

CAPITALIST FRAGILITY, COLONIAL DURABILITY: REDRAWING URBAN APARTHEID

The gentrification frontier absorbs and retransmits the distilled optimism of a new city, the promise of economic opportunity, the twin thrills of romance and rapacity; it is the place where the future will be made. ... Behind the line, civilization and profit-making are taking their toll; in front of the line, savagery, promise and opportunity still stalk the landscape.

—Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*.

After years of remaking the Main Street strip, the urban wing of the dominant bloc reorganized in the early 2010s to delineate a new zone of intervention—the city's next gentrification frontier—where they would focus the energies of the city's next development authority for the next decade. The human geography of the area selected, chosen for its proximity to the city's downtown hockey arena, had been produced in part by the destruction of the Main Street strip, as the strip's predominantly Indigenous community was pushed south and west. CentreVenture continued to stalk this community and destroy the urban spaces it produced into the 2010s. In order to do so, the authority stretched its TIF capacities significantly over time and space, further closed openings for grassroots resistance, and reinvigorated the regional tradition of blaming city-centre residents themselves, rather than the dominant bloc's suburban development agenda, for city-centre disinvestment. CentreVenture transported myths about the Main Street strip to a new segment of the city centre in this period, continuing to deny both the full geographical humanity of existing inhabitants and the full humanness of the existing city-centre geography.¹ This approach became the authority's go-to method for pursuing a new mandate of "investment protection," whereby capital investment in Winnipeg's city centre, defined by its supposed fragility, would be protected via the renewal of colonial geographies both material and imagined.

CENTREVENTURE'S NEXT FRONTIER

In the years following the 2008 global economic crisis, Canadian capitalists—wary of overdeveloped markets in Vancouver and Toronto—expressed a budding interest in Winnipeg real estate, particularly in its underdeveloped city centre. Compared to the

takes on special importance. Thus, CentreVenture's role—the essence of “protecting” and “defending” real estate investment—was to shape the urban space around new real estate investments in such a way that would guarantee the speedy sale of condos and hotel rooms.

CentreVenture proposed two “key elements” for doing so. The first “key element” of the Investment Protection Strategy would be for CentreVenture to “adopt a ‘small management’ approach to Portage Avenue, providing for visitor expectations and social responsibilities similar to what one would experience at a regional shopping centre.” In doing so, CentreVenture renewed the urban wing’s four-decades-old tradition—established by the CAI and the BIDs—of attempting to transform Winnipeg’s city centre into a hyper-controlled suburban subdivision-style environment. In attempting to turn the city centre into a new growth area, capitalists deployed techniques they had learned in the suburbs; that is, they tapped CentreVenture to produce a total community, a totally planned, totally controlled area surrounding the commodities—the units of residential and commercial real estate—they needed to sell.

The most specific method for doing this—in addition to increased lighting, expanded parking infrastructure, and a new “comprehensive safety strategy”—would be to “increase public comfort by working closely with adjoining hotels and vendor owners...to address and resolve the impact of offsite [alcohol] sales within and adjacent to Portage Avenue.” The urban wing’s six-decades-long war against the Main Street strip had long established the tradition of invoking city-centre hotels and beer vendors as code for Native people. CentreVenture’s latest proposed attacks on such spaces were clearly viewed as a response to the unintended geographical effects of its Main Street conquest. In a piece entitled “Hotel Buyouts in Core for Fewer Drunks?” the *Free Press* explained, “After the city closed down a series of skid-row hotels on Main Street, some of the clientele moved to Portage Avenue.”⁹⁵ “We have some problems on Portage Avenue,” McGowan told the *Free Press*. “We sure don’t have them on Main Street anymore.”⁹⁶ CentreVenture’s new round of planning, in other words, was largely an agenda for stalling the Indigenous human geography of the Main Street strip—coded as “hotels,” “drunks,” or simply “problems”—it had displaced to Portage Avenue, now that capital was interested in the latter.

In fact, CentreVenture’s vision for the elimination of low-income and Indigenous spaces in the district was much more expansive, including an agenda for the abortion of affordable spaces already in the early stages of development. In the same year as it drafted its *Portage Avenue Development Strategy*, CentreVenture secretly thwarted a deal that would have installed a large “discount retailer” on Portage Avenue. “I went to my board,” McGowan later recalled, “and said we are either going to let Portage Avenue become a discount mall or we are going to make Portage Avenue into the great Winnipeg street it is.”⁹⁷ “It was our position that this was the last straw in the decline of our iconic avenue,” McGowan told the *Free Press*. “And if action was not taken, our fear was that

we would lose Portage Avenue for decades to come.”⁹⁸ McGowan’s comments betrayed CentreVenture’s attachment to the city’s long-standing apartheid geography whereby Portage Avenue was imagined as a bastion of whiteness where—in contrast to Main Street—Indigeneity was not to be tolerated. In order to boost the profits of a particular segment of real estate capital—the segment that sought to profit through white luxury rather than Indigenous discount consumption—CentreVenture rolled out a fear-based, ranchist story wherein “losing” Portage Avenue to poor, working-class, and Indigenous peoples would spell disaster for the city. In order to make Portage Avenue “great” again, CentreVenture purchased the building in question, demolished it, and made the land a centrepiece of its luxury Portage Avenue vision. While the authority had similar designs on other properties in the district, it first needed more money to fund its plans.

CentreVenture turned to an unprecedented expansion of TIF to fund its new mission. The second “key element” of its *Portage Avenue Development Strategy*, CentreVenture proposed, would be to designate an entire eleven-block TIF zone around the Portage Avenue hockey arena—the Manitoba Telecom Services (MTS) Centre—built in 2005 by the Chipmans, one of Winnipeg’s richest families, with the help of \$40 million in public money. Rather than propose TIF for individual projects in a piecemeal fashion as it had done on Main Street—and as the Government of Manitoba had stipulated in its 2009 TIF Act⁹⁹—CentreVenture proposed that every cent of “incremental” property tax revenues from all properties in the zone be automatically taken out of general state on its “small management” strategy. Among other things, this would close the opening for resistance—the requirement that every TIF-based spending decision be approved by city council—that communities had used to mount resistance to Youth For Christ on Main Street. CentreVenture suggested that the new TIF zone—which it dubbed its Sports, Hospitality and Entertainment District (SHED)—would become “the focal point of the new Portage Avenue.”¹⁰⁰ CentreVenture vowed to lobby the municipal and provincial governments to make the zone a reality—noting that the cooperation of the provincial government, in particular, which controls half of all property tax revenue in Manitoba—would be “crucial.” City Council unanimously endorsed the plan, but waited for the provincial government to commit to the TIF zone before committing itself.

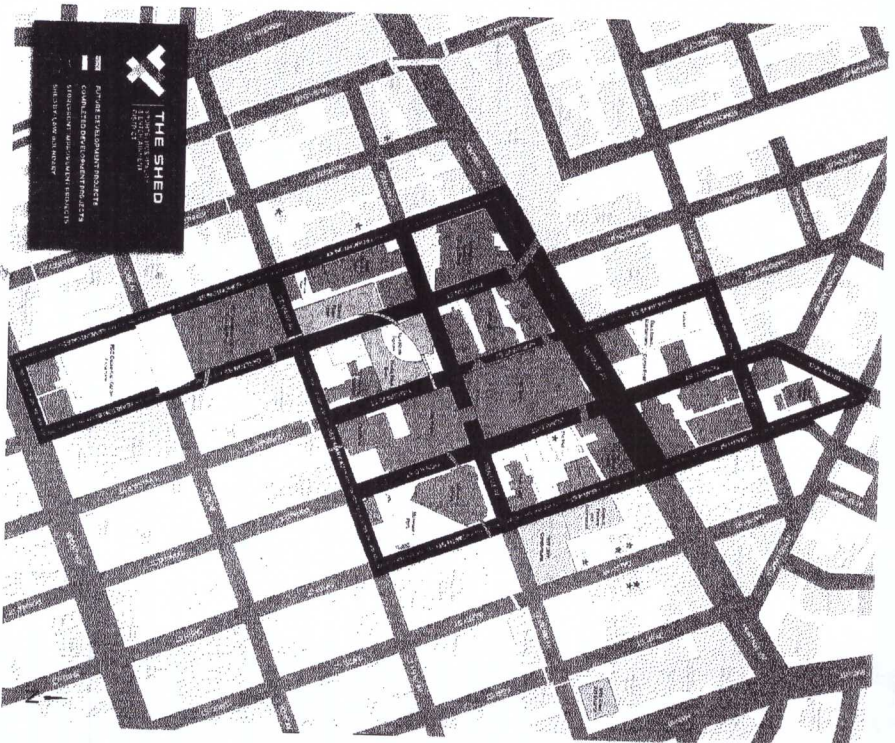
Both the *Free Press* and the *Winnipeg Sun*, the city’s far-right tabloid, lauded the *Portage Avenue Development Strategy*, amplifying the idea that the area’s existing human geography was a “problem” and a “stain,” while implying that city-centre residents themselves—and not the dominant bloc’s suburban development agenda—had caused capital’s abandonment of the area. Both newspapers valorized the upward distribution of public resources represented by TIF as essential to the “greater good.” “Portage Avenue,” a *Free Press* editorial commented, “remains a challenge and a problem.” “The city and province can get the ball rolling immediately by declaring the area a TIF (tax increment financing) zone that would use the new taxes raised by the developments

housed downtown...They should not be displaced. But we're a million miles away from having governments ready to do that kind of thing."¹⁹ The casualties of CentreVenture's renaissance agenda, as pointed out by the unnamed activist, were not simply isolated low-income and Indigenous spaces, but the people's city-centre development tradition as a whole.

In the spring of 2012, the Province of Manitoba announced that it would make the SHED TIF zone a reality. The two levels of government would transfer \$25 million to CentreVenture over two years to pursue its SHED restructuring strategy. The provincial funds, in keeping with 2008 TIF legislation, would come entirely out of Manitoba's education budget. These funds were guaranteed no matter how little investment actually occurred in the SHED, if incremental taxes from the SHED TIF zone over fifteen years did not amount to the full \$25 million, then the rest of the provincial and municipal property tax base would subsidize the shortfall. The governments seem to have been encouraged by the Chipman and Ledohowski developments—Winnipeg City Council cited "two primary private development opportunities within the TIF zone" as the existing initial sources of TIF (despite both developments receiving large government subsidies).²⁰

Politicians again framed the return of capital to Winnipeg's city centre as the harbinger of a regional revival that would take back the city for its respectable classes. "Downtown Winnipeg is undergoing a truly remarkable renaissance," Selinger announced. "By supporting the development of a sports, hospitality and entertainment district," Mayor Katz added, "we can help turn downtown into a destination all on its own—a place where students, professionals, and families want to hang out in their free time." The announcement signalled a landmark achievement for CentreVenture, the Downtown Council, the Chipmans, and other TIF beneficiaries. Rather than pay taxes to fund public education, affordable housing, and other social services, Chipman, Thomson, Ledohowski, and their fellow millionaire and billionaire investors would contribute only to a special fund—controlled by CentreVenture—dedicated solely to the protection of their investments through the "mall management" of the city. Notably, the political justification for this extreme instance of neoliberal statecraft was—via coded language of a "renaissance" for "students," "professionals," and "families"—anti-Native renaissance. To capture significant public resources for themselves, in other words, capitalists appealed to white fears of a Native city.

In the spirit of the people's city-centre development tradition, anti-poverty organizers voiced frustration that an NDP government with social-democratic roots would so heartily embrace public gifts to millionaire and billionaire developers in the name of "community revitalization," while food and housing shortages among city-centre residents remained at crisis levels. These critiques specifically resisted the legislation's renaissance logic, arguing that area residents' needs should be built in to TIF eligibility requirements. The provincial legislation made eligible any developer who could promise

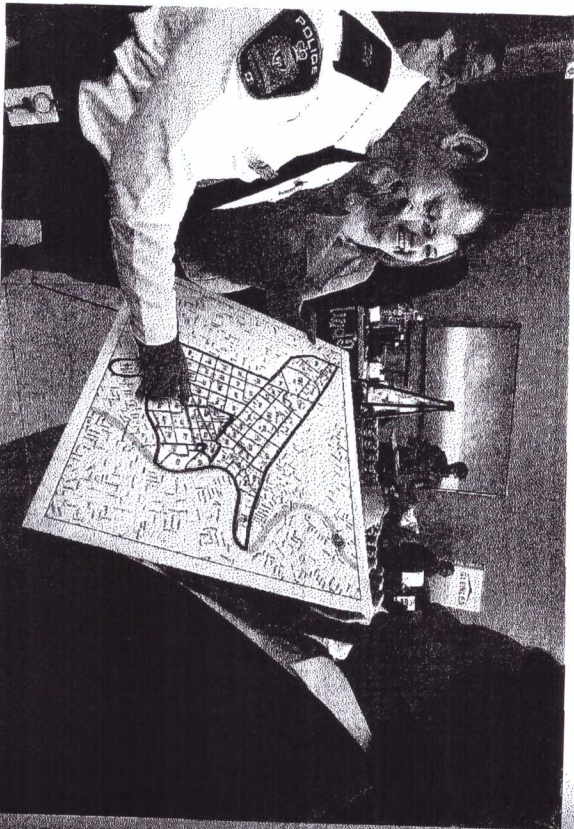


CentreVenture's *Leberrraum*, The Sports, Hospitality, and Entertainment District, as stipulated by the City of Winnipeg's SHED TIF Zone By-Law No. 98/2012.

"significant improvements" deemed "in the public interest." "This criteria says nothing about financial or community need," the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) Manitoba office noted. "Projects that qualify for TIF should have to demonstrate, beyond just the generating of revenue, how they will benefit the surrounding community and the residents that live there." The CCPA criticized the process through which developers were granted TIF. "It leaves community residents out of the process...Stronger public

working with the [Germaine family's] Alt Group to come to Winnipeg to build their hotel on Portage Avenue," he told the *Free Press*, "one of their questions to us was that if we make our investment on the north side of Portage Avenue, which has some challenges to it, what is it that you're going to do to help protect that investment?" McGowan continued, "One of the issues that was constantly being expressed to us was the excessive drunkenness and the aggressive panhandling that was going on in the area—the Winnipeg Police Service helped us identify that one of the primary center points of that was in fact the St. Regis Hotel."²⁶ CentreVenture continued to work closely with the WPS in the following years, collaborating most successfully to establish operation "Centre-line" in 2016, through which 200 specially trained foot patrols were deployed within a one-kilometre radius of the MTS Centre primarily to police "social disorder."²⁷ The sequence leading to the purchase of the St. Regis summed up CentreVenture's activities well. Acting on direct orders from investors, in consultation with police intelligence, the authority moved to destroy a key stronghold of health care-seeking Indigenous families.

Policing is real estate policing. Centreline press conference. (L to R) WPS Division II Commander Inspector Jim Anderson, CentreVenture CEO Angela Mathison, and Downtown Winnipeg BIZ Executive Director Stefano Grande, Winnipeg, ca. 2016. Photo by Boris Minkevich, Winnipeg Free Press December 15, 2016. (Courtesy of Winnipeg Free Press)



CentreVenture sought to demolish the St. Regis immediately after purchasing it. McGowan publicly promoted the fact that the structure was not an officially designated heritage building and could therefore be bulldozed easily by any prospective developer.²⁸ There is also evidence that CentreVenture was not waiting for the market to determine the St. Regis's future—as it so often stated—but instead sought a specific land use deemed compatible with the new accumulation agenda. Brian, an employee of the University of Winnipeg Community Renewal Corporation (UWCRC), told me that CentreVenture approached the UWCRC with the prospect of turning the St. Regis into a different suggestion. He has a close working relationship with Peguis First Nation and Brokenhead First Nation, he told me, and he knew they had significant funds for development as a result of Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) payments—money received as compensation for broken treaties and fraudulent negotiations. Brian suggested that CentreVenture get in touch with these First Nations since, he reasoned, the St. Regis it would be an obvious fit, but CentreVenture was not interested. "The kind of didn't say anything," Brian said of the CentreVenture representative to whom he made the suggestion. "That's what made me think, oh, this is a brown faces outside smoking thing."²⁹ In 2015, CentreVenture sold the St. Regis to Toronto-based Fortress Real Developments Inc., who closed the hotel's doors for good in 2017, with plans to clear the land for a \$200 million luxury condo tower, for which it received a \$6.5 million grant from the City.³⁰ As this and so many other examples indicate, CentreVenture's institutional capacity was used as a tool by a specific bloc of real estate capitalists to remove Native people from the area around their properties. This can be determined not only by examining CentreVenture's destruction of existing spaces but through considering its thwarting of future ones.

CentreVenture announced a second hotel buyout in the SHED less than a month later. In early December 2012, City Council increased CentreVenture's SHED funds by \$6.6 million to allow the authority to purchase the Carlton Inn, located just feet from the MTS Centre and the expanding Winnipeg Convention Centre. The Convention Centre had recently embarked on a \$200 million expansion in the southwest corner of the SHED, a project CentreVenture had lobbied for—or simply saw coming—in its *Portage Avenue Development Strategy*. CentreVenture's request to City Council for additional funds noted the proximity of the Carlton Inn to the expanding Convention Centre. Like the St. Regis, the 108-room Carlton predominantly housed First Nations families visiting Winnipeg for health care.

McGowan said CentreVenture had identified "the Carlton and the St. Regis as the two properties which most affect development in the SHED."³¹ "Quite often there are things going on there that are not what you and I would call lawful to say the least," Mayor Katz said—ironically, in light of a subsequent RCMP investigation of Katz on

to shut down a government-operated liquor store one block north of Portage Avenue, across the street from CentrePoint. A few days later, an editorial published in the *Free Press*—under the headline “New Doubts About CentreVenture”—provided a summary of McGowan’s comments. In announcing CentreVenture’s intentions to relocate the liquor store, the paper reported, “McGowan likened drunks and aggressive panhandlers downtown to ill-mannered children who were not welcome to sit around the dining room table with the adults.” “If you’re too poor to afford a beer at Tavern United”—an expensive bar in the SHED owned by Ledhowski—“then you’re not responsible enough to purchase alcohol downtown,” the *Free Press* theorized, summing up McGowan’s remarks: “The social rebirth that McGowan seems to have in mind for the downtown has nothing to do with actually addressing the issues of poverty, addiction or racism in our city,” the editorial concluded. “Rather, [McGowan] is openly advocating for the simple removal of undesirable elements from our downtown so that we can all feel safe and happy flooding in and out of the MTS Centre before-and-after Jets games.”³³

The next day, in a response to the *Free Press* piece, McGowan doubled down on his statement: “In a recent interview,” said McGowan the next day, “I did make reference to the SHED being compared to the living room in one’s house where the kids are sent to the basement until they can abide by the rules of the living room...Regrettably, my comments were taken out of context.” McGowan, in full patriarchal mode, went on:

The “kids” are always welcome in the living room; however, there are rules, boundaries and expectations of individual behavior. Actions such as excessive public intoxication and aggressive panhandling that make downtown residents, employees, and visitors uneasy, fearful, or unsafe should not be acceptable.³⁴

McGowan’s comments were an unusually open articulation of the fascist tendencies underlying the dominant bloc’s social engineering of the city centre, from their assertion of an authoritarian parent-child relationship between the state and the people, to advocating arbitrary punishments beyond the letter of the law, to the concept of the “living room,” which has the ring of the Nazi’s Aryan *lebensraum* or “living space.” The “living room” comments also expressed very clearly the persistence of an apartheid mentality according to which colonized peoples must be spatially segregated until they can be trained to abide by the rules and expectations of the conquering society. According to this logic, Indigenous peoples must be compelled to reconcile to—in the sense of coming to peace with rather than disrupting—not only past continental-scale dispossession but present-day urban dispossession.

Despite failing to send the liquor store’s patrons “to the basement,” by early 2013 CentreVenture began to claim that its interventions had attracted real estate capital to the SHED at unprecedented levels. “In the last five years,” Mayor Katz wrote

in CentreVenture’s 2012 annual report, “we’ve seen over \$1.3 billion invested in [the SHED].” “What is clear is that we are seeing a renaissance that will change the city forever,” McGowan told an audience of realtors while echoing the billion-dollar figure. “Who would have thought this possible ten, even five years ago?”³⁵ The “billion dollars” line—which soon became “two billion dollars”—would become a touchstone in CentreVenture reports and media accounts in the months and years to come. In this way, the authority absorbed and retransmitted not only the idea of the SHED as the next frontier of profitability, but the long-standing tenet of racial capitalism in the North-West that the disappearance of Indigenous peoples foretold capitalist prosperity.³⁶ Taken as a whole, in other words, CentreVenture’s activities in the SHED emboldened a lethal set of feelings in which the disappearance of Native life accrues tangible economic value. This form of value—the currency of Indigenous disappearance—flows not only to individual billionaires, according to the dominant bloc’s propaganda, but to the entire enfranchised population, who are encouraged to identify as fellow beneficiaries.

While CentreVenture’s numbers were padded significantly by the Convention Centre expansion and the recently constructed headquarters for Manitoba Hydro, the SHED did attract a level of high-profile capital investment unseen in previous years—much of it in previously rare condo development. Three large projects were announced for the SHED in 2013, including a new \$55 million 195-condo tower—“Glasshouse Skylofts”—developed by the Chipmans next door to the CentrePoint complex, in partnership with Toronto-based Urban Capital, a \$200 million 200-condo tower on the St. Regis Hotel lands; and the \$400 million 130-condo, 275-room hotel, office, and retail “True North Square” on the former Carlton lands.³⁷ Celebratory headlines and computer-generated images of the towers filled the pages of the *Free Press* and the *Sun* in 2013, adding to a popular sense of regional revival.

Led by the Chipmans, with CentreVenture at their side, Canada’s real estate capitalists did seem to be taking a more serious interest in Winnipeg’s centre than they had in a very long time. When I spoke with her in 2013, former CentreVenture CEO Annitta Stenning was seriously impressed by the investors McGowan had been able to lure to Winnipeg’s downtown. It seemed to Stenning that it was not simply the return of the NHL to the city but global economic events that had capitalists looking at Winnipeg in a new light. Stenning told me that in her opinion, Winnipeg—long a city of marginal but steady growth—became viewed as a safe bet for risk-averse capitalists in the wake of the 2009 economic crisis. “I think the crisis shook people up around the world, and they do start looking for places like a Winnipeg...we’re unique in a lot of the larger cities in Canada, in that we have a solid, stable economy,” Stenning said. “We’re kind of like that bonds’ slow, sure environment.” In March 2013, Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* ran a feature on Winnipeg’s improving fortunes, again based largely around comments from McGowan. “The NHL’s return has sparked a commercial real estate boom downtown,” the *Globe* wrote. “New development—an unfamiliar sight in the city’s downtown since

maps of the condo tower's future location—its entrance half a block from the liquor store CentreVenture tried to shut down—and describing the rooftop patio where “all owners” will have access to a full bar, yoga area, and “resort-style” cabanas.⁴⁷ This whole mall will be revamped,” one of the realtors said, pointing toward the Chipmans’ slick new bar and casino—Shark Club—that had recently opened on the second floor of the mall. “That’s a good template for what you’re going to see,” said the realtor, adding that while the area may not seem like much at the moment, the Glasshouse Skylofts will “get life back on the streets.”

The performance put on by CentreVenture employees, realtors, and the developers they work for is over the top, but not surprising—they are economically invested in it. Far from being exclusive to the real estate industry, however, these perspectives have been popularized through various efforts to integrate the concerns and logics of real estate capital into people’s imagination of the city. One way that these ideas—which make otherwise questionable ways of relating to other human beings feel reasonable and necessary—achieve the ring of common sense is through repetitive speech, as people construct shared meanings of complex places and lived experiences by drawing on prefabricated narratives. The dominant bloc has been so successful at this that even left-leaning, politically correct Winnipeggers often erase and even casually stigmatize the existing poor, working-class, and Indigenous city centre.

This came across especially strongly one day in a conversation with Andrea, a white woman who held top positions in both the Doer and Selinger Manitoba NDP governments in the 2000s. “We always measured our success based on how well downtown Winnipeg was doing,” Andrea said, recalling how much criticism the Manitoba government faced in the mid-2000s for its role in locating the MTS Centre downtown.⁴⁸ Andrea recalled people who said there was too much “crime” and too many “panhandlers” and “aboriginals” in the area for an arena to be successful. “You know,” Andrea went on, “there’s just so much inherent, endemic racism in people’s views of downtown.” It seemed like Andrea was about to tell a familiar white liberal story about her—or the NDP government’s—passion for downtown, disgust with anti-Indigenous racism, and fearless encounters with Indigenity. But when our conversation turned to Portage Place—one of the two shopping malls built by the CAI in the 1980s—Andrea’s tone changed. “Of all things,” she said, shaking her head, “that should have brought people downtown.” Andrea’s eyes narrowed. “But it’s become a hangout,” she continued. “It’s a wasteland, you know, like a cancer on the downtown.” Andrea’s casual vitriol surprised me at the time, but only because of the aggressiveness of her tone. At its root, this is the dominant racial capitalist vision of Winnipeg’s city centre, a mental map that spans the full spectrum of mainstream politics in the region.

As Winnipeg’s dominant bloc tried to redraw urban apartheid, it needed to rearrange common-sense feelings about who belonged where.⁴⁹ Part of its success in doing so was that it drew on a pre-existing tradition, dominant in the North-West since 1869,

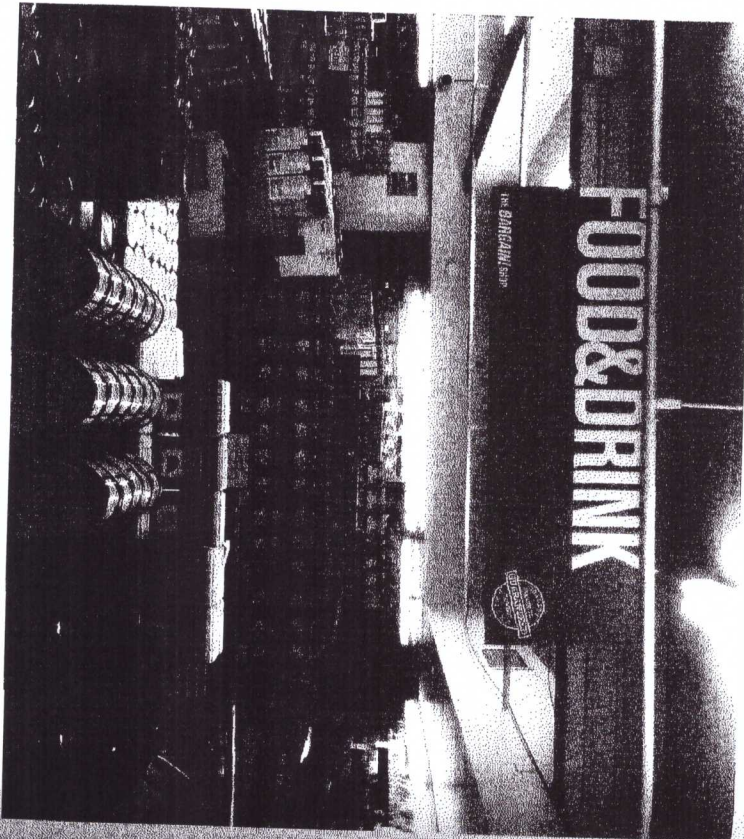
to render existing inhabitants of the SHED at once invisible and hyper-visible. This dynamic was illustrated by the increasing tendency to call the existing landscape both “dead” and “dangerous.” Invisibility and hyper-visibility worked together, in accordance with this tradition, as unknown terrain set the stage for hyper-visibility, whereby what fear and disdain in need of vanquishing. There was an important temporality to this narrative, whereby panhandlers, dollar stores, and job banks—and the people associated with them—were highlighted in the story of the city’s supposedly degraded present and erased in the story of its revitalized future. This was, to quote geographer Katherine McKittrick, the “profitable erasure and objectification” of city-centre people through which millionaires and billionaires renewed their accumulation of Indigenous lands.⁵⁰

A BROADER SENSE OF PLACE

The current dominance of racial capitalist narratives makes it necessary to insist on alternative ways of seeing that are rich enough to honour the full geographical humanity of people and places that capitalists allege do not matter.⁵¹ In fact, hidden from view by the dominant mappings is the fact that Winnipeg’s city centre—including the so-called wastelands—constitutes an extensive, highly productive urban infrastructure produced by the area’s existing community to meet a variety of basic needs, from food to shelter to raising children and taking care of elders.

The St. Regis Hotel, for example—viewed by the Chipmans as the primary threat to their CentrePoint investment—provided crucial accommodation to First Nations families visiting Winnipeg to access health care. Prior to being shut down in 2017, the St. Regis offered rooms with multiple double beds and bunk beds to accommodate large families, starting at \$78 per night, about half the price of a room at the Ledhows-ki-owned Radisson Hotel across the street. The dining room—decorated with a mural depicting Turtle Island from sea to sea, with tipi-dotted plains in the centre—offered breakfast for \$4.99, less than half the price of most other downtown restaurants. The former bar room had by 2014 been turned into a play area for kids, complete with a toy castle, slide, and children’s books. The St. Regis’s lobby included a colour-coded map of the numbered treaties published by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, a pile of *First Nations Voice* newspapers, and a gift shop that sold shirts and hats featuring medicine wheels, dream catchers, and wolves.

The cluster of dollar stores around the MTS Centre—which CentreVenture would prefer “not to see”—continues, as of 2018, to provide a range of everyday necessities including groceries, clothing, shoes, diapers, toiletries, bedding, luggage, and children’s toys. These stores primarily serve the people who live in the city centre, who raise children and take care of elders there, rather than the suburbanites who work in offices and attend NHL games. On weekends, the dollar stores—bustling with children, parents,



Spaces of sustenance. Sports, Hospitality, and Entertainment District, Winnipeg, ca. 2014.

In Greyeyes's poem, the Portage Place encounter comes at a time when "The strip was dying off / And only those who knew nothing else / Clung to the bones."⁴⁵ In Marvin Francis's poem "New Crossing," Portage Place gives rise to complex, hazardous encounters: "Last nite on that late nite crowded sidewalk I saw this kid get jacked for his stainless steel colored Walkman," the poem begins, "right up against the windows of the portage place bus shack." "I call this the madhattan bus transfer," Francis continues:

there were about six of them, all hood young, all part of this downtown mall culture, the great economic hope of the last millennium, I know, let's build a mall and put a fountain in it, a mall of portages from street to jail to mall to street to long walk home in the hood late at nite.⁴⁶

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Portage Place was built across multiple city blocks in the 1980s and literally functions as a portal—or portage—connecting Portage Avenue and the city's central business district to Ellice Avenue and the more working-class West End and Central Park neighbourhoods. A four-storey-high atrium surrounds the Ellice Avenue entrance on the north side of the mall. The atrium—bright with lush gardens—is an obvious place to hang out, especially in the depths of winter, and mall-goers easily mount what dominant bloc-aligned urbanists might recognize as a "sidewalk baller" if they cared to look. Kids in snowsuits sprint down ramps through the gardens; mothers chat and rock babies in strollers; elders and people in wheelchairs sip coffees, waiting for Handi-Transit to pick them up; Francis's "mall culture" teenagers socialize in big groups, laughing, teasing each other, going for smokes.

Around the corner from the atrium is the mall's food court—the busiest social space in the mall and perhaps the entire city centre. At least this seems to be the case for teenagers, elderly people, young parents, people with disabilities, low-wage workers, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour—actual residents of the city centre, in other words, rather than the white, able-bodied professionals from the suburbs for whom most of the downtown is designed. Offering pizza slices, subs, burgers, seafood, fried chicken, sushi, coffee, and Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indian dishes, with seating for 200, the Portage Place food court is practically the only place downtown to purchase hot, affordable food seven days a week from morning to night. A hundred people or more can be found at any given time dining, sipping coffee, chatting, checking their phones, sharing newspapers, or selling small household items, sketches, home remedies, and other things. The food court is busy every day of the week, for every meal, as lively for breakfast on Sunday as it is for lunch on Wednesday.

The atrium and food court are popular sites for political rallies and other community activities. Since 2012, many Idle No More actions have occurred at Portage Place, and the regular food court crowd is sprinkled with "NATIVE PRIDE" hats, AIM hoodies, jackets featuring emblems from various First Nations, and t-shirts promoting Indigenous radio stations. In addition to the Idle No More actions, the largest and most common rallies held at Portage Place have been organized in resistance to the mall's racist, abusive team of security guards.

As Francis pointed out, one of the portages at Portage Place—especially for young Indigenous peoples—is the mall-to-prison portage. The mall's corporate owners aspire to serve suburban office workers and are openly hostile to the city-centre community that actually uses the mall and whose movement for social justice was co-opted to build it. In 2008, mall management installed a small white box—dubbed "The Mosquito"—in front of the mall to deter young people from spending time there. The Mosquito emits a piercing high-frequency tone apparently audible only to youth, as adults' ears are supposed to have deteriorated sufficiently not to pick up the tone. Metal ribbons jut from the concrete planters outside the mall, making sitting impossible, and large signs

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