URBAN REVITALIZATION IN WINNIPEG

ABSTRACT

Urban growth in Winnipeg over the last two decades can be characterized by the decentralization of business and the continued suburban expansion of the city. The outcome of this pattern of development has been a further decline of inner city neighbourhoods and a shift in the commercial structure of the downtown. The response has been the increased role of community groups in helping reverse the decline of inner city neighbourhoods. Many of these community-based responses are the direct result of the many strategic partnerships formed amongst all levels of governments. For the commercial district of the downtown, a more targeted effort has been underway with government lead development corporations playing an increasingly vital role in the marketing of Winnipeg's historic downtown precinct to attract not only new business but to also increase the residential component.

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Over the last two decades, the inner city of Winnipeg has become a laboratory for urban regeneration programs. Many of these programs attempted to stimulate, restructure and/or revitalize ageing neighbourhoods and declining commercial areas. Insomuch as these efforts have been valiant, the symptoms of urban decline remain prevalent, especially in Winnipeg's centrally located neighbourhoods. To combat this situation, the tireless efforts of community groups have worked to improve not only the physical condition of the inner city but also to create a more positive image. Two such groups are The Spence Neighbourhood Association and The West Broadway Development Corporation. The West Broadway Development Corporation formed in 1995 as a way to give voice to neighbourhood residents and organizations. Their mandate remains creating a stable neighbourhood through the active participation of residents. The Spence Neighbourhood Association has been active in community efforts for the past three years. Both groups have been able to access much needed government funding to improve a large section of the inner city.

Winnipeg is a medium-sized metropolitan centre with just under 700,000 inhabitants. It has had a long history of being a working class city, strengthened by its central geographic location within Canada and North America. Location has contributed to the prominent role transportation played in shaping its economic development. Whether it was the early fur trade by Red River Cart or by river, to the more recent role rails, truck and air transportation have played, Winnipeg has held its grip on ensuring transportation remains a central component of the local economy.

Looking back over the last 50 years, Winnipeg, like other Canadian cities, underwent a significant restructuring of its economy and internal geography. This has resulted in shift from agri-business, transportation and manufacturing to more information based functions such as technology and medical research. Change to the internal geography of the city has been characterized by an increased decentralization of business and the continued suburban expansion of the city.

Urban change has resulted in a shift in the demographic profile of the inner city. According to Statistics Canada data, just over 20% of Winnipeg's population reside within the inner city. Overall, the bulk of population growth over the last two decades has been centred in the expanding suburbs. For the inner city, the result has been a deepening concentration of single persons, lone parent families, seniors and a high concentration of Aboriginal persons. As an example, the 1996 percentage of single persons living alone in non inner city neighbourhoods was approximately 25% while in the inner city this number swelled to 46%.

On average, the age and condition of housing in Winnipeg is older and in greater need of repair when compared to other western Canadian cities (Table One). In fact, the 1996 census data showed that Winnipeg had more than three times the amount of older housing than either Calgary or Edmonton along with a higher average need of major repairs. When looking specifically at the inner city of Winnipeg, these numbers become more pronounced. This is evident in the fact that 25% of inner city housing was in need of major repairs with just over 40% of this housing built prior to 1946. The result remains an ageing housing stock with an increasing need for repair – repairs that

become more cost prohibitive as homes age and internal components become obsolete and expensive to repair or replace.

TABLE 1. AGE AND CONDITION OF HOUSING BY CENSUS METROPOLITAN AREAS

	Winnipeg	Calgary	Edmonton	Saskatoon
Home Built Prior to 1946 (%)	20	5.6	5.3	10.9
Need of Major Repairs (%)	9	6	5.5	6.4

The challenges facing the inner city of Winnipeg are numerous in scope. Perhaps the most important are dealing with the price and condition of housing. In many neighbourhoods, housing prices have declined considerably over the last two decades. This has resulted in selling prices dropping, in some cases, to less than $10,000 for properties that once sold in the range of $45-$60,000. This devaluation has lead to a dramatic decline in the percentage of homeowners (33% in 1996). In contrast, the home ownership rate for non-inner locations was just under 70% for the same period. The drop in the value of homes along with an increase in renters has made the conversion of single family units into multi-family more attractive. This has been especially true for converting older homes into rooming houses. The majority of these rooming houses remain located within the inner city where cheap housing prices have allowed owners to carve up stately character homes into anywhere from 6-12+ units.

The precarious situation experienced in the inner city was further examined by the present author in a city-wide survey of sixteen neighbourhoods. The intent of the survey was to examine for differences amongst neighbourhoods with respect to housing and general characteristics. The results pointed to significant spatial differences amongst Winnipeg's neighbourhoods. These data revealed that inner city neighbourhoods tended to be less optimistic about their neighbourhood's present condition and the future outlook. When asked how confident residents were presently about their neighbourhoods, 43% of inner city residents were either not overly or not confident at all about their neighbourhood which was in direct contrast to the 88% of suburban residents who were somewhat or very confident (Table 2).

TABLE 2. LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE

	Inner City (%)	Suburban (%)
Very Confident	13.5	55
Somewhat Confident	33.8	33
Not Overly Confident	32.4	5
Not Confident at All	10.8	1
Not Sure	9.5	6
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**

This question was followed up by asking residents what they thought the future held in terms of whether the neighbourhood would remain the same or become a worse place to live over the next three years (Table 3). Again, inner city residents tended to be less optimistic about the future as compared to their suburban counterparts. To put this question in perspective, nearly 60% of inner city residents stated their neighbourhoods would remain the same but presently rated their neighbourhoods poorly – meaning they felt they the neighbourhood would remain in poor condition. This was contrasted by the 75% of suburban residents who felt their neighbourhoods would remain the same while rating the current condition of the neighbourhood quite high – meaning they anticipated that their neighbourhoods would remain positive places to live.

TABLE 3. FUTURE OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

	Inner City (%)	Suburban (%)
A Better Place	27	23
A Worse Place	13.5	2
About the Same	59.5	75
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**

These factors further entrench the dichotomous relationship which exists between inner city and non-inner city neighbourhoods. Traditionally, these differences have contributed to the negative stenotypes many residents have about the inner city.

A key issue facing community groups in the inner city is the "market gap" that has emerged in the housing sector. This gap is the result of low overall market values and the high costs associated with undertaking renovations and repairs to an ageing housing stock. As an example, an inner city home can be purchased in the range $15,000-$25,000+. Once purchased, the renovation costs can easily exceed $35,000 for projects such as internal reconfiguring (if converting from multi-family to single), electrical upgrading, heating systems, windows, roofs, etc. It is at this point in which the market gap occurs as the initial purchase cost plus renovations would result in a total investment (by the community group) of $50,000-$60,000 but the eventual selling price remains lower – perhaps $35,000-$45,000 or a gap of $15,000-$25,000. Although this is a simplified example, the point remains that in many cases, the market gap has resulted in the need to have the strong commitment of all three levels of governments to help offset the market gap and allow for homes to be sold or rented.

In the inner city of Winnipeg, home prices are showing some signs of recovery but the gap between the cost of purchase and renovation still exceeds the eventual selling price for many homes. Therefore, for community groups to be successful in purchasing, renovating and the subsequently selling inner city homes, government subsidy programs are essential to bridge the market gap while continuing to create a stabilized housing market capable of functioning without direct assistance of community groups.

In Winnipeg, government involvement has historically been a cornerstone for the delivery of inner city programs and funding. Although, roles have changed (with community groups becoming more active) Winnipeg remains a centre where tripartite delivery mechanisms remain prominent. It is important to note that the blueprint for tripartite funding programs remains the Winnipeg Core Area Initiative which was a massive $200 million dollar program which spanned 11 years (1981-1992) and injected a much needed boost to the social, physical and economic environments of the inner city of

Winnipeg. Since 1992, many other tripartite initiative have been critical in assisting community based efforts achieve success.

Overall, Winnipeg remains unique in the delivery of funding for inner city revitalization. The recent model which has emerged is a strong partnership between community based groups (who act as delivery agents) and the three levels of government that provide necessary funding and program direction through a newly created "single window agency" consisting of representatives from all three levels of government. This agency is the Winnipeg Homeless and Housing Initiative (WHHI) which has become the central location from which community groups can access funding and program information and support. The WHHI programs has received funding from the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) which was a Federal program established in response to Canada's increasing homeless population. This program was struck in December, 1999, with the mandate of investing $753 million over a three-year period.

The SCPI program resulted in the establishment of Winnipeg's "single window agency" whose mandate has been to act as a delivery mechanism for programs offered at the Federal, Provincial and local level. The benefit of this single window approach can be significant as combined funding per unit can total $38.000.00. This includes $18,000.00 from the RRAP program (Federal Program), $10,000 from the Province under Neighbourhoods Alive and $10,000 in matching funds from the City of Winnipeg. This funding has been critical for community groups to purchase, renovate and subsequently sell or rent properties within the inner city.

The types of programs funded have included creating more student housing for the University of Winnipeg, dealing with homeless youth in the inner city, expanding outreach programs to those most in need, creating job opportunities through training and education and providing needed resources to various communities. The value for many of the projects have ranged from just a few thousand dollars to many hundreds of thousands. As an example, the Tenant Landlord Co-operation (TLC) Program based in the West Broadway neighbourhood, received an initial $20,000 grant to begin work. The TLC program is an educational program for current owners of rental properties. The program operates by working with owners to meet standards set by the community to ensure that the rental properties are safe, clean and secure. The TLC program is targeted towards rental units at the lower end of market and when an owner meets the standards, they are given a sign to place on the front of the building. This program is an excellent example of the strength of the single window approach as the TLC program has accessed funding from all three levels of government. This has allowed the program to not only provide support and education to owners but also the ability to provide small grants to make necessary renovations.

The Winnipeg model works because of the strong partnerships between community groups and all three levels of government. This has produced a well integrated system of allocating funding to various areas of need. In the end, without programs and support of all three levels of government, the market gap would be insurmountable to overcome. Without these strategic partnerships and innovative programs, community based efforts would not be able to achieve the successes they have had over the last five years.

Within the inner city boundaries of Winnipeg, the downtown region has also undergone a number of significant changes over the last two decades. This period has seen a continued pattern of commercial growth in suburban areas while at the same time, decline of the downtown has accelerated. As in other Canadian cities, the big box phenomena has swept across Winnipeg and resulted in hundreds of thousands of square feet of new retail space being developed – complete with plentiful free parking. Much of this retail space has located at the junctions of high traffic regional streets that pull in not only suburban residents but also commuters from nearby rural communities.

This pattern of growth has lead to the decreased prominence of downtown as a shopping destination. The final blow for the downtown remains the destruction of the once symbol of downtown shopping – the Eaton's building. With the first three floors demolished and shards of glass and brick strewn on Portage Avenue, the face of downtown will be radically redefined as a new glass and brick hockey rink, touted as a key component of downtown revitalization, will rise on the same location. Although many planners and citizens remain skeptical as to whether the new arena will 'save downtown" most do agree that there will be positive benefits from this project such as new retail, restaurants, increased traffic and more activity outside of the regular 9-5 schedule of the downtown office workforce).

If there is reason for optimism, it remains in the numerous "pieces" of downtown redevelopment. This includes the continued expansion of the Forks. This area of the downtown straddles the Red and Assiniboine rivers and has become a tourist destination including retail, office and green space. However, a criticism of the Forks development has been that it is not connected well with the rest of the downtown. To correct this, the city has worked to create a new roadway which integrates the Forks with the nearby and very successful baseball park and the historic Exchange District. Furthermore, the completion of a pedestrian bridge that will connect the Forks with St. Boniface (Winnipeg's French quarter) will further integrate and connect these precincts.

The final element for the revival of downtown Winnipeg is centred on increasing the residential component. This has lead to an increased number of warehouse conversions into condominiums. For the most part, preliminary housing projects have catered to the middle to upper income groups but some affordable housing is being renovated within the downtown district. A further catalyst for this renaissances has been in the clustering of educational programs in the warehouse district. This has resulted in substantial investment in the new construction of the Red River College Campus as well as the relocation of the University of Winnipeg's Continuing Education program. Both of these projects are expected to inject new vigour into this section of the downtown and potentially lever further activities and people into the area.

The future of Winnipeg's inner city and downtown remains somewhat positive. Certainly, community groups, the business community, educational institutions and others are laying the groundwork for continued revival but the rest of the city must decide if they too will invest – both socially and economically. It will be only at this point that the seeds being planted today will blossom into a vibrant and exciting down-