



Voices



Local institutions shaped East Town for decades before a recent wave of redevelopment on and around the former Metrodome site. File photo

Before East Town: A journey through Elliot Park

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With the new Vikings stadium and other development occurring rapidly, the Downtown East/Mill District and Elliot Park neighborhoods are transforming and thriving. The area has a fascinating history prior to the wave of \$2 billion of redevelopment that made the district what it is today.

There are, in fact, manifold legacies of important historical anchor institutions in Elliot Park and Downtown East that existed long before even the 1970s and '80s, when large tracts of land were razed to create the sea of parking lots that came to service the Metrodome. Today, these institutions continue to anchor the neighborhoods of East Town, which is “undergoing an unprecedented economic renaissance,” according to Governor Mark Dayton, who spoke at the July 22 U.S. Bank Stadium ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Like a skeleton is to a body, though, historic institutions are often deeply woven into the neighborhood fabric throughout multiple blocks. It is not always clear to those driving, biking or walking through the neighborhood that they are even there. One such anchor in Elliot Park is also one of the larger downtown employers: Augustana Care.

When Augustana Care was founded in 1896, the organization’s original objective was to create a social ministry to aid women and children. Augustana Care now provides housing, health care and community services primarily to older adults.

Augustana Care CEO Tim Tucker has served on the East Town Business Partnership Board (formally the East Downtown Council) for more than 20 years. Long before the current wave of development and in a time of uncertainty for Elliot Park, Tucker recalls, “We very much wanted to stay in the community where Augustana Care began.”

That meant large scale reinvention, because while the organization’s mission involved older adults, Augustana Care’s leadership also recognized the importance of services and housing for employees.

“They are the most important part of any organization, whether it’s non-profit or for-profit,” Tucker points out. He and the Augustana Care leadership knew quality housing for employees at affordable rates was crucial to Augustana Care’s success.

In response to these recognitions, Tucker reached out in the early 1990s to the Greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation, the Minneapolis City Planning Department (now CPED), Central Community Housing Trust, the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority and other agencies to begin developing the area. The results can be seen along 11th Avenue South and between 10th and 11th avenues, as additional

assisted living apartments were added to the original health care center. The East Village development provided new affordable housing options for both new residents and Augustana employees.

Tucker also reached out to the Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) to set up a clinic at Augustana Care's Minneapolis campus, seeking to leverage HCMC's focus on education and research. Augustana Care's goal has always been to collaborate, particularly with distinguished organizations such as HCMC and North Central University, he said.

"We hope our decision to expand in East Town affected the decisions of others who chose to stay here," Tucker said.

Augustana Care's efforts, including the surrounding housing and mixed-use development, transformed several tracts of land around the park and helped frame the neighborhood park as the definitive center of the neighborhood. Today, the park boasts a new \$1-million collegiate-sized soccer field built through a public and private partnership between the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, North Central University and dozens of private contributors.

The emergence of East Town as regional destination is one for the history books. It is to be credited to the phenomenal efforts of neighborhood, city and county leadership, the private development community and the hundreds of people choosing to become new residents alongside the 10,000 who already live in Elliot Park and Downtown East/Mill District.

It is important to remember, though, that in the decades prior to this moment, historic institutions such as Augustana Care, HCMC and North Central University served as the backbone of the community in less fortuitous times. Such institutional histories model for us what can happen when people and organizations choose to stay and invest in their urban centers, enabling city neighborhoods to prosper and thrive regardless of the ebb and flow of urban development.

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