

## **The Memorable Chippewa Falls Riverfront Park**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discussed the Riverfront Park in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. The park is described as on the Chippewa River, close to the Xcel Energy dam with swinging park benches, a trail, and water fountains located in the charming downtown. The author discussed the park as memorable to her based on fun, loving memories she has with family, friends, and lovers. The location was then examined through the lens of place attachment theory and proxemics theory. The main components of the place attachment theory focused on memories the author made within the place with different people. Proxemics theory focused on the use of personal space of park benches and sidewalks.

## **The Notable Chippewa Falls Riverfront Park**

Written to address the memorability of the Riverfront Park of Chippewa Falls, WI., this paper describes the memories associated with the park. The paper addresses the memorability using both the place attachment theory and proxemics theory. Place attachment theory describes the way one is emotionally connected to a place/space based on memories. Proxemics theory further explains the memorability through the use of personal space and the closeness one feels at the park.

### **Description**

The Chippewa Falls Riverfront Park is located along the Chippewa River below the Xcel Energy dam on the corner of South Bridge Street and West River Street. Allen Park is located across the street, which together comprises a large amount of waterfront property. There are multi-use paved trails for walking, jogging, biking, rollerblading/skating, and longboarding as well as a large amphitheater which hosts music in the park and other miscellaneous events, 3 pavilions with picnic tables beneath them, and indoor restrooms. With scenic views along the river, steps down to the river and fishing along the back the park has swinging benches along the trail to take it all in (see figure 2). Closer to downtown there are water fountains that light up at night (see figure 1). The park is built to withstand floods that happen occasionally being located close to the dam. Visitors/park goers are advised to use caution along the shore of the river and in the park when high waters occur.

Vibrant green trees line the river bank, the trail is a deep, dark concrete while the sidewalks are a soft white. Along one side of the seven acre park, cattails and dandelions grow. There are enormous rocks in some of the areas of the park by the water and across the water, by the dam, there is a pile of massive rocks. Sometimes ducklings land in the bright green grass in

the middle of the park behind the amphitheater. Typically, there are few people visiting the park at a time. Occasionally, for events the park gets packed.

### **Memorability**

The memorability of the Riverfront Park starts with my best friend at the time and my first love, when the park had just been completed. It was the summer after sophomore year, we went one night to the park. The sky was a deep blue, but the moon led a soft glow. The crickets were chirping and the sounds of the dam falling and the river flowing/babbling set up a special night to remember. My best friend, Hailey, and I were sitting on the park bench (it is actually my favorite one based on the next story I will explain). My boyfriend at the time, Brady, went off on the trail and down by the bank of the river. Hailey and I were talking and laughing, I'm not sure what about, when Brady came walking up with a yellow flower. It might have actually been a weed, but it was the thought that counts. A sweet act like that had made the association between love and the park.

My second love, Luke, and I carved our initials on the swinging bench previously mentioned (see figure 3). This bench was the one we always sat on because it was the closest one to the river. It was the first bench we sat on one of the first times we had hung out. I remember the first time we were sitting there, he mentioned he liked my shoes. I still wear those shoes. It was also the first time I felt like he thought I was funny. A girl went past the bench on the trail in front of us riding a skateboard and I said "zoom," as she passed. He thought that was so funny and let out a genuine laugh. I remember holding back my smile because I love when people laugh at the dumb things I say, when they get my humor. This is the bench we sat on the night we stayed at the Cobblestone Hotel downtown because my parents didn't want him and I staying in my room together. They made me sleep upstairs on the couch so he could sleep in my

bedroom. The park was a place we would go to sit and look at each other or to sit in silence comfortably, laugh with each other, or have deep conversations together.

During quarantine, one of my best friends at the time and I would meet up in the parking lot of the park in our cars because our parents wouldn't let us hang out. We texted each other and told our parents we were going for a drive. We'd sit in the parking lot that overlooks the entire park and the part of the river, roll down our windows and catch up with each other. The summer of 2020, my other best friend at the time, Olivia, and I would meet at the park to practice longboarding. We'd fall off and laugh, take cute, aesthetic pictures of us being wannabe skater girls, and get videos to see what we looked like.

This past summer of 2022, my best friend, Nicole, and I would do yoga in front of the amphitheater with the sun hitting our skin and the sounds of the river and the busy downtown bustling in the background. It was so nice to have a place where we could practice yoga, especially such a vibrant, scenic place. Afterwards, we'd go to Bridgestreet Brew Coffee or Olson's Ice Cream that were both a walk away.

I'd also go to the park with my Mom and put headphones on and do a stairs workout. She and I would stretch in the grass, which made my skin itch, but my Mom being there for me to complain about it made it less itchy for some reason. My sister, Lexi, and I, were obsessed (and still are) with a salad from Bridgestreet Brew Coffee. So, we would go to the shop and get it, go to the park and share it in either the grass or on the picnic tables or swinging benches. Preston, my brother, came with me ice skating there in the winter. We were both not great at ice skating, but we'd go there and mess around and fall-a lot. But, we'd laugh so hard our stomachs hurt and get up every time and keep going. Amelia, my baby sister who is four, asked to go to the downtown park when I'd babysit her. She'd ask if we could go down by the rocks and then

would proceed to pick up rocks and “skip” them. Mimi had the biggest smile on her face and if I let her, she would’ve stayed there for as long as she could. I could’ve too.

This park holds a lot of special, key memories for both me and the people I love. To have a place hold so many seemingly ordinary memories makes a place extraordinary.

### **Place Attachment Theory**

The design theory of place attachment contributes heavily to the reasons for the memorability of the Riverfront Park. Places can be important based on the memories one holds within them (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p.3). There are so many memories in such a short time at the Riverfront park. From yoga to ice skating to initial carvings to flowers being picked. Even when I would go there by myself to walk around, sit by the river or even journal, I learned so much about myself. I can remember one specific walk, I went early in the morning when it was still dark out and raining. The post lights were on, as well as the NSP dam sign lit up the river. I was having a hard time in my personal growth. As I was walking along the trail along the river, I realized the river and I had a lot in common. Specifically, in accordance with my personal growth. I saw there were blockages in the river, rocks, a dam, etc. The river still found a way to, (for the most part), peacefully either flow around, through, or over these blockages. I realized I can do the same thing-I don’t have to get rid of the blockages to flow, I can flow around the blockages, flow through them or over them. This was a huge realization for me, as I felt I couldn’t get over the blockages I was facing. Had I not had the attachment to this park, I may not have felt comfortable exploring it in the dark and coming to these realizations. The Riverfront park also made me realize I actually like my hometown. I used to always feel so resentful towards my town, but this place gave me a feeling of belonging and appreciation for my

hometown. Had the park not been there, I wouldn't have the same appreciation for Chippewa Falls, as I do now.

The bonding that occurred between this park and I contributed to my attachment to this specific park (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). If I had made these memories at another place, there would be an attachment to that place. It is solely based on cognitive memories that create the attachment. I have been to lots of parks, but no other parks come close to the many memories I have made at this one. So, I haven't formed an attachment to another park, although I could have.

### **Proxemics Theory**

Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist deemed the "father of proxemics," put numbers to the unspoken rules of proxemics (Rosenbloom, 2006). He defined the invisible zones around humans and created a range of distance to each one. The zones include the intimate distance, with a range of six to 18 inches, personal distance, with a range of 18 inches to four feet, social distance with a range of four to 12 feet, and public distance, at about 12 feet or more. The park has benches and sidewalks that are in the ranges of intimate distance of six to 18 inches, and personal distance of four to 12 feet. The usage of these distances helped create closeness physically and ultimately leads to closeness emotionally. Distances of these proximities aided in the reasons why I felt so close to my family, friends, and lovers, as well as created memories with them that I still hold dearly in my heart.

When COVID-19 hit, the distances at this park changed from six to 18 inches and 18 inches to four feet to a range of four to 12 feet. As previously mentioned, my friend and I would meet here at the park and have to stay in our cars. While we were still connecting with each other, it wasn't the same as it had been before. However, since it was the only time we got to see

each other in person instead of over the phone, the social distance range felt like we were closer than what it would normally feel like had we not been in quarantine. Dr. Krauss said about proxemics and space, “it will enhance the amount that you enjoy things that are enjoyable.” The presence of people is arousing, in this instance, the near presence of my friend in her car enhanced my enjoyment of the park.

### **Conclusion**

In the development of the Chippewa Riverfront Park over the past several years, I have had a place where I can enjoy the presence of my favorite people and spend time doing our favorite things, which makes it especially memorable. The place attachment theory assists in the explanation of why the park is memorable because of the cognitive memories associated with important people to me and the park. Proxemics theory contributes to the explanation of the memorability of this place because of the personal spacing within the park along the trails, benches and picnic tables. There are many reasons why this place is memorable and significant and it can be explained through the memories and spacing of the plan.



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**Figure 1**

*The Riverfront Park in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin*



**Figure 2**

*Park bench at Riverfront by Cindy L. Meyer*





**Figure 3**

*The initials carved into my favorite park benches.*

