

THE REVITALIZATION OF DOWNTOWN PRINCE GEORGE

JOHN CURRY AND JASON LLEWELLYN

AS A RESULT OF SHRINKING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS and the degradation of physical form, the majority of Canadian cities have embarked on some form of downtown revitalization.¹ Planners, merchants, and politicians seek to increase the vitality of downtowns for a number of reasons. Downtowns are thought to influence how tourists and other visitors, investors, and residents perceive the vitality of the city as a whole. Although comprising fully serviced, centrally located properties, they often contribute weakly to the municipal tax base due to declining property values. Their economic function decreases as they become increasingly dilapidated and tawdry, and they lose their ability to function as the cultural and social heart of the city.

Most of the research on downtown revitalization has focused on large cities located along the southern Canadian border. In these cities, the dominant contributors to inner-city decline have been identified as industrial- and service-sector relocation, increased private automobile ownership, expansion of the transportation infrastructure, growth of the service sector, movement of senior levels of government out of the housing market, and lack of comprehensive regional planning.² The forms, functions, and urban development processes associated with Canada's largest cities are not, however, the same as those in the country's smaller, more northerly cities.

¹ Downtown revitalization is defined as the purposeful process of redeveloping the central business district with the primary goal of enriching the quality of life through improvements to the physical, economic, social, cultural, and/or ecological elements of community.

² For a discussion regarding inner-city decline in large cities, see Michael Broadway, "Differences in Inner-city Deprivation: An Analysis of Seven Canadian Cities," *Canadian Geographer* 2 (1992): 189-96; Pierre Filion, "Concepts of the Inner City and Recent Trends in Canada," *Canadian Geographer* 3 (1987): 223-32.

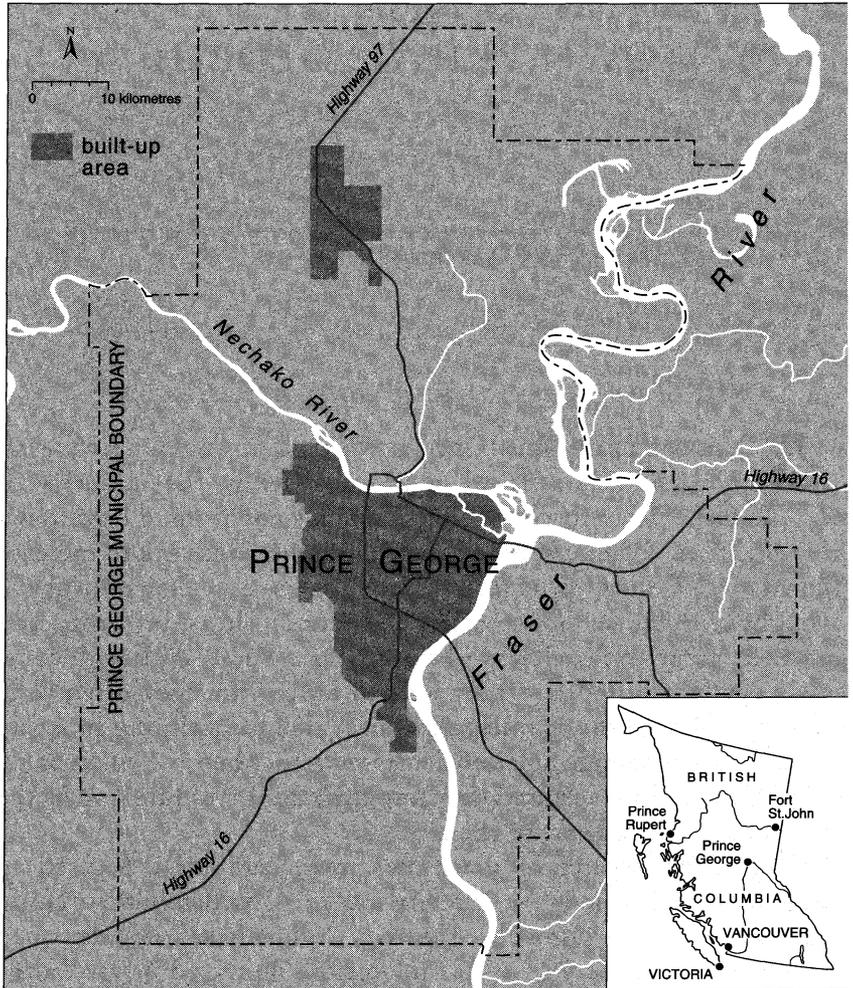


Figure 1: Location Map of Prince George.

Notably harsh winters and unique historical patterns of development set these cities apart. A winter climate can greatly affect the dynamics of transportation within cities, the perception and enjoyment of the outdoor environment, the weathering and maintenance of buildings, and the impact and success of shopping malls. Moreover, these resource-based communities developed rapidly, with little comprehensive planning, in order to exploit newly discovered, or newly accessible, natural resources. Such planning as did take place was based, almost invariably, on planning principles imported from elsewhere, most notably from Europe or the United States. As a result,

the downtowns of many small northern cities are often very inhospitable places that do little to mitigate the negative effects of a severe continental climate.

Successful attempts at downtown revitalization in small northern cities should be based on an understanding of the processes that have shaped their forms and functions. This article examines the development and planning history of downtown Prince George, British Columbia, and then considers current efforts to revitalize the downtown. On the basis of a historical examination of the downtown, important components of a successful revitalization strategy can be suggested – components that may be relevant to other downtown redevelopments in small northern Canadian cities.

A HISTORY OF DOWNTOWN PRINCE GEORGE

Located on the Nechako Plateau between the Coast Mountains and the Rocky Mountains, the City of Prince George serves as the “northern capital” of British Columbia. The community is close to the province’s geographical centre – approximately 800 kilometres north of Vancouver and 800 kilometres east of Prince Rupert. Encompassing an area of 324 square kilometres, with an estimated 1996 population of 76,171,³ Prince George is the largest community in central and northern British Columbia.

The development of downtown Prince George began in 1914 with the opening of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway through the Yellowhead Pass to Prince George on its way to the coast at Prince Rupert. Since that time, the city has served two general functions: as the social, political, entertainment, and retail centre for much of northern British Columbia and as the administrative and distributional centre for the regional forest products industry, the mainstay of the local economy. In recent years, Prince George has expanded its role as a regional centre with the addition of such amenities as the University of Northern British Columbia and numerous big-box retail outlets.

The history of planning for downtown Prince George has been dominated by grand plans that were, at best, only partially implemented. The first of these, and the most completely implemented, was the original townsite plan prepared in 1913. This plan was followed

³ Development Services Department, “Supplement to the Official Community Plan,” City of Prince George, 1992, 4.



Figure 2: A street map of downtown Prince George. The dark line outlines the boundary of the Central Business District. Map courtesy of the City of Prince George .

by five major redevelopment/revitalization schemes, all of which responded to the shortfalls of the rapid, poorly coordinated, and relatively unplanned expansion that occurred during periods of economic boom.

THE CITY BEAUTIFUL PLAN

The area incorporated as the City of Prince George in 1915 was formerly the Fort George Indian Reserve No. 1. (Figure 3), acquired by the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in 1912 as the location for a townsite and train station.⁴ The Boston landscape architecture firm of Brett, Hall and Company, which planned the townsite of Prince Rupert

⁴ Frank Leonard, *A Thousand Blunders* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 165-85.

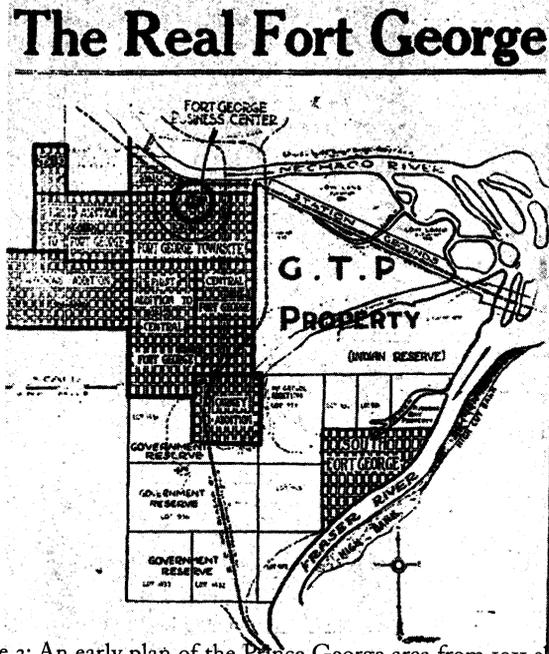


Figure 3: An early plan of the Prince George area from 1911 showing the South Fort George and Central Fort George townsites and the Grand Trunk Pacific Property which was formerly the Fort George Indian Reserve No. 1. Map taken from the *Fort George Herald Newspaper*, 1914.

for the GTPR in 1908,⁵ was hired to plan the original Prince George townsite. The Prince George plan contained many City Beautiful Movement⁶ design elements, such as diagonal avenues, radial streets, civic plazas, and public squares (Figure 4). Historical geographer Kent Sedgwick offers the following description of the plan.⁷

⁵ Harold Kalman, *The Prince Rupert Heritage Inventory and Conservation Program* (Prince Rupert: Heritage Advisory Committee, 1983).

⁶ This movement originated from an appreciation of the design of the grounds and buildings of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and was concerned with the improved aesthetic design of cities. Common City Beautiful design elements include diagonal avenues, radial streets, civic plazas, public squares, and grand public buildings. One of the principle designers of the 1893 world's fair was Frederick Law Olmstead, an architect from Boston. Both Brett and Hall were students of Olmstead's son, who was also an architect. The City of Boston and Harvard University were a centre for the development of the City Beautiful Movement at the turn of the century. Brett and Hall were no doubt heavily influenced by the principles of City Beautiful design. For more information, see Kent Sedgwick, "Chicago of the North: A City Beautiful Plan," in *Street Names of Prince George: Our History*, ed. University Women's Club of Prince George (Prince George: College of New Caledonia Press, 1989), 4.

⁷ Kent Sedgwick is a historical geographer and senior planner for the City of Prince George who has completed significant research into the townsite plan prepared by Brett and Hall and the influence of the City Beautiful Movement principles in that plan.

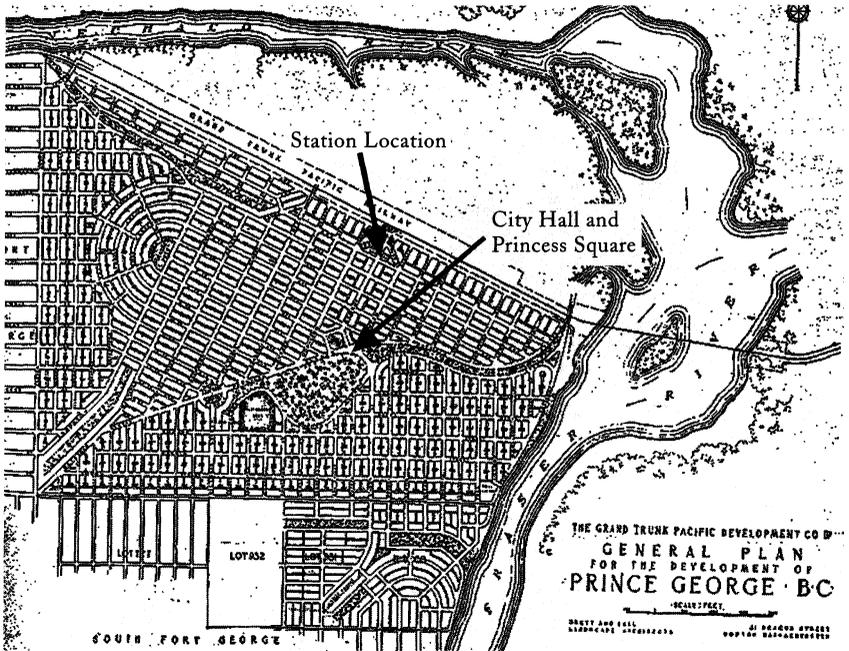


Figure 4: The Brett & Hall plan for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. Map taken from the Fort George Herald Newspaper, 1914.

George Street was planned as the main commercial thoroughfare. It is the only street with lots facing west or east; all the other lots have north or south frontages. George Street was to be terminated at the northern end by a small park, defined by short diagonal streets, the railway station and a major hotel. Octagonal shaped Princess Square containing City Hall terminated the south end. In a newspaper interview Brett and Hall declared that George Street would be a “splendid axis” for the City.⁸

There is no evidence, however, that any consideration was given to the local climate during the preparation of the townsite plan. The downtown grid street system was designed to run in a north-south and east-west direction, apparently to align with the orientation of the railway tracks. From a multi-season northern planning perspective, this grid street system orientation is problematic. A very inhospitable microclimate exists on the shadowed south sides of east-west streets, and the wide, long streets channel and intensify cold winter winds.

⁸ Kent Sedgwick, “Prince George: A City Beautiful Plan.” Paper presented at the Western Canadian Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, Prince George, British Columbia, 1997.

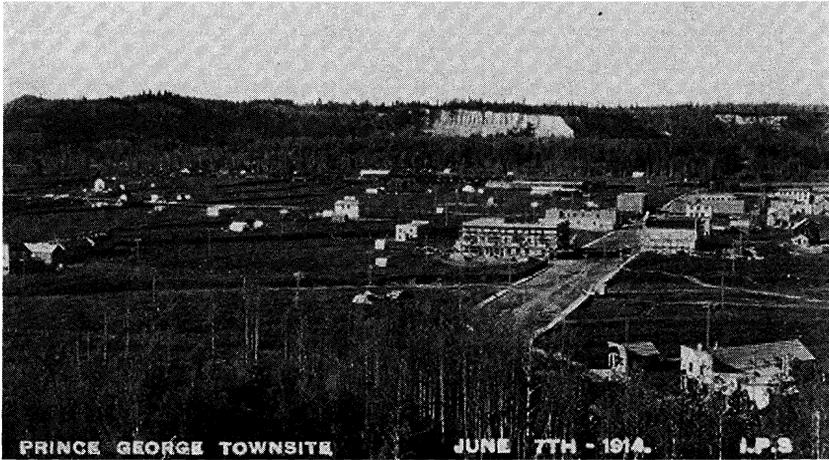


Figure 5: Early George Street development in 1914. Photograph Courtesy of the Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum.

The sale of the GTPR townsite lots in 1913 lured development away from the two surrounding townsites of Central Fort George and South Fort George. By 1914, when the first trains arrived, the area had a population of approximately 3,500 people.⁹ By the end of 1915, Prince George was the social, political, and economic centre of the British Columbia interior. Commercial and social activities were concentrated along George Street and diffused into adjacent blocks (Figure 5).

Prior to the arrival of the GTPR, local industry had supplied lumber for the local building boom at Central and South Fort George (Figure 3) and, to a lesser extent, for the needs of the railway. There was a second speculation and building boom in 1913 associated with the development of the railway station and the sale of townsite lots. During the interwar period, the region's economy was dependent upon the salaries of railway company employees, the sale of lumber to the Prairie provinces, and immigration.

The Second World War marked renewed growth for Prince George. The region's forest products industry expanded to meet the lumber demands of the war, and the city became the headquarters, and the central supply and staging area, for the Northern Pacific Defence Command.¹⁰ The role of regional central place continued to focus on and around George Street.

⁹ Francis Runnalls, *Boom Days in Prince George*, 2nd ed. (Prince George: Fraser Fort George Regional Museum, 1984), 284.

¹⁰ Tom Makowsky, "Prince George at War," in Tom Thorner, ed., *SA TS'E: Historical Perspectives on Northern British Columbia* (Prince George: College of New Caledonia Press, 1989), 441.



Figure 6: Downtown Prince George in the early 1950s. Photograph Courtesy of the Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum.

Growth continued after the war, as the regional forest products industry stabilized and centralized in and around the city. Census Canada records Prince George's population as 4,703 people in 1951, 13,877 people in 1961, and 33,000 people in 1971.¹¹ Urban growth in the 1950s and 1960s was both rapid and uncoordinated. The downtown commercial area had sprawled one block east and four blocks west of George Street and consisted almost exclusively of one- or two-storey rectangular or square shaped wooden buildings. Only the hotels exceeded two stories (Figure 6). In 1966, a study commissioned by the City of Prince George described the downtown as "a confusion of residential properties, industrial buildings, warehouses, offices, shops and parking lots."¹²

By the 1960s, despite the intent of the Brett and Hall plan to have George Street serve as the primary thoroughfare, most retail activity

¹¹ Statistics Canada, "Statistical Profile Highlights Prince George (City), British Columbia," (Online), Available <http://www2.statcan.ca/english/profil/Details/details1.cfm?sgc=5953023&LAND=E>

¹² Joseph Ward and Associates, *Space Requirements: Central Business District, Prince George, B.C.* (Prince George: City of Prince George, 1966), 32.

was concentrated along 3rd Avenue, anchored by Simpson Sears, Kresges, and the Bay. George Street had become the secondary area of retail concentration, maintaining a certain level of prominence with four of the city's larger hotels, a number of drinking establishments, and, at the southernmost extremity, City Hall.¹³

THE MIRACLE PLAN

In 1964, a number of downtown businesspeople came together to promote the Miracle Plan, created by local architect Trelle Morrow. The plan, which proposed a dome covering the five blocks along 3rd Avenue from George Street to Victoria Street, had no significant effect on the downtown.¹⁴ It did, however, serve to draw public and political attention to downtown issues, and it was the first in a line of ambitious schemes to redevelop the area. Today these plans may appear to be excessive and grand for a community the size of Prince George; but they were developed within the context of a city that had experienced an average annual growth rate of between 7 and 10 per cent between 1941 and 1964. Figures 7a and 7b portray views south down George Street and west down 3rd Avenue in the 1960s.

The issues brought to light as a result of the Miracle Plan prompted the city to commission a comprehensive study of the downtown in 1965. The ensuing 1966 report, *Space Requirements: Central Business District*, warned of a potential crisis due to the development of two shopping centres outside of the downtown area.¹⁵ The Parkwood Mall and Spruceland Shopping Centre (Figure 8) added 1,960 square metres of retail space to the city, reducing the downtown's share of retail space from 78 per cent in 1965 to 66 per cent in 1968.¹⁶ The study concluded that

the position of the central core as a viable retail-commercial centre has deteriorated. A minimum estimate of \$11,400,000 will be spent in these two [shopping] centres in 1967. A major share of this amount could have been spent in the Central Business District.... Strong action by City Council and Central Business District merchants will be necessary to ensure that further decentralization of retail space does not occur.¹⁷

¹³ Ward, *Space Requirements*, 33.

¹⁴ *Prince George Citizen*, 11 October 1964.

¹⁵ Ward, *Space Requirements*, i.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ward, *Space Requirements*, ii.



Figure 7a: Looking south along George Street in the early 1960s. Photograph courtesy of the City of Prince George archives.



Figure 7b: Looking west along 3rd Avenue in the 1960s. Photograph courtesy of the City of Prince George archives.

Despite these conclusions, two additional shopping centres were developed in the 1970s: the 4,645-square-metre Hart Highway Shopping Centre, located to the north of the city limits, and the 11,694 square-metre Pine Centre Mall, located on a downtown fringe (Figure 8).

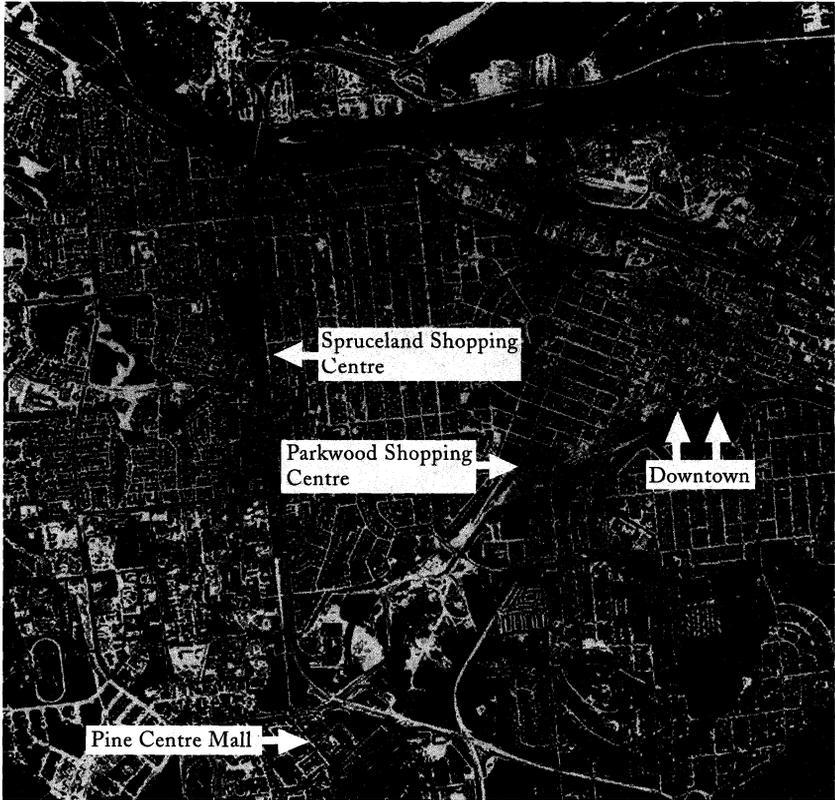


Figure 8: The location of Prince George shopping centres in relation to the downtown. Air Photograph courtesy of the City of Prince George.

THE CENTRUM PLAN

The 1966 report was followed by the Centrum Plan, proposed in 1967 by the Downtown Business Association and local architect and planner Desmond Parker.¹⁸ This comprehensive plan involved the entire downtown area and was to be implemented over the course of fifty years, as the city grew to a projected population of over 140,000 by the turn of the century. The plan proposed converting 3rd Avenue into a covered shopping mall, with an elevated monorail system linking the downtown and its proposed parkades with Parkwood Mall, located on the downtown fringe. Also included in the plan were a convention centre and numerous

¹⁸ Mr. Parker's consulting firm, Central Interior Planning Consultants Ltd., provided the planning functions for the City of Prince George on a contract basis from 1957 to 1975, when the City of Prince George created a planning department.



Figure 9: The model of the final stage of the Centrum Plan to be achieved after 50 years of growth. Photograph courtesy of the City of Prince George.

high-rise apartments and office buildings (Figure 9).¹⁹ As with the Miracle Plan, the grand scale of the proposal, the significant financial commitment necessary from both the public and the private sector, and the difficulties associated with land assembly and possible expropriation, resulted in only a small portion of the plan being implemented. The Centrum Plan resulted in the widening of sidewalks, the addition of canopies and street furniture along 3rd Avenue and George Street, and the construction of a parkade.²⁰

In 1974, the *Downtown Study* was prepared for the Regional Development Commission of the Regional District of Fraser Fort George. This study provided an inventory of the commercial sectors within the downtown, made projections for future commercial space demands, and recommended that “the City of Prince George and Regional District of Fraser Fort George be urged to develop a policy for commercial development that will retain 60percent of retail space in the downtown.”²¹ It also recommended improvements to design planning and amenity provision. With the completion of Pine Centre Mall in 1975, downtown Prince George contained only 53 percent of the city’s retail floor space²² – a drop of 25 percent in ten years.

¹⁹ *Prince George Citizen*, 17 January 1967.

²⁰ A.E. LePage et al., *City of Prince George Central Business District Study, 1980*, vol. 1, *Goals and Issues* (Prince George: City of Prince George, 1980), intro.

²¹ Region Development Commission, *Downtown Study* (Prince George: City of Prince George, 1974), 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

THE TOWN CENTRE PLAN VERSUS PARKWOOD MALL

The demand for commercial floor space in the city continued to grow with the population. In 1979, the city commissioned the comprehensive *Central Business District Study*,²³ the purpose of which was to generate proposals aimed at strengthening and preserving the downtown. As a result of the study's recommendations (1980), the city sought out the Cadillac Fairview Development Corporation and the Hudson's Bay Company to jointly undertake a downtown redevelopment project in the downtown.

The Town Centre Plan, prepared by the developers, covered a four-block area of the city, with 3rd Avenue and Quebec Street at the centre (Figure 10). The developers proposed to convert the area into a two-level shopping complex of over 38,000 square metres of floor area, with a central court area proposed as the new "town centre." The initial cost estimate for the city's portion of the project was \$5.5 million for improved downtown parking and from \$9 million to \$11 million for land assembly. The total public- and private-sector cost was estimated at \$54 million.

The Town Centre Plan had its critics, who reacted both to the high public costs of assembling such a large area of relatively expensive property and to the idea of converting four blocks of the downtown into an enclosed shopping mall.²⁴ Opposition to the project intensified in June 1981, when the owners of the Parkwood Shopping Centre, located on the periphery of the downtown (Figure 8), announced that they wished to undertake a \$40 million expansion. It was clear that both redevelopment schemes could not occur, and residents became involved in one of the largest political debates in the city's history. Despite public opinion, the majority of Prince George City Council members backed the Town Centre Plan.²⁵

On 2 November 1981, city council denied a rezoning application that would have permitted the proposed expansion of the Parkwood Shopping Centre. At the 21 November 1981 civic election, the councillors who opposed the Parkwood expansion were defeated; the only official re-elected who supported the Town Centre Plan was the mayor. In February 1982, Cadillac-Fairview and the Bay withdrew

²³ LePage, *Goals and Issues*, intro.

²⁴ Tom West and Jolyon Briggs, "Downtown Redevelopment: A Critique," 1982. Prince George, Department of Development Services Library, City of Prince George. This document is a thirty-page critique of the proposed Cadillac Fairview plan prepared by two local architects and presented to the Prince George City Council for consideration.

²⁵ *Prince George Citizen*, 28 July 1981, 29 October 1981.

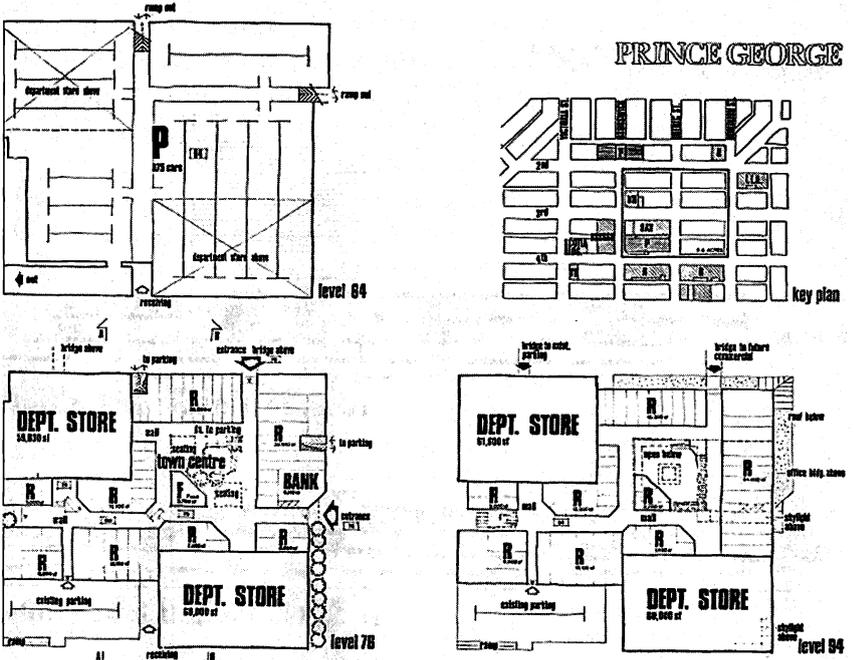
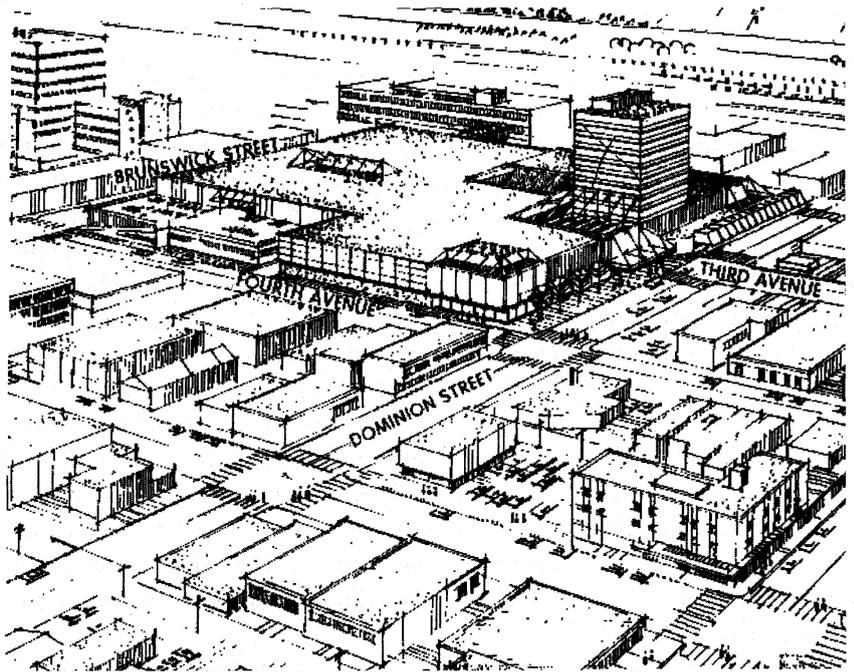


Figure 10: The Cadillac Fairview Town Centre Plan. Drawings courtesy of the City of Prince George.

their mall proposal for downtown Prince George. The rezoning to allow the Parkwood expansion was approved by the new council in 1983; the recession of the 1980s, however, thwarted plans to expand the shopping centre.

THE PRINCE GEORGE CITY CENTRE STRATEGY

There was little physical change in the downtown during the 1980s, apart from the addition of street trees, decorative light standards, and brick paving stones to a section of George Street. Beginning in 1987, however, there was renewed interest in the idea of downtown revitalization. The Prince George Region Development Corporation (PGRDC)²⁶ proposed that a City Centre Concept Committee be formed, with members representing city council, the Town Centre Business Association, the chamber of commerce, the PGRDC, and the city planning department. This group initiated, in 1988, the Prince George Downtown Strategy Study (to examine possible strategies for downtown revitalization) and the Retail Market Study (to determine the nature and extent of retail leakage from the downtown and to make retail demand projections).

These studies were concerned primarily with physical and economic revitalization issues. To address downtown social issues, the Mayor's Task Force on Downtown Concerns was created. This body made thirty-three recommendations to council related to the social aspects of downtown revitalization. The Mayor's Task Force on Downtown Concerns, the Retail Market Study, and the Prince George Downtown Strategy Study were consolidated into the Prince George City Centre Strategy by the City Centre Concept Committee, endorsed by council in May 1990.

In 1991, city council commissioned a consultant to develop a concept plan to guide the implementation of several objectives outlined in the Prince George City Centre Strategy. Two documents, *City of Prince George Downtown Revitalization* and *City of Prince George Downtown Revitalization: Preliminary Design and Costing*, were completed and endorsed by council in 1992. These documents proposed: a revitalization of 3rd Avenue, the promotion of George Street as a gateway to the downtown, and the development of a courthouse plaza at the intersection of 3rd Avenue and George Street.

²⁶ The Prince George Region Development Corporation was previously the Regional Development Commission.

Construction of the courthouse began in 1994 and was completed in 1996.

The plan for 3rd Avenue involved a conversion from one-way to two-way traffic; a conversion from angle-parking to parallel-parking; the removal of existing canopies; the increase of sidewalk width from 3 metres to 4.5 metres; and the installation of street lights, flower baskets, banners, and street trees.²⁷ Some 3rd Avenue business and property owners were opposed to this plan due to the high cost, the removal of the canopies, and the loss of parking spaces.²⁸ The cost of the proposed revitalization plan was estimated at \$3 million, \$1.3 million (43 percent) of which was to be paid by the city. The balance, \$1.7 million, was to be paid by property owners through a local improvement loan. This arrangement would have resulted in an increase in annual taxes of approximately \$2,438 per year over a ten-year period for properties with a 10-metre lot width. Due to opposition from property owners, the City of Prince George agreed to assume 60 percent of the costs, reducing the property owner's share to approximately \$1,600 per lot per year.²⁹ City council was not prepared to proceed with the 3rd Avenue improvements, however, without the support of property owners. Implementation of the City of Prince George Downtown Revitalization Plan was blocked in October 1994 when 68 percent of property owners, representing 73 percent of the value of the properties in question, voted against the proposal.³⁰

THE DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION COMMITTEE

In early 1996, an eleven-member Downtown Revitalization Committee was established as a sub-committee of the Community Planning Council,³¹ with a mandate of "researching and reporting on the issue of downtown revitalization including recommendations for action."³² The group was composed of academics, planners, a city council member, the city manager, and a number of social activists.

²⁷ Peter Bloodoff, Director of Development Services, *Report to Prince George Mayor and Council*, 11 March 1993, "Schedule 1" (Prince George: City of Prince George, 1993).

²⁸ *Prince George Citizen*, 15 October 1993, 31 January 1994, 11 October 1994.

²⁹ Bloodoff, Schedule 1.

³⁰ *Prince George Citizen*, 18 October 1994.

³¹ The Community Planning Council is a non-profit society with a mandate to strengthen the community's ability to plan for growth and change, to coordinate social planning activities and processes, to engage in social planning initiatives, to offer a process for building community well-being at all levels, to develop and maintain a knowledge and research base, and to subscribe to and promote the values of social planning.

After soliciting input from various community groups and the general public, by the end of 1996 the committee developed a report entitled *A Time for Action*, which outlined downtown issues and recommended a downtown revitalization action plan. The key to the proposed plan was the creation of a downtown commission whose broad membership, representing upwards of thirty public- and private-sector groups and organizations, would be responsible for coordinating and directing the downtown revitalization process outlined in the report.

The city administration supported the principles underlying the recommendations but was against the establishment of a “powerful” downtown commission, which it felt would duplicate the function of existing organizations and had the potential to be confusing and counter-productive. Instead, the city suggested the creation of a downtown action team to “coordinate the development of a common vision and a comprehensive action plan to guide the future growth of the downtown.”³³ The city also suggested that the

process would hopefully combine the efforts of the community as well as build partnerships amongst the various downtown constituents including residents, merchants, property owners, workers and the various agencies representing the interests of these groups such as the Downtown Parking Commission, the Town Centre Business Association, Downtown Service Providers, the Region Development Corporation, and City Departments, among others.³⁴

The major criticism of the report focused on the process leading to its development rather than on the nature of the report itself. According to the city, the Downtown Revitalization Committee was composed primarily of academics and bureaucrats (without any representation from the downtown business community) and did not adequately solicit input from the business community. The Downtown Revitalization Committee countered that input had been received from downtown business and property owners as well as all other interested segments of the community. The committee further noted that the downtown was the concern and responsibility of the entire community and not just downtown business and property owners.

³² Downtown Revitalization Committee, *A Time for Action* (Prince George: Community Planning Council, 1997), 11.

³³ George Paul, City Manager, Memo to Mayor and Council, 2 April 1997, Prince George, City of Prince George Archives.

³⁴ Ibid.

The result of this debate was the creation of the Prince George Downtown Action Team under the direction of the Prince George Region Development Corporation and the Community Futures Development Corporation. This group is continuing the process towards downtown revitalization and the creation of a downtown Business Improvement Area.

AN OVERVIEW OF PRESENT-DAY DOWNTOWN PRINCE GEORGE

Today, downtown Prince George is predominantly composed of single- and two-story rectangular wood-frame buildings built primarily during the boom period of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the buildings are in need of repair and are approaching, or have reached, the end of their economic lives. The redevelopment of the downtown has begun with a publicly funded municipal civic centre, art gallery, provincial courthouse, CNR office building, and some privately funded new buildings and renovations. This investment, however, has not been significant enough to affect the general character of the downtown.

In 1994, Prince George residents were polled to determine their perceptions of the quality of life offered by the city. The fourth most frequent response regarding negative aspects of the quality of life in the city related to the ugliness of the downtown.³⁵ When residents were asked what they would change, the most frequent response was that they would beautify the downtown. According to the poll, residents do not, in general, have a positive affinity with the downtown and do not perceive it as the social/cultural centre of the city.

Despite residents' negative perceptions, Prince George's downtown has functioned adequately from a strictly economic perspective. Between 1990 and 1997, the total vacancy rate in the downtown averaged approximately 5 per cent. This figure increased to 12 per cent in 1998 due to a slowdown in the regional economy.³⁶ Given such low vacancy figures, there has been little economic incentive for landowners to spend significant amounts of capital on downtown redevelopment, especially when faced with the costs associated with grand plans.

³⁵ Healthy Communities Committee, *Report on the Quality of Life in Prince George* (Prince George: Healthy Cities Committee, 1997), 25-7.

³⁶ It is interesting to note that the city's shopping centres have been experiencing a zero vacancy rate.

The amount of retail floor area in the downtown (94,000 square metres) is slightly greater than the combined floor area of the large shopping centres located outside of the downtown (90,000 square metres).³⁷ If the recent establishment of big-box retail outlets, including Costco and the Real Canadian Superstore, are considered in this equation, then the downtown contains less than 50 percent of the city's retail floor area. Despite the decreasing prominence of the downtown in terms of total floor area, and despite its inability to function adequately in a cultural and social context, the downtown continues to be the most significant and largest commercial area in the city.

Perceived obstacles to downtown revitalization are issues associated with homelessness, prostitution, and associated social issues.³⁸ The development of the courthouse at its present location resulted in the demolition of two single-room occupancy hotels. These hotels, with a total of approximately forty rooms, had provided an important housing stock for the city's poor.³⁹ The area around these hotels was the location of the community's sex trade. Although one of the intentions of constructing the courthouse at its present location was to clean up a derelict portion of the downtown, the closure of the two hotels eliminated the majority of affordable housing units in the downtown and redistributed social problems from a concentrated location to numerous new downtown locations.

Prince George's harsh northern climate also offers challenges for downtown revitalization. Urban design for northern areas must exploit the positive, and minimize the negative, elements of each season. Frequently, the importation into the North of southern-based design principles results in the intensification of negative climatic elements. The appropriateness of design to the local climate plays a significant role in determining people's perceptions towards the urban landscape, the climate, and the overall quality of life in their community.

In the Miracle Plan and the Cadillac Fairview Project, the approach was to create a large enclosed structure in which a southern climate could be recreated. Current revitalization practice encourages urban design that creates a more positive winter experience and contributes to increased recreational activity, community involvement, and a more

³⁷ Development Services Department, *Commercial Vacancy Report* (Prince George: City of Prince George, 1997). This is an annual survey of the vacancy rate within downtown Prince George, undertaken by the planning department of the City of Prince George.

³⁸ *Prince George Citizen*, 15 July 1994.

³⁹ *Prince George Citizen*, 18 January 1983.

positive outlook towards the community and the downtown environment. This can be achieved without creating the isolation of an enclosed mall. Revitalization must include a retrofitted downtown urban environment which accentuates the positive elements of each season and diminishes the negative elements.

A number of opportunities to increase the social and cultural function in the downtown have been missed over the last few years. The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) was located on the periphery of the city in 1994, and two major cultural facilities and one major recreational complex have also been located outside of the downtown core.

At this point in the history of Prince George, there is a strong sense within the community that something must change in order to improve the quality of the social, cultural, and built elements of the downtown. To reverse the relative stagnation of the downtown, community leaders must learn from the mistakes of the past and the successes of current revitalization efforts, and they must apply this knowledge to their community development and revitalization activities.

LESSONS LEARNED

This examination of earlier efforts to revitalize Prince George's downtown suggests that all downtown interest groups must be involved in the planning process; that strong leaders, who understand the process of negotiated compromise, must participate; that plans must be on a scale that is implementable; and that plans must be flexible in order to allow for organic growth and development.

INTEREST GROUP REPRESENTATION IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

All interest groups must be involved in developing a downtown revitalization strategy. In the past, Prince George's plans have been developed under the control and direction of a particular interest group or consortium of interest groups, with attempts made to "sell" those plans to other interest groups. The initial plan for the downtown, created in 1913, was developed according to the needs of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, but the implementation of the plan was opposed by the developers of adjacent townsites and their

residents. The Miracle Plan and the Centrum Plan were proposed by the business community, but, practically and politically, the plans could not be implemented by city officials. The Town Centre Plan was proposed by the City of Prince George and a property developer but was opposed by a portion of the downtown business community and the general public. The City Centre Strategy, proposed by the City of Prince George, was defeated by downtown property owners. The Downtown Revitalization Committee had representation from the City of Prince George, the academic community, and the social service providers, but the downtown business community and property owners were not directly involved in developing its plan.

The process of developing a downtown revitalization strategy must be, to some extent, a negotiation process in which interests are expressed and compromises are made. In Prince George, historical issues that have never been resolved to any degree of mutual satisfaction include the future use of canopies, the loss of parking spaces to accommodate increased pedestrian traffic, the manner in which social problems are addressed, and the sharing of the costs of revitalization between downtown property owners and taxpayers. These and other issues must be addressed in a downtown revitalization strategy that will receive commitment from major interest groups, including business owners, property owners and developers, city council and administration, social service providers, and the academic and professional communities.

LEADERSHIP AND COMPROMISE

Interest groups involved in negotiating the nature of a revitalization plan must have strong leadership. In past Prince George revitalization efforts, the groups that have encountered the greatest difficulty in obtaining a single voice have been downtown property owners and the downtown business community. The problem of gaining representation and interest from property owners is complicated by the fact that a number of properties are owned by individuals or companies from outside of Prince George.

The downtown business community has been represented, to some extent, by the Town Centre Business Association (TCBA), which has been successful in organizing downtown events, developing joint media promotions, and lobbying for improved parking and policing. TCBA membership reached a maximum of 122 members in 1996, up from a

low of forty-one members in 1989.⁴⁰ Despite the increase in membership, the 1996 figure represents only a fraction of the business community in the downtown.

Historically, the diverse views and interests of downtown landowners and businesspeople have frustrated attempts at unified representation. If the interests of this community are not adequately represented and addressed, then implementation of any revitalization plan will be difficult. Whether it be the TCBA, a Business Improvement Area, or some other organization, a legitimate and recognized voice must be developed to represent the interests of downtown business and property owners.

IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING

Most past revitalization efforts have focused solely on developing a plan that deals with physical and functional changes to the downtown. The Miracle Plan, the Centrum Plan, the Town Centre Plan, and the City Centre Strategy all involved detailed physical improvements that were unimplementable due to difficulties associated with their complexity, inflexibility, high costs, or opposition from interest groups. These plans failed adequately to consider the implementation of proposed changes. In contrast, the last plan proposed by the Downtown Revitalization Committee was solely concerned with developing a process to implement downtown revitalization. Because the physical and functional changes that would take place under the plan were not addressed, it was difficult for the various interest groups to support the creation of a powerful downtown commission.

Design and function issues, related to elements such as canopies, reduced on-street parking, expanded sidewalks, parking meters, location of social services, and infrastructure maintenance, must be negotiated as part of the development of a plan. Equally important in the negotiation process are implementation considerations such as how revitalization is to be financed, the acquisition and assembly of lands required for public use, the role of the city in legislating and enforcing elements of revitalization, and the time frame for implementation. If these issues are not negotiated satisfactorily with the groups who perceive themselves to be affected, then those groups will not be willing to commit to the plan. Considering implementation issues during the

⁴⁰ Town Centre Business Association, *Annual Report: 1996* (Prince George: Town Centre Business Association, 1996), 2.

plan development stage also ensures that the specific physical and functional changes proposed are practical from a political, economic, and logistical perspective. This has not been the case in past Prince George revitalization efforts.

PLAN FLEXIBILITY AND ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT

Past revitalization efforts in Prince George have tended to be grand endeavours, proposing detailed and relatively inflexible plans whose complexity and comprehensiveness contributed to their failure. A successful plan must be designed to adapt and evolve over time, along with the complex and ever-changing environment within which it must operate. Downtown redevelopment is a long-term project. If a plan's level of detail is too high, or if it lacks flexibility, then it will not allow for an evolving urban environment and development process. A downtown environment that is too controlled and predetermined will be artificial and sterile and will consist of unrelated and detached elements. A plan that allows for an organic development process will result in a more coherent and better functioning downtown.

CONCLUSIONS

Downtowns provide two distinct ingredients that contribute strongly to a lively, vibrant community: a concentration of large numbers of diverse businesses (which promotes entrepreneurial activity) and a social, cultural, and recreational centre (which creates a strong sense of place and belonging).

Jane Jacobs, one of the most well-read urbanists in this century, believes that downtowns should be "organic, spontaneous, and untidy."⁴¹ Diversity and activity have been crucial to the survival of downtowns over the centuries. Concentrations of people are essential to their economic growth and to the prosperity of the larger community and region. Downtowns can create an environment for, and can cultivate, entrepreneurial activity and small business development. A vibrant, diversified downtown can help to alleviate the boom-bust cycles that have been a traditional element of northern British Columbia's economic activity.

⁴¹ Jane Jacobs, "Ideas that Matter: An International Gathering to Create and Share Knowledge" 4 February 1998. (Online.) Available: <http://www.jacobs97.com/>.

This history of the growth and development of downtown Prince George has identified a number of lessons that have been learned and that are currently being incorporated into the revitalization process in Prince George: the plan development process must be inclusive of all interest groups and must function as a negotiation process in which interests are discussed and compromises reached; the interest groups involved must have legitimate and strong representation so that compromises are committed to by all groups and their members; the plan development process must concurrently address issues related to physical and functional change in the downtown as well as the implementation issues involved in those changes; and the plan must be capable of evolving in an organic manner over time in relation to the complex and ever-changing real world environment.

This research may assist other small northern communities in their revitalization efforts, but further research is needed to determine the cultural and economic roles that dynamic downtowns may play in the development of small northern cities and towns. Comparative historical studies of such communities as Kelowna, Kamloops, and Prince Rupert could identify additional successful downtown revitalization strategies as well as pitfalls to be avoided. The applicability of current theoretical revitalization models needs to be examined, and these models need to be adapted to the unique conditions found in northern communities. Finally, multi-season urban design and winter livability principles need to be developed and incorporated into community and site design planning processes.

John Forester describes community planning as a complex process involving an infinite number of variables that are constantly changing within the dynamic landscape called community.⁴² Studying this phenomenon called community may be shunned by many researchers as too complex and imprecise. By not studying community in all its complexity, however, we avoid the opportunity of making our urban regions and downtowns vibrant, beautiful, exciting human places.

⁴² John Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 3-13.