



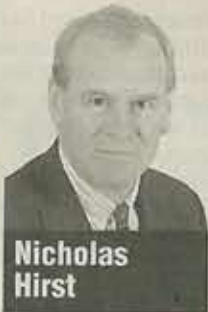
Just pull them down! Now!

Whatever I may think about the design chosen to revitalize Portage and Main matters little, because the exercise itself is surely irrelevant. Whether the design can actually improve the windy crossing, I will discuss in a minute. Of greater importance is that the whole design competition was an ill-conceived sideshow which creates a new artificial barrier to improving our downtown.

Like many mistaken initiatives, this one was undertaken with the best of motives, and like others, it was not without its good points. Design competitions do draw international architectural and local attention to potential improvement. On the other hand, they also can serve to prevent anything from happening at all.

I was involved in the steering committee for a design competition for a building on the new Waterfront Drive. The designs were exciting, they drew great architectural interest, went nowhere and are now forgotten. A flurry of interest developed around one of the most attractive development sites in Western Canada, but there was no practical effect.

Exactly the same outcome is likely from the design competition to improve Portage and Main. Remarks by the City of Winnipeg's planning, property and development director, Harry Finnigan, in a press release yesterday were, for a bureaucrat, perhaps more on the mark than usual. The competition, he said, marked the takeoff point for more focused discussions on giving this corner back to the community.



Nicholas Hirst

"Nobody is under-estimating the work ahead to build commitment and consensus around this winning idea, but we couldn't ask for a better way of launching enthusiasm for this task... the City is committed to working with Portage and Main property owners, other downtown stakeholders and the community at large."

In other words, having started one debate, we'll now proceed to another one. Nothing, absolutely nothing has actually been decided. Everybody and her uncle will now have to be persuaded not only that the winning design by Toronto-based Janet Rosenberg & Associates Landscape Architects and Corbett Cibinel Architects of Winnipeg is what should be done, but a "private-public partnership" as the mayor described, will have to be created to pay the "less than \$10 million" it's going to cost.

This newspaper, the CentreVenture downtown development agency, and most people involved in attempts to revitalize our still-shaky downtown have been campaigning to take down the barricades at Portage and Main for years. Most downtown advocates see the barricades, which prevent pedestrians from walking across the intersection, as the worst symbol of a city centre devoted to cars and highrises rather than people.

CentreVenture obtained a legal opinion which confirmed what others have known for the longest time, that there is no real impediment to moving the barricades.

But, will city council just rent a bunch of forklift trucks to move them out of the way? Not on your life. No. Instead, we now have a fancy new design to discuss.

It may be that the design with its blue light poles, central medians of prairie grasses, trees and wind turbines, and glass silos could create a wonderful ambience that will make Portage and Main the eighth wonder of the

world. It hardly matters. Before the necessary lanes are closed to make the median, city council will order yet another traffic study. Someone will suggest that having just spent the last two years digging up and repairing Main Street, it's surely a thoroughly bad idea to do it again, and, you know what? That person will be right! The design is the equivalent of choosing furniture for a house you have yet to build.

The solution to Portage and Main was never difficult. It did not need a design competition. It needed the nerve that, for the big decisions, always seems so sadly lacking.

Bring down the barricades. Set up pedestrian crossings. That can hardly be a problem, the traffic has to stop at lights as it is. Allow the marketplace to make its own choices about what to do next.

City council can help, of course. It can improve signage as it has promised. It can even do another traffic study to see if Portage could become at least a partially traffic-free street like downtown avenues in Calgary and Minneapolis.

It can find a way to offer more tax incentives for the downtown area, especially on Portage, Portage East and Main Street south. Alternatively, it can debate a design that puts a higher price tag on the initial conversion of the intersection than is necessary.

If council wants to show it is serious about removing the biggest symbol of downtown decline it will take down the barricades now. That must be the first step. Once the barricades are down, the city can talk about the next step for as long as it wants, but I bet that business interests will move to create improvements faster than council can react.