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State of the INNER CITY

PLACING COMMUNITY AT THE HEART OF THE RECOVERY FROM COVID

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What's Going on With Portage Place?

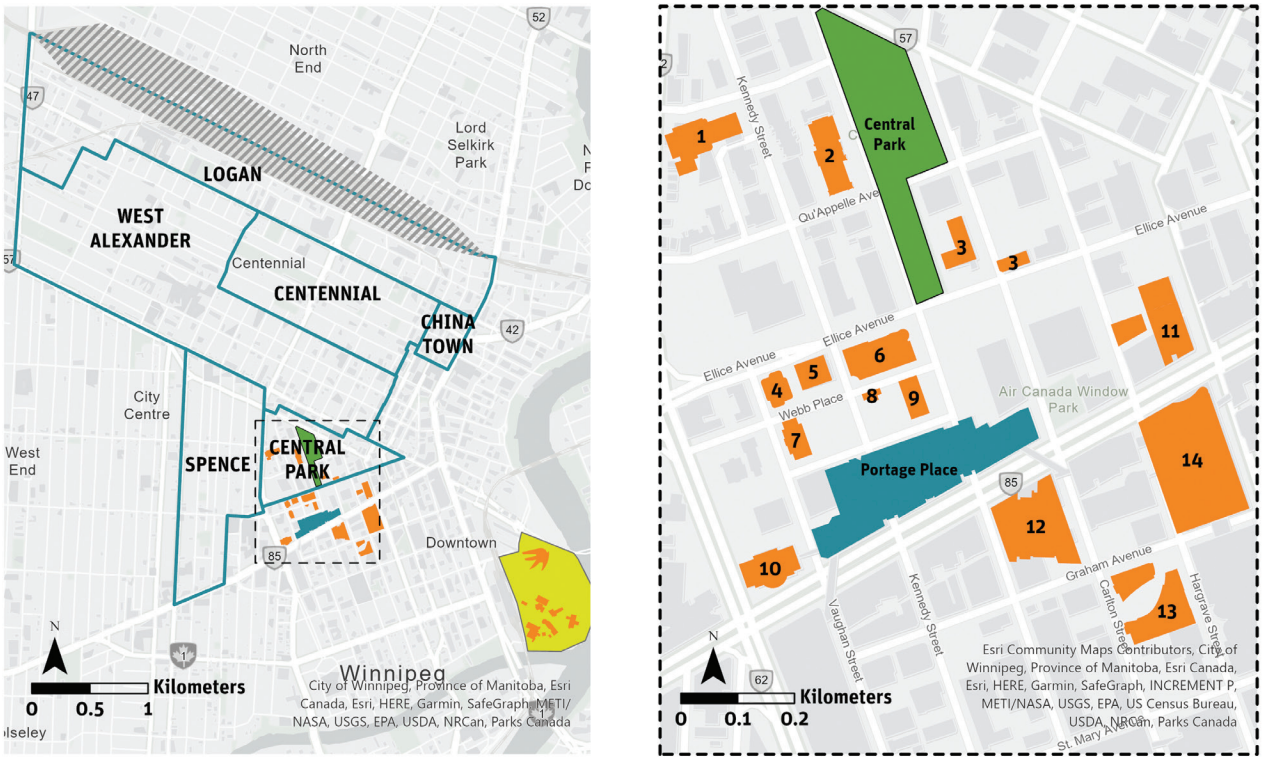
Owen Toews

"I think the lesson that I'm taking away is that we have the vision and capacity in Winnipeg to redevelop Portage Place." — *Michael Champagne*

Introduction

The story of Portage Place is just beginning. At thirty-five years young, Winnipeg's quintessential mix of visiting, resistance, and creativity is at a turning point. The proposed sale of Portage Place Mall to Starlight Acquisitions — requested in 2019 by the Forks North Portage Partnership (which owns the land under Portage Place) and opposed by the community — fell through in September of 2021. As the powers that be quietly scramble to find another developer to gentrify the mall, the door has opened for community leaders to make a counter proposal for Portage Place and seize the public conversation. Since 2019, inner-city community leaders have established the broad outlines of a four-pillared vision for Portage Place based on priorities that radically differ from those of corporate property owners and business-oriented politicians. (1) Portage Place should become a non-profit community centre (that may include for-profit stores offering affordable

FIGURE 1 Map of Central Neighbourhoods and Important Sites



Legend

- CPR Yards
- Central Park
- Portage Place
- The Forks
- Other significant buildings

1 - Sister Mac School
2 - Knox United Church
3 - Quest Health & Natawiwewak Clinic
4 - Fred Douglas Place
5 - Hotel Royal Plaza
6 - Symcor Building
7 - Kiwanis Chateau
8 - Iqra Islamic School
9 - Place Promenade
10 - Investors Group Building
11 - Glasshouse Condos & Alt Hotel
12 - MB Hydro Building

necessities, as determined by the community) primarily for the people in the neighbourhood, rather than a corporate shopping mall aspiring to entertain suburbanites attending Jets games. (2) Hundreds of new rent-geared-to-income social housing units should be built at Portage Place. (3) A real safety plan that centres Indigenous women and girls should replace the current security approach. (4) Indigenous peoples should own Portage Place. What is needed now is a formal counter proposal, based on these four pillars, for communities to rally around. This chapter aims to educate people interested in fighting for that community vision about the basic facts of the situation, including who has done what over the past two and a half years. It aims to build confidence in the possibility of a community-driven future for Portage Place and to document how ordinary people have already made progress toward it.

This chapter is made up of five sections that discuss: the history of inner-city community action that led to Portage Place; the past and present community connection to Portage Place, especially Indigenous peoples' connection; the gentrification frontier that advanced toward Portage Place starting in the early 2010s; the Forks North Portage Partnership's proposed sale of Portage Place to Starlight in 2019 and the different phases of community resistance that followed, with a focus on lessons learned by those involved; and a summary of where things stand now, including opportunities and challenges for community action.[1]

Community Action Led to Portage Place

The story of Portage Place began with one of the earliest campaigns against the City of Winnipeg's organized abandonment of the city centre: the fight to relocate the Canadian Pacific Railway yards that run through the heart of the city. In 1977, the City approved a plan to destroy homes and community spaces in the Centennial, West Alexander, and Logan neighbourhoods (sometimes referred to today as the Central neighbourhoods) to make way for an overpass spanning the rail yards at Sherbrook and McGregor Streets.[2] Residents mounted a popular, high-profile campaign against this proposal, insisting that their homes and community spaces were precious. They unified around a counter proposal to relocate the rail yards instead of bulldozing their homes, and to spend the money that would be saved on the repair and replacement of bridges and overpasses, on affordable housing, daycares, community clinics, youth recreation facilities, and other community spaces in the inner city.

A strong community development ethos had been fostered among neighbourhood residents in the years prior to the City's overpass proposal, marked by a belief that communities have the right to determine their own futures, that neighbourhoods should be refurbished for the people who live in them and not bulldozed, and that the key to urban improvement is investing in people not corporate profits. Local organizations that espoused and supported such views at the time included the Centennial Neighbourhood Improvement Committee, Community Education Development Association, Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, Indian Métis Friendship Centre, Kinew Housing, Winnipeg Chinese Development Corporation, Rossbrook House, Company of Young Canadians, Dufferin Elementary School, and St. Matthews-Maryland Christian Centre. The idea of redeveloping the rail

yards to meet community needs built, in part, on planning completed by Indigenous community organizers between 1969 and 1975, to remake Winnipeg's Main Street strip into a Native village called Neeginan, operated by and for Indigenous peoples, consisting of affordable housing, schools, clinics, daycares, youth recreation space, and worker co-operatives.[3]

Key to Central neighbourhoods residents' momentum was their ability to broaden the definition of the problem from the City's attack on their specific neighbourhoods to the City's deliberate neglect of a much larger area that the community took to calling the "inner city." By framing it as an inner-city issue they were able to unite a broader coalition of community organizations — including Indigenous organizations, churches, schools, residents' associations, and small businesses — from beyond their immediate neighbourhoods, under the banner of the Inner City Committee for Rail Relocation. In 1980, the coalition successfully defeated the Sherbrook-McGregor overpass. Today, the elementary school in Central Park is named after a leader of the rail relocation movement, Rossbrook House founder Sister Geraldine MacNamara.[4]

Shortly after, in 1980, Liberal MP for Winnipeg South Centre, Lloyd Axworthy, announced that in response to the rail relocation movement's calls for the government to reinvest in Winnipeg's inner city, he was creating something called the Core Area Initiative. The five-year, $96 million ($304 million in 2021 dollars) Core Area Initiative would be funded equally by the municipal, provincial, and federal governments and would be followed by three more such five-year plans (for more on these agreements, see Chapter 1 starting on page 25), with total funding of $346 million (roughly $577 million in 2021 dollars). However, instead of funding the kinds of community facilities prioritized by the rail relocation movement, the bulk of Core Area Initiative money from 1981 to 1991 was spent on Portage Place and The Forks, shopping centres that inner-city residents never asked for.[5] To build Portage Place, the Core Area Initiative destroyed homes and community spaces between Ellice and Portage Avenue — precisely the bulldozing that the rail relocation movement had opposed — and ignored community leaders' demands around affirmative action, affordable housing, and safety.[6] The three levels of Canadian government spent $20 million ($45 million in 2021 dollars) to build Portage Place, retaining public ownership of the land and underground parking beneath the mall, and handing the mall itself over to commercial real estate firm Cadillac Fairview, who contributed $12 million to the mall.[7]

In 1990, a new coalition with strong leadership from Indigenous women community leaders, including Dorothy Betz and Kathy Mallett, launched the Community Inquiry into Inner City Revitalization. The Inquiry received presentations from ninety community organizations, including Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, Native Women's Transition Centre, and the Original Women's Network. The Inquiry blasted the Core Area Initiative for spending public money on shopping centres that "have not met the basic shelter, employment and other needs of many inner city residents, nor have they provided significant 'trickle down' benefits to core area people."[8] Instead, Inquiry organizers proposed an alternative city-centre improvement agenda centring the well-being of Indigenous women and children. Their alternative prioritized funding for women's resource centres, preschools, parent-child centres, community clinics, post-natal programs, and housing for women including women escaping intimate partner violence. The Community Inquiry made it evident that the Core Area Initiative had co-opted the political activity of inner-city people and sidelined their actual demands. It is not a stretch to say that Portage Place represents the misappropriation — so far — of $45 million in public funding from affordable housing, daycares, community clinics, and youth recreation space called for by the Inner City Committee for Rail Relocation and the Community Inquiry Into Inner-City Revitalization.

Portage Place Has Always Belonged to the People

The neighbourhood that was flattened to build Portage Place was lively, valuable, and home to a loving community. As a girl in the 1970s and 1980s, Jackie Traverse lived with her dad, Joseph Fabian, in the West End and Central Park neighbourhoods of downtown Winnipeg. They lived on Cumberland Avenue and later on Furby Street, but for Traverse, who is Anishinaabe from Lake St. Martin First Nation, it was the sweet streets between Ellice and Portage Avenues — Kennedy, Edmonton, Carlton, Hargrave, Donald — that were special. For as long she can remember, Traverse has been drawn to those streets, first on daily trips with her dad, then as a teenager, arcading with friends at video-game spots and pool halls (Long John Silver's, Circus Circus, Las Vegas, Magic Land, Dr. Q's) shopping at fun stores (Dominion News, O'Calcutta) and sharing meals at cheap cafés (Manhattan Restaurant, Family Hamburger House). Traverse was sixteen when Axworthy's Core Area Initiative expropriated and bulldozed most of her and her friends' favourite hangouts.

When construction fences went up on Portage Avenue around the ruins, young people in the neighbourhood quickly retook the space by covering the tall, sky-blue walls with graffiti.[9] Traverse, now a renowned multi-disciplinary artist, created one of her first pieces: a giant spray-painted heart with an arrow through it and the words, "JACKIE LOVES LES."[10] (Les was her boyfriend at the time). "It was too big to miss," Traverse recalls, laughing, "you'd be like, 'Oh yeah look, there's construction, oh, and look at that, Jackie loves Les.'" Traverse's graffiti so dominated the streetscape that the city's official narrators felt compelled to dispel any notion that "JACKIE LOVES LES" was the story of what was happening there. "I think it was the *Free Press*, or something, was writing about, like, what's going to be built there," Traverse continued, "and he mentioned, like, 'Who cares if Jackie loves Les?'" The columnist's point was, as Traverse remembers it, that "they're putting a mall there and we don't care if Jackie loves Les,' you know, that's not what this is about." The real lesson of the fences, typically overlooked by the cheerleaders of capitalist progress, was that the neighbourhood, and its residents' love for one another, were not going anywhere.

While its goal was to boost real estate values by luring white suburbanites with disposable income to shop downtown, from the day it opened in 1987, Portage Place was adopted by locals who made it part of their lives and fought for their right to be there. The escalators had barely started turning when it became clear that the Indigenous neighbourhood was a problem for mall management.[11] Over the years, despite its corporate owners' focus on enforcing urban apartheid for the comforts of white shoppers, neighbourhood residents built up a longstanding community in the food court, atriums, and other common spaces of Portage Place.[12]

"The nickname we had for it was Indian Place, because that's where all the Indigenous people would hang out," explained Ian Ross, celebrated Anishinaabe and Métis playwright, who frequented the area before Portage Place was built and lived in an apartment connected to the mall during its early years. When Portage Place opened, young people such as Ross, Traverse and their friends flocked to the charming mall that had replaced their old haunts. To this day, at the age of 52, nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, Traverse goes to Portage Place virtually every day. "I know everybody at that mall," Traverse boasts, "and it's usually the same people that have been coming there for years." Over the years, Portage Place gained a quintessential place in Winnipeg culture, featuring in the work of writers such as Marvin Francis, Trevor Greyeyes, Tasha Spillett, and Chimwemwe Undi. Now in its thirty-fifth year, the mall has ingrained itself

across generations and phases of life. For the last fifteen years of her dad's life, Traverse visited with him at Portage Place on a weekly basis, meeting up for fish and chips at Cherry Creek Café after her dad's daily workout at the Portage Place YMCA.

Many residents' connections to Portage Place, however, are far more profound than the brief arcs of their own lives. When I asked Traverse about the Core Area Initiative's goal of using Portage Place to change the demographics of the neighbourhood, she replied, "I never believed that would happen. Like when people would say that, I'm like, 'No way.'" This belief is rooted in Traverse's knowledge of the deep Indigenous connection to the area. In response to a 2000s Downtown BIZ campaign against Indigenous people panhandling on Portage Avenue, Traverse began to envision an art piece that would assert Indigenous peoples' right to make lives of their choosing in downtown Winnipeg. "I was like, 'These people don't have a right to do this,' because they don't know the history here, you know, that our people have a right to be here, and our people are drawn to this place because for thousands of years our relatives have used this place and walked this way and sat this way." Traverse created the piece in 2020—it is featured on the cover of this report and will soon be installed on the ceiling of a new building at the downtown Winnipeg campus of Red River College.

In the piece, Traverse explains, "I say that our people have a right to be in this area, to be downtown, if they want to be with their ancestors. You know, it's a blood memory thing, it's a DNA thing, and that's just naturally where the people are drawn to, to walk with our ancestors... I wanted to say how important it was that our people be allowed in the area, without being looked down on." Traverse now has hopes for a public art installation near Portage Place, to install solar panel projectors that will project archival images of Indigenous peoples walking on the land that became downtown Winnipeg. "It's the same thing," Traverse explains, "we're still doing the same thing, it's just we're just not dragging around our tipis and our horses and stuff, our people are still going the same way, to do the things they need to do in their daily lives, just like the people were then. Why should we think that now, 'oh, with the concrete jungle, these people don't have a right to be here no more?' It's still on the land, people are connected to the land. That's one thing people don't understand, you know, there's an actual connection to land, and places, and spirit." Over the past thirty-five years, the Portage Place community has vigorously resisted organized attempts to sever that connection.

Resistance to the policing of Indigenous people at Portage Place ratcheted up during the early days of the Idle No More movement — which not coincidentally kicked off in Winnipeg at a three thousand-person round dance inside Portage Place[13] — and in the years to follow, when hundreds of supporters held flash mobs and round dances inside the mall in support of Annie Henry, Joseph Meconse, and other Indigenous people harassed, assaulted, and/or evicted by the mall's security force.[14] Guards attempted to ban Traverse herself from the mall, for videoing them as they assaulted a young Indigenous woman. It was a proclamation she refused to recognize. "There's no keeping me out," said Traverse, laughing, "like even if you say I'm not allowed in there, I'll go in through the next door." Indeed, attempts to push Indigenous peoples out of Portage Place have only backfired.

In 2016, following the groundswell of support for the aforementioned Joseph Meconse, a pipe ceremony was held in the central atrium of Portage Place to honour Meconse (who passed away three years later, in 2019) and name him the official ambassador and Ogichidaa of Portage Place.[15] (Ogichidaa is Ojibwa for warrior, veteran, or ceremonial head). The ceremony lent credence to a common feeling at the mall: Portage Place shopping mall is better referred to as Portage Place First Nation. For Meconse's daughter, Renata Meconse, who often visited with her dad at Portage Place, "Portage Place First Nation" signals that there is a real community at Portage Place, that people there are connected to each other, and identify as part of that community. "Being a part of the Portage Place community, I would call it a community, we even dubbed it the Portage Place First Nation, how much we felt a part of it and made it our own, and he [Joseph Meconse] was given the name Ogichidaa there being a veteran and for his role in that community," said Renata.

The meaning of Portage Place First Nation, for Renata, is also about Indigenous peoples' response to colonial displacement and their making of new communities in the city. "If you think about it," Renata explained, "Winnipeg is made up of many First Nations people from all over. We have the highest population of Indigenous people across Canada…Portage Place is a community for people like my dad. This includes people who have been displaced at some point in their lives. For Joe, he was displaced from his community as a little boy and he didn't go back to his community [Sayisi Dene First Nation] for a very long time, so for a big part of his life, Winnipeg was his home. He had friends and family meet him there at Portage Place, it was a place where he could be with others and they could see him…And we also have people travelling from their First Nations coming in to shop, coming

in for medical, and often are having to wait in between their appointments and travelling back home."

Joseph Meconse was the product of, and helped shape, an inclusive, caring, community-minded Portage Place that fosters relationships between people from all walks of life. "My dad," said Renata, "he was the people's person. He knew and was friends with people from all walks of life. He knew people in...the powwow community, the unemployed, people who worked downtown, our relatives who were struggling, real people who make up the fabric of our community, our city...My dad would also see the guys who had spent time in the penitentiary there too, and they would come and say hello to him. There was mutual respect between each other and that really spoke to who my dad was." Renata continued, "At Portage Place First Nation, people can always count on getting a coffee and sharing if they don't have the money to get a coffee, or a meal, or whatever, they might be able to get a friend to do that, and sometimes my dad was that friend, and sometimes he would be on the receiving end of getting a coffee or a meal from one of his friends." Portage Place is a rare venue where people for whom the rest of the city can be largely unwelcoming — teenagers, elderly people, formerly imprisoned people, unhoused people, people who use drugs — have created community. "[Portage Place] is a place where a lot of people who are struggling with homelessness have been able to find warmth and company," said Fearless R2W organizer Michael Champagne, "It is also a place where a lot of people who are using drugs were able to find a place...A lot of Indigenous young people that are aging out of child welfare and also struggling with housing are able to connect with one another." This, Champagne said, is what makes Portage Place a true "community asset."

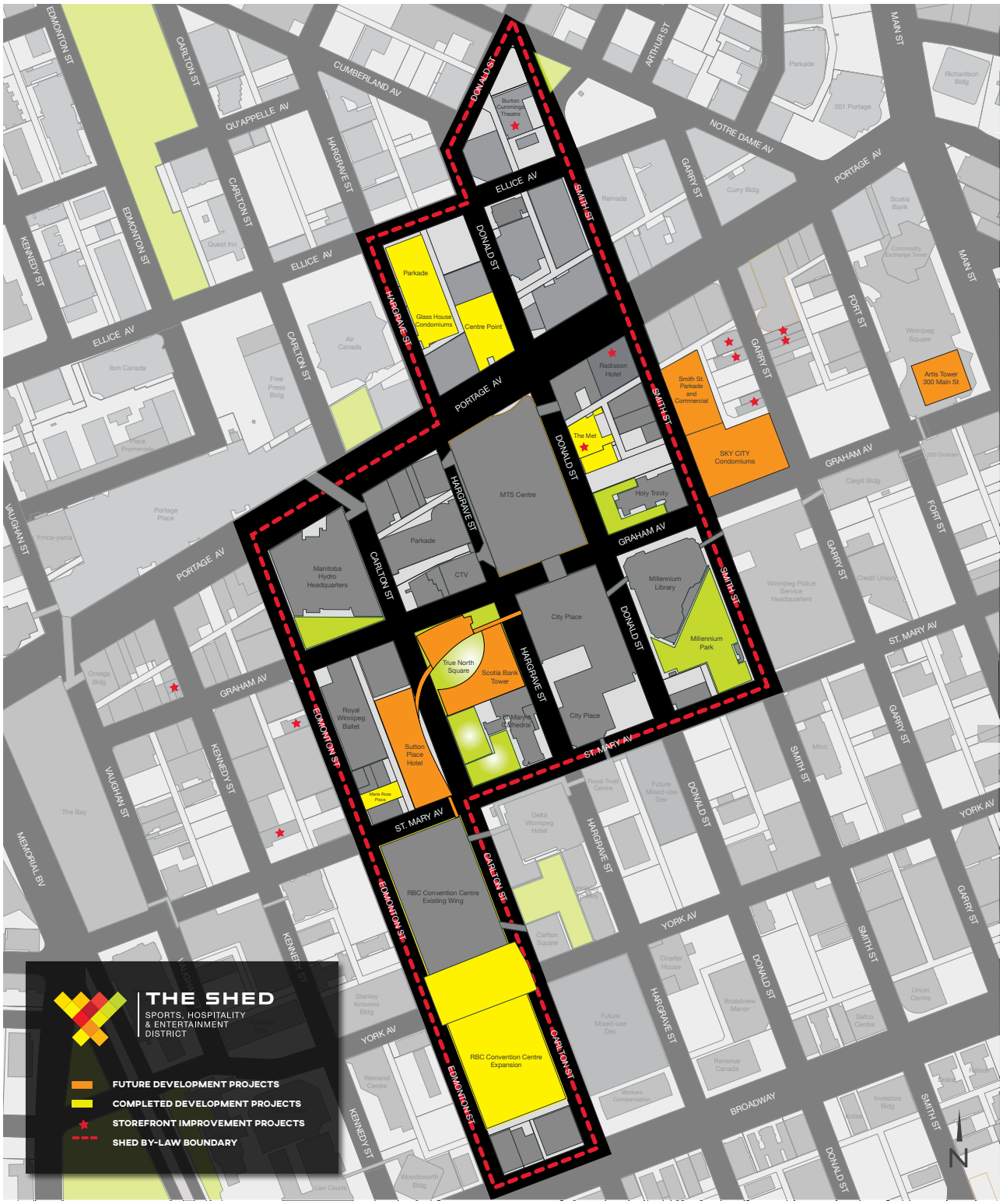
Like everywhere else, there are legitimate safety concerns at Portage Place — above all, the safety of Indigenous women and girls. Corporate ownership's aggressive policing of the mall only makes it less safe and is not capable of addressing real harms such as sexual exploitation or intimate partner violence. (Bear Paw Security, an Indigenous security firm hired after Meconse's eviction, ended up no better than the rest, according to Jenna Wirch, a long-time helper in the Winnipeg community. "It's the same violence being perpetuated by our own brown people now," said Wirch, "I was a victim of being pushed out by Bear Paw Security, so I know first-hand what it's like.") Members of the Portage Place community acknowledge safety concerns, but refuse to let them define Portage Place. For instance, the buying and selling of criminalized drugs is sometimes mentioned as an activity that makes Portage Place unsafe, but Traverse made the point that

big crowds anywhere attract people who buy and sell drugs. "There's always a bad side to people gathering like that, like if you know there's going to be large crowds of people and you want to make money," she explained. "I've seen times that it felt dangerous to go there," said Meconse, "There was times when I think there was violent things that have happened there, and I always felt bad about that, that it had gone that way, or it had gone down that way, because I personally have had a lot of good experiences there." Traverse, Meconse, and other members of the Portage Place community readily acknowledge the need to make Portage Place safer — especially from racial profiling, harassment, and assaults committed by security guards — through measures that prioritize de-escalation, harm-reduction, and people's right to be downtown without spending money.

Portage Place has also become a rare place for peoples with different experiences of colonialism (British or otherwise), of oppression under the Canadian racial order, and of kindred anti-colonial traditions to associate. It has, in Champagne's words, "become a space for Indigenous peoples and newcomers to build relationships." (The term "newcomers" is widely used in Winnipeg to refer to people who have recently moved to Canada, especially from non-Western countries). Over seventy percent of all refugees who arrive in Winnipeg settle in Central Park neighbourhood, where Portage Place is located.[16] Thousands of immigrants and refugees live in Central Park, Chinatown, Centennial, and other neighbourhoods within a short walk of Portage Place, and use the mall daily.[17] "In this community there are a lot of newcomers," a neighbourhood resident named Maan told Humans of Portage Place, an Instagram account published in 2019. "Portage Place is also an important meeting place for us. Isolation is a big problem for us when we are new to the community so we need the community space that Portage Place provides. It is the heart of our area. We practice English there. We see our friends. Communication is very important."[18]

As it became clear that Portage Place is, more than anything, a gathering place for Indigenous peoples, migrants, and refugees, the goods and services offered there became more relevant to the neighbourhood. Through the 2000s and 2010s, Portage Place retailers shifted from expensive luxuries to affordable necessities. Portage Place now offers a variety of affordable hot food, clothing, medicine, household items, and (not so affordable) phone plans. These items are accompanied by affordable fitness services at the YMCA, access to social assistance at a Service Canada office, legal assistance at the Legal Help Centre, family counselling at Family Dynamics, art programs at Artbeat Studio, live theatre at Prairie Theatre Exchange, a dentist's office,

FIGURE 2 SHED Map



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and an optometrist. All of these are connected by indoor, climate-controlled walkways, ramps, and elevators, in a tree-lined, sun-filled setting, making Portage Place one of the most accessible spaces in the city and a frequent destination for accessible transit. For the past decade, however, the future of Portage Place as a community asset has been put in jeopardy.

The Coming of the Gentrification Frontier

After the suburbanization of North American cities in the mid-twentieth century, real estate investors began to see an opportunity for high rates of profit in older city centres where property had become cheap, as long as they could rebrand older urban spaces to appeal to affluent, usually white suburbanites. This process of buying up cheap city-centre property, displacing existing lower-income residents — who are more likely to be Black, Indigenous, immigrants, or refugees — and replacing them with a more profitable, whiter clientele, is known as gentrification.[19] Geographer Neil Smith found that gentrification tends to advance along a "frontier of profitability" that is an actual physical location that distinguishes areas of disinvestment from areas of reinvestment. Behind the gentrification frontier, property values are increasing, properties are being "revitalized," and people are being pushed out. Ahead of the frontier, property values are still stagnant, owners are not investing in their properties, and lower-income homes and community spaces remain intact. Locating gentrification frontiers can assist communities in anticipating and defending against displacement. Indeed, there is evidence that a gentrification frontier began creeping towards Portage Place ten years ago.[20]

Following the 2002 demolition of the Portage Avenue Eaton's store, the construction, in its place, of a hockey arena owned by the city's super-rich Chipman family and paid for, in part, with $40 million in public money, and the 2011 arrival of a National Hockey League (NHL) franchise co-owned by the Chipmans and Toronto-based billionaire David Thomson, the Manitoba NDP government announced in 2012 that an eleven-block area surrounding the arena and bordering on Portage Place would become Manitoba's first-ever tax increment financing zone. The decision meant that all future real estate investors in the district would, instead of paying taxes, pay into a special fund for the "mall management" of the area.[21] A miniature real estate boom in the Sports, Hospitality, and Entertainment District (SHED) followed (See Figure X), with a luxury condo tower and boutique hotel going up on the

north side of Portage Avenue, a block east of Portage Place, and even more investment going into True North Square, a $400-million luxury condo, hotel, office, and retail complex owned by the Chipman family in partnership with the Winnipeg-based billionaire Richardson family and the Vancouver-based billionaire Gagliardi family, a block south of Portage Place.[22]

Through their "mall management" strategy, the Chipman family and their billionaire associates have aggressively removed Indigenous peoples and poor working-class people from the area around True North Square, and clearly view doing so as crucial to the profitability of their investments. Soon after the Province's commitment of funds, CentreVenture carried out the mass-eviction and demolition of two hundred units of short-term housing primarily used by First Nations peoples visiting the city for medical appointments. It was explicitly the removal of the inhabitants of the Carlton Inn and St. Regis Hotel — not merely the demolition of the structures — that was portrayed as key to clearing the way for new investment in the area.[23]

Policing of local people intensified at the onset of the "mall management" era. Most infamous, perhaps, was the Winnipeg Police Service's 2016 operation "Centreline" which deployed two hundred specially trained foot patrols within one kilometer of the hockey arena to police not crime but "social disorder."[24] Indoor gathering places connected to the arena via the city's skywalk pedestrian corridor system are now more policed than before the creation of the SHED. "City Place is a big one," said Wirch, speaking of the mall located between True North Square and the hockey arena. "Much more security, at Robin's Donuts, there, people are like, getting ushered to move. Inside the skywalks, from City Place to [the hockey arena] they're just getting moved out, kicked out…they target our houseless relatives who just want to gather." Portage Place, one block away from the Chipmans' hockey arena and directly connected to it by the skywalk system, was affected from early on.

Soon after the NHL's return to Winnipeg, the Forks North Portage Partnership — owners of the underground parking lot beneath Portage Place — began marketing special Portage Place parking packages to NHL ticketholders.[25] Interlocutors said they have since witnessed increased policing, especially by Winnipeg Police Service cadets, of community members in Portage Place on NHL game days. The Forks North Portage Partnership was an early backer of the mall management of the Sports, Hospitality, and Entertainment District and even contributed land it owned at 315 Portage Avenue to the Alt Hotel development.[26] Inner-city community leaders speculate that Portage Place is likely much too close to True North Square for the Chipmans and

their billionaire associates to tolerate it as an Indigenous gathering place indefinitely. Indeed, interlocutors pointed out that the Chipmans chose 190 Disraeli Freeway, nearly two kilometres away, next door to most of the city's jail-like shelter infrastructure, as the location its security patrols will take so-called vulnerable people after picking them up from around True North Square.[27] The tentative integration of Portage Place into the NHL-based gentrification agenda down the block set the stage for a dramatic series of events starting in 2019.

The Starlight Threat

As Portage Place transitioned from aspiring luxury mall to neighbourhood gathering place, its corporate owners lost interest. In 2015, then-and-current owner, Vancouver-based Peterson Group, admitted it had stopped investing in Portage Place, wanted to sell it, and to find a buyer, wanted the Forks North Portage Partnership to include the publicly-owned land and underground parking in a package deal. Ominously, large real estate developers seem to value the land and parking lots beneath Portage Place much more than the mall itself. Soon after, the Forks North Portage Partnership began to offer Portage Place—land and underground parking included—for sale to big firms across the country.[28]

Early Community Resistance

In early summer, 2019, people in Central Park caught wind that changes were afoot at Portage Place. At a meeting of the Central Park Stewardship Committee, a Forks North Portage Partnership spokesperson announced that the Forks North Portage Partnership was actively seeking to sell off the land and lucrative parking garage it owned beneath Portage Place.[29] Community-minded groups at the meeting protested, telling the spokesperson that the neighbourhood must have a say in the future of the publicly-owned components of Portage Place and that the government-owned Forks North Portage Partnership must not sell the land before consulting with the community. The spokesperson responded that The Forks could not survive without the cash from the sale of Portage Place, and that was that. There would be no consultation.

The Forks North Portage Partnership's manoeuvres have everything to do with what Portage Place and The Forks have become over the past thirty

years. Both were built by the Core Area Initiative and maintained by the Forks North Portage Partnership for the same reason: to attract a whiter and more affluent clientele to the city centre and spur gentrification. The Forks succeeded in doing so and Portage Place failed. While the Forks — especially Oodena Celebration Circle, the monument honouring missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and the rivers themselves — attracts inner-city residents and is frequently used for Indigenous gatherings, it has become a city-wide destination that attracts a significant number of suburbanites and tourists, while Portage Place has not. For years, the Forks North Portage Partnership has funneled approximately $5 million per year[30] in parking revenues and ground rents out of the Portage Place neighbourhood and into The Forks, indicating that the corporation prioritizes the enjoyment of the whiter and more affluent suburban and tourist clientele that the Forks is able to attract, over the quality of life of Portage Place's largely low-income, Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee clientele. It was in early summer, 2019, that it became clear, according to community helpers who attended the committee meeting, that the Forks North Portage Partnership was committed to washing its hands of the Portage Place community once and for all, and in one fell swoop shifting all the Core Area Initiative's public investment out of Portage Place and into The Forks.

Soon after that meeting, on July 5, 2019, the Forks North Portage Partnership announced a tentative deal to sell Portage Place to Toronto-based, Daniel Drimmer-founded Starlight Acquisitions, one of the country's largest and most notorious slumlords.[31] Starlight would pay $70 million in total, with $23 million going to Peterson Group for the mall and $47 million going to the Forks North Portage Partnership for the land and underground parking. Starlight released virtually no details of its plans for Portage Place, other than its intention to build multiple residential towers on top of the mall, and to dedicate some units to university students. The Forks North Portage Partnership announced it would put the $47 million in an investment account and use the annual returns, estimated at $3 million, to subsidize the Forks.[32] Because the Forks North Portage Partnership is controlled equally by the municipal, provincial, and federal governments, each level of government needed to approve the sale. The Forks North Portage Partnership ensured only the briefest of windows — thirteen days — would pass before Winnipeg City Council would vote on the deal on July 18, 2019.

Community resistance to the sale was immediate. "As soon as we knew Portage Place was going up for sale, that's when the informal conversations began happening in the community about wanting to make sure it

remained essentially a community asset," Michael Champagne recalled. "So because those conversations were happening, when it became evident that Starlight was the purchaser of Portage Place, that's when everyone kind of went into organizing mode." On July 15, 2019, *Winnipeg Free Press* columnist Niigaan Sinclair published an article opposing the sale, arguing, "Winnipeg's town square is Portage Place," and concluding, "Let's keep it the place community built."[33] On July 16, 2019 the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba published an op-ed opposing the sale, demanding community control over Portage Place and the return of the $45 million (in 2021 dollars) in public money originally spent on Portage Place to the community.[34] During this thirteen-day period the Central Neighbourhoods community development corporation and the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg teamed up and mobilized people to speak against the sale at City Hall. Nine days later, community leaders presented a clear, united stance on the future of Portage Place.

First, community leaders insisted that any reimagining of Portage Place be dictated by the Portage Place community itself. With this demand in mind, delegates perceived that any meaningful democratic process had been side-stepped by the Forks North Portage Partnership, Starlight, and City Council, who were trying to dictate the future of Portage Place behind closed doors. Indeed, it had come to light only the day before, on July 17, 2019, that a near majority of City Councillors — Janice Lukes, Scott Gillingham, Markus Chambers, Vivian Santos, Devi Sharma, Ross Eadie, and Jeff Browaty — had met privately with Starlight executives in a hotel that afternoon. "Why are [Starlight executives] not presenting to Council whatever they told you yesterday?" delegate Sandra Somerville demanded to know, "Why is it behind closed doors? Why the secrecy?" The speed with which the Forks North Portage Partnership was trying to ram the deal through was suspect to the community. "Portage Place holds a very special place in my heart and my family's," said Anishinaabe activist Kakeká Thundersky. "I grew up at Portage Place. Portage Place was the place where my family would go to visit our relatives...I just heard about this not too long ago and now here I am a couple of days later, speaking to everybody here. And I don't know, it's really fast." Central Neighbourhoods Executive Director at the time, Mareike Brunelli, compared it to the scandal, nine years earlier, when City Council, CentreVenture, and the evangelical Christian organization Youth for Christ kept under wraps until the last minute a plan to build what one Indigenous community leader then referred to as a "contemporary, altered form of the Residential School experience," at Higgins Avenue and Main

Street.[35] As Brunelli's comparison signaled, community helpers advocating for a more imaginative use of Portage Place were prepared to make connections between the issue of the moment and longer histories of capitalist development in the city. Winnipeg's history of gentrification and several of its specific lessons — including that real estate capitalists cannot be taken at their word because they will do and say anything to maximize profits, will push people out of community spaces, and will not benefit local people with their investment — had clearly been absorbed into the consciousness of inner-city community leaders.[36]

Second, community helpers were immediately able to see that the Forks North Portage Partnership and Starlight were trying to gentrify Portage Place. "I'm worried about the area being gentrified," said Thundersky, "We see it everywhere. More condos aren't going to solve the housing crisis." For Val Cavers, Executive Director of Mosaic Newcomer Family Resource Network, the Forks North Portage Partnership's stated reasons for the sale — including "re-development of an under-utilized building" and "potential to attract new private investment dollars" — were red flags. "This language is more language of exclusion and gentrification. It's not the language of reconciliation. It's not the language of community building," Cavers told City Council. "It's a widely known fact that trickledown economics does not work," delegate Angie Herrera reminded City Council.[37]

Delegates later told me they were motivated to speak out by the recent intensification of efforts to push people out of downtown, specifically the proliferation of Winnipeg Police Service cadets and private security guards who harass and evict Indigenous peoples, and the (now removed) security checkpoint at the Millennium Library. Community leaders were also motivated by the Chipman family's sidestepping, a year earlier, of a government requirement to build approximately 20 units of affordable housing in exchange for $20 million in public subsidies.[38] "After time and time again of history repeating itself," said Brunelli in 2019, "Winnipeggers cannot be so naive to believe that a community has any leverage with the private sector even when promises are made, even when conditions are signed on paper."[39]

Third, community leaders articulated two clear principles that should guide the future of Portage Place: Land back, and people over profit. Because the land Portage Place is on was taken by force and fraud from Indigenous peoples, delegates reminded City Council, it must be returned to Indigenous peoples. Portage Place is on "land that our ancestors passed on to us, furthermore, that was stolen from us," Wirch, a member of Long Plain First Nation, told City Council. "I may remind you," Wirch continued, "if you

are not Indigenous, you are still a visitor to this land. You still have treaties to uphold." Wirch explained in a later interview that to honour Treaty 1 at Portage Place means that nothing may be done there without the prior and ongoing consent of the Indigenous people who use the mall. "This land the city's preparing to sell is public land, it's Indigenous land, it's stolen land," Brunelli concurred that day. "It strikes me as rather audacious to try to sell something that doesn't belong to the attempted seller," added Herrera.[40]

The needs of the people rather than the imperatives of profit-making — or euphemisms for the latter, such as 'increasing the tax base' or 'attracting private investment' — must guide the state's planning for the future of Portage Place, community leaders stated. "There seems to be this understanding that north Portage and downtown are places of business, commerce and profit. But people live in this area, this is their community, and we seem to keep forgetting that," said Brunelli, "we would rather see investments in community than gifts to the private sector." "Why are we selling a very large chunk of that land in downtown Winnipeg to private interests? That land was purchased with the taxpayers' money," added Somerville, "I do not believe that corporate interests trump the needs of the Winnipeg citizenry." On this note, community leaders suggested a creative, but obvious, twist to the way we think about Portage Place.[41]

Portage Place, they argued, should be seen as a neighbourhood community centre rather than a corporate shopping mall. "Let's not forget there is no community centre in North Portage or Central Park," Brunelli pointed out. "Community centres are the hearts of where we come together as neighbours, friends, and families. They're gathering places where residents celebrate many different milestones and aspects of life…Portage Place serves that purpose. It is our de facto community centre." Cavers observed that the municipal government, which built and operates sixty-three community centres across Winnipeg, had neglected to provide one in Central Park, a neighbourhood that — because virtually all residents live in small apartments and many have larger than average numbers of children — desperately needed one. "These are low-income families, large families supported by an average household income of less than $30,000," said Cavers, "and there is no access to municipal recreation facilities…For many years now, Portage Place has been part of filling that gap."[42]

On July 18, 2019, Winnipeg Mayor Brian Bowman and all fifteen City Councillors — including Cindy Gilroy, the Councillor for the area –voted unanimously to approve the sale of Portage Place to Starlight Acquisitions. For at least one delegate I spoke to, it was an important learning experience

that Winnipeg's City Council does not care about the people of the inner city and is committed to making decisions on behalf of capital regardless of what the people want. On August 1, 2019, it was reported that Conservative Premier Brian Pallister had given provincial approval for the sale.[43] On the same day, however, the Liberal federal government via the Western Economic Diversification department announced it was delaying its approval of the sale by 30 days to do its due diligence, including examining its treaty obligations.[44]

The Portage Place Community Coalition

Acting in response to the 30-day window, Central Neighbourhoods community development corporation and Social Planning Council of Winnipeg organized a meeting of community helpers interested in stopping the sale and working towards a community-owned Portage Place, or, failing that, in stopping Starlight from gentrifying Portage Place and making sure the $47 million sale price went to the community and not to the Forks. The meeting was the first of the new Portage Place Community Coalition, which would come to include representatives of Mosaic Newcomer Family Resource Network, Knox United Church, Women's Health Clinic, Public Interest Law Centre, Spence Neighbourhood Association, End Homelessness Winnipeg, Make Poverty History, Manitoba Harm Reduction Network, local police and prison abolition organizations, and other long-time inner-city community helpers. The Coalition agreed to call on the federal government for clarity about its intentions for the 30-day window; support a First Nations ownership plan for Portage Place if one would emerge; initiate a community conversation about the role and mandate of the Forks North Portage Partnership; and host community information and planning sessions for Portage Place in the Central Park neighbourhood.

The Community Coalition was also able to connect with members of Ottawa's Herongate Tenant Coalition, who for years had resisted Starlight's and other Daniel Drimmer-affiliated firms' systematic neglect and displacement of people in the low-income immigrant and refugee Herongate neighbourhood. Herongate organizers informed the Winnipeg coalition that Drimmer's companies, since purchasing the Herongate Mall and hundreds of housing units in the neighbourhood in 2007, drastically cut back on maintenance and repairs, then demolished the mall and carried out one of the largest mass-evictions in Canadian history.[45] In light of this information, CBC Manitoba published a piece questioning Winnipeg City Council's failure to do its due

diligence in welcoming Starlight to Winnipeg, and putting Starlight's racist, predatory track record firmly on the local radar.[46]

After calling, emailing, and visiting federal MPs' offices for weeks with no response, on August 22, 2019, the Coalition received a message from then Winnipeg Centre Liberal MP Robert Falcon-Ouellette, informing them that the 30-day delay was intended to avoid a court challenge by Treaty 1 First Nations like the one through which First Nations acquired the Kapyong Barracks in Winnipeg in 2015. (After breaking its treaties with First Nations, Canada implemented a Treaty Land Entitlement process that gives First Nations a right to land the federal government intends to sell. This presumably applies to the land under Portage Place because it is owned in part by the federal government). On August 28, 2019 the federal government approved the sale of Portage Place to Starlight. After apparently failing to prevent the sale, the Portage Place Community Coalition stopped meeting. There was still strong interest in resisting the gentrification of the mall and keeping the $47 million sale price in the community, but three barriers to further action emerged.

First, a key gap in communication prevented the group from taking further action. The Coalition had no lines of communication with Treaty 1 First Nations leaders such as the chiefs of Long Plain and Peguis First Nations and Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs officials, all of whom the Coalition was aware had been meeting with Starlight.[47] Because the Community Coalition was mostly non-Indigenous and supportive of any hypothetical First Nations ownership plan for Portage Place, it decided to wait and see what First Nations leaders would do. This would be a theme moving forward, as an ongoing lack of communication between First Nations officials and urban community organizers — both Indigenous and non-Indigenous — was cited by several urban organizers as an impediment to grassroots action on Portage Place.

Second, the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, for unknown reasons, was supportive of the sale to Starlight. Despite vocal opposition to the sale by other Indigenous community leaders, some members of the Community Coalition felt the Aboriginal Council's support of the sale made it difficult for them to continue pushing for a community-owned Portage Place.

Third, a strategic disagreement about how to relate to proponents of the sale created a rift in the Coalition. Some members believed in maintaining friendly working relationships with Starlight and organizations, such as the Downtown BIZ, whose commercial interests are aligned with gentrification, by meeting and sharing information with them. Other members were unable to see the strategic value in doing so, considered it a waste of precious organizing time, and began to distrust those who insisted on it.

The Portage Place Community Voices Committee

A predictable turn of events came on January 17, 2020. After announcing it planned to install five hundred apartments, a daycare, and a grocery store at Portage Place — but with the sale not yet finalized — Starlight sent letters requesting $20 million apiece from each level of Canadian government to help the multi-billion-dollar firm "close anticipated funding gaps."[48] A month later, Starlight announced its plans for Portage Place had been updated to include "up to" 10,000 square feet for a so-called community hub that neighbourhood residents would be able to access twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The space represented a meagre 2% of the commercial space at Portage Place — not at all what community organizers were calling for. Starlight claimed the new plan was a result of consultation with "key community stakeholders," although the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs was the only organization Starlight was able to mobilize public support from.[49]

At this point, the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg invited organizations to form a new coalition with the aim of privately meeting with, rather than publicly opposing, Starlight. The coalition, which took the name Portage Place Community Voices Committee, included groups such as Fearless R2W, Fred Douglas Place Residents' Council, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba, Graffiti Gallery, Ethno-Cultural Council of Manitoba, Immigration Partnership Winnipeg, Mosaic Newcomer Family Resource Network, Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. In the months following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, Winnipeg City Council voted to give Starlight the $20 million it was asking for, while the Conservative provincial government decided to throw $29 million Starlight's way.[50] After those announcements, with True North's 2018 swindle of the $20 million intended for affordable housing at the top of their minds, the Community Voices Committee's top priorities were ensuring that the $49 million in public money now committed to Portage Place would directly benefit low-income neighbourhood residents, and that a great deal of the five hundred new apartments would be truly affordable, ideally rent-geared-to-income.

Fearless R2W, whose mission is to support parents fighting back against state apprehension of their children, had a strong vision for new housing at Portage Place. The organization was completing a study, "Housing Solutions for Indigenous Youth Aging Out of Care in Winnipeg," that would form the basis of its plans, published in 2021, to create affordable housing dedicated to young people aging out of state guardianship and to families who are

reuniting.[51] The idea of creating such housing at Portage Place ingeniously built on the mall's role as a place for gathering, visiting, and tending to relationships.

Over the course of a year, the Community Voices Committee met several times with Starlight spokespeople. The unanimous conclusion of Community Voices Committee members I spoke with was that the tactic of meeting privately with Starlight was a failure. Starlight sent employees to meetings who had no decision-making power, refused to share information, and never committed to anything. Starlight's constant refrain was, "That's a great idea, I can take it back," said Champagne. "There was never anything more to report, the people from Starlight could never really say anything because they were in negotiation with the federal government, or this person, or that person," continued Champagne. "It just became clearer and clearer that there wasn't any wiggle room," said Social Planning Council Executive Director Kate Kehler, "we were going to get 10,000 square feet of community space and some sort of affordable housing and that was going to be it." Committee members realized that the proposed dollar store-sized community space was a cynical tactic to minimize community gains.

According to Champagne, "[Starlight] began to hyper-isolate the impact of our Community Voices collective, in the terms that we would only be used for community consultations and the community consultations would only be for a small area somewhere within Portage Place that would be designated as a community space." Champagne continued, "That's where the Starlight people were really throwing all of their energy, in terms of saying, 'Hey, we are listening to you, and look, it's all contained in this one tiny little area!'" Starlight's approach was creepily reminiscent of Canada's founding apartheid Indian Reserve system, whereby Indigenous nations who insisted on retaining access to their entire traditional territories were forced to winnow the scope of their rights down to tiny reserves.[52]

Starlight, in a further act of treachery, exploited committee members' willingness to meet with them by claiming that the meetings fulfilled their obligation to consult with the community. The committee was clear with Starlight that the meetings did not constitute genuine community consultation. Instead, the committee drafted a memorandum of understanding for Starlight to pay for an extensive community consultation process, complete with a dedicated storefront at Portage Place, an event at Central Park, and a commitment to talk to residents out and about at all hours of the day and night.

A major turning point came on March 2, 2021, when Starlight inflated its request to the federal government to $50 million plus $240 million in loans. (Starlight estimated the total cost of its plan at $300 to $400 million.)[53] In response, the socialist NDP MP for Winnipeg Centre, Leah Gazan, who defeated Liberal MP Falcon-Ouellette in the fall of 2019, released a statement excoriating corporate handouts and calling for public ownership of Portage Place. "Our community has been very clear about what it wants," Gazan wrote. "Investment in affordable, accessible, social housing, a place to buy food and essentials, and a safe place where community members can gather." "I will continue to advocate for the decommodification of housing stock," Gazan continued, "and for public ownership of community spaces."[54]

Starlight's astronomical new request was the final straw for all members of the Community Voices Committee. "[Starlight] gave us no heads up that this was coming," recalled Kehler, explaining that even the committee members who had supported $20 million in federal grants for Starlight could not bring themselves to support $50 million. "It just came to the point," said Champagne, "where we felt like the amount of government dollars that was committed to Portage Place could in and of itself sustain a satisfactory future development that would be consistent with the values put forward by this collective." As Kehler put it, "We could have had real social housing for that amount of money."

On May 19, 2021, the Community Voices Committee stopped meeting with Starlight. "[A]s the committee's work has been misrepresented in the media by Starlight as community support for their proposal," the Committee stated, "the committee must clarify that it has not met with Starlight since the increase ask in federal government funding came to light and given the pandemic, no community consultations have taken place."[55] Brunelli's keen observation, made twenty-two months prior, that "Winnipeggers cannot be so naive to believe that a community has any leverage with the private sector," had been proven correct.[56] As a final act, the Committee sent letters to all Manitoba MPs and relevant federal Ministers urging them to reject Starlight's request, and requested that the Forks North Portage Partnership issue a new request for proposals for Portage Place, which the public corporation declined to do.

The choice to meet privately with Starlight—rather than work in the neighbourhood to raise awareness about what was happening and build grassroots support for a counter plan—depleted Committee members' limited organizing energies and left them feeling frustrated, burned out, and pessimistic. Upon reflection, Kehler's takeaway from the experience was

that time is better spent tending to relationships within community, rather than chasing after concessions from developers who will most likely betray the community at the first opportunity. "Starlight will come and go," said Kehler, "what matters are the folks that are here, doing the work."

Community Voices Committee members reflected that they came up against two of the same barriers to success that beset the Portage Place Community Coalition in 2019. First, opening the committee to supporters of Starlight, and not being clear from the start that there were two camps within the committee — one in favour of the sale to Starlight and one in favour of pursuing an alternative community proposal — made it difficult to make progress. "There were so many different voices there and so much painstaking work to come to an agreement about how we were going to work with [Starlight], that there really wasn't a lot of progress," said Cavers.

Second, the ongoing absence of clear communication from high-level elected officials led to a 'wait and see'-type of idleness at the grassroots. "We were really hoping," said Champagne, "that the fact that the Treaty Land Entitlement process has to first go to First Nations, I think that's why we were so excited about trying to maintain our relationship with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, as part of this collective, but…we never got to have a really clear understanding of what Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs' plans were." (It is important to note that the Indigenous political landscape in Canada consists of different types of bodies with different types of claims, some of which are legally recognized and some of which are not. The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs is not a rights holder within the Treaty Land Entitlement process, but a coordinating body, meaning it is up to individual First Nations themselves to make Treaty Land Entitlement claims). Community helpers reported a similar type of idleness-producing uncertainty following interactions with supportive federal politicians during this period, who reassured community leaders that a community-oriented plan for Portage Place was in the works but neglected to share specifics and never brought one forward.

Keeping the Spirit of Resistance Alive

Two new players picked up the flame of community resistance to Starlight in the summer of 2021. The West Broadway Tenants Committee, a grassroots group of tenants with an overtly anti-capitalist analysis, took a notably different approach from prior waves of organizing. Grounding its approach in solidarity with communities across the country who had been standing up to Starlight for the past ten years, the Tenants Committee aimed to

build knowledge and confidence among ordinary people in Winnipeg by making them aware of the growing movement against Starlight and other multi-billion-dollar real estate firms across the country. On May 25, 2021, the Tenants Committee hosted a panel, "Communities vs. Starlight," featuring Ashleigh Doherty, tenant organizer with Parkdale Organize! in Toronto, and Josh Hawley of the Herongate Tenants Coalition in Ottawa. Doherty and Hawley's presentations included testimony about Starlight's ongoing criminalization of tenant resistance in Parkdale and Starlight's and other firms' overall strategy of evicting and demolishing entire neighbourhoods to "re-position" them as long-term speculative investments for large investors, including pension funds.[57] Following the panel, the West Broadway Tenants Committee formed a Portage Place working group consisting of people who were inspired by the panel to support a counter-proposal to Starlight.

Much of the Tenants Committee working group's energies so far have been spent trying to figure out what organizing has already happened around Portage Place and where to fit in. Almost two years out from the initial community resistance to the sale, two not-well-publicized community coalitions later, and still with no clear understanding of what Treaty 1 First Nations aspirations for Portage Place were, community leaders are grappling with a lack of clarity about who is doing — and has done — what with respect to Portage Place. The Tenants Committee working group agrees that their role is not to invent their own vision for Portage Place, but to support a counter proposal based on the priorities of those with the most at stake.

Another organization that attempted to keep organizing around Portage Place in the summer of 2021 was the Central Neighbourhoods community development corporation. The organization had a new Director who similarly struggled for a clear picture of what organizing had already happened and what others were doing. In May of 2021, MP Gazan contacted Central Neighbourhoods to see if the organization could help come up with a counter proposal that Gazan could use to fight Starlight. Central Neighbourhoods tried to find funding to finance the creation of a counter proposal, but could not. In late summer 2021, the Director arranged a meeting of Fearless R2W, Knox United Church, Mosaic Newcomer Family Resource Network, Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, and the West Broadway Tenants Committee to plan next steps, but then the Director left Central Neighbourhoods for a position at the City of Winnipeg and the meeting did not happen. The turnover at Central Neighbourhoods — which had three Directors in just over a year — posed a barrier to progress during this phase of organizing and is indicative of the riskiness of relying on non-profits, whose funding is such

that they can only offer low pay and no job security, and therefore struggle to retain paid staff.[58]

Happily, on September 29, 2021, it was reported that Starlight had notified the City of Winnipeg that it was unable to proceed with the purchase of Portage Place. It seems that the Liberal federal government's reticence to provide the requested $50 million in grants and $240 million in loans was the deciding factor, although the federal government still has not made an explicit decision on Starlight's request. The only statement by a federal official came from a spokesperson for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation — which ironically had initially, many decades ago, been established to build affordable housing for people of modest means — who said the government agency was still open to discussing the deal with Starlight.[59] Without any more information, we can only speculate that two years of community resistance, plus, perhaps, the Community Voices Committee's letters to federal officials and MP Gazan's activities in closed-door meetings, added up to enough, alongside whatever other unknown factors, to prevent the federal government from giving in to Starlight's request for funding. Lesley Harrison, the Minister at Knox United Church who participated in the initial resistance to Starlight in 2019, reflected: "I think the lesson is...that every action has the potential to have a cumulative effect with every other action...and [even] if an entire City Council votes for it, that there's still, that power still continues to exist, and takes a different form, and continues. So I guess the lesson in it, the most simple of statements would be, don't stop, always speak out, always say what you need to say, don't be pushed into a corner by the powers that be."

Where Do Things Stand Now? Opportunities and Challenges.

Almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the people of Portage Place are missing each other. "A lot of the regulars from before that used to come, before COVID, they don't come now," said Traverse. "I wonder if I'm going to see some of the elders we used to see, are we going to see them again, you know? That to me is sad. The band office has been dismantled." When we are finally done with the self-isolating and social-distancing required to stop the spread of COVID-19, the desire to get back to gathering at Portage Place will be stronger than ever, and the question of how to keep Portage Place a community asset for generations to come will be as relevant as ever.

Community Counter Proposal for Portage Place

Several inventive ideas ordinary people have proposed for the future of Portage Place demonstrate the creativity of the community and the kinds of specifics that could go into a community counter proposal for Portage Place:

- **Workshop space and craft market.** Artisans, including downtown fixture Jimmy the Turtle, already make and sell pieces — beadwork, moccasins, and mukluks — at Portage Place, and could use dedicated space.
- **Indoor park.** People flock to Central Park in summer, but in winter the park's amenities becomes less accessible. A Portage Place community centre could offer free indoor versions of things — playground, splash pad, soccer pitch — people enjoy in the summer at Central Park.
- **Fearless R2W's Community Safety Host program.** In addition to making sure everybody has the food, housing, and healthcare they need, and that people are allowed to be at Portage Place without spending money, an Indigenous-led safety plan for Portage Place could replace security guards with Fearless R2W's Community Safety Host program (which Champagne describes as, "an entirely Indigenous value-infused, deliberately anti-racist, deliberately harm reduction approach"), create a 24/7 safe space, and ensure all Portage Place workers are trained to understand what sexual exploitation looks like.
- **Housing for Indigenous elders.** "That's something that I've wished for and dreamed for," said Meconse, "We're the biggest First Nations population, urban centre in Canada, and we have very few Indigenous Housing options specifically for 55+ and assisted living. I'm aware of one building in the North End, and First Nations elders have no other options. There should be more options for our Elders to live safely, independently and as part of a community."
- **Community-based renaming.** Parts of Portage Place could be renamed and furnished with public art to honour important people and communities at Portage Place, such as renaming the food court after Joseph Meconse, the central atrium after Annie Henry, and the fountain after the source of Winnipeg's tap water, Shoal Lake 40 First Nation.

Where have we arrived after two-and-a-half years of community organizing to defend Portage Place? Now that Starlight has skipped town, community members interested in working towards a counter proposal for Portage Place face a series of new opportunities and challenges.

Opportunities

By far the greatest opportunities are the ones established by inner-city community leaders themselves over the past two-and-a-half years. It has been proven that the community in and around Portage Place cares deeply about the mall, has creative ideas for its future, and is willing to put in the

work to make that future happen. "I think the lesson that I'm taking away," said Champagne, "is that we have the vision and capacity in Winnipeg to redevelop Portage Place…Because the commitment, passion, ideas, and ability to organize in a quick manner of that community voices collective was really what maintained those conversations happening, even after the formal committee went away." A solid foundation has been set for the next phase of community action.

Four consensus pillars of a community counter proposal for Portage Place have been established. (1) Portage Place should become a non-profit community centre (that may include for-profit stores offering affordable necessities, as determined by the community) primarily for the people in the neighbourhood, rather than a corporate shopping mall aspiring to entertain suburbanites attending Jets games. (2) Hundreds of new rent-geared-to-income social housing units should be built at Portage Place. (3) A real safety plan that centres Indigenous women and girls should replace the current security approach. (4) Indigenous peoples should own Portage Place. Because this consensus has been clearly established, there is widespread agreement among organizers that a vague, open-ended community consultation about Portage Place's future is unnecessary. "The ideas are there already to pick up and move with," as Lin Howes-Barr, executive director of the Spence Neighbourhood Association, put it. What is needed is a formal counter proposal, based on these four pillars, for communities to rally around. Once funding and agreements have been won for such a proposal, specifics of what it will look like can be hashed out in a community planning process.

Three facts established since 2019 are ripe for organizers to take advantage of. First, the federal government has acknowledged that it must consider its treaty obligations when deciding to sell off the land under Portage Place. There is some sense that a Treaty Land Entitlement process like the one that led to the Treaty One Development Corporation's Naawi-Oodena development on the former Kapyong Barracks land is the best bet for a successful community-based Portage Place. "I feel like First Nations leaders are in the best position to acquire the land," said Champagne. "I think it's the most likely of the options that are available to community organizations and community-minded folks." While turning Portage Place over to the Treaty One Development Corporation would not guarantee a people-over-profit vision for Portage Place, it could open the door to it.

Second, the City and Province have shown their hand by establishing that they can find, at minimum, a combined $49 million for the redevelopment of Portage Place. "Now we know how much money people were willing to put

on the table to a Toronto-based private, corporate organization," said Kehler, "why would they not be willing to consider that same amount of money for a publicly-run organization?" While that money was justified by those governments' neoliberal ideology that the role of the state is to 'increase the tax base' and 'attract private investment,' it still at the very least constitutes an acknowledgment by governments that forever claim the cupboards are bare when it comes to their constituents' urgent basic needs, that $49 million for Portage Place is already in the budget. In addition, some expect that the Liberal federal government may soon make more money available for social housing and that these funds could go to Portage Place. Given that the mall was for sale before the pandemic for only $23 million — and the pandemic seems to have prompted some retailers to abandon the mall — a public purchase of Portage Place would seem to be easily accomplished.

Third, in 2020, the Hudson's Bay Company permanently closed its downtown Winnipeg store, which is attached to Portage Place by a skywalk, and announced that the building, which it values at $0, is up for grabs. Given that it is attached to Portage Place, the reality that the bulk of the Hudson's Bay Company's wealth was stolen from Indigenous peoples by means of exploitative terms of trade and a 7 million acre land grant from the British Empire made without the involvement of Indigenous peoples, the immense level of unmet need that exists in Winnipeg's city centre, and the stated willingness of the City and Province to support its redevelopment, the Bay building would make a logical component — and the Hudson's Bay Company would make a logical funder — of an Indigenous-owned Portage Place-Bay building community centre and housing complex.[60]

Another source of confidence for the community should be the fact that, in 2022, Winnipeg would be far from the first city to attempt to transform a shopping mall into a community centre. The profit rates of corporate malls around the world are declining and a worldwide process of "demalling"[61] is taking place, with many cities turning disinvested malls into "human services centres."[62] Winnipeg community organizers have a demonstrated capacity to transform large, outmoded buildings into thriving new community infrastructure, with a long track record of inspiring examples including the redevelopment of the Canadian Pacific Railway depot on Higgins Avenue into the Neeginan Centre, the Gault building on Arthur Street into Artspace, 91 Albert Street into the Old Market Autonomous Zone, the Canadian Pacific Railway Postal Station on Main Street into the Social Enterprise Centre, the Christie's Biscuits factory on Notre Dame Street into the Specialized Services for Children and Youth centre, and, as we speak, Kapyong Barracks into the

Naawi-Oodena development. These precedents might provide both confidence and potential governance models for a community-owned Portage Place.

Now that Starlight has ghosted Winnipeg and the level of urgency around Portage Place is dialed down somewhat, there may be an opportunity to establish new spaces for collaboration, lines of communication, and feelings of identification between like-minded, but not very well-connected, groups in the city.[63] "Hopefully what happens in the next stage, now that Starlight has backed away," said Kehler, "maybe we can come together again and say, 'Okay, what do we really want for the community?' We don't have to worry now, we don't have a corporation to be concerned about, what can we as community members, as community organizations, do to come together and say this is what Portage Place should be?" As Kehler and others noted, the current moment offers an appealing opportunity to unite around a common purpose, to be energized by the fight *for*, rather than against, something.

One movement relationship that interlocutors specifically mentioned Portage Place provides an opportunity to strengthen is the one between urban grassroots community leaders, especially Indigenous community leaders, and high-level First Nations leaders. "I will just note that, at least within the grassroots activist circles in Winnipeg," said Champagne, who is a member of Shamattawa Cree Nation, "there are many people that are of the same opinion as me, where we have not had previous partnerships and relationships with First Nations. So my hope is that Portage Place can be an opportunity for partnership between urban Indigenous leadership and First Nations leadership as well. Because it's different. I always talk about the village, right, and the village is the urban Indigenous activist collective here in Winnipeg...and it's just a different type of leadership, cooperation, and collaboration that seems to happen here than I've seen with First Nations. And I think that Portage Place represents a really great opportunity for reciprocity between those groups that I mentioned, urban Indigenous leaders and First Nations chiefs."

Because relationships between Indigenous peoples and immigrants and refugees are essential to the Portage Place community, there would seem to be an excellent opportunity to foster understandings of the resemblances between Indigenous communities and immigrant and refugee communities, including experiences of colonialism, anti-colonial struggle, and Canadian white supremacy. There is also a clear need to find common purpose and establish better lines of communication between white activists and each of these groups. In these ways, Portage Place could offer an opportunity to

renew the promise of multi-racial, multi-issue coalition-building that the original "inner-city" activism of the 1970s introduced.[64]

There is also an opportunity to build connections between community leaders and the Portage Place community itself, and perhaps to build confidence among regulars at Portage Place that they have a right to shape the future of the mall. "You know what," said Traverse, "for most people, they really don't have opinions on stuff like [the future of Portage Place] just because they've never had any say in anything, you know what I'm saying? Like these people, its mostly Indigenous people, right, and if you ask them what they think, they'd be like they don't know, because when has their voice ever mattered?" Lesley Harrison, Minister at Knox United Church, believes that grassroots confidence will come from a gradual, intentional process of getting to know each other better. "It probably sounds kind of trite," said Harrison, "but I would always come back to the small group model of how can we get to know each other as human beings in a setting where we are safe and comfortable enough to do that, and then begin to infuse that setting with the vision of where we might want to go."

Finally, there is an opportunity to stretch the kind of thinking and acting people are doing around Portage Place much further. "We need to stop looking at these projects as one-offs," said Kehler, "We need to look at the downtown as a whole and we need to stop thinking, 'Oh, well we have one community space for folks," you know...that certainly can't answer the needs that we have downtown, so we have to be careful." Widespread interest in a land-back, people-over-profit Portage Place offers a chance to think about decolonial, de-commodified housing and community space elsewhere and at other scales. Thinking about what we want Portage Place to be could help us think about what we want the world to be. The experiment of transforming Portage Place could be a laboratory — or a rehearsal space — for becoming the kinds of people who are capable of extraordinary change. Remaking Portage Place together in community could allow us to improvise, try things out, break old habits, and form new ones. If taking over one shopping mall seems like a daunting task now, perhaps we could see it as an opportunity to build the skills, capacities, and sensibilities we will need to feel more confident in the future.[65]

Challenges

The biggest thing standing in the way of a community counter proposal for Portage Place will be the Forks North Portage Partnership, for the simple

fact that its entire business model relies on extracting value from Portage Place for the benefit of the Forks, and they will surely resist any proposal that doesn't involve a big pay day for them on the scale of the $47 million they hoped to receive from Starlight. Any shift in leadership or enlightenment within the organization is unlikely to overcome this economic imperative.

The Forks North Portage Partnership extracts approximately $5 million each year in total from multiple parking lots and land leases in and around Portage Place, and re-invests very little back into the community.[66] The vast majority of the Forks North Portage Partnership's involvement in the neighbourhood has been firmly in line with the gentrification agenda that created the mall in the first place, and has been done in coordination with gentrification-committed groups such as CentreVenture, the Downtown BIZ, and the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce.[67]

It is time for the inner city to stop paying for the Forks. The $5 million per year should stay in the inner city and would go a long way toward operating funding for a community centre at Portage Place. "Why is the revenue generated in North Portage being floated over to the Forks when this area could sure benefit from it?" Brunelli rightly questioned in 2019.[68] The Forks is a National Historic Site and a tourist attraction that boosts the profits of the downtown hospitality and luxury real estate industries and should be publicly financed by taxing those firms that market and profit from their proximity to it. One way forward might be for the three levels of Canadian government to reinstate the independence of North Portage from the Forks (the two merged in 1994), then transfer North Portage to the community. In the unfortunate event that the Forks North Portage Partnership does sell the land and underground parking against the community's wishes, the full sale price should be transferred into a fund for social housing and a community centre somewhere in the central neighbourhoods.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents both opportunities and challenges. Early pandemic emergency measures showed that the "impossible" can be done (and quickly), and federal government stimulus measures may make money available for urban infrastructure. But inner-city community helpers seeking state support for working-class communities hammered by pandemic unemployment, restricted access to services and networks, and the virus itself, will have to contend with downtown capitalists' counter-push for state investment in a gentrification-recovery. Fearing a reversal of the modest gains made toward the gentrification of Winnipeg's city centre over the past decade, big downtown property owners and their allies are

already calling for more corporate handouts and renewed state investment in their fifty-year-old racial project of 'bringing people back downtown.'[69]

Finally, people interested in organizing around Portage Place will be faced with the challenge of avoiding the trap of meeting privately with the Forks North Portage Partnership and the next corporate real estate firm it tries to sell Portage Place to. As Starlight's manipulation of the Community Voices Committee demonstrates, big developers know how to use private meetings to string community leaders along, claim they have consulted with the community when they haven't, and keep the broader community uninformed and idle. Learning from that experience, organizers' time will be better spent working in community, fostering popular knowledge of what's happening, support for a counter proposal, and the community power we will need to make that proposal a reality.

Conclusion

What a fabulous opportunity Portage Place is, in 2022: a beloved gathering place at a turning point, offering the multitude of people that care about it a chance to unite around something tangible, positive, and energizing. To be sure, the city's ruling institutions are lined up against that prospect. But the history of Winnipeg's inner city is nothing if not a history of people with the courage to fight for a better world, against all odds.

Chapter 3 Endnotes

1 The bulk of this chapter is based on telephone interviews conducted by the author in November and December of 2021, in Winnipeg. Thirteen people were interviewed, selected for their involvement in different phases of community resistance to the sale of Portage Place to Starlight, and/or for their involvement in the Portage Place community. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Winnipeg and interviews were recorded with permission. Interlocutors were asked about the meaning of Portage Place in their lives, the experience of resisting the sale to Starlight, and lessons learned. A majority of the thirteen interlocutors are Indigenous peoples and a majority are women. No recent immigrants or refugees were interviewed, which is an important shortcoming of this piece.

2 The area set to be bulldozed was roughly between Sherbrook and Furby streets, from Notre Dame Avenue to the CPR yards.

3 Damas and Smith Limited 1975. The term "Native" was the term originally used by the Indigenous proponents of the Neeginan plan in the early 1970s and is reproduced here for accuracy.

4 Toews 2018, 146–150.

5 Toews 2018, 154, 158.

6 Ladyka 1989.

7 Silver and Toews 2009. Cadillac Fairview contributed $12 million to the construction of Portage Place. https://uniter.ca/view/portage-place-marks-25th-anniversary

8 Urban Futures Group 1990.

9 Mullin 1986.

10 Traverse's paintings include "My Love," "Blue Moon," and "Sweethearts," her short films include "Butterfly," "Two Scoops," and "Empty," and she is the author of the colouring books, *Sacred Feminine: An Indigenous Art Colouring Book* and *Ikwe: Honouring Women, Life Givers, and Water Protectors*.

11 Ladyka 1989; Santin 1989; Thomas 1991.

12 Following the abolition of Canada's apartheid Indian Reserve pass system and increased migration of First Nations people to Winnipeg in the post-WWII period, Winnipeg's white property owners have drawn and redrawn an urban apartheid geography in an effort to keep Indigenous peoples out of certain parts of the city. For many years, landlords, business owners, police, and others made Indigenous peoples especially unwelcome south of Portage Avenue. The construction of Portage Place on the north side of Portage Avenue redrew this line to some extent. See Toews 2018, 212.

13 Sinclair 2019. Idle No More is among the largest uprisings in Canadian history. It was sparked in 2012 by Prime Minister Harper's Bill C-45, which aimed to abolish an array of Indigenous land rights and environmental protections, as Indigenous peoples carried out hundreds of flash mobs, round dances, hunger strikes, occupations, and blockades across the country.

14 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2013; Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2014; Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2016.

15 Zoratti 2016.

16 City of Winnipeg 2019.

17 Statistics Canada 2011; Manitoba Collaborative Data Portal 2019; Major countries of origin for immigrants and refugees living around Portage Place include Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria, Afghanistan, Philippines, Vietnam, China, Pakistan, and Bhutan.

18 Humans of Portage Place 2019.

19 Rucks-Ahidiana 2021; Smith 1992.

20 Smith 1996.

21 CentreVenture 2010.

22 The Richardson family are perhaps the wealthiest and longest-standing tycoons in Manitoba. James Richardson & Sons Limited is a Winnipeg-headquartered conglomerate invested in food production, oil and gas, trucking, finance, insurance, real estate, and more. The Vancouver-based Gagliardi family conglomerate is invested in hotel and restaurant chains, real estate, construction, the Dallas Stars NHL franchise, and more.

23 McGowan 2013; McNeill 2016; Kives 2017.

24 Winnipeg Police Service 2016.

25 Forks North Portage Partnership 2011.

26 Forks North Portage Partnership 2011.

27 Baxter 2021.

28 City of Winnipeg 2020.

29 The Central Park Stewardship Committee was established to care for the park and consists of municipal officials, community-minded groups such as Central Neighbourhoods community development corporation, Knox United Church, Mosaic Newcomer Family Resource Network, and Artbeat Studio, as well as profit-minded groups such as the local business improvement zones and the Forks North Portage Partnership.

30 Santin 2019; Forks North Portage Partnership 2014; 2019. In addition to the Portage Place land lease and parking lot, the Forks North Portage's North Portage revenues come from parking lots at the Investors Group headquarters and Place Promenade apartments and land leases at the Investors Group headquarters, Place Promenade apartments, Kiwanis Chateau Seniors' Residence, Fred Douglas Seniors' Residence, Symcor Inc. offices, Hotel Royal Plaza, and YMCA.

31 MacLean 2019; August 2020; August and Walks 2018.

32 Santin 2019.

33 Sinclair 2019.

34 Toews 2019.

35 Roussin and Christensen 2010; Hugill and Toews 2014.

36 City of Winnipeg 2019; "Capital is a fiend," writes geographer Annie Spencer, and addiction "is an organizing principle of capitalist social formations."

37 City of Winnipeg 2019

38 MacKinnon, Shauna (2018) Tax increment financing and True North Square. Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/fast-facts-tax-increment-financing-and-true-north-square

39 City of Winnipeg 2019

40 City of Winnipeg 2019

41 City of Winnipeg 2019

42 City of Winnipeg 2019

43 It is unclear what formal process led to the provincial government's decision to approve the sale.

44 Keele 2019.

45 Yearwood and Kitz 2020; August 2020; August and Walks 2018.

46 MacLean 2019

47 The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, Peguis First Nation, and Long Plain First Nation did not respond to multiple interview invitations for the 2022 *State of the Inner City Report*. Treaty One Development Corporation declined to participate.

48 City of Winnipeg 2020.

49 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2020.

50 Kavanagh 2020; Kives 2020.

51 Morton et al 2021.

52 Craft 2013; Morris 1880.

53 Kavanagh 2021; Winnipeg Free Press 2019.

54 Gazan 2021. MP Gazan declined to speak to the 2022 *State of the Inner City Report*.

55 Portage Place Community Voices Committee 2021.

56 City of Winnipeg 2019

57 See August 2020 and August and Walks 2018.

58 Silver, et al 2009.

59 Petz 2021.

60 The Hudson's Bay Company received seven million acres of land from the British Empire that did not belong to them as part of the transfer of colonial authority over the North West from the Company to Canada (see Manitoba Indian Brotherhood 1971 and Gaudry 2016. "During Treaty 4 negotiations," Gaudry writes, "the Gambler, a Saulteaux spokesperson, protested the Crown's Treaty Commissioner, Alexander Morris that "the Company have stolen our land.") In 2020 the City of Winnipeg created a citizen's committee to propose ideas for the future of the Bay building and in 2021 the government of Manitoba committed $25 million to preserving the building.

61 Guimaraes 2019.

62 Vander Ark 2020.

63 Gilmore 2008.

64 Toews 2018, 146.

65 Gilmore 2020.

66 Santin 2019; Forks North Portage Partnership 2014; 2019.

67 Forks North Portage Partnership 2010; 2011.

68 City of Winnipeg 2019.

69 Distasio 2021.

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