

# The rise and fall of Winnipeg's modern project (1958-1972): causes and failures

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## Abstract

This article focuses on a second-tier city proposal of a modernist urban renewal project: that of Winnipeg. Our objective is to illustrate how the *Metro Plan of 1969* would have transformed the downtown into a 'modern metropolis' and explores the numerous causes for its failures. The first section consists of an overview of Winnipeg's urban planning history from 1958-1972. Section two examines the main objectives and components of the *Metro Plan* to illustrate the radical transformation which it was aiming to accomplish in order to 'modernize' downtown Winnipeg. The analysis of the *Metro Plan* concludes with an overview of the causes which led to the plan's subsequent abandonment by the City of Winnipeg. In doing so, the plan's legacy is considered, as are the effects that the *Plan* may have had on the downtown had this modernist urban renewal project been undertaken.

*Keywords: modern metropolis, City of Winnipeg Metro Plan, urban renewal, modernist*

## Introduction

For Canada's urban centres, the 1960s was the era of the bulldozer and construction crane. Flush with resources from a decade of un-paralleled economic growth and government funding, cities aggressively sought to modernize both their infrastructure and image. To do so, civic leaders focused primarily on revitalizing their decaying downtown and surrounding inner city neighbourhoods. Guided by comprehensive renewal plans, cities cleared these areas to build high density housing and commercial developments, open and recreational space and transportation infrastructure such as freeways, street expansions and public mass transit. The central business district was also cleared to make way for the construction of massive office tower complexes, public recreation facilities and public infrastructure. Such drastic changes in the CBD were undertaken in part to help reaffirm the centrality of city commercial sectors.

This was certainly the case for Toronto and Montréal. Seeking to claim their spots as the country's economic hubs and major players on the global level, both cities aggressively modernized their inner cities using modern renewal techniques. Urban

renewal emerged in recognition of the fact that the housing stocks of many Canadian communities were old and in some case in need of major repairs. This situation also affected old factory and warehouse buildings and many other industrial sites in need of repair. Thus, urban renewal was a strategy to redevelop downtown in order to end the exodus to the suburbs and modernize the housing stock. In many cases, once these 'blighted' housing areas were razed the land was deemed more important for commercial value than residential value (Rose 1958; Gans 1969). Not surprisingly, urban renewal became highly unpopular due to the fact that in many cases, from Montréal to Halifax, it caused the displacement of residents and the destruction of close-knit neighbourhood units and communities. In Montréal, the development of its CBD was characterized by massive office tower complexes such as Place Ville Marie and Place Bonaventure and the underground pedestrian concourses (Marsan 1994). Accompanying these developments was the construction of a subway system, major highways such as Décarie Boulevard, and high-density housing blocks. As history shows, this process re-

quired the destruction of historical buildings and public space and, more often than not, the eradication of viable and vibrant neighbourhoods. Although much focus is placed on the Toronto and Montréal renewal programs, the desire for modernization spread far beyond Canada's two largest cities (Hodge and Gordon 2008). According to the CMHC, by 1969 more than fifty different cities had created comprehensive renewal schemes. Of these fifty cities, approximately thirty actually implemented a portion of their scheme's recommendations. One of these 'secondary city' renewal plans was the *Downtown Development Plan (1969)*, created by Dr. Earl Levin, the head of the Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg's Planning Division as a way to transform downtown Winnipeg's blighted and decaying image into a modern and cosmopolitan one over the span of twenty years. The downtown area of Levin's plan is similar to the one of today; it is the area bounded by Notre Dame Avenue, Main Street, the Assiniboine River, Memorial Boulevard and Colony Street. The *Metro Plan*, as it will be referred to, represented the most stunning and comprehensive renewal effort the City of Winnipeg or Metropolitan Corporation had attempted to date.

To accomplish the transformation, the *Metro Plan* called for 400 acres of the traditional downtown to be rebuilt based on five important elements. These elements included high-rise residential towers, public parking facilities, open and green space, public recreation facilities and an elevated skywalk system. By investing \$161 million dollars in public facilities and amenities, the Metropolitan Corporation expected that the downtown would lure 75,000 residents from the suburbs and help fill many of the downtown's empty lots with commercial activities. The population decline of Winnipeg's downtown from 1941 to 1969 was remarkable. In 1941, Winnipeg's downtown had a resident population of 15,567 and 25 years later, in 1966, the population had dropped to 8,706 (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969, 6). In other words, in 25 years, the downtown population declined by 44 percent. In 2011 the population of the downtown is around 15,000 residents.

The large scale and dramatic recommendations of the plan were deemed necessary by the Planning Department due to the downtown's deep seated problems. Since 1945, the area had shed nearly 44 percent of its population, surface parking lots occupied 30 percent of the downtown, one-third of all buildings were in poor condition and nearly 20 percent of the downtown's commercial structures were vacant. (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969, 19-22) The recommendations were also to be used to improve the overall image of the city's economic importance on a national and global scale.

Although the *Metro Plan* was heralded by many as the downtown's salvation upon its release in 1969, it was subsequently abandoned by the City of Winnipeg and the Metro Corporation less than two years later. While it may seem like just one of the city's many failed planning initiatives, the *Metro Plan* is of particular interest as it illustrates the currents of thoughts and processes found in the framework of post-war urban planning in Canada. Our objective here is to illustrate how the *Metro Plan* of 1969 would have transformed the downtown into a "modern

metropolis" and to explore the numerous causes for its failure. The analysis is therefore divided into three parts. The first section consists of a short overview of Winnipeg's urban planning history from 1958-1972 which is thought to have informed the 1969 *Metro Plan*. Section two examines the main objectives and components of the *Metro Plan* to illustrate the radical transformation which it was aiming to accomplish to 'modernize' downtown Winnipeg. The analysis of the *Metro Plan* concludes with an overview of the causes which led to the plan's subsequent abandonment. In doing so, the plan's legacy is considered in addition to the potential consequences for the downtown had this modernist urban renewal project actually been undertaken.

### Winnipeg's Modern Project 1958-1972

During the post-war era, Winnipeg's inner city was characterized by a dramatic socio-economic transition which threatened its long-term viability. Faced with the promise of ample green space, cheap housing and infrastructure geared towards the automobile, many simply abandoned the crumbling inner city for the suburbs. As a result, neighbourhoods in the central part of the city were losing their population at a rapid pace with some posting losses as high as 25 percent (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969).

In 1958, the City of Winnipeg established the *Board of Renewal and Revitalization*. The primary purpose of the *Board* was to identify areas within the inner city which either showed signs of blight or had the potential of decay. After identifying these areas, comprehensive renewal plans would be created to restore the neighbourhood back to health.

Despite being disbanded only three years later, the *Board of Renewal and Revitalization* managed to produce six reports on the socio-economic and physical conditions of the inner city and it identified three areas of significant blight: Lord Selkirk Park (Renewal Area 1), Logan – C.P.R. (Renewal Area 2) and the west bank of the Red River running from South Point Douglas to the C.N.R. east yards (Renewal Area 3) (Figure 1). It also recommended the creation of a large housing complex near Burrows Avenue and Keewatin Street to help reduce the shortage of healthy housing in the North End.

While its tenure was short, the impact of the *Board of Renewal and Revitalization* on the physical and planning environment in Winnipeg was immense. Using Toronto's Regent Park housing project as a template, the heart of Winnipeg's Jewish community was turned into the Lord Selkirk Project and changed the traditional neighbourhood environment (Silver 2006).

The Lord Selkirk Park Renewal Project was characterized by high densities, abundant green space, uniform land use and alterations of the existing street pattern. Likewise, the Burrows-Keewatin projects turned large portions of the North End into low-income row-housing projects. Despite receiving critical praise at their inception, both projects are now considered to be among the worst planning mistakes in the city's history.

However, the *Board's* most important contribution was its use of modernist planning theory to guide the recommendations of its renewal plans and reports. The theory's foundation was



**Figure 1:** Board of renewal and revitalization: downtown renewal area. Source: Murray V. Jones & Associates 1969 *An Economic Evaluation of the Metropolitan Corporation report "Downtown Winnipeg"* (Winnipeg, MB)

based on the belief that the problems of the post-war city were caused in large part by the *laissez faire* planning practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. To rectify the situation, modern planners would have completely cleared away the existing built environment and replaced it with one based on rational and scientific principles. As a result, the modernist landscapes were characterized by a number of key features: the separation of residential, industrial and commercial land uses, separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, rigid geometry, high densities and widespread demolition of the existing landscape.

The use of modern renewal practices in Winnipeg was a symptom of two underlying factors (goals): to modernize the inner city and do so in an efficient and effective manner. The latter was crucial, for time was of the essence given the fact that the decay of the inner city and downtown was seemingly accelerating with each passing year and municipal finances were at a premium. It was therefore considered much more efficient to clear away an entire neighbourhood in one fell swoop than to evaluate the physical condition of each house.

More importantly, by replicating the urban renewal practices found in Montréal and Toronto, officials hoped to change Winnipeg's image from that of a tired, industrial gateway city to one that was modern and cosmopolitan. Thus, by replacing the decayed and crowded housing with new freeways, row housing and high-rise apartment blocks, Winnipeg was to become known as the 'City of the Future.'

## The Shift Downtown

Although several more comprehensive renewal plans were created by the Metropolitan Corporation during the early 1960s, none were solely focusing on the downtown. Despite the fact that it passed its renewal responsibilities to the Metro Corporation in 1961, the City of Winnipeg initiated major renewal activity to address the blighted business district. In 1965, the city began its work on the *Cultural Centre Renewal Scheme*, a renewal plan which sought to completely redevelop the entire Study Area 3 (see Figure 1). Budget constraints, however, forced the city officials to curtail its focus on the 180 acres immediately across from the newly constructed modernist City Hall.

Aside from removing blight from the study area, the objective of the renewal scheme was to ensure that the downtown would remain the region's primary entertainment and leisure hub. To do so, planners envisaged that the area would become home to a ballet school and performing theatre, a large museum and a concert hall. In addition, to help create a vibrant, 24-hour, year round attraction, these developments would be flanked by a pedestrian mall on Market Street, a sunken plaza with a fountain, an amusement park, underground parking, residential towers, a hotel and an underground commercial concourse. The attractiveness of the area was to be further enhanced by placing all of the parking facilities below ground and altering the existing street pattern to reduce the noxious effects from vehicular traffic.

## Murray V. Jones Plan - 1967

Despite having the largest study area of any metro Winnipeg renewal plan to date, the *Cultural Centre Renewal Scheme* managed to cover only a small portion of the downtown core. In response, the Metropolitan Corporation announced it would begin work on a comprehensive renewal plan to study the remaining 400 acres of the area. Planners began work on the *Downtown Development Plan* in 1967 by undertaking a detailed physical and socio-economic survey of the downtown and hiring the Murray V. Jones & Associates consulting firm to study the constraints hampering renewal (Murray V. Jones & Associates 1969).

Although it was intended to be comprehensive, budget constraints limited the consultants to focus on only four key issues, including downtown land costs and taxes, problems caused by the new downtown zoning by-law and various institutional impediments such as the preference of single family housing over apartments. In addition, the firm was given the task of creating a conceptual renewal plan to help guide the efforts of the team of the city Planning Department.

Due to the city's modest growth rate, Jones and Associates could not rely on renewal practices used by other cities such as Montréal, Toronto or Calgary. Whereas Montréal and Toronto could rely on corporate head offices to fill vacant land and parking lots, the demand for office space in Winnipeg was simply too low to have any noticeable effect. Similarly, the population growth experienced by Canada's two largest cities ensured that residential growth would eventually spill from the suburbs into the downtown. By adding only 8,000 people every year, Win-

nipeg simply did not have enough residential growth for any to spill-over from the suburbs into the downtown.

As a result, Jones and Associates proposed that the only way to redevelop the downtown's empty spaces was to fill it with medium and high-density housing. To create a vibrant environment which could effectively compete with the suburbs, the plan argued that the population of the downtown should range from 50,000 to 75,000 residents. However, due to the city's slow growth, it was estimated that nearly one-third of all the housing units constructed in the metropolitan area between 1968 and 2000 would have to be constructed downtown (Murray V. Jones 1969, 17).

To attract both investors and residents back downtown, Jones and Associates abandoned modern renewal theory and instead relied on the 'neo-urban' principles to guide its renewal of the area. Seemingly influenced by Jane Jacobs' urban critique, the *Murray Plan* sought to balance the needs of the pedestrian and automobile and in turn help create a more inviting and exciting street environment. It would do so by encouraging new developments to feature mixed land uses, street oriented commercial activities, and reduced floor space ratios. The current ratio, which was nearly two and a half times that of Toronto's, was perceived to be detrimental to the street environment by reducing the amount of sunlight hitting the street, the loss of a human scale and the creation of a wind tunnel, and other undesirable characteristics. To avoid such degradation, the plan recommended that the majority of high density structures fall between four and ten stories, with the former placed immediately adjacent to any public open space.

To further help improve the attractiveness of the area, the *Murray Plan* also sought to dramatically increase the amount of green and open space in the downtown. In addition to the proposed riverbank park system, the plan proposed constructing a pedestrian mall, urban plazas, pocket parks and a shared boulevard. These elements were to be connected to each other via 'fingers' of green and open space which would begin at the riverbank parks and crisscross through the downtown. To compliment these public spaces, the plan placed a large number of residential, cultural, commercial, entertainment and educational facilities.

The only areas to remain relatively untouched by Jones and Associates were the commercial functions of Portage Avenue and Broadway, which the proposal called relatively stable. To accommodate the modest growth expected for these functions, the plan made room adjacent to these areas for the expansion of office activities and the creation of parking structures.

### The Downtown Development Plan - 1969

In the late 1960s, downtown Winnipeg was experiencing a building boom not seen since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. None of the projects were more anticipated than the Metropolitan Corporation's *Downtown Development Plan*, released in 1969. Although the plan's goal was identical to those of previous renewal efforts, it was the way in which city planners would attempt to fulfill their objective which stirred the hopes and ex-

citement of the community. Even Metro's most vocal detractor, Winnipeg Mayor Stephen Juba, exclaimed that with this plan, "Winnipeg would become a 21<sup>st</sup> Century city....a city of the future' (Burley 2006, 46).

The *Development Plan* would create this futuristic city primarily by rebuilding the existing built environment and replacing it with one which was deemed modern, progressive and cosmopolitan. This new downtown was to be vibrant and exciting — a self-sustaining 24-hour, and year round utopia unlike anything seen not only in the prairies but in all of Canada. Using Montréal's renewal program as an example, and in particular the Expo 1967 as a template, Winnipeg's modern downtown was to be comprised of five core elements including high-rise residential towers, public parking facilities, an above grade system of enclosed walk-ways, public open and green space and recreational facilities such as an aquarium and conservatory.

Taking heed of the *Murray Plan's* recommendation, Metro planners aimed to increase the downtown's population from just over 10,000 in 1968 to over 75,000 in twenty years. According to the *Development Plan*, such a large population was necessary to help stimulate demand for commercial and retail uses. These activities were seen not only as a way to provide amenities for residents but also as an inexpensive way to fill the empty and under-utilized spaces which were making the area unattractive.

Although not explicitly stated, the plan called for developers to take full advantage of the city's high floor space ratio. Real estate companies were expected to build residential towers ranging in height from twelve to twenty-two stories as part of comprehensively designed complexes which would encompass entire square city blocks. In addition to having a minimum of 1,000 residential suites, these complexes were also envisaged to house commercial, retail and recreational uses on their lower levels.

The increase in the area's population was expected to come not from a large influx of new residents to the region, but also by capturing a significant portion of Winnipeg's growing demand for apartments. This growing demand was created in large part by the increasing number of childless adults, seniors and young adults under the age of 25 within the Winnipeg metropolitan area. These population cohorts, the first wave of the Baby Boomers generation, were crucial to apartment demand as they either could not afford to live in a detached suburban home or simply preferred the lifestyle an apartment afforded (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969, 69). Thus, these two factors help explain why the number of new apartments constructed in 1968 was nearly three times greater than the number of new single family units constructed that year (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969, 66).

But in order to capture this portion of the apartment market, the downtown's physical and investment environment would have to be dramatically improved. One of the most pressing problems identified by the plan was the large amount of surface parking in the downtown. Although surface parking occupied almost 30 percent of the downtown's surface, much of it was considered to be inconvenient, particularly in winter months. As a result, the large amount of parking in combination with its

poor location was deemed to be one of the causes of the lack of vibrancy of the downtown while simultaneously imposing a heavy toll on the aesthetics of the area. The *Development Plan* also recognized that the high cost of providing tenant parking was reducing the attractiveness of constructing real estate in the downtown. To help ease the burden of high parking costs as well as eliminate the need for surface parking, the second element of the plan was the construction of a comprehensive system of publicly-funded parking structures.

Managed by an independent public authority, these parking garages were to be integrated as a secondary use in newly constructed office towers and public recreational facilities. By placing these structures on the lower levels of these buildings, Metro planners attempted to place every structure in the downtown within 1500 feet of parking and to remove the blight associated with surface parking. More importantly, by providing residential parking within these facilities, residential developers were relieved of the cost associated with providing tenant parking. By reducing the risk and cost of construction, it was assumed that the downtown would not only become more economically competitive with the suburbs but that the overall cost of renting would decrease as well. The latter was deemed particularly important in achieving the plan's population target and increasing the area's economic and social diversity.

To offset the discomfort created by Winnipeg's extreme climate, the *Development Plan* called for the creation of an elevated, weather-protected system of pedestrian corridors. While concerns for pedestrian comfort were significant for Metro planners, so was the need to move vehicular traffic efficiently and quickly through the downtown's street network. By moving traditional retail and social activities off the street and into the elevated corridor network, interference caused by pedestrians would be reduced. Since these corridors were designed to replicate the traditional activities of the street, the walkway system was conceived as a public space to be owned and operated by the city as part of its regional street system. To discourage pedestrians from using the street during warmer months, the *Development Plan* sought to establish 'the second story habit' through creative design elements, flanking the corridor with commercial and retail activities and by placing public attractions above these corridors. By forcing patrons to move through the corridors to get to their destination, Metro planners expected that pedestrians would not only enjoy the atmosphere, but prefer it to the street below (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969).

According to physical surveys conducted by the Metro Planning Department, only 10 acres, or 2.5 percent, of the downtown was devoted to green or recreational space; in contrast, nearly 30 percent was devoted to surface parking. Consequently, the *Development Plan* made the creation of open and green space one of the major elements in its vision of a modernized downtown. The rationale for doing so was based on the assumption that these amenities would increase the appeal of the area and therefore attract investors, visitors and residents to the area. Although it was assumed that either the City of Winnipeg or the Metropolitan government would be responsible for the maintenance of these spaces, developers were nonetheless expected to

not only set aside room for this amenity but sell it to the public parks authority for one dollar.

The design and form of these public spaces was to take two forms, half of which would be devoted to open air gardens and plazas and the remainder to a series of winter garden conservatories. These enclosed green spaces were designed to help provide residents with a lush escape from the bitter winter weather and, more importantly, a chance to reconnect with nature and one's spirituality. Access to these public areas was provided by the elevated pedestrian corridors to ensure year round comfort and to keep people from using the street below.

The final element of the Development Plan was the construction of public recreational facilities in key locations throughout the downtown. Some of the proposed facilities included a conservatory, aquarium, enclosed skating rink, swimming pool, a regional library and a convention centre featuring a botanical garden. Metro planners placed a high emphasis on creating these amenities due to the belief that, if properly developed, such assets could act as catalysts for growth and in turn create a profound change in the character and attractiveness of the area.

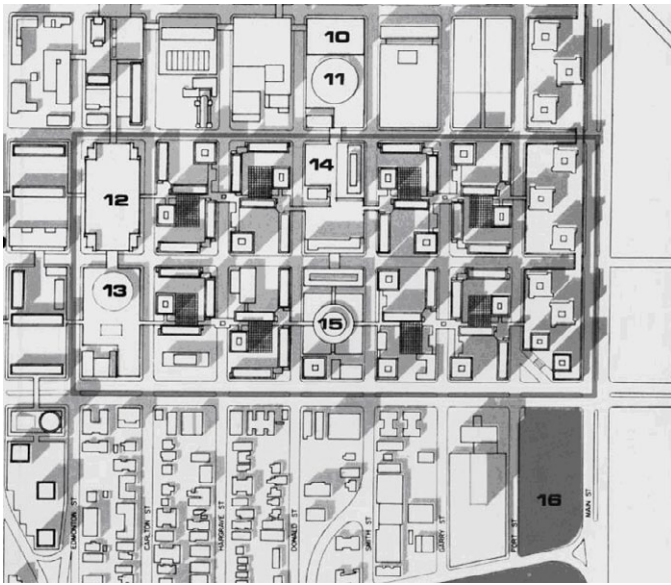
In applying these elements, the *Development Plan* chose to concentrate them in two areas rather than disperse them as had past renewal efforts. By concentrating approximately \$169 million in the Broadway–St. Mary and the Ellice–Cumberland sectors over a twenty year span Metro planners hoped to transform these areas into catalysts for future downtown development (Figure 1). While both renewal areas were small, it was expected that their success would not only spur development in the surrounding areas but would also influence the architecture and layout of these developments. Despite incorporating all five elements in each renewal sector, their applications and orientations were varied in each sector.

### **Sector One: Broadway – St. Mary**

The primary organizing features of the Broadway–St. Mary Sector were the traffic arteries which surrounded and ran through the renewal sector (Figure 2). To provide easy access for visitors and to shelter residents from the noxious effects of traffic, non-residential buildings were placed primarily along these major traffic arteries while residential buildings were placed between them on lower priority streets.

These non-residential buildings, which were to occupy an entire city blocks, would be constructed with public funds and contain the parking, shopping, recreational and entertainment facilities required to make the downtown attractive. Each building was to house the recreational facilities (such as the aquarium and conservatory) on its upper level while the pedestrian corridor and commercial shops would sit immediately below it. At street level, the building would house a multi-level parking garage providing access to the corridor network and recreational facilities. The vertical placement of these functions was meant to ensure that residents and visitors became accustomed to using the corridors instead of the sidewalks.

Although the *Development Plan* provided flexibility on the arrangement and appearance of the residential structures which were to occupy the space between these public amenities, there

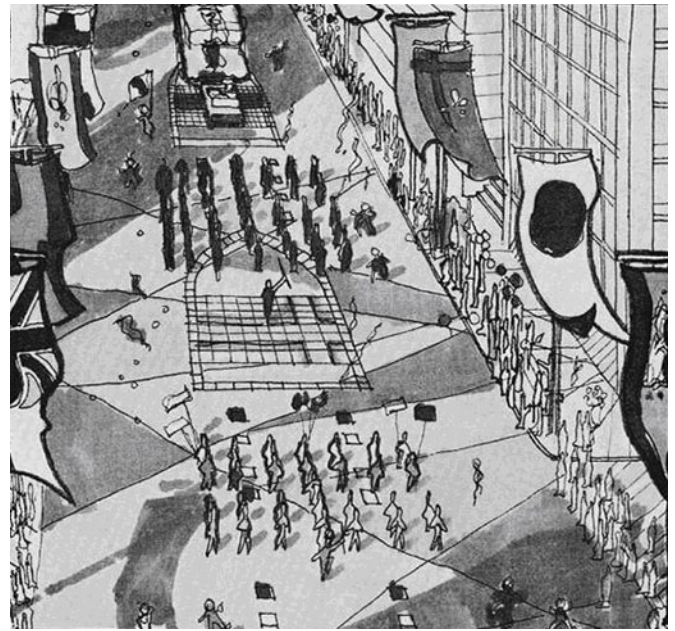


**Figure 2:** The Broadway – St. Mary Sector. Source: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969 Downtown Development Plan Section 10, Plate 16 (Winnipeg: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969)

were nonetheless a number of stipulations. Metro planners expected that developers' projects would encompass entire city blocks and maintain a minimum density of 1,000 suites per block. In addition, developers were expected to set aside space for the pedestrian corridors and a public green or open space. These open areas, which were to be transferred to the Metropolitan Government, would be transformed into public parks and winter garden conservatories. The latter were designed to provide a year round "oasis of verdant foliage, colourful flowers, open pools and playing fountains" in the midst of the harsh Winnipeg winters (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969, 56). In most cases, these open spaces were placed in the middle of the block and surrounded on three sides by apartment structures.

With growing interest in a downtown convention centre, the plan also included architectural renderings to show how such a structure could fit within the sector and influence development outside of it. One of the most unique features of the convention centre was the conservatory restaurant above the pedestrian corridor. Featuring a lush décor of plants, flowers and reflecting pools, the restaurant was designed to provide Winnipeggers another escape from the winter and surrounding prairie environment. As with all such developments, the purpose of the convention centre was not only to provide a catalyst for future growth but to help establish Winnipeg as an emerging centre of commerce.

To help celebrate the city's diversity, Metro planners created the 'Avenue of the Nations' on York Avenue between Main Street and Edmonton Street (Figure 3). Although it was designated as a major thoroughfare in the downtown, the *Development Plan* nevertheless transformed it into a processional avenue and



**Figure 3:** A ceremony on the Avenue of the Nations. Source: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969 Downtown Development Plan, n.p.n. (Winnipeg: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969)

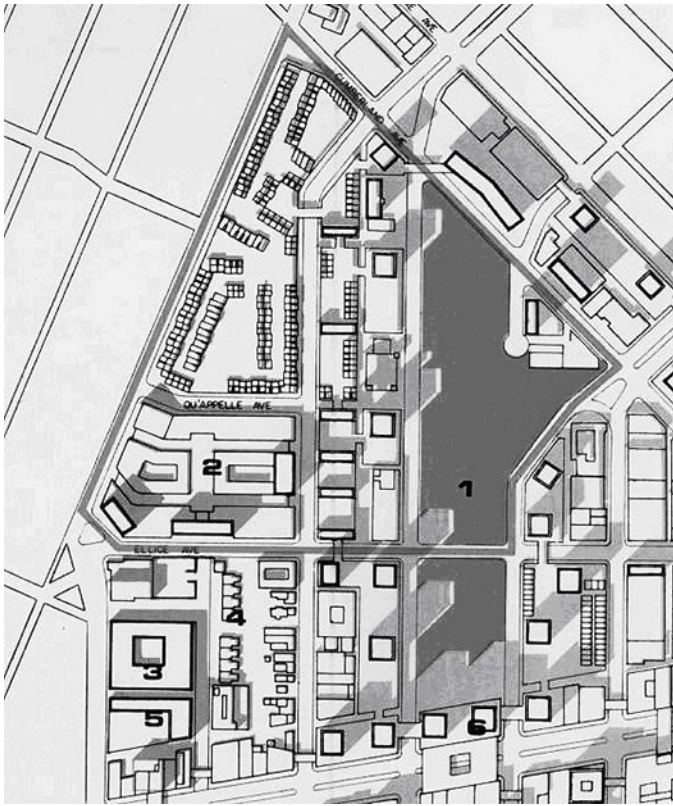
envisaged that it would host a number of cultural festivals and parades during the summer months. Between these activities the street would continue to promote diversity by emblazing twelve different coats of arms into the pavement, each representing one of the city's dominant ethnicities.

### Sector Two: Ellice-Cumberland

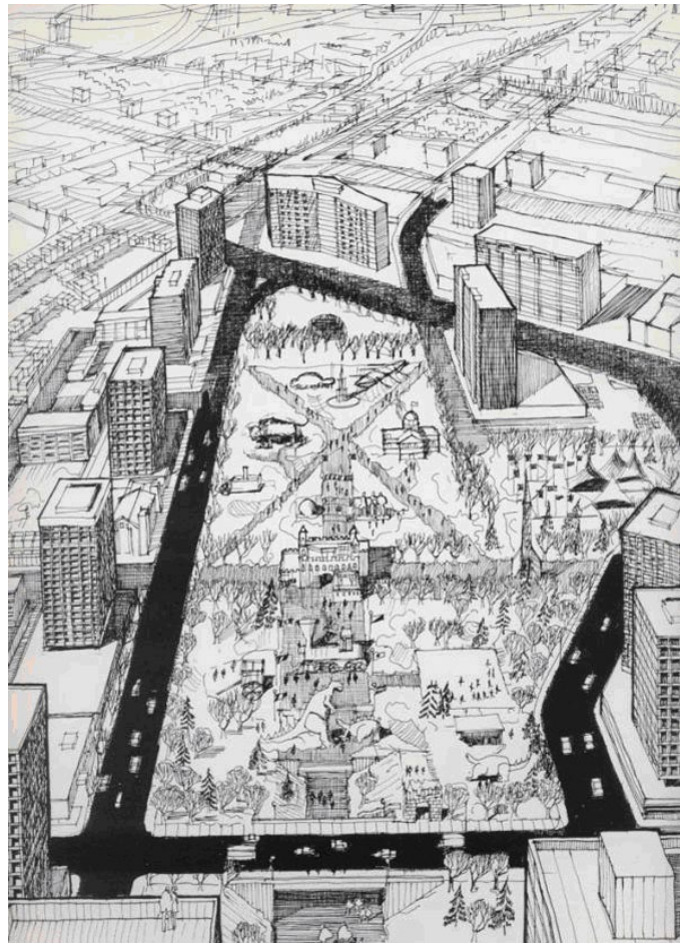
To redevelop this sector north of Portage Avenue, the Development Plan focused much of its effort on expanding two of the area's existing uses. The first called for the University of Winnipeg to expand its campus onto the former St. Paul's College site at Ellice Avenue and Balmoral Street. It was expected that by introducing a large concentration of staff and students to the area, demand for housing, shops, entertainment and other services would increase and therefore stimulate new construction.

In addition, the *Development Plan* also called for Central Park to be expanded south of Ellice Avenue and its landscaping and amenities to be modernized (Figure 4). Though the park was intended to act as a catalyst for high-density residential towers along its perimeter, its renovation and expansion was also designed to provide the area with a world class recreational amenity. Citing examples such as New York City's own Central Park, the plan argued that the renewed park would give the downtown the charm and character it needed to compete with the suburbs and other Canadian cities for investment.

The plan also contended that Central Park could serve as a major tourist attraction for the metropolitan region and Canada itself. While the park was designed to provide year round activities, Metro planners envisioned that its greatest potential lay in its winter uses (Figure 5). The highlight of these winter activities was to be a winter fair which was to feature "ice sculptures,



**Figure 4:** The Ellice – Cumberland Sector. Source: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969 Downtown Development Plan Section 10, Plate 16 (Winnipeg: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969)



**Figure 5:** Ice sculptures in Central Park. Source: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969 Downtown Development Plan Section 10, Plate 26 (Winnipeg: Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969)

torchlight parades, snow events and outdoor dancing and barbecues.” (Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg 1969, 84). Such a festival would be so great, the plan stated, that it would overtake Quebec City’s Bonhomme Winter Festival in terms of its attractions and vibrancy.

#### **Other Recommendations:**

Although the *Development Plan* provided public funding for the redevelopment of the two renewal sectors, it nevertheless created a conceptual plan for the rest of downtown. Some highlights of these recommendations include the creation of a riverbank park system, an entertainment district near Notre Dame and Ellice Avenue, the development of mixed use structures on the north side of Portage Avenue, a new downtown library on Graham Avenue and the transformation of the row houses on Vaughan Street into specialty shops and restaurants to serve the expanded University of Winnipeg campus.

### **The Fall of Winnipeg’s Modern Project**

Shortly after the Province of Manitoba accepted the *Development Plan* in 1969, Metro Planners set about implementing the plan’s recommendations in the Broadway – St. Mary Sector (Figure 2). With funding from the provincial and Metropolitan governments, and also the Federal government, construction for a state of the art convention centre commenced in the spring of 1970 at the corner of York Ave and Carlton Street. Not long after, Lakeview Properties announced that it would start construction on a massive development adjacent to the Convention Centre. Lakeview Square, as it was billed, would feature open space and a Japanese garden which was to be surrounded by two high-rise residential towers, two office towers and a first class hotel. A second-story skywalk was designed to provide a weather-proof connection to each building and the convention centre. Subsequent additions to the skywalk soon enabled residents and visitors to walk to various points throughout the downtown in a comfortable, climate controlled environment. The skywalk system continues to be a popular idea even today with its most

recent expansion connecting the convention centre to the City Place shopping mall.

Although Metro's public investments had altered a large portion of the downtown and brought private investment capital into the area within a short period of time, the *Development Plan* failed to maintain the enthusiasm it received during its initial release. In addition to being vocally derided by Mayor Juba at every possible occasion, the demise of Winnipeg's largest comprehensive renewal plan was also caused by a number of local and national socio-economic and political events which unfolded during the early 1970s.

One of the most devastating of these events was the beginning of a long and deep lasting economic recession in the early 1970s. Due to the nature of the city's size and economic status, the majority of the *Metro Plan's* proposed mega-block real-estate developments were to be funded by national and international real estate firms. During the economic boom of the 1960s, it was possible for Winnipeg to attract these firms as cheap credit reduced the risk of investing in Winnipeg's slow growth market. As interest rates rose steadily and the economy fell into recession, the risk of investing in Winnipeg was simply too high and many firms retracted fully from the city. With the local economy in tatters and the absence of outside capital, there was simply no will or money available to build the vision of the Metro's planners.

One most also point out that by the end of the 60's and early 70's there was a marked change in philosophy regarding how urban renewal should be undertaken. The focus was now on small projects, rehabilitation and restoration rather than big projects and the bulldozer approach which characterized urban renewal during the 50's and early 60's. Winnipeg's transformation to a city of the future did not fit this philosophical change in urban planning

### Conclusion

Had the *Development Plan* been adopted by the City of Winnipeg, it is difficult to know whether or not its goals would have been attained. Although it attempted to emulate the success of Montréal's underground city, it is difficult to predict whether or not Winnipeggers would have embraced the so-called 'second story habit'. Had the walkways failed to attract sufficient numbers of pedestrians, both the street and the enclosed spaces would have, in effect, become dead spaces. The result would have been opposite of what planners intended; rather than making the area more attractive, the modernist mantra of separating vehicular and pedestrian traffic would have created an even more hostile and unattractive environment.

While Metro planners believed that improving the downtown through public investments would help attract close to 75,000 residents from the suburbs, in hindsight it is apparent that such a figure would have been virtually unattainable. In order to achieve such a number, nearly one-third of all new apartments in the metropolitan area would have had to be constructed in the downtown, a number only an area-wide growth management plan could have accomplished. At the time, it was

highly unlikely that the 13 surrounding cities and towns, many of which were eventually amalgamated with Winnipeg in the early 1970s, would have ever allowed their residential and commercial growth to be siphoned into downtown Winnipeg.

But perhaps the most damning factor was the growing desire for residents to live in detached, single-dwelling houses in the suburbs. Although the construction of new multi-family buildings outnumbered new housing starts during the late 1960s, one of the primary reasons for this trend was the high cost of constructing new houses in the city. According to a study on housing (Murray, Jones & Associates 1969), the cost of constructing a new single family home in Winnipeg in 1968 was the second highest on the prairies. With few affordable housing options, those wishing to leave the dilapidated neighbourhoods of the inner city were forced into renting an apartment.

Although one cannot blame the demise of the *Development Plan* for the continued decay of Winnipeg's downtown, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the problems it sought to address 40 years ago are still present. Nearly 30 percent of the downtown is devoted to surface parking lots; abandoned buildings and vacant lots mar the landscape; most shops close after working hours and, most importantly, the image of the downtown remains one of crime, decay and empty streets.

If there is one lesson to be learned from this situation, it is that planners and politicians must carefully examine the benefits and possible repercussions that each new project will have on the downtown. Buildings cannot simply be seen in terms of how much tax they will generate, but also how they can compliment existing buildings and improve the environment. As the *Development Plan* has shown, the easiest way to accomplish this frame of thought is to create a comprehensive master plan which sets guidelines on the design and nature of new developments. In the absence of such a plan, Winnipeg's renewal efforts have been characterized as being piecemeal and left strictly to market forces. In the rush to increase tax revenues, planners have catered only to the needs of investors and unwittingly helped contribute to the area's dysfunction. While numerous renewal projects have been heralded as being 'the saviour of downtown,' one needs to look only at the empty buildings and sidewalks on Portage Avenue to see that they have been anything but.

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