Looking into Rondo: Environmental Studies

Senior Seminar Spring 2006

Challenges

• How do we define the Rondo community?
  • How and when is community defined? When a community is built on loss, how does that change the sense of community?
  • When there are multiple communities within one space, how do you choose which community to focus on? When do you acknowledge the diversity within a community?

Though each group may have defined community slightly differently, in our final projects we all focused on the African American community in Rondo. Focusing on the African American community only was not a deliberate choice, but rather where we were led because of way Rondo is framed: in current discourse “Rondo” has come to mean the historically Black neighborhood destroyed by the construction of I-94. It was thus difficult to get past this definition in approaching our research.

• Is Rondo an Environmental Justice issue?
  • Is retroactively applying the term Environmental Justice to the historical case study of the Rondo accurate? How did the community define their struggle at the time? By using a term like Environmental Justice who is left out of the discussion? How do we as environmentalists use this term as a vehicle to access and be a part of these justice cases? Does injustice necessitate intent?
  • By looking at a historical case study through an environmental justice lens we put it in an academic context. There has historically been a tension between academic and activist approaches to environmental justice. We wanted to take a more participatory approach to our research knowing that.

• How do we confront our own bias, as well as our privilege?

• How do we approach an issue when we are outsiders?

Concerns arose early in the project about how to go about our research when we were all students in a mostly, but not exclusively, white class from a privileged academic institution. We acknowledged that doing organizing or activist work in a community that is not your own poses particular challenges. We wanted to make the research more accessible to the community by first and foremost trying to work with and talk with residents of Rondo, and also by creating a final project that could have use in the current community. We were interested in creating some sort of public scholarship for our final project to share with the community and decided on the poster format.

The Project

The Environmental Studies senior seminar for the Spring of 2006 centered around Environmental Justice with a specific case study on the construction of I-94 through the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul. For this project the class was divided into four groups each with the task of designing two weeks of curriculum for the seminar. The class worked collectively to design the specific themes for each week, aiming to frame the case study in four distinct but overlapping ways. Group 1 explored socio-economic aspects asking questions such as, what was the neighborhood like? And, how did the freeway change it? Group 2 looked at policy and transportation issues: who planned the highway? What was the logic behind it? Was there a opposition to the planning process? Group 3 focused on the health and science sides of environmental justice. Group 4 finished off our semester by looking at media and memory: how have ideas of Rondo changed over time? What is the symbolic history of Rondo? What types of voices are heard in environmental justice struggles?

Highlights:

We spent the first week exploring the Rondo neighborhood in small groups and documenting our experiences. To get a feel for the highway we went on a class fieldtrip to compare I-94 and I-35. The class also researched different toxins in detail as well as looking at Environmental Protection Agency documents and reading about federal transportation and housing policy. Finally we hosted several speakers from the community share their knowledge and memories with our class. These included members of the Rondo community; Mrs. Massey and Marvin Roger Anderson, David Vessel from Metropolitan Council and Kate Cavett, author of the recently published oral history project “Voices of Rondo”.

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THANK YOU!!

Current Local EJ issues

In conjunction with the class, we were interested in exploring some of the contemporary environmental justice issues in the Twin Cities. As a class we organized an EnviroThursday panel entitled: “Environmental Justice in the Twin Cities: A Grassroots Perspective.” We invited panelists Nieeta Presley—— Executive Director of the Aurora/St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation, Carlos Garcia-Velasco—— Lead Organizer for the West Side Citizens Organization and Salvador Miranda—— Associate Director of the Organizing Apprenticeship Project to speak about the community organizing they were involved with and the role of allies in that work. Some of the specific issues we discussed were the Light Rail Central Corridor project, the proposed flood wall at the downtown St. Paul Airport and the Lake Street redevelopment.

In February the Environmental Studies Department co-sponsored the 7th Annual American Studies Conference on the theme of “The Movement for Global Environmental Justice and Human Rights: Confronting Racism and Ecocide from the Grassroots.”This conference featured Dr. David N. Pellow — an activist-scholar who has published widely on environmental justice issues in communities of color, a student roundtable and presentations by various local environmental justice activists. This event significantly informed our work for the semester.

Anna Argyridou, Katie Ashton, Ryan Baugh, Kristalle Chin, Julia Eagles, Katie Edwards, Anna Gordon, Sara Johnson, Matt O’Connor, Julie Ramsey, Kat Schuck, Ekke Soot, Roscoe Sopiwnik, Shoko Takemoto, Professor Chris Wells
Businesses in the Rondo Neighborhood

Introduction: Rondo Avenue was the heart of St. Paul’s black business district. As a major transportation route in the city, first for carriages and later for the trolley cars and buses, the street was the main artery of the community’s commercial center. Many of the residents of the neighborhood at the time didn’t necessarily have access to a vehicle, so having businesses that served people’s basic needs within walking distance was essential to the neighborhood’s vitality. Businesses were an integral part of the social fabric of the black community at that time.

Rondo’s Black-owned Businesses: Rondo had the highest concentration of black-owned businesses in St. Paul, as it was home to the city’s largest African-American population. The neighborhood was by no means homogenous, but because of the racial discrimination prominent at the time, black business owners were often limited to primarily black neighborhoods for opening their establishments. These businesses gave the community a sense of cohesiveness and an identity. The businesses enhanced the tight-knit feel of the community; business owners knew their patrons and their stores became public meeting places for the residents of the neighborhood. There was a relationship of trust and camaraderie between shopkeeper and clientele. Black business ownership was encouraged by social organizations including the Urban League, the Black Chamber of Commerce and Rondo’s own Sterling Club—a social organization dedicated to promoting black professionalism and entrepreneurship.

Businesses in the Rondo neighborhood included beauty parlors, night clubs, barber shops, grocery stores, restaurants, tailor shops, cleaners and funeral homes. For the most part the black-owned businesses in the area were small, family-owned and part of the service sector. But there also existed a limited number of professional offices and businesses including insurance agencies, real estate businesses, and law and medical practices. The employment opportunities available to African Americans in St. Paul at the time were limited. Many people worked in the service industry—in meat packinghouses, manufacturing, the railroad, and hotels. Rondo’s businesses provided a space for professional development that was unavailable to minorities in white-dominated society at large. The importance therefore of black businesses in the Rondo neighborhood was less in their economic profits than in their contribution to the spirit of Rondo as a tight-knit, self-sufficient community.

Challenge and Changes: The peak for black businesses in St. Paul was 1950, at which point there were a total of 48 businesses on Rondo Avenue. But these market area and impermanence were characteristics of many Black businesses and significantly limited their success. Because the businesses were often small, limited to the low-profit service sector, and with a mostly black clientele, they were disadvantaged in relation to the market as a whole. The success of a business establishments struggled through the 1950s, and their numbers dwindled. Factors such as size, location, is very much connected to the transit development in the area. With new highway development Rondo Avenue was no longer a major traffic corridor and the businesses there suffered.

Redevelopment and the impending freeway construction also threatened the future of black businesses in the Rondo. Many were forced to either close or relocate when the freeway came through in the 1960s. Twelve businesses, the majority of them black, were demolished by the freeway clearance. Others went out of business or relocated to nearby areas. The businesses of the Rondo neighborhood have never really recovered, and only a few of them remain.

Environmental Justice: The displacement of black businesses on Rondo Avenue due to the construction of Interstate 94 could be viewed as a case of environmental injustice. The freeway served not only to split the neighborhood, but also to disrupt the base of its local economy. Black business development goes hand in hand with community development, in alleviating unemployment, reducing economic exploitation, increasing investments in community institutions, and reclaiming economic and political decision-making power. Therefore the physical displacement of these community institutions has had lasting implications on the economic, social and physical health of the neighborhood. Community members were minimally involved in the planning process, and the freeway was therefore not designed to meet community needs or encourage healthy development in the neighborhood. The planning process and model of development employed in the freeway construction are contradictory to environmental health and justice and have left a lasting legacy in the community.

Contemporary Issues: One of the concerns with the New Central Corridor Light Rail project is what effect it will have on the small businesses along University Avenue. Local residents are invoking the legacy of the Rondo neighborhood to encourage and highlight the necessity of community input in the process. New immigrants to the Twin Cities have been largely responsible for the redevelopment of University with small ethnic businesses. However, the Midway area has seen an influx of big box stores over the past decade. The community is worried that the light rail may bring more such development or neglect the Midway neighborhood altogether with the proposed stops, putting the future of small businesses there at risk. There is also concern that, like I-94, the light rail will pass through without engaging with the neighborhood’s diversity.

Archival photos of Al’s Barber Shop
Courtesy of Al’s Barber Shop & Shoko Takemoto

Businesses on Rondo. 1950 and the Displacement of Businesses. 1960
City of St. Paul Annual Report, Dept. of Public Works, Jan 1, 1969

“We opened the store and I had a chance to meet a lot of people that I wouldn’t have known otherwise. Some people came to the store every day.” Gladyce Clemens Miller Voices of Rondo

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Exploring the Social Fabric of Rondo
Housing in the Rondo Neighborhood: 1950s-1970s

Introduction
The construction of the Interstate 94 on Rondo Avenue, approximately a 10 years project completed in 1961, significantly modified the social fabric of the Rondo Community by altering the geographic and demographic layout and social function of housing in the area. Geographically, houses were removed and neighborhoods were cut in half. Demographically, the multi-ethnic community was changed, establishing a predominantly African American neighborhood. Socially, housing issues instigated collective resistance and political action through organizing for open occupancy legislations. The extent in which housing was transformed in the Rondo Community during the time of construction of I-94 was immense because it was part of a larger urban renewal programs implemented by the City of St. Paul.

Geographic and Demographic Impact
Construction of I-94
Choice of the “St. Anthony route” the construction of the interstate split the Rondo neighborhood into north and south. Among the 608 families displaced by the slum clearance, 35% were African American. The City did not provide proper number of low-cost replacement units before proceeding with clearance, nor did it pay legitimate price for houses.

Empowered by the 1949 Federal Housing Act, a four-square-mile area between University Avenue, Summit Avenue, and Lexington Parkway was designated as the Summit-University Renewal Project. The project aimed to improve both the physical and social elements of the large area by replacing aging sewers, installing new streets and street lights, creating more jobs, and solving housing needs and problems.

By the 1950s, the conditions of housing in the Rondo neighborhood was aging and deteriorating. Deterioration was particularly apparent in the African American neighborhoods and business along Rondo Avenue. This was due to the fact that it was a time when many African Americans lost their job after the end of World War II. The high focus on education and business of the community made the residence during this time to funnel their limited funds towards their children’s education and business investments rather than on improving the façade of their homes.

Regardless of these complex factors, the consequent deterioration of the area’s housing, the city planners identified Rondo as a “blighted” neighborhood and put it on their priority list for urban renewal.

Western Redevelopment Project: 1952-1968
In 1952, the Saint Paul’s Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) developed the “Western Redevelopment Project” targeting the area bounded by Rondo, Western, Fuller, and Rice. The project aimed to beautify the Capital areas by removing the “blighted,” impoverished, and overcrowded area of the City. This was done by rejuvenating commercial facilities, creating motel accommodations, installing public amenities such as a new city park, and building new residential housing such as Fuller and Capital Plaza apartments in 1962, and public housing such as the hi-rise Mt. Airy Public Housing Project built in 1959. Combined with the Eastern Redevelopment project targeting the Eastern regions of the Capitol, the city invested $9 million for these initiatives.

Social Impact
Relocation and destruction of housing of the Rondo neighborhood in the 50s and 60s instigated collective action against housing inequalities caused by practices based on racism. The construction of I-94 and urban renewal enforced several families, predominantly working class African Americans, to relocate. Many of these families accepted the relocation as ‘uprooting’ poverty. However, the City’s unjust decision making process, lack of creating enough low-income housing, and the unjust price paid for homes built frustrations and anger within the community. As a response, community organizing and political action around housing issues developed.

Open Occupancy
Influenced by national civil rights movement, in 1956, the City Council passed an ordinance to prohibit discrimination in the sale, lease, or rent of all property. However, the African Americans looking for new housing due to the urban renewal projects and the highway construction still faced severe housing discrimination by private owners and renters, as well as the city. Since the establishment of the open occupancy ordinance, the issues were left untouched by city councilmen. In the mean time, realtors, home builders, finance institutions, and some landlords resisted the movement that violated the ordinance. To counter this movement, the St. Paul National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) based in the Rondo neighborhood played a significant role in organizing hearings and protests. Together with labor associations, religious organizations, and educational groups, NAACP fought for fair housing legislation.

Conclusion
The construction of I-94 and urban redevelopment in the 50s and 60s significantly altered the social fabric of Rondo by geographically and demographically altering the housing conditions in the area. The community of Rondo neighborhood consisted of housings for culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse populations prior to the highway construction. Through the process of “Slum Clearance” and enforced relocation by the city planners, low-income African American population limited by funds and discrimination were left in the divided neighborhood to face the air pollution from the highway in their homes everyday.

However, at the same time, frustration and anger towards unequal housing and discrimination fostered leadership and community organizing in the neighborhood to fight for fair housing legislation. Using the language of open occupancy and fair housing, the Rondo Neighborhood fought hard for justice in hopes of regaining its strong community.
An Introduction to Planning and Policy-Making in the Rondo

Policy-making and Planning: Putting the Rondo in Context
Kat Sachs

The construction of I-94 through the historically African American Rondo community in Saint Paul, MN is a story that is still very real to some, but which given its close proximity to the Macalester community, is a relative mystery to many students. In studying the policy-making during the period of planning and construction of I-94 through the Rondo community, which spanned the late 1940’s through the early 1960’s, our research has brought us into contact with planning documents which we found to be both interesting and relevant to a study of changing policy-making over time.

Transportation planning on the whole has been informed by the case of the Rondo because it highlighted the ways that early policy-making did not fully account for the concerns of environmental and social justice. Given the changing nature of policy over time, the Rondo in the context of transportation planning and policy was one of the earliest freeways to be built in an urban area. This meant that it acted as a test case, in many respects, for shaping the future of transportation planning and policy-making.

Our work through re-examining the policy and planning of the construction of I-94 has aimed to show the changing nature of policy-making by taking the Rondo as one case study in the evolution of transportation planning to account more fully for local concerns of environmental justice. Our goals for this work were two-fold; the first is a re-visitation of Rondo policy documents with the goal of synthesizing these fairly complex and out of date pieces into a more readily understandable format. The second was the goal of providing a visual comparison of Rondo policy within the greater scope of transportation policy at the federal level. The poster “Cruising through Time” is our attempt at achieving these objectives.

Collision
By Katie Edwards

The following piece attempts to visually express how the construction of Interstate I-94 impacted the Rondo community, using raku clay as the medium for inspiration.

The House:
I chose to build a house relatively similar in form to those found throughout the Rondo neighborhood. Generally three stories tall with a large front porch, these homes served as multi-family housing in the community. I tried to build a somewhat dilapidated, yet sturdy structure because slum clearance was often cited as a major benefit for the St. Anthony location of I-94, a distinction that baffled Rondo residents and their view of home.

The Freeway
When I made sketches for this piece, I wanted to show how the houses literally gave way to freeway construction. I decided to build the freeway as an extension from the back of the house to show the sacrifices certain members of society burdened in the name of a wider public good. I created the plunging gap between the beginning of the freeway and inside of house in order to show how once the commitment to construction was solidified, it was really impossible to turn back and undo mistakes. Instead, the scars of a national interstate system were irreversible.

The Deeper Meaning
Personally, the most interesting aspect to the study of I-94 and the Rondo neighborhood was how the emphasis on one mode of transportation altered a way of life. As opposed to public transportation forms, like buses and streetcars, automobile transportation emphasizes individuality in transport, where people move through space alone in the isolated sphere of their personal vehicle. As opposed to Rondo, where community interaction lay at the foundation of people’s lives, I-94 supported travel based on self-reliance rather than community reliance. Thus, through clay I tried to show how the destruction of Rondo by I-94 specifically also symbolized the destruction on community as the nation became paved with interstates.

Congress authorized federal financing of urban redevelopment projects (St. Paul was the first city to win a project approval).

1945-1946: Desire lines used to make routes for proposed freeway.

1948: Street car replaced by bus line on Rondo Ave.

1949: Minnesota funded first full scale survey of driver origins and destinations in the Twin Cities (to determine traffic volume for freeway).

1953: African American leaders first became aware that the city and state had approved the St. Anthony route as part of the proposed freeway system, same year that St. Paul school board recommended rehabilitation of the old elementary school in the Rondo area.


1956: Reverend Massey established the Rondo-St. Anthony Improvement Association, the first property owners group to appear in connection with the proposed Twin Cities routes. The Association soon included nearly 100% of the threatened property owners (Altschuler). Association understood their ability to respond in two ways: 1, to fight the location of the St. Anthony route and push for the other route; 2, emphasize the opportunities created by the freeway program, including replacing dilapidated structures. The community leaders emphasized the need for an open occupancy ordinance and fair compensation for housing losses in order to afford moving into other areas.

“Political leaders might recognize the moral justification of the Negro cause and appreciate the fact that Negro leaders had not tried to obstruct progress” (61).

1958: Interstate Highway Act passed in June 1956 by United States Congress, authorizing the construction of 41,000 mile network of freeways to interconnect all major cities in country.

Agencies involved:
- Congress: Passes basic federal highway legislation and appropriateness money to finance the federal share. The Bureau of Public Roads and Department of Commerce: Establishes basic design standards, administers federal highway funds to states, and reviews and approves plans of state highway departments.
- Project was largely justified as a national defense issue, through manipulation of fear and the public good. The hat counted a highway trust fund supported by revenues from the federal gasoline and oil taxes (pay as you go plan), thus, project funded by federal government (90%) and the states (10%).

1958-1964: Acquisition of land for I-94, which replaced the north side of Rondo and north side of St. Anthony with strip of dirt.

1959: Rondo neighborhood removed for highway construction.

1962: Federal Aid Highway Act: Mandated urban transportation planning as a condition for receiving federal funds, incorporated ten elements into the planning process:
- Economic factors affecting development
- Population
- Land use
- Transportation facilities including those for mass transportation
- Travel patterns
- Terminal and transfer facilities
- Zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, building codes, etc.
- Financial resources
- Social and community value factors

1965: Williamsburg Conference on Highways and Redevelopment: organized out of concern that planning processes were not adequately evaluating social and community values.

1969: National Environmental Policy Act passed: enunciated broad national policy to prevent or eliminate damage to the environment; required that federal agencies use a systematic interdisciplinary approach to planning and decision-making that impacted the environment; required an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for major federal actions that would significantly affect the environment.

1970: Federal Aid Highway Act of 1970: routes on the system were to be selected by local officials and state departments cooperatively, significantly increased the influence of local jurisdictions in local highway decisions.

1991: The removal of the last traffic signal on Interstate 90 in Wallace, Idaho on September 15, 1991 is often cited as the completion of the Interstate System (though 1.5 miles of the original planned system remains unconstrued to this day). The initial estimated cost for the system was $25 billion over 12 years, it ended up costing $114 billion and taking 35 years to complete.

Benefits of Freeway cited: reduction of neighborhood blight, access to various parts of urban area, relieve congestion, improve traffic flow along city desire lines (east-west movement).

1947: City of St. Paul approved the national highway department’s proposed route location along St. Anthony.

1953: African American leaders first became aware that the city and state had approved the St. Anthony route as part of the proposed freeway system, same year that St. Paul school board recommended rehabilitation of the old elementary school in the Rondo area.


1956: Open occupancy housing ordinance denied by city officials despite heightened campaign efforts by African American organizations.

In 1959: “State highway officials, when interviewed in 1959 about the techniques they had used in 1950, claimed that... had been an important advance over previous approaches. They admitted readily that the techniques used had been extremely crude but they maintained that they had been the most advanced available at the time.” Alan Altschuler, The City Planning Process: A Political Process (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965).

1957: City Planning Board Report published June 28, 1957

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1956-197: Public Hearings. The Governor referred responsibility for relocation to the state Commission on Human rights (the commission had no legal power and no budget). After African American leaders expressed discontent over this action, in 1957 Gov. Freeman created a subcommittee within the Human Rights Commission (the Commission on Housing and Relocation). In 1958, the Housing Authority reported that the right-of-way acquisition during 1958 and 1959 would displace 2,319 St. Paul families and other public actions would displace 929 families. Within that group, 399 were African American families (p. 64).

1958: Sagamore Conference on Highways and Urban Development, informed planning with region-wide focus and recognized that urban transportation plans should be evaluated through grand accounting of benefits and costs, including user and non-user impact.

1959: Rondo neighborhood removed for highway construction.

In 1959: “State highway officials, when interviewed in 1959 about the techniques they had used in 1950, claimed that only the concept of relating land-use projections to traffic projections had been an important advance over previous approaches. They admitted readily that the techniques used had been extremely crude but they maintained that they had been the most advanced available at the time.” Alan Altschuler, The City Planning Process: A Political Process (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965).

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1965: Williamsburg Conference on Highways and Redevelopment: organized out of concern that planning processes were not adequately evaluating social and community values.

1966: Climax of San Francisco Freeway revolt, in which local activists staged ongoing demonstrations to protect the building of the Panhandle-Golden Gate Freeway, slated to cut through scenic areas of the bay area and neighboring communities. The continued public resistance has successfully thwarted many interstate plans for the city.

This poster was created by Katharine Edwards and Kathryn Sachs for Chris Wells’ Environmental Studies Senior Seminar, May 2006.
Pedestrian bridges

Highway I-94 is like a wound that cuts through the neighborhood, leaving it in two loosely tied units. Even the pedestrian bridges – although built to connect the two sides – exemplify the actual separation and isolation. Crossing one of the two pedestrian bridges in Rondo neighborhood is a scary and unpleasant experience (photos on the right column). It is actually through the symbolic act of crossing the bridge that one can begin to understand the level of frustration and anxiety of Rondo community when the highway was built. Not only that people often used to walk several blocks to get to these bridges, but once there they find that these shaky metal and concrete constructions are also deeply isolating and impersonal. The noise and air pollution are almost unbearable. This is not a bridge that connects, but bridge that divides.

Sound walls

To reduce noise transmission to residential neighborhood this section of I-94 was purposefully depressed and made sufficiently wide to provide sound walls with gradual slopes. Highway planners believed that these sound walls could serve not only as efficient noise barriers, but also as narrow park strips with attractive and landscaping (first photo on the left column).

However, most of the sound walls today serve neither of the two functions. As seen in the second photo on the left side of this page, the depth and slope of sound walls varies as well as the distance of houses from the highway. In fact, in most places it is actually much narrower and less steep (compare it to photo on top). This means that vehicles and noise can literally pass by a house's front yard, not protected by a buffer zone, green area or gradual slope to shield them.

Sound walls in the 35E Parkway, in comparison, are very steep and the buffer zones much longer than I-94 (third photo left). Although 35E was built later, it serves as an example of what could have been designed differently when I-94 was built through Rondo.

Highways – the most rigid elements of urban life

Between Grotto and Dale Street (photo on left). After the freeway came through, the amount of space taken was much greater than just a four-lane highway. Because of its sheer magnitude, a freeway is a bar to some mixed-use development and a barrier to a strong community. One bulb, the highway became one of the most rigid elements in city’s structure.

Urban renewal

Among other things, building the I-94 was thought to bring one more benefit – urban renewal and development of “blighted” areas. However, the actual outcome was much more controversial than initially thought. There are some examples of urban renewal that have taken place in Rondo neighborhood since I-94 dissected it (photos on the right column).

Marion beautification park – located in the eastern end of what was Rondo. The project was aimed at adding community to an area that had some of the highest crime in Saint Paul.

Sears building – situated right next to Marion park. The big box building and its parking lot were built as a buffer for the capital from the working class Rondo neighborhood.

Rondo Education Center

Ineffectiveness of the highway

Although I-94 was planned with the intent to be highly efficient, in reality it is much less so than initially thought. Why so? First, it generates traffic that previously did not exist, leading to traffic jams in rush hours. Second, being just a local highway, it avoids a much broader problem – lack of public transportation system.

*This poster was made for Chris Wells’ Environmental Studies Senior Seminar, May 2006.* Photos: Ekke Soot
When Interstate 94 came through St. Paul in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, the term ‘environmental justice’ was yet to be coined. Today, residents of the divided Rondo community struggle with adversity brought by the interstate. Arguably, much of the hardship, namely the loss of the community, businesses and homes, could be termed environmental injustice or racism. As academics, our Environmental Studies senior seminar has used the Historic Rondo neighborhood as a case study to examine environmental injustices and accounts of environmental racism. To help understand the objective behind Interstate 94’s siting as well as the reasoning, the following maps use historic data to recreate maps used in the St. Paul City Planning Board’s proposal document.

This 1945 landuse map shows both the alternate northern route and the current southern route for Interstate 94. Even though many more houses needed to be removed if planners chose the southern route, this route promised to serve the traffic needs in a more beneficial way. So, instead of routing the freeway along the northern route and an existing railroad line, the southern route was chosen and what is now the Summit-University neighborhood was divided in two. Since, the freeway has acted as a barrier to community building and interaction among people from opposite sides.

The need for urban freeways was a given and the only questions left to be answered were where to place the freeways. There were two main criteria that the Minnesota State Highway Department used to site Interstate 94 through St. Paul: “traffic surveys of existing traffic, and the projection of these findings into the future.” The 1949 Twin City Traffic Survey was designed to determine the number of vehicles while using various streets and determining the origin and destination of these trips. This map highlights the 1949 traffic volume on major streets in St. Paul and in the opinion of planners served as evidence for constructing Interstate 94 in its current location.

This map is a recreation of the desire line map created by the 1949 Twin City Traffic Survey and highlights the actual routes that individuals wished to use if they could travel from origin to destination in a straight line. Again, this served as evidence for the eventual route of Interstate 94. By mostly relying on empirical data in the siting of Interstate 94, the division of a vibrant community was allowed to happen. One stark difference between then and now is that Environmental Impact Statements and Public Forums of communication better accommodate for social issues than was the case in siting Interstate 94.

This poster was created by Roscoe Sopiwnik for Chris Wells's Environmental Studies Senior Seminar, May 2006
Health, the Environment, and Public Policy

Policymakers frequently rely on scientific data to make decisions that can affect human health and the environment. This data can be used to show potential harmful environmental and health impacts of a particular policy or action, determine the level of risk to humans and the environment, and guide the development of methods for reducing these harmful impacts. Environmental and health policy decisions are influenced by much more than scientific data, however, and other considerations, such as the cost of reducing harmful impacts or the effect on other government policies, may result in a particular policy or action despite data that shows a significant potential for harm. The use of scientific data in the development of public policy to effectively address environmental and health concerns is also limited by the level of scientific uncertainty regarding the exact nature of threats to human health and the environment. If there is a high level of scientific uncertainty about a particular issue, policymakers may choose not to act on the issue or the policies they make might be inadequate for addressing environmental and health impacts. Although scientific data is somewhat limited and may be overshadowed by other policy considerations, it is still an important part of policy tools such as risk assessment, Environmental Impact Statements, the Precautionary Principle, and environmental health research.

Risk Assessments and Risk Management Policies

Risk assessments use scientific data to evaluate the effects on human health and the environment from a proposed action or specific environmental and health risks such as lead and arsenic. A risk assessment establishes whether a risk exists, determines whether there is a need for more data, and evaluates the potential environmental and health effects. Although risk assessments are important for organizing and analyzing scientific data that can show potential threats to humans and the environment, they are still limited by scientific uncertainty that can arise from limitations in the data that is currently available, differences in sources of and exposure to risks, and the complex interactions between contaminants, the environment, and human health. Risk assessment requires an ongoing process of improving available data and methodology to make it a comprehensive, accurate, and useful tool.

Risk assessments provide important information that can be used in the development of risk management policies, but there are many other factors that can influence the types of policies that are made and the use of risk assessments in the decision-making process, such as the acceptable level of risk, the cost-effectiveness of risk management solutions, and the goals of risk-management strategies.

The Precautionary Principle

The Precautionary Principle provides a framework for making policy decisions that can affect public health and the environment. The foundation of the Principle is the idea that when an activity has the potential to harm human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken to reduce this harm, even if there is incomplete scientific data on the nature of the risk. Under the Precautionary Principle, those who are proposing the activity that may cause harm should be responsible for proving that it would not pose a significant threat.

Applying the Precautionary Principle to environmental and public health policy-making would significantly change the way that policy decisions are made. Currently, many regulations that address environmental and health concerns are developed only after scientific evidence has shown the precise nature of the risk. Under the Precautionary Principle, however, policies should be developed to deal with any possible risks as soon as they are identified, even if there is still a great deal of scientific uncertainty regarding the potential for harm to health and the environment. Although this scientific uncertainty is acceptable when developing precautionary policies, further scientific inquiry into the nature of risks is necessary in order to guide future policy decisions.

Environmental Impact Statements

Under the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), federal agencies must complete an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for any major projects or legislative proposals that may have a large impact on the environment. An EIS is a document that discusses the purpose of a proposed action, why the action is necessary, the potential environmental consequences, and other possible alternatives to the action. In addition to considering the potential impacts on the natural environment, the EIS also discusses the impacts on aspects of the human environment such as health, cultural resources, the economy, and land use. The EIS addresses both positive and negative impacts of a proposed action, and is supposed to consider these impacts over the entire lifespan of the project or legislation.

An important component of the NEPA process for major federal projects is public input into the EIS, including input into what things should be considered in the EIS, possible alternatives to the proposed project, or comments on the results of the EIS. Although federal agencies must take into consideration all public input, they ultimately decide the course of the project and what effect public input has on the decision.

One of the main purposes of the EIS is to help agencies make a decision about a proposed project that will reduce the negative impacts of the project and make concern for the quality of both the natural and human environments a part of project decisions. Agencies often do not choose to implement the project in a way that will have the least amount of negative environmental impact, because this may require changes to the project that are too costly, not feasible, or not compatible with the main purpose of the project. Agencies are, however, required to provide a rationale as to why they choose to carry out a project in a particular way, in order to ensure that the results of the EIS were given due consideration.

Environmental Health

The field of environmental health studies how the environment influences human health and disease. The “environment” includes not only the natural environment of soil, air, and water, but also aspects of the built environment, particularly concerned with populations that are especially vulnerable to environmental health threats, such as children and other high-risk groups.

In the past, most scientific studies done to determine the level of health risk from environmental toxins were based on exposures to high doses of a single chemical. The reality, however, is that we are all exposed to many different sources of environmental toxins every day – everything from food contaminated with pesticide residues to consumer products made with harmful chemicals to polluted air and water – and there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the nature of these health risks. Environmental health studies have begun to study the effects of long-term exposures to low levels of toxins, the effects of multiple chemical exposures, and the interaction of different chemicals in the environment and in our bodies.

Despite the large amount of uncertainty that still exists regarding the health impacts of the many toxins that we are exposed to in our environment, many people advocate a Precautionary Principle-based approach to environmental health policies. This approach would require implementing policies to reduce the harm that could result from any kind of exposure to a potential toxin, even if it has not yet been determined that there is a definite threat to human health.

Sources

1 National Center for Environmental Assessments http://www.epa.gov/enviro/gov/environmental-assessments.htm
2 Environmental Protection Agency http://www.epa.gov/compliance/basics/nepa.html
3 Science and Environmental Health Network http://www.sahb.org/Precautionary/index.html

This poster was made by Katie Ashton for Chris Wells’ Environmental Studies Senior Seminar, May 2006
I-94 and the Rondo: A Sample Environmental Impact Statement

Introduction
Since the 1970's, the EPA and Federal Government have required Environmental Impact Statements (E.I.S.) for all major construction projects (see the poster entitled "Policy Making, Public Health, and the Environment" for more information on Environmental Impact Statements). If a project's impact on the physical or socio-economic environment is exceedingly deleterious, the litigation resulting from its implementation may render it too costly or otherwise infeasible. I-94, however, was built during the 1960's, before Environmental Impact Statements were required, and hence, no such concerns were scrutinized. Had they been considered, it is likely that the impacts on the Rondo community and the problems they would cause would have been insurmountable, and that the project would not have proceeded. With this poster, we present some of the main considerations that are taken into account in an E.I.S.

Noise Pollution
Noise pollution can have several different effects on an area. It can drive off some animal species, damage people's hearing, and create a living environment that is unpleasant at best. Noise levels present around freeways are significant, and in many cases exceed Federal Regulations for safe background decibel levels (2). These levels likely are not exceeded in the case of I-94 through the Rondo neighborhood, though they would be higher during times of peak traffic and would certainly be higher than the background noise pollution disregarding the freeway. People living within 100 feet of the freeway can expect to experience background noise levels of at least 70 decibels, equal to the federal limit. Although the depression should lower the decibel level by about five decibels, it would be wise to place sound barriers along the freeway’s banks in order to mitigate potential long-term effects. (2)

Air Quality
Increased traffic flow through an area leads to increased car exhaust, which contains carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, phthalates, nitrogen oxides, various heavy metals, and other toxins and carcinogens (3, 5). Although it is understood that freeways and other large thoroughfares bring increased traffic into an area, and so increase the levels of local air pollution, they also facilitate faster travel. It has been shown that many pollutants are reduced with reduced travel time, and so reducing travel time for large numbers of people should reduce air pollution in St. Paul overall (2). In the long term, however, this may be an untenable strategy for improving air quality. Facilitating automobile travel encourages people to opt for cars instead of buses or trains, and so increases exhaust and air pollution over the long run. Hence, I-94 could be expected to decrease air pollution in greater St. Paul at least in the medium-term, but it would continue to promote a automotive system, which is unwisely as a long-term air quality strategy, and it would ensure increased air pollution in the Rondo neighborhood permanently. (3)

Water Pollution
Water pollution is often disregarded as a potential side effect of freeway construction, but it is a factor that should always be considered with the particular watershed in mind. In the case of I-94, the Mississippi River watershed is the one in question. Runoff from freeways may contain particulate matter and pollutants from cars, including residue from gasoline and other automotive fluids and dust from brake wells, which even today often contain asbestos (4, 5). Rain will also contain aerosols born from exhaust from the freeway, as that type of pollution is localized. When the rain falls, it will wash these pollutants into the sewer system as the water cannot sink into the pavement (4). Once in the sewage, it will be carried down to the Mississippi, where it could affect riparian vegetation and river fauna. It is likely that the impacts of these pollutants would be relatively low, but as this type of pollution is non-point source, it is difficult to quantify its impact. (5) Incidentally, in the case of I-94, sedimentation was also a factor. After Rondo Avenue was cleared, it was some years before construction of the freeway began. Once cleared of foundations and vegetation, the area became a mudflat, incapable of preventing erosion in any meaningful way. Any eroded soil could have ended up, eventually, in the river, increasing sedimentation and hence altering aquatic ecosystems (4). This could not have been foreseen, however, and would not have been taken into account in an actual E.I.S.

Disruption of Neighborhoods
As has been seen in hindsight, a severe disruption occurred in the Rondo neighborhoods with the construction of the freeway. In an Environmental Impact Statement made before the construction, however, several factors would have been noted, but none were taken into account on the neighborhood affected by the freeway. Environmental and some socio-economic factors are presented here, but environmental justice issues, an essential part of an Environmental Impact Statement, are presented elsewhere; see the poster entitled “Rondo in an Environmental Justice Lens” for more information on the environmental injustices dealt to the Rondo neighborhood by the construction of the freeway. Various factors are listed and discussed here, as follows: Noise Pollution, Air Quality, Water Pollution, Disruption of Neighborhoods, and Displacement of Persons.

Sources
2. Environmental Impact Statement for I-35, Environmental Protection Agency

This poster was made by Matt O’Connor for Chris Wells’ Environmental Studies Senior Seminar, May 2006.
Introduction

This poster examines how environmental justice considerations might have affected the Environmental Impact Statement, had there been one, for the proposed building of I-94 through the African-American community of Saint Paul in the 50’s and 60’s. It draws largely from an EPA document providing guidelines for its officials to aid in the discernment of potential environmental justice concerns. The EPA’s Office of environmental justice defines Environmental Justice as “The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people ... should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.”

Background

In 1994 President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898, “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations.” In 1995 the EPA produced a document outlining how it would uphold its new duty to address concerns of environmental justice in the context of its various agency responsibilities. One of its responsibilities includes the preparation of environmental impact statements (EISs) and Environmental Assessments (EAs) under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA).

EISs and EAs are supposed to assess both the environmental impacts of a proposed action and the socioeconomic effects related to that action and its physical effects. The president’s executive order helps to focus these types of assessments on those populations that are often most at risk — minority and low-income populations. The EIS should not only address the potential impacts of the proposed project, but also the potential impacts of reasonable alternatives.

The EPA offers its analysts three perspectives from which to analyze environmental justice issues in the EIS process: 1) whether there exists a potential for disproportionate risk; 2) whether communities have been sufficiently involved in the decision-making process; and 3) whether communities currently suffer, of have historically suffered, from environmental and health risks or hazards.

If there had been an EIS for the proposed I-94 freeway through Saint Paul, and if Executive Order 12898 had been on the books then, what issues might have been uncovered, or what questions might have been raised and subsequently given weight in the decision-making process? In what ways might that process have been different?

Cumulative Effects

The majority of the community in the Rondo area did not have a surplus of cash on hand, and the infrastructure there was older and less recently renovated than in surrounding communities. This means that people in these homes may have been more highly exposed to dangerous household products that more wealthy homes fared out. Nowadays, lead paint might be such a product.

The heightened exposure to air pollutants caused by new proximity to the freeway would be combined with existing exposure to air pollutants due to urban location, and aggravated by less access to healthcare due to poverty and racial discrimination. New sources of pollution often add their burden to existing background levels of pollution. The community in the Rondo area was predominantly working-class, and therefore members may have already faced disproportionate exposure to pollutants through their job sites. Lower-income people tend to have fewer options in regards to finding safer places of employment.

Indirect Effects and the Process

The freeway would potentially change traffic patterns in the city, as well as public-transit routes. Low-income populations tend to be more reliant upon public transportation than other groups. Attention should be paid to mitigating negative impacts of the freeway on peoples’s ability to commute to and from work.

Those whose homes were not destroyed were subsequently next to or near a loud and unattractive freeway, and land values could be expected to decrease. No mitigation was offered to these people less directly affected.

Access to the decision-making process was inadequate. Members of the community were not made aware of the proposed project until it was well underway. They were not given access to public meetings on the scale to make all of their worries and concerns known. Lower-income communities often need special accommodations to make meetings and hearings accessible, such as remote access through toll-free phone numbers. Also, the EPA now attempts to provide technical assistance to such communities to understand and evaluate potential community and environmental impacts. No such assistance was forthcoming. Greater access to the process may have allowed residents to receive fair treatment and mitigation.

Mitigation Opportunities Missed

African Americans were frequently disallowed from many businesses, and so were largely limited to the businesses along Rondo Avenue. As the freeway was built over the route of Rondo Avenue itself, many African-American businesses and businesses welcoming African-American patronage were destroyed. These businesses could not always relocate to profitable locations, due to discrimination. Efforts by the city to open up new areas for African-American businesses could have helped to save businesses. The route of the freeway also cut off the community from itself. Very few bridges were placed across the freeway in the Rondo area, requiring community members to walk far out of the way to cross to the other side and visit their friends or church or to patronize a business. More bridges might have mitigated the disruption of community life.

Other areas of the freeway in the Twin Cities have both a depressed bed and noise-reducing walls alongside. The freeway through the Rondo area has no such walls, which disproportionately exposes residents and workers there to noise pollution. The low revenues within the community allow lower ability to react to the freeway construction with community revitalization or reorganization schemes. Adapting to new circumstances requires capital, and people in this community had more difficulty in acquiring loans. Without proper adaptation, businesses may be more likely to fail. Special loans might have been provided. The buildings along Rondo Avenue were said by the authorities to be structurally inferior, and they therefore gave lower compensation there than in other areas. Some of these buildings, relocated, still stand today.

A Community Facing Discrimination

The community centered around Rondo Avenue between Rice and Lexington was largely African American, and the majority of African Americans living in Saint Paul lived in this area. An EPA analyst developing an EIS would have therefore identified this area and community as a minority community, and taken action to examine whether it might face “disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects.” These effects can be direct or indirect, and cumulative effects should also be assessed.

The use of redlining and other discriminatory housing practices largely confined African Americans to the Rondo area and a few smaller neighborhoods throughout the Twin Cities. With the freeway coming through, this would give them fewer options in terms of relocation. Fewer options and choice inherently leads to a lower ability to deal with disruption.

Sources

“All we knew was Rondo”: Memory as Primary Resource

In researching the historic Rondo neighborhood, we couldn’t get away from the voices of its elders, community members who had witnessed the construction of the highway and its after effects as children and teens. These are charismatic people—often with families of their own now—who go out of their way to share their stories and thus keep the community alive. They recognize that the Rondo was never fully destroyed if it exists in memories and shared spaces for storytelling today. Importantly, part of conceptualizing Interstate 94’s construction through the Rondo neighborhood as an environmental justice struggle is realizing that mainstream channels—government publications, official correspondence, and some media coverage—present clear biases. Memory constitutes a legitimate source of knowledge in cases like this, especially to the extent to which it allows us to create alternative histories privileging voices that were “written out” of earlier struggles. In addition it can act as a teaching tool, forming a basis from which we can critically investigate the voices of authority we encounter every day.

The Power of Recollection: Visions of Rondo Then

Often memories expressed through pictures and words are more powerful than academic, theoretical analysis. We will let the memories of Rondo speak for themselves.

Rondo Days is one of the most visible expressions of how the memories of Rondo are being used in the present day. The annual celebration began in 1982 when a small group of residents came together with a vision to bring back the sense of community and neighborhood values they felt were lost when Rondo was destroyed by the construction of Interstate 94.

Memory as Motivating Force: Current Expressions of Rondo

Not only do memories frequently have a sustaining power for many people, they also often propel people into action. Memories of Rondo are no exception to this generalization, and the number of books, plays, poems, and documentaries that have been written about Rondo exist as a testament to the force of memory.

“Many of the uninformed may wonder what the old Rondo Avenue Neighborhood stood for. Why all of the noise about a neighborhood that virtually disappeared with the construction of Interstate 94 in 1964? For many of us who lived, played and grew up there, Rondo Avenue meant home to us. It will always be remembered as home. The old neighborhood stood for something majestic in terms of our families, our Black historical roots, our citizenship, our academic and social accomplishments along a meaningful continuum of time.” –Dr. Louis L. Zachary (Committee Chairman), Remember Rondo

“The community took care of everyone.” – Gloria Yvonne Presley Massey, Voices of Rondo


The St. Paul Dispatch, October 25, 1960. Originally from MN Historical Society

These posters were created by Anna Argyridou, Kristalle Chin, Sara Johnson and Julie Ramsey for Chris Wells’s Environmental Studies Senior Seminar, May 2006
The media plays an instrumental role in reporting events to the public; but at times, reporting can also be very biased and exclusive to specific groups, which in turn causes a great deal of controversy. As a result, different groups who want their voices to be heard have driven to initiate their own ‘place’ in the media, based on categories of race and gender. During the Civil Rights movement especially, numerous black newspapers were published in different states, including Minnesota. With regards to our case study, the Rondo neighborhood, the black newspapers were important; they gave blacks an outlet to be heard and also acknowledged their issues and achievements. Some examples of black newspapers in Minnesota were: The Western Appeal, The Spokesman Recorder and Summit University Press.

The Utopian Image

It is important to note that there is a specific way the media describes the Rondo community: “The historical black community was destroyed by the construction of I-94…..” Articles which include a statement similar to this, raises questions about the way in which the Rondo community should be and is remembered by people. This phrase obscures the smaller stories that combine to present the illusion of a single, unified community known as the Rondo. As media continues to build on a single, well-worn narrative, it reduces the struggles and victories of the community to only one-dimension. We believe that we can discover the real roots of the Rondo, and create opportunities for positive change in the upcoming Light Rail debate only by looking beyond this “catch-all” phrase.

The Realistic Image of Highway I-94

Many people were suspicious of explanation they were given as to why the chosen route of I-94 went straight through Saint Paul’s largest African American community. They objected but did not have the political power to affect the final decision. A letter to the editor published in the Saint Paul Pioneer Press in 1993 mentioned the real reasons behind the location of I-94. There is no question that the residents of Rondo felt legitimized discovering that the chosen route was based on social and not engineering reasons.

Reverend Davis was the last homeowner to leave Rondo; standing in his home with a shotgun in hand he told police that they would only get his house over his dead body. Eventually he peacefully vacated the premises. This action and the article describing the event still resonate with people to this day, symbolizing the resilient spirit of Rondo.

Many people see parallels between the Rondo struggle and the ongoing Light Rail debate. The Light Rail is a source of anxiety because community members are afraid that they will be written out of the process. But looking back on what went wrong during the Rondo evictions provides insight and inspiration for this current and future struggle.