



CASE IN POINT 2009

Regenerating Downtown

Lessons for Winnipeg from St. Louis's Gateway Mall

Gateway Mall's Urban Hallway Perspective (Background Image: Rendering done by Thomas Balsley and Associates)

CONTRIBUTORS

Bwale Bwalya with
Peter Reed, MCIP
& Margaret Shipley,

ABSTRACT

Cities across North America and around the world are increasingly investing in their public realm. Through cutting-edge planning and design processes, The City of St. Louis will soon see the transformation of the downtown Gateway Mall – the ribbon of ‘open green space’ bisecting downtown St. Louis - into an ‘active civic space’ that offers range of experiences for residents and visitors alike.

As project lead, the design team comprising of Thomas Balsley & Associates and Urban Strategies Inc., was contracted by The City to develop a comprehensive master plan that would provide the City of St. Louis with the first comprehensive vision for transforming downtown's central park into a “significant open active space that defines the heart and soul of St. Louis” (Gateway Mall Master Plan, 2007). Building on this long-range vision, the plan creates an overall design framework, which will guide future individual proposals within the Mall, and establishes a road map for implementation and long-term management. The planning document produced is the result of comprehensive participatory planning processes with stakeholders including adjacent property owners as arranged by the Gateway Foundation Advisor. Further collaboration with other experts led to a comprehensive plan and specific developments requirements for the Gateway Mall.

“Our vision is a series of parks, green space, shops, cafes, gardens, and active spaces on Market Street from the riverfront past Union Station” Francis Slay (St. Louis's Mayor)



View of the Gateway Mall looking East (Image Credit: Urban Strategies Inc.)

BACKGROUND

Located in downtown St. Louis, the Gateway Mall is an 18-block 'green space' that runs between Market and Chestnut Streets from the Old Court House (at Broadway) to St. Louis Union Station at 21st Street. Key civic buildings within the Mall are the Civil Courts and the War Memorial. Several smaller memorials and public art of varying size are also housed within the Mall. The Gateway One building and its associated plaza occupy one of the blocks within the Mall axis, though it is not part of the public open space. Some significant civic buildings border the Mall, including City Hall, the Municipal Courts, Kiel Opera House, as well as key private buildings including AT&T and Bank of America.

The Mall was a part of the grand Civic Plaza plan originally initiated by the City's Civic Plaza Commission, chaired by noted landscape architect Harland Bartholomew in the early 1920s. The citizens of St. Louis voted to develop much of the land on Market Street from 11th to 15th Street as a park and civic center. There were plans to eventually extend the park to the Old Courthouse on the east and to 22nd Street on the west, and the area was to become a larger public space to be known as the Gateway Mall. The Mall exists today, along with the Civil Courts Building (Mayor's Office, 2007).

Beginning in the 1950s, St. Louis entered a decades-long period of decline, losing much of its economic base and population. During this period, several plans to revitalize the Mall were proposed but never came to being. In the past decade, the downtown has undergone a tremendous rebirth due to various interconnected efforts to revitalize the downtown: thousands of residents are moving downtown; retailing is coming back to the streets; the new baseball stadium is open, and plans for a vibrant mixed use neighborhood adjacent to it are progressing. These events have created opportunities in the area, including the exceptional potential of the Gateway Mall.

It was recognized that the Gateway Arch - east to the Mall - was receiving a lot of tourist attention, but due to its location, tourists never crossed the highway to go and experience downtown St. Louis. In 2007, Mayor Slay approached the Gateway Foundation to request the Foundation's assistance in developing a plan to energize the Gateway Mall and enhance its attractiveness so that tourists can cross over the highway from The Gateway Arch and come and experience the downtown. The Gateway Foundation responded by pledging funds for the development of the Gateway Mall Master Plan.

FACTS OF THE CASE

Comprehensive Public Engagement Strategy

In early February of 2007, a design team led by Thomas Balsley & Associates and Urban Strategies, Inc., were selected as the prime consultants by the City of St. Louis to move the revitalization forward from visioning to an action plan. Through out the creation of the master plan, public involvement alongside the steering committee was a key component in informing every step of the process.

The planning process began with an inventory of the existing conditions and features in the space, and discussions with stakeholders and adjacent property owners as arranged by the Gateway Foundation Advisor. When the inventory was completed, the design team prepared an initial design and programming thoughts that were later to be presented to the steering committee at a charrette. The design team was encouraged to provide ideas that stimulate new innovative thinking, more European in nature that focuses on quality urban space of “human scale” (City of St. Louis). The design team also carried out a venue analysis to analyze the potential economic impact of the emerging master plan. The mall’s potential for creating income was another important part of the analysis.

A draft master plan was prepared based on discussions and feedback from the charrettes and consultations with experts in all fields of design. The program advisor circulated the draft master plan to the steering committee for comments and circulated the comments back to the design team. The draft plan was then presented to the public via a designed webpage. The webpage was also used as a space for posting public open house notices; the agreed upon draft plan, and for the public to submit opinions.

The result of this comprehensive public participation process is a documented master plan for the visioning of the Gateway Mall. Included in the document is a roadmap for how the open green space can evolve into an active civic space that offers a range of experiences for residents and visitors alike. The Gateway Mall will contain five distinct yet interrelated areas, or “rooms”. From east to west, these are as follows: Keener Plaza, Urban Garden, Civic Room, Neighborhood Room, and The Terminus. The Primary unifying element of the Mall will be the Urban Hallway.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Gateway Mall is to be a leading ‘active civic space’ with a cutting edge approach to urban planning and design. The following planned strategies are highlights



Gateway Mall’s Civic Room (Image Credit: Rendering done by Urban Strategies Inc.)

of the master plan that may be informative as a precedent in Winnipeg's urban design.

Unifying an Open Civic Space

According to the Gateway Mall Master Plan (2007), the Mall lacks unifying elements to bring it together as a coherent and recognizable whole. To achieve the feeling of 'whole', an Urban Hallway has been designed to run along the entire south edge of the Gateway, and it will use trees, benches, signage, lighting, and textures to establish a common identity throughout the Mall. This element will be visible from bordering streets, from within the Mall and perhaps more importantly, from the hundreds of offices in neighboring buildings, drawing office workers out into the active space. This unity will be strengthened by a limited number of street closures, namely the portion of 17th Street that crosses the Mall, and the frequent and potentially permanent closing of a portion of Chestnut Street between 15th Street and Tucker Boulevard.

The same strategy could be applied to the 'green space' that runs along Broadway Avenue in Winnipeg. Broadway, surrounded by a number of civic buildings



Storm water retention garden
(Image Credit: Urban Strategies Inc.)

and office blocks, has the potential to be an active civic space by bringing it together as a recognizable whole. The feeling of 'whole' was effectively achieved during the time a number of sculptured Polar bears were placed along the green strip. The Polar bears attracted the local residents and visitors, making Broadway Avenue an 'active civic space'. If this were to be done permanently, Broadway Avenue may have continued to be an active civic space, especially in the summer.

Adopting Sustainable Strategies

The Master Plan strives to promote an environment that is "sustainable", both within the Gateway as well as the surrounding environment. All reasonable efforts will be made to ensure that changes to the Mall respect the principles of sustainability – fiscal, social and environment. Lessons learned from other projects show that well designed, secure and programmed open spaces do attract higher densities. Higher densities are encouraged because they increase the efficiencies of the urban environment due to the concentration of a population in one given space.

The Mall being a large open urban space can become a model for creating amenities that either "minimize energy consumption or minimize impact on the environment, or in fact improve the existing conditions in terms of impacts such as on storm water run off" (Gateway Mall Master Plan, 2007). Existing trees, particularly specimen trees will be retained wherever feasible, and a broader set of sustainable strategies will be followed, including: green roofs on structures; solar panels to operate lights; storm water retention and filtering; reusing existing materials; permeable surfaces; minimizing maintenance needs; planting native species; renewable energy, and so forth.

Winnipeg is yet to create an 'open urban space' that can become a model 'for creating amenities that either minimize energy consumption or minimize impact on the environment'. Unfortunately, in downtown Winnipeg there are not many feasible open spaces for such a development. Rooftop gardens go back 30 years in Winnipeg, but there is still a need to further the initiatives that lead to better sustainable practices. So far, a number of new downtown developments are encouraged to be green in structure, for example, the new downtown Manitoba Hydro building. In addition, a Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP) has been created by The City to develop a comprehensive greenhouse gas emissions reduction strategy for the municipal operations of the City of Winnipeg.

A Focus on Programming Activities and Events

In order to achieve high levels of activity in the Mall, an emphasis on the programming of its spaces is necessary. The plan emphasizes the ability to provide a range of effective planned and implemented programming for a various people. This is key to the Plan. With a downtown that is booming due to the increase in residential population, the adoption of effective programming will help to activate the designed spaces beyond work hours. The success of the Mall largely depends on its own internalized attractions, but it will look to programming as a compliment. All areas that are intended to host events should be constructed with the necessary electrical and water hook-ups, discreetly yet conveniently located.

The Mall is already a popular venue for many large special events. To avoid deterioration of the landscape areas because of overuse by special events, it is important that event guidelines are developed for the Mall to protect these areas. In addition, a regular schedule of public programs should be developed, “perhaps including a concert or film series to attract a new constituency to the park and better serve the city as a whole” (Gateway Mall Master Plan, 2007).

Winnipeg is limited when it comes to looking for open public spaces located downtown to utilize for special events. The Gateway Mall has the advantage of it being a large 18-block of green space to encourage continuous and all day programming. But once again, Broadway Avenue, the Forks and Central Park behind Portage Place, have the potential to be effectively utilized in such an attractive manner, although with some form of usage regulations in place.



Millennium Park Botanical Garden
(Image Credit: Urban Strategies Inc)



Temporary and permanent sculptures set amid gardens
(Image Credit: Urban Strategies Inc.)

Creating an Urban Garden

The Urban Garden, which is expected to cost at least \$20 million, will be financed entirely by the St. Louis-based Gateway Foundation. It will feature plantings selected in consultation with, and maintained by, the Missouri Botanical Garden; fountains and other water features; artistic lighting; seating; and 20 to 25 pieces of sculpture by internationally renowned artists. A café with indoor and outdoor seating is also being contemplated.

In Winnipeg, one needs to drive down to Assiniboine Park or visit the small downtown Japanese Botanical garden to experience something of the kind. Currently, the City of Winnipeg can be contacted to rent a plot for the purpose of it becoming a Community Garden. The City probably can replicate the garden found at the Assiniboine park - but on a much smaller scale - by looking to one of their available plots downtown so that it is accessible to downtown residents and for the people that work downtown. It would probably be just as successful as the garden found at Assiniboine Park.

Reduce Vehicular Circulation

Changes to bordering vehicular circulation and street parking will make the mall more useable and accessible (Gateway Mall Master Plan, 2007). Parallel parking should be removed on streets between Mall blocks to provide linear continuity and connection through the length of the Mall. The north lane of Market will be replaced with a two-direction bicycle path, separated from vehicular traffic by a low, three-foot wide median. The median at the eastern end of Market should be removed to permit views into the Mall, and medians should be built on Tucker to assist pedestrian crossing.

In Winnipeg, reducing vehicular circulation is a challenge, but that does not mean it can not be achieved. For example, at the north entrance of Portage Place Shopping Center (between the Mall and The Promenade Place), parking should not be permitted to encourage pedestrian use and accessibility to the mall, as such this would be a small step in reducing vehicular circulation in one area of downtown. Where ever feasible this strategy could be applied as well.

Good Collaboration with Local Practitioners

The Gateway Mall project was locally well led by the Steering Committee - comprising of Gary Bess, the City's Director of Parks, Recreation and Forestry; Rollin Stanley, the City's Director of Planning and Urban Design; David Fischer, Executive Director of Great Rivers Greenway; Jim Cloar, President of the Downtown Partnership; and Christy B. Fox, Director of the Gateway Foundation. Although the lead members of the design team were not from St. Louis, they were able to work well with the local practitioners. A special mention was made of the great effort Rollin Stanley - the City's Director of Planning - put in through out the project's development. It is always good to have a some kind of local champion in a planning process.

Involving the Public

Key to any planning process is the involvement of the public. It is essential to carry out public participation at the start and through out the planning process. Local stakeholders and residents usually have a wealth of knowledge and experience with their neighborhood. In the case of the Gateway Mall master planning, the Steering Committee and the City guided the planning process and outcomes. The process included a variety of opportunities for public participation.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

As stated earlier, Winnipeg may not have an open urban space as large as the Gateway Mall, but the City of Winnipeg can apply some of the planning strategies and principles at a smaller scale to achieve a transformation of an 'open public space' to an 'active civic space', especially in downtown. The City is currently working on changes to the Plan Winnipeg document, some of these strategies can also be considered in an effort to reinvest the City's public realm.

Access to Local Funding

The Gateway Mall project was probably not going to take off without the financial support received from the Gateway Foundation, a local non-profit organization.

The Gateway Foundation has in the recent decade funded a number of St. Louis's downtown revitalization projects.

For future projects, The City of Winnipeg may consider approaching well financially established local organizations for financial support towards projects that encourage downtown revitalization. Currently, provincial organizations such as the Neighbourhoods Alive play such a role, and they focus more on community projects than on projects associated with downtown public spaces.

Inspiring Images

Master Plans should have 'pretty pictures'. Once a Master Plan document has been created, it is important that citizens are somehow attracted or drawn to review the document. One way to present the document's ideas is by displaying inspiring images within the document. This method will not only provide the citizens with an imaginary view of the city's future, but it will allow the citizens to be inspired and participate in future urban development decisions.

REFERENCES

- City of St. Louis Website, 2009.
- City of Winnipeg Website, 2009.
- Thomas Balsley & Associates and Urban Strategies Inc., 2007. *St. Louis Gateway Mall Master Plan*. St. Louis: Thomas Balsley & Associates and Urban Strategies Inc.
- Mayor's Office, *Design Team for Gateway Mall Master Plan Selected. Press Release (February 06, 2007)*. Retrieved at <http://stlcin.missouri.org/release/getpressdetails.cfm?Auto=1160>.

About the Planners:

Bwale Bwalya is completing her Master's of City Planning at the University of Manitoba and is focusing her studies on planning for safer communities.

Peter Reed is a Planner in Toronto with Urban Strategies Inc.

Margaret Shipley is an Urban Designer in Toronto with Urban Strategies Inc.