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Downtown dreams remain unfulfilled

Nicholas Hirst

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My office window looks across Main Street onto three parking lots. One next to the Canwest building, an adjacent lot beside the Whiskey Dix nightclub in the old Royal Trust building and a third, multi-storey lot on Albert Street that feeds the buildings around Winnipeg Square.

The lots, and the many others like them, are a silent reminder of how this city works. As the consulting firms Altus Clayton and Urban Strategies Inc., pointed out in their recently released report, one in four residents of metropolitan Winnipeg works downtown, but only about 13,000 live there.

Those downtown workers get to their offices by car. I'm one of them and that's exactly what I do. My offices are in the ornate building at the corner of Lombard Avenue and Main Street above the Birks jewelry store.

It's a great place to work. Cheap, medium-priced and expense account lunching is available by walking briskly through the freezing wind into Winnipeg Square. Banks, legal firms and accountants are all less than five minutes away. The professional associations and arm's-length government agencies that deal with my business are also within easy walking distance, even in the coldest weather. The same goes for many other businesses.

It is exactly the kind of concentration of talent, professionalism and services that urban experts wax eloquently about.

Its disadvantage is that after 5 p.m., there is hardly a car left in the Rory Street parking lot where office workers park. The parking lots across Main Street are deserted and unless there is a game at the Canwest ballpark or the MTS Centre, you could shoot the proverbial cannon down the street and not hit anyone.

Downtown working in Winnipeg has not translated into downtown living, nor has it spurred, so far, the development of easy mass transit to bring folk from home. The question is why not?

Why is it that Winnipeg has developed like so many American cities? Houston and Dallas in particular come to mind. The downtown is relatively busy during the day, but it is as if the

streets were rolled up after dark.

Like many American cities, Winnipeg has also developed the beginnings of an interesting boutique-type retail district in its downtown. That's mostly in the west Exchange District. It appears to be flourishing, but despite a few loft-style developments, it has not, as yet, helped spur the type of downtown living that has occurred in larger centres.

Despite the concentration of downtown workers and a relatively low office vacancy rate, downtown Winnipeg still has a depressed feeling. There are still empty buildings on Portage Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare and dotted throughout the Exchange District.

In short, the downtown is still not what it could be.

The new Manitoba Hydro building will help bring more people during the day, but the likelihood is that those people will drive out after dark just like the rest of us. It seems that the downtown has become an intractable problem. It can have new headquarters, many people working there, a new ballpark and a hockey arena and yet it has still failed to become a truly vibrant centre: the opportunity always seems to be waiting just around the corner.

Winnipeg has many things going for it, but without that vibrant downtown it remains a city without a soul: more a collection of suburbs, shopping malls and big-box sites than a true urban centre.

How can it change? Improvement to mass transit is one crucial step: not just a link to the University of Manitoba, but improvements to regular service. It has to be possible to get in and out and around downtown without a car.

I strongly believe that little changes could mean a lot. Former mayor Glen Murray had a great idea when he held summer concerts at Portage and Main -- it made the place feel alive and innovative.

The downtown needs small steps: a shuttle service that runs along Portage, bicycle rentals, a car-sharing service and more loft conversions. A pub for the University of Winnipeg would help keep more students in the evening and the same goes for Red River College.

Perhaps the opening of the Manitoba Hydro headquarters could become a downtown celebration. For some time, the downtown has been close to the tipping point that would shift it from its depressed state into a vital catalyst for the city. What are still lacking are champions either from politics or business to sell a vision and to make it happen. Who, then, will step up?

Nicholas Hirst is CEO of Winnipeg-based television and film producer Original Pictures Inc.

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