that read “American Indian Movement,” an organization founded 50 years ago just a few blocks away. Hand-painted signs were hung along the fence, reading “Urban Farm, Not Toxic Harm” and “Native Lives Matter.” It was a profound demonstration of community resilience. The residents and allies gathered together around the fire with their patches, buttons, and artwork, proudly stating their cause. They were prepared to stay until the city agreed to halt the demolition, but that evening, Minneapolis police evacuated the camp and detained two Indigenous activists.

This occupation was a result of years of back and forth between the city and East Phillips, but also decades of resistance by East Phillips’ marginalized communities fighting for themselves in an urban space that was not built to serve them. East Phillips has a rich history of activism, including community-led urban planning initiatives. It is also home to a thriving urban Indigenous culture and many immigrant communities. The neighborhood is also a victim of systemic environmental racism.[1] Now, with its recent successes and media coverage, it has also become a glimpse into what a decolonial future could look like.

The fight for East Phillips Urban Farm is an example of residents exercising their right to produce lived space, a term popularized by philosopher Henri Lefebvre.[2] An

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[1] Andrew Hazzard, “Police Oust Protestors Camped at Roof Depot to Block Demolition,” Sahan Journal, February 23, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-occupation-east-phillips-minneapolis-demolition-snowstorm/.

[2] Henri Lefebvre, “The Production of Space,” *Space and Social Theory*, 2008, 60–97, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446215784.n3.

article in *The Canadian Geographer* explains the importance of the production of lived space for urban Indigenous populations:

> "Through the lived space, inhabitants or users, notably marginal and underprivileged groups, engage in a struggle to create alternative forms of spatial organization. Lived space provides 'sites of resistance and counter-discourse that have either escaped the purview of bureaucratic power or manifest a refusal to acknowledge its authority.'"[3]

Indigenous peoples have been planning and managing the land long before colonization, and they still have a right to sustain that relationship with space and place. The camp on the Roof Depot site was a political act of reclaiming abstract space by transforming it into a site of resistance.

East Phillips is an excellent case study to examine who gets to determine how space is produced, and how marginalized communities push back against colonial planning practices to create counter-spaces. First, I will discuss literature and theories on the production of lived space, the right to the city, and the geography of protest. I will put these ideas in the context of urban Indigenous communities in United States cities. In the second section of my paper, I will recount the story of the East Phillips Urban Farm and connect it to the aforementioned theories. I will explore the history of Indigenous people in Minneapolis, the American Indian Movement, and the Roof Depot site to show how the spatial oppression of Indigenous peoples and their resistance led to the events of 2023. I will then argue that the fight for the East Phillips Urban Farm is a model example of a marginalized neighborhood asserting the Indigenous right to the city, and connect this story to a variety of urban issues. The story of the East Phillips Urban Farm is ongoing, and it is important to place its significance in a larger historical and theoretical context as it remains a conversation in current events.

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[3] Sarem Nejad et al., "'This Is an Indigenous City; Why Don't We See It?' Indigenous Urbanism and Spatial Production in Winnipeg," *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien* 63, no. 3 (2019): 413–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12520.

Section 1: Theories on the Production of Space

Indigenous Stewardship and Urban Planning

Indigenous people[4] across the globe have been caring for the land and planning their communities long before colonization. Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies of land have been passed down, building a generational knowledge on stewardship. In Indigenous geographies, the land shapes the people and the people honor their relationship to the land.[5] Planning and geography educator Bryan Higgins, who worked as a planner in East Phillips in the 1980s, wrote that "In contemporary society on the Upper Mississippi River, Anishinaabe and Dakota ways of life embody the oldest planning traditions of the land." He gives the example of owámniyomni (also known as St. Anthony Falls) on the Mississippi River,[6] which was significant in Indigenous pre-colonial geographies and instrumental in the foundation of the city of Minneapolis.[7] Water is central to the organization and planning of society in pre-colonial Minnesota. Minnesota was named after the Dakota phrase Mni Sóta Makoce, meaning "the land where the water reflects the sky." Minneapolis was named after the Dakota word *Minnehaha,* meaning waterfall. Its Dakota name is Bdé Óta Othúŋwe, meaning village of many lakes.[8] Another significant water feature is Bdóte, meaning confluence, where

[4] The Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (North America) have been known by many names, some of which came from their communities and others which were given by colonizers. I will be using the terms Indigenous people/s or refer to specific tribes by name, since those are what I currently understand to be the preferred language. There are regional, cultural, and generational differences that result in differing preferences (i.e. elders using the term "Indians" while young people steer away from it). Some of the sources I will quote use terms like Indians, American Indians, and Native Americans. While I will not use those terms when writing from my own voice, we are referring to the same demographic of people. It's important to note that Indigenous people of Turtle Island are not homogenous and have great cultural diversity. When talking about a specific tribe or tribes, I will use the tribes' name rather than a catch-all term, to recognize this. However, for most of my paper, the Indigenous groups I am discussing comprise different tribes, so I will mostly be using catch-all terms.
[5] Teresa Peterson and Walter Labatte, "The Land, Water, and Language of the Dakota, Minnesota's First People," MNopedia, January 30, 2014, https://www.mnopedia.org/land-water-and-language-dakota-minnesota-s-first-people.
[6] Marlena Myles, "Twin Cities Dakota Landmap Print," The Art of Marlena Myles, May 1, 2023, https://marlenamyl.es/product/twin-cities-dakota-landmap-print/.
[7] Bryan Higgins, "Visions of People: A Look at Imagination, Philosophies of the Land, and the Well Being of People" (dissertation, Bryan Higgins, 1980).
[8] Myles, Twin Cities Dakota Landmap.

the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers meet. The Dakota origin story says that Bdóte is the origin of the first people and is the center of the universe.[9]

Another example of Dakota spatial planning is the Four Oaks, depicted on the cover of this journal. The four Indigenous trees were planted near the Minnesota River in a diamond to represent the cardinal directions. It was used as a burial site for the hundreds of Dakota elders, women, and children who died of imprisonment on Pike Island (located at Bdóte) after the US-Dakota war.[10] Dakota elders today believe the oaks were planted to tell future generations that it is sacred land.[11]

In the early 19th century, colonizers transformed and controlled the land with no respect to the land's history. As cities developed, the profession of urban planning emerged as a tool of colonization and maintaining White supremacy. Urban planners imposed borders, restrictions, and superficial definitions of land use to exclude and erase Indigenous peoples.[12]

In the Twin Cities, the establishment of Fort Snelling at Bdóte in the 1820s marked one of the first colonial attempts to control Indigenous land. Built to facilitate the fur trade and establish claim to Minnesota, the fort paid no attention to the history and sacredness of the land. In 1862, during the US-Dakota War, colonizers committed the largest mass-hanging in US history, killing 40 Dakota on the storied land of their ancestors.[13] It is thought that the Four Oaks were planted during this year,[14] and those killed in the hanging were buried there.[15] The building of the fort, putting a new name on Bdóte, and committing acts of violence on sacred land are examples of colonial tools that aimed to change Indigenous space by erasing its history.

This imposition of colonial and White supremacist values onto Dakota land persisted and evolved as the Twin Cities grew. Urban planners established a "labyrinth

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[9] Peterson, *The Land.*
[10] Mary Losure, "The Camp," essay, in *Our Way or the Highway: Inside the Minnehaha Free State* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1–24.
[11] Friends of Coldwater, "Highway 55," Friends of Coldwater, accessed January 21, 2024, http://www.friendsofcoldwater.org/hwy55/hwy55.html.
[12] Libby Porter, Louise Clare Johnson, and Sue Jackson, "Indigenous Communities Are Reworking Urban Planning, but Planners Need to Accept Their History," The Conversation, August 10, 2023, https://theconversation.com/indigenous-communities-are-reworking-urban-planning-but-planners-need-to-accept-their-history-92351.
[13] Peterson, The Land, Water, and Language.
[14] Friends of Coldwater, Highway 55.
[15] Losure, The Camp.

of guidelines, policies, criteria, and administrative agencies [that seek] to experimentally regulate the land."[16] These enforcements excluded the Dakota people from their own land and forced them into poverty, out of the city, and away from family.

It is important to recognize the origins of urban planning in the United States in colonization and White supremacy. Decisions made by cities to segregate, displace, and exclude people are not passive results of urban development, but intentional, systemic tools that enforce White supremacy. Spatial organization is not inherently bad–it has been used to care for the land and solve social problems long before the concept of urban planning.[17] However, the modern organization of urban space is much more than what goes where; it is a method of social, political, and environmental control. This brings me to the discussion on the production of space.

The Right to the City

Contemporary discussion of space often begins with French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's 1974 work, *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre asserts that space is a social product that is formed by spatial practices, representations, and conceptions. Spatial practices create *lived space*, which is defined as the real everyday goings-on in a space.[18] An example of spatial practices creating a lived space is a neighborhood hosting events in their public park. The park on its own is not a lived space, but the practice of gathering as a community establishes it as a community space, giving it a purpose that fulfills a human need. Lived space is interrupted by conceived space, which is ideas of space imposed upon lived space by planners, politicians, and cartographers. An example of conceived space interrupting lived space is a city building a highway through an ethnic cluster neighborhood.[19] The idea to build the highway was conceived and enforced by people outside the community, and the highway displaces some of the community and makes it difficult for the remaining residents to stay culturally connected. Space is political, and taking space is a political act.

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[16] Higgins, Visions of People.
[17] Porter, Reworking Urban Planning.
[18] Lefebvre, The Production of Space.
[19] For example, Highway 55 in Minneapolis and Highway 94 in Saint Paul. See Laurel O'Hare's paper in this journal, Concrete Legacy: The Effects of the Interstate Highway System on Black Communities in the U.S.

Lefebvre also differentiates between abstract space—which is commodified, homogenized, and bureaucratized—and concrete space, which is produced by everyday lived experiences.[20] When planners and politicians enforce colonial thinking through their conceptions of space, they produce abstract space. Abstract space erases lived experiences and histories and prioritizes homogeneity and conformity. Examples are parking garages and government buildings; they are created for one purpose, and the activities that happen there are homogenous.

This brings us to the Lefebvrian theory central to my argument: the right to the city.[21] The right to the city is the idea that anyone who resides in a city should have the ability to *produce lived space*. It is more than the ability to participate, it is the right to lead initiatives that transform space and be part of every step of the process. When abstract space is imposed by those with power, it infringes on the people's right to the city by limiting where and how they can practice lived experiences. The right to the city, Lefebvre argues, has been made inaccessible to marginalized groups.[22]

In the example of the highway built through an ethnic cluster, the highway is an abstract space that limits the lived experiences of the community. For example, the community held farmers markets in an empty lot that fulfilled social, cultural, and material needs. The market is an example of exercising the right to the city because it was created by and for the community and transformed the empty lot into a concrete, lived space. If the highway cuts off half of the community from easily accessing the market, their ability to engage in the market is limited. Over time, the highway results in less business in the community and it falls into poverty. The community now lacks the financial and social power required to sustain the market.

Geography of Protest

American geographer Eugene McCann put Lefebvre's theories in an American context. He argues that in U.S. cities, racialized groups must be carefully considered in

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[20] Lefebvre, The Production of Space.
[21] The right to difference goes hand in hand with the right to the city. Lefebvre defines it as the right to resist homogeneity. It relates to my topic, but more so socially than spatially, so I won't focus on it. Jessie Speer, "Henri Lefebvre: Spatial Politics, Everyday Life and the Right to the City," *The AAG Review of Books* 3, no. 1 (2015): 4–5, https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548x.2015.985526.
[22] Lefebvre, The Production of Space.

discussions about space. Abstract space in U.S. cities is used as a tool by urban planners to erase the histories of racialized groups and diminish their strength in community. McCann argues that the downtowns of U.S. cities are examples of public abstract spaces that have attempted to erase histories and curb resistance. The homogeneity of abstract space is "achieved and maintained through a continued state-sponsored process of fragmentation and marginalization that elides difference and thus attempts to prevent conflict."[23]

The contradiction between the lived experiences of marginalized residents and abstract space can lead to conflict, including protest. This argument aligns with the phenomenon of protests often occurring in public downtown spaces. U.S. cities are political landscapes that brew resistance. They suppress their racialized residents by denying their histories and lived experiences, but at the same time, these conditions create a stronger sense of community that can lead to organized resistance.[24]

Racialized groups have often demonstrated resistance in cities by taking space, whether that be through rallies, sit-ins, or occupations. Taking space, especially abstract space, is a powerful tool of the oppressed–Lefebvre argues that no social movement can be successful without it.[25] It disrupts the guise of unity that White supremacy relies on to maintain order. Taking abstract space is therefore a powerful assertion of the right to the city. Taking abstract space creates differential space, or counter-space, which asserts the right to the city and challenges the conceptions of the space.[26] Counter-spaces are crucial for social movements. Without challenging the homogeneity of abstract space and disrupting business-as-usual, their efforts may go unnoticed by

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[23] Eugene J. McCann, "Race, Protest, and Public Space: Contextualizing Lefebvre in the U.S. City," *Antipode* 31, no. 2 (1999): 163–84, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00098.
[24] Nick Estes, "Chapter 5: Red Power," essay, in *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Verso, 2019), 169–200.
[25] Serge A. Marek, "Indigenous Urban Geographies of Empowerment: Māori Urban Geographies of Whakamanatanga," *Espace Populations Sociétés*, no. 2020/1-2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.4000/eps.10001.
[26] An example is Breonna Taylor Square Park in Louisville, Kentucky. After Taylor's murder by Louisville police in 2020, the people took a small downtown park that sits in front of the justice building and is gridlocked by other government buildings. They transformed it into a site of resistance by holding memorials, protests, artwork, community gardens, food and supply drives, and welcoming unhoused neighbors to reside there. This was especially effective because it directly confronts the oppressor and disrupts the homogeneity of the abstract space. If they had done the same in a neighborhood park, it would not have had the same impact. The location of this counter-space was crucial to the successes of the movement.

the public and by those in power. But by taking abstract space, the people demand that the city stop and listen. And by transforming that space into a place for gathering, community, and healing, the people redefine it and demonstrate what that space could become. In McCann's words,

> "These counter-spaces and the spatial practices woven through them reveal the contradictions of the abstract spaces of the state and capital and, on the relatively rare and short lived occasions when they are produced, provide hope for the production of truly open and inclusive public spaces where "marked" bodies can negotiate the future on a free and equal basis."[27]

In my next section, I will recount the story of the fight for the East Phillips Urban Farm and demonstrate how it fits into the concepts detailed above.

Section 2: Case Study on the East Phillips Urban Farm

Relocation and the American Indian Movement

By the 1900s, the United States had pushed many Indigenous people of Turtle Island[28] off their homelands and onto reservations. But as the country urbanized in the early 1900s, Indigenous people migrated to the cities at about the same rate as the rest of the population. They were often segregated, which excluded them from the rest of the city, but also allowed them to band together to build the amenities that the city wouldn't provide. They began forming political and cultural organizations and started developing an urban Indigenous identity distinct from their rural counterparts.

In Minnesota, many Dakota and Anishinaabe migrants ended up in South Minneapolis, where the East Phillips neighborhood is located. The residents founded tribal offices, the American Indian Center, and centers for Indigenous art.[29] Many of those organizations, along with Indigenous-owned businesses, were located along East

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[27] McCann, Race, Protest, and Public Space.
[28] Turtle Island is an Indigenous name for North America, which I will often use in place of the United States when discussing the land itself or its people. I will use the United States when referring to the United States empire, which is a settler colonial creation imposed onto Turtle Island.
[29] Nancy Shoemaker, "Urban Indians and Ethnic Choices: American Indian Organizations in Minneapolis, 1920-1950," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1988): 431–47, https://doi.org/10.2307/968322.

Franklin Avenue. This stretch, which borders the north of East Phillips, became known as the American Indian Cultural Corridor.[30]

In 1956, the Indian Relocation Act encouraged Indigenous people living on reservations to move to cities, and Minneapolis saw an influx of Indigenous residents. However, the government didn't provide adequate assistance and often left Indigenous people with no support network.[31] It was a tool for cultural erasure, aimed at separating Indigenous people from their families and assimilating them to White American culture. Dennis Banks, Ojibwe Minneapolis resident and a founder of the American Indian Movement, said that "urbanization was part of the downfall, part of the destruction of the Indian community."[32] Left to fend for themselves in a city that was not built for them, Indigenous people struggled with unemployment, homelessness, police violence, poor working conditions, poor healthcare, and a lack of community and culture.[33] Urban Indigenous communities developed their own culture, social networks, and political power to address the inequities they faced.

In 1968, inspired by the Black Power movement and fueled by the progressive wave of the 1960s, Dakota and Anishinaabe residents in South Minneapolis founded the American Indian Movement (AIM), also known as Red Power. It began as a community patrol to protect Indigenous people from police violence, and expanded to provide services that they were denied, such as teaching Indigenous history to youth.[34] In 1970, the urban Indigenous population surpassed the rural Indigenous population for the first time, and Red Power continued to grow in urban centers across Turtle Island.[35]

AIM and other urban Indigenous organizations went on to fight for the rights of urban Indigenous people across Turtle Island, as well as stand in solidarity with other movements of the time. Nick Estes, a Dakota author and organizer who was heavily involved in the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement at Standing Rock, wrote:

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[30] NACDI, "Cultural Corridor," Native American Community Development Institute, 2023, https://nacdi.org/programs/community-engagement/cultural-corridor/.
[31] Larry W. Burt, "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s," *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1986): 85–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/1183982.
[32] Shoemaker, Urban Indians.
[33] Burt, Roots; Shoemaker, Urban Indians.
[34] Estes, Red Power.
[35] Burt, Roots.

> "Originally envisioned as a means to dismantle Native communities by removing them from the land and integrating them into mainstream society, relocation in fact has the opposite effect… Relocation, for all its malicious intent, helped birth a new movement that arose from both poverty-stricken ghettos and rural reservations."[36]

History of East Phillips and the Roof Depot Site

One of the successes gained from AIM was Little Earth in East Phillips. In 1973, grassroots activism led to the establishment of Little Earth, the first and only Section 8 rental assistance community in the United States with Indigenous preference. It was like a smaller neighborhood within East Phillips, with 212 units, nearly 1,000 residents, and its own distinct markings of place. It was built a few blocks south of Franklin Avenue, the American Indian Corridor, so residents had easy access to resources built by and for Indigenous people. In addition to providing affordable housing, Little Earth also served as a center for Indigenous-led programming to keep people in and around Little Earth culturally connected.[37]

The Little Earth residential community is a strong example of lived space and concrete space. It was designated to address the economic and social needs of the neighborhood. It is clearly defined as a place, and that definition is maintained by the residents' everyday activities.

The Phillips Neighborhood Improvement Association (PNIA), one of the neighborhood's oldest planning groups, was started in the 1970s and had many Indigenous people from Little Earth on its board. In 1977, they started working on a comprehensive neighborhood plan, which included the voices of Indigenous leaders and activists. An article from 1978 said, "The group believes that those who live and work in the neighborhood are best able to plan its future. This recent effort of residents to formulate a plan for the renaissance of their community differs from many "Citizen Participation" activities in that it has been conceived and initiated wholly from within the community."[38]

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[36] Estes, Red Power, 107.
[37] Little Earth, accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.littleearth.org/.
[38] Higgins, Visions of People, 141.

Residents' involvement in every step of planning their community is central to the right to the city. This is most accessible through smaller political bodies, such as neighborhood associations.[39] PNIA was an avenue for political participation that residents could see themselves represented in, which empowered them to engage. Its inclusive nature is what made it a successful urban planning group. When residents feel empowered to participate and feel welcomed in doing so, the right to the city becomes more attainable.

Though PNIA's efforts to improve the community were fruitful, East Phillips was still a systematically neglected neighborhood. It has endured environmental damage for many decades. From 1938 to 1963, the 7.6 acre Roof Depot site had factories that made pesticides with arsenic, and it seeped into the soil and groundwater.[40] The concentration of polluting factories in East Phillips was a result of the spatial phenomenon known as "not in my backyard" (NIMBY). NIMBYism is a process of environmental racism in which environmentally damaging institutions and infrastructure are disproportionately built in marginalized communities due to the power of privileged communities to reject the placement of them in their neighborhoods.[41] The polluting of East Phillips was not a random event but a direct result of systemic oppression.

In 1947, the actual Roof Depot building was constructed as a Sears warehouse. In 1968, the warehouse was abandoned.[42] It sat vacant and polluted, taking up space in East Phillips for over 25 years before the damage was realized.

North of the Roof Depot site is Minneapolis' Hiawatha Public Works facility. In 1991, the city identified the site as a potential spot to expand their campus. In 1994, the Hiawatha Avenue expansion was constructed nearby and during the process, they discovered that the arsenic was still in the soil. From 2007-2011, the Environmental

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[39] Iris Marion Young, "Residential Segregation and Regional Democracy," essay, in *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 196–235.
[40] Minnesota Department of Agriculture, "Roof Depot Site," Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 2024, https://www.mda.state.mn.us/roof-depot-site.
[41] Belanger, Yale D., Dekruyf, Kathryn, Moncrieff, Allison and Kazakoff, Thomas. The Urban Indigenous Housing Experience of NIMBY-ism in Calgary, Alberta. Final Report prepared for the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (ASCHH), Calgary, Alberta, 2019.
[42] Kyle Stokes, "The Long, Bitter Fight over Minneapolis' Roof Depot Site, Explained," MinnPost, February 28, 2023, https://www.minnpost.com/environment/2023/02/the-long-bitter-fight-over-minneapolis-roof-depot-site-explained/#:~:text=The%20plant%20closed%20in%201968%2C%20but%20the%20contamination,went%20undiscovered%20for%20nearly%20three%20decades%2C%20until%201994.

Protection Agency declared it a superfund site, and they removed 50,000 tons of contaminated soil. Disproportionately high rates of asthma, lead poisoning, and heart conditions were reported in the area, which led the Minnesota Legislature to pass a law in 2008 requiring screenings for any new facilities in the area.[43]

The Roof Depot site is an example of abstract space. Since 1968, it has been vacant with little identity. The land first served the sole purpose of industrial development before settling into its legacy of abandonment. During its 48-year vacancy, its purpose was to simply be unoccupied. Not only has it served no purpose to East Phillips, but it has caused irreparable harm.

East Phillips Neighborhood Institute

Today, 71 percent of East Phillips Neighborhood residents are people of color, including Indigenous people, Black Americans, and immigrant groups from East Africa and Latin America. One-third of residents live below the poverty line. Disproportionately high rates of illnesses caused by pollution persist.[44] It is important to recognize that this is a spatial issue. The Roof Depot and the Arsenic Triangle are less than a mile from Little Earth and the American Indian Corridor, where AIM was founded. It is not by accident that Indigenous people were segregated and abandoned in South Minneapolis, that the city allowed the area to be heavily polluted, and that there are community-led efforts to build the power of the residents.

The right to the city is inaccessible to many marginalized groups. Public meeting times may take place during the work day, excluding many working class people. People with disabilities[45] may not be provided necessary accommodations to participate. Immigrants may not be provided information in their native languages. People of color may face discrimination in political settings.[46] East Phillips experiences all of these barriers, resulting in a systemic suppression of their political power. With the

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[43] Andrew Hazzard, “East Phillips Residents Fight for Urban Farm Instead of a Public Works Yard.,” Sahan Journal, April 16, 2021, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/east-phillips-pollution-urban-farm-proposal/.
[44] Hazard, East Phillips Residents Fight.
[45] Due to environmental racism, East Phillips experiences disproportionate health issues. Arsenic contamination can cause cancer, respiratory problems, and liver and kidney damage, all of which lead to disability. Stokes, Bitter Fight.
[46] Young, Residential Segregation.

city denying them the right to the city, East Phillips residents had to take matters into their own hands to address spatial inequities.

In 2015, East Phillips residents conceived the idea of creating an indoor urban farm in the abandoned Roof Depot warehouse. Notable in the initial planning group were Indigenous people, Somalis, and Latinos. They presented the idea to the East Phillips Improvement Coalition at their annual meeting in 2015, and it received unanimous support. In 2016, the group secured a grant from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. Little Earth, which already had its own community garden, was planning to buy the site to expand it into a farm. They were in communication with the owner of the Roof Depot and the neighborhood was prepared for this new development. However, in that same year, the city of Minneapolis bought the 7.6 acre site for $6.8 million] to expand the Hiawatha Public Works campus.[47] The city used eminent domain to take the land, a governmental power which is often used as a weapon to seize space. The city did little outreach to let the neighborhood know about their plan to take the land. This dampened hopes of the farm becoming a reality.

In 2017, Minneapolis established Green Zones in areas with marginalized groups and high air pollution, illness, and poverty to improve health and sustainability. East Phillips was located in the Southside Green Zone. This gave some fuel to the movement, but still, the project remained stagnant. Some residents said it was “a lot of talk and no action.”[48] The city’s persistence on expanding the Hiawatha Public Works campus contradicted the promise they made when establishing the Southside Green Zone. Still not receiving the support they needed, East Phillips residents decided to found their own group to tackle environmental injustice.

In 2019, the East Phillips Neighborhood Institute (EPNI) formed as a nonprofit to work toward creating the urban farm.[49] Their structure consists of community leaders and board members, and both groups include Indigenous members. Their model is not hierarchical, but built on a network of relationships between neighbors, families, and friends who share common values. EPNI named their goals for the project: convert the

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[47] Hazard, East Phillips Residents Fight.
[48] Andrew Hazzard, “Residents of Minneapolis Green Zones Want Results, Not ‘Feel-Good Lines on a Map,’” Sahan Journal, June 3, 2021, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/green-zones-minneapolis/.
[49] Hazzard, East Phillips Residents Fight.

existing warehouse structure into a cooperatively owned urban farm that grows food for the community, utilizes rooftop solar panels, and includes a job training center, space for local businesses, an art center, services for the unhoused, a community kitchen, and affordable housing. It would serve as a gathering place with many resources that worked to improve the health of the community.[50] Their strategy appears to have two prongs: political action and community empowerment. Political action includes attending public meetings, lobbying, meeting with lawmakers, and holding protests. Community empowerment includes mutual aid, celebrations and ceremonies, and creating art for the movement. With a well-structured nonprofit established, East Phillips was ready to take on Minneapolis.

East Phillips Versus the City of Minneapolis

In February 2020, EPNI filed a lawsuit against the city of Minneapolis claiming that it failed to get permits from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to demolish the warehouse. The city agreed to write an environmental impact report. During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, pollution levels rose in East Phillips due to its highly polluting factories while they dropped in nearly every other neighborhood in the Twin Cities.[51]

In the summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police just a few miles south of East Phillips, protests calling for racial justice filled the city. This new wave of energy around racial justice reignited some hope for EPNI. Karen Clark, a longtime resident of East Phillips, said, “What happened with the murder of George Floyd has opened some hearts and minds about how neighborhoods control themselves.”[52]

In February 2021, the city released an environmental assessment which was approved by the council but rejected by land defenders[53] and activists for not being

[50] EPNI, “Why the East Phillips Urban Farm Matters,” East Phillips Neighborhood Institute, 2019, https://www.eastphillipsneighborhoodinstitute.org/.
[51] Hazzard, East Phillips Residents Fight.
[52] Hazzard, East Phillips Residents Fight.
[53] Some Indigenous people prefer to identify as “land defenders” over “activists” because activism implies the privilege of choice, and they do not have any other choice but to defend their native land.

thorough enough.[54] The assessment said that the city's project would raise emissions, but not enough to require a permit. The community pushed back, stating that any more pollution in East Phillips will be harmful.[55] In August of 2021, the Minneapolis City Council voted 7-6 to move the Hiawatha public works expansion off the Roof Depot site, but voted 6-6 with one abstention to give the land to EPNI.[56] In October 2021, the council voted 7-6 to approve a compromise that would give three of the 7.6 acres to EPNI, and allow the city to build a new water facility on the remaining land. The community rejected this proposal since this compromise wouldn't allow them to use the Roof Depot building, which was crucial to their plan.[57] In March 2022, the council voted 8-5 to halt the expansion of the water facility.[58]

In December 2022, several legal cases were heard in court. EPNI claimed that the city should have provided a cumulative environmental impact report instead of a less thorough environmental assessment, and that they should cancel the demolition. The city said that EPNI should pay $4.5 million to cover the cost of delaying the project. Activists gathered outside the Hennepin County Government center in protest, holding banners and art and chanting "urban farm, not toxic harm!" [59]

On January 26, 2023, the City Council voted to move forward with the demolition of the Roof Depot and give three acres to EPNI.[60] On February 13, Hennepin County

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[54] Andrew Hazzard, "Opponents of Roof Depot Demolition Seek Relief from Supreme Court, Legislature," Sahan Journal, March 3, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-demolition-east-phillips-neighborhood-institute-minneapolis-legislature/.

[55] Andrew Hazzard, "Activists Fight Roof Depot Demolition to Keep Urban Farm Dream Alive," Sahan Journal, December 21, 2022, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/east-phillips-neighborhood-institute-roof-depot-demolition-minneapolis/.

[56] Andrew Hazzard, "Minneapolis Council Spikes Plan to Expand Public Works at Roof Depot Site," Sahan Journal, August 19, 2021, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/minneapolis-urban-farm-east-phillps-vote/.

[57] Andrew Hazzard, "Minneapolis Council Vote on Roof Depot Offers 3-Acre Compromise to Urban Farm Group.," Sahan Journal, October 8, 2021, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-minneapolis-east-phillips-public-works-city-council/.

[58] Sheila Mulrooney Eldred, "Minneapolis City Council Reconsiders Roof Depot Plan in East Phillips Neighborhood," Sahan Journal, March 11, 2022, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-east-phillips-minneapolis-city-council/.

[59] Hazzard, Activists Fight Demolition.

[60] Andrew Hazzard, "Minneapolis City Council Votes to Demolish Roof Depot Warehouse," Sahan Journal, January 26, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/minneapolis-city-council-roof-depot-demolition-east-phillips-institute/.

Judge Edward Wahl declined a request from EPNI to delay the demolition. It was scheduled for the week of February 27. The community quickly rallied together in response.

EPNI announced their seven demands:

1. Relocate the public works expansion project
2. Give the community control of the Roof Depot site
3. Fund the indoor urban farm
4. Create plans to remove industrial polluters
5. A moratorium on evicting homeless encampments
6. Invest in programs to support unhoused people
7. Fund peer support workers[61]

EPNI, land defenders, and activists organized a week of action leading up to the demolition. They planned to keep showing up until the city met their demands. On February 21, they held a mass sit-in on the Roof Depot site, transforming it from an abstract space to a site of resistance. The encampment welcomed hundreds of community members and supporters. The occupation sent a firm message to the city. The acts of protest, community, healing, and spirituality that filled the once-desolate land demanded acknowledgement. By practicing lived experiences on the site, they redefined the site as a counter-space. They created dissonance between the city's abstract space and the community demonstration of what the space could become.

As a testament to its effectiveness, the occupation was met with "hundreds of cops" to clear the site. Minneapolis police detained eight people, including Indigenous community members Rachel Thunder and Nicole Perez. Thunder said she was charged with misdemeanor trespassing.[62]

At a press conference Thunder said, "We invite everybody, you know, all of our relatives from all across Turtle Island to come and join us here in this fight on stolen unceded land. This land, that we're currently residing on, falls under treaties signed under Fort Snelling in the early 1800s that were not honored, that were broken by the

[61] Hazzard, Police Oust Protestors.
[62] Estelle Timar-Wilcox, "'The Fight Isn't over': Protesters Try to Stop Roof Depot Demolition," MPR News, February 23, 2023, https://www.mprnews.org/story/2023/02/22/the-fight-isnt-over-mpd-arrests-protesters-at-roof-depot-site.

United States government."[63] Thunder's statement drew the connection between the imposition of colonial practices on Indigenous land and the events of that day. Just as the Dakota were forcibly removed from their land in the 19th century, so were the land defenders in 2023.

The police evacuation of the encampment raised the tension, and the community brought a fierce energy to a protest during a Minneapolis City Council meeting on February 23. Community members and supporters came with signs, a banner reading "Little Earth Matters," drums, and shirts and patches reading "American Indian Movement" and "Defend the Depot" among other things. Councilman Jason Chavez, who represents East Phillips, introduced a motion to terminate the demolition. It failed 6-6, with one absence. The room erupted, and people chanted "Native lives matter." President Andrea Jenkins, who voted to continue with the demolition, called the room to order. An Indigenous community member asked her, "Would you do this in your own backyard?" a reference to the NIMBYism that caused the disproportionate polluting of East Phillips. When the protestors remained in the room, they were evacuated by security guards. They moved to Mayor Jacob Frey's office and knocked on the door, asking him to meet with the elders of Little Earth, to no response.[64]

The next day, February 24, Judge Wahl granted an injunction that halted the demolition, just three days before it was scheduled. This was a significant win for East Phillips. The community celebrated, acknowledging that it was both a success and not at all the end of the fight.[65] On February 26, they held a block party with free food, groceries, clothes, and supplies and celebration with music and art. This event was a true display of community care, and a glimpse into the future of what the neighborhood could look like if they won the fight. The community's acts of joy on the same land

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[63] Minnesota Native News, "People of East Phillips & Little Earth Organize to Stop Roof Depot Site Construction," Minnesota Native News, February 24, 2023, https://minnesotanativenews.org/people-of-east-phillips-little-earth-organize-to-stop-roof-depot-site/.
[64] Jaida Grey Eagle and Andrew Hazzard, "Indigenous Activists Demand Mayor Frey Address Roof Depot Demolition," Sahan Journal, February 24, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-indigenous-activists-minneapolis-city-council-mayor-jacob-frey/.
[65] Andrew Hazzard, "Judge Grants Activists' Request to Postpone Roof Depot Demolition," Sahan Journal, February 24, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-demolition-postponed-minneapolis-east-phillips-neighborhood/.

where they experienced harm changed the narrative of the land. It sent a reminder that they weren't just opposing the demolition, but working toward building a better tomorrow.[66]

With the demolition halted, activists gave more focus to another branch of their strategy, which was lobbying for funds. "We ask you to grant us this critical step toward community self-determination," said Rachel Thunder in a hearing. The city maintained that it would not sell the land, though several lawmakers showed support.[67] On March 1, the Minnesota State Legislature heard a bill that would grant EPNI $20 million to fund the farm. Supporters of the bill packed the room. The bill was passed by the Minnesota House Committee and moved on to the House Capital Investment Committee.[68]

The lawsuits and requests for funding pended for a while, and the public didn't hear many updates. After a tense media silence, on April 21, EPNI announced that the city agreed to sell them the whole 7.6 acre site for $16.7 million. EPNI would have to secure the funds and also reimburse any public money that went to it.

In response to the decision, Rachel Thunder said, "This is a win for the land-back movement, for our community, and sets a national precedent for community-driven initiatives in urban areas overcoming environmental racism. The power is with the people."[69]

Through May, EPNI worked to get the funding secured before the end of the legislative session. Activists, land defenders, community business owners, and other allies showed up at the State Office building to demonstrate their support.[70] The legislature approved $12.1 million to help EPNI purchase the site, and pledged to grant another $5.7 million in 2024 if EPNI could raise $3.7 million by September 7, 2023, to purchase the site. Members of EPNI weren't allowed to enter the warehouse until July,

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[66] This echoes the journal's title: "Bury the Empire: Cultivating Resistance."
[67] Hazzard, Opponents of Demolition.
[68] Isavela Lopez, Sam Choo, and Emma Needham, "MN House Committee Approves $20 Million for East Phillips Urban Farm," Minnesota Native News, March 3, 2023, https://minnesotanativenews.org/mnhousecommitteeapproves20millioneastphillipsurbanfarm/.
[69] Andrew Hazzard, "Minneapolis Says It's Willing to Sell Roof Depot Site to Activists.," Sahan Journal, April 21, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-sale-update/.
[70] H Lynn Adelsman, "Victory for the East Phillips Urban Farm : The Alley Newspaper," The Alley Newspaper, June 1, 2023, https://alleynews.org/2023/06/victory-for-the-east-phillips-urban-farm/.

which was necessary for securing investors, so they asked for more time to raise the $3.7 million. They were given a two-month extension, until November 8.[71]

After two months of collecting donations, EPNI successfully raised $3.7 million. On November 8, the city officially approved the sale of the site. Activists and land defenders felt shock and relief that this nearly decade-long struggle finally had its end in sight. “It feels like this heavy weight has been lifted,” said longtime resident Cassie Holmes.[72]

Now, the neighborhood can focus on moving forward. Local law firms are assisting with legal costs and establishing community ownership of the building. Their goal is for the community to own two-thirds of the site, with the rest owned by outside investors.[73] EPNI will work to establish development rights and finalize designs and commercial tenants in preparation for summer 2024, when construction will begin.[74] Dean Dovolis’ architecture firm is designing the site. They plan for the 230,000 square foot building to include an “indoor farm with hydroponic and aquaponic gardening, room for about 20 local businesses and organizations, and affordable housing, all capped and powered by a massive rooftop solar array.”[75]

After this victory, the East Phillips Neighborhood celebrated briefly before another hurdle hit them. The Environmental Protection Agency paid a surprise visit to the Smith Foundry, an ironworks across the street from the Roof Depot, back in May, and the results were announced in November. They found that the company had been emitting more particulate matter than their air permit allows since at least 2018. On November 10, just two days after their fundraising deadline for the Roof Depot, East Phillips was back on its feet protesting at the Smith Foundry. “We got one day to celebrate!” people said, laughing in frustration. Little Earth resident Jolene Jones said at a public meeting,

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[71] Andrew Hazzard, “East Phillips Group given Extension to Fundraise Roof Depot Site,” Sahan Journal, August 22, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/roof-depot-east-phillips-neighborhood-institute-minneapolis-fundraising-extension/.
[72] Hazard, Given Extension to Fundraise.
[73] Hazard, Given Extension to Fundraise.
[74] Susan Du, “East Phillips Environmental Activists Raise $3.7 Million to Buy Roof Depot for Urban Farm,” Star Tribune, November 8, 2023, https://www.startribune.com/east-phillips-environmental-activists-raise-3-7-million-roof-depot-urban-farm-minneapolis-frey/600318295/?refresh=true.
[75] Hazard, Given Extension to Fundraise.

“This is environmental racism at its finest guys. We’ve got the most diverse community in the state of Minnesota, and we can’t breathe.”[76]

Not long after the Smith Foundry report, another injustice occurred. In South Minneapolis, just outside East Phillips, there was an encampment for unhoused Indigenous people called Camp Nenookaasi. The city of Minneapolis announced that it would evict the camp of about 160 people on January 4, 2024. With another threat to Indigenous people and land looming, East Phillips turned its support to the camp. East Phillips residents were among the many people who occupied the camp on the day of the eviction. Supporters helped everyone move their belongings to a new site a few blocks away. Since relocation, efforts have shifted to advocate for supplies for the camp.[77]

The timing of the Smith Foundry report and the eviction of Camp Nenookaasi was an unfortunate demonstration of the severity and persistence of spatial inequities in marginalized communities. However, East Phillips did not let that overshadow their historical win.

As East Phillips’ story gathered more local and national attention and gained traction in environmental justice and social justice circles across Turtle Island, residents continued to center the narrative of community resilience. EPNI board member Dean Dovolis reminded the public of who is at the core of their success:

> "I credit the intelligence and genius of the community. They've managed to structure this deal, create the vision, out-negotiate Minneapolis, get the legislative support for it and wide community involvement."[78]

EPNI is now focusing on community-facing events to collect input on implementing the project, including meetings to establish community ownership of the site and rename the warehouse. As of January 2024, they are developing their community ownership model, negotiating with the city to include landscaping that would support outdoor

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[76] Andrew Hazzard, “Public Demands Answers from State on Smith Foundry Pollution,” Sahan Journal, November 28, 2023, https://sahanjournal.com/climate-environment/smith-foundry-community-meeting-minnesota-pollution-control-agency/.

[77] Katelyn Vue, “Eviction of Camp Nenookaasi Pushes Encampment to Nearby Lot,” Sahan Journal, January 11, 2024, https://sahanjournal.com/housing/camp-nenookaasi-eviction-thursday-south-minneapolis-homeless-encampment/.

[78] Du, Activists Raise $3.7 Million.

farming, beginning to hire full-time staff, and connecting with local partners and farmers.[79] There is much to celebrate and much work to be done. As work on the farm progresses, the ongoing struggles for Camp Nenookaasi and against the Smith Foundry continue.

Conclusion

The fight for the East Phillips Urban Farm is an assertion of the Indigenous right to the city. Dakota people have long stewarded the land, settler colonialism attempted to sever that relationship, and now a diverse group of community members led by Indigenous land defenders are reclaiming it. By occupying the Roof Depot site, they claimed their right to produce space in the city. Their acts of resistance, community, and healing transformed the narrative from one of harm and abandonment to resilience and fruitfulness. The handmade artwork and protest signs that decorate the fence around the site are a love letter from East Phillips to itself.

This effort was successful for many reasons. The land defenders and activists occupied an abstract space, which sent a strong message by breaking the homogeneity of the land. The East Phillips Neighborhood Institute was born from the belief that the people who live in a community know what's best for them. They gained many allies but didn't lose sight of their beginnings and the decades of resistance that led them to where they are now. Their tactics always centered on the community, staying true to the idea that everyone should have access to every part of the process of the production of space. They didn't just focus on stopping the demolition, they took care of themselves and others and practiced joy at the same time.

This is a story about a neighborhood that was denied its right to the city–to plan their own community, to health, to environmental justice, to land that belongs to its Indigenous residents–and took it back. Through Indigenous leadership, centering radical joy, taking care of community, and creating counter-space, they have made history in the worlds of urban Indigenous communities, urban planning, environmental justice, and the Land Back movement.

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[79] EPNI, Why the Farm Matters.

Why does this story matter? It proves that urban Indigenous communities can lead successful initiatives to produce lived space. It shows what urban planning could be if communities got to organize themselves. It offers new ideas of what our cities could look like. It opens possibilities for how abstract space could be transformed. It serves as a model for other communities looking to assert their right to the city. Most importantly, it shows what a decolonial future could look like. Hope is central to any movement. If we want to dismantle systems of oppression, we must be able to imagine what the world would be like afterwards. Stories like this allow us to see a world in which space is created and stewarded by those who belong there.

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