



Heritage NL

Jane's Walk –The Impact of Development on the Heritage of Downtown St. John's

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Overview:

This Jane's Walk is intended to familiarize participants in a greater way with the historic commercial heart of St. John's and to generate reflection on the impacts of post-1960s development on the area. Ideally, it will stimulate conversation about how we ensure a healthy, dynamic downtown that continues to draw both residents and visitors. This walk was first conducted in May of 2019 and included a conversation with participants about principles for good downtown development. The discussion points are included in Appendix A.

The Jane's Walks are named after Jane Jacobs who was a journalist, author and activist and one of the first and most articulate critics of post WW II urban renewal. Her most famous work was *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in which she critiqued the post-WW II slum clearance and freeway building schemes in city centres across North America. After living in New York she relocated to Toronto in 1968 where she carried on her writing career. Two of her key concepts were "eyes on the streets" which was about having sufficient density, activity and visual access to a street to ensure its safety and the notion of "social capital" or those intangible human relationships and values that contribute to community health, something that the planners and engineers often failed to grasp. Her idea of maintaining the health of a city was to maintain the diversity of its streets. In her words:

"To generate exuberant diversity in a city's streets and districts four conditions are indispensable:

- 1. The district, and indeed as many of its internal parts as possible, must serve more than one primary function; preferably more than two...*
- 2. Most blocks must be short; that is, streets and opportunities to turn corners must be frequent.*
- 3. The district must mingle buildings that vary in age and condition, including a good proportion of old ones so that they vary in the economic yield they must produce. This mingling must be fairly close-grained.*
- 4. There must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people, for whatever purposes they may be there..."*

“...there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to insure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind... This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance . . . in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole.”

Urban designer Jeff Speck reinforces these conditions with his 4 principles for walkable cities, “walkability” being a key concept in ensuring a dynamic cities and neighbourhoods:

1. A Reason to Walk – a broad diversity of functions within a fairly dense area to attract people
2. A Safe Walk - ensuring sufficient separation from vehicular traffic or slowing it down sufficiently so that pedestrians feel safe and lots of people in the streets.
3. A comfortable walk – a space needs to be psychologically comfortable to walk in that allows pedestrians to see what is around them while providing a sufficient sense of enclosure
4. An interesting walk – sufficient visual interest at the ground level of a street with active ground floors (shops, services, windows to look into and out of buildings).

Jacobs’ observations provide a lens for participants in this Jane’s Walk to consider the impacts of development on downtown St. John’s over the last decades and going forward.

For a brief history of the evolution and development of Downtown St. John’s see Appendix B

Walking Route with Key Points

1. Starting Point: NW Corner of Springdale and Water Streets (Newman Building). Walk south along Water Street as far as underpass to Pitt's Memorial Highway.

- Note the single block of historic structures that include the Newman Building, Newman Wine Vaults and a few historic commercial buildings. These have been isolated by developments in both directions on Water Street including by a 4 land extension of Hamilton Avenue, Pitt's Memorial Drive and the container port development across the road. Just beyond Hamilton Avenue on Water Street are two orphaned buildings – cut off from their original streetscape -- one of which is vacant and the other the O'Mara Pharmacy Museum. The isolation of small groups of heritage buildings puts them at risk either through under-utilization or future development.



Historic and contemporary views of the west end of Water Street (l-r: site of JAG Hotel expansion; Oceanex Building; Newman Building on right with site of container port on left)

2. Return north on Water Street to the corner of Springdale. Walk up Springdale a 30 metres or so and look left and right.

- On the left is the new Fortis Building which follows a suburban style setback surrounded by parking. Could it have been more successfully been situated right at street level with a strong street address with parking behind? Look right to the new Salvation Army building. Note how the Springdale entrance is located up an entire level, with a blank wall offered to passing pedestrians. Even though these new buildings are situated in a medium highrise zone, consideration should still be given to creating a walkable neighbourhood that has a strong street address. Too many of the modern developments within downtown St. John's over the last few decades pretty much exist unto themselves with no sense of how they fit into a unified whole that supports the kind of street life Jane Jacobs spoke of. I think that a more thorough understanding of the historic fabric of downtown St. John's and of the importance of creating a pedestrian-friendly environment by developers and builders may give us better new development in every part of downtown St. John's.

3. Return to the corner of Water Street

- The excavated site adjacent to the JAG Hotel is a planned extension to the hotel comprising a theatre and additional hotel tower. An existing stone Georgian commercial building and an early 20th century concrete building on Buchanan Street housing Gaze Seed, were demolished to make way for the development. Like the Water Street elevation of the existing JAG Hotel, the new addition will, essentially, turn its back on the street, offering no street address on Water or Springdale Streets, raising concerns that there will be a somewhat unwelcoming stretch for pedestrians a block long (see Jeff Speck #4).

4. Continue walking north on Water Street to corner of Water Street and Waldegrave

- Note the Oceanex Building at the SW corner of Water Street and Harbour Drive – while the container port displaced a whole row of historic commercial buildings, this fairly recent building has made some attempt to blend in with the downtown area in its scale and use of materials.
- From the north side of this intersection look back west at the high rise buildings. This area has been zoned high rise development (up to 54 m or or nearly 180 ft equivalent to a 16-18 storey building). How successfully do you think this area integrates with the historic scale and fabric of downtown? Does it reinforce a special sense of place that is St. John's? How successfully does it adhere to Jacobs' and Speck's principles above for a healthy and walkable neighbourhood? How could buildings in this area more successfully follow these principles? (e.g., ensuring a strong public face with windows on the street; maintaining the line of buildings right on the sidewalk).
- Now view the new Convention Centre along Water and Waldegrave Streets – how successfully do you think these facades support the interests of the pedestrian?

5. Continue walking north on Water Street to the Post Office and Adjacent Buildings

- Continue to the Post Office – while a modern building dating from the 1960s, that replaced an earlier building (see Photo pg. 14), it does incorporate some quality materials such as stone – note recent renovations to accommodate additional retail that further enhance the address to the street.
- 357 Water Street – new office building – What works: shops on the ground floor; covered area for pedestrian comfort; office tower steps back. What doesn't work: why do we have to look at a 4 floors parking garage? Should building have been stepped back at 3 storeys? Could the parking garage function have been better masked?
- City Tourist Information Office and city offices – good example of a public-private restoration project – city took out a long-term lease which made the historical recreation of the building possible

6. Continue walking north on Water Street to Bishop's Cove

- As you walk east along Water Street note the use of non-masonry materials that are recent additions to the front facades of some buildings (clapboard or fake stone) and that are chipping away at the integrity of the historic character.
- As you walk further east on Water Street, you will notice several streets on the harbour side that have "Cove" in the name (Bishop's Cove, Beck's Cove, Ayre's Cove, and Baird's Cove) – these all denoted small coves on the harbour front that provided public docking facilities (as opposed to most of the harbour which was owned by private commercial firms along Water Street).
- At the northeast corner of of Bishop's Cove and Water Street construction has begun on a new home for the Bank of Montreal. While the notion of infill is positive, the current proposal does little to reference the historical/architectural context on the edge of the National Historic District that extends as far as Beck's Cove). Reflect on how you think new buildings can best integrate with historic neighbourhoods.

7. Continue walking north on Water Street to Bowering Building

- Continuing north on Water Street, you are now entering the National Historic District which recognizes the best block of remaining pre-1892 Fire structures. They provide a good sense of what much of Water Street looked like in the second half of the 19th Century between the great fires of 1846 and 1892.
- Bowering Building (east side of Water Street) – what you see is a 1990s redesign of a 1960s renovation that presented a more stark, modernist façade. This was an attempt to better blend with the heritage character of the street – the overhang is great when it is raining or snowing, a third level parking level is hardly noticeable from the sidewalk

8. Continue walking north on Water Street to Atlantic Place, noting stops along the way

- Ayre's Lane – walk down this lane to small plaza at rear adjacent to the Scotia tower. It is difficult to read as private or public space, which is often the case with bank plazas. It is easy to miss this interesting outdoor area which overlooks the harbour. What thoughts do you have for how Ayre's Lane and the plaza could be better made use of as public space?
- Scotia Tower – while this is a very modern, medium-rise structure, an attempt was made to maintain the traditional building height at the street level.
- Atlantic Place – built in the 1970s, this was the second office building to be constructed on Water Street after the Fortis tower. Originally it was to have several floors of hotel space on top of what you see now. It saw the demolition of a half block of Post-1892 buildings (see photo lower right, pg. 13) and greatly exceeded the height of all of its neighbours; creating a wind tunnel effect on the street. Stepping the building back above 2-3 storeys would have helped better maintain the scale and texture of the historic buildings on the street. It was originally built to house shops on the lower levels but eventually these mostly left and the current food court struggles to maintain tenants. Downtown shopping mall spaces in many small to medium-sized cities were built in Canada in the 1970s and 80s. Most have had little commercial success over the long-term. A few years ago Atlantic Place received a face lift on Water Street and Harbour Drive to liven up its box-like exterior. This project acted as a significant catalyst for the development of a strong citizens' voice for preserving the city's built heritage.

9. Continue walking north on Water Street to Beck's Cove

- As you continue north on Water Street, note the imposing, early 20th century stone courthouse on your left. At the street level, the area has been turned over to parking. How could this space be made more visually appealing and friendly to downtown users?
- Glance down the street to the harbour on Beck's Cove and note that the street level of these older buildings (originally serving as warehouse space) is devoted to shops and a restaurant, making it a pedestrian-friendly street. Contrast this to the side streets where newer buildings have been constructed which offer no street address (usually blank facades masking parking garages)

10. Continue North on Water Street to 156 Water Street

- Note the half block of buildings starting at 156 Water Street extending to the Fortis Building. A proposal had been brought forth to tear down this range of historic structures to erect a 15 storey office tower. After public objections the proposal was withdrawn and Fortis, instead, built a new office building in the west end of downtown. Architect Grant Genova and others put together ideas to reanimate this block of buildings and to find a new business model.

11. Continue North on Water Street to 156 Water Street

- View the Fortis Building (144 Water Street) – how effective is the small plaza in front? Who uses it? How could it be made a livelier and more engaging public space.
- Turn right on Job's Cove– note the sides of these more modern buildings at street level and contrast them with Baird's Cove. Again, most modern developments downtown have ignored the street address along their side street elevations.

12. Turn right on Harbour Drive and continue south

- The west side of Harbour Drive comprises the backs of historic Water Street commercial buildings and was once populated by dozens of piers that jutted out into the harbour in an irregular way, interspersed with public coves. The backs of these buildings offer considerable visual interest with their historic construction of mostly brick and stone and their less formal facades and less regular texture than Water Street. the many indentations in the line of buildings can be quite interesting with their less formal facades and less regular texture – some have more of an old warehouse feel to them. They open up possibilities for other kinds of activities and uses – restaurants, studios, art spaces. Unfortunately, most of this side of Harbour Drive has been given over to parking.
- As you continue along Harbour Drive you will note the high iron fence on the water side that was erected to enhance port security. Previously, the public had access to the harbour apron all along the west side of the harbour.
- Continue along the block long Atlantic Place parking garage and office tower. As a pedestrian, how do you feel walking on this stretch? Is there anything to catch your interest or make you linger? How safe do you feel?

13. Continue along Harbour Drive to Beck's Cove

- On your right is the Murray Premises, 19th century fish merchant warehouses which were redeveloped in the 1980s to a complex of shops, offices, and a branch of the former Newfoundland Museum. Today, it is largely devoted to a boutique hotel. It demonstrates an alternate path to the redevelopment of an historic port area. At Bishop's Cove a couple of old warehouses along the old harbour front have or are being converted to shops.
- Across the road, on the water side you will see two relatively new structures, built under the auspices of the Port Authority. How successfully do they integrate into the historic fabric of downtown? Should the harbour front which – many might claim is a public good – be devoted to private business development?

14. Continue along Harbour Drive to the Parkade at 351

- This is the most recent parking facility constructed along Harbour Drive that offers little interest to the pedestrian and misses opportunities for engaging with the harbour at street level

15. Continue back to Water Street which concludes this Jane's Walk.

Appendix A: Principles for Good New Development in Downtown St. John's

1. New development downtown should not be derivative or provide a false sense of history. It should be of this time and of this place.
2. New development needs to respect and acknowledge the historic building fabric in terms of human scale, quality of materials, level of detailing, and what it offers to the street in terms of interest to passersby. It should also respect the traditional street pattern which often comprised short blocks reinforcing Jacobs' principle about short blocks. Failure to consider these things, further degrades the heritage character of downtown and relegates what remains to the role of relic. Take for example, the Newman Building and the Newman Wine Vaults, two significant heritage structures which are, increasingly, being cut off from the rest of downtown through new development. A good practice would be to have proponents for new developments submit an analysis of their site (e.g., cultural, historical, climatic/environmental context and analysis of the way people use a neighbourhood) and to demonstrate how their proposals addressed these things. Understanding and responding to site is one of the key principles of good building design.
3. Drawing on Jacobs, all development must offer something to the street in terms of services and interest to pedestrians. This means no blank facades which create a hostile environment for the pedestrian. North America is littered with cities and towns that have driven out pedestrians with new development and thereby made virtual wastelands out of their city centres. Good development can strengthen a city centre. Poor development can kill it.
4. Public and stakeholder consultation is key to ensuring good development. While properties may belong to private interests, the street belongs to and impacts everyone and citizens should have a say in how it is shaped. It is important to involve the public early in the design process for new developments. Typically, proposals come for public input very late in the design process when property developers have already invested significantly in their concepts and are very invested in them. When the public is finally consulted, their input is generally ignored which only creates public cynicism and a sense that municipal officials are more aligned with the interests of developers. Whether it is through public design charettes or the input of a citizen design committee early on, public input can provide ideas for how a development can benefit the entire community and not just the developer. What is good for the public is likely good for property owners as well over the long term.
5. Long-term Sustainability – most of the pre-World War II buildings downtown were built of quality materials that, with ongoing maintenance, would survive centuries and they have generally aged to a pleasing patina. Many of our contemporary buildings are

made of poor quality materials that require complete replacement or major upgrades every couple of decades. This is not good for the environment.

6. Cars and Downtown – there is a need to re-evaluate policies downtown related to how cars are accommodated. Building ever more parking garages is likely not the solution. The decades-long trend of trying to bring more cars downtown has resulted in the loss of the majority of the city's historic building fabric and has rendered long stretches of downtown unfriendly to pedestrians. Placing a greater emphasis on accommodating pedestrians will likely do more to enliven downtown along with a strategy for enhancing public transportation to get people to and from the downtown area.

Observations & Recommendations for the City for a Healthy Downtown (based on a participant discussion at the end of the Jane's Walk)

- Ensure that the downtown supports a good mix of functions and activities and that supports public life. No development should be allowed that doesn't offer something to the street and the pedestrian in the way of visual interest, windows to the street
- Need to support more green space
- Need to rethink some of the semi-public spaces that exist (e.g., bank plazas) that don't seem to support much public activity or use. Those that exist could be made more visually appealing and could be animated (e.g., pop-up food fairs; craft fairs; entertainment). A good example of this is the wide pedestrian passageway between Water Street and the west side of the Scotia Building that leads to a seating area overlooking the harbour. Most people aren't even aware that it exists.
- Development should respect the historic character of the downtown.
- Developers should be required in their proposals to demonstrate public benefit (for all strata of the community)
- We must ensure the walkability of downtown in terms of:
 - Safety
 - Outdoor seating areas
 - Accessibility
 - Aesthetics – good lighting and quality landscaping
 - Enhancement and maximizing of views
 - Shelter from the wind and rain
 - Visual interest
 - Windows on the street

- Encourage sidewalk patios
- Celebrate the existing laneways and alleyways downtown with art/greenery/naming
- Animate downtown with festivals and special activities all through the year (e.g., art walks, historical tours, etc.).

Appendix B: Background on Downtown Development and its Impacts on Historic Downtown Streetscapes

Prior to the 1960s downtown St. John's comprised an extensive commercial area of storefronts, merchant premises, and industrial buildings that reflected a largely intact streetscape dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries. It formed a continuous commercial district on Water Street from Temperance Street in the East to Victoria Park in the West, all along Duckworth Street, and the west end of Gower Street, extending up into some of the residential streets on the west end.

The commercial core of St. John's that many of us know and love, developed in an organic way without any zoning regulations and little in the way of formal regulation, save edicts from the Colonial Government requiring non-combustible materials and fire breaks along with improved sanitary and water services.

Historic downtown St. John's is characterized by a number of things:

- The gentle, undulating curves of Water Street that followed the old harbour shoreline.
- The strong patterning of buildings with heights of two to three storeys and fairly consistent window patterning. There was a unity of materials (brick and stone) which gave a fine texture to the street and provided a sense of permanence. The whole of downtown, including the old residential streets, have a pleasing architectural pattern with variations on a theme. The reason we have this unity is largely because of the building technology that was available in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Aside from wood, brick and stone were pretty much the only available building materials. Building heights were limited by the vertical distance that people and goods could realistically be transported to upper floors by human power. Initially roofs of wood or slate shingles needed to be steep to properly shed water; only in the late 19th century did flat or low-sloped roofs become possible with the introduction of bitumen-based products like felt and tar. Window configurations and sizes were determined by the standard-sized glass generally available that resulted in typical 6/6 windows in the 19th century and 2/2 or 1/1 windows in the 20th century with large plate glass reserved for shop windows.



Water Street 19th century



Water Street Early to mid-20th century

- The commercial buildings of downtown were interspersed here and there with the occasional public edifice of a larger scale but these were all built of the same materials and generally followed the same classical architectural vocabulary.



Former Post Office (demolished)



Courthouse (Duckworth Street elevation)

Post-1960s Development Brings Change

A number of developments beginning with the creation of Harbour Drive and the construction of the Pitt's Memorial viaduct, had a major impact on the historic commercial district resulting, over the next decades, in the demolition of more than half of St. John's historic commercial structures. The major focus seemed to be – as with cities all across North America – of moving traffic to and through the downtown as efficiently as possible. Changes included:

1) The elimination of the old finger piers on the harbour and their replacement with Harbour Drive, saw a change in character of the water front from a fine-grained, irregular texture of jutting piers and public coves to a continuous, straight harbour apron. This opened up the backs of Water Street buildings to a new public street, Harbour Drive, designed to speed up vehicular traffic moving through downtown.



St. John's Harbourfront with its Finger Piers

2) The construction of the container port saw the elimination of all the 19th century commercial buildings on the south side of Water Street from Waldegrave Street up to the former Train Station.

3) The building of the Pitt's Memorial Viaduct and the creation of New Gower Street resulted in the elimination of a significant number of 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings on Gower Street and the streets leading up from it. It also served to cut off the pedestrian access from the central downtown area to the West End of Water Street with the viaduct and an extension to Hamilton Ave.



The construction of the Pitt's Memorial Viaduct (left) and the widening of Gower Street saw the demolition of a whole street of historical commercial buildings (right)

4) The construction of Atlantic Place saw the demolition of a half block of post-1892 Fire commercial buildings (see photo bottom right, pg. 3) and the construction of a large, multi-storied commercial/office building and parking garage. This, by the way, was one of the key events that lead to the heritage preservation movement in the city. This had been preceded by the original Fortis tower and was followed by other bank towers including the TD the Scotia towers, along with other smaller commercial developments. Most of the north side of Harbour Drive has been developed either for parking lots or parking garages.

5) More recently the city made the decision to create a high rise zone at the west end of downtown. This has had the benefit of keeping recent high rise development away from the old historic heart of downtown. That being said, good design principles that make the rest of downtown a good place should still be applied, particularly when it comes to maintaining pedestrian-friendly streets. Much of the new development in this area either presents blank walls and parking garages on all but one street address or offers suburban-set backs surrounded by parking lots (e.g., the new Fortis Building).

Due to the availability of new technologies and materials, many of the newer developments have been constructed at a scale completely different from the existing building fabric of downtown. The intimate scale of downtown, defined by standard building widths of a few bays, shop fronts on the street, and short blocks began to be replaced with new structures that often took up a major section of a city block and that extended several stories higher than existing structures. Larger edifices can be visually broken down to a finer scale that conforms to existing building typologies. As well, little consideration seems have been given to climate in the design of the new high rise towers which have a tendency to amplify the already windy conditions of the city and make it less comfortable for pedestrians.

Of particular note is the fact that many of the newer developments, particularly those situated on corner lots, offer only blank facades to side streets adding no visual interest for pedestrians. Add to this the fact that properties along Harbour Drive are comprised of either parking garages or parking lots, and we have long stretches of downtown that don't support walkability. It is interesting to contrast these newer developments with the few remaining older side streets leading to the harbour such as the east side of Baird's Cove and the west side of Bishop's Cove that offer shops and services.



Other than on their front facades, most modern developments downtown have offered only blank facades to passing pedestrians on side and rear elevations creating pedestrian “dead zones”

The opportunity to develop a lively rejuvenated harbour front with shops, restaurants and accommodations, parks and other amenities – something found in cities such as Halifax, Montreal and Vancouver – has been largely missed in St. John’s. The lack of a long-term plan for the harbour front and existing regulations which actually discourage amenities at the street level (i.e., by requiring parking) means that the harbour front is becoming less and less a place where the public might want to go.