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Arena not a panacea

MTS Centre proves sports facilities can't fix neighbourhoods

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Have you ever tried to fix a car by baking banana muffins?

Faced with a flooded basement, would you consider solving the problem by reading Spider-Man comics?

Of course, you would do none of these things. You are a rational human being. If you're capable of reading these words, you understand cause-and-effect relationships.

Drop an apple and it gets bruised. Pet a cat and it starts purring. But build an arena to revitalize downtown? That's just crazy because the notion you can revitalize a blighted area by building an arena is illogical and naive.

Allow me to explain. Five years ago, Winnipeg's agonizing arena debate ended with the opening of a 15,000-seat arena on Portage Avenue, crammed into the space where the dear, departed Eaton's once stood.

Back in the 1980s, when the Edmonton Oilers were destroying the Winnipeg Jets every other night even though they had a coke habit the size of Grant Fuhr's moustache, Jets owner Barry Shenkarow tried and failed to warn the city's power brokers we needed a new arena to keep the NHL here.

You know what happened next: Players' salaries went up. Team revenues all but flatlined. The NHL outgrew the Winnipeg market and began its bizarre experiment in the American south. The Jets stopped losing in Winnipeg and started losing in Phoenix.

Eventually, once the Manitoba Moose moved to town, co-owner Mark Chipman convinced investors and governments to help build the MTS Centre, which opened on Nov. 16, 2004.

Since then, the building has been an unqualified success. Pollstar magazine routinely lists the MTS Centre as one of the busiest venues in the continent. The Manitoba Moose play to average crowds of about 7,800, among the highest in the American Hockey League.

But the arena has not done a hell of a lot for Winnipeg's underpopulated downtown. And to be frank, there was no way it could do anything in this regard.

The MTS Centre has sparked next to no activity outside its immediate footprint as well as the associated power-plant development that includes a Tavern United pub and CTV's studios.

The Metropolitan Theatre to the east remains empty. The cityplace mall to the south is wanting for tenants. The north side of Portage Avenue still has mostly vacant buildings. The lone Fyxx coffee outlet that opened up to the west has since closed, though it has been replaced by a sushi joint.

This is no fault of the MTS Centre. Across North America, professional sporting facilities simply haven't been fantastic drivers of inner-city revitalization.

Downtown Winnipeg needs unified leadership instead of the competing interests; real provincial tax incentives to create more housing and some genuine attention from city hall. If that doesn't happen soon, then we all might as well bake muffins and hope downtown fixes itself.

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