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# FAST FACTS

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## Putting Winnipeg On Track Using Heritage as a Tool for Downtown Rejuvenation

**A**fter incorporation in 1873, the city of Winnipeg flourished, growing from 25,000 people in 1891 to almost 180,000 by the beginning of the 1920s. During this period of rapid expansion, a number of American architects headed across the border to leave their mark on Winnipeg's skyline. Much of their work was carried out in the 20-block area of the downtown known as the Exchange District, which housed the Winnipeg Grain Exchange, lavish theatres, banks, and some of the tallest skyscrapers in the British Empire.

Today, Winnipeg's Exchange District is an exciting and slightly Bohemian area of the city. As a National Historic Site of Canada, it also contains a range of preserved, architecturally significant assets that illustrate Winnipeg's role in shaping Western Canada from 1880 to 1914. Unfortunately a majority of the recent city centre development initiatives have focused on the portion of downtown south of Portage Avenue, ignoring the historic area. As a result more architectural testaments to Winnipeg's past are torn down almost every year.

To counteract such decay, the City of Winnipeg is committed to inner-city revitalization and heritage conservation. Promoting heritage assets has worked in other cities to rejuvenate the city

centre, and Winnipeg should capitalize on its own beautiful heritage architecture to rekindle a sense of pride for the downtown. The City should consider transforming the Exchange District into a major attraction that, like a museum or arena, draws people and investment to the city's core. The Exchange could become an interactive living history museum, showcasing one of North America's best examples of preserved early 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. The life line of this living museum would be a streetcar system that, by linking the Exchange to the other historic sites in the city centre, takes passengers on a journey through 10,000 years of Canadian history.

As streetcar tracks were a prominent feature of urban design in the early 1900s, re-establishing a heritage tramline using traditional-style streetcars could unify scattered structures into a collective historical whole. The urban railway could also be used to help revitalize the downtown. Rail systems are different than other public transportation initiatives because of their sense of permanency. Tracks are a symbol of a lasting commitment by the city government to encourage development along the transit corridor. Investors see that commitment, and focus their own efforts on these areas. Since the original construction of a streetcar line in Portland, properties along its length



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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have reportedly experienced \$2.3 billion in new investment.

Some of American cities have traditional-style rail systems. City planners in these municipalities recognize that vintage trams offer a look and feel that fit well into a downtown made up of elegant historical buildings. While the Winnipeg streetcars would be a year-round feature of regular public transit, during the summer months they could also be an integral part of a living urban museum. Special cars would be used to offer hour-long tram tours throughout the day, with a costumed conductor acting as a guide as the streetcar made its way from the Aboriginal gathering place at the Forks, past the Hudson's Bay Company's Upper Fort Garry gate, and through the Exchange District.

To truly turn the Exchange District into an urban museum, however, the new streetcar would be complemented by a number of other initiatives. In the summer months, actors could be deployed around the Old Market Square, portraying characters—war veterans, nurses, railway workers, suffragettes, and business people—living in the summer of 1919. They could act out short 20–25 minute plays throughout the day around the Exchange, and during streetcar tours board the trams to speak with passengers. As well, food carts could be set up along the streetcar line selling foods, like perogies and latkes, that would have been popular in Winnipeg in 1919. An historical newspaper or magazine stand could be situated along the route, along with a jazz ensemble to perform music appropriate to the era.

Ultimately though, the goal of this venture is not only to showcase some of the most interesting aspects of Winnipeg's evolution, but to spur development in the downtown. Unlike a conventional museum or arena, the streetcar tour would not be a feature in isolation; rather, it will introduce passengers to the city centre in its entirety. They will be able to see the many shops

and restaurants located along the tram route, while the historical activities in the Exchange District encourage them to explore the neighbourhood. With urban rail lines already appealing to businesses because of their permanence, this influx of potential customers makes investment in the area even more attractive.

Additionally, this project would help Winnipeggers envision a city that is less car-dependent. With a streetcar line connecting the Exchange District to the parking lots and other transit routes available at the Forks, it could even be feasible to make a number of city blocks in the Exchange car-free during the summer months, assisting with the municipal government's goal of creating a more pedestrian-friendly city.

Learning the history of the neighbourhood would familiarize Winniepgers with their downtown, making them more interested in its preservation. Furthermore, a number of themes appropriate for the tour—including Aboriginal heritage, the women's suffrage movement, and the Winnipeg General Strike—would strongly complement the exhibits found in the new human rights museum, by illustrating Manitoba's critical role in the development of human rights in Canada.

A living museum would bring people to the city's core, nurture development in the downtown, and support the preservation of Winnipeg's architectural heritage. Lastly, it would promote alternative modes of transportation by offering passengers an informative and fun historical tour, or simply a pleasant ride past a gorgeous early 20<sup>th</sup> century streetscape.

After one hundred years, it is time to put Winnipeg back on track.

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