

The Rondo Neighborhood

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(This is an article written by the opinions of EWB UMN students)

Everyone has a safe haven for their community. A safe haven is a sense of security where you and your community can flourish, and everyone has the right to know that their community will always be protected. For some, it can be a concert venue to listen to their favorite artist. For us struggling CSE students, it is our beloved Lind Hall. However, for the St. Paul African American community, their safe haven was once the Rondo neighborhood. The Rondo neighborhood was once a community where 80% of African Americans lived in St. Paul before the construction of highway I-94 from 1954-1968. The Rondo neighborhood was a beautiful, spirited, tight-knit community that had a rhythm of their own. Rondo was their safe-haven, their home, but the construction of highway I-94 pushed through and destroyed their livelihood.

Over 700 family homes were demolished.

300 businesses were closed.

Horrible compensation was left for their homes, creating a \$270 million home equity gap.

A diminishing 61% decline in the neighborhood population.

There were alternative routes for the construction of the I-94 highway, but because the Rondo neighborhood was an African American community, and the St. Paul demographer designated it as a “slum neighborhood,” they decided that it would be the better option. Additionally, during the time of high racial socioeconomic bias, black communities were seen as an easier target because their rights were stripped of any way to stop it.

This was not a technical engineering mistake, but rather a failure of engineers and the government in considering the social, political, economical and urban planning impact. The ignorance of ignoring these factors resulted in the forced displacement of many families with little compensation, further creating the racial bias of the equity gap in St Paul. This resulted in the destruction of a spirited community, with many businesses shut down and houses passed on generation to generation destroyed. Ultimately, this created heartbreak for the Rondo community, as nothing will ever be the same after the destruction of their homes.

This is why as engineers, we must be aware and educate ourselves in the non-technical aspects of engineering, because although the highway works, it is still known as a social and moral failure that divided the Rondo neighborhood in half, physically and emotionally.

As of today, there is a Rondo memorial plaza along with an annual *Rondo Days Celebration*, where the community shows that the spirit of Rondo still breathes. Currently, a project known as *Reconnect Rondo* will bring a land bridge over the highway of I-94 to “right past wrongs” and bring in the “long overdue social justice” for the Rondo neighborhood while also creating a hopeful future.

As engineers and, more importantly, humans, efforts like the Rondo land bridge does not undo our past, but it does create hope, and it is our responsibility to uphold integrity, transparency, equality, and accountability for what we have done in the past and what we will do in the future.

It is important to be conscious about the non-technical aspects of engineering, and I hope that we all consciously remind ourselves of the social, political, ethical, and economical impacts of engineering. And the next time we drive over the I-94 highway, let us remind ourselves that the Rondo community was once there.

Sources

“History.” ReConnect Rondo, 27 July 2021, reconnectrondo.com/vision/history/.