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Parking is the problem, not answer

By: Robert Galston

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Headed south down Waterfront Drive on an unseasonably warm November afternoon, the row of new condo buildings lining the winding roadway met my eye.

Architecturally, none of these buildings are notable for anything but average attempts at cartoonish "heritage" design, but taken together, perhaps with eyes squinted a little bit, they gave a definitive form to a neighbourhood that does not fade out as it approaches the Red River, but is built up right to its edge.

Behind Waterfront Drive could be seen the massing of century-old warehouses and offices of the Exchange District east of Main, and still beyond them, the quartet of post-war skyscrapers that stand at the four corners of Portage and Main.

From this view, one gets the impression that while Winnipeg is not a rich city of highrises and glass, it is, in its modesty and pragmatism, a low-rise but compact and urban city.

But to look closer, down the avenues that make up the East Exchange, one sees a neighbourhood threatened by a gradually hollowing destruction, and that the new urbanity of Waterfront Drive could end up being only a false front.

Sport Manitoba is undergoing redevelopment of the Smart Bag Company building on the corner of Pacific and Lily Street. Actually two separate buildings, the larger section built in 1913 is being renovated for office use, while the oldest section, dating back to 1884, will be demolished for a parkade, possibly with a gymnasium built on the top level.

On Lombard Avenue, the Grain Exchange Annex built in 1920 has a date with the wrecking ball in order to create a bigger loading dock. On a vacant lot next door, another parkade is planned.

In the vicinity of James Avenue, city planners are looking at the construction of a parkade for 450 cars, to be operated by the Winnipeg Parking Authority.

That planners would exert any energy in finding the best place for the publicly owned parking authority to build a massive parkade, is outdated and absurd. More than 50 years of destruction in the name of parking has been a driving force in creating such a problematic downtown. Winnipeg planners should be working to counter the effects of suburbanization, not to amplify them.

Not only counter-productive, a wave of new parkades in the East Exchange is redundant. Ostensibly

planned in response to new residences, every residential unit on Waterfront and elsewhere in the East Exchange already has at least one (usually two) underground parking spots available on-site. The Market Avenue theatres do not need new facilities either, since the Civic Centre parkade and curbside spots easily meet the demand on show nights.

Still, everyone from Mayor Sam Katz to the anonymous armchair urbanists that populate the city's web forums cheer for more parkades. Not only because they are visually preferable to the many surface parking lots downtown, but because the construction of the former supposedly cancels the existence of the latter.

If a five-level parkade is built, the theory goes, five surrounding surface parking lots will be eliminated by being built upon by a mixed-use development (that was lured to the area by the great parking facilities). Sounds nice, but how has it worked in downtown Winnipeg so far?

In recent decades, the East Exchange has been seen as downtown's leading potentially desirable residential neighbourhood. Yet so little of what is being planned and developed there has any sense of actual livability. No one but car-bound misanthropes would want to live in a neighbourhood where parkades are a dominant feature of the landscape, no matter how gussied up in heritage motifs they are.

In 1959, Toronto civil engineer Norman D. Wilson wrote in a report on transit in Winnipeg, that "(t)he dead storage of motor vehicles within the downtown area adds nothing to the attractiveness of its appearance, and detracts from its overall business utility."

If storing vehicles for office employees and theatre-goers, on an increasingly over-saturated supply of parkades, is a "fact of life" in the East Exchange, then Winnipeg should drop the pretence of wanting a strong residential population and busy sidewalks there.

It should instead publicly acknowledge that sparse and discontinuous streetscapes, inefficient land uses, fewer heritage buildings, and a whole lot more dullness continues to be what is wanted for the East Exchange District. We're already on our way toward that end.

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writer and Point Douglas resident.


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