

An Integrated Approach to Heritage Area Infrastructure Renewal

Consultation and Design in the North East Exchange District

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Abstract

The North East Exchange District includes parts of the nationally designated Exchange District Historic Site. In the past 30 years, several of the traditional warehouse buildings have been converted to loft style residential and offices. The area has seen significant development in recent years and the growing population has begun to put additional strain on the aging infrastructure. Updated and upgraded roads, active transportation infrastructure, parking, and municipal services will be required to meet the new demands.

In response to recent and future redevelopment and expansion plans in the area, the North East Exchange District Engineering Study details a 10-year infrastructure renewal plan. More than just an engineering study, the report includes recommendations for incorporating the unique history and heritage of the area through a consistent design vernacular. A key piece of the study was a robust public engagement and consultation strategy that included residents, business owners, developers and property managers, and culture and heritage organizations. This Case-in-Point explores the multi-faceted approach to an infrastructure renewal project that incorporates planning, engineering and landscape architecture. In particular, it looks at the considerations taken to accommodate accelerated development in a rapidly changing heritage area and the importance of public consultation in shaping the final recommendations.

Background

An integrated approach to infrastructure renewal in a historic area is essential to ensure that all decisions are made in concert with future planning and development, and, most importantly, to preserve the aesthetic and historic qualities of the area. This approach is strengthened by high quality public consultation and urban design in conjunction with essential engineering plans that anticipate future intensification.

In the past 30 years, The Exchange District of Winnipeg has experienced significant investment and growth with its heritage warehouse buildings being converted into loft-style homes, restaurants, shops, and offices. As the popularity of the neighbourhood continues to increase, development has moved from the south and west portions of the area and has begun to intensify in the northeast.

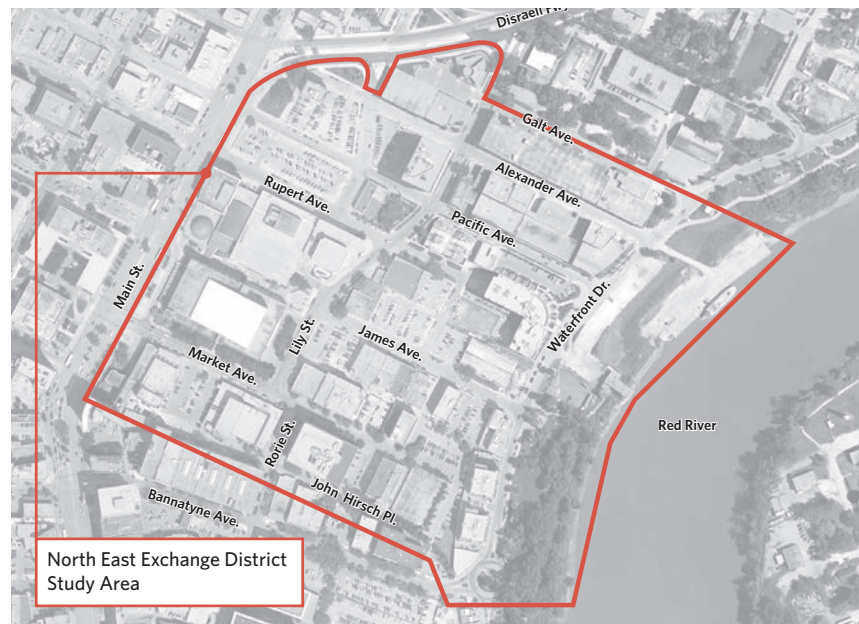
Beginning in January 2014, the City of Winnipeg commissioned The North East Exchange District Engineering Study to develop a 10-year infrastructure renewal plan. In conjunction with the City of Winnipeg, the project was led by MMM Group, with MMM Group responsible for planning and engineering, and HTFC Planning & Design, who were responsible for landscape architecture and urban design.

Study Area

The North East Exchange District includes parts of the nationally designated Exchange District Historic Site. The study area for The North East Exchange District Engineering Study was bounded by Main Street to the west, the Disraeli Freeway and Galt Avenue to the North, the Red River to the east, and John Hirsch Place to the south. While the study identified significant assets in the area, including heritage buildings, short blocks, comfortable road widths, well-proportioned buildings, it also noted that the aesthetic quality of the streets is inconsistent throughout — with many streets, particularly in the north, requiring pedestrian improvements and consistency in design.

The area has seen significant development in recent years, and the growing population has begun to put additional strain on the aging infrastructure. Updated

and upgraded roads, active transportation infrastructure, parking areas, and municipal services are required to meet these new demands. In addition to being a destination for recreation and entertainment, the area has experienced increased mixed-use redevelopment with an increase in people living and working in the area. The City needed to address aging infrastructure and other physical improvements to accommodate recent and future growth. The study required a detailed engineering plan, including preliminary right-of-way designs and a prioritized schedule for implementation. The planning component of the project included a comprehensive public consultation and engagement strategy aimed at gathering insight and input from a variety of stakeholder groups in the area, as well as the general public. The goal of this approach was to ensure that the existing concerns and future needs of



Project Study Area, image: MMM Group

those who live, work, visit, and have an interest in the area were fully understood.

Urban Design issues included: “Integrating new works with the heritage structures; accelerating development pressures; vacant housing; concentration of investment at the east edge of Waterfront Drive; sightlines and river access; surface parking; identity; edge definition; and street life”

This document highlights the importance of public consultation and heritage planning within an integrated infrastructure renewal plan. It draws out lessons learned from The North East Exchange District Engineering Study, and recommends how this planning and design approach can serve as a best practice model for other areas in Winnipeg.

Heritage Planning and Public Consultation

Much of the Exchange District is recognized as an urban heritage district — where “land use, buildings, streets and topography often define or influence spatial organization” and “buildings’ siting, the open spaces between them and the circulation corridors, are often identified as character-defining elements” (Parks Canada, 2010, p. 63). Parks Canada defines historic conservation as “all actions or processes that are aimed at safeguarding the character-defining elements of a historic place so as to retain its heritage value and extend

its physical life (p. 17). More specifically, The North East Exchange District Engineering Study focused on rehabilitation: “the action or process of making possible a continuing or compatible contemporary use of an historic place, or an individual component, while protecting its heritage value” (Parks Canada, 2010, p. 17).



Rupert Avenue, photo: MMM Group

In heritage areas, public consultation is important as it provides “a better understanding of what people identify as their important cultural environments” and “can contribute to a redefinition of cultural heritage and enable people to feel that they have a role to play in the protection of valued environments” (Swensen et al., 2012, p. 215). Heritage areas are not only important to elected officials, planners and conservationists. As Olsson (2008) notes, “a specific

built environment can have a meaning for a much larger group of people than those who are normally invited or actually participate in the planning” (p. 387). Generating meaningful input from multiple voices and perspectives “contributes to greater awareness of and debates on cultural heritage” (Swensen et al., 2012, p. 224).

Facts & Outcomes

The City of Winnipeg established several objectives for the detailed engineering plan:

- Ensure the rights-of-way are compatible with the anticipated land use.
- Ensure all planned surface works are coordinated with planned underground improvements.
- Ensure the area is walkable and accessible.
- Provide recommendations to improve the rideability, drainage and condition of the pavement for the streets in the area.
- Ensure public transit amenities are accessible and available.
- Identify any improvements to bicycle parking or facilities.
- Ensure the design conforms to crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) principles.
- Provide sustainable and practical solutions for new tree installations, street

- lighting and other amenities.
- Determine future loading needs and on-street parking supply.

As a first step, the project team synthesized the City's objectives to four goals, which are consistent with the City's planning documents Our Winnipeg and Complete Communities:

Goal One: Active Lifestyles

- all planned works needed to be compatible with existing and proposed land use, and provide safe, active, accessible and healthy lifestyle options.

Goal Two: Integration with Underground Improvements

- surface works needed to be planned in coordination with underground improvements to minimize disruption.

Goal Three: Effective Asset Management - advanced techniques, technologies, best practices and sustainable materials needed to be incorporated to mitigate maintenance requirements.

Goal Four: Loading and Parking Needs - future loading and on street parking supply and demand needed to be considered throughout.

Consultation and Engagement

Public consultation and engagement was pivotal in the process as infrastructure improvements were intended to be tied to the needs of existing

users of the space and future development plans for the area. This connection was very important to the project team, as it could directly impact the future success of the neighbourhood.

With input from the project's Steering Committee, the project team used landowner maps and relevant reports and documents to identify stakeholder groups and key contacts. A Public Consultation Memo was drafted to outline all consultation plans and identified groups.



Public Open House, photo: MMM Group

The project team used six methods of engagement to inform the study:

A **project website** provided background information, promoted upcoming public engagement opportunities, and provided opportunities to submit feedback on engagement events.

Five separate **key stakeholder meetings**, held in January and February 2014, brought

together individuals who lived, worked or owned property within the study area. At these semi-structured round table meetings, stakeholders were asked to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats throughout the study area, including any infrastructure improvements they would like to see. Stakeholders were also asked to share any future development or expansion plans for the area (where applicable). The stakeholder groups consulted included:

- The Exchange District BIZ Board, which included the area Councillor
- Business Owners, determined with assistance from the Exchange District BIZ
- Developers, Property Managers and Real Estate Agents, determined using City information and assistance from CentreVenture
- Residents and Local Services – including members of the Residents of the Exchange District (R:ED)
- Culture and Heritage Organizations

A **Public Information Display Session (PIDS)** was held in March 2014. Boards with an overview of the study were presented, and the project team was available to answer any questions. Large-scale maps to identify areas of concern were provided, and a 'dotmocracy' exercise was used for attendees to choose infrastructure

improvements that they wanted to see prioritized.

The project team conducted **study area walkabout** **community conversations** where they walked through study area and engaged in unplanned conversations on the street. They provided a brief description of the project and asked questions based on previous stakeholder meeting outcomes.

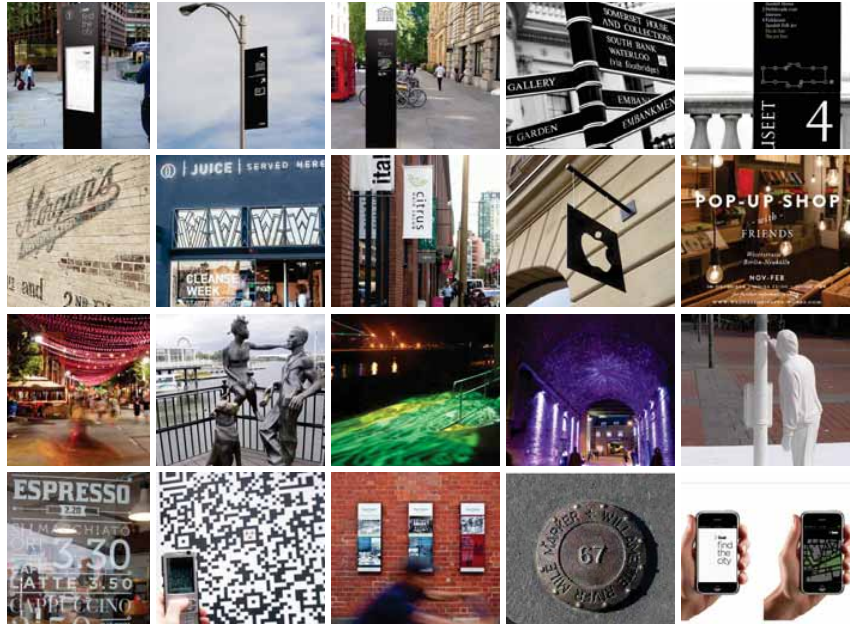
A **Public Open House** was held in June 2014 to present the preliminary designs, proposed infrastructure improvements and draft implementation plan. The project team was available for questions and comments, and comment sheets were provided for feedback.

Two **Online Surveys** were created: one that correlated with the comment sheet provided at Public Information Display Session, and one that correlated with Public Open House. Due to a low number of respondents, the results were combined with in-person comment sheets.

Integrating Heritage Urban Design

Emerging from the public consultation and integrated study, preliminary public realm design recommendations were made. The designs are all meant to create a consistent streetscape network throughout the study area that meets three overall goals:

Harmony: A unified, consistent appearance throughout



Exchange District Design Palette, image: HTFC Planning & Design



Pedestrian Lighting Plan, image: HTFC Planning & Design

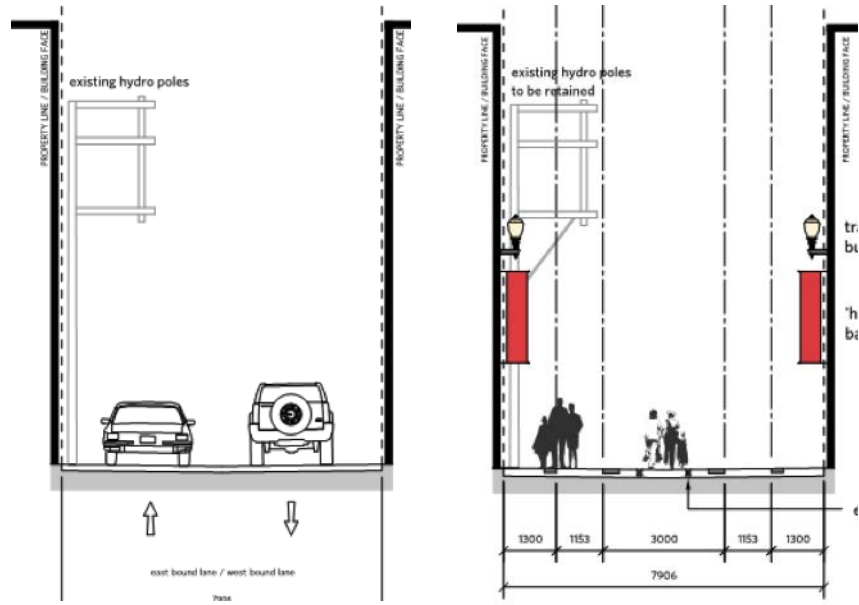
the Exchange District was recommended. Based on standards in the draft Exchange District Design Guide (2010), the streetscape would “improve legibility,” “strengthen sense of place” and “respond and derive value from heritage elements in the District”

Proportion: Although the study noted a well-developed tree canopy along some of the more southern streets in the study area, the project team recognized that a tree canopy was not feasible on all streets. Acknowledging that trees may not be the best tool to establish pedestrian scale in the

area, pedestrian level lighting was included in the design recommendations in all phases of the 10-year plan.

Visual Appeal: A visually appealing streetscape was recommended to help “foster social interaction and economic activity”. A diverse palette of signs, artwork, and shop windows was encouraged to create visual interest at street level. The designs also recommended reducing other infrastructure ‘clutter’ to accommodate sandwich boards, flowers, cafe tables, and pop-up uses along sidewalks. At the same time, it was recommended that ‘messier’ historic features such as cobblestone and hydro lines should be restored in unique locations such as Hell’s Alley (located between Market and James). In addition to at-grade planters at entrances, seating areas and intersections, the use of minimal street furnishings that serve multiple functions (e.g. bike racks that are also tree guards, and light fixtures that also aid wayfinding) were encouraged.

The design recommendations reinforced the significance of recognizing the heritage of the area in the urban design elements, which was identified during the consultation process. The design recommendations provide a guideline for how future development and supporting infrastructure should be implemented to ensure consistency and opportunity for optimal placemaking.



Before and After 'Hell's Alley', image: HTFC Planning & Design

Lessons Learned

Due to the integrated approach of this infrastructure study, planning was given a significant role in a predominately engineering-based report. Typically, a functional design project of this nature would not have a large emphasis on public consultation or landscape architecture. In doing so, the connection between land use and public works decisions was significantly strengthened. The consultation process was done before any designs were put forth to the City, and having a wide range of groups at the table ensured that any fundamental engineering recommendations were done in concert with the needs of the current and future community.

One of the overarching goals of this study was to have representatives concerned with

local infrastructure improvements (engineers), planning, (planners) and design (landscape architects) involved in the project from start to finish. The integrated nature of the project aimed to ensure implementation of future infrastructure improvements coincides with future development plans in a logical and sustainable manner. For example, brand new streetscaping will not be dug up or destroyed to accommodate sewer repairs in a year or two. Whereas infrastructure improvements are sometimes completed in reaction to development pressures, this study anticipates future growth and development and phases an approach to accommodate it.

Since the 1980s, there have been several reports and studies written on the Exchange District¹, from heritage conservation studies to interpretive plans to draft secondary plans. The project team used this wealth

of past information to inform their background knowledge and complement the new study. However, this vast amount of background information also speaks to the challenges of planning for a highly valued heritage neighbourhood, and the difficulties to implement completed plans. However, Lauren Lange noted that many of the recommendations put forth in this plan will be implemented, out of necessity. Some of the aging infrastructure is currently in need of repair to accommodate existing uses, while other infrastructure will need to be upgraded to accommodate proposed future plans for development.

Reflecting on the consultation process, Lange suggested that the stakeholder meetings were the most informative engagement tool, as they helped elicit the most input and information. Additionally, the Area Walkabout and Community Conversations, were an effective consultation tool. This component helped connect with individuals who might not necessarily participate in any of the other scheduled community engagement events or online surveys. It also served as a way to engage with individuals who were only in the area at very specific times of day (e.g. people who work in the area, and people who attend the theatre). Although it did not generate any surprising feedback, it was

helpful to gain the perspectives of individuals who may not have any previous background on the project, unlike stakeholders, who were very familiar with what was going on in the area. The team received very genuine and open responses from the people they spoke too. During Community Conversations, respondents often focused on their personal “experience” in the study area, which provided very rich information.



Existing Market Avenue Improvements, photo: MMM Group

Lange noted that when meeting with developers, it is important to be clear that the consultation process is about gathering input, not disseminating finalized plans. In future studies of this nature, one-on-one meetings with developers would be a more suitable approach, as many developers are

hesitant to discuss private and unannounced projects with others.

Lange noted that the multidisciplinary nature of the project team was a great asset to the study. Engineers, planners and landscape architects worked in collaboration to help plan for and propose infrastructure and urban design improvements that will be implemented in conjunction with future development plans for the area.

She considers the approach used a successful model that greatly benefited from the support and input of everyone involved at the City of Winnipeg, CentreVenture, MMM Group and HTFC Planning & Design.

Most importantly, this integrated approach could be used for future infrastructure renewal studies in Winnipeg — especially in heritage rich areas and along major corridors. Having a very defined and manageable study area allowed for more focused consultation, and resulted in detailed designs and a phased set of final recommendations. In areas where much of the cultural value and community pride is derived from the built environment, it is necessary to engage a diverse range of people – residents and visitors alike.

Previous area plans and studies include: Design Guidelines: Historic Winnipeg Restoration Area, June 1986; The Exchange District: An Illustrated Guide to Winnipeg's Historic Commercial District – 1989; Exchange District Commemorative Integrity Statement, January 2001; The Exchange District Strategic Action Plan – 1996; The Exchange District: A National Historic Site - Heritage Interpretation Strategy, July 1999; Exchange; District National Historic Site Streetscape Inventory – 2009; Downtown North Pre-Plan Assessment, November 2008; Commemorative Integrity Evaluation - 2009

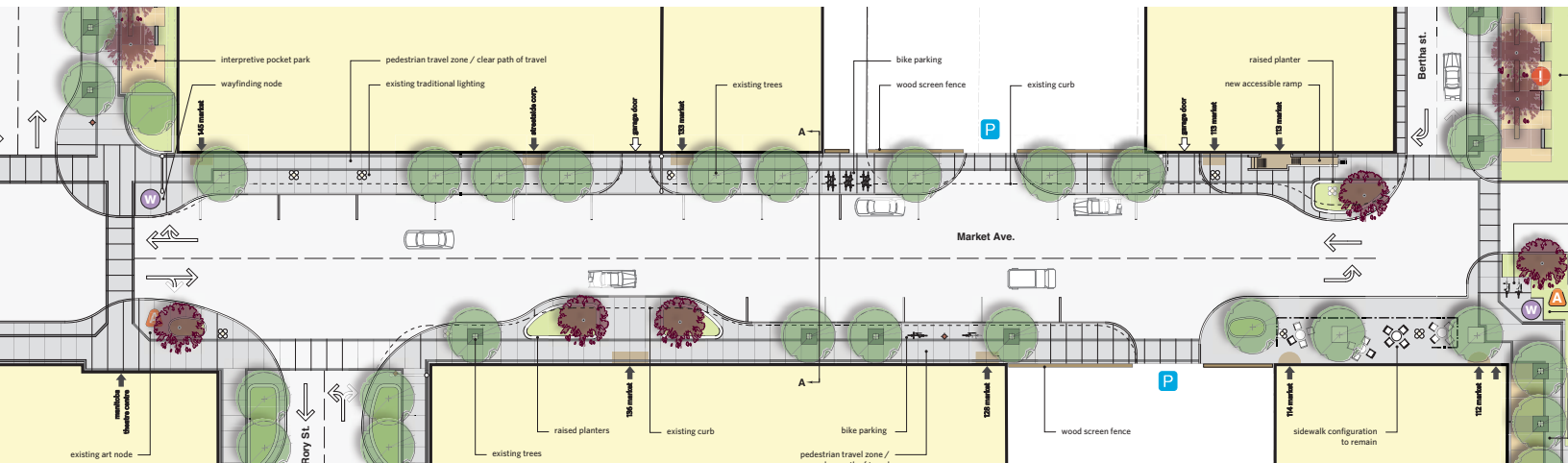


Conclusion

The North East Exchange District Engineering Study is the beginning of a proactive approach to future development in the area. The multidisciplinary methods used in this engineering study reinforce the importance of urban design and community input in a highly valued neighbourhood of Winnipeg. The project benefited from a manageable study area and clearly defined goals. This specificity ensured that public input could be incorporated to mitigate future strains on safety, accessibility and capacity. This study serves as a best practice for similar urban areas where development pressures require upgraded infrastructure.

Resources

- Olsson, K. (2008). Citizen input in urban heritage management and planning: A quantitative approach to citizen participation. *The Town Planning Review*, 79(4), 371-394.
- MMM Group. (2015). North East Exchange District Engineering Study.
- Parks Canada. (2010). Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada
- Swensen, G., et al. (2012). Alternative perspectives? The implementation of public participation in local heritage planning. *Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 66(4), 213-226.



Market Avenue Plan, image: HTFC Planning & Design