

# Putting History on Track

## Using Heritage as a Tool for Downtown Rejuvenation in Winnipeg

by Benjamin M. Gillies



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## About the Author

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Benjamin Gillies is a recent graduate of the global political economy program at the University of Manitoba, where he focused on energy policy and urban development. He is also a supporter of the preservation and pres-

entation of Canadian culture and heritage, having worked at a number of historic sites managed by Parks Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada, and the Library of Parliament. He lives in Winnipeg.

**Cover photo: A streetcar ambles down Broadway Avenue in Winnipeg in the early 20th century, with the gorgeous Hotel Fort Garry (built 1913) visible through the trees. Photo: Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg—Streets—Broadway 11 (N4567)**

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The history of Winnipeg is a fascinating story of social and economic change. In the heart of the country, the city's locale has been a traditional gathering place for Aboriginal groups, a focal point of the fur trade, and a gateway to the development of the West. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, downtown Winnipeg, housing the Forks National Historic Site of Canada (NHSC), the remains of Upper Fort Garry, and the buildings that make up the Exchange District NHSC, is a testament to the various aspects of the city's growth.

Today, Winnipeg is a modern city with all the attendant challenges such urban centres face. In 2001, the City of Winnipeg produced *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision*, a document designed to guide urban planning in the city over a period of 20 years. While replete with ambitious goals, one of the municipal government's major intentions is to rejuvenate the city's core, by reducing the number of vacant properties and increasing residential development in the downtown, while also providing realistic alternatives to single-occupant auto use and increasing pedestrian activity in the area (Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision 2001: 11-12, 22). These are positive objectives—for the city, its residents, and the natural environment—but while there have been a few excellent revitalization projects carried out in the downtown since this document was published, such as the MTS Centre or the new Canadian Museum for Human Rights, more can be done to generate development in the city centre in order

to curb urban sprawl and pollution, and establish a more compact, efficient urban space.

To encourage future development, Manitoba's capital city should take advantage of its downtown's strengths and unique attributes. While often overlooked, it is my opinion the aforementioned historical significance is one of the area's greatest assets. In the remainder of this proposal, therefore, I outline how, by building on its past, Winnipeg can rejuvenate the inner city and showcase itself as a fascinating and forward-looking place to live and visit.

### Bringing History to Life

After incorporation in 1873, the new city of Winnipeg quickly flourished. The Canadian Pacific Railway completed the first direct link from eastern Canada in 1881, making Winnipeg the gateway to the Canadian Prairies as the federal government encouraged immigration out west. The provincial capital expanded rapidly, going from a city of 25,000 people in 1891 to one of almost 180,000 by the beginning of the 1920s. With new Canadians arriving from across Europe, during this period Winnipeg also took on a distinctly multicultural character. As an indication of the optimism exuded by many in the young city, the Manitoba Legislature, completed in 1920, was built to accommodate enough provincial representatives for an expected future population of three million people.

During this period of growth, the city at the heart of the country earned the moniker ‘Chicago of the North’, as, beginning in the 1880s, American architects headed across the border to leave their mark on Winnipeg’s expanding 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, banks, lavish theatres, business enterprises, and even some of the tallest skyscrapers in the British Empire. However, due to the opening of the Panama Canal—a more efficient trade route linking Europe and the East Coast to the Pacific Coast and the Far East—in 1913, Winnipeg’s growth slowed quite drastically after World War I. This abated expansion meant few of the buildings in the Exchange were demolished to accommodate new development, with many of these structures preserved right up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In 2010, Winnipeg’s Exchange District is an exciting and slightly Bohemian area of the city, filled with numerous local restaurants and shops. Declared a National Historic Site of Canada in 1997, the Exchange also contains a range of preserved, architecturally significant resources illustrating Winnipeg’s economic and social role in the evolution of Western Canada, as a centre of grain and wholesale trade, finance, and manufacturing from 1880-1914. Moreover, during the summer the neighbourhood comes alive, playing host to the Jazz Winnipeg Festival, the Winnipeg Fringe Festival, and other smaller events.

Unfortunately, the situation in the Exchange is far from ideal. The iconic Portage Avenue and Main Street intersection has its back to the area, and a majority of the recent city centre development initiatives have focused on the portion of downtown south of Portage Avenue, ignoring the Exchange District. This has left many of its approximately 150 heritage buildings unoccupied and decaying. Al-

most every year, more of these testaments to Winnipeg’s past are torn down, with their lots paved over for parking. Consequently, the city is losing some of its most valuable historical assets, and often it can be difficult to generate investment in this part of the downtown.

This regrettable situation is contrary to the perspective laid out in *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision*, which notes that:

given the challenge of municipal government to deliver livable cities with an increasing quality of life in the face of shrinking resources, it becomes clear that new approaches to land use, urban development, transportation planning, and financing are in order. In doing so, *maintenance of existing infrastructure must be recognized as more important than building new* (2001: 29, emphasis added).

To counteract such inner-city decay, the City of Winnipeg is committed to ‘thoughtful development’, in order to “take maximum advantage of existing infrastructure through increased densities and compact form, [and] to commit to inner-city revitalization and heritage conservation” (Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision 2001: 10). Taking this as inspiration, I have come up with a plan I believe will:

- Protect and present Winnipeg’s social and architectural heritage.
- Create incentives for, and interest in, development ventures across the city centre.
- Encourage sustainable urban planning practices in development.

Furthermore, as it is evident from the multitude of references in *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision* that future city evolution must move away from auto-centric design, one of my major objectives is to stimulate support for public transportation alternatives in Winnipeg.

Preserving and promoting heritage assets has worked in other cities to rejuvenate the downtown, and Winnipeg should capitalize on its own dynamic history and beautiful heritage architecture to generate a sense of pride and appreciation for the city centre. The Exchange District NHSC, like an arena or museum, can itself be a major attraction that draws people and investment to the city's core. This neighbourhood can become an interactive living history museum, which showcases one of North America's best examples of preserved early 20th century urban architecture. The lifeline of this living museum would be a streetcar system that, by linking the Exchange District to the other historic sites in the downtown, along a route known as the 'Heritage Line', takes its passengers on a journey through 6,000 years of Canadian history.

### **The Heritage Line**

In Winnipeg, debate over urban rail transit has thus far been largely focused on the feasibility of a light rail rapid transit corridor from the University of Manitoba into the downtown. An attractive rail system alternative, however, is a slower streetcar line running through the city centre itself. As streetcar tracks were a prominent feature of urban design in the early 1900s, when many of the Exchange District's buildings were constructed, re-establishing a heritage tramline using traditional-style streetcars could unify these rather scattered structures into a collective historical whole. Taking this idea further, a longer route—the Heritage Line— could be laid, carrying passengers from the Forks, past the former site of Upper Fort Garry, through



**Winnipeggers enjoy the festivities in the Exchange District in summer 2009, while the stately Union Bank Tower (built 1903) and Confederation Life Building (built 1912) stand tall overhead. Photo: Bryan Scott (winnipeglovehate.com)**

the Exchange District to the Manitoba Museum, and finally down Main Street back to the Forks. Not only would this streetcar line be an integrated part of Winnipeg Transit's routes, similar to the Downtown Spirit already available; it would be the focal point of the living urban museum, with animators, vendors, and other services (described below) found along the track.

A streetcar system would benefit the city far beyond simply consolidating Winnipeg's historic sites, however. As noted above, the municipal government is committed to breathing new life into the downtown. This is not unlike the ambitions of other North Ameri-

can governments, many of which are using urban rail transit for just this purpose—with promising results. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2007:

like stadiums, convention centers, and aquariums, streetcars have emerged as a popular tool in the effort to revitalize downtowns in the United States. About a dozen cities, from Madison, Wis., to Miami, are planning lines. But while research shows that big-ticket projects such as ballparks largely fail to spawn economic development, evidence is mounting that streetcars are indeed a magnet (Herrick 2007).

Urban railways have been such strong catalysts for increased efforts at designing an energized downtown because the profile of a rail track makes it clear the municipal government is taking inner-city rejuvenation seriously. A rail system is different than other public transportation initiatives in its sense of permanency. Though more expensive than a bus line, the railway becomes a symbol of a lasting commitment by the city government to encourage development along the transit corridor. Citizens, businesses, and other investors see that commitment, and in turn focus their own efforts on these areas. In Portland, for example, since the original construction of a streetcar line, properties along its length have experienced \$2.3 billion in new investment, 10,212 new housing units, and the construction of 5.4 million square feet of office space (Portland

Streetcar Report 2008: 2). Table 1 shows the amount of new development generated after the implementation of urban rail initiatives in four American cities. Each one enjoyed high returns on the original venture in terms of new construction surrounding their rail lines; and, encouragingly, studies indicate businesses found along such lines actually enjoy greater economic stability than those established elsewhere (IBI Group 2006: 13).

What makes this project even more appealing is that, done strategically, a heritage streetcar system could be constructed and integrated into Winnipeg Transit’s services at a lower cost than many other proposed downtown revitalization initiatives. Unlike light rail rapid transit trains, heritage streetcars cost approximately the same as the \$600,000 buses currently purchased by Winnipeg Transit, at between \$200,000 and \$800,000 each (Weyrich and Lind 2002: 18). While the track is obviously the larger expense, it too can be put in place in an economic fashion. Kenosha, Wisconsin installed its two-mile vintage line for around \$6 million, which included the cost of five restored streetcars. Similarly, San Pedro, California’s line, including three streetcars, was put down for \$4 million per mile (Weyrich and Lind 2002: 18).

Once in place, costs per passenger mile for many rail systems are 25-75% lower than for buses through a combination of greater carrying capacity, higher levels of ridership, more efficient grid-connected power, and lower

**Table 1: Development Return on Investment for Urban Rail Systems (in millions of dollars)**

	Initial Track Miles	Capital Cost per Mile	Total Capital Cost	Development Investment	Return on Investment	Expansions Planned
Kenosha, Wis.	2.0	\$3.00	\$6.00	\$150	2,400%	Yes
Little Rock, Ark.	2.5	\$7.84	\$19,60	\$200	920%	Yes
Tampa, Fla.	2.3	\$24.35	\$56.00	\$1,000	1,686%	Yes
Portland, Ore.	4.8	\$11.38	\$54.60	\$2,300	4,112%	Yes

Source: Hamilton Light Rail.



**At its peak, Winnipeg’s streetcar system had over 193 kilometres of track running throughout the city. The above photo illustrates some of this streetcar traffic on Main Street, circa 1914. (Note the Union Bank Tower and Confederation Life Building in the background.) Photo: Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg—Streets—Main c1914 1 (N908)**

maintenance costs per vehicle (Hamilton Light Rail: 2). It is also possible the streetcar could permanently replace the Downtown Spirit (or at least one of the three Downtown Spirit lines), leaving Winnipeg Transit employees available to drive the streetcars. Finally, as US transportation consultant John Schneider has said, “building a streetcar system is partly about transportation, but it’s mostly about economic development” (quoted in Hamilton Light Rail: 1). When such returns have been so high elsewhere, and are in line with a number of the City of Winnipeg’s most important goals, it is likely the initial expense of a streetcar line is quite justified.

Already, a number of streetcar cities—perhaps most famously, New Orleans—have tradi-

tional-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, helping to provide a pleasant journey which is a major draw for passengers in and of itself. Though therefore not the first to build a heritage streetcar line, Winnipeg would be the first Canadian city to implement such a new approach to its transportation system, and is in a unique position to capitalize on the fact it saw such rapid urban growth around the turn of the last century when the streetcar was in its heyday. While the new streetcars would be properly insulated and heated for winter, allowing them to be a year-round feature of regular public transit, during the summer

months they would also become an integral part of the living urban museum program in the downtown. From June to August, in addition to normal service, special cars would be used to offer hour-long tram tours throughout the day, with a costumed conductor acting as a guide through 6,000 years of history as the streetcar made its way from the Aboriginal gathering place at the Forks, past the Hudson's Bay Company trading post of Upper Fort Garry, and through the early post-incorporation buildings of the Exchange District. While this streetcar line is easily the largest and most permanent investment of this heritage project, though, it is only one aspect of bringing Winnipeg's history to life.

### **Creating a Living Urban Museum**

To truly turn the Exchange District NHSC into an urban museum, the new streetcar would be complemented by a number of other initiatives. Much like what is available at certain other national historic sites (such as Lower Fort Garry or Riel House), in the three summer months a team of costumed interpreters could be deployed around the Old Market Square, portraying characters living in the summer of 1919. I have chosen this year in particular, as it would allow the historical figures to easily discuss a number of events and themes relevant to Winnipeg and Canada's evolution: the First World War; the construction of the Panama Canal; the Spanish Influenza; the Winnipeg-based women's suffrage movement and the establishment of universal suffrage at the provincial level (Manitoba, 1916) and national level (1918); the construction of the Manitoba Legislature; immigration; and, of course, the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike.

From 10:00 am to 6:00 pm, eight to ten animators—as war veterans, nurses, newspaper carriers, railway workers, suffragettes, new

Canadians, and business people—would stroll about the area, sharing their stories and discussing the above events and their impact on early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada. They would educate visitors as to the historical significance of the various buildings around them, and what was taking place in Winnipeg in the summer of 1919. As well, they could act out short 20-25 minute plays throughout the day around the Exchange along the streetcar line, with times and locations posted at streetcar stops. During streetcar tours, they would board the trams to speak with passengers and interact with the guide. Having these costumed staff wandering about the Exchange District speaking with visitors would not only help share Winnipeg's role in Canadian history with locals and out-of-towners alike, but these animators would be available to provide information on the services and other attractions found in the downtown—and linked by the Heritage Line.

As noted above, it was during the migration boom after 1880 that Winnipeg further diversified its multicultural population. With new citizens coming from Ukrainian, Anglo-Scottish, French, Jewish, and other European backgrounds, ethnic communities sprang up across the city. These communities had, of course, many restaurants offering traditional fare for the new arrivals. A corresponding gastronomic feature could be incorporated into the Exchange District site, with historical food carts set up along the streetcar line selling foods—perogies, latkes, and the like—such as would have been available back in 1919. A number of restaurants in the city still make traditional dishes, and they could be in charge of the two or three carts placed along the route. It would be excellent promotion for their businesses, and would enhance the Exchange District visit.

It might even be possible to establish a historical newspaper or magazine stand along the





**As part of the Exchange District NHSC living urban museum, actors could teach visitors about the events that shaped Winnipeg in the first decades of the 20th century, including the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike (above). Photo: Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg Strike 12 (N12303)**

route. While it would sell current newspapers and magazines, it would look traditional and have period publications on display for visitors to view. As well, by working with the University of Manitoba Faculty of Music, a jazz ensemble near the Old Market Square could perform music appropriate to the era. Other ventures, such as putting up historically-accurate flyers and posters throughout the neighbourhood, could also be undertaken. Even if visitors chose not to take the formal streetcar tour, with so many supplementary attractions available they could easily hop on and off the streetcar as it wove through the Exchange, exploring both the historical and 21<sup>st</sup> century features of downtown Winnipeg by themselves.

### **Riding Into History: An Overview of the Streetcar Tour**

Climbing on at the Forks, visitors are welcomed aboard the Heritage Line by the ‘conductor’ (the guide) and driver, both dressed for the year 1919. As they set off, the guide informs his or her passengers that for thousands of years, people have been coming to the natural meeting place at the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, and talks about the different Aboriginal groups that have lived here for millennia. Passing the Upper Fort Garry gate on Main Street, they point out that when the Hudson’s Bay Company moved into western Canada, this fork in the river would prove to be a central point for exchange, and one of their largest trading posts was eventually constructed on this land. It was out of this

fort that the city of Winnipeg would develop and, as it had been for centuries, after the 1880s the area remained an important juncture along a transportation route—though now people were moving on steel rails instead of a waterway.

As the streetcar heads up Fort Street to the Exchange District, a soldier of the Canadian Expeditionary Force climbs aboard. While speaking with visitors, he loudly claims that, with the construction of the Panama Canal, the boom in Winnipeg has ended; he lost his job back in 1915, which is why he enlisted to go overseas. As the guide points out the historical significance of various buildings outside the window, an agitated man and woman get on at the Old Market Square. They hold out flyers to visitors and make quite a racket. When the guide asks them to quiet down, they shout back that the whole city is in an uproar. Just last month, on June 21<sup>st</sup>, large crowds gathered in Winnipeg demanding labour and union reforms. The woman explains that women, too, were involved in these actions, especially now that they had the right to vote—thanks to the determination and demonstrations of Nellie McClung and many others in Winnipeg and across Canada.

While the tram ambles down Main Street back to the Forks, the guide discusses the evolution of the city up to the present century, and encourages visitors to continue exploring the attractions in the area on their own. The skits and other historical activities available are mentioned at this point as well. Ending back where they began and armed with this overview, passengers are free to use the streetcar transportation to explore the Forks, Upper Fort Garry, and the Exchange District living museum, or carry on to other shopping and dining options in the downtown. If the streetcar, like the Downtown Spirit, were free of charge, they could easily spend all day in

the area, conveniently hopping on and off as suited them.

Many cities offer bus tours of their most important sites, but the above plan goes beyond a guided tour. It is an interactive historical experience, where visitors ride through the city's past on a vintage, environmentally-friendly streetcar, meeting characters from early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada while seeing, hearing (and potentially tasting) Winnipeg's history. 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 and help accomplish many of the goals laid out in *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision*. This new attraction will draw both Winnipeggers and other visitors alike to the downtown. Unlike a conventional museum or arena, however, the Heritage Line tour will 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, restaurants, and attractions located along the tram route, while the vignettes and other historical activities in the Exchange District encourage them to descend from the streetcar and wander about the neighbourhood to see what is available—hopefully convincing them to return in the future to enjoy these amenities. 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.

Perhaps an even more critical consideration for downtown revitalization is the need to increase the area's residential population. Running the length of Fort Street, the streetcar line will connect the Forks to the Exchange District. This route is designed to stimulate the construction of apartment complexes along Fort Street, which is currently bordered by a multitude of surface parking



**A new approach to urban development can help Winnipeggers view their downtown, especially the Exchange District (above), as a beautiful and significant part of Canada’s heritage landscape. Photo: Bryan Scott (winnipeglovehate.com)**

lots. A permanent streetcar system provides the occupants of any new Fort Street high-rises with access to the shops, restaurants, theatres, and other amenities found in the two heritage areas. As a part of the Downtown Spirit system, the streetcars will be frequent, and the route limited to no more than five kilometers, to ensure passengers can easily travel from one site to the other in under ten minutes. With the ability to access various dining, shopping, and entertainment facilities a critical consideration when choosing where to live, a reliable public transit system—that is quite literally set in stone—assures both developers and potential residents such services will be conveniently available to any downtown tenants living along the streetcar line. It is hoped this will offer a compelling incentive to transform the collection of Fort Street surface parking lots into a community of new residential towers.

According to the municipal government,

“continued growth in the proportion of urban trips made by the automobile is not sustainable financially or environmentally, [so] future direction must be toward the provision of positive incentives to reduce the reliance on automobiles and encourage alternative modes of travel” (Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision 2001: 29). The Heritage Line provides a unique way to introduce Winnipeggers to alternative transportation systems, while simultaneously helping them envision a city that is less car-dependent. Even citizens not normally interested in public transit may take the tour; if this proves to be a positive experience, they might be encouraged to use Winnipeg Transit with greater frequency. With a streetcar line running through the Exchange District and conveniently connecting it 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. This

would benefit pedestrians who could enjoy the car-free streets, and might help encourage a reduction in personal vehicle traffic in Winnipeg more generally, assisting with the municipal government's desire to create a more pedestrian-friendly city.

Finally, the City of Winnipeg is committed to "supporting and encouraging affordable activities in the downtown that foster a spirit of celebration and festivity and that promote the participation of all residents and visitors" (Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision 2001: 13). Not only is the streetcar tour directly related to this goal, but learning about the history of the neighbourhood in an exciting manner will familiarize Winnipeggers with their city, making them feel connected to the downtown and more interested in helping to ensure its preservation. Furthermore, a number of themes appropriate for the tour—including Aboriginal heritage, Louis Riel's struggle for Metis rights, the women's suffrage movement, and the Winnipeg General Strike—are directly related to human rights. These themes will strongly complement the exhibits found in the new national museum under construction at the Forks, by illustrating Manitoba's critical role in the development of human rights in Canada.

The authors of *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision* report that Winnipeg's:

reputation as a city rests largely with [its] downtown. The streets and buildings, the people, the businesses, the activities, merge to fashion the image that visitors take home with them. It also influences how Winnipeggers feel about their city. They want to see a revitalized downtown where people want to live, work, play, and invest (2001: 11).

By emphasizing the area as an attraction worth exploring, a living urban museum will bring people to the city's core. It can change public perception of Winnipeg's downtown, encouraging Winnipeggers and their visitors to view the city centre as a beautiful part of Canada's heritage landscape, and as a site of significance in the evolution of our national social fabric. Simultaneously, it will nurture business and residential development in the inner city, using the rail line to unify three distinct parts of the downtown: the Forks NHSC, the area between Broadway Avenue and Portage Avenue, and the Exchange District NHSC. Lastly, it will 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.

Too often, development in Winnipeg has been uncoordinated and has failed to look towards the future. This report attempts to encourage a new plan for Winnipeg, one that capitalizes on its existing assets. Building a streetcar track is certainly an achievable ambition, as has been proven by other cities that have undertaken similar ventures. The heritage streetcar line and living urban museum would be unique in Canada, helping to showcase an earlier time in Winnipeg's history. They could revitalize the city and make it clear Winnipeggers want their city centre to be a sustainable place that is attractive and exciting for both citizens and visitors. The opportunity is at hand to turn Winnipeg into a capital that employs innovation and vision to the benefit of all involved.

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

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