

0:00 **Anish:**  
Hello and welcome to "Freshwater Radio," a show about society's relationship to water in the Great Lakes basin. Produced out of the Freshwater Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I'm your host, Anish Tailor. Today, we're talking about the Chicago River, why it looks the way it does, and what the future holds for the river. But before we get to it, we're going to start on the other side of the Atlantic.

*{fade in background sounds recorded by Allison Neubaur}*

00:30 **Anish:**  
I'm walking through Toulouse, France. The streets are narrow and cobblestone like you see in the movie, Hugo. The buildings are stout, 2-4 story, classical looking buildings. They've got columns on the facades, red clay shingles, mansard roofs, cast iron grates on the windows. Every now and then I see a painted wooden flowerbox hanging on the outside of a window.

00:50 The sun is setting and giving off that tangerine golden hue. The bricks in Toulouse are pink, so when they are kissed by the sun it emanate this rich goldenness. It's SO resplendent here.

I don't know exactly what direction I'm walking in, all I know is that I'm going towards the river. Toulouse is on the Garonne River in the south west of France. There are signs pointing towards Place de la Daurade and Place St Pierre, and I follow them through the winding, narrow, French streets of Centre Ville or downtown. The brick buildings are tall enough to frame the street, but short enough to let the evening sunlight shine on the cobblestone street path.

01:23 I turn a corner and the street opens up onto this plaza. There's a grassy lawn that's below grade with a wide ramp descending down to the lower level where there are people just hanging out on the lawn. At street level, a narrow roadway encircles the plaza on three sides where mini cars, bicycles and pedestrians mix and intermingle together on a path that has no lane markings. As I walk down the really wide ramp to go down to the below-grade lawn, I see maybe a few hundred people lounging around, chilling on the lawn. There's a playground where kids are running through. There are trees of various ages. Some newly planted stalks, some with great trunks and shade canopies. The lawn is perpendicular to the river and it gives way to the granite pathway that runs alongside the river. There are 3-4 steps leading off the lawn and onto the granite pathway and you walk maybe 50 more feet before you arrive the riverbank, where the granite stone pathway forms a ledge where maybe a hundred more people are sitting with their feet dangling.

02:18 The whole atmosphere is festive and jovial. I felt like I wanted to stick around and stay for a while. The environment around me encouraged me to sit down, and take in the sights, and soak in the view. It felt like I was "somewhere," like the place had its own unique identity.

02:32 **Leo:**  
The Garonne River is a kind of central point of Toulouse. When you want to have just a place to chill with friends, to have beers, just to talk. Just to have a date with someone you used to go along the river. There are some places la Daurade. la prairie des Filtres. When you want to just hang out.

03:02 **Anish:**  
This is a friend of mine, he's an exchange student from Toulouse.

03:06 **Leo:**  
My name is Leo Marty, and I'm a student at UIC for an exchange program with the south of France in Toulouse.

- 03:15 **Anish:**  
Back to France - I continued walking along the river, and I come across the other plazas Leo mentioned. Place St Pierre, and la prairie d'filtreq@%@ {butcher name}
- 03:26 **Leo:**  
"prairie des Filtres" hahaha
- 03:31 **Anish:**  
Sorryyyy for butchering the name. But as I was walking up and down the river bank, each open space felt as festive and inviting as the last.
- 03:39 **Leo:**  
the thing I like is that you can do anything you want, especially in la prairie des Filtres. I used to go there with friends in the middle of the day with a six pack of beer and a ball to play soccer or to play whatever you want and you can do what you want. No one is going to tell you something because there is a lot of space and no one is watching you. That's why I like this place because there is a lot of green and a lot of trees.
- 04:17 **Anish:**  
So the river itself feels like a place that people go to for the purpose of socializing and spending time with one another. And I wondered. Why doesn't the Chicago River feel this way?
- 04:26 You're listening to Freshwater Radio, a show about society's relationship to water in the Great Lakes Basin produced out of the Freshwater Lab at the University of Illinois at Chicago.
- 04:36 Today we're going to be talking about the Chicago River and the plans to make it more livable. We'll be talking with an urban planner/architect about what the plans that are in store for the Chicago River. And we'll be talking with a community organizer about what their plans leave out. Back in a minute, on Freshwater Radio.
- 04:50 *{fade in "La Mer" by Charles Trenet}*
- 05:11 **Anish:**  
Let's talk about what the Chicago River felt like for me the first time I saw it. I moved to Chicago in January 2019. It was too cold to go out and walk around, exploring. So, I didn't venture out until later in the spring, when I got tickets to see West Side Story, which played at the Lyric Opera House on Wacker and Madison. I thought, "This is perfect. It's less than a 30 minute walk from UIC campus, I can take a stroll and see some of downtown." So I headed North on Halstead and took a right on Madison. When I got to the bridge to cross the river, I thought, "Oh this is the river?" The back of all the buildings were facing the river. It looked more like a water alley. It was not at all what I was expecting.
- 05:50 Some time after that, a friend of mine invited me to meet her for lunch. She works downtown and suggested we have lunch outside on the Riverwalk. I thought, "Oh there's a Riverwalk? Where was that, how did I miss that last time?" We decide to meet at Michigan and Wacker because her office is near there. As I walked over from UIC Campus, I half expected to see signs for the Riverwalk or some sort of wayfinding signage pointing out the direction towards the riverfront. I didn't see any, so when I got to the intersection, I didn't know we had to go downstairs for the Riverwalk. We crossed Wacker and got a quarter way up the Michigan Ave bridge before realizing we missed the stairs. So we turned around and saw the stairs tucked away in a corner.

06:28 When we got down stairs to the Riverwalk path, I thought, "Oh, okay this isn't bad." There were lots of people, there was a lively buzz. There were a few benches to sit on, but there were more people moving to and fro on the walk way. There's a wine bar we popped into, but a glass was \$15 so we opted out of it since it was way out of my price range. Continuing up the path, there was a section of terraced seating that stair-stepped up to street level. We found an empty spot and sat down to eat.

06:54 It was a beautifully designed space. There were some beautiful architecturally significant skyscrapers that could be viewed from the walkway. But it felt more like a riverfront that people moved through, as opposed to a riverfront that was a destination in and of itself where people spent time.

07:09 **Leo:**  
It's kind of like a museum. You go from bridge to bridge, and you just see one tower. So it's really wonderful because you see a lot of beautiful things and I like it. But it's not a place to spend time, but a place to show the good parts of city.

07:31 **Anish:**  
Yeah it's a cool place to maybe show out-of-town visitors. It's got a cool design to it. It's a great place for architecture buffs. But I wouldn't necessarily spend hours strolling along the Chicago River, like I did in Toulouse. Why does Chicago's river look like this? To learn more, I spoke with Carol Ross Barney, Chicago native and Design Principal at Ross Barney Architects, the chief design firm of the river walk.

07:53 **Carol:**  
I'm Carol Ross Barney. I'm an architect and a planner. I have my own firm Ross Barney Architects. And I am professor of architecture at IIT.  
Chicago gets its great boost, its urbanization happens basically in the 19th and 20th century. And the economy at the time is this amazing industrial economy. And people are learning how to make things in a different way. And so Chicago develops this massive industrial power and because it depends on transportation and water it's along the river. And that characterizes the riverfront and our city.

08:37 **Anish:**  
For most of Chicago's history, the river was used for industrial purposes. It was a shipping canal to move raw materials to processing plants, and finished goods to market. So the reason that most of the river looks like a "water alley" is because it has traditionally been used as a transportation corridor for barges. But the City of Chicago has a desire to change that, and to bring more people to the river, to activate, and to make it a nice place for people to be. They have partnered with the Metropolitan Planning Council, or MPC, to carry out this vision in a planning document titled "Our Great Rivers."

09:07 Carol was a consultant on the "Our Great Rivers" document, which was produced in 2016 by MPC in partnership with the Friends of the Chicago River, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, and the City of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> You can read the report online at [greatriverschicago.com](http://greatriverschicago.com). It sought to make the Chicago River a better place and The Riverwalk is a manifestation of this desire. Its three specific goals are to make both the Chicago and Calumet Rivers more Inviting, Productive, and Living. City leaders believe that rivers present lots of opportunities for all citizens of Chicago.

09:41 **Carol:**

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<sup>1</sup> "Our Great Rivers." (2016). Retrieved at: <http://greatriverschicago.com/uploads/cms/documents/our-great-rivers.pdf>

In fact our role, Ross Barney Architect's role in the "Our Great Rivers" project was to illustrate some of those opportunities. One of the drawings in the book, for example, is in the southwest part of Chicago at the Collateral Channel, which right now is not asset in the community. And our illustration, by the way, which came out of meeting with community groups, we just didn't go to the river and think of these things. One of the things that I think MPC very wisely did is they set up a conversation. And then basically our illustrations are a result from that conversation. But for that particular project it imagines that this unused, disreputable canal could be turned into a neighborhood swimming area.

10:31 **Anish:**

So, "Our Great Rivers" is a plan to beautify the river and make it a destination where people want to linger and socialize. The authors have even reached out to communities along the river to gain input on how it should look in the future. That being said, Edith Tovar with the Little Village Environmental Organization has a different perspective.

10:48 **Edith:**

Yeah so my name is Edith Tovar. I'm a community organizer with the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization.

And so looking at the renderings they created right, on the collateral channel it's like people kayaking, people doing recreational activities near that waterway. To me, it's like disturbing knowing how many toxins there are in that area and the lack of conversation that exists with the Army Corps of Engineers, MWRD, City of Chicago. There are no conversations about how the remediation process is going to look like. Especially given you have MPC pushing for these areas to be reimagined and redeveloped, and it's like, "Woah, that's scary." You can't have these types of conversations without addressing other important health risks.

11:55 **Anish:**

The "Our Great Rivers" report contains plans to transform the river along the South Branch of the Chicago River, where industrial corridors are currently located. But the report leaves out key factors that are important to the people who are living right next to the industrial corridor. Here was Edith's response after seeing the report.

12:12 **Edith:**

I felt like my community's history was erased. There was no accountability, or even statement of all these industries that were here for decades. They polluted, they did industrial dumping on this site - one of the reasons why Collateral Channel is known as "ass creek," right. Looking at it, I felt very removed. Like I wasn't there, but I was there.

12:42 **Anish:**

And regarding the community outreach that planners at MPC did...

12:47 **Edith:**

I think, people within the spaces are so contained with time that they have to reach a certain time frame. We can only do three months of engagement. But for the community, the population ranges from 75-90,000, three months is not a good time for you to capture a large amount of engagement. So I think within these spaces you have to slow your roll lol and really think about what are some ways... And obviously, like MPC did do a great job of at least collaborating with community organizations. At least like orgs that do have a good gauge. But there is a lack of continued outreach. Even though you collaborated with one org, you can't really rely on that one org to do all of your community engagement. It's not possible or fair for one organization to do that much legwork.

14:06 **Anish:**

We start to see a tension within the plan for the River here. If you recall, one of the goals of MPC's "Our Great Rivers" plan is to make the river *productive*. So, it explicitly states that in addition to making it inviting to people, they want to continue to use the as a transportation waterway for industrial users. The Chicago River is, after all, still a working river, as an official from the Department of Transportation told me.

- 14:29 MPC's goal to make the Chicago River productive, inviting, and living all at the same time is actually illustrative of a conflict that urban planners face between three competing interests: economic development, social equity, and environmental protection. It's like that impossible triangle where you can only choose two. It's hard to do all three because these divergent interests conflict in different ways. First there's a conflict that arises from competing uses of the river. You can make the river inviting to people by building a Riverwalk, trails, pathways, gardens, parks, boating facilities, kayaks rental docks, swimming holes and other recreational facilities for the public. But then all of that will get in the way of industrial barges who are using the river to transport raw materials and goods. So it's an open question how any plan would do both at the same time.
- 15:17 Then there is the tension between the economic utility of the river for the industrial base, and the ecological utility of the river to the Great Lakes Basin. On the one hand, the Chicago River is an integral shipping channel, while on the other hand it is an important component of the Great Lakes ecosystem.
- 15:34 And then there's the issue of how to increase social equity and protect the environment at the same time.<sup>2</sup> You can build recreation facilities on the river for people to go boating, jogging, walking, swimming, or strolling. But is that necessarily the best thing for the natural environment?
- 15:49 What do these inherent tensions mean for the Chicago River? Well, Chicago is currently in the middle of a transition. It's in the process of de-industrializing. Over a hundred years ago, as we learned from Carol, industry came to Chicago and built up the city. At that time, the river was used as a transportation artery, and to dispose of industrial waste, turning it into a foul cesspool of toxic sludge crowded with barges. But now, the global economy is changing and the industries that brought a lot of money to Chicago and built the city up have mostly left. So there's an opportunity to make it into something new.
- 16:21 **Carol:**  
It's not a long story historically. Chicago is not even a teenager when it comes to being a city. This is a very new city. So the period of time when the river was despicable wasn't all that long. But you're starting to see a more mature city. And this report, "Our Great Rivers," is a beginning of a thought about how a river system works in the city. And how valuable it can be.
- 16:57 **Anish:**  
So the Chicago River looks the way it does because the culture of water in this town started as one of industry. The Chicago Riverwalk, and the rest of the plan in the "Our Great Rivers" report was a starting point to change the culture of water here, to something more inviting, where people interact with and engage with the water more. But because they are balancing that with making the river livable and productive, they didn't hit all the marks. Communities along the river like Little Village don't necessarily feel like the plan reflects what they want to see. So, as Chicago matures into adulthood, in the next iteration of the River, hopefully city leaders will listen more to local community organizations, expand outreach, conduct longer engagements, and produce something that's more in line with what neighborhood leaders who live along the river want to see.

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<sup>2</sup> Campbell, Scott. (1996). "Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities? Urban Planning and the Contradictions of Sustainable Development." *Journal of the American Planning Association*. 62(3). Retrieved at <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/greencities/files/2014/08/Campbell1.pdf>

17:41 *{fade in "Je Ne Regrette Rien"}*

17:54 **Anish:**

That's our show. Our program was produced by me, Anish Tailor. Special thanks to Juan Sebastian Arias, Carol Ross Barney, the City of Chicago Department of Transportation, Rachel Havrelock, Leo Marty, Allison Neubaur, Nate Roseberry, Edith Tovar, Steve Schlickman, and Sanjeev Vidhyarti.

This has been "Freshwater Radio." A show about society's relationship to water in the Great Lakes Basin. I'm Anish Tailor, from the University of Illinois at Chicago, sending you freshwater wishes.

Thanks for listening.