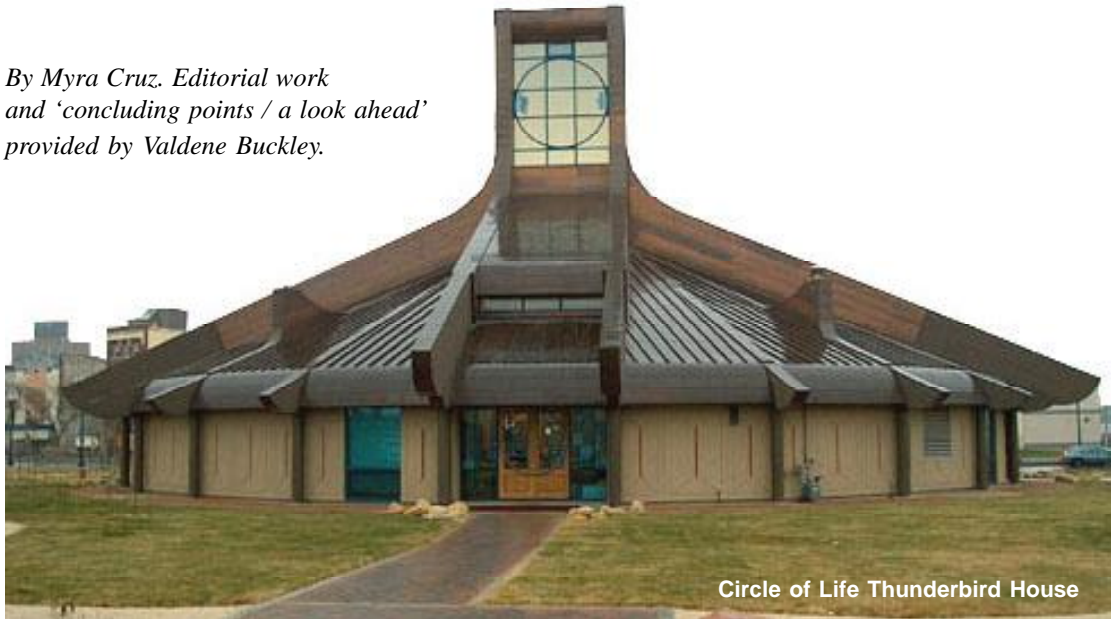




CASEBOOK

Neeginan: *Our Place - The Rebirth of Winnipeg's North Main Street*

*By Myra Cruz. Editorial work
and 'concluding points / a look ahead'
provided by Valdene Buckley.*



Circle of Life Thunderbird House

FOREWORD

Main Street, the heart of the City of Winnipeg has great historical significance. The area has been home to First Nations people including the Cree, Ottawa, Nipissing, Algonkin, Saulteaux, Mohawk, Blackfoot, Atsina, Ojibway, Assiniboin, Mandan, Hidatsa and Sisseton Dakota for thousands of years. In 1812, the first permanent European settlement was established by Scottish settlers. The Metis population was also growing during this period. Settlement continued to expand slowly until 1885, when the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway brought immigrants from Iceland, Great Britain and Eastern Europe. Following the entry of Manitoba into Canada, the signing of treaties between First Nations and the government led to the establishment of the Indian Reserve system and the removal of Native people from their traditional lands. In the 1950's restrictions against off-reserve movement were lifted, and First Nations people began returning to the North Main area. Settlement over the years lead to the development of vibrant commercial and residential activity.

Yet, the North Main area has gone through physical, economic and social decline over the past few decades. Statistics reveal poor housing, high crime rates, population losses, and high unemployment. With its decline, the heart of our City demanded attention for the opportunity of rebirth. Today, redevelopment and revitalization on North Main has begun, initiated by the Winnipeg Development Agreement and the creation of a Mayor's Task Force, called the *North Main Task Force*.

Neeginan, Cree for 'our place' strengthens and celebrates Aboriginal history, culture and spirituality in Winnipeg. Neeginan, a concept originally conceived in 1975, is today composed of several elements including a Round House based on the principles of the Medicine Wheel, called the Circle of Life Thunderbird House; and Neeginan Park. Neeginan was the lead component of the North Main Task Force redevelopment strategy, and aims to act as a catalyst for further development, revitalization, and private sector investment along North Main.

FACTS OF THE CASE

The first phase of redevelopment along North Main Street was made possible by the Winnipeg Development Agreement (WDA). The WDA was a five year 75.0 million commitment by the three levels of government to increase economic development and employment opportunities, and create safe, healthy communities in which to live, work and do business in Winnipeg. The WDA built on the legacy of intergovernmental cooperation in the City following initiatives such as the Core Area Initiative and The Forks North Portage Partnership.

As part of its 25.0 million commitment under the WDA, the City of Winnipeg allocated 6.0 million to support the *North Main Strategic Development Program*. Valdene Buckley was the Program's Manager.

In January 1997, City Council authorized the creation of a Mayor's Task Force, a steering committee, to develop an overall strategy and plan for the North Main Street area (bounded by William Avenue to the south, Canadian Pacific Railway tracks to the north, Princess Street to the west, and the Red River to the east), and to oversee the implementation of the 6.0 million WDA funding. The creation of a task force was appropriate to the context, and level of community development required in the North Main district. Since there was no distinct community – the integration or coming-together of various community stakeholders were required: the Aboriginal, Ukrainian, and Scottish communities; businesses; and other organizations. The task force model is thus a hybrid between a top-down and, in this case a 'built-up' grassroots community approach to process planning, which was appropriate to the conditions of North Main.

In April 1997, the North Main Task Force, began its mandate to prepare a comprehensive, community based plan addressing the serious physical, economic and social decline of the North Main area. The Task Force was charged with the following principles to guide development of its plan:

- A commitment to consultation
- Building community consensus
- A common, dynamic vision, the establishment of partnership with industry, business, community organizations, local people, the city at large, and the other levels of government
- An economically-sustainable plan

The then Mayor, Susan Thompson, selected Joe Bova, and Mary Richard as co-chairs to lead the Task Force, composed of key stakeholders in the North Main area. Stakeholders included representatives from the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Anishinabe Mazaska Capital Corporation, Winnipeg Police Service, Royal Bank of Canada, Manitoba Homebuilders Association, Mitchell Fabrics, Ukrainian Cultural and Education Centre, St Andrew's Society, Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, Manitoba Metis Federation, Social

Planning Council, as well as Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal youth representatives, City Councilors, and the Commissioner of Planning and Community Services.

The Task Force Process

Since its creation in April 1997, the Task Force met as a whole, approximately every two weeks. A conscious effort was made to hold meetings at the Aboriginal Centre and other Aboriginal facilities.

In general, the North Main development strategy was divided into three phases: research and information gathering, strategy development and implementation. Al Baronas was appointed as Task Force Secretariat, and six sub-committees (chaired or co-chaired by Task Force members) were established to focus on priority areas identified by the Task Force.

The subcommittees were asked to recruit members from the community to assist in their deliberations. This resulted in multiplying the number of people involved in the process six times.

North Main Task Force Subcommittees

- Neeginan Round House (later, Thunderbird House)
- Housing
- Main Street Commercial Development
- Cultural Development
 - Victoria Park Working Group
 - St Andrew's Society – Scottish Cultural Centre
 - Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Committee
 - Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature
- Social Development
- Aboriginal Investment

Reports / Background Studies Prepared by the North Main Task Force

- Neeginan Development and Long Term Site Planning Vision
- Neeginan Round House Design Development Report
- Centennial Centre Parking Feasibility Study
- Archaeological Monitoring of the Redevelopment of Main Street
- Neeginan Development Plan – Final Report
- Scottish Cultural Centre – Feasibility Study & Preliminary Business Plan
- Main Street Commercial Subcommittee Report
- Nestawe'Ya: The Place and its People
- Vision/Imaging Session Report
- Recommended Housing Strategies
- Assessment of the Proposed Expansion of the Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre
- A Profile of the North Main Street Area
- Report of the Victoria Park Working Group
- A Socioeconomic Profile of the North Main Street Area
- Social Strategies – Interim Report
- *Our Place* – North Main Task Force Final Report

Each subcommittee developed background reports, detailed plans of action and recommendations in their respective areas of concern. This involved intensive area stakeholder consultations and the development of partnerships with various non-profit and social agencies; business groups; property owners; Aboriginal Elders, youth, First Nations communities; etc to recommend the best course of action in dealing with problems of North Main.

Following the receipt of action plans submitted by each of the working committees, the Task Force Secretariat prepared a draft development strategy for consideration by the Task Force as a whole.

Toward the end of the strategy development phase, the Task Force invited some 200 property owners and merchants in the area to meet and discuss the proposed strategy and plan, and to seek their input and suggestions. Approximately 50 area merchants and property owners met the Task Force in an open house in late November 1997 where plans were on display, a presentation was made, and an open discussion took place. Input was sought from as many stakeholders as possible, to ensure a comprehensive solution addressing the issues of North Main.

Urban design development and coordination was provided by the McGowan Russell Design Group in collaboration with Smith Carter Architects. Also commissioned by the Task Force were studies on the historic settlement of the area as well as socio-economic and demographic conditions.

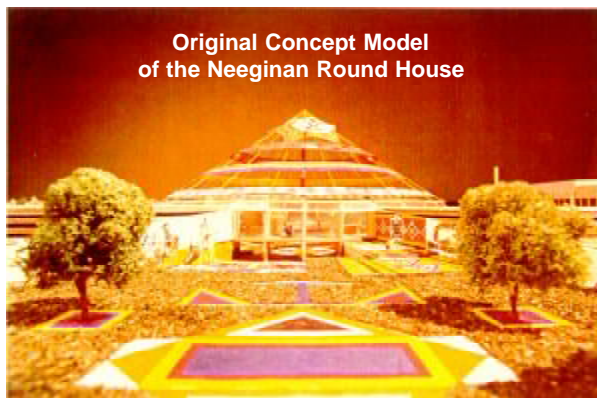
The North Main Street Task Force submitted its report for consideration by City Council in December 1997. The plan was approved unanimously by Council; a remarkable achievement considering the varied political dimension of Council. By its unanimous approval, Council was making a statement that the issues around the development of Main Street needed a concerted, apolitical commitment.

In the early stages of the process, the concept of an Aboriginal Round House arose. Neeginan, Cree for "our place" was originally developed in 1975 in a feasibility study that called for the creation of an Aboriginal community or village in central Winnipeg. It was, however, shelved at that time in part due to a lack

of capital resources, but more so because there was community perception that the concept was too early for its time, and too big of a leap for the Aboriginal community to buy into in the mid 1970s.

Now that funding was potentially available, members of the Task Force looked over the feasibility study to see if still had merit today. The original Neeginan concept included several components: Aboriginal housing, a community centre services building, and education and training programs. Task Force members found that certain components had already been implemented with the establishment of the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg, located at 181 Higgins Avenue. The missing piece was the cultural component, which was translated into a Round House, a spiritual home for ceremonial and cultural activities, set against the backdrop of an outdoor Medicine Wheel.

The Aboriginal community which developed the original concept, allowed the Task Force to carry the Neeginan name forward for the Round House and Medicine Wheel development. It was the key element, providing a cultural community focal point, a place for traditional ceremonies, gatherings, and meetings for the Aboriginal people of Winnipeg, as well as a gateway to the larger more comprehensive redevelopment of North Main described above. It was to be a place of pride and celebration of Aboriginal culture.

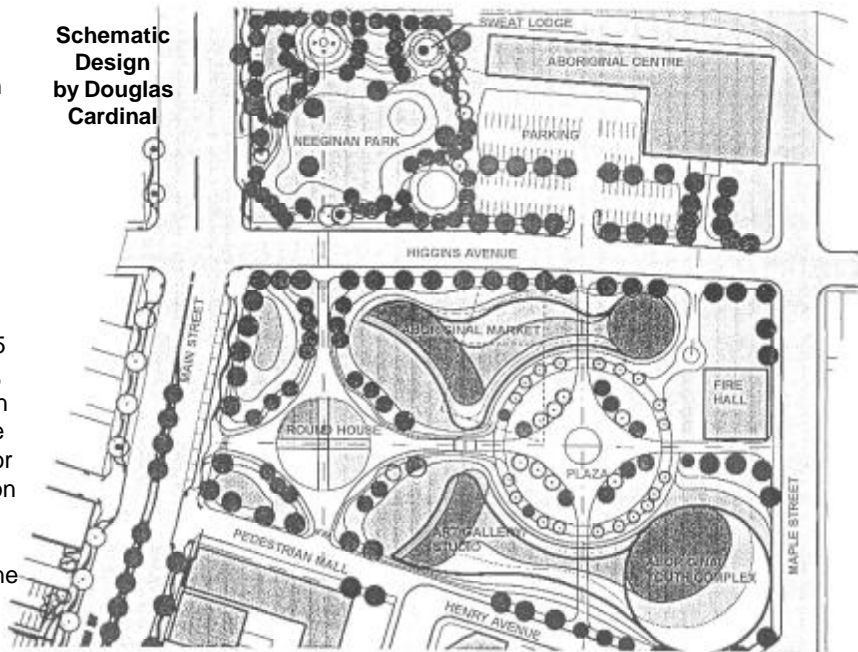


- North Main Task Force Recommendations**
- Neeginan (meaning *our place* in Cree), an Aboriginal Round House that will serve as a spiritual anchor for redevelopment
 - Property acquisition
 - Commercial revitalization including streetscaping
 - A Multi-purpose Youth Centre as part of Neeginan
 - A Centre of Excellence for Children's Welfare
 - A restorative justice initiative
 - A relocation program for affected area residents
 - Housing renewal and upgrading
 - Encouraging Aboriginal investment
 - Development of Victoria Park to reflect the area's cultural and historic significance
 - Extension of the Riverwalk from The Forks to the Alexander Docks
 - Expansion of the Ukrainian Cultural and Education Centre
 - Improvements at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature
 - Initiatives to improve safety and security
 - A long-term legacy for the Scottish community in the area
 - Social development programs to offer local solutions for the issues of North Main, ensuring the problems and people are not simply shifted to another neighbourhood

Douglas Cardinal, a prominent Canadian Aboriginal architect, was selected to undertake a visioning process to help define the Neeginan project, design the Round House, and come up with a master plan which consisted of a Round House, Aboriginal market, a plaza, a youth complex, a park, and housing.

Since the Round House was seen as the key focal point in the scheme and a held a place of esteem, the Task Force allocated 1.5 million out of the 6 million WDA total, toward the planning and construction of the Round House including: 1) the preparation of a development plan for Neeginan; 2) design and construction of the Round House, located east of Main Street and south of Higgins Avenue; and 3) design of the Medicine Wheel and Neeginan Park at the northeast corner of Main Street and Higgins Avenue.

Schematic Design by Douglas Cardinal



ACTIONS AND INTERACTIONS

Strengths

Task force: In planning circles, task forces or steering committees are very common in devising and implementing a process and plan. However, Ross McGowan of the McGowan Russell Design Group, and Joe Bova, Task Force co-chair believes that the selection of the right people plays an important role in the process.

McGowan points out that: "Often you get a lot of bluechip names put on the Task Force, who are more there in a figure-head capacity than they are prepared to roll up their sleeves and work hard at it." This was not the case here, as "... people chosen specifically to sit on that Task Force were necessary to conceiving the plan and delivering the plan. Crime was a major issue, so who better than to get the Chief of Police on the Task Force. Financing of the business community [component] was important, so one of the vice presidents from Royal Bank sat on the Task Force ... you go around the table and the Aboriginal community was heavily represented as well, but not from a political standpoint, more from an implementation, grassroots kind of approach. So it was an enormous success and it took two very, very strong co-chairs to make it happen. Bova is a very, very powerful speaker, good motivator and Mary Richard, obviously extremely well respected in the Aboriginal community."

Bova believes that: "The process on Main Street was probably one of the most brilliant processes put together. And I don't take the credit for that. The most incredible group of human beings came together as a committee, who brought some tremendous intelligence to the table from different walks of life, from different perspectives of life. We always listened to each other. We became a real democratic body. We

empowered the committees to make decisions. We gave the means to succeed in the things they were trying to do. It was an interesting show. And we made a difference."

Diverse ethnic groups: In addition to Aboriginal peoples, involved in the process, were people from the Scottish and Ukrainian communities who have a strong cultural and historical presence in the North Main area. Yet, Mary Richard reveals that: "The Aboriginal people played a key role to make sure that we didn't lose control of the [Aboriginal] cultural aspect of what we wanted to do. And of course, we are more knowledgeable of our heritage and our culture. We've been working to reestablish our values and our teachings and our spirituality."

Visioning exercise: Hiring an Aboriginal architect was critical. Douglas Cardinal's visioning exercise was a milestone in the process, which brought together Aboriginal people to talk about their future as a community and what they would like to see in the North Main area.

Area clean-up: A concerted effort was made to close down operations and demolish non-viable hotels in the area, which were seen as one of the main contributors to issues of crime – drug-dealing and safety in the area, namely: The New Brunswick (vacant), The Sayoy (occupied), and the Princess Hotel (occupied, and where the Round House now stands). The Social Development Committee played a critical role, working with the Salvation Army and other social agencies to come up with a strategy to relocate residents living in these hotels in the same or nearby area, and to not displace them in a completely different district within the City. With funding provided

by the Task Force, residents were moved into viable and better accommodations in the area, such as Veterans Manor and the McLaren Hotel, keeping the conditions of the residents' accommodations consistent or improving them.

Aboriginal traditions: Aboriginal ways of thinking and traditions were celebrated in the process. For example, there were prayers at the beginning of each Task Force meeting, and blessing ceremonies of the whole process and the ground breaking for the Round House.

Joined forces: Aboriginal politics and competitiveness between various Aboriginal political groups was removed in this process. The Aboriginal community came together in an apolitical way, and joined forces to take ownership of the problems and solutions for North Main. Both the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and the Manitoba Metis Federation were equal partners at the table. The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs was invited to join the Task Force, but declined.

Weaknesses

Youth involvement: McGowan maintains the view that youth who were recruited were not given the proper tools and mentoring to become genuinely involved, and to fully understand the process and product: "The right intention was there to involve them. But the execution, I think was, in hindsight, lacking ... I'm not sure that they felt as though they were full participants of the Task Force." McGowan suggests a mentorship program would be an asset, (a project that McGowan Russell Design Group is trying to implement in their own offices). The program would train aspiring professionals or youth on group facilitation, report writing, how to make contacts, etc towards running their own planning processes themselves, instead of "hiring us to do them all the time [which] is extremely expensive, and these groups often don't have that kind of money."

Lost employment opportunities:

A construction company, PCL was hired to undertake the work. In hindsight however, the process lost the opportunity for Aboriginal employment on the construction of the Round House in partnership with the construction company.

Other Issues

New Advocate Role: In McGowan's view, one issue with task forces is that they disband, but for a number of reasons. "Everybody kind of walks away [at the end of the process]. We built the Round House, we cleaned up the street, we put our 6 million dollars in and we created some feel-good things out there from a social standpoint. But at the end of the day it is likely to move forward without more public-sector intervention, I'm not sure. It needs an advocate. The advocate was the Task Force. Neeginan [Development Corporation] is its own advocate now. The intent was that the improvements would be similar to Corydon Avenue where the physical improvements would be the catalyst then for further private sector investment,

and that hasn't happened yet ... we need Neeginan now to step forward – that was the legacy that was left, both to empower them politically and empower them financially. It needs the Aboriginal community to invest in that area."

It is true that the process has slowed down in terms of further private investment on Main Street. It is at that key but critical stage. Other issues include change in the political landscape. Al Baronas, North Main Task Force Secretariat points out that: "This was a project very much close to the heart of the previous Mayor" but when "the political landscape changed, the priorities changed." On the other hand, McGowan believes that "It wasn't because it was no longer a priority, but because it had served its purpose. I think the feeling there was, that right now, the incubation is finished, let's see if it can stand on its own." Baronas also points out that "Task forces don't have perpetual existence, and I don't think they are ever meant to be. They are short-term vehicles for doing something in a particular area."

Moreover, McGowan believes that there is still a lot of work needed to "break down perceptions of Main Street. You can buy a piece of land on Main Street for a dollar. Pretty good deal and nobody wants it. So what's going wrong? What do we need to do to turn that around?"

Bova is confident that the Aboriginal community will move forward with progress over time: "... in my mind, they're the only group that has the growth potential and energy to make a difference. So why aren't they doing it? The reason is, unlike most other communities in Winnipeg, the Native community has a number of serious challenges and issues that they have got to face. They're a very new community in the City ... they've been here forever but in terms of urban life, this is probably the newest of any communities we have. They are dealing with the whole idea of urbanization, dealing with moving from reserves to the City and the challenges. I was an immigrant, I know I the challenges I had to face – challenges of education, trying just to fit in. Unless you can tap into the potential of the Native community in the City, that area will never have a chance. So the sooner we roll up our sleeves, and go out there and assist the Native community, the better off we are."

Breaking down barriers: The Aboriginal community was an integral player in the North Main planning process. At the end of the process, the North Main Task Force wanted to turn over complete ownership of Neeginan (the Round House, now called the Circle of Life Thunderbird House, and the master plan) to the Aboriginal community. The Neeginan concept was theirs from the beginning (1975), and the availability of funding through the WDA helped them implement the first phase. However, there were many battles internally to try to get that message across to City administrators and decision-makers; that this was the right thing to do. Overcoming barriers of traditional thinking and convincing people at City Hall to have confidence in the Aboriginal community, was thus a key challenge.

Funding: In city planning, money is always an issue to implement plans, rather than doing plans for planning sake. The WDA allowed the opportunity to link those two things together – the planning strategy for the area, and to have the money to accomplish the objectives that were being developed in the process. However, it was one of those ‘chicken and egg’ situations, where the dollars were made available first and then a development plan was prepared to allocate the resources. However, it was agreed at the beginning of the planning process that the level of funding would be put to the side and a comprehensive plan developed as a true planning exercise. At the end of the process a cost estimate for the all of the projects, revealed a total cost of 12 million for the entire concept of Neeginan – the master plan and Aboriginal village, which was deemed to be quite workable. The 6 million of WDA funding permitted the implementation of the first phase. In order to implement the second phase of the plan, the Aboriginal community and other area stakeholders were charged with the responsibility of generating the remaining 6 million in funds.

OUTCOMES

The North Main Task force process planted the genesis, which included physical street improvements, streetscaping and landscaping, and the Circle of Life Thunderbird House, for future investment and change.

A large part of the process was directed toward celebrating and recognizing the history of North Main, including Aboriginal history, culture and spirituality. Mary Richard emphasized how “the second generation wants to learn about who they are. Back in 1975, we didn’t have any pow-wow dancers here in Winnipeg. There were no chanters, singers.” The cultural facility now holds pow-wow instruction, drumming, pipe ceremonies, and spiritual teachings.

Community building was a key goal of the entire North Main Task Force process, apart from the physical streetscaping improvements, the establishment of a cultural centre, and improved social perceptions. The process, especially with Cardinal’s visioning exercise, was critical in motivating the Aboriginal community to take ownership of the Neeginan project and to implement the rest of the plan in the future.

Paula Mitchell (chair of the Main Street Commercial Development subcommittee) and Mary Richard now act as co-chairs for the current group representing North Main, called *Our Place Community Development Corporation*. The group is not as active, but as McGowan points out, the intent is still there “to promote Main Street as a good place to do business.” Moreover, as Bova states: “Community development and community building never ends; it is ongoing as life itself. When it stops, the community is dead. And that’s a price to any community, no matter how rich or poor, how destitute or growing a community is. A

community needs tending to and caring for at all levels. And if you do that, you have a healthy community.”

CONCLUDING POINTS/A LOOK AHEAD

- By Valdene Buckley

The City of Winnipeg has been the fortunate recipient of a series of intergovernmental agreements over the past 20 years that has resulted in a legacy of cooperation and commitment from the three levels of government. This legacy is unique in Canada and the envy of many major Canadian cities. Starting with two Core Area Initiative agreements in the early 1980’s, the series was most recently rounded out by the Winnipeg Development Agreement between 1995 and 2000. Discussions are currently underway on a successor agreement to the WDA.

The problems of the North Main Street district have been well documented over the years. *Symptoms of decline are pervasive and include sizable population losses, rising unemployment levels, reduced socioeconomic well being, loss of jobs and economic activity, high residential vacancy rates, declining property investment, and widespread concerns among residents about personal safety and security of property* (North Main Task Force Final Report; December, 1997). Main Street is a key indicator of downtown’s health.

With the City of Winnipeg as the agent of program delivery, the WDA was responsible for commencing the rebirth of North Main, providing the initial seed capital to demolish derelict buildings, closing down troublesome hotels and beverage room operations, upgrading street infrastructure and furnishings, improving the living conditions of local residents, restoring pride and giving the urban Aboriginal community a genuine voice in planning for their community. The revitalization of North Main has been a contributor to the resurgence of the downtown. However, it is not a panacea. There is still a long way to go and even a targeted investment of 6.0 million cannot address the root causes of the problems on North Main. There needs to be more intervention, cooperation and commitment to the area to realize an economic turnaround and make Main Street a contributing component of the downtown. This will require the involvement not only of the public sector, but the local community, the business community, and the voluntary sector.

Without the WDA to implement these planning initiatives, where would we be? We would be much further behind. The Circle of Life Thunderbird House has placed Winnipeg on the map. Tourists from across Canada and internationally seek out a tour of the building to explore Aboriginal culture and heritage. Donators have lined up to join in being a part of this one of a kind facility in the heart of a major urban centre.

What’s next? The responsibility has clearly been

placed in the hands of the urban Aboriginal community to continue the revitalization process leading toward full implementation of the Neeginan master plan. The creation of CentreVenture, as a development agency, has assisted in keeping the momentum going on Main Street, by providing low interest loans, heritage tax credits and grants to renovate, convert and construct new buildings in the area. The process of business recruitment needs to continue. Another key

project is needed to act as a catalyst for others to locate on Main Street.

As street life begins to come back, then progress can commence on housing initiatives to increase the residential population of the area. CentreVenture's initiative to introduce Waterfront Drive will act as the spark to get development off the ground in the vicinity of the Red River, on the eastern edge of the North Main district. Conditions are ripe; now is the time to act.

– Valdene Buckley

Lessons Learned

Planning is a community building exercise (this lesson also relates to the role of the planner). Planning professionals can provide technical knowledge, expertise, energy, and resources, but community and stakeholder input is critical to discover out local concerns, interests, and goals. Bringing diverse groups to the table from different walks of life permits the opportunity to learn from one another to generate more comprehensive planning solutions.

Partnering with the community requires a lot of time, patience, passion, energy, conviction, and believing. A lot of time and money is invested in a process involving diverse interests groups. However, what is key is building community capacity towards allowing/encouraging local groups to initiate

social change themselves. "It might take longer, but you're going to have the support of the community. I know that I can call a meeting if things aren't going right. I can go back to the community and say look I'm having trouble ... we need to get back together." – Richard

A planners job is to facilitate a process, and to listen. "The moment a planner takes control of the process, or cannot understand what the people want or how people perceive their problems or solutions to their problems, then you have failed as a planner ... when working with the Native people, listening is ten times more important, because they have been told what to do now for 200 years and that led them to absolutely nowhere." – Bova
It is time to "give us respect, recognition and opportunity." – Richard

A staged process and a logical strategy is critical. A catalyst is needed to encourage change. The North Main Task Force wanted to establish a climate for investment and living, which included streetscaping to improve the aesthetics of Main Street, and public amenities. The desire was to bring back people, to work, play, but above all to live in the area again. Tearing down the run-down hotels and getting rid of the blight on the streets was the critical first step before beginning the process of attracting future commercial investment and housing in the North main area. "Bricks and mortar will follow once you create the kind of environment both emotionally and physically to welcome people back into the area."
– Bova

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– Myra Cruz