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District in need of direction

Realizing the Exchange's vast potential will take a co-ordinated effort

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1:00 AM | [Comments \(0\)](#)



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Late last week, there were so many Christmas shoppers in the Exchange District, you could barely walk down Albert Street without bumping into a gift-wrapped present.

OK, so somebody was shooting a movie. The shoppers were extras and the gift boxes were props, much to the chagrin of the very real shopkeepers in the commercial heart of an Exchange District that's made gains in recent years but remains woefully underdeveloped.

As any die-hard urbanist will tell you, the Exchange is the Winnipeg neighbourhood with the most potential for transforming the entire city.

While several inner-city residential neighbourhoods are improving -- Centennial, West Broadway and North Point Douglas, for example -- the Exchange can be the catalyst for a wider form of renewal that's both tangible and psychological.

As recently as 2001, when the last full Canadian census was taken, only 340 people lived within the boundaries of what's officially the Exchange. That number has tripled, if not quintupled, thanks to condo and apartment development, but far too few people actually live in the handsome collection of turn-of-the-20th-century warehouse buildings that form the architectural basis or the Exchange's status as a national historic site.

Lasting renewal in the Exchange demands a drastic increase of density, in terms of residential, commercial and cultural development. The retail shops, restaurants and galleries

that grace the neighbourhood right now serve the people who already love the inner city: downtown office workers, summer festival-goers, arts patrons and die-hard urbanists.

The existing Exchange is already my favourite part of the city. But other Winnipeggers see empty streets and are afraid.

"Currently, if one takes the bus to attend a concert or theatre or some club downtown, one is faced with an endless after-event wait for a bus in what must be one of the riskiest areas of the city right in front of city hall," a reader wrote to me last week, referring to the stretch of Main Street opposite the Centennial Concert Hall.

"What should be a well-lit, bustling transportation hub is a barren, shadowed gulag, furtively peopled by those who have no choice."

As an inner city resident who works downtown, I always feel safe in the Exchange. But I'm not indicative of the average Winnipeg resident or visitor. The perceptions of the neighbourhood will only change when there are more people on the street.

Achieving that goal is both incredibly easy and extremely complex. Governments love megaprojects, but small-scale incentives for businesses, developers and apartment owners could effectively transform the entire neighbourhood one building at a time.

A package of tax incentives and progressive policies requires co-ordination. And right now, there is no effective co-ordination in the Exchange District.

The neighbourhood is served by city tax credits, provincial project grants, federal heritage programs that do not complement each other. It is the object of the benign but unco-ordinated attentions of downtown development agency CentreVenture, The Forks North-Portage Partnership, Red River College and the Winnipeg Parking Authority, to name a few powerful institutions.

It has been the subject of power struggles between competing city council committees. It is also supported by the well-intentioned lobbying efforts of The Exchange District BIZ, Heritage Winnipeg and Parks Canada and menaced by the urban evils of demolition and façadism.

To suggest the neighbourhood is being pulled in too many different directions is kind of like saying the economy is a bit of a mess. There are far too many cooks standing over the development broth,

In contrast, the movie shot last week on Albert Street had a single director. If only life could imitate direct-to-DVD art.

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