

# Case-in-Point 2023



## REVITALIZING URBAN SPACES

### The Argyle and Grafton Shared Streetscape Project in Halifax

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#### Abstract

In 2018, the councillor of the Exchange District of Winnipeg proposed a shared street concept in response to a potential loading zone along Main Street. Consequently, the planned drop-off/pick-up zone would impact the sidewalk width by cutting it in half. This prompted discussions from community councillors about implementing a “shared street” concept on Albert Street, as a pilot project for the city of Winnipeg. (Macdonell, 2019).

The purpose of shared streetscape projects is to adapt vehicular roadways into welcoming and accessible spaces for all modes of transportation, with a strong emphasis on pedestrians and bicycles, while also maintaining access for vehicles at low speeds. This typically requires redesigning streets with increased traffic calming measures such as street furnishings, bollards, street trees, and lighting (Toronto Complete

Streets Guideline, n.d.). As a result, these strategies help blur the distinction between sidewalk zones and the vehicle travel way, forcing automobiles to slow down. Thus, shared streets create a safer environment for pedestrians and cyclists as the street design emphasizes pedestrian comfort and right of way.

This case-in-point will examine a successful streetscape project and its impact on revitalizing urban spaces. Hopefully the success of this pilot project will encourage similar initiatives in other parts of Winnipeg.

## 1.0 Background & Context

In the 1950's as cars became more prevalent, vehicular needs became increasingly more important, as individuals relocated from the city to suburban communities. These neighborhoods created a way of life that relied heavily on personal automobiles to access everyday services, including grocery stores, libraries, schools, places of work, etc. (Baobeid, Koç, & Al-

Ghamdi, 2021). As a result, planning shifted to designing areas that accommodated motorized transportation, with a strong emphasis on building efficient highway networks that would link remote urban areas.

Unfortunately, this neglected alternative active transportation modes like walking and biking (Baobeid, Koç, & Al-Ghamdi, 2021). In response to the car centric city, the concept of “walkability” arose around the 1990's. It refers to creating built environments that are accessible and inviting at the pedestrian scale (Zumelzu, & Herrmann-Lunecke, 2021). By improving walkability in the built environment, it has been found to have a significant impact on reducing overall carbon emissions, promoting stronger social interactions, and supporting healthier lifestyles (Baobeid, Koç, & Al-Ghamdi, 2021).

The concept of shared streets emphasizes the dual functionality of roadways as they operate as both a transportation route, as well as a space for pedestrian socialization and activity (Ben-Joseph, 1995). By creating a shared space for all modes of

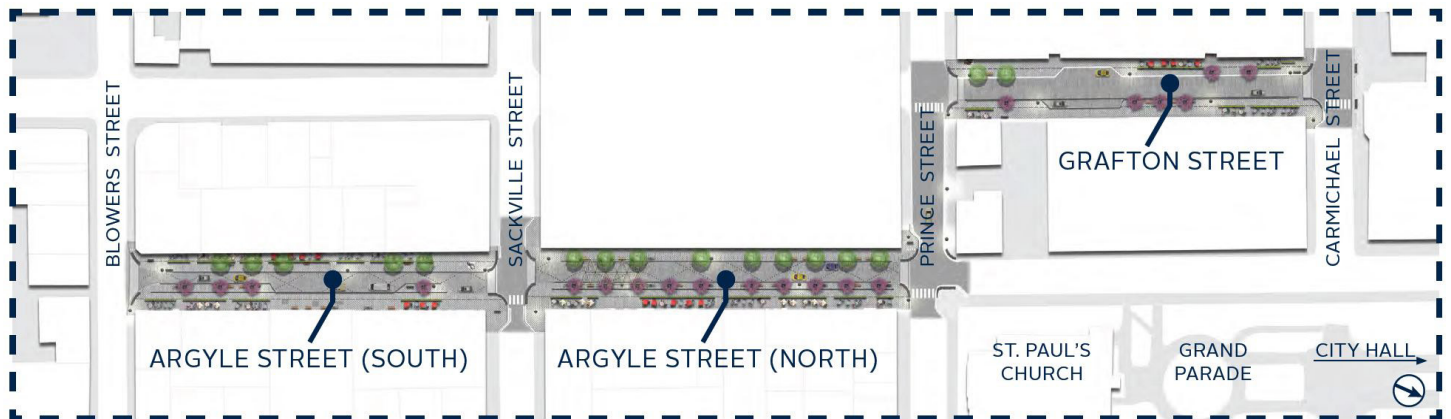


Figure 1: Argyle and Grafton site plan (Personal Communications, 2023)

The Street is now poised to become a shared street, fully open to people while still accommodating cars. This plan proposes Argyle Street as a gathering place that works night and day, summer and winter as a daily public space and destination for special celebration

- Planning & Design Centre, 2012

transportation, including cars, bikes, and pedestrians, shared streets aim to increase safety and create a more inclusive and accessible urban environment.

## 2.0 Facts of the case

With a budget of 6 million dollars, the Argyle and Grafton Streetscape project converted 3 100m long downtown city blocks into a unique shared space for pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists (refer to image 1).

### 2.1 Why Argyle and Grafton?

The area has a history of being the heart of Halifax’s entertainment district. Some of the first outdoor patios were established by local business owners in the 1990’s. The patio culture has become a defining feature of these streets creating a vibrant and welcoming atmosphere.

Today, Argyle Street is lined with bars, restaurants, and nightclubs, making it a popular destination for both locals and tourists alike. Every year, Argyle Street hosts numerous events including theatrical performances, live music, DJ concerts, sporting events, etc. (Graspointer, n.d.). With an active business community, the desire for a higher quality pedestrian environment was petitioned by the local Argyle business owners and supported by the local municipality.

### 2.2 Alignment With Regional And Community Plans And Initiatives

The Argyle Street Project in Halifax was

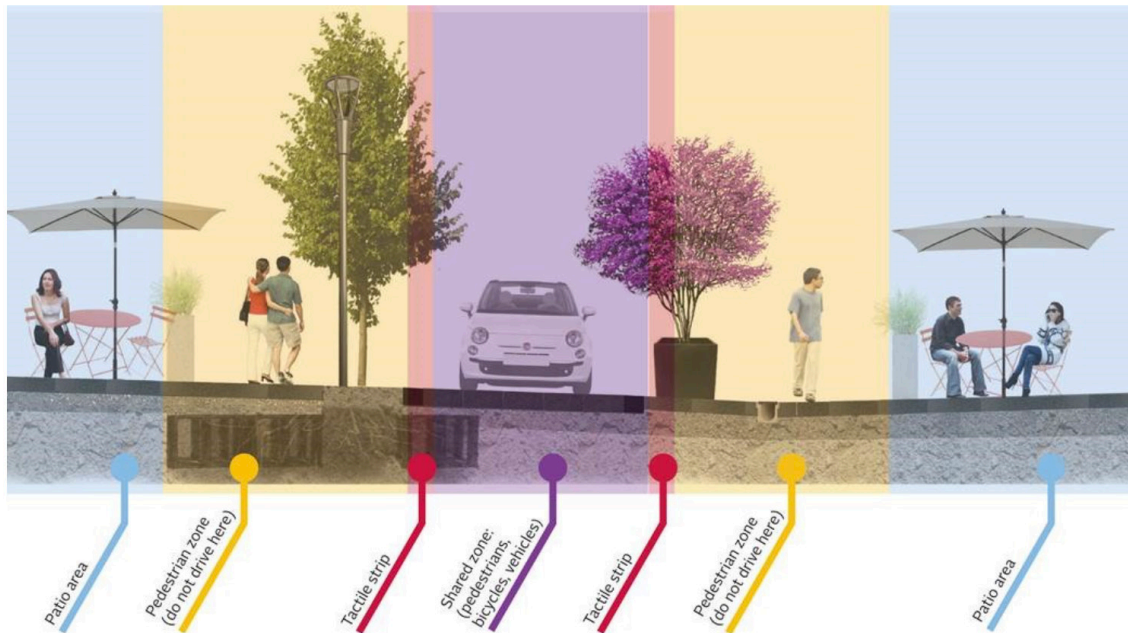


Figure 2: New shared street “zones” (Halifax Regional Municipality, n.d.)

designed to align with various regional plans, community plans, and other strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of life for residents and visitors (Planning Design Centre, 2012).

Halifax's Regional Plan emphasizes the importance of creating "healthy and vibrant communities", as part of its overall vision (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006, p. 3). Section 4.2.2 of the report specifically highlights the active transportation goals required to achieve this broader vision. These goals include enhancing mobility and public safety, improving environmental quality, and reducing automobile dependency (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006). Similarly, the Argyle and Grafton project aligns with Halifax's Integrated Mobility Plan, which seeks to prioritize pedestrian and active transportation options, such as cycling and public transit, over personal vehicles (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2017b).

The Argyle Street Project is also aligned with the Halifax Downtown Plan, which aims to establish a lively and thriving downtown area by encouraging a compact, intensified, and walkable core (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2017a).

Overall, the Argyle Street Project in Halifax reflects a commitment to building a more inclusive, sustainable, and vibrant community for the Halifax Regional Municipality.

### 2.3 The Role Of Fathom Studio Architecture Firm

Fathom Studio, an architecture firm based in Halifax, Canada played a key role in the design of Argyle Street. As Devin Segal, Partner, and Director of Landscape Architecture at Fathom recalls, part of the ambition with the project was to create a destination for visitors by creating a pedestrian-friendly atmosphere (Fathom,

n.d.). The firm worked closely with the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) and other stakeholders to ensure that the design met the needs and goals of those involved in the project. This included improving accessibility, enhancing public safety, and creating a welcoming and attractive human-scaled public space.

### 2.4 Community Engagement

In 2015/2016, Fathom Studio embarked on a comprehensive community engagement process aimed at ensuring the inclusivity of the Argyle and Grafton Shared Streetscape design. The project sought to promote accessibility for the blind and visually-impaired community, and hosted numerous workshops with advocates to ensure these needs were addressed in the overall project design (personal communications, 2023).

These meetings and workshops were instrumental in providing insights on the needs and preferences of the community, which were used to inform the project's design.

Additionally, the studio conducted one-on-one interviews with each business and property owner in the project area. This was important in establishing a comprehensive understanding of the project's impact on the community and identifying any potential issues.

Additionally, Fathom Studio also held two follow-up sessions to update the members of the Downtown Halifax Business Commission on the project's design and construction mitigation. These sessions were key in ensuring that the community was informed and involved in the project at every stage.

It is also worth mentioning a pilot project was conducted on one block of the street. The pilot project was a significant community engagement effort that helped Fathom Studio to test the design



Figure 3: Before and after view of the streetscape project (CBC news, 2017)

and identify any potential issues before implementing it on a larger scale. Overall, the community engagement efforts ensured that the project was inclusive, accessible, and beneficial to the community.

Following extensive community engagements sessions, Segal (personal communication, 2023) outlined six key goals and objectives created for the project. They included:

1. Developing a high-quality street environment
2. Prioritizing pedestrian needs over vehicle traffic
3. Improving the urban forest in the downtown area
4. Ensuring accessibility for individuals with mobility and vision impairment

5. Providing accommodations for events and street closures
6. Establishing an unobstructed emergency vehicle route

After establishing the framework to help guide the project, construction on the Halifax Argyle and Grafton Street project began in June 2017 and was concluded November 4, 2017 (Halifax, 2023). The project involved the installation of new pavement, tactile strips to indicate the transition between pedestrian and vehicular areas, 3.0 meters of patio space on either side of the street, lighting, street furniture, landscaping, and public art installations. The streetscape design also included the creation of wider sidewalks with a minimum of 2.1 meters for a pedestrian zone and reduced the vehicular lane to 3.0 meters.

### 3.0 Outcomes

The Argyle and Grafton Street project has received several awards and recognitions for its successful redevelopment efforts. In 2017, the project won the Best Effort to Improve Halifax award, and was also recognized by Streetsblog USA, People’s Choice for Best Urban Street Transformation of 2017 (Fathom, n.d.).

In 2018, the Argyle Street project received the International Making Cities Livable Design Award and was also recognized by the Atlantic Planners Institute for Excellence in Planning, Physical Plans and Design. In the same year, it also won the Pinnacle Award from the International Downtown Association, and also won the award for Best Thing to Happen to Halifax in the Past Year (Fathom, n.d.). In 2020, the project was also recognized with the APALA Award of Excellence for Large-Scale Landscape Designed by a Landscape Architect.

The attention that the Argyle Street project

has generated demonstrates the success of this project, and the possibility of creating more livable and sustainable urban environments.

## 4.0 Lessons Learned

### 4.1 The Importance of Municipal Department Cordination & Collaboration

Following the completion of the Argyle Street project, Devin Segal from Fathom Architecture highlighted that a new department named Strategic Transportation was created at the HRM. The department's primary objective is to bring together individuals from different disciplines such as design, engineering, operations, maintenance, and traffic authority and to promote departmental collaboration.

As Devin noted, a group that meets regularly is crucial to ensuring everyone is on the same page, and conflicts that may arise from differing interests can be avoided. Regular meetings allow team members to discuss project progress, identify potential issues and adjust project plans as needed. Before the creation of the Strategic Transportation department, Fathom faced a challenging task in trying to receive unanimous agreement from municipal departments before moving forward. When the Argyle schematics were created, they were sent numerous departments with competing interests, including: Police, Emergency Services (Fire), Transportation and Public Works Design Engineering, Right of Way Services Traffic Management, Municipal Operations, Lighting, HRM Development Approvals Engineering, Planning & Urban Design, Urban Forestry, Halifax Water, Public Art Coordinator, Corporate Communications, Legal. As well as, Heritage Gas, Bell Aliant Communications, and Nova Scotia Power.

After the plans circulated the different departments, over 300 comments were generated that needed to be addressed. Devin emphasized that without regular meetings and open communication, consultants often end up playing the role of mediator, trying to accommodate the needs of all groups.

Thus, establishing clear goals and objectives for the project is essential before engaging a consultant. All stakeholders should be aware of and support these goals to ensure alignment and a shared vision.

### 4.2 Budget For Public Relations

Another lesson learned from the project is the importance of creating strong relationships with local business owners and residents to ensure concerns are addressed and that the local community is on board. Fathom studio recognized the importance of building strong relationships with the local community, especially with members of the Downtown Halifax Business Commission. They worked diligently with them, to ensure that local business owners were informed about the project's progress and that their concerns were addressed promptly. This helped to build trust and foster a sense of collaboration between Fathom and the local business community.

For example, roughly 1 million dollars of the project budget was spent to keep the street open for business throughout construction. This included pedestrian traffic control through fencing and access ramps, specialized loading, garbage removal, and coordinated construction noise restrictions during theatre shows.

By investing in these strategies, Devin reflects how the project team was able to minimize the impact of construction on local businesses, ensuring they were not severely economically impacted during the construction period. Overall, this strategy

supported the livelihoods of those located on Argyle Street and also helped to build goodwill and positive relationships with the local business community.

### 4.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Argyle and Grafton shared street project successfully coordinated competing interests to create Atlantic Canada's first pedestrian friendly urban corridor. The reimagined street design prioritizes the pedestrian experience, encouraging alternative modes of transportation, whilst challenging the car centric nature of cities today. This project revitalized Argyle Street, transforming it into attraction in Halifax. The project highlighted the importance of departmental collaboration, as a project of this scale typically requires multiple stakeholders and expertise for its success. Winnipeg may learn from this project's success and consider a similar collaborative approach for future large-scale developments in the city.

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## Figures

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