Revitalizing Main Street

Insights from Selkirk Manitoba Avenue East project

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Manitoba Avenue East Revitalization Project is a transformative urban development initiative by the City of Selkirk aimed at enhancing the character, accessibility, and sustainability of the city's downtown area. This project focused on Manitoba Avenue East, a one-block section stretching from Main Street to Eveline Street.

The project focused on modernizing the street by improving infrastructure, fostering active transportation, and creating inviting public spaces. As part of Selkirk's broader Downtown Renewal Strategy (2016-2021), this revitalization project will not only improve the aesthetics and functionality of Manitoba Avenue East but also strengthen community connections, promote environmental sustainability, and support local businesses (City of Selkirk, 2016). This case study explores how the project started, the elements of the redevelopment project, and key lessons learned and potential impacts for future urban development in Selkirk and other small to mid-size cities.

Figure 1: Aerial of Manitoba Avenue East. Source: City of Selkirk

Figure 2: Overview Manitoba Ave. East
Source: Deeproot.com

2.0 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Selkirk, located just north of Winnipeg, has experienced significant population growth and urban development in recent years. Following a period of slow population growth with only modest increases, the City's population has now reached 10,504, reflecting a 2.2% increase from 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2021). As the City grows, there is an increasing need to address the

challenges of aging urban infrastructure, transportation and mobility, climate change adaptation, and sustainable land-use planning.

In 2014, the city adopted its Strategic Plan, which serves as a roadmap for long-term outcomes like revitalizing downtown, encouraging responsible land use, and improving transportation systems. At the same time, the City was also preparing its Downtown Renewal Policy Document and Capital Asset Management Program. Selkirk's Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Active Transportation Strategy followed in 2019 and 2020.

Manitoba Avenue East has a rich history tied to the growth and development of Selkirk and has always served as the commercial hub and heart of downtown. Over time, Manitoba Avenue East has evolved to accommodate higher traffic volumes, diverse business needs, and a decline in residents and workers in the downtown

> ***"Downtown Selkirk is the heart of a thriving city"***
>
> **-City of Selkirk**

area. Additionally, Manitoba Avenue East faced growing challenges related to deteriorating road conditions, aging underground utilities, and limited public amenities.

The Manitoba Avenue East Revitalization project was conceived not only to meet the need to replace aging underground infrastructure but also as an opportunity to achieve the goals outlined in the City's planning documents. Goals such as creating a vibrant, inviting, and accessible downtown by improving transportation systems, creating a safer and more connected active transportation network and encouraging community engagement and business growth. In response to this, the

Figure 3: Map of Manitoba Ave. East. Source: City of Selkirk

revitalization project included a series of urban design enhancements and infrastructural upgrades, with the goal of transforming Manitoba Avenue East into a multi-functional street that serves both residents and visitors. Key objectives of the project included updating aging infrastructure, improving the pedestrian and cycling network, enhancing accessibility, supporting climate change adaptation planning, creating new public spaces and promoting local businesses, all while honouring the town's historic roots (City of Selkirk, n.d.-b).

Figure 4: Family using improved crosswalk. Source: City of Selkirk

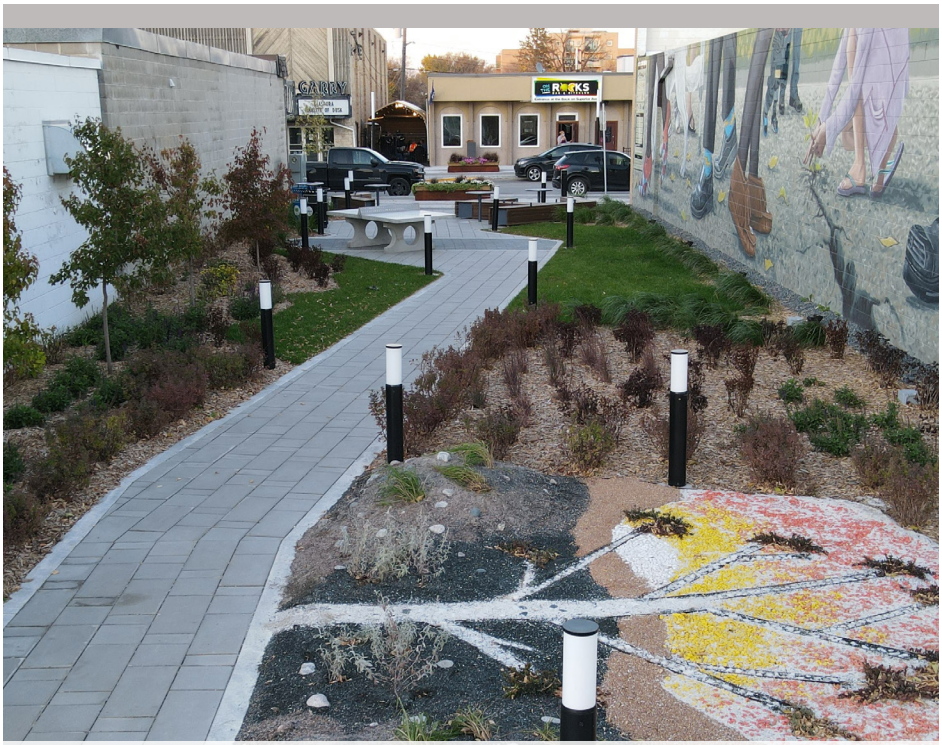

Figure 5: Public Art Installation at the public park. Source: City of Selkirk

3.0 FACTS OF THE CASE

The redevelopment and design of Manitoba Avenue East involved several modifications to the existing street while preserving the elements that define and make the place unique, such as the architecture and the former Dominion Bank built in 1905, which was the old Selkirk's business community (Wendy, 1997). Preserving the heritage and character of Manitoba Avenue East was a key focus of the project and played a central role in the planning process. All proposed modifications and designs carefully balanced modern urban design with the existing features of this section of the main street. The project introduced added enhanced pedestrian and active transportation and street design changes, which included converting angle parking to parallel parking and one-way street to two-way, public space and amenities, and urban tree canopy (City of Selkirk, n.d.-b). The following sections summarise the key elements of the project as facts of the project.

3.1 Public Spaces and Amenities

To help make Manitoba Avenue East a destination, the revitalization project also included designing new public spaces and adding public amenities. Before the project, Manitoba Avenue East lacked a true destination beyond the existing businesses. There were no public outdoor seating areas or spaces for people to gather, which limited its potential to become a vibrant community space. The city recognized an opportunity and re-developed two vacant lots it owned along Manitoba Avenue into pocket parks.

These parks feature benches, public art installations, and spaces for community activities, fostering social interactions and community engagement. They also offer areas for relaxation and recreation, providing a spot to enjoy lunch or play a game of ping-pong. Seasonal patios were also introduced, with street bump-outs strategically placed to protect potential on-street patios. These bump-outs were added in locations outside of existing restaurants, allowing them to expand their outdoor seating.

The introduction of seasonal patios encourages outdoor dining and gathering, enhancing the social atmosphere of Manitoba Avenue East. Planters also now line the street, creating a more aesthetically pleasing environment. The inclusion of public spaces and recreational areas is ultimately aimed at improving the overall quality of life for residents in the area, making Manitoba Avenue East a place where people can gather, relax and enjoy the outdoors.

3.2 Enhanced Pedestrian and Active Transportation

One thing that visibly stands out from the outcome of the project is the improved sidewalks and the bicycle lanes that were introduced. Before the project, there was no cycling infrastructure,

crosswalks, curb cuts or tactile paving for accessibility, and the sidewalks were often uneven due to the installed brickwork. These conditions did not support accessibility or encourage inclusive, multi-modal transportation for people of all ages and abilities.

The project re-prioritized space previously used for angle parking, reallocating it to create a wider sidewalk and new fully protected bike lane. The bike lane, which is at the same grade as the sidewalk, is clearly identifiable by asphalt paving to separate it from the sidewalk. These changes not only create a safer and more comfortable environment for both pedestrians and cyclists but also support the City's commitment to reducing community greenhouse gas emissions. By making sustainable transportation options like biking and walking more accessible and convenient, the city aims to lessen reliance on private vehicles.

3.3 Street Design Changes

Significant changes were also made to the street layout. The project converted Manitoba Avenue East from one-way to two-way traffic. As a one-way street, it was challenging for the street to provide strong connectivity with surrounding streets and key destinations like Selkirk's Waterfront. Converting it to a two-way street not only improved connectivity but also helped reduce vehicle speeds, creating a more enjoyable and accessible space for everyone. Additionally, angled parking was replaced with parallel parking.

Figure 6: North Pocket Park. Source: City of Selkirk

This change was not initially welcomed by all residents, as there were concerns about a perceived loss of parking and increased parking difficulties. However, a robust public engagement program helped address these concerns, confirming that the change would result in the loss of only five parking spaces while providing additional benefits like street patios, a bike lane, and wider sidewalks (City of Selkirk, n.d.-b). These changes have improved the functionality of the street, making it easier to navigate for both drivers and pedestrians while fostering a safer environment for everyone.

3.4 Urban Tree Canopy

Twenty new trees were planted as part of the reconstruction project. The trees provide much-needed shade for pedestrians and enhance the street's aesthetics by softening the buildings and street infrastructure. In addition, the trees also support Selkirk's climate change adaptation planning. The trees offer cooling benefits, improve air quality, and promote environmental sustainability on Manitoba Avenue East. The trees were planted in Silva Cells, which help sustain their health, ensuring that the trees will thrive and continue to provide long-term benefits.

4.0
LESSONS LEARNED

The Manitoba Avenue East project offers valuable insights into revitalizing the downtown core of cities and small towns. The insights from this project can be applied to similar projects aiming to enhance community spaces, improve infrastructure, and address sustainability concerns.

From this project, I have learned several lessons that have shaped my understanding of how small towns and communities can revitalize their main streets to make them accessible, attract local businesses and promote economic development in the long term. The following subsections outlines some of the lessons learned from this project.

4.1 Importance of Community Engagement

One of the critical elements that contributed to the success of the Manitoba Avenue East project was the inclusion of the residents or the community's input throughout the planning and design phases. Public consultations allowed local residents and businesses to voice their concerns, ideas, and desires for the place. This collaboration helped shape the final design, ensuring that the project goals met the community's needs and fostered a sense of ownership and pride in the project.

Figure 7: Improved Accessibility and Active Transportation. Source: City of Selkirk

The project team engaged with business owners and residents throughout the design phase and construction to help mitigate any impacts, such as temporary road and sidewalk closures. By gathering input from the public in the early stages of the project, the planners were able to create a design that not only addressed safety concerns but also improved accessibility and pedestrian experience. This underscores the importance of community engagement as not just beneficial but necessary to ensure the long-term success of urban development projects. It also shows how important early engagement and constantly updating the public on the developments are in the planning process.

4.2 Balancing Heritage and Modernization

The project highlighted the importance of finding a balance between preserving a city's unique history and making space for modern, functional infrastructure. The idea to preserve the city's historic downtown character while modernizing its infrastructure was the success of the project as it made the project unique from any other redevelopment projects. The revitalization effort sought to create a multi-functional public space that respected the city's heritage, incorporating historical elements into the new design, such as public art, while also enhancing accessibility and sustainability.

The project exemplifies how urban design, or development can respect and incorporate historic features into projects to maintain existing character while accommodating modern needs and trends, which I found fascinating. It again illustrates that successfully blending existing features of an area with emerging designs requires thoughtful planning, community involvement and a commitment to preserving what makes the city special while embracing innovation.

4.3 Prioritizing Accessibility and Active Transportation

Improving transportation specifically for pedestrians and cyclists was a central focus of the project. This included redesigning the street layout to accommodate two-way traffic, enhancing sidewalks, and adding bike lanes. The shift towards a more pedestrian and bike-friendly environment is important for cities looking to create sustainable, accessible, and equitable public spaces.

The project highlights the growing importance of active transportation infrastructure in urban planning, promoting healthier lifestyles and reducing dependence on private vehicles. I think the lesson that can be learned from this is that creating a more walkable and bikeable environment not only supports active transportation but also improves safety, accessibility, and the overall attractiveness of a downtown area.

4.4 Green Infrastructure for Sustainability

The last lesson learned centres around the project's respect for greenery and sustainability. One of the standouts features of the Manitoba Avenue East project was the integration of green infrastructure, including tree plantings; these elements are essential for managing stormwater and enriching urban green spaces. The use of Silva Cells, which provide tree roots with non-compacted soil, has been instrumental in promoting healthy trees and preventing sidewalk damage caused by root growth (Deeproot, n.d.).

This project demonstrates how urban planning can evolve to become more resilient to climate change while simultaneously enriching the urban environment. Tree canopies and urban green spaces help to lower temperatures, provide shade, and improve air quality, all of which are critical in adapting to the warming climate. This project serves as a model for how cities can integrate green infrastructure into redevelopment projects to address both environmental sustainability and the pressing need for climate change adaptation. By investing in green spaces, cities protect natural resources and improve residents' quality of life, making it a win-win strategy for both the environment and urban communities.

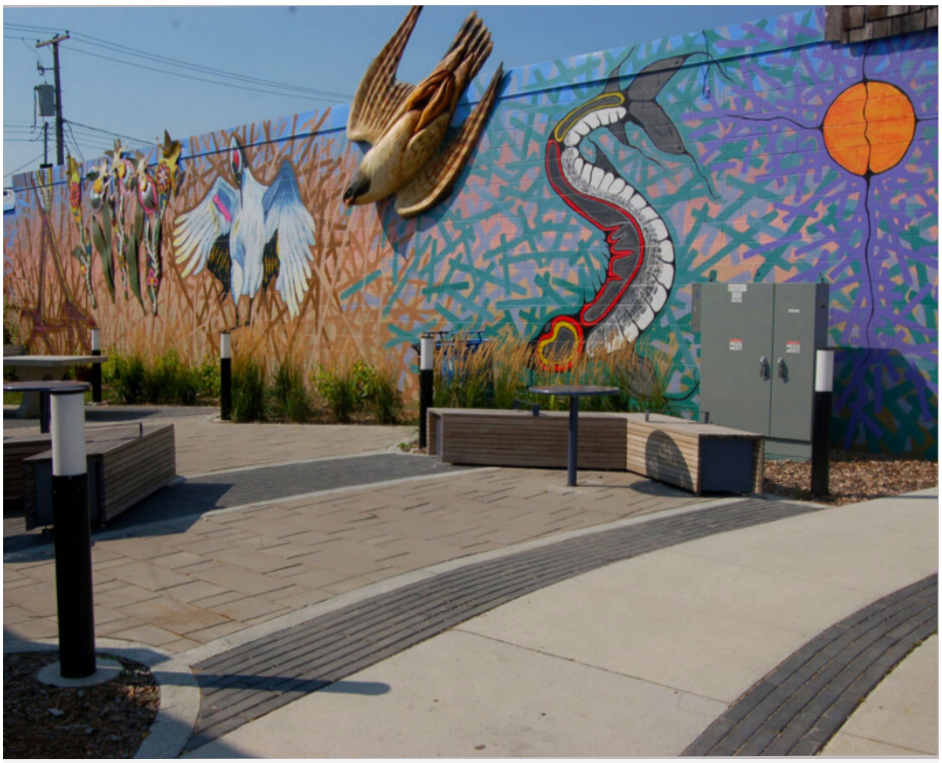

Figure 8: Public Art: Endangered Species Art. Source: City of Selkirk

Figure 9: Public Spaces and Amenities. Source: City of Selkirk

5.0
FINAL THOUGHTS

From an urban planning perspective, Selkirk's Manitoba Avenue East project stands as an exemplary case of successful small-town revitalization, demonstrating that with a well-thought-out strategy, communities and cities can transform their main streets into vibrant, economic hubs. Revitalizing a main street is not just about improving its physical appearance but about addressing a city's broader social, economic and environmental needs.

Figure 10: Street trees planted along Manitoba Ave. East. Source: City of Selkirk

In the City of Selkirk, the project highlighted the power of green infrastructure, community engagement, and a focus on accessibility to foster positive change. By incorporating elements such as tree planting, the project has enhanced resilience and residents' well-being. The integration of active transportation features, such as expanded sidewalks, bike lanes and pedestrian crossing, reflects the growing recognition of the importance of multimodal transportation in modern urban design. The transformation is expected to increase foot traffic and vehicular traffic, encouraging business activity and creating a more welcoming atmosphere for both residents and visitors alike, ultimately enhancing the City of Selkirk's reputation as a progressive and thriving community (City of Selkirk, n.d.-a).

The project makes the main street vibrant, accessible, and appealing to businesses, boosting local economic development. Moreover, by aligning the revitalization with broader climate change action goals, the project serves as a model for sustainable urban planning. This aligns with the growing reports on the benefits of urban green infrastructure and climate-conscious design in improving the quality of life in cities (Glazener & Khreis, 2019).

The revitalization of Manitoba Avenue East has also contributed to economic growth by attracting local businesses and increasing foot traffic in the downtown area. By creating a safe, welcoming space for both locals and visitors, the City of Selkirk has fostered a more engaged and economically dynamic community.

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FIGURES

Figure 1: City of Selkirk. "Aerial of Manitoba Avenue East". [Photograph]

Figure 2: Deeproot. "Overview of Manitoba Avenue East." https://www.deeproot.com/case-studies/silva-cell/selkirk/

Figure 3: City of Selkirk. "Map of Manitoba Avenue East." https://www.myselkirk.ca/mydowntown/

Figure 4: City of Selkirk. "Family using the improved crosswalk at Eveline." [Photograph]

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