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Make the old new again

Barriers at Portage and Main not only block pedestrians, they block renewal

By: Nicholas Hirst

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Free Certified Alberta Angus beef burgers were being handed out at Dundas Square in downtown Toronto Wednesday. The one-acre concrete public space at the heart of Toronto's shopping and commercial district has become the Times Square of the city.

Roundly attacked as it was being planned eight years ago, Dundas Square has gradually become what its proponents wanted it to become: a thoroughly modern meeting place with free entertainment, displays and marketing opportunities. At a cost of \$10 million, it is the only public-private partnership managing a public space in Canada and is now surrounded by "media towers" with advertisements and movie clips creating a neon-like jungle with a similar feel to Leicester Square in London or much of downtown New York.

There are obvious limitations in comparing a large city like Toronto with a far smaller city like Winnipeg. But given that Winnipeg is now undergoing a complete revamp of its 25-year-plan, it is perhaps worth asking what it is that other cities have done that Winnipeg could learn from and adapt.

If you ask the question where in Winnipeg could you have the kind of downtown free events that happen at Dundas Square, the answer appears obvious: The Forks. The Forks has such events on a regular basis. The Forks as a venue, however, is not at all the same as the urban environment of Dundas Square. Dundas Square is surrounded by new movie theatres and Toronto's main downtown shopping mall, the Eaton Centre. It is two blocks away from the main campus of Ryerson University, one of two universities in downtown Toronto. The area is dotted with theatres and inexpensive restaurants.

The Forks is adjacent to downtown rather than part of it. The possible equivalent to Dundas Square is Portage and Main. If you think that is a dumb thing to say given the volume of traffic that moves daily through the intersection, then you're entitled to your opinion. But nowhere in Winnipeg is more central to the idea of the city than Portage and Main: a windy and occasionally very cold intersection that is indelibly stamped into the

image of Winnipeg.

Former mayor Glen Murray recognized that when he organized his free downtown parties with the pop group Great Big Sea performing at the closed intersection. I remember those parties as the spirit of "what could be." Like Dundas Square they were attacked by the naysayers. The shame was that the follow-through never happened.

Now that the City of Winnipeg is set to start again on its 25-year-plan, to be dubbed "OurWinnipeg" it's the time to think radically about what we can do to make the city the place we want it to be.

Dundas Square is at the intersection of two streets very similar in their historical importance to Portage and Main. Yonge Street is the old main Ontario north-south route. Dundas Street is the old main east-west route. At the intersection now, the traffic lights are designed so that they regularly stop all traffic to allow pedestrians to cross the intersection diagonally. Cars can just wait.

Portage and Main is still the preserve of the automobile. Gas prices may have shot through the roof; car companies may have been rescued by governments. Other cities may be switching car lanes for bicycle lanes, but in Winnipeg at its chief intersection, the car still rules supreme.

The new 25-year-plan must change that. The downtown has made great strides over the past 10 years, but it will not become the centre of a revitalized Winnipeg unless we can revitalize our main thoroughfare. Progress has been made on Portage. The Birks building is refurbished; Mountain Equipment Co-op is a destination store. The University of Winnipeg is in a state of constant renewal and the new Hydro headquarters will create a major influx of workers.

But while Portage remains an avenue for cars, while Winnipeg concentrates more on the movement of cars than the movement of people, the downtown will not be what it could be, the city will not be what it could be and it will not be part of an energy saving future.

The OurWinnipeg Plan must create a downtown that puts pedestrians first. The most important symbol of change will be what is planned for Portage and Main. I know there are legal problems to pulling down the barriers that prevent people walking across our most famed intersection. I know there are practical problems to re-routing traffic.

Those problems should not prevent a plan to use Portage and Main as a catalyst to make Portage Avenue what it once was: a place where people strolled and talked. Portage Avenue is our city's main artery and Portage and Main is the heart that makes it pump. OurWinnipeg should take the heart off life support.

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


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