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Rush to raze leaves lingering holes

Vacant lots affect security, foot traffic

By: Brent Bellamy / On Architecture

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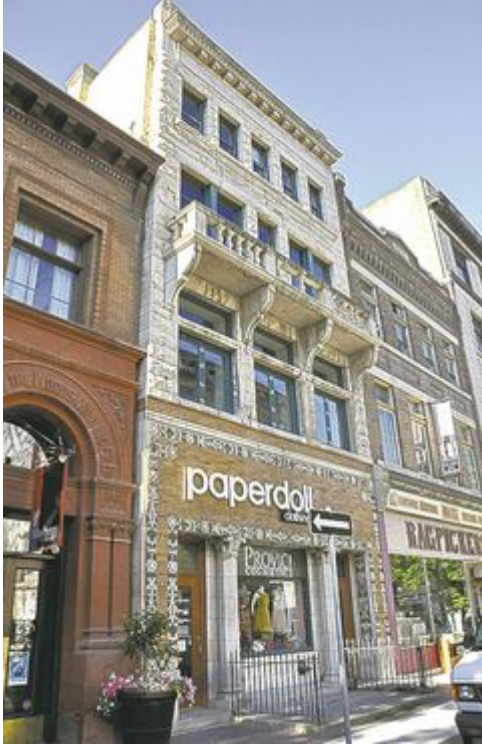
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Brent Bellamy / Winnipeg Free Press While downtown buildings like the Criterion Hotel (below) were successfully redeveloped and repurposed, the Shanghai Restaurant building (above) will become a green space.

Dec. 15, 2010: Winnipeg city council approves demolition of the Shanghai Restaurant building at 228 King St. with the following condition for redevelopment: "preparation of a firm redevelopment proposal and a formal application for a building permit."

July 18, 2012: Approval for demolition is granted with the following change to the original conditions: "receipt of an urban design submission that meets the intent of council not to allow a surface parking

area."



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Criterion Hotel.

With this revision, the requirements for demolition of a building that has stood at the heart of Winnipeg's Chinatown for longer than Chinatown has existed went from proving the building would be replaced immediately to the installation of a few thousand dollars' worth of sod and a promise to water and mow. The 130-year-old building will soon make way for a city block-sized grass field being hailed as a "much-needed" passive park for Chinatown's few hundred residents.

This raises the question: Is it the physical presence of cars that makes parking lots detrimental to the quality of a city's urban environment, or are there greater issues that laying sod does not alleviate?

The 2010 city report indicated "allowing surface parking on an interim basis may discourage the timely development of the site due to the income that is generated at low cost to the owners." This is a common argument against allowing parking lots and it is certainly true that sod, for now, prevents the collection of these revenues. Allowing the building to be demolished, however, does provide a significant economic advantage that will also likely discourage timely development. Lower property taxes on an empty lot and the elimination of building-maintenance costs removes any financial pressures that may have acted as an incentive to redevelop the site.

During the last civic election, Mayor Sam Katz referred to surface parking lots in the downtown as "magnets for crime." Creating open space between buildings results in pedestrian dead zones that can decrease security. Famed American urbanist Jane Jacobs argued safety in cities is a result of having eyes on the street. Building density and increased sidewalk traffic is a self-policing deterrent to criminal activity. Crime is attracted to secluded open spaces, and the perception of safety decreases as one's feeling of isolation increases. Open space between buildings, whether paved with asphalt or grass, promotes this seclusion, creating these "magnets for crime."

The hope is grass will make the site an active park, filled with people providing those eyes on the street. Jacobs again argues that in low density, under-populated neighbourhoods like Chinatown, parks become desolate, unsafe spaces. In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she writes, "You can neither lie to a neighbourhood park, nor reason with it. 'Artist's conceptions' and persuasive renderings can put pictures of life into proposed neighbourhood parks, but in real life only diverse surroundings have the practical power of inducing a natural, continuing flow of life and use."

Perhaps the greatest reason parking lots are considered detrimental to the quality of a city is that they harm the pedestrian experience by disrupting the urban streetscape. Buildings constructed to the sidewalk create a continuous edge that provides environmental shelter and visual interest at the pedestrian level. The visual expanse of the street is confined by this edge, providing a sense of enclosure that creates a feeling of intimacy and slows vehicular traffic. In Winnipeg, Corydon Avenue is a good example of these conditions working together to create an attractive pedestrian environment. Walking beside gaps between buildings, whether paved and filled with cars or grassed and vacant, significantly diminishes the quality of the pedestrian experience.

It is, of course, hoped that a new building will soon rise on the Shanghai site and the vacant lot will be a

short-term condition. The damaging results, however, of previous demolition without firm plans for redevelopment can be seen across Winnipeg's checkered downtown.

When the McIntyre Block was torn down at Portage and Main, it was hoped a new structure would soon fill the void, yet it has remained a gravel lot adjacent to our famous intersection for 33 years. The same story can be told for the Tribune Building, demolished in 1983, and the Empire Hotel in 1976. The loss of these buildings has resulted in some of the largest vacant lots existing in our downtown today.

In contrast, numerous buildings have sat abandoned for long periods and, like the Shanghai Building, were considered too expensive and too derelict to save, yet they now stand as prominent and beautifully redeveloped structures. The buildings that make up Red River College's downtown campus, soon joined by the Union Bank tower, all remained vacant for 30 years. The Criterion Hotel on McDermot Avenue was gutted by fire in 1987. Once considered unsalvageable, its beautiful terracotta facade is today home to offices and trendy ground-floor retail.

The dramatic new balconies that project over Portage Avenue are part of the Avenue Building, vacant for 13 years and often considered too rundown to restore. With patience, the conditions changed to make redevelopment of these buildings viable, even when it seemed unlikely in the short term.

The Shanghai Building will not get that opportunity. We can only hope that the decision to create yet another vacant gap in Winnipeg's toothless downtown grin doesn't follow so many previous examples and remain that way for decades to come.

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