## THE HEYDAY OF THE MAIN STREET STRIP

Of all the urban locations written about by MIWC poets, Winnipeg's Main Street strip is the most mythologized. "All the Aboriginal writers live on Main Street," Francis joked while teaching at a local university. According to the story, Francis' students had inquired whether Trevor Greyeyes, author of the poem "The Strip," actually lived on the Main Street strip.[12] "Natives and the strip are synonymous," Francis once wrote—while pointing out that several other groups have established strong connections to the strip, including "The Chinese," who "have always had a strong presence on Main Street." "A white person who lives on the strip is more of an outcast than is a Native person who lives there." Like Mercredi, Francis viewed Main Street as an important site of encounter between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The large Indigenous presence on Main Street, according to Francis, "leads to the only interaction that many non-Native Winnipeg citizens have with Native peoples."[13]

For Mercredi, the story of the Main Street strip is a crucial but largely buried chapter in Winnipeg's history.[14] "It all started after the 1940s," he said, "when the Aboriginal people began to move into the city." Prior to the 1950s, Mercredi told me, there were only five Indigenous families in the city, but in the 1950s and 1960s, more and more people began to move from First Nations and Métis communities near Winnipeg—places like Roseau River and Sagkeeng—into the city. In Mercredi's recollection, many if not most were high school graduates heading to Winnipeg to attend university.

By the 1970s, families from more distant, mostly northern First Nations and Métis communities—not merely those within a short drive of the city—began moving to Winnipeg in greater and greater numbers. Something changed in Winnipeg at that point, Mercredi said. In the 1940s and 1950s, Winnipeg's few Aboriginal families were more or less tolerated by the city's white majority. But when "the invasion," as Mercredi put it, began, white hostility towards Indigenous peoples increased, and the city's de facto system of urban apartheid began to take hold.

Mercredi mapped the emerging geography of urban apartheid in Winnipeg. The first Indigenous families to move to Winnipeg in the 1940s and 1950s settled on a few specific West End blocks—Young, Spence, and Furby Streets, north of Portage Avenue. "That was our territory," Mercredi said. "We didn't go south of Portage [Avenue] because we weren't welcome there." A city planning study commissioned by urban Indigenous organizers in 1975 summarized the tactics used by landlords to maintain apartheid, including "refusal to sell or rent, anonymous threats, acts of extreme nuisance, and so on."[15] Mercredi pointed out that so-called public spaces—hotels, bars, theatres, cafés, and restaurants—south of Portage Avenue were bitterly inhospitable to Native people in those days.[16]

"Let me tell you a story," Mercredi said. "I was a little boy, and we were living at the Mac, the McLaren Hotel [on the Main Street strip], because my father was a war veteran,





and the McLaren gave discounts to veterans in those days. And my mother loved going to Eaton's [the famous Canadian department store on Portage Avenue just south of the Main Street strip, where the city's corporate hockey arena stands now]." Mercredi continued: "So one day she got all dressed up and dressed all of us little kids up, and took us to dine at the fancy restaurant that used to be in Eaton's. So we sat down, and we waited two hours without being served." His mother had been so set on dining at Eaton's with her children that she refused to move, Mercredi said. "Eventually that waitress ended her shift, and a new waitress took over, who served us," said Mercredi. "But my mom never went back."

In typical Canadian settler-colonial fashion, white Winnipeggers combined silence and terse lips with overt violence to keep Indigenous peoples in their place. The WPS regularly enforced the city's de facto apartheid system. Jack, an elder involved in the early days of the Main Street strip, moved to Winnipeg from Ebb and Flow, Manitoba, in the 1950s. The WPS frequently took Native people on "floaters," also known as Starlight Tours, according to Jack, throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. "You were taken out of town, dropped there, no charges, but you were left there," said Jack. "'Don't come back here or you're going to go to jail,' and that's what happened."[17]

In an attempt to reduce their exposure to degrading encounters at the hands of white landlords, businesses, and police, Indigenous Winnipeggers—including Mercredi's family—headed to the housing, restaurants, cafés, bars, and theatres of the North End, and the Main Street strip in particular. Although there were some lively Indigenous social spaces at the time in and around Young, Spence, and Furby Streets—for example, a now-demolished hotel and bar near the old Greyhound bus station—Mercredi said, the scene shifted north as more and more Indigenous people moved. IMFC organizer George Munroe moved to Winnipeg from Camperville, Manitoba, in 1965. As he put it: "The racism was very, very pronounced, I mean, you could see it. We were kind of confined to one area of the city, which was the North End, as the place that welcomed us better than any other place so that's where we ended up, our hang out was Main Street."[18]

By the late 1960s—a period Francis describes as "the heyday of the strip"[19]—the hotels, bars, restaurants, theatres, and cafés of Main Street had become a booming cultural and political scene where Indigenous peoples from nations and communities across the North-West and Turtle Island came together to create new movements of all kinds. Of any place in Winnipeg, the Main Street strip of the 1960s and 1970s was the concrete manifestation of Indigenous resistance to apartheid's attempt to divide and isolate. Mercredi emphasized the diverse, exciting mix of people who frequented the strip in those days. University students, musicians, artists, and activists hung out with blue-collar workers—including Mercredi, one of the younger children in a family that could not afford to send every child to university, who worked in highway crews and other manual labour jobs—as well as elders and more "hardcore" people who tended to live in the hotels on the strip. As young people piled into cars, sometimes eight or nine


The Main Street strip at Logan Avenue. Winnipeg, date unknown. University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, RAHM-55a. (Courtesy University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections)

On the brink of its heyday. Main Street strip, Winnipeg, ca. 1956. Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg – Streets – Main, 1956, 1, South from Higgins. (Courtesy of Archives of Manitoba)







at a time, and headed for Winnipeg, Main Street was the first stop.[20] If you didn't know somebody's address or phone number, said Mercredi, you went to Main Street to look for them. More often than not, you would find them.

At the time, the Main Street strip gave voice to postwar Indigenous realities, analyses, and struggles most famously through music. Indigenous blues, country, rock and roll, and folk music scenes took root and flourished on the strip beginning in the 1960s.[21] Line-ups stretched down Main Street to see the "forefathers of Indigenous rock and blues"—musicians such as Billy Joe Green (Ojibway), Percy Tuesday (Ojibway), and Errol Ranville (Métis)—play the Occidental, the Savoy, and the Brunswick hotels, the latter of which Billy Joe Green called the "Grand Ole Opry of Indian country."[22] Musicians, many of whom were residential school survivors, articulated a bold sense of Indigenous identity and community in resistance to colonialism and apartheid. "One of the universal themes...was the articulation of resistance through music," documentary filmmaker Vanda Fleury-Green (Métis) told the CBC. "That was both in the music and the expressions of lyrics but also the people who were frequenting and participating in the Main Street scene."[23]

The Main Street music scene overlapped significantly with Indigenous student radicalism and the political scene at the IMFC, a hub of Red Power organizing and other Indigenous radical politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Anti-Native racism was so rampant in Canadian universities during the strip's heyday, Mercredi recalled, that many Winnipeg students involved in the early days of the American Indian Movement (AIM) convened on the strip rather than on campus. Munroe first learned of the IMFC and its political activities by frequenting the strip, an encounter that sparked a lifetime of political organizing. With friends he met on Main Street, Munroe formed Club 376, which eventually became a 500-member Indigenous youth group inspired in part by the US civil rights and Red Power movements. Organizers planned Red Power marches—including the 1,000-person march against the Toal Report—to start on the Main Street strip, and newspaper photographs from the 1970s show the strip covered in posters calling to "FREE LEONARD PELTIER," the Anishinabe, Dakota, and Lakota AIM activist imprisoned by the US since the 1975 uprising at Pine Ridge, South Dakota.[24] In its heyday, Winnipeg's Main Street strip was a crucial hub of what Glen Coulthard describes as an "unprecedented" period of "pan-Indian assertiveness and political mobilization."[25]

Memories and cultural representations of the strip can, however, be deeply ambivalent. In his poem "Main Street," the late Salteaux poet and MIWC member Douglas Nepinak described the strip as both "beautiful" and "ugly," a "refuge" and a "rip-off," "the only mother some of us have ever known" and "all the hell most people will ever need."[26] Main Street hotel owners exploited Indigenous peoples' subjection to urban apartheid—specifically their lack of employment and housing options, and the fatigue of colonialism—for immense profits. "The Nazis of Main," as Francis put it, "were the economic ones."[27] Day-labour offices set up shop on Main Street to prey on unem-


Political hub. Free Leonard Peltier posters, Main Street strip, Winnipeg, ca. 1977. Photo by Frank Prazak. Winnipeg Free Press, April 2, 1977. (Courtesy of Winnipeg Free Press)

ployed Indigenous workers, paying starvation wages for the city's most dangerous and back-breaking work. Hotel owners charged exorbitant rates—described by an anthropologist in the 1980s as "usurious"[28]—for run-down rooms and made millions selling booze on the strip. Jack, who recalled Main Street fondly, also criticized the hotels along the strip as "a contributor to the problems people had," particularly addictions.

## COUNTER-PLAN VII: NEEGINAN

Indigenous community organizers responded to this ambivalence by attempting to take control over the strip in order to expand its usefulness as a social, cultural, and political hub while simultaneously transforming its uneven, exploitative social relations. Neeginan, an Indigenous development vision for turning the strip into a Native "village," was drafted by the IMFC in 1969.[29] The plan's name translated from Cree to English as "Our Place" and conveyed a clear pan-Indigenous claim to the strip. "Let's work together on this opportunity to build a place for ourselves and our children," a newsletter published by Neeginan organizers urged, "a place that we can truly call 'Our Place.'"[30] Coming







on the heels of settler suburbanization and its requisite destruction of the Indigenous suburbs, the choice of Main Street as the location for Neeginan's work was a decision to define Winnipeg's entire city centre as a place of special significance to Indigenous peoples. When Neeginan organizers posed the question at a gathering of 60 Indigenous community organizers in 1974, "Where would you like to see this take place—in the city or in the suburbs?" 93 percent responded in favour of the city.[31]

Neeginan was conceived, in part, as a single concrete project that diverse Indigenous communities in Winnipeg could unify around and into which they could channel the general feeling of decolonial desire in the city. "If you are among those who are fed up with such empty talk that passes for concern, and want something really meaningful to take place," a Neeginan newsletter implored, "then join us in our crusade to bring about positive action."[32] When 1,000 people marched against the Toal Report—ostensibly a march against anti-Native police brutality—their list of demands included Neeginan.[33] Using the slogan "UNITY IS STRENGTH," Neeginan organizers built an impressive coalition of urban Indigenous peoples to shape the plan.

In 1972, 21 Indigenous organizations united under the banner of the Winnipeg Native Coalition (WNC) to unanimously pass a resolution supporting Neeginan and appoint a smaller group, dubbed the Winnipeg Indian Council (WIC), to negotiate with settler governments to support its implementation. Two years later, 50 community organizers—representing organizations such as the MIB, IMFC, the Native Women's Group, Kinew Housing, Winnipeg Ehnakumiguk, Youth Action Project, Dufferin Action Centre, Winnipeg Centre Project, MMF, and the Winnipeg Native Club—convened to further develop the Neeginan plan.[34] Prominent organizers from this period included people such as Bev McCorrister, Celestin Guiboche, Linda Bennett, and Darlene Tomasson.

Neeginan organizers came from the same political milieu that published *Wahbung* a year earlier, and Neeginan pursued the same fundamental goals. Primarily, this meant restoring land and self-determination to Indigenous peoples according to present-day social, economic, and geographical—in this case urban—conditions. Organizers summarized the Neeginan vision in the following five-point program:[35]

> WHAT IS NEEGINAN?
>
> NEEGINAN...is native peoples working together to accomplish a common goal in a community which will promote, produce, and preserve an urban cultural and economic base for all Indian and Métis people!
>
> NEEGINAN...means proper housing, good schools, and business enterprises—owned, operated, and controlled by you!

NEEGINAN...means native people, themselves and in their own way, solving the real problems of everyday city life!

NEEGINAN...means building a future for your children – a future in which they can control their own destiny and not have to face the frustrations we now feel and fight every day!

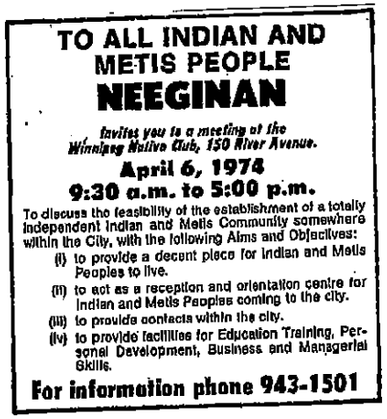
NEEGINAN...means "OUR PLACE"!

Organizers' first step was to build grassroots support for this vision and involve residents in shaping it. A team of Neeginan "fieldworkers" visited people in their homes, spoke with people on the strip, and held picnics on land intended for Neeginan, where people discussed their visions for how the new community could be laid out. A "comprehensive mailing list of all Indian and Métis people in the city" was compiled and regular newsletters sent out. Organizers urged fellow Indigenous Winnipeggers to join them in creating a place "about which we can honestly say 'This is Our Place and I helped build it'...NEEGINAN workers are always available for consultation, just call 943-1501. They will come and see you at your home if you so request, so feel free to contact them." Elaborate maps, slideshows, and displays showing what Main Street could look like according to the Neeginan vision were created—including contributions by renowned artists Daphne Odjig (Potawatomi/Odawa) and Jackson Beardy—and exhibited in the community, including in the storefront windows of the IMFC.[36] Organizers were extremely successful in generating widespread grassroots support for an Indigenous village on the strip. More than half of Indigenous Winnipeggers consulted said they would be interested in living on the strip when Neeginan was built.

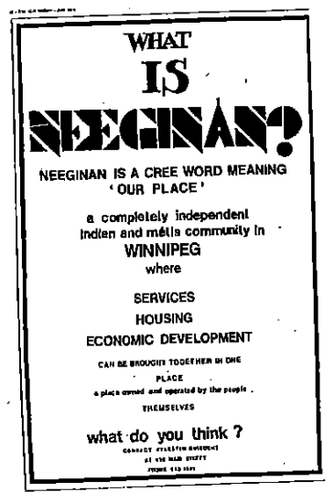
Drafted over a year of consultation with the area's Indigenous residents, the plan for the Main Street strip was a bold, comprehensive vision for an urban district owned, built, and operated by and for Indigenous peoples to address the basic needs that the settler city systematically deprived them of. The Neeginan plan envisioned Main Street as a residential village consisting of a mix of quality, affordable low-rise and high-rise housing for Indigenous families, elders, and single people. The plan included a special proposal for short-term "hostel" housing for people living in the city temporarily, including students and those visiting to access healthcare. Non-residential components of the plan included new schools, health care facilities, childcare facilities, meeting space, youth recreation infrastructure, a "reception and orientation" centre for people new to the city, "centrally delivered social services," and worker co-operatives. To find enough land for this sweeping vision, the plan called for parts of the Neeginan village to expand onto and replace the CPR tracks.[37] Neeginan, in this sense, was a forerunner to, and one of the desired outcomes of, the rail relocation movement.



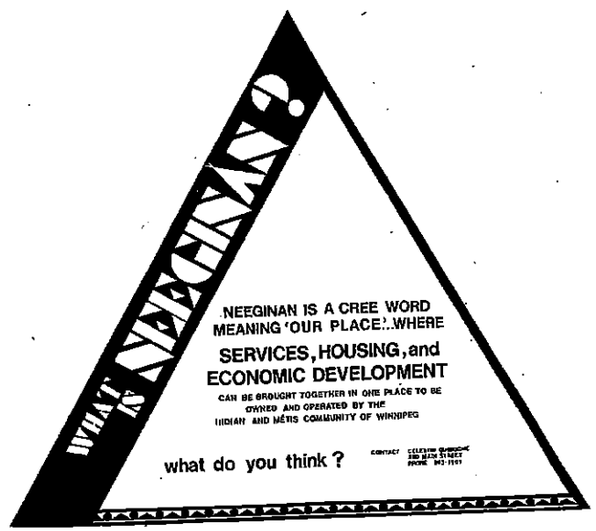





Neeginan invitation placed in Winnipeg Free Press, Winnipeg, ca.1974. (Used with permission of George Munroe)




Neeginan invitation placed in The New Nation, Winnipeg, ca.1974. University of Manitoba Archives, IMFC fonds, A13-70, MSS 395, IMFC Programs, Neeginan, 1974, Box 1. (Used with permission of George Munroe)




Neeginan invitation, Winnipeg, ca. 1974. Damas and Smith Limited. (1975). *Neeginan: A Feasibility Report Prepared for Neeginan (Manitoba) Incorporated.* (Used with permission of George Munroe)

SAMPLE OF NEWSLETTER
USED IN THE CONSULTATION
PROCESS

# NEEGINAN*

# NEWSLETTER

WE ARE A PEOPLE AND AS SUCH RESERVE
THE RIGHT TO DETERMINE OUR DESTINY.

June - 1974

1

NEEGINAN PRESIDENTS' REPORT

My Dear Friends;

Since April 6th, 1974 we have been quite busy setting up various meetings in the community discussing Neeginan. We realize we have come only a short distance and that time is quickly catching up with us. We would like very much to do what is right for our people and to be of help. At the same time we realize that it is an impossible task to please everyone, as not all people will agree with what we are proposing. This is as it should be. This is good. However, we cannot stop because of any opposition or disagreement. We must push on and work even harder and more passionately with those who really care and want to do something constructive for our community. If you are among those who are fed up with much empty talk that passes for concern, and want something really meaningfull to take place, then join us in our crusade to bring about positive action. We are the builders of a new era - a new age. Will we be faint-hearted and weak-kneed at the first test of adversity? No, you will say with me, No - never - we have not yet begun to fight - to work - to create.

GEORGE MUNROE

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Taking back Main Street. Neeginan newsletter, Winnipeg, ca. 1974. Damas and Smith Limited. (1975). *Neeginan: A Feasibility Report Prepared for Neeginan (Manitoba) Incorporated.* (Used with permission of George Munroe)

But the City of Winnipeg—flush with federal urban renewal cash and looking to transform Main Street—was not interested in Indigenous peoples' plans for the strip. White city councillors derided Neeginan as a plan for a "ghetto," conveniently ignoring the fact that it was they—and the city's landlords, businesses, and police—who had segregated Indigenous peoples on the strip in the first place. "I don't want to see a reserve in the middle of Winnipeg," said ICEC councillor Bill McGarva. "Indian people have a tough time making their way in the city," Councillor Munroe responded. "There is also strong objection to Indians moving into other areas of the city, so we plan to work in this area."[38] If settlers refused to tolerate urban Indigenous peoples anywhere but Main Street, as Munroe's response implied, how could they deny what they themselves had established: Main Street was Native space.

Instead of embracing the vibrant, highly organized Indigenous community that had established itself on Main Street and made serious plans to improve the area, the settler city derided it as a pathological danger that—like Rooster Town two decades earlier—ought to be policed, contained, and eventually eliminated. Among other things, in the age of Red Power, this was a counter-revolutionary tactic. Settler journalists went out








Taking back Main Street. Neeginan plan cover, Winnipeg, ca. 1975. Damas and Smith Limited. (1975). *Neeginan: A Feasibility Report Prepared for Neeginan (Manitoba) Incorporated.* (Used with permission of George Munroe)

of their way to portray Red Power marches and posters on the strip as, paradoxically, signs of the area's supposed pathology, destitution, and powerlessness.[39] The lengths settler journalists went to in order to depict Main Street as "down and out" were often comical. In more than one case, newspapers literally fabricated images of the strip to

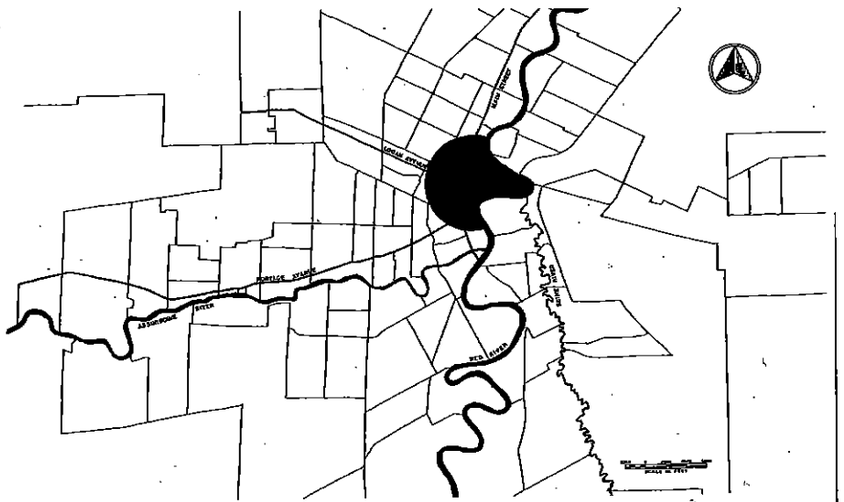


Figure 2
The Neeginan Study Area

Claiming the city centre. Neeginan study area, Winnipeg, ca. 1975. Damas and Smith Limited. (1975). *Neeginan: A Feasibility Report Prepared for Neeginan (Manitoba) Incorporated.* (Used with permission of George Munroe)

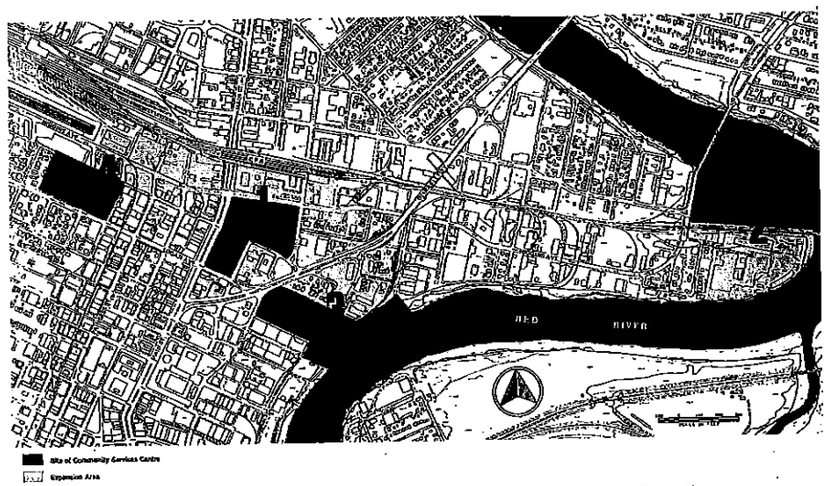



Figure 4A
Alternative Sites for Neeginan

Places of special importance. Alternative sites for Neeginan, Winnipeg, ca. 1975. Damas and Smith Limited. (1975). *Neeginan: A Feasibility Report Prepared for Neeginan (Manitoba) Incorporated.* (Used with permission of George Munroe)





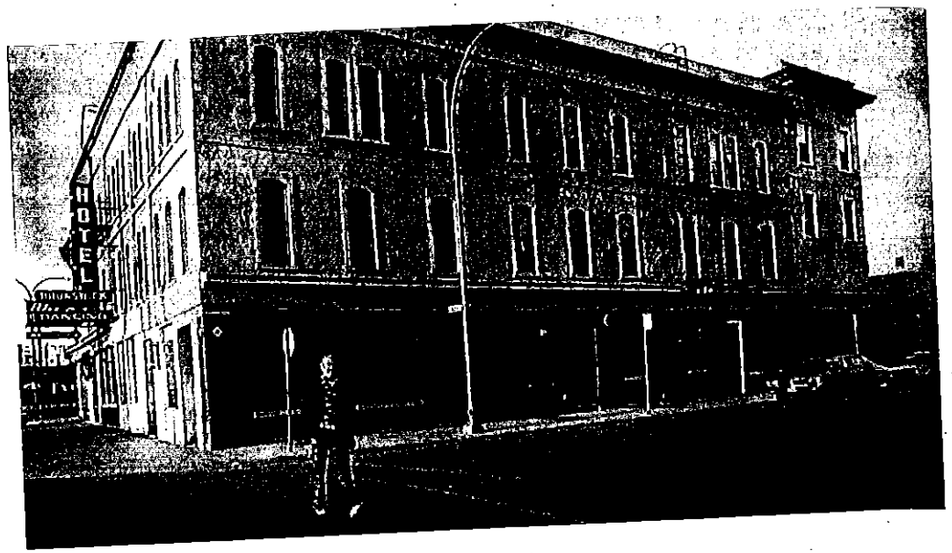


fit their narrative. "On two occasions the author observed reporters photograph each other," noted Christopher Hauch, an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork on the strip during the 1970s and 1980s, "in staged supine and disheveled poses, when efforts to locate an unconscious 'drunken derelict' had failed."[40] The image of the strip generated by settler media is far from the image provided by people who actually spent time there, a point made repeatedly by the musicians and music fans interviewed by Jesse Green (Ojibway) and Fleury-Green in *Brown Town Muddy Water*. The strip could get lively, Mercredi said, and—like anywhere else—there were sometimes fist fights in front of the bars, but none of the hotels on the strip were nearly as unruly as settlers made them out to be.

Settlers who deemed the Main Street strip a blight on the city—like Canadian expansionists who had never travelled west of Ontario yet cast the mid-1800s North-West as a wasteland—had no first-hand knowledge of its actual, vibrant Indigenous geography. Their image of the strip conformed much less to lived reality than to racist fantasy. MIWC poets have long critiqued the knowledge-gathering methods of white Winnipeggers who attempt to make claims about urban Native space. It was Mercredi's impression that City officials and journalists, like most of the rest of the city, obtained almost all of their knowledge of the strip by driving past and gazing at Native people hanging out in front of the hotels. This dynamic of detached encounter is a theme in Mercredi's poetry and in the work of many other MIWC poets and writers; it is the trope of a white city gawking at Native people and places through the windshields of cars, and thinking they've learned everything there is to know.

The mass destruction of a beloved and historic district was initiated from nothing more than this tepid form of geographical knowledge. Winnipeg's white-dominated City Council deliberately dismantled one of the country's most important hubs of Indigenous social, cultural, and political life in the 1970s while totally ignoring the Indigenous redevelopment plan for the area. This fact has never been officially acknowledged at City Hall, not even in 2016, its official Year of Reconciliation. At the top of City Council's hit list was the "Grand Ole Opry of Indian country"—the Brunswick Hotel—which the City demolished and replaced with a European-style opera house. For years, according to Mercredi, the Main Street scene danced in step with the City's wrecking ball, as the centre of the scene moved from the Brunswick to the Occidental, from the Occidental to the Savoy, and finally from the Savoy to the Leland Hotel, as each was demolished in turn. When the Leland closed, the scene moved farther north, past the tracks, as well as west, to places like Brooklands. The demolition of the Leland Hotel, for Mercredi, was the blow that signalled the end of the strip's heyday.

In the post-heyday 1980s, Main Street became less diverse and increasingly populated by only the most "hardcore" people, Mercredi said. Most of Main Street's hotels, bars, theatres, and cafés were replaced—if they were replaced at all—with a sterile, authoritarian infrastructure of shelters, food banks, and the city's "drunk tank," a bunker of




The Grand Ole Opry of Indian country. Brunswick Hotel, Main Street strip, Winnipeg, ca. 1970. University of Manitoba Archives, Winnipeg Tribune fonds, May 13, 1970, Thordarson, PC 1884718-847-001_preview. (Courtesy University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections)

short-term cages for people arrested for public intoxication.[41] "They started to patrol it more," said Mercredi, and many university-educated Indigenous people moved away from the strip, sometimes leaving the North End entirely. Much of the remaining bar scene moved south of Portage Avenue, into places like the St. Regis Hotel and the Garrick Hotel. Today, Mercredi pointed out, CentreVenture is targeting these places for closure and demolition.

I asked Mercredi about the significance of city council's lust for demolishing Native urban space. "I think we're losing a lot of our history," he said. Mercredi said that he thought the "older generation" didn't like to talk about the worst days of urban apartheid and settler demonization of urban Native people and places. They prefer to keep silent, hoping that it will go away if they don't talk about it. "Kind of like residential schools," Mercredi said. "But I think the opposite is true," he continued, saying that he makes a point of telling the story of Main Street to his children and grandchildren. Mercredi listed a few other examples that he thought compared to the loss of Main Street, including three Indigenous burial mounds and an informal settlement that had all been built over and erased by development projects dating as far back as the construction of the railway. Mercredi's telling communicated a sense of the cultural importance of Indigenous spaces in the city and the pain of losing them. His history of the Main Street strip—as well as the immense labours of the early-1970s Neeginan organizers—has been doggedly erased from the city's official memory.



Last stand of the heyday. Leland Hotel, Main Street strip at William Avenue, Winnipeg, ca. 1990s. University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, Leland Hotel, LHBB-53. (Courtesy University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections)

The story of Neeginan, however, does not end in the 1980s. Indigenous planners and activists nurtured Neeginan over the years, continuing to insist on the special significance of Main Street to Indigenous peoples. The 1990 Community Inquiry into Inner City Revitalization (discussed in Chapter 4) was instrumental in reviving the Neeginan vision. The Inquiry "urged that a long-term, multi-faceted commitment be made to the future development of Main Street and that significant representation from aboriginal communities...be included in decision-making and implementation."[42] In 1990, a coalition of Indigenous organizations came together under the name Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg Incorporated (ACWI) to purchase the CPR depot on the strip—a large, ornate turn-of-the-twentieth-century railway station, staffed by 1,500 CPR workers before being decommissioned in 1978— and transform it into offices for their organizations.[43]

In 1997, as a result of the Inquiry's criticism of the CAI, the Winnipeg Development Agreement (WDA) sponsored a more grassroots planning process for the Main Street strip aimed at building on the momentum of the Aboriginal Centre.[44] Mary Richard—a Métis community organizer and restaurant owner originally from Camperville, Manitoba—was appointed by Winnipeg Mayor Susan Thompson as co-chair of the WDA's North Main Street Task Force. Richard took the opportunity to install Neeginan as the official vision for Main Street. "We had to redo Main Street from City Hall," Richard recalled, "so then I just pulled out the Neeginan plan...We were the only ones that already had a plan since 1972...We had community meetings and reviewed the original plan of

Neeginan."[45] The final plan of the WDA's North Main Street Task Force—drafted by a predominantly Indigenous sub-committee chaired by Richard—was a slightly reworked version of the 1970s Neeginan plan.

"We, the aboriginal people of the City of Winnipeg, have joined together to make a commitment to the future of our children," the 1997 Neeginan vision statement begins. "We have joined together to carve our future into the heart of Winnipeg, and by doing so, save our children and heal our tragic past. Neeginan and North Main Street will be our contribution not only to ourselves but to the City of Winnipeg." The plan included a mix of not-for-profit infrastructure and for-profit commercial initiatives that would complement the Aboriginal Centre. It called for 160 units of "housing for Aboriginal students who are in Winnipeg for educational and technical training, and housing for Aboriginal families who are here for relatively short periods for medical treatment or visiting friends and relatives who are hospitalized or receiving specialized treatment"; a Centre of Excellence for Children's Well-Being; a Hall of Justice to facilitate Indigenous restorative justice models; an art gallery and youth recreation and athletic facilities; and a Round House to function as the "spiritual and cultural focus" of the Neeginan village. To centre the needs of existing residents, the plan included a well-funded "Relocation Assistance Program" to ensure that any residents displaced from the strip would "have the opportunity to relocate to comparable accommodation within their community."[46]

Beyond the official plan published by the task force, organizers envisioned much more for the Neeginan village. Richard imagined Neeginan as the potential concretization of a new Indigenous territorial and political model that she summarized, in a 2002 interview, as a Native version of Vatican City. Indigenous peoples would obtain a degree of sovereign jurisdiction over the Main Street strip according to Richard's plan. "I was thinking of the Vatican because it's a central area and it has its own small geographic area that it governs," said Richard. "It has its own laws, up to a certain level." Extending the Vatican City model, Neeginan would operate as a political capital of Indigenous Turtle Island, formalizing its role as a pan-Native hub. "We're so scattered across the country," Richard said:

> We could still have a central location of government and then you have all these little arms. Then you've got to make sure each community is self-reliant. So you have to develop that capacity. That was why I was interested in the Vatican model.[47]

Richard envisioned Indigenous communities across Turtle Island uniting on the Main Street strip to pursue collective goals while retaining their autonomy in a similar way that self-sufficient Catholic dioceses relate to the Vatican. The Neeginan village, according to Richard's plan, would be the seat of a central Indigenous government that would support Indigenous communities across Turtle Island to achieve their plans for the future.







The WDA and the three levels of government accepted the Neeginan plan in principle—minus the Vatican City model—but did not provide the land and money necessary to build it. Some money for the Round House—which would become known as Thunderbird House—was provided initially, but this funding soon dried up. "[The mayor] just stopped funding, that's it, we couldn't go any further," Jack recalled. Organizers were forced to scramble to find money just to complete Thunderbird House. "I think that [the larger Neeginan plan] wasn't completely developed before [Thunderbird House] was built and then it just became like an all-consuming priority to get that house up there and then special money had to be found," recalled Neeginan organizer Janet Fontaine. "There had to be this huge fundraising campaign to put the roof on that house...so there were some financial challenges there."[48] The feeling that Thunderbird House and the Aboriginal Centre represent only a fraction of the full Neeginan vision persists. "I think there should be twenty Thunderbird Houses in this city," said Albert McLeod, a Cree and Métis Two-Spirit Winnipegger and long-time community organizer.[49] In the midst of the push to build Neeginan in the 1990s, City Council established its new urban redevelopment authority and tasked it with facilitating an alternate future for the Main Street strip.


Neeginan in action. Event hosted by the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, (from L) Linda Bloom, Mary Richard, Anita Flett, Wayne Helgason, Trevor Greyeyes, George Munroe, Main Street strip at Higgins, Winnipeg, ca. early 2000s. (With permission from the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg)

## NEGLECTING NEEGINAN: HEART OF GOLD

CentreVenture took control of a large swath of land on the Main Street strip just two years after the 1997 Neeginan plan was drafted. While the authority focused most of its energies in the early 2000s on convincing the local and provincial governments to build Waterfront Drive and luring capital to invest there, it also went to work destroying what remained from the heyday of the Main Street strip. CentreVenture demolished several of the strip's remaining hotels and theatres in these years, sodding over dirt lots and erecting signage aimed at potential buyers. "We've been talking to a couple of interested developers," said CentreVenture CEO Annitta Stenning at the time. "But the first stage is to clear the land and do some greening up."[50] The authority hoped that by paying for demolition and other costly preparations for development, it could subsidize developers' costs and convince them to take the land. CentreVenture replaced the old structures with billboards advertising the number of cars that regularly pass through the area, and featuring slogans aimed at motorists, such as "PUT ASIDE YOUR PRECONCIEVED IDEAS ABOUT MAIN STREET AND BECOME PART OF THE DOWNTOWN REBOUND." "Forget the squalor," the *Free Press* joined in, "bring on the lawyers and office workers."[51]

By 2006, with construction underway on Waterfront Drive, CentreVenture cast about for a new geographical focus. Despite the advertising and site-preparation subsidies, the authority had had little success luring new investment to Main Street during the previous years. A consensus seemed to emerge between CentreVenture and its urban-wing allies that Waterfront Drive was an isolated success that had not done enough to transform the city's appearance to the outside eye. To the dominant regional bloc, it seemed that CentreVenture had sorely neglected far more "visible" parts of the downtown—the city's busiest thoroughfares, Portage Avenue and Main Street.

"[CentreVenture] has properly recognized that something needs to be done urgently to repair the pitiful state of Portage Avenue and Main Street," the *Free Press* editorialized in a 2007 piece entitled "It's Our Downtown." City Council's decision to destroy Indigenous Main Street had left it with a new problem: a landscape of destruction unpleasing to the eye. "As it stands now, visitors to Winnipeg are left with the impression of a city in decline," continued the *Free Press*. "It tells out-of-town investors that Winnipeg is not a good place to do business and it tells tourists there's nothing here worth seeing."

The editorial concluded by urging local and provincial governments to eliminate taxes for developers on Main Street, rather than, say, taxing developers and funding Neeginan. "A healthy downtown is somewhat intangible," the *Free Press* wrote, utterly ignoring Neeginan's very specific definition of a healthy downtown, "but at a minimum, downtown Winnipeg must be seen by investors as a place where money can be made."[52] This spirit of neoliberal urbanism—the exclusive definition of the city as a money-making tool—so pithily espoused by the *Free Press*, was a basic logic through which public






**A billboard on the corner of Main St. and Logan Ave. lures developers.**

Planting the flag. CentreVenture billboard, Main Street strip, Winnipeg, ca. 2001. Photo by Jeff De Booy. Winnipeg Free Press. (Courtesy of Winnipeg Free Press)

land and money for Neeginan became unthinkable. This free-market orthodoxy would come to dominate CentreVenture's approach to a much greater extent in the coming years. Whereas the authority enforced very narrow land-use and architectural regulations on Waterfront Drive in order to produce its specific vision of a luxury condo district, when it came to Main Street—a place for which Indigenous peoples had clear plans—the authority stubbornly refused to endorse any particular vision for the strip's future outside of what the market would dictate. The ascendance of neoliberalism, in this way, reinvigorated the colonial impulse to see Main Street as *urbs nullius*. On the flipside, CentreVenture drew on the regional tradition of *urbs nullius* to make a neoliberal future for Main Street feel reasonable or even obvious.

The *Free Press* editorial came on the heels of CentreVenture's second comprehensive plan, its *Heart of Gold Strategic Business Plan 2007–2009*, which it presented to City Council for approval in January 2007. The *Heart of Gold* plan was an aggressive—if coded—expression of racial-capitalist engagement with Native urban space. "Arguably, the private marketplace is performing adequately in many parts of CV's mandate area," *Heart of Gold* begins. However, "it is CentreVenture's contention that the market is not yet functioning adequately with respect to the properties in two related areas," namely Main Street and Portage Avenue. These areas were "plagued by an exodus of businesses and residents," according to CentreVenture, which ignored the fact that City Council itself had manufactured the exodus. Somewhat more ominously, "civil society,"

according to CentreVenture, was "not functioning adequately" in the area. At the time, an estimated 1,000 people still lived in hotels on the Main Street strip.[53]

In *Heart of Gold*, CentreVenture refers to Main Street and Portage Avenue as the "Focus Area." "The Focus Area is an embarrassment," CentreVenture writes, citing "unsightly entire blocks," "unattractive" empty lots, and a "skid row collection of hotels, restaurants, and pawn shops." By way of explaining why City Council should fund its plan, CentreVenture rehearses the self-evident truth of the urban wing—"The downtown of any city is a snapshot of the real health, even the real *meaning* of a city."[54] But this time, CentreVenture forwards a new claim: downtown may be crucial to the region's future, but Portage Avenue and Main Street are the downtown's most crucial segments:

> For better or (mostly) worse, the most visible and vital section of Winnipeg's downtown is the Focus Area. If suburban Winnipeggers "see" (with their eyes and their minds) the Focus Area as an embarrassment, then they will "see" the entire downtown as an embarrassment—a place they do not wish to be, or even to think about.[55]

CentreVenture claimed that once the area's fortunes are reversed, Main Street and Portage Avenue could act as a nearly literal "Heart of Gold," driving the entire regional economy and lifting all boats. "[T]he Heart of Gold will act as the pump of economic power, and of vitality to the suburbs and beyond," CentreVenture explains. "The word 'Gold' in this context, connotes the commercial success that will flow to participants (building owners, merchants, employees, local residents, and the tax collectors) in the new, invigorated economy in the area." But first the existing neighbourhood—that old "disgrace"—must be eliminated. "Everything must be done to remove this disgrace," CentreVenture concludes, "there is no time to lose."[56] The future of capital accumulation—not merely in the city centre but in the entire urban region—the authority contended, depended on the swift removal of the existing human geography of the strip.

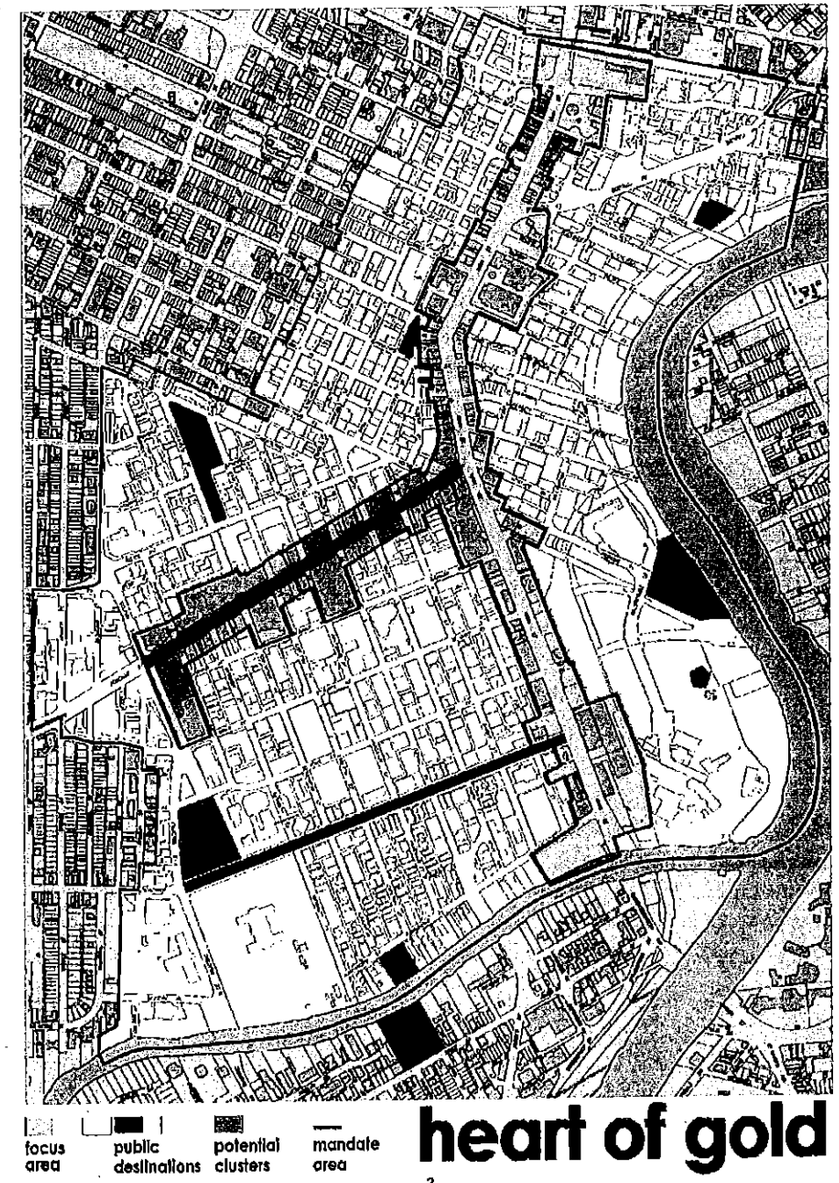
The Main Street strip became CentreVenture's almost exclusive focus in the years following the release of *Heart of Gold*. While its framing of the situation was extremely dire, CentreVenture's actual "prescriptions" for Main Street were surprisingly modest. This was an outcome of the authority's even bolder commitment to free-market ideology. "CentreVenture does not take a position as to what a resurrected Winnipeg downtown would or should look like," the authority explained, "only the market can determine that. CentreVenture and others can only create conditions that allow the market to function efficiently."[57] CentreVenture proposed three related strategies to create conditions for capital accumulation in the Heart of Gold.

First, it would "secure" the area by working with the WPS to increase its police presence there. CentreVenture's new emphasis on policing came at a time of renewed geographic targeting of city-centre residents by the WPS. Two years prior, in 2005, Winnipeg Mayor










Jettisoning Neeginan. CentreVenture, Heart of Gold Strategic Business Plan 2007-2009, Winnipeg, ca. 2007.

Sam Katz announced an unprecedented round of broken-windows-style policing in the city's West End, which the mayor dubbed "Operation Clean Sweep." Pioneered most notoriously by former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani—whom Katz brought to Winnipeg in 2006 for a keynote address on the topic—broken-windows-style policing, also known as quality-of-life policing, involves aggressive enforcement of minor legal violations such as vandalism or public intoxication, based on the false premise that more serious crimes proliferate where minor acts of disorder go unpunished. In the same year as Giuliani's visit, with the help of the Manitoba NDP Government, Operation Clean Sweep was expanded to target the entire city centre.[58] In *Heart of Gold,* CentreVenture promises to "continue to support strongly all existing security initiatives"—including already prevalent private police forces sponsored by multiple business improvement districts—but also proposes to deploy a team of "Special Safety Wardens" to the area: "[T]he knowledge that a figure of authority can always be found in a specific spot, during specific times, would come to be an important component in creating the reality, and the perception, of security in the Heart of Gold."[59]

Second, moving beyond its role as mere inheritor of surplus City-owned properties, CentreVenture vowed to continue doing what city council had been doing on its own for decades: purchasing outright and eliminating privately owned properties—usually residential hotels—that it viewed as troublesome. CentreVenture categorized its purchase of such properties as "profile investments." "In this category," it wrote, "is the outright, unconditional purchase of a troubled property whose rehabilitation will anchor the resurrection of a Cluster." CentreVenture continued, "This type of investment is intended to create high visibility and interest, to raise the flag—in circumstances where it is difficult for the private marketplace to appreciate the potential for profitable investment."[60]

The final method proposed by CentreVenture to "unleash the power of the market" along the Main Street strip was, predictably, the removal of existing taxes and regulations on investment. "[A] long history of difficulty and disappointment, surrounding the development and ownership of property in the Heart of Gold, has left a legacy, amongst many members of the local, national, and even international development community, of cynicism at best," it wrote. "At worst, the notion of development in downtown Winnipeg, particularly in the Heart of Gold, has simply disappeared from their thoughts."[61]

To perk up the development community, CentreVenture suggested a general clear-cutting of local and provincial property taxes in the area. Failing this, it proposed a litany of "special incentives" for capitalists willing to invest on the strip, from low-interest loans to "outright grants." CentreVenture proposed that a few tax breaks already in place—most for the private redevelopment of heritage-designated buildings—be expanded into a general "Urban Tax Credit" for any investment in the downtown built environment. "The intent," CentreVenture wrote of its proposed interventions, "is to tilt the playing field back in favor of the smooth working of market forces." Of course, the very existence of CentreVenture and its new plan indicated the impossibility of capitalist markets functioning without police and a litany of other state supports. In





making its case for the new plan, CentreVenture aggressively discouraged criticisms of its prescribed mix of police, eviction of the poor, and gifts to capital. "It is not socially acceptable to stand in the way of this project," CentreVenture told City Council, which quickly approved the plan.[62]

### THE BELL HOTEL

The Bell Hotel—constructed in 1904 to house settlers arriving on the CPR—was one of the most famous residential hotels and bars remaining on the strip by the 2000s. As one of the last hotels standing after decades of city council's onslaught, the Bell was an emblem of the strip's long-standing Native community. Cree writer Tomson Highway perfectly captured Native writers' ambivalence about this in his take on the Bell in 1998's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*: "Cree? In Winnipeg? Why not? He was, after all, in the Hell Hotel."[63] The Bell became the first high-profile battleground of the CentreVenture era on Main Street. CentreVenture's way of relating to the Bell's residents and its attempts at guiding the building's future encapsulated the authority's broader colonial mode of engaging the strip. This included the authority's overriding tendency to pathologize the people of Main Street—casting them as subjects of social control rather than participants in planning the area's future—that enabled it to bury the Neeginan plan.

CentreVenture's first order of business was to purchase, close, and evict the Bell's 75 residents, some of whom had lived there for upwards of 25 years.[64] CentreVenture described the Bell as the last stand on the modern Main Street frontier, and its residents—especially those who patronized its bar—as the final remaining threats to the strip's golden future. Shutting down the Bell "could well be the catalyst that would kick-start a grand redevelopment of an entire neighborhood," said CentreVenture's new CEO Ross McGowan, a condo developer who had received land on Waterfront Drive from CentreVenture a few years previous. "In recent years," added Jim Ludlow, President and CEO of the city's professional hockey team and Chair of the CentreVenture Board, "CentreVenture has received numerous complaints from area businesses regarding the negative effect the activities related to the liquor sales in the beverage room and beer vendor was having on their ability to conduct business." "CentreVenture's mandate is to attract business and residential development to the downtown, not to sit idly by while negative activity causes an exodus," the authority stated, once again profoundly confusing the source of depopulation on the strip.[65]

CentreVenture's elimination of the Bell and displacement of its residents was swift and, in some eyes, cruel. I spoke with Simon, a University of Manitoba urban planning graduate who—interested in the progressive potential of reversing suburban sprawl—took a job at CentreVenture during the mid-2000s.[66] Simon was assigned to oversee the evictions of the Bell's residents. "My boss basically said, 'Make sure it's empty by the end of the day.'" CentreVenture offered no relocation assistance program, as had been

called for in the 1997 Neeginan plan. "People were moving with shopping carts," Simon recalled, raising his eyebrows. He remembered hearing residents sneer at the "big, evil developer" as he oversaw their evictions. Winnipeg Mayor Sam Katz appeared oblivious to the reality of the situation. In a video statement, Katz appeared to be under the impression that Bell Hotel residents enjoyed their own evictions. "Although that was their home," said Katz, "I can assure you they would not have been very proud to tell you that was their home."[67] The mayor's statement only makes sense, of course, if the Bell's residents are understood to have no aspirations of their own for the strip's future. Simon eventually quit his job at CentreVenture, in part because he had not realized how "conservative" the authority was. Within processes of gentrification—Simon's experience indicated—as within processes of imperial conquest, the inhumane requirements of racial capitalism are generally hidden in order to convey a progressive, cutting-edge, adventuresome image.

Seventy-five units of affordable housing were lost in the closure of the Bell, adding to the city's booming homeless population.[68] The CBC interviewed the director of one of the largest homeless shelters on the strip, writing that the director "expects many former Bell residents will end up sleeping in his shelter."[69] But in its editorial, "Last Call at the Bell," the *Free Press* ignored this significant loss of affordable housing, focusing strictly on the wholesomeness of eliminating the hotel's bar and the removal of its clientele from the strip. "The Bell Hotel will serve its last drink on Friday," the *Free Press* wrote. "That may make some people cry in their beer as they remember the good old days of brawling, boozing and bar-hopping, but it's welcome news for those working to revitalize Main Street."[70]

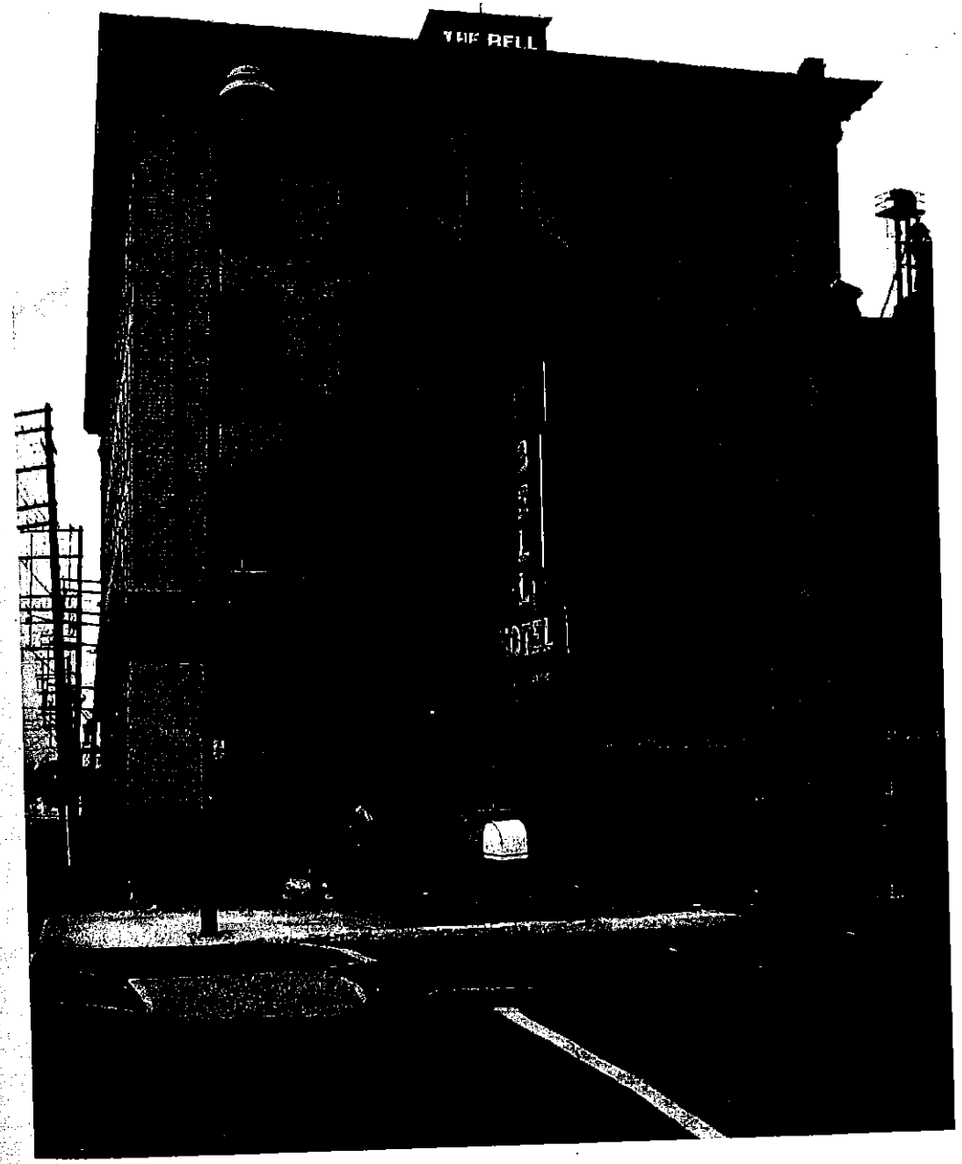
The Bell remained vacant and boarded up for years, as CentreVenture waited for the market to decide its fate. "We know there is interest by various private-sector developers in this property," McGowan said in 2007, but none emerged. Jessica, a CentreVenture employee, later told me that there had been virtually no private market interest in the Bell.[71] Compared to Waterfront Drive, Main Street was still seen as a "rough area" with little to no potential for profitable condo or even rental housing development. The lack of market interest in the Bell and the Main Street strip in general highlighted the perversity of evicting its residents and ignoring the Neeginan plan. Capital in general—as represented by CentreVenture—wanted the strip's existing, largely Indigenous, community gone without a trace as part of its larger vision for the city centre, but not a single developer actually wanted the land on the strip itself. This was the imperative to which 75 people were sacrificed into homelessness.

As a last resort, CentreVenture agreed to bring a reduced number of neighbourhood residents back to the Bell—although none of the hotel's previous residents were given homes in the new Bell[72]—forestalling the invasion of "lawyers and office workers" envisioned by the *Free Press*. In a moment of capitulation, CentreVenture, which retained ownership of the Bell, accepted a proposal by the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority










Pre-CentreVenture takeover. Bell Hotel, Main Street strip, Winnipeg, date unknown. University of Manitoba Archives, Bell Hotel, BELLHB-50. (Courtesy University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections)

(WRHA) and a large area homeless shelter—Main Street Project (MSP)[73]—which had secured provincial funding to convert the Bell into 42 tiny bachelor suites as part of the "housing first" public health trend the WRHA was pursuing at the time. CentreVenture echoed the "housing first" ethos, giving more credence to the insulting idea that the strip's residents—rather than the region's long history of immiserating dominant development visions—were the source of the area's "problems": "The philosophy behind the project," CentreVenture explained, is that "before an individual's problems can be addressed, they first need a roof over their heads."[74]

Almost immediately, CentreVenture looked for ways to cease its involvement with the new Bell. I spoke with Will, a manager there, who told me that CentreVenture would likely sell as soon as it could. He told me that the provincial government and the WRHA had made their investment in the Bell conditional on the building being part of the government's "housing-first" strategy. "It wasn't their cup of tea," Will said of the plan to use the Bell as affordable housing, adding that he didn't think CentreVenture knew what it was getting into. This view is confirmed by a 2011 report on the Bell authored by CentreVenture, in which the authority writes, "Ultimately, a separate organization, dedicated to addressing the issue of homelessness in Winnipeg may be established who might incorporate the Bell Hotel into their portfolio."[75]

In the meantime, CentreVenture parlayed the new Bell into a significant public relations tool, using its involvement with the "housing-first" trend to soften its image and portray itself as compassionate towards existing city-centre residents. "It's just the right thing to do," McGowan told the *Free Press* in 2009, in a total reversal. "I think it's important when we talk about community building to...help the people within the neighbourhood. And we see this as an opportunity to do that."[76] In fact, CentreVenture handled the Bell in such a way as to serve the two hostile intentions—eviction and policing—that ruled its engagements with the strip's residents. Through its restructuring of the Bell, CentreVenture achieved a net displacement of low-income residents—which resulted in an overall loss of 33 affordable housing units. And by shutting down the Bell's bar, it eliminated one of the few remaining unsupervised gathering places for neighbourhood residents.

The design of the new Bell extended the authoritarian, paternalistic restructuring of the Main Street strip from the vibrant 1970s social, cultural, and political hub that it was to the sterile, heavily policed, tightly managed shelter infrastructure—where residents are treated as pathological charity cases—it has become today. This is true despite the fact that many aspects of the new Bell appear earnestly tailored to meet the needs of the strip's residents in a dignified, humane way. Will took me—past two police officers loitering at the front desk—to have our conversation in the Bell's Culture Room, where a circle of chairs sat on a carpet with a Navajo design, beside a flip chart with "SHARING" and "HEALING" written on it. Bernice, a Métis woman in her fifties who lives in one of the Bell's new apartments, said she prefers the Bell to the Main Street Salvation Army, which she described as "just like prison." "I have my own place here," Bernice told me.







She has friends in the building, and she likes volunteering in the kitchen.[77]

But Bernice felt that she lived under the control of Bell staff who impose unreasonable rules and don't understand Native culture. To illustrate, Bernice told me a story about her boyfriend, Richard, visiting her at the Bell. Richard was asked by staff to leave the building, but he declined, saying he had come to visit Bernice. Instead of contacting Bernice, the front desk staff called the WPS. Richard spent the weekend in jail, Bernice told me, and she was furious at the front desk staff. "She said she cancelled the call," Bernice said of the front desk worker, "but how naïve can you get? You can't cancel a call to the cops once you make it—once you call, they're coming." Part of the reason Bernice was so upset was that Richard had recently been locked in Stony Mountain Penitentiary—a federal prison just outside Winnipeg—for eight and a half years. Through their ignorance and insensitivity, according to Bernice, not only had the Bell's staff forbidden her from seeing her significant other, they had also put his entire future in jeopardy.

This heavy-handed approach appeared to be the rule, rather than the exception, during my visit. A sign in the lobby warned tenants, "VISITORS CAN ONLY STAY OVERNIGHT 5 TIMES in 3 MONTHS," a draconian rule that, as Bernice's experience demonstrates, prevents residents from seeing their loved ones. Will told me that he does not hesitate to evict tenants if they behave in a disorderly manner, and the Bell has strict visitation rules. "We can't even have *any* guests on Wednesdays," Bernice complained. Another sign in the lobby announced that Wednesday was "TENANT/STAFF DAY," dedicated to tenants and staff doing "some important work together." The rigorous control exercised over tenants by Bell staff reminds one of CentreVenture's ominous assertions, in *Heart of Gold*, that "civil society" was not functioning adequately on Main Street. In failing to remove the old community entirely, CentreVenture settled for placing a reduced number of residents in a "controlled environment"—essentially the City's approach to the strip since the 1980s. By positioning residents as "problems" in need of fixing, supervision, and policing, the housing-first model fit CentreVenture's colonial approach to the strip's residents; and it was a far cry from the affordable housing, based on restoring land and self-determination to Indigenous peoples, envisioned by Neeginan.

## MAKING MAIN STREET WHITE COLLAR

CentreVenture capped an extensive round of destruction on the strip that involved shutting down the Bell and demolishing six other buildings—among them the Club Hotel, Epic Theatre, and Starland Theatre—by transforming a large segment of the area into a new white-collar district of massive office-space developments. To do so, the authority mobilized new techniques to transfer state resources to capital. Among the various financial innovations proposed by CentreVenture for the *Heart of Gold* initiative, the recommendation that gathered the most momentum was its call for a widened application of tax increment financing (TIF) grants for developers—essentially, large upfront

grants in the amount of tax breaks promised over the coming years. Combined with new federal "economic stimulus" grants rolled out in response to the 2008 global economic crisis, TIF grants made the area newly profitable for developers. Rather than "stimulating" Indigenous economic development on the strip, CentreVenture maneuvered the new federal funding into supporting a vision for the area reminiscent of Macdonald's 1870s "swamping" strategy. While city council had been destroying Main Street for decades, developments in the late 2000s constituted the first successful creation of a more affluent, non-Indigenous human geography on the strip since the replacement of the "Grand Ole Opry of Indian Country" with an opera house in the 1960s.

In 2008, CentreVenture transferred an entire city block in the heart of the strip to Re Solve Group Inc. "The biggest commercial development on North Main Street in nearly a century was to be unveiled today," the *Free Press* announced on March 18, 2008, "as part of a multimillion-dollar plan to breathe new life into one of the most desolate sections of downtown."[78] The deal called for Re Solve Group Inc. to construct a four-storey, 74,000-square-foot office building and a four-storey 300-car parking garage to house the WRHA's corporate and administrative headquarters. CentreVenture gifted $500,000 to Re Solve Group Inc. in the form of a TIF grant.

CentreVenture soon brokered a second large white-collar development on the strip, immediately next door to the WRHA building. In 2010, the United Way began construction on a new $10 million three-storey, 20,000-square-foot headquarters on the site. The federal and provincial governments paid $7 million of the total cost, with matching "economic stimulus" grants of $3.14 million. Winnipeg City Council and CentreVenture together contributed $700,000 in land and TIF grants. With its United Way and WRHA developments, CentreVenture replaced most of Main Street's remaining single-room occupancy hotels with a landscape of gleaming glass and steel office buildings. The hotels' low-income residents were replaced with 300 white-collar office workers.

The arrival of hundreds of white-collar workers to the strip prompted a renewed police sweep of the area. Will told me that the opening of the WRHA headquarters coincided with a steep increase in broken-windows-style policing on Main Street. Since then, Will said, the WPS increasingly descend on the strip to do "shake-downs," ticket people, crack down on public drinking and drug use, check if people have prior convictions or are breaking conditions of their parole, and order people to leave the area. Jessica, the CentreVenture employee I spoke with, confirmed that CentreVenture works closely with the WPS to maintain an expanded police presence in the Heart of Gold district. These events clearly demonstrate a racial capitalist approach to policing. Capital, expanding into Native space, requires police to harass and jail existing inhabitants in order to ensure the profitability of its investments. CentreVenture, responsible for guaranteeing the profitability of urban space, intensified this dynamic by nudging the WPS towards an area of importance to developers.







The local media broadly embraced CentreVenture's transformation of the Main Street strip, but the authority did not escape at least some perfunctory criticism. "Respect the Locals When It Comes to Main Street," read the headline of a 2008 *Free Press* editorial. "What is going to happen to people and institutions already in the neighbourhood?" the author asks, citing the WRHA development, the closure of the Bell, and the "trendy condos" popping up on Waterfront Drive. "If you are going to redevelop an inner-city area, treat the people who are already there with dignity." "[I]n the continuing effort to gentrify the area for our civil servants," a 2009 *Free Press* editorial went on, "six of the worst hotels were torn down to improve the neighbourhood's climate with no one, apparently, ever giving a single serious thought to where the people who lived in them...might go when they were gone."[79] A louder line of criticism, however, rather than critiquing CentreVenture's colonial vision, lamented its lack of success.

Urban wing–aligned commentators blamed Winnipeg suburbanites for not being courageous enough on the new frontier. "The bunker mentality demonstrated in WRHA design," wrote the *Free Press*, "seems typical of the mentality of most Winnipeggers when it comes to Main Street—keep your head down and you might get through it."[80] In another piece, the paper interviewed a Main Street business owner about the strip's new office workers. "Main Street now looks great from the car," the man told the *Free Press*. "No one driving by would think there were any problems." But he criticized the strip's new white-collar inhabitants for not livening things up enough. "The people here make big salaries, eat lunch at their desks and drive home to Lindenwoods at 5," the business owner lamented. The newspaper responded by blaming and insulting the strip's remaining long-time residents. "Nobody wants to sip a latte or browse an art gallery while somebody who just crawled out from under a bridge walks by."[81]

Exchanges such as this conjured a new urban settler-colonial culture, defining suitable settlers as those who embraced urban life by purchasing lunch at local restaurants, drinking expensive coffee, and supporting the local art scene. On the other hand, the embers of the area's longstanding Indigenous community—coded as homeless and therefore ineligible to participate in the district's white-collar future—were defined as threats that frightened away desirable settlers and therefore posed an obstacle to civic progress. CentreVenture continued to pursue a corresponding policy of Indian removal on Main Street into the 2010s, attempting, for instance, to make the biggest park on the strip—the former site of the Royal Alexandra Hotel, now owned by the Aboriginal Centre—its next "profile investment." "CentreVenture wants to get the park off us real bad," explained Wayne Helgason, a founder of the Aboriginal Centre. "But no, those people there still need a place to hang out...those people are important...so we're going to leave it green until such time that others have a plan that is respectful of what goes on around here."

### YOUTH FOR CHRIST

CentreVenture's total rejection of Indigenous Main Street and Indigenous urban planning histories soon materialized into a far more incredible symbol of settler colonialism's resilience. In a startling twist, in 2010, CentreVenture directed the city's post-industrial redevelopment agenda towards the construction of an institution on the Main Street strip that paid uncanny tribute to a key genocidal institution of an earlier phase of Canadian settler colonialism. The depth of the dominant bloc's historical amnesia and the severity of its disregard for Indigenous Main Street and the Indigenous city centre generated irrepressible grassroots resistance to CentreVenture's agenda. This resistance revealed more clearly than ever the colonial relationship of capital and the dominant bloc to Winnipeg's Indigenous city centre.

Events began in early 2010, when the multinational evangelical Christian organization Youth for Christ (YFC) requested funding from the City of Winnipeg to build a $10 million youth recreation complex somewhere in the city—a project for which YFC had already gained a federal stimulus grant of $3.2 million. YFC needed to find another funder quickly, as the federal stimulus money was time-sensitive and would soon expire. The City directed YFC to CentreVenture, which proposed the former site of the Savoy Hotel, a plot of land long envisioned as part of Neeginan, located at the same intersection as Thunderbird House and a stone's throw from the Aboriginal Centre. Simon, the former CentreVenture employee, told me that the parcel of land—formerly surplus City-owned land then owned by CentreVenture—was CentreVenture's "last big obstacle" on the Main Street strip, and that in order to sign on to the project, "the City's condition was that this is the piece of land it's on." It was the City—taking cues from CentreVenture—and not YFC that insisted on locating the evangelical Christian youth centre on the Main Street strip.

While CentreVenture itself was able to finance developments without city council oversight, the large TIF grants it brokered for developers still required city council approval. This requirement— the kind CentreVenture was originally designed to side step—made the deal public and provided a formal opening for grassroots resistance. On February 17, 2010, the Executive Policy Committee of Winnipeg's City Council passed a motion to provide a TIF grant of $3.375 million to YFC. Less than a week later, Diane Roussin (Anishinaabe) and Tammy Christensen, Executive Directors of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, Inc. and Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc. respectively, published a scathing critique of the proposal, highlighting the racial hierarchy and genocidal logic implicit in attempts to Christianize youth in an Indigenous neighbourhood. "Aboriginal youth represent the majority of youth in the neighbourhoods near the proposed Christian centre," Roussin and Christensen wrote, noting that YFC's guiding purpose is the "Christianization" of children, and that the organization explicitly targets "the aboriginal youth community as a prime area for development." "While the Youth for Christ approach is more subtle than that used in residential schools," Roussin and Christensen







continued, "it is in essence based on the same model—Christianity is viewed as superior and missionaries from outside the community will teach people a better way." Roussin and Christensen emphasized the long history of Indigenous organizing in Winnipeg, and then critiqued the state's lack of support for it. "Existing organizations working with youth in the inner city—Aboriginal as well as many non-Aboriginal—have been working for years to reverse the great harm caused by assimilationist policies and attempts to 'Christianize' a people with a strong culture and spirituality of their own," the authors went on. Taking millions of dollars for YFC, they explained, "out of a budget that is supposedly so strained that it cannot support existing public recreation programs and more culturally appropriate community-based initiatives, is extremely troubling for those who know first hand the damage that 'well meaning' Christians have caused."[82]

A grassroots coalition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous city-centre organizers—most of them youth service providers—filled the city council chambers on February 24, 2010, to speak against CentreVenture's plan. Speakers positioned the plan within the context of more than a century of Indigenous resistance to Canadian colonialism, tracing the impact of residential schools through present-day efforts to establish Indigenous-run education and youth programming in Winnipeg with a decolonizing mandate. Activists positioned a publicly funded YFC Centre on the strip as a betrayal of the hard-won 2008 Canadian apology for Indian Residential Schools and Canada's new high-profile mandate to "reconcile" with Indigenous peoples.[83] Nahanni Fontaine, Director of Justice for the Southern Chiefs' Organization, attempted to educate Winnipeg's City Council about the Indian Residential Schools apology and their responsibility to honour it:

> As a result of this apology, Aboriginal peoples were assured that these sort of strategic and infringing policies and practices would never occur again, and despite this assurance, we're gathered here today debating the construction of a Youth for Christ Recreational Facility which is entirely founded on Christian world views and practices...[if the project is approved] this council will be doing nothing short of reinstituting and state sanctifying another more contemporary, altered form of the Residential School experience, mentality and practice all under the guise of helping at-risk Aboriginal youth...To suggest that the same institution who on the one hand is complicit in the total destruction of Aboriginal peoples' culture, traditions, lands, economies and language, can on the other hand, be the ones to offer change and healing is absolutely ridiculous and insulting.[84]

Indigenous activists who spoke against the project invoked the five-decades-long tradition of community control over the Main Street strip and broader North End, and described this tradition as a plan to reverse Canada's colonial destruction through the

creation of urban space by and for Indigenous peoples. The street corner in question—Main Street at Higgins Avenue—was positioned as the geographic heart of the still only partially realized Neeginan plan. "Now we are at the corner of Main and Higgins," Damon Johnston, former director of the Aboriginal Centre, told City Council. "They're going to be across the street from the Thunderbird House, which is our spiritual, the first spiritual house of the Aboriginal people, the First Nations in this city." "[O]ne of the things about that corner lot that we've all agreed on," said Marileen Bartlett, director of an Aboriginal economic development organization based at the Aboriginal Centre, "is that we wanted it to be something that would reflect our culture, our heritage and a promise to our people that we are developing and we are moving forward."[85] In this way, Indigenous organizers attempted to remind Winnipeg's wilfully ignorant white-dominated City Council about the long history of Indigenous plans for the Main Street strip. Presenting this history—including settler governments' history of refusing to fund the Neeginan plan—as the backdrop for the City's eagerness to fund YFC clearly revealed the settler city's profound hostility toward Indigenous Main Street and Indigenous urban planning.

In order to defend the YFC plan, CentreVenture erased the reality—eloquently established by Johnston, Bartlett, and others—of a well-organized Indigenous community with a rich history of planning and redeveloping Main Street and replaced it with an updated story of *urbs nullius*, recasting the Main Street strip as an unwanted, underdeveloped territory inhabited by inferior people with no idea how to use the land properly. This story erased city council's previous four decades of systematically attacking the strip and refusing to support the full Neeginan plan, making the area appear naturally empty, unstable, and in need of intervention. "Yes, Higgins and Main, who would have thought we'd be here arguing over Higgins and Main a few years ago?" said CentreVenture CEO Ross McGowan, transmitting CentreVenture's fundamental obliviousness to local people's histories and claims to space. "Stabilizing the area and providing a framework for further private and public investment is of paramount importance," McGowan continued, making the capitalist case for an updated Indian Residential School. "The proposed Centre for Youth Excellence meets this objective and fills a major void on North Main." City councillors assisted CentreVenture by mobilizing the geographical knowledge of their suburban constituents—CentreVenture's target audience—to describe an area in desperate need of a saviour. "I know for a fact, Higgins and Main is a bad place," said one city councillor. "People will not venture from Tuxedo, from Transcona, [they] say, 'Don't go there because it's a bad place.'...You've got transients hanging out, it's a place that should not be visited."[86] With Neeginan removed from the equation, YFC was positioned as the only possible healthy future for the strip. "If it's that [YFC] or crack, I'd rather have somebody have that," said one councillor.[87] Replacing Neeginan with crack cocaine as the image of Main Street's Indigenous future perfectly captured the anti-Native racism of the dominant bloc's geographical imagination. In





fact, the "void" YFC proponents conjured—as well as the idea of the "at-risk" Indigenous young person critiqued by Fontaine—were produced by the settler state's attacks on Indigenous communities and its refusal to fully support Indigenous development agendas. The YFC plan only reiterated and deepened both of these patterns. Rigorously ignoring this, Winnipeg's entirely non-Indigenous City Council voted ten to four in favour of funding the project. The YFC centre held its official opening at Main Street and Higgins Avenue on December 9, 2011, polluting the North End with perhaps Winnipeg's single most noxious example, to date, of contemporary urban settler colonialism.

Indigenous organizers who resisted CentreVenture's YFC plan made clear, again and again, how CentreVenture's actions infuriatingly recreated the colonial dynamics of Indian Residential Schools. The sense of déjà vu—of colonialism repeating itself in the contemporary city—generated by state funding for the YFC centre, of course, is not limited to the comparison between state funding for YFC and the Indian Residential Schools system. The colonial dynamic extends, fundamentally, to the contest over land. CentreVenture's support for YFC reiterated colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands as much as it reiterated the construction of Indian Residential Schools. While CentreVenture's



CentreVenture's residential school. Youth For Christ Centre for Youth Excellence, Main Street strip at Higgins Avenue, Winnipeg, ca. 2013. (Photo by Bryan Scott, used with permission)

other, lower-profile projects did not attract the same fierce, open opposition, they were equally rooted in the same racial capitalist project: the removal of land from the reach of Indigenous peoples. Ultimately, wealthy developers, evangelicals, and foundations were the most immediate beneficiaries of this round of Indigenous dispossession, while the entire urban wing of the dominant regional bloc—who approved the plan but opted not to invest—profited indirectly.

Trevor Greyeyes—poet, long-time MIWC member, and publisher of *First Nations Voice*—has produced some of the MIWC's best writing about the strip. I asked Greyeyes what he made of the particular geographic logic that seems to motivate CentreVenture, whereby the authority explains that spaces inhabited predominantly by Indigenous peoples are not intolerable in and of themselves but are intolerable in particular locations. "Well, you know," Greyeyes responded, "it's been done for years—why do you think most First Nations are located where they are?"[88] For Greyeyes, in order to understand Main Street—and gentrification in Winnipeg in general—it is necessary to understand it as part of the much longer regional history of serial Indigenous dispossession.

Greyeyes, who is a member of Peguis First Nation and has spent most of his life in Winnipeg, compared Main Street to the history of Peguis First Nation itself, which—when it was still known as St. Peter's First Nation—was forcibly relocated from its original location near the city of Selkirk, Manitoba. Greyeyes compared the stories used to dispossess St. Peter's to those used to dispossess Indigenous Main Street. "I remember part of the reason they gave for having St. Peter's relocate," Greyeyes said, "was because of the 'rampant poverty' and 'drunkenness' and that sort of thing" so close to the largely white city of Selkirk. Greyeyes went on, outlining the economic motivations for the relocation and the fraudulent means used to carry it out:

> Because if you look north of Selkirk, that's prime farming land here in Manitoba, so they had a huge swath of it, they were dealing with it in their own ways, and they did have private property, and people had their own farms, and there were little settlements here and there and that sort of thing, but there were also people, say, like my great-grandparents who lived the way that they had lived for untold generations. They didn't permanently live anywhere, you know, they worked out in the bush. In fact, they lived so far out in the bush that the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] didn't even care to go there to get my grandfather to go to residential school. But they wanted that land, so they tried on a number of occasions to get them to sign a surrender, but they weren't able to do it, until one time, a number of people had gone off hunting in the fall for the gathering of the season, you know, so I imagine they did ducks and geese and that sort of thing. Then, with the people they had in the local parish, they called them down for a meeting, and most of them spoke either Cree or Ojibway, it was a mixed reserve. And then they, the guy, the judge who was in charge, knew a little bit, so he said to them, "Anybody who wants $50 line up over here, anyone who doesn't want $50 line up over there." Then the guy who was the local deacon of the church, you know, he could actually speak English well, and he could speak the other languages, so he was trying to warn the people, "No, no, no, no, this isn't just for money." They kind of cut him off, and they didn't even have a vote, but these people took the money.







Members of the Peguis First Nation immediately contested the so-called surrender, but it took 90 years for Canada to recognize that the relocation had been fraudulent and therefore illegitimate. "The exodus happened over, like, a 20-to-30-year span," Greyeyes said, "to what is now known as Peguis." The relocation was a serious economic blow to Peguis. "It basically was like a swamp area, you know," Greyeyes said of the relocation area. "So it floods everywhere." The original lands were never returned. Instead, in 1998 Peguis received a one-time cash settlement.

"So it's the same thing," Greyeyes reflected, "that's happened over and over again." "You know," he went on, "Canadians have a certain image of themselves, a mythology, and so they would rather embrace the mythology than actually confront the reality of historical foundations." This mythology amounts to a kind of wilful amnesia, Greyeyes said, that sustains present-day agendas—including but not limited to urban gentrification agendas—to fracture and displace Indigenous communities. The human consequences of these agendas are never genuinely addressed, only moved around—evicted, policed, imprisoned—in perpetuity. "They just want to sweep us under the carpet," said Angela, the community organizer who runs an Indigenous women's organization in Winnipeg's city centre. Angela positioned CentreVenture's activities as part of a larger, ongoing dynamic of "racial cleansing." Greyeyes' and Angela's analyses recall Mercredi's poem "This City is Red," in which the non-Indigenous city suppresses the ghosts, bones, voices, and heartbeats—the "blood red history you have chosen to ignore"—that form its historical foundations. They also advance a truth that grows from listening to Francis when he writes, "the landscape now has city."[89]

The power to reactivate colonial mythology into a determining force in the remaking of the world—in the face of decades of powerful opposition—comes, as the story of Main Street teaches, in part from the creation of new institutional arrangements and capacities such as CentreVenture's "entrepreneurial" power to dispose of public land and money with little to no opening for community input. The theory of colonial amnesia—the idea that what happened in the 2000s and 2010s is "the same thing that has happened over and over and over again"—is not necessarily an insistence that the present is identical to the past, but an observation that capitalist solutions to the fall-out of dispossession, new as they may be, fail over and over again to redress dispossession itself.