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A window to Exchange's future

Colin Fast
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When it was first proposed in the early 1960s, Old Market Square was billed as "a little oasis" in the centre of Winnipeg's historic business district.

By the mid-1970s, the space was the centrepiece of an ambitious scheme to turn the Exchange District into Winnipeg's version of Vancouver's Gastown, complete with residences, shopping, dining and offices surrounding a vibrant public square.

If all that sounds a bit familiar, it's because the same vision was touted for the next four decades with mostly disappointing results.

While Old Market Square occasionally displayed signs of life over that time, it never amounted to much more than a scrubby patch of grass and concrete that was home to the occasional farmer's market, noon-hour concert or sleeping hobo.

But recent renovations to the square, combined with an aggressive programming agenda by the Exchange District Biz and a small influx of residents and businesses, have really brought the area to life over the past few years.

And sitting on the grass last Friday evening with my son, taking in the sights and sounds of the Fringe Festival, it was possible to see Old Market Square as a window to what the future of the area really could be.

Hipsters, hippies, families and retirees all sitting side by side in front of the pulsating CUBE stage. Sidewalks and patios filled with people, food vendors and street performers. A surprising lack of cars and an even more surprising abundance of bikes. A neighbourhood with real energy.

Now this is the vision of a vibrant district that generations of Winnipeggers have been talking about. Granted, I'm judging the space during its busiest week of the year, but never has the potential been any clearer.

So what can be done to turn the Fringe excitement into a year-round experience? Government tax credits to turn old warehouses and parking lots into condos and apartments will help, and so will new developments like Red River College's renovation of the Union Bank Tower.

But what's needed more than anything is focus. So many times over the past four decades the Exchange has inched forward, only to lose ground after the spotlight was turned to another part of downtown. The same thing seems to be happening today with the proposed Sports, Hospitality and Entertainment District (SHED) around MTS Centre.

And while there's little question that many parts of downtown could use revitalization, it would be nice if we could finish the 40-year Exchange District project first.

So do yourself a favour this week: Head down to Old Market Square and get yourself a curry and a bag of mini doughnuts. Grab a beverage in the Fringe Festival beer garden, and just look around and imagine what could become Canada's next great neighbourhood.

Metro Winnipeg