

PORTAGE AND MAIN: THE FUTURE



The winning entry envisions the floor of the concourse resembling a subterranean wheat field, with kiosks dotting the walkway. Inset photos show Portage and Main today.

Trees, Star Wars inspire architects

By Mary Agnes Welch

Competition winners envision prairie oasis, light tubes

SHADY walks along the Red River and Luke Skywalker's light sabre inspired the architects who designed what could launch Portage and Main's renaissance.

The winner of the City Crossing design competition could turn what's now a cold, concrete intersection into a woody oasis where tubes of light pop out of the ground like trees and large glass silos mark the entrances to the underground concourse.

Among the most subtle of the 72 entries, it's the brainchild of architects Doug Corbett and George Cibinel and the Winnipeg firm that bears their name.

They worked with the Toronto-based landscape architecture firm of Janet Rosenberg and Associates.

"We propose that Winnipeg begin a major reforestation of its downtown, at the heart of its city, speaking to its history, its harsh environment, the great rivers that flow nearby and to the need within all of us to have something that

contrasts with the harshness of the towers surrounding the crossing," wrote the architects.

The same sorts of big trees that grow near the Red River — birch, oak, elm and poplar — would be planted along new boulevards and in front of each of the intersection's buildings.

Around the trees would be tall prairie grasses, which could help protect the trees from winter street salt.

If the TD Centre's owners agree, Corbett Cibinel are also proposing a "river-bottom forest" in the vacant lot beside the headquarters of CanWest Global Communications.

Neither the TD Centre's manager nor officials from CanWest Global returned calls yesterday.

To capture the softness of the light that filters through the trees along the Red, Doug Corbett and his team turned to long polymer tubes of light that look like Luke Skywalker's light sabre. The tubes, which look a little like clear plastic tree

trunks, will be as tall as real trees and will puncture the pavement and run down to the concourse like tree roots. That will help illuminate the tunnels and link them visually to the street level.

And, much larger glass silos in front of the Bank of Montreal, the TD Centre and the Richardson Building will lead people down circular staircases to the concourse, making the entrances to Winnipeg Square much easier to spot.

Those silos are located where stairs down to the concourse already exist, which reduces the amount of new construction needed, said Corbett.

Solar panels and rows of wind turbines along the boulevards will power the lights and harness some of the bluster that has come to define the intersection.

The five-person jury charged with picking a winner among the dozens of entries said the Corbett Cibinel team "really got it." The firm understood the intersection, the financial limitations and the soul of Winnipeg, said the judges.

Jury member Thomas Fisher said he loved the proposal's plan to reforest the intersection and the light tubes, which act as street lighting and a way to connect the street to the tunnels. He also liked an overlooked part of Corbett Cibinel's proposal — the image of a wheat field imprinted on the floor of the concourse to reflect Winnipeg's prairie identity. Fisher felt the architects should risk being a little wackier and turn the image into reality.

It was the only entry among 72 to include a winter scene — surprising given Winnipeg's climate and the intersection's reputation as the coldest in Canada.

Corbett Cibinel envisioned a winter street party scene that looks like Winterlude in Ottawa.

"A place occupied by people in the winter is so seductive," said the jury's chair, Toronto architect Robert Allsopp. "We can't resist it. We've got to go for it."

But Jane Perdue, Toronto's public art boss, cautioned the city must commit to

maintaining any investment in the intersection, echoing Mayor Glen Murray's recent campaign to glean more money from Ottawa and the province to fix the city.

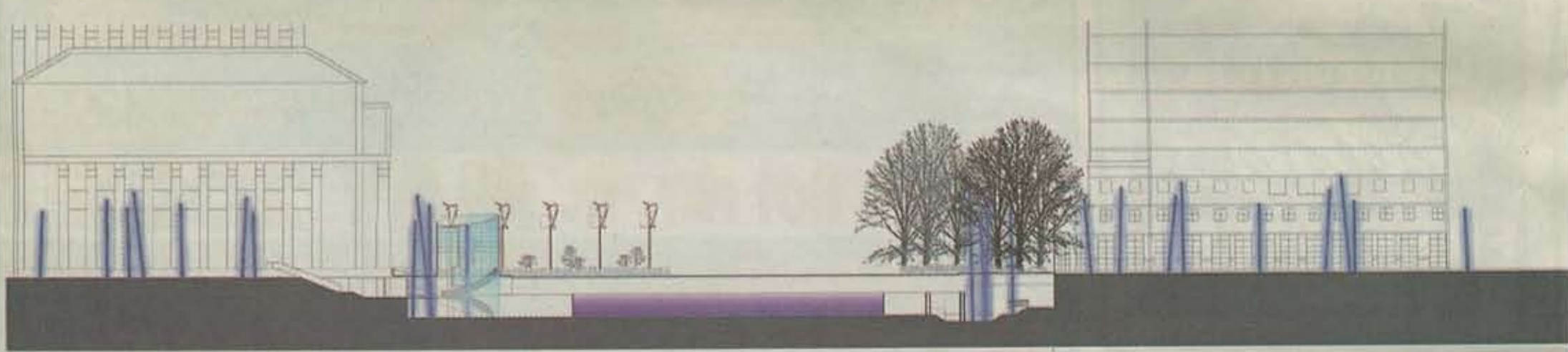
"This will be a destination point and we don't want it to be, within a few years after it's completed, that it looks like it in need of repair," said Perdue in the jury's comment brief.

The jury made its decision in a marathon meeting Thursday, and Corbett said he wasn't told his firm's design had won until 15 minutes before yesterday morning's press conference.

"I was shaking, quite a bit," said Corbett. "I was thrilled."

Corbett said he doesn't fear his design will be watered down or corrupted during negotiations with the intersection's big-name landowners. He said it's better to work with the landowners from the very beginning to incorporate their concerns into the design instead of firing the project scuttled because a stakeholder was not consulted.

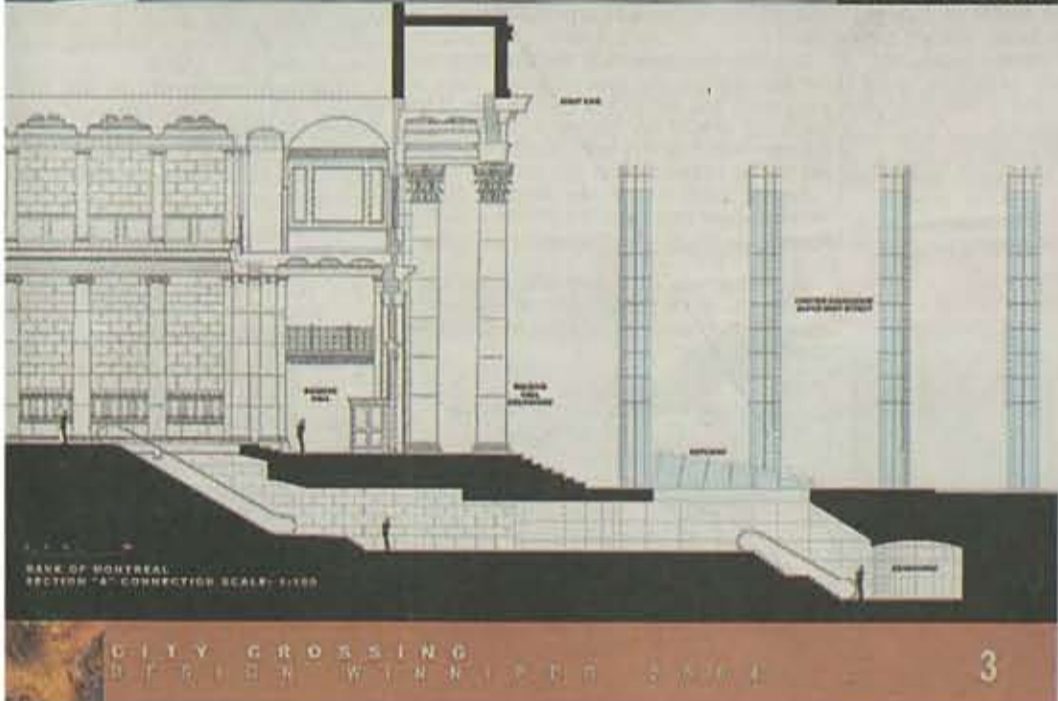
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PORTAGE AND MAIN: THE FUTURE

CITY / DISTRICT 87

RUNNERS-UP



SECOND PLACE: LM Architects

Beacon tower, waterfall bring sense of wonder and tranquillity

THE jury's second favourite proposal, designed by Winnipeg's LM Architects, grabbed hold of a grandiose plan that focuses on the plaza in front of the Richardson Building.

Its symbolic heart is a tower that acts as a beacon and penetrates to the concourse below, allowing natural light in. Inside the tower is a windmill, able to produce energy. The wind will also activate chimes within the tower that ring more vigorously depending on the weather.

The tower's proportions are based on the columns of the Bank of Montreal across the street.

The architects also envisioned a 12-metre waterfall flowing off the "urban cliff" of the Richardson Building that would drown out the sounds of traffic and offer "a sense of wonder and tranquillity" to the intersection.

Around the waterfall and beacon

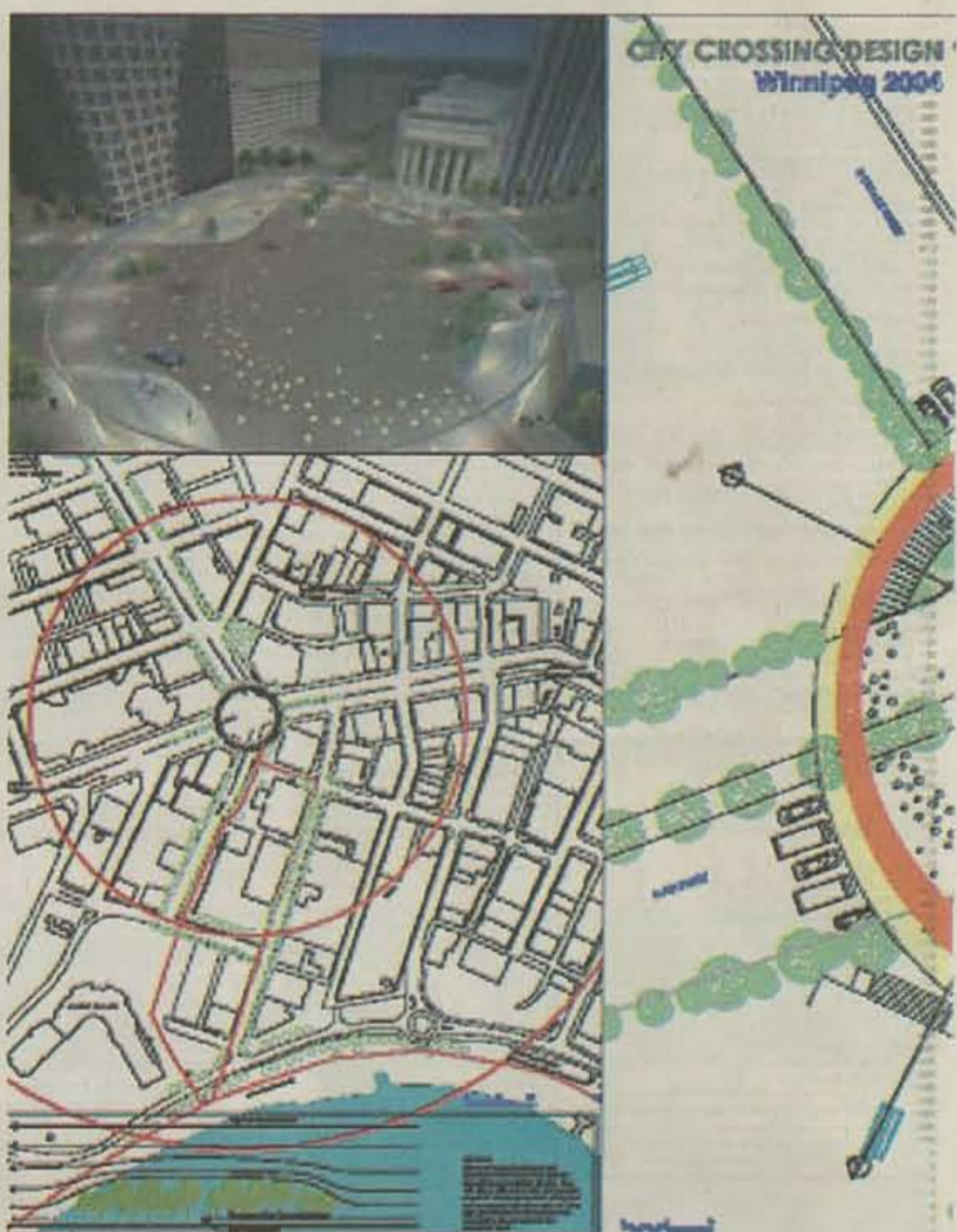
tower would be a plaza open to noon-hour lunchers and special events. There would be room for public art, such as a Leo Mol sculpture and some landscaping.

What's now a windy dead zone between the Richardson Building and the Lombard Hotel would be glassed in for a restaurant, gift shop and perhaps the home of the city's planned design centre.

Dotted around the other corners are skylights — one more than 30 metres long — to provide natural light and a view of the sky from the concourse.

The five-person jury praised the project for its monumental, "world class" quality and for addressing each corner specifically. But the judges feared it would be too expensive, and they wondered if the waterfall would be practical in the winter.

— Mary Agnes Welch



THIRD PLACE: Yoshihara McKee Architects

Tilted arc above plaza uses wind to make music for pedestrians

THE New York-based firm of Yoshihara McKee Architects earned the third-place award for their proposal, which imagined a sort of halo over the intersection echoing the round concourse underground.

"The site has taken on a mythic stature," wrote the architects, the only non-Winnipeg designers to earn a spot in the top three. "It manages to capture the wide-open spaces of the prairies, with their endless horizon line and unattainable vanishing point, as well as the spires of commerce. It must become the vibrant focus of the urban life and civic character of Winnipeg."

Three separate rings — one below ground, one at street level and one above the intersection — would define the intersection as a crossroads and

link what are now very isolated parts of Portage and Main.

Above the plaza, a tilted arc would act as an Aeolian harp, which uses the wind to make music and filters the sounds of the wind to pedestrians below. At night, it would act as a glowing halo above the crossing, diffusing light and snow.

A ring of skylights above the concourse mark it for those on the street and allow the shadows of cars to be seen from below.

Open green spaces and sunken gardens would be located in front of the skyscrapers along with light-filled ramps down to the concourse.

The configuration of the intersection would not change for vehicles.

— Mary Agnes Welch

Some facts about the competition

Here are some facts about the proposed redesign of Portage and Main:

The Winner: Toronto-based Janet Rosanberg & Associates Landscape Architects working in partnership with Winnipeg's Corbett Gibinel Architects, the same firm that designed the new downtown Red River College campus.

The Runners-up: LM Architects of Winnipeg; Yoshihara McKee Architects.

The Jury: Robert Allsopp, du Troit Allsopp Hillier Urban Design, Planning, landscape Architecture, Toronto; Donald Carter, Urban Design Associates, Pittsburgh; Thomas Fisher, Dean of the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of Minnesota; Daniel Friedman, Director of the School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Chicago; Jane Perdue, public art co-ordinator for the City of Toronto.

Public Input: Beginning today,

Winnipeggers can see all the submissions displayed in the TD Centre and in the Richardson Building's concourse. They can then cast a vote for their favourite, and the winner will be awarded the Prix de Publique, which carries a \$5,000 prize. The exhibit is on until May 14.

See the designs online: Visit <http://www.winnipeg-design-competition.org> and click on the box in the bottom right corner.

The cost: It's unclear, at least until detailed designs are worked out, but it's expected to come in under the \$10-million imaginary budget given to the contest's entrants.

Who pays? The plan, say city officials, is to work out a deal with the intersection's five landowners to share funding for the project as a public-private partnership. Mayor Glen Murray said such partnerships generally cost the city about 10 per cent of the total cost.

When could work begin? Likely within two years, though it depends on how quickly the landowners and the city reach a deal.

— Mary Agnes Welch