
“A labor hall for the community”: Saint Paul’s East Side Freedom Library

11.308 Ecological Urbanism
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East Side Freedom Library



What

- Research library for labor and immigrant history;
- Community hub where residents can learn from each other and share personal histories

Where

An historic Carnegie library building in the Payne-Phalen neighborhood on the East Side of Saint Paul, MN

When

2014 to present

(Source: East Side Freedom Library)

Mission + Theory of Change

Inspiring solidarity, advocating for justice, and working toward equity for all.

A central premise of the ESFL is that it is difficult for people to work together effectively if they do not know their own or each other's stories. ESFL seeks to:



Provide neighborhood residents with a context within which they can situate their own experiences



Structure and facilitate conversations that build bridges across generations and between communities



Encourage community members to value their own and each other's histories, cultures, and challenges

Abstract + Keywords

Seeking to “inspire solidarity, advocate for justice and work toward equity for all,” the East Side Freedom Library houses a variety of non-circulating research collections on labor, immigration, Asian and African-American social movements, and more and hosts the Hmong Archives, a repository for collecting and preserving stories of the local and global Hmong community. The library also hosts storytelling events, workshops, small-scale public performances, and History Day activities for neighborhood youth. Its founders sought to create a space that empowered the different groups that call the East Side to “build bridges to each other by using culture and history,” by both remembering trauma but also celebrating the ways these groups shaped the neighborhood’s trajectory. The library offers a potential model for fighting back and fighting forward by both preserving the histories of a community and creating the space to celebrate these histories and cultures and build community.

Keywords:

*Community
archive*

*Labor
movement*

Immigration

*Social
movements*

Histories

Saint Paul's East Side

For nearly 170 years, the East Side has been a destination for immigrants and migrants seeking jobs, homes, and new communities in Saint Paul.

Mid-1800s

Scandinavia; Germany; Ireland

Late 1800s - Early 1900s

Southern and Eastern Europe; Middle East

Late 1900s - Early 2000s

Southeast Asia; East Africa; Central America; other Midwestern cities and the American South



ESFL founders imagined creating a space that preserves and promotes knowledge about the East Side and empowers the neighborhood's various communities to build bridges to each other by using culture and history.

Co-founder Peter Rachleff commissioned a mural for the library stairwell which depicts immigrant history to the United States. (Source: Marianne Combs | MPR News)

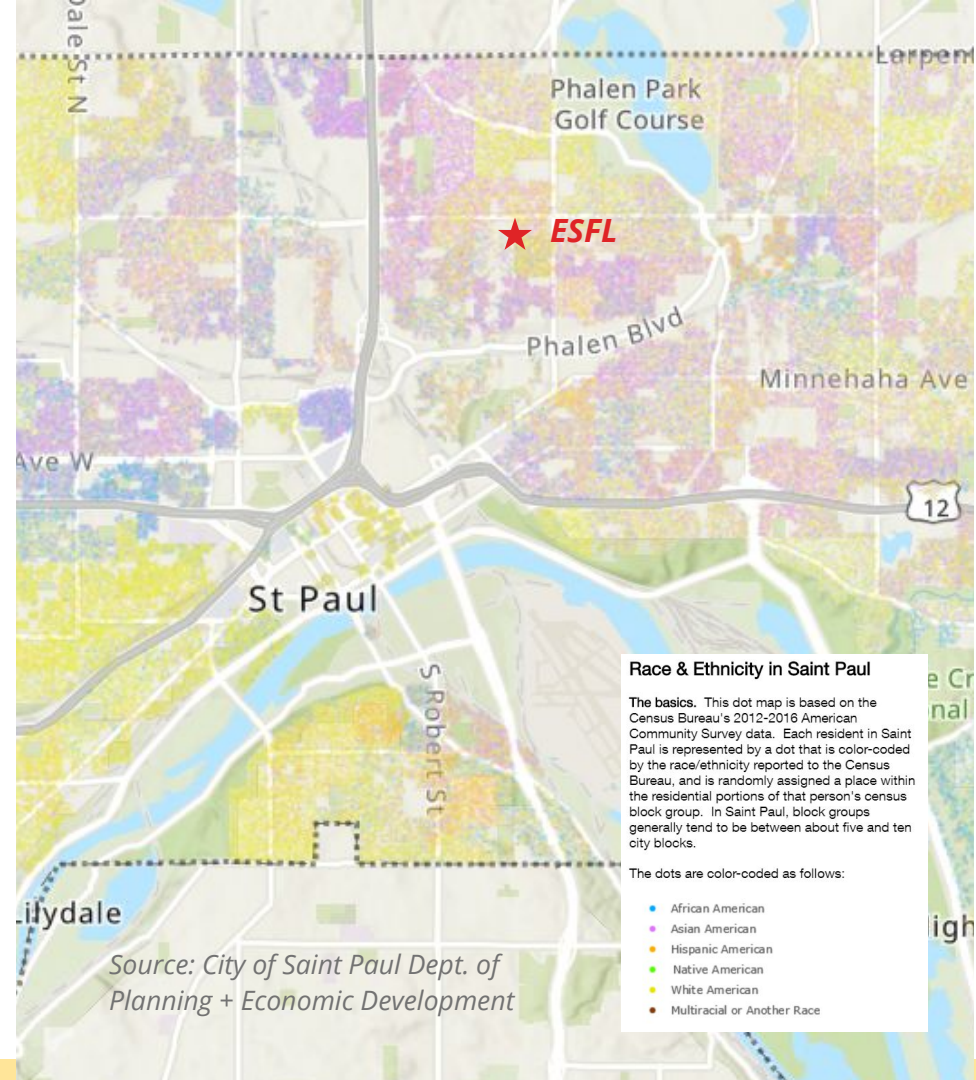
Saint Paul's East Side

Communities of color, and immigrants in particular, have driven recent growth in Saint Paul.

The community surrounding the ESFL is over 70 percent people of color.

- Ex. 36 percent Asian American, 14 percent Latinx, 13 percent African American

The ESFL grounds its work in sharing histories – through generations, despite language barriers, and in support of the diversity of the East Side.



Origins

2013: Macalester College professors and long-time East Siders Peter Rachleff and Beth Cleary co-found East Side Freedom Library with personal collections

October 2013: City of Saint Paul releases Request for Proposals for purchase and reuse of century-old, historic Carnegie Library building

March 2014: ESFL signs \$1 per year, 15-year lease agreement with City

Summer 2014: ESFL moves into library and embarks on “Raise the Roof” campaign and applies for City program for capital improvements

Feb 2016: Hmong Archives relocate to ESFL

May 2019: ESFL publishes its first book *Reinventing the People's Library*

Organization + Operations

Board-Driven, Volunteer Run

- The library has one paid associate director, its co-founders, a thirteen-member board of directors, and a community of volunteers.
- Volunteers donate, catalog, and shelve books; build bookshelves and other furniture; help with gardening and landscaping; and sponsor and host events.

Strong Community Partnerships

- “A labor hall for the community,” the ESFL has become a go-to venue for labor events and has received significant support from numerous local unions.
- ESFL hosts the Hmong Archives, the most extensive collection of Hmong documentary materials in the world.

Programs

The ESFL aims to *“to preserve and promote knowledge about the East Side – its history, residents and institutions – through educational collections and programs.”*

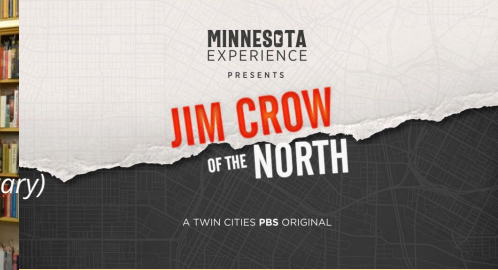
- Collection of 20,000+ books, visual art, music, and other materials, telling stories of immigrants, workers, people of color, and social justice movement
- Community conversations and workshops, artistic and cultural presentations, and author events



**A Six Session Course:
Immigration and the Making of St. Paul**
Wednesdays, 6-8PM
October 2nd — November 6th



(Source: East Side Freedom Library)



Financing + Resources

Low-cost lease, yet high maintenance

- + City leased vacant library to ESFL at virtually no cost
- + Entirely donated collection, and large team of volunteers
- However, century-old building costs \$4,000 per month to operate and has required substantial maintenance
- ESFL replaced boiler this fall after three years of fundraising

Fundraising difficulties, yet promising momentum

- Founders have struggled to secure philanthropic and legislative support
- Org still working to establish a capital campaign
- + ESFL secured \$75K grant from Saint Paul-based Otto Bremer Trust in June 2019 to hire additional staff

Assessment

"The East Side Freedom Library is an important connector and collaborator on Saint Paul's East Side. The work [the library] is doing is having a positive impact on building community and bringing together the neighborhood's diverse residents."

Daniel Reardon, co-CEO and trustee,
Otto Bremer Trust

(Source: Marianne Combs | MPR News)



Assessment: Strengths + Opportunities

- + ESFL has thrived thanks to the strong partnerships it has built with local unions and labor organizations, immigrant organizations like the Hmong-American Partnership and Karen Community of Minnesota, and other community-based organizations on the East Side
- + The dedicated team of volunteers, from its co-founders to East Side residents, helped to seed the library and have nurtured its success and growth over the past five years
- + ESFL's unique combination of community-based archive and community hub for the East Side leverages preservation as a means to build community and create new stories
- + Through its mission and ESFL has positioned itself as a multicultural and intergenerational convening space for the diverse community on the East Side and
- + ESFL continues to forge new partnerships and embark on new ventures such as publishing, laying the foundation for expansion

Assessment: Weaknesses + Threats

- Fundraising remains the primary challenge threatening the existence and potential expansion of ESFL, including the lack of a capital campaign and inability to hire additional staff
- Although ESFL enjoys virtually free rent in its location, the library is saddled with the cost of extensive maintenance and capital improvements without the benefits of owning the building
- Despite recently receiving funds to hire additional staff, ESFL remains largely a volunteer-driven nonprofit, which threatens the long-term sustainability of the project

Lessons for West Philadelphia

A joint community archive and resource center can serve as an opportunity to:

- Celebrate and preserve neighborhood histories
- Build community across identities
- Create new multicultural, intergenerational spaces

Lesson:

The community archive plus resource center model could honor and give life to the histories of West Philadelphia and provide a one-stop shop for neighborhood residents.

A clear yet inclusive mission can attract strong partnerships and rich programming

- Strategic partners and volunteers have not only helped the ESFL get off the ground but also brought its mission to life

Lesson:

By developing a focused yet welcoming mission for its community-based efforts, Monumental Baptist can create an inclusive coalition of partners based in West Philadelphia and across the city who will deliver on the collective vision.

Lessons for West Philadelphia

Community ownership vs. sustainability

- The ESFL began as a passion project and was seeded by an extensive private collection
- The library's volunteers and neighbors make it special, yet its existing capacity has strained potential expansion

Lesson:

The initial success of Monumental Baptist's CDC will depend on its ability to engage and activate volunteers; however, the long-term sustainability of the CDC will depend on its ability to plan for building capacity beyond dedicated volunteers.

Fundraising, ownership, and maintenance can determine long-term viability

- Maintenance and fundraising have dogged the ESFL since its inception, and continue to threaten its long-term survival and distract from its core mission

Lesson:

Monumental Baptist benefits from already owning property and could leverage on-site space for an archive or resource center. However, the ESFL case highlights the importance of fundraising to execute core programs and suggests caution when it comes to expansion coupled with high maintenance costs.

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