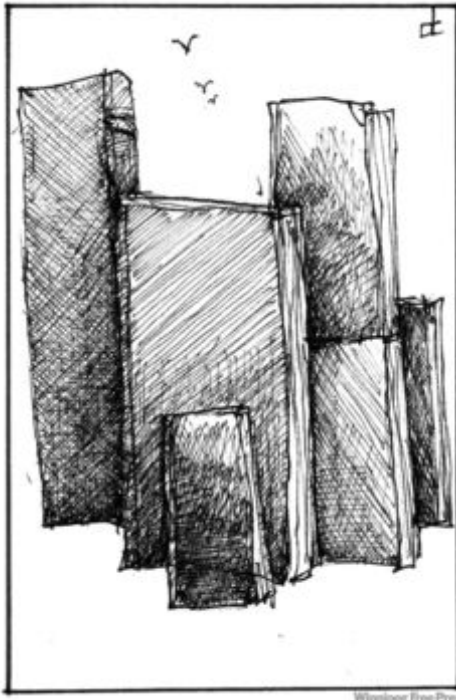


Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

You can always go downtown

By: Staff Writer

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DOWNTOWN UNIVERSITY

What a difference a decade makes. When the 1990s came to a close, large swaths of downtown Winnipeg were a no man's land of uninhabited, underused, decaying and hopeless buildings. It was a forlorn place few people seemed to want to live, or at least that was the perception.

The downtown still has its challenges -- and always will -- but the sense it is beyond redemption is long gone. Today, it's a place where people of all ages and income levels want to live because it's cool, convenient and interesting.

The latest evidence of this optimism came Friday when the city and province said they were jointly putting up another \$20 million in downtown housing incentives. They were doing so not to stimulate interest, but to meet demand.

The two governments put up their first \$20 million a year ago and it was very quickly used up by 16 separate projects that created or will create 135 rental units and 606 condominiums, as well as commercial opportunities.

One of these projects is the former Avenue Building on Portage Avenue, an ugly duckling that, quite frankly, few people would have missed if it had been put out of its misery.

Developers Mark and Rick Hofer saw it differently, however.

The brothers acquired the building last year with plans to convert it into a multiple housing complex, while respecting the heritage of the 107-year-old building.

The \$8.5-million project could not have succeeded without roughly \$2 million in funding from the province and city. That's because dilapidated heritage buildings are exceedingly difficult to renovate and even harder to finance because banks regard them as risky investments with too many potential problems. It is usually easier and cheaper to demolish old buildings and start from scratch.

These are among the reasons taxpayer incentives are necessary if the city wants to find a use for older buildings while increasing the number of people living downtown.

The total provincial-civic contribution of \$40 million sounds like a steep price to pay, but the cost of doing nothing is much more. A rise in downtown housing will create a demand for new services, while boosting safety and a sense of well-being.

New and redeveloped buildings, with bustling streets and busy sidewalks, will tell visitors Winnipeg is

thriving and full of confidence, a good place, in other words, to live and invest.

The city has had its own tax-incentive program for many years, but it was never enough to generate a vigorous response. By doubling the amount of cash available, the province has produced a sort of tipping point.

Housing companies such as Qualico, for example, shunned the downtown until the tax incentive was raised to a level that made investment feasible.

The pace of change is not as fast as some people would like, but the important point is that the city is moving in the right direction.

In fact, with all the major projects underway today, particularly the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and the redevelopment of Assiniboine Park Zoo, the city should redouble its efforts to prepare for the huge wave of visitors coming our way.

Most of them will want to go downtown, which, ready or not, will tell the story of Winnipeg.

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