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Parkades need not be the ugly stepchild of the downtown

By: Stefano Grande

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As much as we don't want to hear about it, Winnipeggers, and most North Americans, are addicted to parking. The recent media and public interest in the sale of the Shops of Winnipeg Square parkade is a testament to that. Access to a convenient parking space is a mundane but critical part of our individual daily activities.

We love our cars. The only cars we don't like are the ones that belong to other people; those are the ones that pollute the air, congest our environment, and create increasing traffic headaches. We love our cars because they enable our personal mobility; they allow us the freedom to get from A to B in a fast and efficient manner. In our increasingly hectic world, our need for personal mobility will only increase. Who knows, cars might run on water one day, and they will then be with us forever!

As downtowns grow and more people come to the city centre, people need greater access to rapid transit, and bicycles. It's good to see these options being fully explored by city hall. A vibrant downtown also requires an effective overall transportation plan, which includes parkades.

So the lowly parkade -- ugly stepchild to architects and planning wonks -- takes on an increasingly important role in city building. Modern parkades are multi-functional, architecturally significant, and service oriented, providing a helping hand to people on the run, and access to key areas of the downtown. Many include farmers markets or restaurants, day care centres or dry cleaners, transit or cycling shops and provide vehicle access where streets and surface lots are not available to contain the volume. Some even have parkland built on the roof.

Modern parkades create "capacity" for growth -- the extra "people space" required to allow an area to grow and change and increase in economic viability.

Some are so well designed you would not even know they were a parkade.

An example of the is the historic Milwaukee Third Ward, where people spaces and parking spaces have been closely integrated to create a burgeoning, shopping, commercial and residential district that allows access and mobility, while eliminating the daily competition between vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists.

Go to any great downtown and you'll see; this is a formula that works, and it's a formula Winnipeg needs.

With proceeds of the sale of the Winnipeg Square parkade now earmarked by Mayor Sam Katz for implementation of such a strategy, and under the direction of the Winnipeg Parking Authority, there is great potential to move in this direction, collectively.

With the continued growth in interest and development in our downtown, and the new provincial TIF tax tool, we have an opportunity to mold our downtown, and begin the slow process of eliminating surface parking lots, with more reasons for people to live, work and shop. They can park, ride or cycle there too.

Parking is only one piece of the downtown puzzle, but it's a crucial gear in the machine that drives development in a vibrant downtown community.

True, "no one comes downtown just to park", but many of us park while we are enjoying all the downtown has to offer.

Stefano Grande is the executive director of the Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone.

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