ABSTRACT
Good urban design will connect people to natural features such as parks, green spaces and waterways. Innovative urban design will attempt to connect people to natural features that were previously under used, unsafe and not pedestrian friendly, turning spaces into places.

Winnipeg’s Exchange District is host to unique 1900’s era architectural heritage buildings. CentreVenture Development Corporation received the authority to assemble the land for infill development along Waterfront Drive from Lombard Avenue to Higgins Avenue, the former railway transfer track land.

The unique combination of public and private perspective generated an innovative design, changing the face of the Exchange District and of Waterfront Drive. Currently there are over 170 residential units and over 36,000 square feet of commercial space. To further the vision of Waterfront Drive, Stephen Juba Park and the road system also received enhancements.

This case in point examines the innovative urban design used to create Waterfront Drive. The purpose of this study is to provide the lessons learned on urban design using natural features in a downtown neighbourhood.

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“These developments represent a significant milestone in the renaissance of downtown Winnipeg. They demonstrate the private sector’s confidence in the revitalization of this historic district and of downtown, in general.” Chuck Loewen, former chair of CentreVenture (CentreVenture 2004(b))
Background
The concept plan for developing Waterfront Drive (between Higgins and Lombard Avenues) was formed in the summer of 2000 by CentreVenture Development Corporation, spearheaded by former CEO of CentreVenture, Annitta Stenning. The City of Winnipeg Council members passed the land assembly to CentreVenture as they realized CentreVenture’s capacity to advance economic development and downtown revitalization in the East Exchange District.

The former railway transfer track property was in derelict condition. The historic buildings were rundown and there was a lack of traffic circulation as the streets led to dead-ends. In addition, the safety of the area was in question. The Stephan Juba Park which runs along the Red River had been designed without particular attention to public safety.

CentreVenture estimated the development to cost nine million dollars. They sought out a grant from Canada-Manitoba Infrastructure Program and received an installment of three million dollars in first three years and subsequently the other six million dollars. Private investment was necessary for the development of the residential and commercial units, blending public and private interests.

A request for proposal (RFP) was sent out for mixed-use development. The RFP outlined the criteria expected from developers and the design teams. The expectations included respecting the current built form of the site including the historical buildings and connecting the development to a pedestrian oriented setting.

In order to successfully develop in the East Exchange District proponents were expected to follow a number of procedures and policy directions. In addition, CentreVenture developed a series of recommendations in order to help establish lucrative development projects on Waterfront Drive.

Nearly all of the buildings surrounding the site have at least one historic building designation and corollary all are protected under the Historical Buildings By-Law.
Downtown Winnipeg Zoning By-Law applies to this area and proponents needed to be aware of its implications on new development. In addition, previous policy directions such as Plan Winnipeg: 2020 Vision and CentrePlan: Development Framework and Vision and Strategies needed to be considered.

Some of the recommendations provided by CentreVenture were traffic and parking, conflict of uses and safety. Traffic and parking issues became apparent as the road system was not suitable for the new development. The road system constrained the flow of traffic as there were a series of dead ends, back alleys and gravel surfaces. Because of the essential changes to the road system infrastructure surface parking also needed to be removed. The new road system and necessity for parking provided the opportunity for different parking strategies, options for potential transit hub development and Winnipeg’s first roundabout.

A change in the use for the area to residential, commercial and office increased the possibility for conflict of uses. It was recommended that new development plans consider noise, loitering, loading docks, and outdoor storage associated with new uses.

A safety audit was conducted in 2000 for the neighbourhood. Safety strategies that were recommended included: coordinating efforts with the Downtown BIZ safety patrol, coordination with residents groups and encourage hours of operation of nearby services to be extended.

Before the project is approved the design review process is a necessary step to development. The design review varies depending on the zone designation, historic building designation and type of development, to name a few examples.

By following the recommendations and the polices and procedures, the developers turned Waterfront Drive into an attraction in Winnipeg. The intent of Waterfront Drive was to revitalize downtown, establish a thriving neighbourhood and foster economic development.

The following section will describe the facts of the case and how CentreVenture’s initiative shaped a space into a place.
**Facts of The Case**

Waterfront Drive site was not always on the agenda for downtown revitalization. However, CentreVenture initiated discussions regarding developing Waterfront Drive into a safe and thriving neighbourhood. They acted as the facilitators or mediators in an attempt to get the public and private sectors interested in the concept. They felt that a blend of private and public perspective would be the key to an attractive sustainable neighbourhood. The public sector provided the community consultation and policy guidelines and the private sector provided the design and development required for long-term neighbourhood stability. Once City of Winnipeg Council members approved the concept and initial finances were in place, selected proponents began the development process.

The natural features of the neighbourhood, the Red River and Stephen Juba Park, were highlighted as unique attractions. Access points and sightlines of the waterfront and park were determined. However, this had implications on the design of Stephen Juba Park at that time. The park needed to be redesigned and cut down to a different scale not only to provide access points and sightlines but also to provide:

- new sightlines of the river from a pedestrian, vehicle and resident view point;
- public safety in the park;
- new road systems to create circulation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic;
- land for development.

From a planning perspective slicing into a park is not common practice. However, the new design of the park was crucial to the creation of new land for commercial and residential development. In addition, most of the trees that were cut down were transplanted and more trees were planted than the park originally had.

With the increase in land a new road system along Waterfront Drive was built. The new road design led to Winnipeg’s first roundabout at the corner of Bannatyne Avenue and Waterfront Drive. The design had intentions of increasing the flow of circulation for both vehicular and pedestrian traffic, while additionally decreasing the speed of vehicles. The new road system has created connections to the streets perpendicular to Waterfront Drive, which were previously dead ends.
CentreVenture wanted to encourage the co-existence of mixed uses along Waterfront Drive, stimulating growth in the neighbourhood. There are four new developments, three of which contain both commercial and residential space. An increase of “eyes on the street” was the objective for developing ground-level commercial and office space.

The challenge was in attracting businesses to the area. Although the space was new and the surrounding landscape was alluring, businesses were not moving in as fast as anticipated.

The Excelsior, Ship Street, Sky and The Strand are the four developments found on Waterfront Drive. The units offer a wide range of styles from penthouse and townhouse to one bedroom apartments. The buildings are not Leed designed and are not all built with sustainable designs. However, the penthouse units in one building feature rooftop gardens. One building offers the option for rooftop gardens, and another building boasts its “sustainable green building design” because of the use of a reflective roof, the maximum use of natural light and office windows that open providing fresh air. Sky currently under construction.

The difficulties that Waterfront Drive experienced were due partially to the fact that Winnipeg had not seen this form of development before. Struggles with initial funding made the project progress at a slow pace. Albeit challenges, Waterfront Drive became a successful urban design initiative that will act as a catalyst for further development in the neighbourhood.

**Lessons Learned**

CentreVenture saw a vision in Waterfront Drive and initiated the development of a downtown mixed-use area. Following policies and area commitments they facilitated development and helped to transform unused space into a connected district.

One of the major components of the project was the use of the natural features in the design. Thinking outside the box, the landscape architects cut into the original Stephen Juba Park site decreasing the size of the park. At first glance this might not have been a sustainable decision. However, cutting into the park proved to be innovative. The land for residential and commercial space was a result of the decrease in the park land. Presently, the co-existence of mixed-use buildings bring another dimension to the area.
Furthermore, the public now has access to the natural features of the area, the park and the Red River, increasing usable public space.

This design also led to the new road system which included Winnipeg’s first roundabout. The improvements made to the road system have enabled circulation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

The design of Waterfront Drive takes into consideration the need for a walkable, safe neighbourhood building on the natural features of the East Exchange District. Key elements which contributed to the success and hopeful long-term sustainability of Waterfront Drive included increasing the use of public and pedestrian space while fostering economic development.

This case-in-point has shared the innovative urban design found on Waterfront Drive. Waterfront Drive can help to inform further development in downtown Winnipeg and other cities wanting to expand and revitalize their downtown neighbourhoods.

Next Steps

Waterfront Drive has generated interest in developing the East Exchange District. YouCube condominiums will be joining the area, providing units which are expected to be more affordable. In addition, the City of Winnipeg is currently discussing the creation of a Secondary Plan which will guide development and expansion of the area.
References


