

# Water Works

## Reclaiming a Forgotten Space in the Heart of the City

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### / Location /

Minneapolis, MN

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### / Category /

General Design

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### / Abstract /

For the development of this major downtown park and visitor building, the client selected the landscape architect as lead consultant, with a team of eleven sub-consultants. The landscape architect led the design effort which celebrates the stories of the site and rehabilitated existing historic structures. Engaging with sub-consultants as diverse as archaeologists and Indigenous linguists, the design communicates a multicultural historic presence. With sustainability at the forefront, reuse of historic structures, relics, remnants, and rainwater are features. As lead consultant, the landscape architect was responsible for directing and managing the design effort, team coordination, communication with funders, public engagement support, document development, cultural interpretation, and construction administration.

## / Narrative /

Located in downtown Minneapolis, on the Mississippi River and near St. Anthony Falls, the project site is culturally important to both Indigenous peoples and the city. Once a well-traveled portage around the falls, the riverbank was claimed by rail; and mills were powered by the river during the industrial era.

Over time, the area transformed into a forgotten industrial remnant. A lone Japanese entrepreneur saw the value in the riverfront location at a time when the city had turned its back on the water, and in 1968 moved her Japanese restaurant to a rehabilitated flour mill. In 1987, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board acquired the site of the restaurant and expanded West River Parkway, part of the Minneapolis Grand Rounds. Since then, the site had been left to decay. Years of construction debris was dumped onto the property, the restaurant deteriorated beyond repair, and volunteer growth obscured the eroding stone wall ruins that remained.

More than 2.6 million visitors a year flock to the Mill District, birthplace of Minneapolis, attracted by area museums, and the historic Stone Arch Bridge. This project had the overarching goals of connecting the city fabric to the river, providing a restaurant and services for visitors, and communicating the storied history of this place.

Recognizing that dozens of extant mill walls had structural, historic, and aesthetic value, the design team embarked on a plan that rehabilitated and embedded the walls into new interventions. Not as visually apparent, the cultural significance of the site to the Indigenous community became a story communicated through interpretive elements woven into design elements.

A 30 foot grade change on the site was a barrier between the river and city fabric. To address this issue, provide universal access, and create safer and more approachable space, the landscape architects designed accessible routes integrated into usable outdoor rooms. Flexibility for programming was a necessary key component.

To accommodate events, classes and celebrations, a turf panel was installed over a regional rainwater reuse cistern which collects water from adjacent rooftops for use in lavatories and irrigation.

During design, the landscape architects worked closely with archaeologists to understand and locate existing historic remnants, many of which were buried. Historic walls that were not incorporated into the visitor center were exposed, rehabilitated and integrated into exterior design features. Two heritage cottonwoods were protected through construction and incorporated into the design. One was incorporated into the entrance plaza. The tree is supported by the use of a permeable granite paver surface. The other provides important shade for the children's play area.

Two outdoor dining areas were designed for public and restaurant use. The second level terrace constructed within the walls of historic mill ruins connects to the Indigenous restaurant and highlights a magnificent

view of the falls. The main entrance plaza provides seating and fire features framed by a rehabilitated stone wall which amplifies the sound of the adjacent falls. Working with Indigenous consultants, the fire features were designed as circles to respect an important geometry relevant to Indigenous origin stories, and covers were designed by a Dakota bead-work artist to depict historic floral patterns and explain the significance of bead-work to this culture.

The Mississippi River has multicultural relevance to this site. In addition to a regional rainwater collection system, the design embedded interpretive language highlighting the importance of water. Overlooking the subsurface cistern, wooden bench tops cap cascading precast seating. Engravings on the

benches explain the rainwater reuse system, graphically exhibit the amount of water captured and reused every year and highlight the importance of water to all cultures using Dakota phrases also translated to English. Through this work with Dakota linguists, the site has become a Dakota Language learning site. In addition, the landscape architects worked with the Indigenous restaurant vendor to interpret many of the on-site plants. Largely native, the palette included many species which have a myriad of cultural, medicinal, ceremonial and food uses. Species were interpreted throughout the site, using both Dakota and English text.

Materials used in the design are intentionally subtle, including concrete, granite and galvanized metal; allowing the beauty of the historic walls to remain prominent. The simple palette was inspired by the historic industrial district and is amplified by the installation of thousands of native plant species.

Opening for use during Covid, the park and visitor center drew immediate attention, and the wildly successful Indigenous restaurant is enjoying skyrocketing popularity. The site has become a key destination for both the neighborhood and visitors to the Minneapolis and St. Paul Area.

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Water Works



# 01 river reconnected

## reclaiming a forgotten place in the heart of the city

Water Works transformed an abandoned remnant of public land into a civic space that reunited it with the city.

**"After 30 years of urban planning blunders, Water Works is a triumph."**

- Star Tribune

# from abandoned industrial remnant to celebrated civic

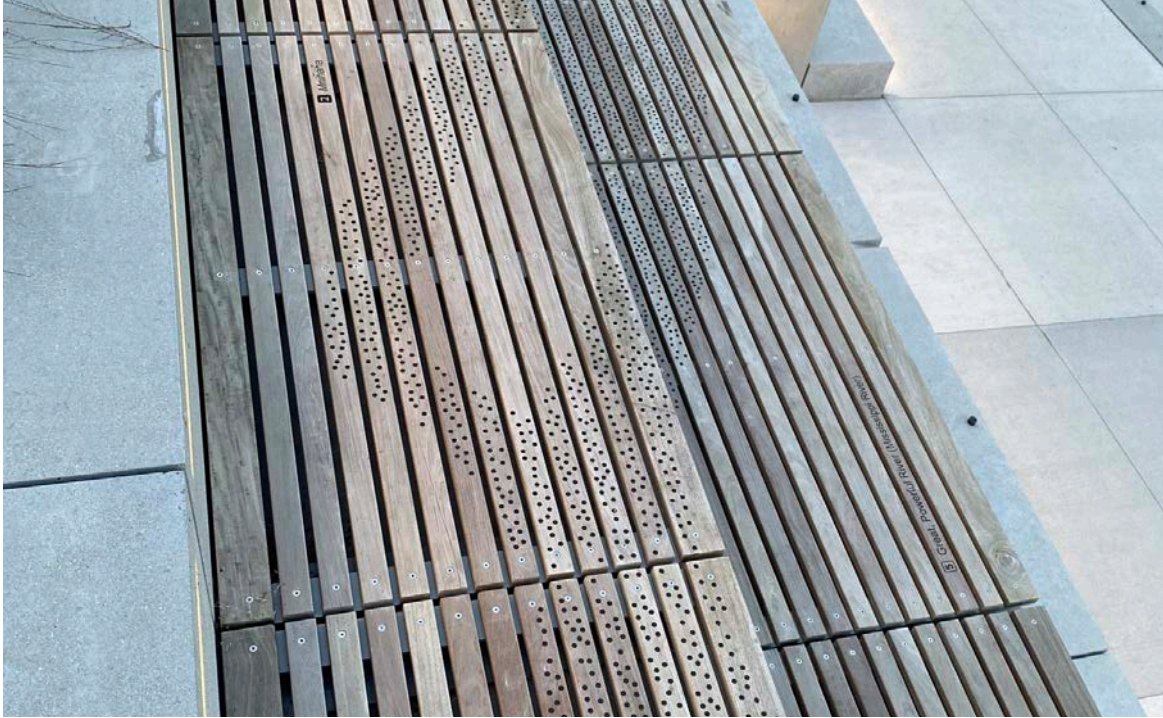
Long used as a dumping ground and home to abandoned historic structures, the site has been reimagined to celebrate its storied past and provide much needed public space and amenities in one of the most visited areas of Minneapolis.





**a place to  
experience the river**

**The narrow strip of land and extreme grade change belied its potential. The landscape architects thoughtfully incorporated once hidden cultural remnants into site features so visitors could experience history while enjoying a front row seat to the magnificent St. Anthony Falls.**



## water story

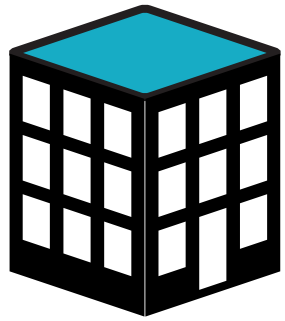
Bench tops are engraved with the shape of the river, each circle representing 50 gallons of water captured and reused on site. To communicate the importance of water cross-culturally, the landscape architects teamed with Dakota linguists to develop phrases describing the importance of water to Native culture, also engraved in Dakota and English.

01



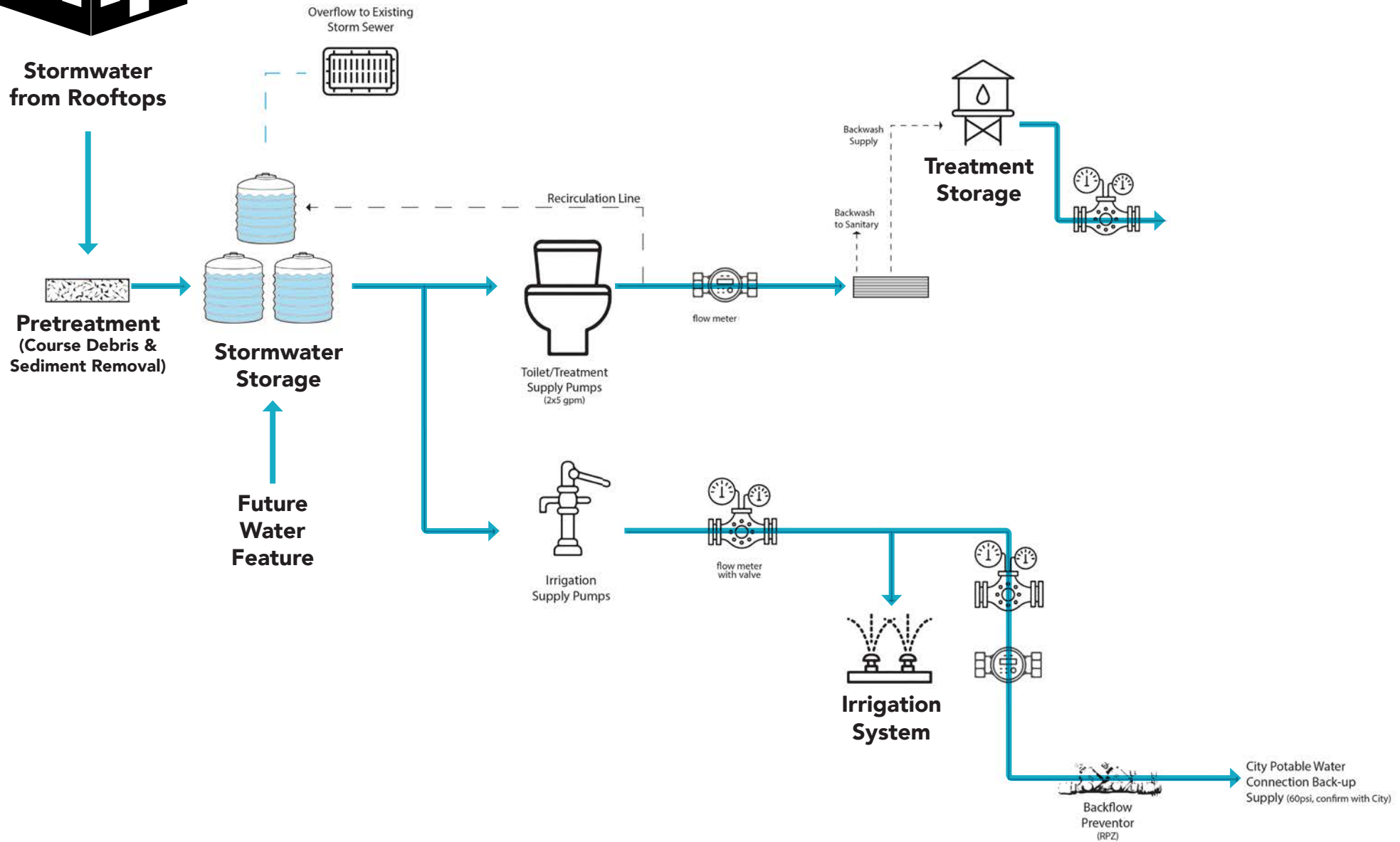
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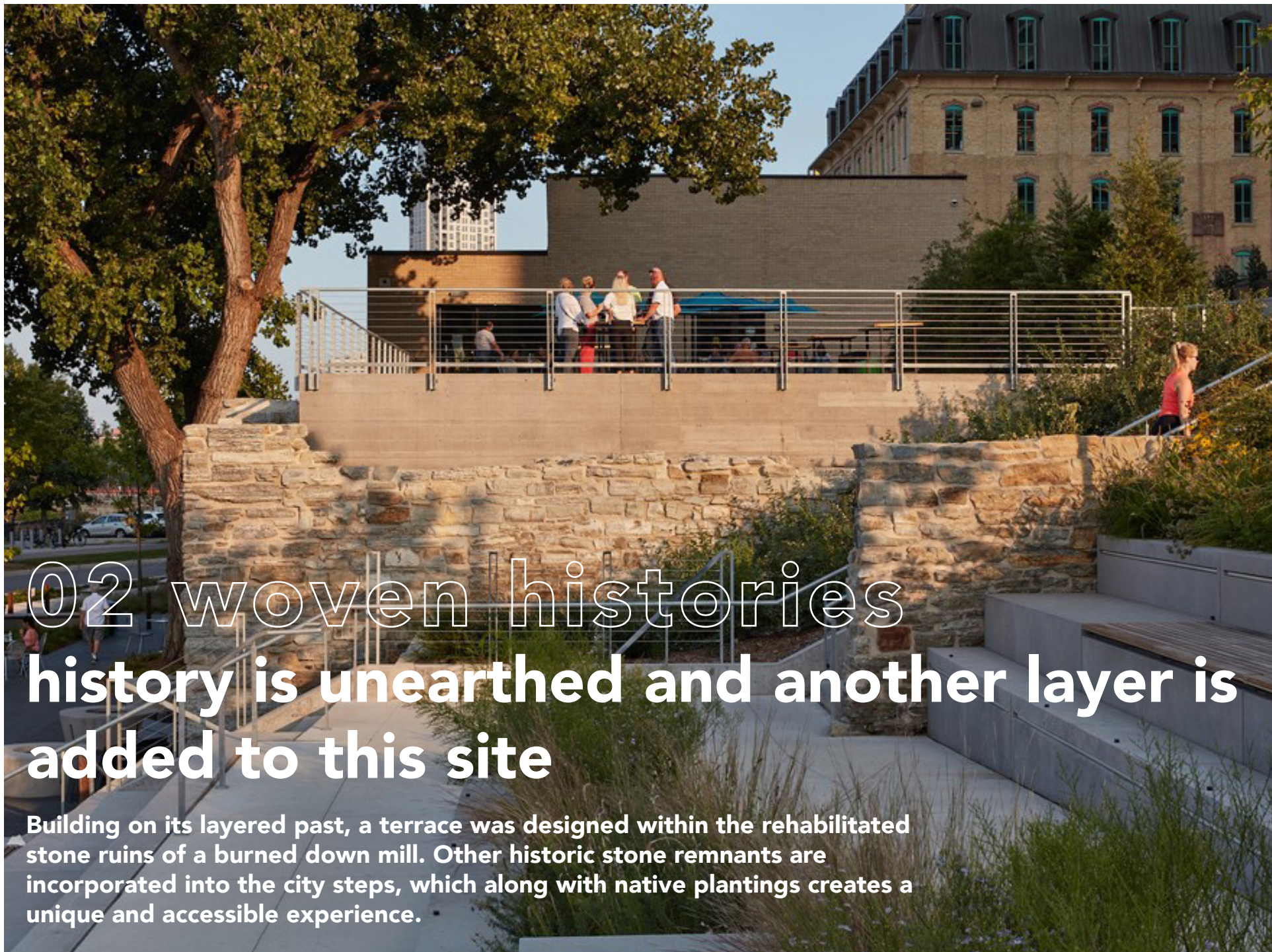




# water systems

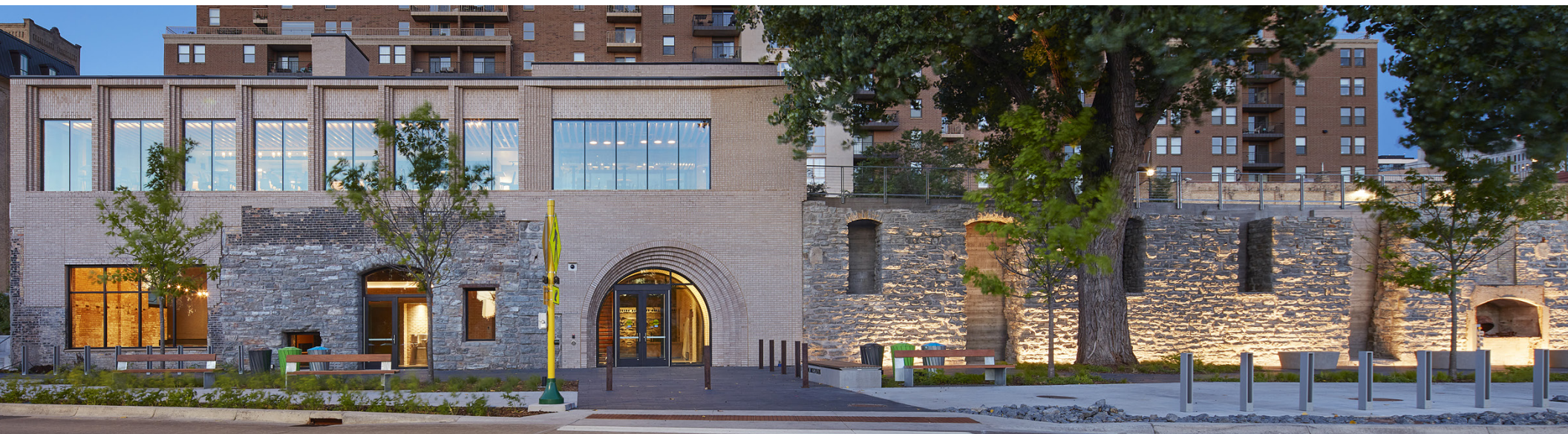
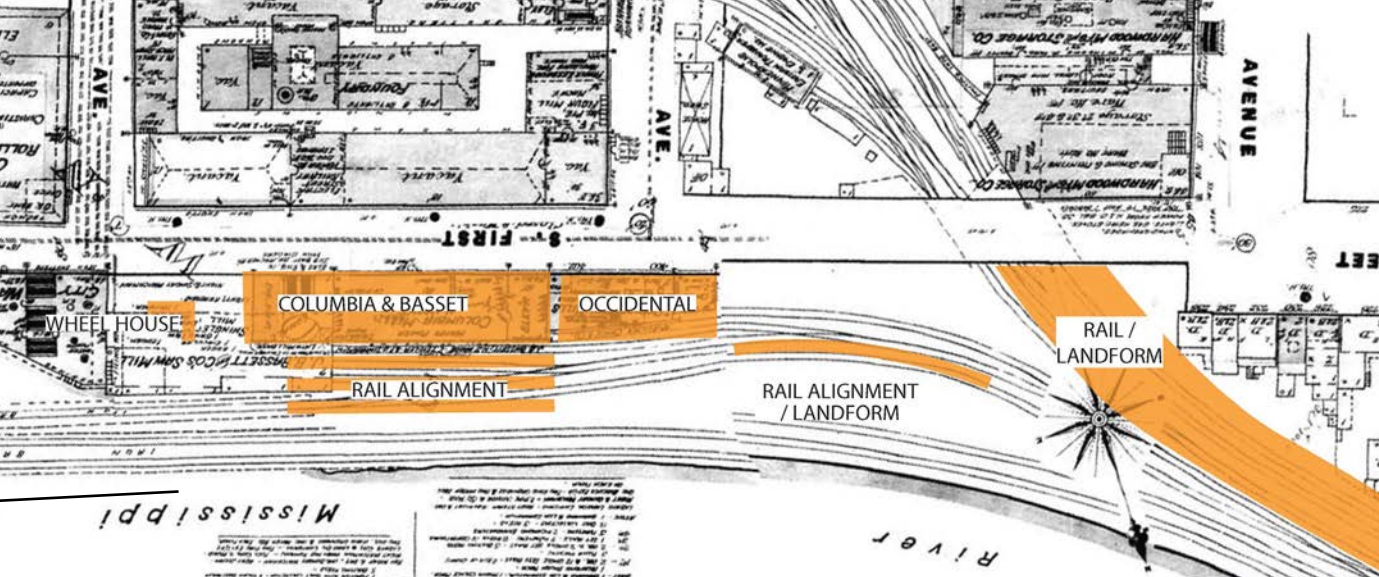
A cistern collects rainwater from several adjacent structures for lavatories within the buildings and irrigation throughout the site.





# 02 woven histories history is unearthed and another layer is added to this site

Building on its layered past, a terrace was designed within the rehabilitated stone ruins of a burned down mill. Other historic stone remnants are incorporated into the city steps, which along with native plantings creates a unique and accessible experience.



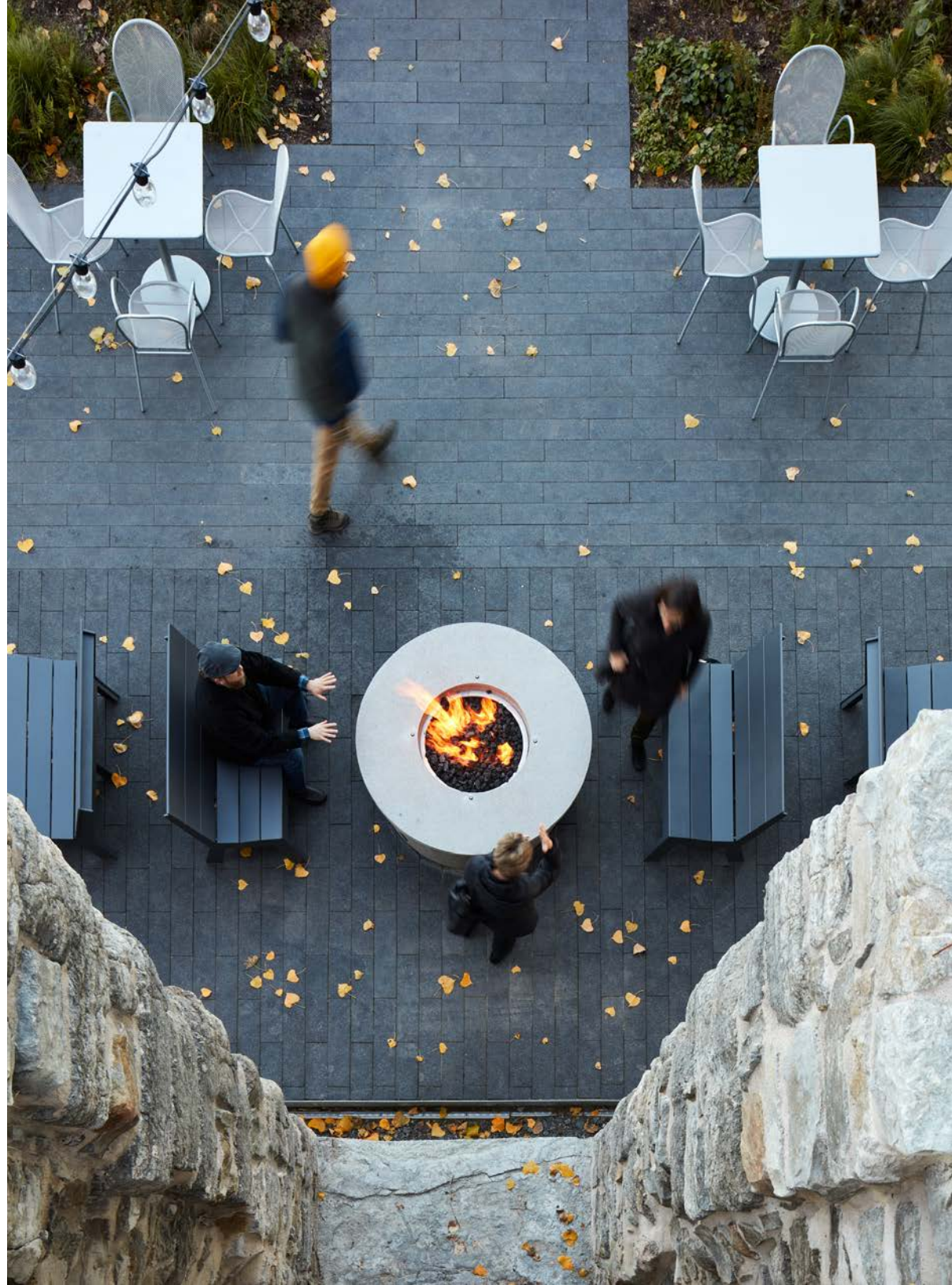
## leading a complex team

The landscape architects engaged an architect as their subconsultant to design a visitor center. Originally intended as new construction located on the opposite end of the park, the team worked collaboratively to convince the client to rehabilitate and repurpose existing mill ruins into a modern visitor amenity.



The cultural importance of the site to the Dakota was a hidden story. We worked with Dakota linguists, chefs and artists to communicate the Indigenous story. Custom fire features became circular; covers incorporate Dakota floral patterns designed by a bead-work artist and communicate the importance of this craft in both Dakota and English.

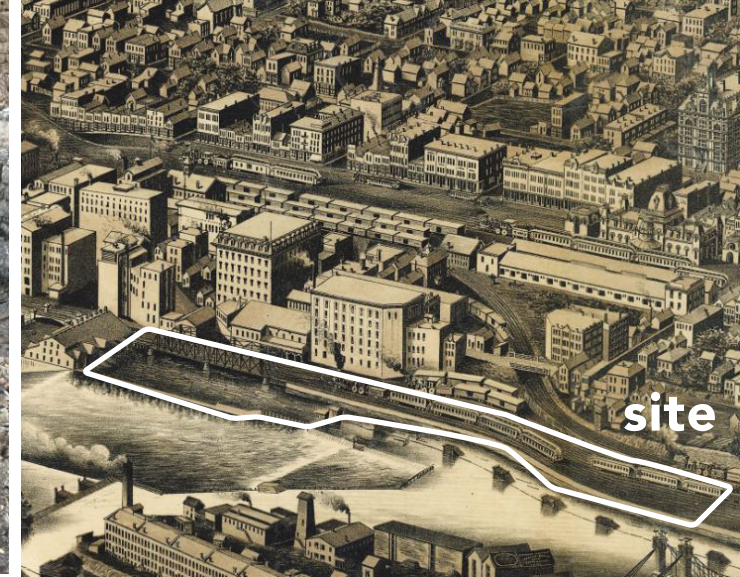
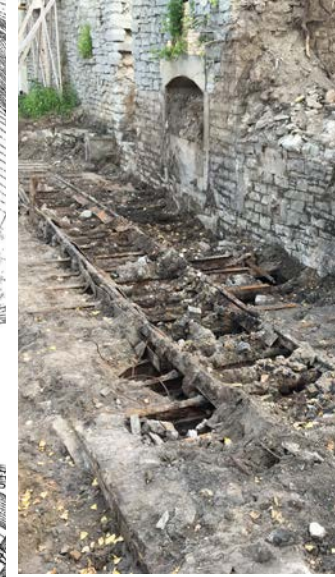
## interwoven interpretation





**Dakota linguists worked with the landscape architects to develop cross-cultural water related phrases engraved in the wood benches. Native plants were extensively used throughout the design. Working with Native chefs and advisors, interpretive signs communicate the medicinal, cultural, and food uses for many of the native species.**

**furthering the native story**



# industry + rail revealed

Once a rail corridor, the geometry of the design reflects the land pattern of the former tracks. In the main plaza, where trains pulled stopped in front of the mill walls, salvaged rails were used as bollards and an extant subsurface scale for weighing cars is expressed in the surface of the paving.

An aerial photograph of a city skyline at dusk. The sky is a deep blue with some light clouds. In the foreground, there is a park area with green grass, trees, and a paved walkway. A river or canal flows along the bottom edge of the frame. The city buildings are illuminated by the setting sun, creating a warm, golden glow. The text "03 respite in the city" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font at the top left. Below it, the text "a civic space that honors layers of history" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

# 03 respite in the city

## a civic space that honors layers of history

**Water Works is a welcoming and inclusive civic landscape, balancing active programming and events with opportunities for respite. Sustainable strategies and innovative programming are incorporated throughout the design, offering a vision for an enduring legacy landscape that honors a diverse history.**



**Located within a historic district, the design blends rehabilitated walls, land patterns and newly revealed historic resources with contemporary, design.**

**contemporary  
intervention in an  
historic context**





## play + living



**"Equally revolutionary for the neighborhood, there's a playground for small children —executed in natural wood rather than the usual eye-popping blue, red and yellow plastic." - Star Tribune**

**"After 30 years of urban planning blunders, Water Works is a triumph."**

*- Star Tribune*

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