The Falls:  
A Visitor & Interpretive Center for the Upper Lock

Image courtesy of Northern Spark
“Surface” by Aaron Dysart
Illuminate the Lock is a program of Mississippi Park Connection
The Central Riverfront of Minneapolis is becoming a great destination for passive recreation, but there are few opportunities for residents and visitors to fully explore the unique potential of an urban riverfront, like being able to find a table within view of the water.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers closed the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock in 2015 when Congress suspended navigation authorization due to concerns about invasive species. The facility is the latest in a growing number of land use and open space transformations on the Mississippi Riverfront which have led to a new relationship between the people of Minnesota and our river.

The Lock, which is sited in the Mill District of downtown Minneapolis, at the convergence of the Stone Arch Bridge and St. Anthony Falls, could not be in a more iconic or significant location. Even before the closure, community plans made reference to the site as an important cultural asset. Plans at the time of, or after, the closure were more specific in their intent: a visitor center that could bring people to the River, or more specifically, to the Falls.

The vision for a visitor & interpretive center on the Lock is codified in multiple plans, adopted over many years. 20+ organizations are active in the coalition effort to implement it.

Years of engagement and planning have resulted in numerous adopted guidance envisioning a visitor and interpretive center at the Lock. Above: plans by the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board, Meet Minneapolis, the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board, Minneapolis Downtown Council, and the National Parks Conservation Association.
The Mississippi River is one of the Great Rivers of the world, on par with the Nile and the Amazon in global popular imagination. The Mississippi is a defining natural feature of our city, region, and state.

At the moment, although there is a lot of parkland abutting the River, there are very few moments where the river and the city come together in a way that transcends mere adjacency and achieves a sense of connectivity and destination. The Falls will be one of those moments. The redevelopment of the St. Anthony Falls Lock will bring a world-class visitor and interpretive experience to life, enhanced by a park, riverside dining, access to the water, and events. The Falls will create an iconic landmark and will be our community’s gathering place on the Great River.

As a destination, it will activate, connect, interpret, and promote the relationship between river and city in meaningful ways for millions of people. As we can see around the world, from the people-friendliness of the harbor and canals of Copenhagen to the revitalized waterfront of Buffalo, New York, industrial waterfronts have almost limitless potential for redevelopment, and they can create an iconic sense of place.

### Project Details

**The Falls will welcome visitors; host exhibits, meetings & events; offer dining & recreation with spectacular views; & provide water access. The site is seamlessly integrated with Water Works Park & the culturally rich East Town/Mill District neighborhood.**

**VISITOR CENTER.** An Upper Mississippi visitor center serving the National Park Service and Meet Minneapolis will be designed with extensive involvement by the City, Park Board and Minnesota Historical Society. It would serve residents, day-trippers, weekend visitors, and business travelers seeking the quintessential Minneapolis experience on one of the world’s Great Rivers. The Falls is envisioned as a hub of history, recreation, activities, and information.

**FOOD & BEVERAGE.** Multiple options for food and drink, including a café,
Events, dining, education, & recreation will bring the Mississippi experience to life for millions of visitors.

full service restaurant, and catering options are envisioned. Patrons will enjoy both inside and outside dining options with exceptional views of the skyline, Stone Arch Bridge, waterfall and the Mississippi River.

EXHIBITION. There is museum-quality space planned for both permanent and temporary exhibitions. Rich interpretive potential is present at the Lock: the Falls’ relevance to American Indian history and culture, the industrial eras of lumbering and milling that grew “the flour milling capitol of the world,” and the era of monumental civil works that opened the Upper River to commercial navigation. Current contributors to Minneapolis culture and creativity would find an audience as well, with millions of visitors projected annually.

Educational and heritage enrichment opportunities will be identified and developed with key stakeholders.

EVENTS. Event space will be equipped to accommodate civic, cultural, entertainment, business professional, and private functions. The site is anticipated to be a highly desirable event location, with structured parking, generous facilities, iconic views, and catering options available.

PARKING. Convenient underground parking will support visitors year-round, serve the restaurant and dining options, and replace the current riverfront surface parking, which will be lost with the construction of Water Works Park and The Falls (including parking spaces on the Lock, abutting Fuji Ya, and at Mill Ruins Park).

OPEN SPACE. An active urban park will seamlessly connect to Water Works, the Stone Arch Bridge, and the Lock itself, offering access to bike rental, water transportation, and a new portage route for kayaking and canoes. A public space and plaza will provide opportunities for outdoor programming and activation year-round, while providing a platform for the best scenic views in town – of both the skyline and the river.

WATER ACCESS. Access to water taxis, kayaks, canoes, and other recreational or leisure boats is possible at both ends of the Lock.
The Falls will contribute to civic & state identity. It will contribute to economic & community development outcomes for the entire riverfront.

The St. Anthony Falls is the only waterfall on the entire length of the Mississippi River. The Lock, which allowed boats to traverse the nearly 50-foot change in elevation, engages the waterfall directly. All of this takes place in a National Park that threads right through the downtown of a major city. Conditions for an identity-making project with significance far beyond the limits of the project site are clearly present.

In addition to an iconic placemaking opportunity, a significant economic development opportunity awaits. The Falls is not conceived in isolation, but rather as one of several riverfront projects above St. Anthony Falls. This group of projects contributes to conditions that could prove transformative to the Upper River.

The Upper Lock was one of three locks constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to provide access to the Upper Harbor, which was dubbed “the greatest inland harbor in the country” by boosters. The Upper Harbor was the end, while the series of Locks were the means. The historic relationship between the Upper Lock and the Upper Harbor Terminal has the potential to be reinterpreted and built upon. Docks that once served commercial barges could be repurposed for new kinds of vessels and passengers.

Getting on the river has historically been difficult. In the future, it may be quite common to see public docks on the Upper River. In 2017, a charter service called Minneapolis Water Taxi began providing service out of the Boom Island marina (www.mplswatertaxi.com). In 2016, Paddle Share launched, and is operating out of the East Channel. Meanwhile, private docks for two restaurants in Northeast Minneapolis - the Sample Room and Psycho Suzi’s - are utilized by patrons arriving for a night out by water.

As public awareness of recreation opportunities, charters, and “ports of call” on the Upper River grows, it seems likely that more riverfront land owners and boating service providers will invest in developing the amenity.
“We support the St. Anthony Falls Upper Lock as the centerpiece of an iconic civic & cultural destination, reflective of our shared history, for the use & enjoyment of all.”