

THE ROSSDALE POWER PLANT

PRESERVATION AND RENEWAL

Presented to Edmonton City Council, Executive Committee
July 8, 2013

Rossdale ReGeneration Group



THE ROSSDALE POWER PLANT: PRESERVATION AND RENEWAL

ROSSDALE REGENERATION GROUP

Summary & Recommendations

In March of 2013 Edmonton City Council and EPCOR began to review the status and viability of the decommissioned Rossdale Power Plant.



The Rossdale Power Plant is the oldest and largest Power Plant of its kind in Alberta and also occupies one of the most historically important sites in Edmonton with a wealth of archaeological layers from 8000

year-old aboriginal gathering grounds and burial sites to fur trader-era fort structures. The Power Plant is a registered Provincial Historic Resource.

For many Edmontonians, the Rossdale Power Plant is both an industrial building that provided households with electricity, and the “unofficial” entrance to the north side and Edmonton’s downtown. It is an iconic building that Edmontonians immediately identify as part of the city’s landscape.

The interest of City Council in the long-term viability of the Rossdale Power Plant was seen by a number of people as both a challenge and an opportunity. Beginning in March, a number of individuals, some from community organizations, others from heritage and architectural groups, others simply individuals with interest in history and the river valley, came together and formed the voluntary Rossdale ReGeneration Group. Over the past four months the Rossdale ReGeneration Group has

- Encouraged and included many interested individuals/groups to join in our discussions and undertakings
- Examined the background and history of the Power Plant and its site
- Reviewed how buildings in similar circumstances in other cities have been preserved and reused
- Held workshops to discuss the potential of adaptive reuse of the building
- Engaged a photographer to document the iconic beauty of the building in its river bank location

- Developed a website that assists all Edmontonians to benefit from what we have learned: www.rossdaleregeneration.ca

As a group, we have concluded that the Rossdale Power Plant and its setting are a rich part of Edmonton’s Aboriginal and civic history, that the buildings are striking, beautiful, and visually recognized by many thousands of Edmontonians, and that the site presents a great opportunity for reuse as a “living” structure in the story of Edmonton.



On July 8 at the Executive Committee of Edmonton City Council, Rossdale ReGeneration Group strongly urges the Committee to pass the following recommendations:

1. Firstly, we recommend that the City of Edmonton protect and preserve the Rossdale Power Plant for a minimum of one year. This means that the owner would commit the required funds to keep the buildings stable and secure, to allow time for the best ideas for a repurposing project to emerge and develop.
2. Secondly, we recommend that the City of Edmonton initiate repurposing of the Rossdale Power Plant in a creative, appropriate and sustainable way. This project should involve input from interested groups and include a broad public consultation process that aligns with the various plans and visioning already performed for the area – including the new Walterdale Bridge and promenade, the West Rossdale Urban Design Plan, Repurposing Rossdale: Views and Perspectives, Spirit of Edmonton, River Valley Alliance aims, and recommendations of the Rossdale ReGeneration Group – and provide an opportunity for collaboration with the province, federal ministries, national historical groups, and private developers. This initiative might take the form of an international design competition encompassing the buildings, site, and public access.

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REPORT

BACKGROUND

Vancouver's Granville Island. Toronto's Distillery District. Winnipeg's The Forks. Medicine Hat's Historic Clayworks District. San Francisco's Ferry Market. Portland's Skidmore/Old Town Historic District. London's Tate Modern. Paris's Musée D'Orsay.

A historic industrial structure, as proven in each of these cases, can serve its city as an important social and economic center, a vibrant place of exchange. Indeed, in each case the modern city's identity is largely linked to the repurposing of the historical structure – and this is because the structure speaks to the city's unique story, and continues that story into the present in an authentic way. Such a centre – large, vibrant, tied to the city's identity – is



rare; it cannot be artificially constructed. Instead, it can only happen in structures that have acquired a genuine patina of use over time. And this means that a site such as the Rossdale Power Plant, as a large, historical industrial structure located in the heart of our native and civic history, presents immense possibility for the City of Edmonton.

Imagine a perfect Edmonton evening – a perfect evening, that is, that could happen *only* in Edmonton. After a summer or winter stroll along the river valley trails, you walk through the doors of the Rossdale Power Plant. Here, you enjoy dinner amidst a 365-degree view of downtown, the Legislature, the newly-lit-up High Level Bridge, and the North Saskatchewan River Valley – all iconic Edmonton sites that, when taken in together like this, remind you of Edmonton's unique history as a fur-trading post, an industrial center, a capital city. You drink beer from the microbrewery downstairs, and eat produce the chef bought at the on-site weekend market. You listen to a local jazz band playing in the open concert venue below. After dinner, you browse through the aboriginal arts

cooperative and craft shop, then wander through the outdoor healing garden and aboriginal interpretive walk, and sense the thousands of years of connection between the land and the river at this very spot.

The Rossdale Power Plant is the place to tell Edmonton’s story.

ROSSDALE SITE AND STRUCTURE HISTORY

The Rossdale Power Plant is located in the true heart of Edmonton. And this is not only where our city began; the entire site is imbued with deep history. According to the Spirit of Edmonton project proposed by Lewis Cardinal and the Indigenous People’s Arts and Culture Coalition (IPACC), “Edmonton was born at Rossdale Flats as a

gathering place for Indigenous peoples 8,000 to 10,000 years before Europeans came.” It was a “pehonan,” or waiting place, and a centre of trade, celebration, and ceremony. It was also here that settlers arrived and met with First Nations groups, and then built the Hudson’s Bay outpost, Fort Edmonton. This



area was the original site of the fort, and of its cemetery. This was also the site on which Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier officially designated the province of Alberta, on September 1, 1905. Much work has been done to recognize the significance of this site. One such project was the comprehensive Rossdale Historical Land Use Study.

Architecturally speaking, the Rossdale Power Plant is unique in Edmonton. Designed by Maxwell Dewar, an award-winning architect and the president of the Alberta Architects Association, the Power Plant reflects the warm, elegant style of early-twentieth-century American industrial design, as well as the art deco style popular in that period. Reminiscent of a steamship, the Power Plant is a sophisticated structure and iconic element in our city’s skyline. The structure’s robust design and brick construction make it visually appealing, while its large interior spaces and high quality of light lend the building to multiple possibilities for new use.

Constructed between 1931 and 1954, the Power Plant was expanded six times in 22 years to accommodate changing technology and Edmonton's growth. Each expansion, therefore, tells the story of a particular technology, and of the growing demand for power in Edmonton homes, commercial and industrial buildings, schools and hospitals, streets and transit. All other power-generating buildings of this scope and size in Alberta (and most in Canada) are gone...as are the opportunities to repurpose those buildings.

Even before the current buildings were constructed, the Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company generated power from this site; in 1902 owner Alex Taylor sold the company to the city of Edmonton. The Rossdale Power Plant itself originally generated power from coal, as the seven tall stacks testify. In fact, looking at Edmonton from a satellite map, one can still see the trace of the railway line that brought coal to the site from the west, along River Valley Road. Boilers helped form the structural framework of one of the buildings, and are still intact.

The Rossdale Power Plant is recognized nationally as one of Canada's Historic Places, by the Heritage Canada Foundation. In 2001 it was also designated a Provincial Historic Resource.

STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

Four buildings comprise the current site: the low-pressure plant (including both the large, west boiler house and the large, east turbine house), the smaller switch house (on the far east side), plus the two pumphouses.

A group of approximately 20 of the city's top engineers, architects and urban planners (including numerous architects from Dialog, commissioned by the City of Edmonton to assess the stability of the Rossdale Power Plant) met for a Rossdale Power Plant engineering and design workshop on April 13, 2013. At this meeting it was determined that, while a number of structural components of the Power Plant require immediate attention – for example, the roof of the low-pressure plant needs repair, the buildings need provisional heating in winter to



prevent heaving, and some windows need to be replaced – the structure is generally sound and there are no insurmountable engineering or design obstacles to repurposing the structure. In fact, some of the structure’s unique engineering characteristics (such as its reliance upon still-intact interior boilers for support) make the structure architecturally interesting and valuable. According to assessment estimates, it will cost approximately \$7 million to stabilize the buildings.

Once the buildings are stabilized, the owner would have to bring them up to code (including installing electricity and public washrooms) before repurposing the structure and site. A number of constraints will determine repurposing, including archaeological remains in the area, underground mechanical remains, and limited vehicle access and parking space on the site. However, these factors, much like the size of the structure, should be viewed as an opportunity: they prevent an easy, humdrum solution and instead guide the project to a creative, appropriate, and sustainable new use.

REPURPOSING THE ROSSDALE POWER PLANT AND SITE

Repurposing the Rossdale Power Plant should reflect the deep significance of the river to the area. It is because of the connection between the river and the land at this particular curve in the valley that the area was a traditional meeting place and spiritual centre for First Nations peoples, and then the location of the first Fort Edmonton. The Rossdale Power Plant can continue to serve as a connection: between the river and city, the past and the present, and Edmontonians with each other, both physically at the site and through our shared identity as a River City.



Besides the historical significance of the site, the Rossdale Power Plant's original

use as an energy-generating station makes for a perfectly symbolic revitalization project: this is our opportunity to spark something new for our city. It is our opportunity to create a dynamic space that demonstrates respect for our own history and for the natural environment. It is our opportunity to show innovation in public transportation. And because of the site's proximity to Whyte Avenue, the university, the Legislature, the river valley, and downtown, revitalization of this site means revitalization of Edmonton as a whole.

What, specifically, might a revitalized Rosedale Power Plant look like? We have lots of ideas, and visitors to our Facebook page keep coming up with more. We envision some combination of the following kinds of repurposing:

- Aboriginal cultural centre and history museum with an aboriginal arts cooperative and crafts market (perhaps as part of the Spirit of Edmonton indigenous cultures and natural history trail)
- Non-profit river learning centre, connecting people with the North Saskatchewan River by educating them on the river's natural ecosystem and cultural and historical significance
- Cooperative craft brewery or distillery, drawing water directly from the river to underscore the importance of clean water
- Local fine-food shops and cafes and restaurants plus a weekly farmers market (similar to the Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco). This repurposing could include an information centre on Edmonton farms and food security; the river valley trails could also be extended out to the northeast farmland area, linking farm and city
- Arts and music performance area and rehearsal spaces
- Educational energy playground, explaining the development of twentieth-century power (achieving LEED designation, including solar panels on the roof, could also speak to the future of energy)
- University of Alberta biological sciences labs and interactive public museum detailing the river's ecology
- Local-food restaurant on the top floor of the boiler house or turbine house, taking advantage of the 365-degree view
- Satellite of the Royal Alberta Museum, highlighting the history of the site and of the city
- Cafe in one of the pump houses, serving visitors to the site and people walking, cycling, and rollerblading along the river valley trails
- Native-species natural area in the cleared area to the west of the buildings, representing healing of the land and of the past; this would be a peaceful space for learning, relaxing and reflecting
- Residential space

CONCLUSION

The Rossdale Power Plant presents Edmonton with immense possibility. Rossdale ReGeneration Group, representing a diverse group of architects, urban planners, engineers, historians, artists, members of the community, and others, recognizes this possibility and recommends that the Rossdale Power Plant be preserved, and that the structure and site be repurposed in a creative, appropriate, and sustainable way.

Many of the structure's and site's perceived limitations are precisely what make repurposing the Rossdale Power Plant exciting and meaningful: the building's large size, the area's limited vehicle access, and the site's location amid layers of history make this an unparalleled opportunity to make something new and edgy while preserving authentic history, character and spirit. The Rossdale Power Plant is Edmonton's place to tell our story, and repurposing the structure and site presents our moment to begin.

