Look east along Olson Memorial Highway toward downtown Minneapolis. Ninety years ago this would have been 6th Avenue North, a vibrant, walkable commercial district with thirteen restaurants, eleven synagogues, grocery stores, a laundromat, ice cream shops, five churches, a streetcar line, and a half dozen nightclubs and live music venues.

Once called the “Beale Street of Minneapolis,” the old Near-Northside was an integrated Black and Jewish community that was destroyed for the construction of Olson Memorial Highway. What was once 6th Avenue, a thriving community and place of commerce, is now a trench of traffic polluting the neighborhood and causing safety concerns for residents.

Imagine the aliveness of 6th Avenue in the mid-1900s and discover how anti-Black and anti-Jewish decisions and policies expedited its destruction.

What void did the destruction of 6th Avenue create? How does that void still impact us today?

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**TIMELINE**

**1870-1890**

6th Ave N, Pre-Highway

In place of the current highway used to be a lively business district in North Minneapolis.

**1890-1940**

Construction of Highway 55

All the businesses and homes along the north side of 6th Ave N were torn down in preparation for the highway.

**1950-1960s**

Expansion and Redevelopment

Olson Highway widening and Glenwood Redevelopment leads to demolition of south side of the street.

**1960s**

I-94 Arrives, Further Division

Arrival of Interstate 94, more displacement adjacent to former 6th Avenue North.
THE BEALE STREET OF MINNEAPOLIS

Like Beale Street was to blues music in Memphis, 6th Avenue was to jazz (and later funk) in Minneapolis. Not only was it 6th at the heart of a boundary-pushing music movement, it also attracted entrepreneurs and served people from many backgrounds to come and make their mark. During the first half of the 1900s, 6th Avenue North and its surrounding neighborhood was a Black and Jewish cultural hub, where residents worked, shopped, played, and learned together.

When Jewish immigrants arrived toward the end of the 19th century, the Near-Northside was a collection of aging stately homes and brick storefronts. By the 1920s, the area experienced an influx of Black entrepreneurs and families looking to put down roots in the lively neighborhood.

The Avenue was narrow, its sides packed from Lyndale to Penn, with everything a community member could need within walking distance. It was also a place of city disinvestment and limited resources, where buildings and employment could be unstable.

Nearby blacks housed influential Jewish and Black youth and community centers that would help shape music and culture, labor rights and housing laws, and activist thinking to this day.

“The North Side was a complete neighborhood: it had all the institutions and commercial establishments that Jewish communities need. It also had its great men and women, and it had its rogues.”

—North Side Memories: Upper Midwest Jewish History, 2000

COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT

Thriving along 6th Avenue was supported by community leaders and the gathering places they founded in the blocks nearby. Neighbors came together to construct significant buildings as social support and community hubs. Along with churches and synagogues, these were the community cornerstones that allowed life along 6th Avenue to flow. They played major roles in sparking interest for youth in music, including young Prince and Jimmy Jam “Jimmy Jam” Harris III.

Emanuel Cohen and Phyllis Wheatley were two settlement houses, social support and gathering centers with safe accommodations and live-in staff. Settlement houses spread in popularity in the late 19th century in response to poor urban living conditions. Their values included respect, reciprocity, cross-class collaboration and strength-based contributions to the community.

SEGMAGATION AND HOUSING COVENANTS

Black and Jewish residents were congregated around 6th Avenue because of segregation, and the systematic denigration of their communities. Legal tools allowed bankers and the government to limit Black and Jewish residents from living anywhere but “less desirable” neighborhoods.

Racially restrictive deeds, or covenants, prevented the sale of housing to non-white people, including Jews, concentrating minorities in specific neighborhoods.

In 1933, the federal Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) “redlined” neighborhoods like the Near-Northside for mixing “incompatible” racial and social groups, deemed to create “instability” and a decline in property values. Redlining limited residents’ ability to obtain funds to own or improve homes and businesses.

The HOLC manual advised that a “high speed traffic artery may prevent the expansion of inharmonious uses.”

Government officials targeted 6th Avenue North for its “inharmonious uses”: a mix of Black and Jewish residents living with aging infrastructure and a lack of generational wealth. In 1931, the City of Minneapolis labeled the neighborhood “blighted” for its dilapidated buildings, which residents could not get loans to repair.

SOUNDS ON 6TH

The musical influence of 6th Avenue is hard to overstate. Touring and local jazz musicians played here after downtown gigs and for events. Up-and-coming artists flocked to Corner clubs, or small bar-venues, to jam and learn from the greats.

Black musical icons and dynasties emerged from this neighborhood over the decades, including the Youngs, Pettifords, and Nelsons. Like many other Black families, Prince’s maternal grandparents—the Shaws—came to Minnesota as part of the Great Migration of African Americans moving north to escape the Jim Crow South.

For African Americans in the late 1920s, Clarence Miller remembered, “The Avenue was their only outlet for enjoyment after six days of hard labor on their jobs in those years. It was said that a Sunday was not a Sunday if you didn’t get to 6th Avenue.”

—The Clarence Miller Memory Map, around 1950s
The Corner, detailed closeup from Clarence Miller's memory map, which he described as "The reflections of my neighborhood…from the year 1924 thru the year 1929," which was "the pinnacle period for Negroes in and near 6th Avenue and Lyndale Avenue North."

Several community gathering places converged at the Corner. Keneseth Israel synagogue was just south of the Kistler Building and across from Brochin's delicatessen.

The store was where leaders would meet "to iron out any problem that confronted the Jewish community." Ben Brochin remembered. Then they would head over to the synagogue for larger meetings. Keneseth Israel was "the biggest meeting place of all...it seemed like there were mass meetings going on all the time during World War I and right after...when the...pogroms were taking place."

—Ben Brochin, son of Solomon Brochin of Brochin's delicatessen, North Side Memories, 2000. The pogroms were state-sanctioned Russian campaigns that persecuted Eastern European Jews from 1881 through World War I, resulting in immigration to the US.

"It was a place unlike any other in Minneapolis—more diverse, more dangerous, more disadvantageous, but also somehow, more alive."

—W. Harry Davis, Sr., Overcoming, 2002

Historically denied membership to many white fraternity groups, Black community members organized a Minneapolis branch of the Elks Club in 1906. The Ames Lodge 106 became a place where Black Elks could gather for social, political, and economic support and advancement. This image shows Ruben Warren (seated in the backseat on the passenger side), three-time president of the Elks Club and owner of the Royal Barber Shop on the Lyndale side of the Kistler, riding in the Elks Car during the Aquatennial Parade in the 1940s.

"I had been invited to attend a meeting at the old Elks Club...to talk about whether we should have a union. From there on, [I] kept right on talking union and before we knew it, we had enough people to call together" — Civil rights leader Nellie Stone Johnson, on formation of the Local 665, Hotel and Restaurant Workers union, in 1935. Interview, 1981.

KISTLER ON THE CORNER

When the family of Dr. James Kistler constructed the building in 1889, they envisioned it serving both as a business and a resource hub to other businesses. For the next 68 years, the building was home to Jewish and Black-owned businesses of the Near-Northside, experiencing particular abundance.

3rd floor of the Kistler:
(mostly music & dance clubs)
- 1890-1920 Kistler offices, Oddfellows, community hall, athletic clubs
- 1921-22 Elks Club (moved to 148 Highland)
- 1920s-30s Kit Kat Club, Kit Kat, Howard's Steak House,
- Harlem Breakfast, Kongo, Rhomaggio, and more.

From social dances to late night jams, the Corner was the focal point of music culture on the Avenue. Many clubs came and went:
- The Cotton Club, Kit Kat, Howard's Steak House,
- The Cotton Club, 766 6th Avenue North, Courtesy St. Louis Park Historical Society
- The Corner, 768 6th Avenue North, Courtesy St. Louis Park Historical Society
- Club Kongo
- The Cotton Club, King Kong and His Mates, Owner: William "B" Cross, "King Kong".
- The Cotton Club was located at 768 6th Avenue North. The club was one of the most popular dance clubs in Minneapolis in the 1920s, and it was a favorite spot for African American musicians.
- Prince's parents—John Lewis "Prince Rogers" Nelson & Mattie Shaw—were also shaped by the music scene on the Corner. Nelson played jazz piano and formed the Prince Rogers Trio.

Weddings, bars and bat mitzvahs, a deli owner buying steamboat tickets for Jewish refugees, bootlegging, the city's first Black-owned grocery store, the hottest jazz and dances, and Foster's Sweet Shop hosting the conversations of labor organizers and other Black activists all existed on "The Corner."

From the early 1900s until the construction of Olson Memorial Highway in the late 1930s, the Corner of 6th and Lyndale was the focal point for all of the social and political activities of the neighborhood.

NORTHEAST ON THE CORNER: The 600 Block

Foster's Sweet Shop was located in a building on the north side of 6th Avenue, across from the Kistler Building in the 1920s and 30s. "The Minnesota Club," a group of Black civic leaders and activists, would gather to strategize for civil rights organization at Foster's.

"We met once a month in Foster's Sweet Shop on Sixth and Lyndale. We met in the back and all they wanted us to do if we met there was to buy a dish of ice cream." —Anthony B. Cassius, 20th Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project interview, 1981

The Keystone Bar, a Jewish-owned speakeasy serving mostly Black clientele, was located at 644 6th Avenue North. In 1938, the city bought them out for the construction of Olson Memorial Highway, and the bar moved across the street to the first floor of the Kistler.
"[Construction of Olson Memorial Highway] made my neighborhood's main street a thoroughfare where pedestrians were no longer comfortable and retail business no longer thrive."

—W. Harry Davis, Sr., Overcoming, 2002
As early as 1922, Black and Jewish Near-North residents called out white newspapers and the Minneapolis police department for abusive treatment.

Black and Jewish employment in Minneapolis was severely restricted by racism. During Prohibition and the Great Depression, liquor and late-night entertainment venues were some of the few employment opportunities available along 6th Avenue.

Motivated by racial bias, policymakers and police enforced laws and morality standards (such as alcohol use and racial integration) more harshly on the Near-Northside than in other parts of the city, oppressing residents and businesses in the 1920s and 30s. Under scrutiny and under fire, businesses traded hands, moved locations, and were forced to close, creating a distorted sense of instability and financial insecurity along the Avenue.

Even after beer was legalized in 1933, police, bankers, and city licensing councils continued to wage a multi-front battle against business owners, workers, and patrons.

These actions created a public perception, fueled by reporting in white newspapers, that 6th Avenue was lawless and “blighted.”

**What if the Avenue had been allowed to flourish?**

**REDEVELOPMENT, THE FINAL RAID**

John Ritchie came to Minneapolis in the late 1940s hoping to make his name in business. He found success transforming a small shoe shining stand at a bus depot into a chain of stands around Minneapolis and St. Paul. In 1954, he remodeled the third floor of the Kistler building, opening the Ebony Social Club where patrons came to hear musicians, like Prince Rogers playing in the Lewis Buggs band.

Throughout 1956, Minneapolis police repeatedly raided the club, arresting Ritchie. Each time, nearly all charges were dismissed in court. As a final blow, the Housing Redevelopment Authority bought the building in 1957, along with all others on the south side, for the expansion of Olson Memorial Highway and the Glenwood Redevelopment plan.

**BLACK AND TAN CLUBS**

Taverns and music venues serving primarily Black and mixed race clientele, known as “Black and Tan clubs,” flourished in the Prohibition period. In addition to a more racially progressive outlook, they generally welcomed other marginalized identities such as religious minorities and integrated groups. Because of their clientele and location in lower-income neighborhoods like Near-North, police and politicians considered them amoral and problematic. They were harassed, raided, and shut down over the decades. Redevelopment was often the final raid.

“In Minneapolis’ largest Negro district on the near North Side, Negroes and whites intermingled sufficiently to result in immorality.”

—“A Study of Minneapolis…a presentation of the geographic, community, and sociological factors characterizing each area,” by the Family Welfare Association, 1944.

This report covered everything from churches to industry, parks and the distribution of toilets, people of “mixed parentage” and the “desirability” of neighborhoods and distribution of “unsuitable” structures.
"What is this, Russia or something? Here I've slaved my head off for the last 36 years to buy and keep up this house, and the government comes around and says I have to leave."  
—Mrs. Mary A. Miller, Minneapolis Star, 1936

How different would the neighborhood have looked if residents had been consulted?

Olson Birthplace Memorial Sought

The city council Friday will be asked to seek federal funds for the preservation of Gov. Floyd B. Olson’s birthplace in north Minneapolis.

The roads and bridges committee Tuesday voted favorably on a request of the Farmer’s Labor association to have the council petition the federal government to preserve the Olson birthplace located in the Sumner field housing site.

A survey, preliminary to starting demolition of 141 houses, 11 stores and several hundred sheds in the area, was begun today by Roscoe Brothers, wrecking contractors, who were awarded the wrecking job. Replacing the buildings will start as soon as authority is received from FHA officials at Washington.

Johnson, Drake & Piper, Inc., Minneapolis contractors, were low bidders on the contract for construction of foundations for houses and apartments in the $3,500,000 federal housing project.

Sixth Avenue North was the section of Minneapolis where government planners tried out new concepts to eliminate the "problem of urban blight." "Blight" was a term used to mean "eyesores," pointing to the condition of buildings, but it effectively cloaked prejudice toward non-white neighborhoods and legitimized disinvestment and, frequently, demolition. It began in the 1930s with the construction of the Sumner Field Homes, Minnesota’s first federally-funded housing project. Designed to house the working poor in long brick row houses, they were unlike anything seen before in Minneapolis. A Minneapolis newspaper called it a "government experiment."

The same was true of Olson Memorial Highway. When it opened in the summer of 1940, newspapers called it the city’s first "super-highway."

In the eight decades that followed, a cycle repeated itself again and again on the Near-Northside: government-funded demolition done in the name of "improvement" pushed people out of their homes and businesses. Most of them were people of color. They had no say in the matter and were rarely consulted on the plans that forced them to leave.

TIMELINE OF DISPLACEMENT

1936-1938: Sumner Field Homes—1,100 people displaced

1938-1940: Olson Memorial Highway—all homes and businesses on the Near-Northside razed (except Sumner Library, moved 100 feet north)

1957: Olson Memorial Highway widened—homes and businesses on the south side demolished

1957: Glenwood Homes—400 families displaced

1968: I-94 created a new barrier between North Side neighborhoods and Downtown and displaced further residents

1990s: Sumner Field Homes demolished, Heritage Park built—1550 people displaced

2010-2020: Metro Blue Line light rail—planning and city-wide housing shortage leads to housing prices that displace further residents

SOUNDS ON 6TH

Music might have been displaced from 6th Avenue, but it still found a home on the Near-Northside.

In addition to tearing up the club circuit and releasing hit records, Maurice McKinnies became a celebrated figure in Near-North.

“They used to practice in the [Lyndale Homes] projects, and I lived in the projects...I would see his car drive around, and I would run and run and follow, because I knew who he was. Maurice McKinnies...they went and practiced down in the basement, and I jumped in the window well and watched them practice.”

—André Cymone, who at age 12 formed his first band with young Prince Rogers Nelson, The Current, 2018
RESONANCE & RESILIENCE

Each iteration of construction disrupted the Near-North community. Despite this cycle, residents and new arrivals, including Southeast Asian and African refugees, still found ways to thrive. Together, neighbors established youth and cultural centers and found places to make and share music, art, food, and history.

In 2012, towards the end of Heritage Park’s development, longtime civic leader T. Williams spoke to the desire of the community to take the reins: “We want to rebuild the North Side. Actually, what they’re saying is, ‘We want to build for the first time’. What we want to do is to connect, we want to stop hiding the place and creating space for you to dump your trash. We want to shed some light on it.”

—Theatrice “T” Williams, former director of Phyllis Wheatley, 1965-72.

SUMMER ACADEMY: BUILDING FUTURES

Glenwood Shopping Center as seen in the 1960s. One resident remembers seeing Ike and Tina Turner play for a grand opening in the early 1960s. Now a vocational training center, Summer Academy OIC occupies the former site of Glenwood Shopping Center.

On September 15, 1981, in a packed room at Summer Library, Mayor Angell got a talk about how poverty could be used as a strategy for survival. The event was part of “Minnesota Portrait of a Life” a National Endowment for the Humanities Learning Library program. The library is home to the Gary N.iidish African American History and Culture Collection, which Branch Librarian Grace Buhman helped to build in the 1970s. Courtesy Hennepin County Library.

An addition was built on Summer Library in 2004 and the library was renovated by architect Mohammed Laredo and Peter Salzman, who grew up going to the library. Continuing History played at the 100th anniversary of the library. The 2004 addition with raised ceiling can be seen in the background. Courtesy Sparkman Recorders, October 14, 2015

SOUNDS ON 6TH: KMOJ

In 1975, just after Maurice McKinnies left Minneapolis, KMOJ set up shop in the Glenwood-Lyndale Community Center behind what is now Summer Academy OIC. Rooted on the Near-Northside, the community center provided new space for local musicians until it was condemned in 2007. Now located on Broadway, the station continues to connect longtime listeners and new fans.

Prince’s Roots

Prince’s roots are inextricably tied to Near-Northside community centers and the musical culture of 6th Avenue. He met some of his bandmates at The Way, where they took music lessons. Prince also performed with his high school band, Grand Central, at competitions at Phyllis Wheatley. In these competitions Prince gained the skills to launch his solo career.

We have lost some of the documentation of the musicians before Prince. The highway was an instrument that resulted in decimation of the Black musical heritage that existed for almost a century in the area. Prince, however, represents the rich cultural legacy of 6th Avenue.

NEW NEIGHBORS

Starting in the early 1970s, many Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees moved into Summer and Glenwood housing. When a court case threatened to take the developments down, the Southeast Asian community feared that displacement would also mean the loss of their new home.

“The opposition to demolition and dispersal from the Southeast Asian community on the North Side was based on three complaints: that the dispersal of families destroyed their community networks, that they had not been full partners in the negotiations process, and that the relocation process had not been sensitive to their needs.”

— Hallman v. Cisneros, 2002

SUMMER LIBRARY: COMMUNITY CONTINUITY

In 1994, several local artists and community members joined Dr. John Rogers, Terence Allen, and Sue Jones to create the Celebration of Life mural, spanning 242 feet on a wall near Loring 64, the result artistic celebration of African history and culture welcomed people to Near-North until its destruction in 2014. Courtesy City of Minneapolis

THE WAY: CHAMPIONS FOR ART & CHANGE

If the maps and overlapping storylines seem dizzying, it is not by accident. Disrupted history results in disrupted portraits, geographies, and timelines.

The story of 6th Avenue North is a poignant picture of the devaluation and ultimate demolition of a community’s assets through state-led harm. Government leaders and city planners sacrificed 6th Avenue for the needs of people who didn’t live on the Near-Northside. It became a place to funnel traffic, a place to experiment on solutions to exploitative housing systems. And yet, the rich legacy of culture, business success, and racial integration shine a light on the necessity to bring back 6th Avenue North. The present form of Olson Memorial Highway is not a foregone conclusion. It has been remade, many times over. This time, let’s remake it for the people who live here.

From this layered collage of time and place emerges a vision of a walkable, livable, and persistently vibrant avenue that can be reimagined and rebuilt today. The voices from the past and present can speak together for a new, more community-centered version of The Avenue.

CONCLUSION

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