

Creating a Square in the Heart of the City

Exploring the opportunities + challenges of creating a pedestrian plaza on 800-block Robson Street

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as part of the Greenest City Scholar program



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Report Summary

London has Trafalgar Square, New York has Rockefeller Plaza, Rome has Piazza Navona. Around the world, public spaces help define a city and its residents. Often imbued with meaning and pride, these civic spaces provide room to breathe and to celebrate the city. Despite its internationally renowned standard of livability, Vancouver is sorely lacking in its inventory of urban public squares. With abundant greenspace and a pastoral setting, Vancouver's public spaces emphasize an extroverted perspective. Rather than celebrating the city's urbanity, Vancouver's public realm provides outward views of the ocean, mountains, and natural elements that contribute to the city's beauty.

The potential of Robson Square as a central fulcrum of civic life has been under discussion since the 1950's – well before the ground was broken in 1973. Many agree that the site has yet to reach its full potential. Although the diversity of users and uses add to the Square's vibrancy, it also presents a significant challenge. Future renovations of the site will have to consider and contend with the many public and private programs that compete to define the space. A balance will need to be struck between these uses to ensure that Robson Square becomes a place for everyone.

The 800 block of Robson Street (referred to as 800-block Robson in this report) represents a rare opportunity to establish a truly vibrant pedestrian plaza in the heart of downtown Vancouver. For this potential to be realized, significant changes are needed and challenges must be overcome. The physical design of 800-block Robson must be altered to demonstrate a coherent and safe pedestrian space. Consistent programming and activation must occur to draw people into the site and keep them there. A strong management structure will need to be established to oversee the day-to-day operations of the plaza. Finally, a successful public square must be accessible to pedestrians. This is where Robson Square faces its most significant challenge. At the physical and figurative centre of Robson Square lies one of the area's greatest challenges with regard to accessibility and legibility; the 800-block of Robson Street. Originally intended as a pedestrian space, this busy thoroughfare currently dissects the Square with buses and motorized vehicles.

It is the intent of this report to identify the challenges and opportunities of returning 800-block Robson to its pedestrian roots on a permanent basis. Using case studies from around the world, this report will provide examples of how the street can contribute to, rather than detract from the pedestrian experience on Robson Square. This study was commissioned by VIVA Vancouver, an innovative program which creates temporary pedestrian spaces, and is housed within the CoV's Transportation Engineering Department. The research project was designed to support VIVA Vancouver's investigation into the future of 800-block Robson, as directed by City Council. This present study is not intended to prescribe any single future for 800-block Robson. Rather, it provides a variety of options and inspirations that can be used to create a truly vibrant public space in the heart of downtown Vancouver.

1.1 Report Overview

REPORT CONTEXT:

The research, interviews, and analysis were completed as part of the Greenest City Scholar program. This internship program sponsors University of British Columbia (UBC) graduate students to work on sustainability projects with the City of Vancouver (CoV). This current study was commissioned by the CoV's VIVA Vancouver program. VIVA Vancouver is housed within the Streets Activities Branch of the Transportation Engineering Department. The program, which is coordinated by two full-time CoV staff, is mandated to coordinate the conversion of road space in pedestrian spaces, typically on a temporary basis. The objectives of this program are to enhance the pedestrian realm, create safer streets, encourage active transportation, and provide opportunities for community connections. In addition to these responsibilities, VIVA Vancouver has been tasked by Council to investigate the future of 800-block Robson.

As to how this assignment relates to City sustainability initiatives; the changes to 800-block Robson would have profound impacts on Downtown Vancouver's road and active transportation networks. As such, public realm improvements on 800-block Robson could enhance pedestrian activity, and thus move the City towards its Greenest City 2020 objectives of boosting active transportation mode share.

The objective of this research project is to compile a list of best practices based on case study research of successful public plazas around the world. The information gathered through this process can then be used to help guide VIVA Vancouver and other CoV staff as they explore possible design, programming, management, and transportation future for 800-block Robson. Case studies were selected based on their perceived relevance to the local context of Vancouver's 800-block Robson. Criteria on which potential case study plazas were compared to 800-block Robson included; physical size, local climate, location in the city, management structure, programming mandate, and existence or proximity of road space within the plaza. A list of nearly 50 potential case studies was eventually reduced to 12 plazas - three examples for each of the four primary categories of investigation mentioned above.

Although the research was completed on behalf of VIVA Vancouver, the recommendations and analysis throughout this report reflect the ideas and opinions of the researcher based on his findings.



Left: This report was commissioned by the City of Vancouver's VIVA Vancouver program. VIVA's signature projects include the summertime closure 800-block Robson, as well as the weekend closures and activations of Granville Street during the summer months.

RESEARCH METHODS and DATA:

The project began with an information gathering process. This included the review of public feedback on 800-block Robson that had already been collected by VIVA Vancouver. Results from an online survey and notes from public meetings provided a fuller picture of key issues from the perspective of Vancouver residents. This information provided a base from which conversations with specific stakeholders could begin. Working with VIVA Vancouver staff, a contact list of approximately ten individuals was created. These individuals ranged from City of Vancouver staff to members of the original Arthur Erickson design team for Robson Square. The subsequent interviews with these individuals provided guidance as to the primary design, programming, and management challenges currently facing 800-block Robson. Interview participants were also asked to describe, in their opinion, how they believe 800-block Robson should look, feel, and be managed in the future. Several interviews were also conducted with staff members responsible for the ongoing management of case study plazas in Canada and the United States, as listed in Section 3 of the report. The information collected through the interview process is primarily applied in Section 2 of this report, although some ideas are explored in more detail in the summary section with recommendations. The complete list of interviewees is included in Section 5 of this report.

The quantitative data collected through pedestrian counts and behavioural mapping helped to demonstrate how people use a pedestrianized 800-block Robson during peak times of the day. These evaluation programs are conducted annually, which allowed for comparative analysis between the various summertime programs and designs on the site. Summer interns in the Streets Activities Branch were tasked with conducting intercept surveys on 800-block Robson. These surveys gauge user opinions of 800-block Robson as a pedestrian plaza. The questions range from user feedback

on the cleanliness of the site, to their opinion on how the street should perform in the future. As part of VIVA Vancouver's annual evaluation program, it was also possible to compare intercept survey results from 2013 with past summers. These comparative exercises are limited in that they only collect information from 800-block Robson users while the street is closed to traffic. However, the data collected can help CoV staff understand how pedestrians intuitively navigate the space.

REPORT ORGANIZATION:

The structure and intent of this report was shaped under the guidance of VIVA Vancouver staff members. Through previous public and stakeholder consultations, VIVA staff identified four areas of investigation related to 800-block Robson: 1) Physical Design, 2) Activation and Programming, 3) Management, and 4) Pedestrianizing Road Space. These prioritized categories guided the research process and formed the structure of this current report.

Before diving into these challenges, this report begins with an overview of 800-block Robson and its surroundings. The opening section traces the development of 800-block Robson from its conceptual phase in the 1970's to its current status as a much debated and contested space in the middle of Downtown Vancouver. This section summarizes the longstanding challenges of the site, as well as the new and emerging opportunities that could bring significant changes to 800-block Robson in the near future. The impact of VIVA Vancouver's seasonal pedestrianization of 800-block Robson is also examined, and used as a proxy to explore the potential benefits of closing the street to traffic on a permanent basis.

Section 3 contains the main body of case study research undertaken for this report. First, key texts are cited to list the primary benefits of creating vibrant public space in urban settings. From economic outcomes to less tangible senses of community belonging, this introduction provides a justification to care and invest in public space in the first place. What follows is a deeper investigation into the urban design theories and principles that guide the creation of successful public space. These principles are organized into the four categories mentioned previously. The majority of Section 2 is dedicated to the twelve case study plazas, representing ten different cities and five countries. Each case study offers applicable lessons and ideas that can be used to inspire conversations and help direct decisions related to 800-block Robson.

This report concludes with a summary of key findings and recommendations for the

future of 800-block Robson. The recommendations borrow heavily from the best practices and most successful qualities of the case study plazas. The action items included in this section include a summary of areas that require further investigation, important design fixtures that should be considered, and possible policy changes that could help support a more vibrant 800-block Robson. To maintain consistency, the recommendations are also divided into the four priority categories.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This project was made possible by the guidance and support of many people. Firstly, I would like to extend my gratitude to Jenniffer Sheel and Krisztina Kassay, who comprise the VIVA Vancouver team. Throughout the summer of 2013, Jenniffer and Krisztina provided invaluable support, mentorship, and understanding. Their creativity and passion for creating a more vibrant and safer public realm were an inspiration throughout this process. Additional thanks is owed to the many City of Vancouver staff members and 800-block Robson stakeholders who generously offered their time for interviews, advice, or technical assistance. I would like to express my very great appreciation to Dr. Thomas Hutton, my academic supervisor, for lending his expertise, encouragement, and counsel during the planning and development this research. Lastly, but certainly not least, to my colleagues at the University of British Columbia's School of Community and Regional Planning. The incredibly supportive community of students and staff at SCARP have made these last two years among my most rewarding.

2.0 Site Context

Historically, plazas have been central to the social, cultural, and economic life of cities. European squares and piazzas provide public space for people to gather, celebrate, and trade in the marketplace. In modern cities, plazas have maintained their significance, and remain essential spaces for people to exercise democratic rights, socialize and relax. The primary benefits of plazas lie in their diversity and adaptability. Activities accommodated by public plazas such as socializing, resting, eating, bus waiting, exhibitions and open air markets add to the quality of city living and working. In response, these activities enhance diversity and increase the educational and cultural opportunities that define the positive experience of urban living.

Plaza, square, piazza. Many terms are used to describe urban public space. For the sake of consistency, this report will refer to the public sites adjacent to 800-block Robson as a plaza. Borrowing from the City of Vancouver's design guidelines, a public plaza is defined as an open space designed for public use and defined by surrounding buildings and/or streets. The primary functions of these sites are to encourage a diversity of opportunities for social interaction and activities, to provide relief and relaxation, to expand and reinforce the public realm and to contribute to the livability and general amenity of the downtown and other developing parts of the city.



2.1 Welcome to 800 Robson

Robson Square is a landmark site in the geographic heart of downtown Vancouver. In addition to being one of downtown Vancouver's premier public spaces, several key civic institutions are located in Robson Square. The Square is home to the Provincial Law Courts, government office buildings, and the Vancouver Art Gallery (the Gallery). The city's only outdoor skating rink is found in a lower level that extends below Robson Street. The University of British Columbia (UBC) downtown satellite campus, UBC Robson Square, is also located on the lower level. Taken together, these tenants represent among the most important pillars of urban life: law and order, bureaucracy, education, culture, and recreation. As a result, Robson Square forms the civic focal point of Vancouver.

Encompassing three city blocks and providing 1,300,000 square feet of space, Robson Square is the largest public space in downtown Vancouver, aside from the Sea Wall and

Stanley Park. What sets this site apart from these larger public amenities is that it offers an introspective view of the city. Whereas Vancouver has successfully capitalized on its natural beauty and pastoral surroundings, Robson Square represents a rare opportunity to celebrate Vancouver's vibrant, yet often overlooked urbanism.

At the centre of Robson Square is 800-block Robson. This space is a paradox in itself. Classified officially as an arterial road, this block also sees the second highest levels of daily pedestrian traffic in the city, according to 2011 pedestrian counts. The surrounding downtown area serves a dual role as a dense neighbourhood - nearly 80,000 residents live in the area - and as a major node of employment with 46,000 individuals working nearby. In addition, businesses in nearby Robson Street Business Improvement Association (BIA) are exposed to 8 million tourists a year and thousands of daily commuters and city residents traveling by SkyTrain, bus, bike and car. To summarize, 800-block Robson is simultaneously a people place and a major roadway; it is in the heart of a residential community, but also a centre of employment and economic activity.

Today, 800-block Robson the future of 800-block Robson is at a crossroads. After experimenting with seasonal closures for the past three summers, the City of Vancouver is now exploring the challenges and opportunities of converting the block into a permanent pedestrian plaza. Before delving into the potential of pedestrianizing 800-block Robson, it is important to understand how it looks and feels today. The following sections will further explore 800-block Robson as it currently functions, and consider its role in the broader Vancouver community.



2.2 A Square in Name Only

DESIGN

In the 1970's, the Provincial Government commissioned the design of the three city blocks known as civic blocks numbered 51, 61 and 71. The block bounded by Robson, Georgia, Howe and Hornby Streets is known as 'Block 51'. An architectural team led by Arthur Erickson was hired to design the public square, along with a new provincial law courts building at the south end of the site. Together with the former courthouse, the Erickson designed law courts building has a dominating presence on Robson Square.

Robson Square (the Square) is defined and framed by two primary buildings; the Vancouver Art Gallery (the Gallery) on the north end of the site, and the Provincial Courthouse to the south. This structure on the south end of the Square stands 42 metres in height and boasts an impressive glass roof that covers 50,000 square feet of public space. In between these north and south blocks are government offices. In the midst of Vancouver's central business district, Robson Square is given a strong sense of enclosure and definition through the towering office and residential buildings that surround it.

In his seminal text, *Town and Square*, Paul Zucker distinguishes five typical forms that a square might take;

- 1) The closed square where the space is self-contained
- 2) The dominated square where the space is directed towards a primary building
- 3) The grouped square where spatial units are combined to form larger compositions
- 4) The nuclear square where space is formed around a centre
- 5) The amorphous square where space is unlimited.

Among these categories, Robson Square aligns most closely with the characteristics of a dominated square. The dominated square is characterized by "one individual structure or a group of buildings toward which the open space is directed and to which all other surrounding structures are related." The defining characteristic for this spatial form of square is an overall sense of enclosure. To create maximum effect, the building that dominates the space should have dimensions similar to the square it faces. By establishing a strong 'wall,' these landmark buildings establish order on the site by creating a sort of outdoor room.

Although this categorization helps us in describing Robson Square for comparative purposes, this space is truly unique. In reality, Vancouver's downtown square shares little in common with traditional European plazas. For starters, Robson Square is comprised of three city blocks which are meant to function in unison, but often feel disjointed and disconnected. This is largely owed to the fact that Robson Street cuts through the north half of the Square, thereby choking off access to the majority of public space.

Also setting Robson Square apart from conventional public spaces is the subterranean level that runs below Robson Street. The underground, which can be accessed by staircases at the north and south sides of Robson Street, adds significant floor space and excellent potential to populate the site with diverse activities. Unfortunately, this space is rarely used to its full capacity. The space once hosted several commercial businesses and a restaurant, but a lack of foot traffic and street-level visibility made these underground locations unviable in the long term. The primary tenants of Robson Square's basement level are now comprised of the University of British Columbia's downtown campus and offices for the provincial government.

In their *1999 Revitalization Study*, Erickson's new team noted the necessity of providing at-grade exposure and access in order for commercial ventures to thrive underground. In response to this critical need, the team advocated for an improved 'iceberg' concept, in which a combination of new and existing space at street-level would be used to provide exposure and presence for underground businesses. However, these plans were never realized, and Robson Square's underground remains one of the greatest barriers creating a truly vibrant public space on the site.

PROGRAMMING and ACTIVATION

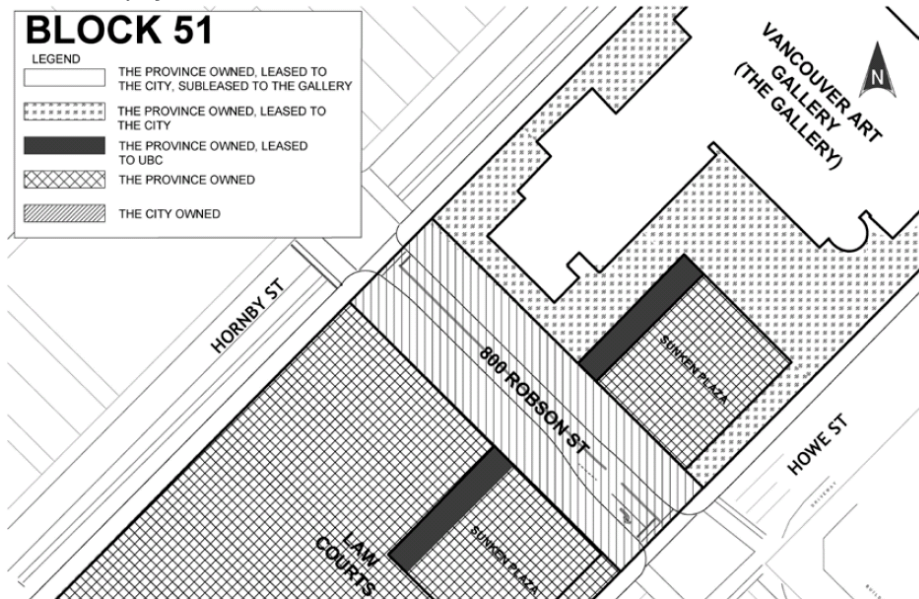
While 800-block Robson Street is classified as an arterial road, the block functions as one of the busiest pedestrian spaces in the city. Its wide sidewalks and narrow lane widths encourage pedestrian movement while minimizing vehicular flow. The sidewalks, along with the adjacent/adjoining plaza spaces, have become significant public spaces over the years. This is evident by the informal programming or uses that have appeared, such as impromptu chess games, busker performances and a range of street vending. These spaces, especially the south facing steps of the Gallery, serve as an important social landmark, ideal for meeting friends, people watching and sitting and relaxing.

Robson Square largely functions as a passive space. It complements the busier, louder, and more activated North Lawn - the once-grassy public space along Georgia Street in front of the Gallery. Dispersed throughout the Square are approximately three-dozen benches, chairs, and other forms of permanent furniture and seating fixtures. The cascading waterfall on the south portion near the Law Courts brings an inviting natural element, as does the garden mound located at the corner of Robson and Hornby. The site is undoubtedly busiest during the summer months. Following the Jazz Festival, VIVA Vancouver has partnered with local design firms to bring four distinct seating installations to 800-block Robson in the past three years. VIVA Vancouver is a City program that specializes in temporary street-to-plaza conversions. The pedestrian spaces on 800-block Robson are well used throughout the summer and are bolstered by the presence of food trucks and impromptu street vending and busking. The impacts of these installations, and the VIVA Vancouver program are each discussed in further detail in the following sections. For the majority of the year, the site functions as a pedestrian thoroughfare - a place one moves through to arrive at their final destinations. Encouraging them to stay for a while - that is the challenge.

MANAGEMENT

Senior levels of government play an important role in providing and maintaining open space in the downtown. The Province is responsible for the public plaza spaces at Robson Square and has been actively programming the sub-ground level, where the ice rink is found, since the Olympics. While the Province is the land owner of Block 51, it leases it to the City of Vancouver (the City), with the exception of the buildings and publically accessible below-grade portions. The Gallery and the University of British Columbia (UBC) lease and occupy the buildings above and below grade. The subterranean level is managed and programmed by a Pace Group, a private company that is contracted by the Province. The City, through its VIVA Vancouver program, has activated the road space on 800-block Robson for the past three summers, beginning in 2011.

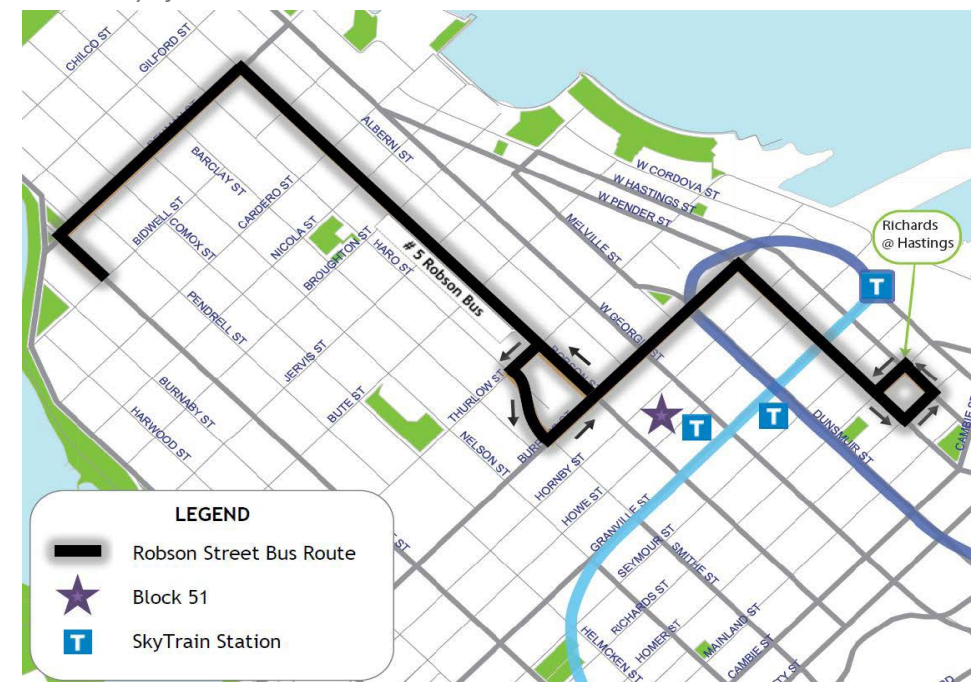
Although this management model appears fractured among various stakeholders, anecdotal evidence suggests the current system functions effectively. Interviews with key staff at each stakeholder organization reveal that the success is largely owed to personal relationships and mutual understandings. The City and Gallery, in particular, work very closely in activating 800-block Robson during the summer and for various special events. Figure 2 (following page) highlights the complex ownership structure of 800-block Robson.

Figure 2: Ownership Structure of 800-block Robson*Source: City of Vancouver*

Although the permanent closure of 800-block Robson has widespread support among Vancouverites elsewhere in the city, valid concerns about the future of the #5 Bus have prevented many West End residents from supporting the full pedestrianization of the block. This key issue must be addressed to attain the necessary community buy-in and grassroots support for creating a permanent plaza on Robson. Fortunately, a comprehensive review of these challenges currently is underway. Beginning in 2013, the City and TransLink have been jointly undertaking a review of local bus service in downtown Vancouver. The objective of the review is to consider changes to local bus service, as the current bus configuration has not accounted for a number of new realities, such as the growth in the population living downtown, the existence of the Canada Line, the desire for public space improvements (such as a pedestrianized Robson Square), and other potential changes (such as the removal of the Georgia and Dunsmuir Viaducts and a proposed move of the Art Gallery). Finding a reasonable alternative to the current #5 reroute has been made a priority objective of the review. In the spring 2013, the City and Translink began a public consultation process to collect information and feedback through open house events and online surveys. The final report is expected in the winter of 2013.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

One of the greatest barriers to realizing a fully pedestrianized plaza at 800-block Robson is the #5 Bus. The bus provides a vital link for residents of the West End neighbourhood traveling to east downtown and onto other regional destinations. As the east-bound #5 Bus travels along 800-block Robson, the seasonal closures of 800 Robson for VIVA Vancouver activations required a reroute. Residents have voiced complaints that the reroute is inefficient, and misses key destinations. Senior residents of the West End have been a particularly vocal, and sizeable group of opponents to the closure of Robson; there are 5,500 senior citizens in the West End, representing over 12% of the neighbourhoods total population. Business owners and the West End and Downtown Vancouver BIA have also raise concerns that the circuitous route has hindered the accessibility of various retail shops and restaurants, particularly for tourists during the summer season. Public transit advocates have joined these groups in their opposition to the inadequate reroute of the #5 bus. In fall 2012, the Transport Action B.C. coalition wrote a letter to Mayor Gregor Robertson to express their disapproval of closing Robson Street to transit, both seasonally and permanently. The coalition asserted that the closure has the effect of “reducing the legibility, directness and overall attractiveness of transit.”

Figure 3: #5 Robson Bus Seasonal Reroute*Source: City of Vancouver*

2.4 History of Robson Square + 800-block Robson

"There's the possibility it can be a people place...We're searching after an expression of ideals. That's an expression that's very sadly lacking. We've grown used to a state of ugliness in the city, and we accept ugly solutions every day. So, to have an image of a realistic ideal that we can aim for over the long-term will be a very useful thing to have."

- Stanley King: Architect and Urban Planner, 1973

Like many significant public spaces, the history of Robson Square's origins adds to its physical and symbolic importance. The development of Robson Square dates back to 1973. At the onset, it was a three-block project initiated for the new provincial courthouse, government offices, and new home of the Vancouver Art Gallery. It was intended to create an integrated public complex, originally envisioned as a 'park in the city' and 'oasis in the heart of downtown.' In place of a conventional, large and formal civic open space, the original site was designed to create a wide variety of public spaces that would range in character from formal to casual, and accommodate both passive and recreational activities.

Designed by a team led by the legendary architect Arthur Erickson, Robson Square was completed between 1979 and 1983. The physical space is inspired by Erickson's trademark concrete modernist style, but is softened by natural elements such as trees, plantings, and water features. In their *51-61-71 Project Report* from March 1974, Erickson's architectural team wrote, "In principle, the project is seen as a 3-dimensional park spine in the centre of the downtown peninsula." The natural aspects and landscaping were designed by Cornelia Oberlander, an equally respected landscape architect. The open concept underlying Robson Square allows for natural light and fresh air to enter the site unobstructed. The waterfall feature importantly masks the noise of nearby downtown traffic. This blend of natural and hardscape materials effectively celebrates the Square's urban surroundings, while providing comfortable and enjoyable escape from the bustling city. Despite several topographic variations, the site is made accessible by gradually inclining stairs with integrated ramps, or 'stramps.'

While it is useful to examine how and why Robson Square took shape, it is equally telling to consider the vision of Robson Square that never came to pass; this alternative history demonstrates the politicized nature of the Square. When originally con-

ceived, the new Law Courts building was intended as a 50-storey tower, which would have made it the tallest skyscraper in the city. However, the defeat of the W.A.C. Bennett government to the NDP-led Dave Barrett brought the swift demise of the tower, just as the first construction phase was set to begin. In 1973, Erickson's team unveiled their revised plans, which effectively laid the highrise on its side. The more modest 7-storey structure housing 35 courtrooms was completed in 1980.

Robson Street was reopened to bus traffic, as directed by City engineers, immediately after construction was complete. This occurred despite Erickson's intention that 800-block Robson would function as a pedestrian oriented public space, seamlessly connecting civic blocks 51 and 61. In the 1980's, the street was opened to all vehicle traffic, and connected to the wider downtown street network. 800-block Robson has functioned as such ever since. Robson Square officially opened to the public in 1978. However, it was not until 1983, when the Vancouver Art Gallery moved into its current home in the former courthouse building, that Robson Square was considered complete.

In need of revitalization and repair, the Province undertook a multi-million dollar renovation of Robson Square between 2004-2011. Most notably, the \$41 million Robson Square Renewal Project removed the aging, dark Plexiglas domes in the middle of the plaza. In their place, larger and more open domes were installed to improve coverage of the ice rink and lower plaza. In addition, the transparent oval shaped glass domes provide better visibility between the subterranean level and Robson Street.



Left: A still image from the 1973 documentary *Chairs for Lovers* shows Block 61 as a surface parking lot - before construction began on Robson Square.

2.4 Time for a Change: Opportunities

Nearly five decades since ground was first broken, and several factors are finally aligning that may allow for a meaningful re-examination of the future for Robson Square and 800-block Robson. To be sure, Robson Square currently serves its purpose as a conveniently located public space. *Spacing Magazine* ranked Robson Square and the Vancouver Art Gallery’s south-facing stairs on Robson Street among the top-ten public spaces in Vancouver in 2011. Pointing to its historical value, the Square was also listed among the Heritage Vancouver Society’s top ten endangered spaces in Vancouver in 2009.

However, the site is not being used to its maximum capacity. Nor is 800-block Robson meeting its full potential as a vibrant civic space. Although aesthetically pleasing, the various design elements in the Square make it challenging to navigate the space. The landscaped garden mound designed by Cornelia Oberlander, for example, is only accessed by narrow steps and pathways, which are easily overlooked as people pass through the 800-block. Overall, the space is successful from a conceptual design perspective, but leaves much room for improvement from a functional standpoint. With respect to Arthur Erickson’s original design, this conclusion can be drawn from comments during interviews with several architects that were consulted for this study. To be sure, Robson Square is a remarkable architectural achievement. However, the space’s idiosyncratic and multi-layered design have made it difficult for Robson Square to adapt to the challenge of having an arterial roadway running through the space.

It is not for a lack of creativity or ingenuity that the redevelopment of Robson Square and 800-block Robson has stalled. Since the 1970’s, a handful of Vancouver’s most respected designers and architects have proposed solutions to some of the Square’s flaws. Rather, a host of logistical and political challenges are to blame for the delayed progress. Among these impediments are the complex ownership structure, significant transportation challenges, financial barriers and more have all contributed to the delay in implementing long term changes.

Currently, however, the area surrounding 800-block Robson has entered a state of flux. Due to several key factors the timing may now be right to revisit the 800-block Robson and make significant improvements to the pedestrian experience. These factors are discussed in greater detail below.

CITY POLICY:

Public support for redeveloping Robson Square and exploring the future of 800-block Robson is bolstered by a supportive city council and city policies. Two documents in particular provide important foundations from which the conversation about pedestrianizing 800-block Robson can begin. The City’s *Greenest City 2020 Action Plan* and transportation plan, *Transportation 2040*, each support the improvement of pedestrian realm, and identify the importance of accessible public space. A key strategy identified in the *Greenest City* plan calls for the creation of “more dedicated pedestrian-priority spaces, streets and sidewalks that encourage active transportation, and improved safety through design, education and enforcement.” The *Transportation 2040 Plan* includes policies and actions to enable: an active and healthy city, a reduction in traffic collisions to support a safe city, an accessible city for people of all ages and abilities, a range of options to help create a more affordable city, a vibrant public realm to foster a lively city, and a resilient city prepared to deal with global issues and unexpected events. The transportation plan also sets a new target for the City that at least two-thirds of all trips will be made on foot, bike, or transit by 2040.

Permanently closing 800-block Robson to traffic is not listed among the specific actions in *Transportation 2040* or *Greenest City* documents. However, the policies highlighted above could all be used to justify a full-time pedestrian plaza behind the Art Gallery. The *Transportation 2040* consultation phase also revealed robust support for improving Vancouver’s inventory of pedestrian areas. The most common suggestions to support walking were to provide wider sidewalks and more public spaces. The creation of public plazas was ranked as “the most exciting” direction relating to walking and public space by more than 10,000 people who participated in the consultation program during the summer of 2012.

The success of a public square is largely measured by the number of people who visit or move through the space. For this reason, author and planner Nick Corbett writes, “An urban design strategy needs to be closely integrated with highway and transportation policy.” The way in which an urban square connects to surrounding its surroundings is crucial to its vibrancy. Given the political clout and public pressure behind these policies, it is difficult to overestimate their importance to the future of 800-block Robson.

PUBLIC SUPPORT:

The idea of the 800-block as a public space has existed in the imaginations of Vancouverites for nearly half a century. Public interest in the site has remained strong in the intervening years. As mentioned above, several public space advocacy and City-hosted consultations have revealed that many residents have voiced support for creating and improving public spaces in downtown Vancouver. In many respects, the 800-block represents a rare, and perhaps last opportunity to create a functional civic space in the heart of downtown Vancouver.

A public design competition titled, *Where's The Square?* invited Vancouverites to create and design the ideal central plaza for the city's core. The competition was held in 2009, and coordinated by the Vancouver Public Space Network (VSPN), a citizen-led advocacy organization. More than 50 teams submitted design proposals, and each competed for the Jury Selection and People's Choice awards. Although design concepts were welcome from any location in the downtown core, twenty per cent of the submissions took on 800-block Robson as part of their proposal. This creative response helped demonstrate and reinforce the fact that 800-block Robson still resonates among Vancouverites as a potential central plaza in downtown Vancouver. The *Where's the Square* competition also helped spark the public's imagination, which led to further investigations of the space over the next four years.

Chief among the reasons for supporting the closure of 800-block Robson to traffic is the potential to improve the accessibility and connectivity of blocks 51 and 61, thereby increasing the usability of the entire site. Several engagement and consultation processes have indicated that there is considerable public support for pedestrianizing the 800-block. In 2011, VPSN, seeking to build on the *Where's the Square* competition, conducted two surveys designed to measure public support for keeping Robson Square car-free. Over 1,800 signatures were gathered in support of the expansion of Robson Square, while just over 40 indicated opposition to the move. The City has also been active in gauging interest in creating a permanent pedestrian space in the 800-block. In the fall of 2012, City staff hosted a series of stakeholder meetings to discuss the future of the site. Participants in these events included Translink, business associations, transportation advocates, seniors living in the West End, Tourism Vancouver, the Province, the design community, and youth. Following these closed group meetings, the City and VSPN co-hosted two public events, in the winter of 2012, which invited the broader Vancouver community to participate in the 800-block Robson visioning process. The first event, subtitled *A Look Back*, featured a screening of the 1973 film, *Chairs for Lovers*. The short film details the participa-

tory urban design of architect and illustrator Stanley King, focusing on his work with Robson Square. A panel discussion followed the film, which featured three members of Arthur Erickson's original Robson Square design team, Bing Thom, Alan Bell, Nick Milkovich. After the panel, attendees broke into small groups, each with their own graphic facilitator in order to explore and visualize their ideas for the possible uses for Robson Square and the north side of the art gallery. City staff then used the creative concepts developed through this interactive design process to populate an online survey, which engaged the wider public in visioning a future for 800-block Robson. More than 2,100 people participated in the survey, making it the most popular online survey the City has ever conducted. One of the key findings was that 64% of respondents preferred 800-block Robson to function as a permanent public space. An additional 17% favoured a summertime public space, while 19% opted for occasional closures of the street for special events.



Left: During the fall of 2012, the City hosted two public consultation meetings on the future of 800-block Robson and Robson Square. The events included presentations, slide shows and collaborative drawing exercises. Following a panel discussion, attendees broke into small groups, to brainstorm new design and programming concepts for the spaces. Stanley King is pictured here, participating in the group drawing process.

Source: VSPN

Nordstrom Redevelopment:

As previously mentioned, the success of a public square depends on how well it interacts with its environs. It is also true that surrounding areas and structures can either drain or inject vibrancy into the space. As such, the redevelopment of the former Sears building located at the corner of Robson and Granville will have profound impacts on 800-block Robson. The blocky structure is often described as an eyesore, and "repels pedestrians" due to its windowless and uninviting façade, according to architect Michael Heeney. The building will be undergoing an extensive, multi-million

dollar renovation in preparation for Nordstrom, an American retail department store, to occupy 230,000 square feet of the building, with the top four floors being converted into office space. The proposed renovations will include a new 'shell' constructed of glass to allow maximum natural light exposure, and to open the building to the street below. The makeover is expected to finish in 2015.



Above: Cadillac Fairview - one of North America's largest investors, owners and managers of commercial real estate - is partnering with Nordstrom to redevelop the former Sears Centre building. [Source: Cadillac Fairview]

Demand for Event Space:

The closure of Robson Street represents a significant opportunity to create a premiere space for temporary and special events in downtown Vancouver. In 2010, the City commissioned a study on the demand for cultural performance and event spaces in the city. The study, conducted by John Donnelly and Associates, engaged 173 performance organizations and event producers through an online survey. The survey results reveal that the existing supply of event space has limited capacity to meet future growth in demand, due to population increase and attendance trends. The need for venues in the 1,000 to 3,999 person capacity range were identified as most urgently needed, as the current stock of mid-sized venues is either fully booked or have limited availability. Similarly, outdoor venues that serve capacities ranging from 4,000 to 6,999 have a high rate of usage, yet only seven existing venues currently meet this need.

A permanently pedestrianized 800-block Robson would meet the needs for small to medium-sized public events. The lack of open space, unconventional configuration, and important role as a major pedestrian thoroughfare each present challenges for 800-block Robson becoming a regular event venue.

However, 800-block Robson demonstrates its value as an event space each summer while serving as a venue site for the Vancouver Jazz Festival. The North Plaza in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery along Georgia Street, on the other hand, is better suited to accommodate events in the 2,000-4,000 person range. The role of 800-block Robson could be seen as companion event space, or venue for community events with lower volumes of visitors. Perhaps the greatest potential lies in further activating the subterranean level of Robson Square, which houses a 6000 square-foot ice rink surface. The Province currently operates an event rental program for the ice rink surface. Past events have included public dance lessons, floor hockey games, and promotional and advertising opportunities. A more formalized organizational structure that includes all Robson Square ownership stakeholders could help improve the consistency and quality of public events in the lower levels of 800-block Robson. Nevertheless, studies such as the Donnelly and Associates report further prove the need for new event spaces, which may be used as added incentive to explore the full time closure of 800-block Robson.



Above: Map of public and privately owned public spaces in Downtown Vancouver. Robson Square denoted by #25, Vancouver Art Gallery by #26. This map illustrates the lack of significant publicly-owned pedestrian space in the downtown core.

[Source: Alex Leckie, UBC Geography Department]

Vancouver Art Gallery Relocation:

Writing about public squares, architect Michael Webb has stated, “Buildings dignify the space.” For Robson Square and 800-block Robson, the dignifying structure is the Vancouver Art Gallery. The Vancouver Art Gallery, located in the former courthouse building, has a dominating presence on 800-block Robson. Situated opposite the current provincial courthouses, the Gallery forms the northern border of the site. Aside from framing 800-block Robson with its physical presence, the Vancouver Art Gallery is an important cultural institution that helps enliven its surroundings. At the north-east corner of the site, the Gallery Café offers an outdoor patio and brings a lunchtime crowd into the pedestrian areas of 800-block Robson. A regular gathering spot for protests and demonstrations, the North Lawn and south steps regularly host a wide variety of informal activities; from lunching office workers, to flash mobs, to political protests. Perhaps most significantly, the south-facing steps that led to the former rear-entrance of the courthouse are a popular site for sitting and socializing.



Above: The Vancouver Art Gallery plays an important role in activating 800-block Robson. The south-facing steps on Robson Street, pictured here, are a popular seating and meeting place, particularly on sunny days.

Source: GoVancouver.com

As the fifth-largest art gallery in Canada, and a permanent collection of over 10,000 artworks, officials allege that the Gallery has outgrown its 41,400-square feet of exhibition space. After 24 years occupying its current home, the Art Gallery announced plans to relocate to a new building in 2007. The original proposal outlined plans to

construct a new 320,000-square foot gallery at Larwill Park on the corner of Cambie and Georgia Streets. In 2008, however, a revised proposal announced the Plaza of Nations near BC Place as the designated site for the new gallery. As of summer 2013, no official decision has been made about expanding or moving the gallery. The Art Gallery’s strong physical presence and role as a cultural draw to the 800-block Robson make its potential departure a significant consideration when reimagining the space.

Dozens of public spaces around the world demonstrate the value of having a major cultural or social institution for a neighbour. Several examples of this effect are included in this report; Exhibition Road and London’s Science Museum and the Museum of Natural History; Gammeltorv and the Copenhagen City Hall; Portland’s courthouse sits across from Pioneer Courthouse Square; and finally, Federation Square and the National Gallery of Victoria. Each of these institutions bring significant foot traffic to their adjacent public spaces, and imbue the area with a sense of cultural and social significance, which acts as an important draw. As the primary leaseholder, the City will have the authority to approve a new tenant that will maintain the accessibility of the site, and support the vibrancy of surrounding public spaces, including 800-block Robson.

It would be most beneficial to the liveliness and community atmosphere of 800-block Robson if a cultural institution replaced the Gallery, if new tenants were needed. The Museum of Vancouver would certainly fit this requirement. Regardless of who or what eventually moves in, it will be essential for the City to approve a tenant that can demonstrate some commitment to engaging with the public places that surround the courthouse. This engagement would not necessarily require direct programming, but could include tolerating and supporting the impromptu protests and community organizing that occurs around the building.

North Plaza Redesign:

Although the Gallery may soon depart, plans are already underway to redevelop and modernize the courthouse’s north-facing lawn, known as the North Plaza. As of summer 2013, a design team has been hired, and research and stakeholder engagement is in progress. The connection between the north and south sides of the Art Gallery is embodied in the composition of the design team tasked with creating a redevelopment plan. The team includes architects and landscape architects that have worked on the original Robson Square design, and have coordinated with VIVA on previous summertime activations. Recognizing the relationship between the two sites, VIVA

Vancouver staff have been working closely with the staff team for the North Plaza project. A preliminary research report compiled by the design has identified “complementing the uses and role of Robson Street” as one of the primary objectives of the redevelopment project. Due to the North Plaza’s sizeable footprint, the site is better suited to accommodate larger events and celebrations. This high intensity activity would then be complemented by 800-block Robson’s quieter, more reclusive and passive atmosphere. The recently installed bike lane along Hornby Street demonstrates the potential to connect the two sides of the VAG with an attractive, tree-lined pedestrian path.

Although there are no dedicated forms of seating within the plaza, the north-facing steps and the edges of the large fountain in the North Plaza are used regularly for sitting, socializing and enjoying lunch from a nearby food truck. Evergreen trees provide significant shade and enclosure on the west side of the plaza along Hornby Street. This much-needed greenery contrasts the uninviting brown mulch that covers approximately 50% of the plaza’s surface.

Due to the inherent connections between the two sites, the redevelopment project provides an opportunity for City staff and the design team to consider the future of the North Plaza and 800-block Robson simultaneously. Although the North Plaza redevelopment project has progressed further than 800-block plans, it is important that both for the design team to plan with a cohesive and integrated site in mind.



Above: A view of the North Plaza in front of the former courthouse building, taken from Georgia Street. The once-green lawn has now been replaced with a less inviting brown mulch surface.

Source: This City Life Tumblr Page

2.4 A Square in Transition: The Role of VIVA

Temporary events such as the Olympics have demonstrated the potential success of a pedestrian-oriented public space at the 800-block. Seasonal closures of 800 Robson Street, organized by the City's VIVA Vancouver program, have also provided evidence of the public demand for comfortable spaces to sit and socialize in the public realm.

VIVA Vancouver encourages sustainable and active transportation by creating safer and more interesting spaces for walking and cycling. This mandate aligns with Vancouver's *Transportation Plan* and the *Greenest City 2020 Action Plan* objectives. Currently housed in the Street Activities branch of the City's Transportation and Engineering Department, VIVA's work requires a blend of logistical transportation planning and community engagement and outreach.

The VIVA Vancouver program was borne out of priorities identified in the City's *Greenest City 2020 Action Plan*, which was released in 2008. Strong political support also played a vital role in VIVA Vancouver's birth. Elected in December of 2008 with a mandate to improve the pedestrian realm, Mayor Gregor Robertson and the Vision-leaning council were early supporters of experimenting and repurposing Vancouver's roads. Shortly after his election, Mayor Robertson prioritized specific initiatives within the City's then-ongoing *Greenest City 2020 Action Plan*. Among these fast-tracked motions was the creation of the Summer Spaces pilot program in 2009. These day-long events closed roadways to motorists for various community events and activities throughout the summer. While city staff provided logistical support for the events, community organizations in each of the four neighbourhoods that hosted Summer Spaces events were responsible for programming and activating the street.

The Summer Spaces program was eventually placed in the City's Strategic Transportation branch. The program received robust community support, but was put on hiatus by council in the fall of 2009. The Summer Spaces staff were given one year to refine their program to return in 2011. When Summer Spaces hit the streets again in 2011, the program had been given additional permanence by dedicating resources for three permanent staff, and a new name; VIVA Vancouver. In between the hiatus and the official launch of VIVA Vancouver, the 2010 Winter Olympics came to Vancouver.

According to VIVA City Planner Krisztina Kassay, "The Olympics were a game changer." Following up on the success of Summer Spaces in 2009, the Olympics further dem-

onstrated the potential and demand for new pedestrian spaces. However, whereas Summer Spaces pointed to a need for community spaces, the Olympic festivities showed the potential of creating gathering areas in centre of downtown Vancouver. Through the two-week Olympic event, Robson Square, including the road at 800-block Robson, was converted into a central node of activity. The festivities at Robson Square included an elevated zipline, live performances, and a large screen on which live events were displayed. These events were openly embraced and celebrated by Vancouverites and tourists alike. The public's enthusiasm for these public gathering spaces was largely expected. Ms. Kassay points out that, "the public has always been ahead of us [staff] in demanding and embracing road-to-plaza spaces." Importantly, the Olympic activations also began to shift perceptions among City staff and council that pedestrianizing road space is an effective way to increase active transportation, and create a vibrant downtown core.

Riding the coattails of the 2010 Olympic events at Robson Square, the newly-minted VIVA Vancouver seized an opportunity to keep 800-block Robson closed to traffic, and activated for pedestrians in the summer of 2011. This opportunity took shape in the form of PICNURBIA, which was installed on the 800-block of Robson in June 2011. Since 2011, VIVA has remained closely involved on 800-block Robson by activating the space with seasonal installations. These summertime activations, which are described in greater detail below, will continue throughout the summer of 2014.



Left: Robson Square, and 800-block Robson in particular became a key node of activity and celebration during the 2010 Winter Olympics.

It is worth revisiting each of VIVA's three key activations of 800-block Robson because each offers valuable lessons on how the space could perform if pedestrianized. Each installation is unique in the way they changed the physical space of the street, but also in how they shifted people's behaviour.

PICNURBIA | Summer 2011:

In the summer of 2011, VIVA Vancouver unveiled PICNURBIA on Robson Street. The undulating landscape was designed to provide a public space for people to sit, socialize, and play. The sloping formations gave people a comfortable place to lie, but also allowed spaces for comfortable seating. PICNURBIA was a 28 metre long, 4 metre wide wavy island covered in a bright-orange artificial lawn. The wooden structure was complemented with nine large umbrellas to provide shade, and five tables with seating. In their proposal, site designers Loose Affiliates described the concept as an 'über-picnic-blanket.' The installation was in place from August to September, and was available to the public 24-hours a day.

Pop Rocks and Tables and Chairs | Summer 2012:

Pop Rocks was installed on Robson Street in the summer of 2012. The project was designed by Matthew Soules Architecture and AFJD Studio. The temporary installation was composed of pillow-like forms that varied in size and shape. The forms were constructed by recycling 2000 square feet of fabric from the Canada Place 'sails,' which were stuffed with 4000 square feet of recycled industrial polystyrene. The entirely re-useable project was designed to create a comfortable and playful space in downtown Vancouver, where residents and children alike could meet, lounge, and play.

Halfway through the summer, Pop Rocks was replaced with 60 tables and 150 chairs. This moveable furniture arrangement quickly became a popular lunchtime and socializing destination for people working, visiting or living in downtown Vancouver. Part of the street furniture's success is owed to an unknown and anonymous individual or individuals who re-configured the tables and chairs in a way that allowed free pedestrian flow, and prevented cyclists from weaving through the street. Prior to the rearrangement, the furniture was prone to haphazard placements, which often created obstacles.

Corduroy Road | Summer 2013:

In the summer 2013, VIVA Vancouver animated Robson Street with a wooden deck-like structure titled Corduroy Road. Key features of the installation included 26 cedar benches and 13 umbrellas situated on the street, and scattered throughout the entire block. Most notably, the installation included a 23 metre deck, which created a level surface between the north and south sidewalks on Robson. This wood surface brought Robson Street to grade with the sidewalk, and offered a glimpse of how the site could perform if a permanent pedestrian design were implemented. The deck was located directly south of the popular Gallery steps near Hornby Street.

Brightly coloured paint on the ends of the benches and the yellow umbrellas created a vibrant, summery environment and helped to send visual cues to draw people into the site. Used regularly as a place for rest, socializing, or eating lunch, Corduroy Road remained popular and well used throughout the summer. Contributing to its success was the presence of five to six food trucks on the site, which drew crowds during lunch hours. Interestingly, 800-block Robson continued to function as an impromptu gathering space during Corduroy Road's presence, with protests and guerilla marketers frequently populating the space. As with previous summer activations, bus routes along Robson were rerouted to nearby streets for the duration of the closure. The temporary pedestrian plaza cost the City \$50,000 to design, build, install, and maintain over the course of the summer. The installation was designed by Hapa Collaborative.



[Source: Krista Jahnke]



[Source: Krista Jahnke]



[Source: Ryan O'Connor]

2.6 Measuring Success

Walk through 800-block Robson on a sunny summer day, and you'll find the street transformed into a lively and well-used pedestrian space. Anyone who has visited the site in the past three summers will have noticed the dramatic change in atmosphere, compared to when Robson Street is open to traffic and pedestrians are kept on the sidewalk. Although 800-block Robson is a busy pedestrian intersection throughout the year, it often fails to compel passersby to stop and enjoy any of the permanent furniture fixtures near the Art Gallery or throughout Robson Square. The VIVA Vancouver activations effectively bring social and passive opportunities directly to pedestrians as they pass through the space, thereby making the option to stop and rest a more obvious and accessible activity.

Anecdotal evidence aside, VIVA Vancouver closely monitors the usage of their seasonal activations each year. In the summer of 2013, City staff conducted pedestrian counts, behavioural mapping, and intercept surveys, analyzed video surveillance, and received nightly activity reports from security guards at the Art Gallery. The table below illustrates the average number of people who visited 800-block Robson during a four-hour period while VIVA installations were in place. These findings were developed through onsite behavioural mapping exercises in which City staff record the activities of people using the space over a predetermined period of time. Individuals passing through the block without stopping are not counted. Behavioural mapping occurred over a two-day period between 11:00am and 3:00pm in 2011 and 2012. In 2013, VIVA conducted behavioural mapping exercises over six days throughout the summer. The times of day varied between 11:00am to 3:00pm, and 3:00pm to 7:00pm. The number of behavioural mapping exercises was expanded in 2013 to capture a more accurate picture of how people use the space at different times of the day.

Despite providing a quick snapshot of the public's experience on 800-block Robson, several observations can be made from the behavioural mapping studies. First, the information displayed points to a clear demand for public spaces in Vancouver that support passive activities. Behavioural mapping exercises completed from 2011-2013 reveal that the tables and chairs installed during the summer of 2012 attracted the largest number of people during the observed hours. The second best used installation was Corduroy Road during summer 2013. The commonality between each of these installations is the abundance of accessible seating that they provided. A

Figure 4: Do you like the fact that 800 Robson has been transformed into a temporary plaza? [Online Survey, City of Vancouver, 2012]

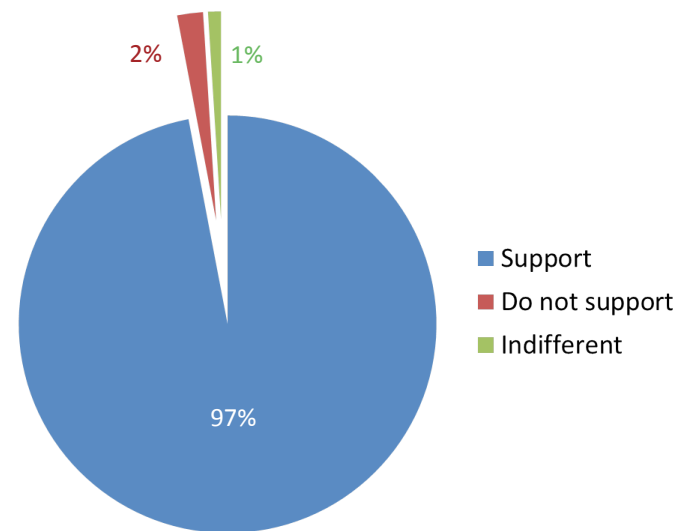
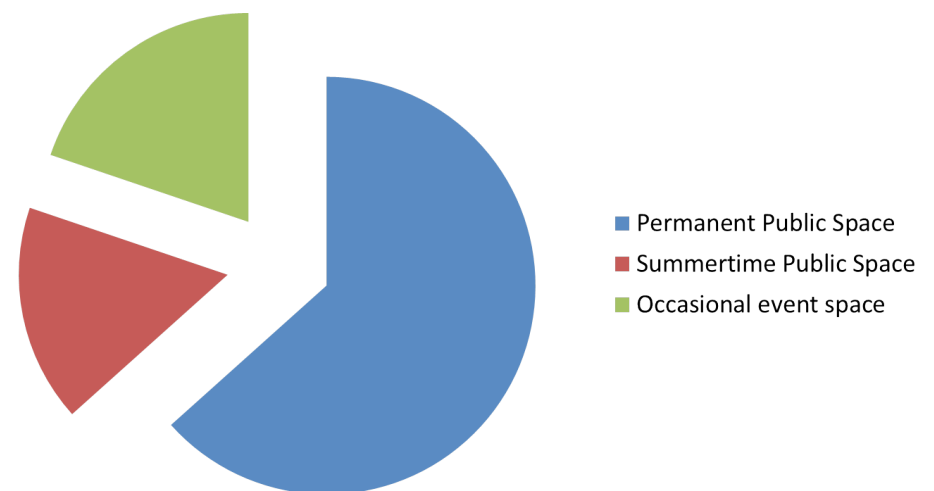


Figure 5: How do you think 800-block Robson Street needs to function in the future? [Online Survey, City of Vancouver, 2012]



[Source: City of Vancouver]

demand for spaces that support passive activity is also demonstrated in the most common behaviours among visitors to Corduroy Road. The top three actions were; socializing; eating and/or drinking; and activity watching. These findings support the theory that 800-block Robson serves a need for accessible spaces in downtown Vancouver where pedestrians can sit, gather, or enjoy the city without paying for food at an outdoor patio.

There are important limitations to VIVA Vancouver's data, however. First, 800-block Robson activations occur only during the summer months. Therefore, it is difficult to summarize how these installations would perform during the colder and rainier season, which last for six to eight months in Vancouver; from October to March, the average monthly precipitation exceeds 100mm. Indeed, these temporary installations are insulated from many complex obstacles that must be addressed before permanent changes are made to the pedestrian realm on 800-block Robson. Long-term plans for the block must contend with climatic challenges, determine a management structure, and develop a programming strategy that keeps the space vibrant year-round. Although VIVA Vancouver has demonstrated a successful model for temporary pedestrian projects, more sophisticated planning must occur to create lasting improvements.

Thousands of people have enjoyed the imaginative spaces created by VIVA Vancouver and its partners over the past three summers. VIVA Vancouver's greatest achievement, however, is the dialogue and excitement that these temporary installations have helped inspire. The summertime closures have demonstrated the immense potential to create a truly pedestrian space in the heart of downtown Vancouver. VIVA Vancouver has built a foundation from which more fulsome discussions on the future of 800-block Robson can begin. Moving forward, it will be essential for the City of Vancouver, key area stakeholders, and the broader community to collectively determine what a successful pedestrian plaza on 800-block Robson would look and feel like. Measuring or predicting the success of public space is an amorphous science. Behavioural mapping and intercept surveys provide important baseline data for designating what works and what does not. These qualitative and quantitative methods, however, fail to capture the true essence of what makes a pedestrian space successful.

Having evaluated thousands of public spaces around the world, the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has settled on four key qualities that lead to vibrant urban plazas. A thriving public space is one that is: 1) Accessible and well connected to its sur-

Figure 6: How have you used 800-block Robson in the past year?

[Online Survey, City of Vancouver, 2012]

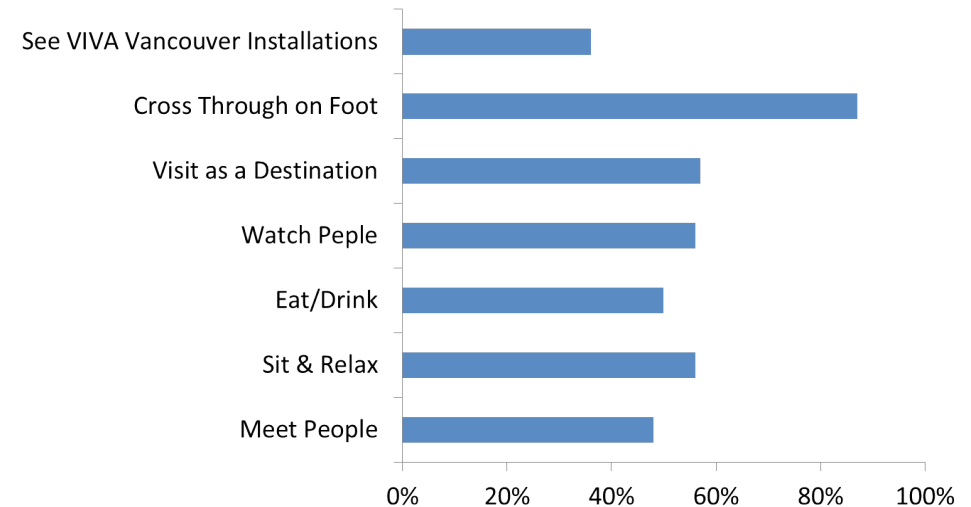
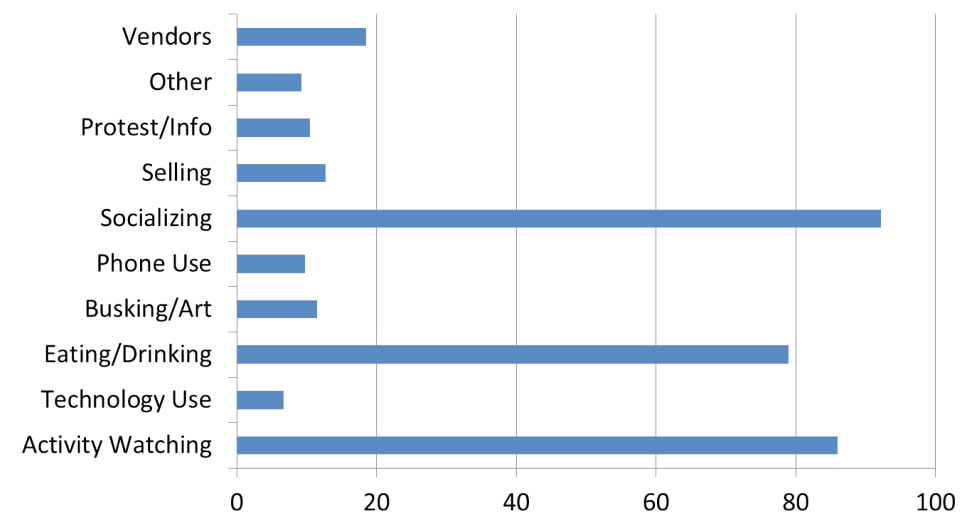


Figure 7 Daily average visitors by behaviour on 800-Block Robson | 11:00am - 7:00pm
Five dates, chosen at random, between July 6 - August 17, 2013

[Intercept Survey, City of Vancouver, 2013]



[Source: City of Vancouver]

roundings 2) Comfortable in both a physical and perceived sense 3) Provides people a reason to visit by offering them something to do and be active, and 4) Invites people to be sociable and interact with others. PPS developed The Place Diagram (below) as a tool to assist people in judging any place, good or bad: These more visceral and intangible qualities of public space are difficult to count or measure. The following section will delve deeper into the question of what makes a public space successful. Taking the PPS's more visceral qualities as a starting point, Section 3 will consider four topics related specifically to the context of 800-block Robson; 1) Physical Design, 2) Activation and Programming, 3) Management, and 4) Repurposing Road Space. Under these categories, the following section reviews academic literature on urban design theories, and offer a series of case studies to help inform the future of 800-block of Robson.

Figure 8
The Public Space Diagram



[Source: Project for Public Spaces]

3.0

Literature Review + Case Studies

There is little debate that successful public squares are good for cities and the people that live in them. However, public squares created with little regard for its surrounding context, or for the people who may use it can lead to neglected and an unattractive space that detracts from the city experience. At their best, public squares constitute the symbolic, and occasionally geographic, heart of the city. In *The Image of the City* Kevin Lynch refers to the city node as one of the key elements which defines a city's identity, and gives it 'strong imageability.' He writes, "Nodes are points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling." For many cities, centrally-located public squares act as the 'conceptual anchor point,' which gives the place definition and coherence.

The following section represents an overview of the central urban design theories related to public space and pedestrian plazas. It begins by describing the social, cultural, environmental and economic advantages of supporting vibrant public spaces. This chapter then describes the key elements of creating successful

public space. These core elements comprise the building blocks of the best examples of public plazas around the world. The elements are categorized under five subjects, which are then explored in greater detail in the following Case Studies Section.

The four elements of public space described in this section are:

- 1. Physical Design and Natural Landscape**
- 2. Activation and Programming**
- 3. Management**
- 4. Repurposing Road Space**

3.1 The Benefits of Public Space

Enhanced Social Interaction and Cultural Opportunities:

When properly designed, public squares have the ability to strengthen community ties and build civic pride. They accomplish this by providing accessible spaces for people to gather and socialize, and by evoking a sense of participation. Author and urban planner Nick Corbett writes, “When people can actively participate within the public realm, they learn how to conduct themselves within it.” Following this logic, public squares provide a forum in which people learn how to be neighbourly, how to care for their community, and to respect one another. From the Romans to our current time, public plazas have also served as the central space to exercise our most fundamental rights and freedoms as individuals and as collective citizens. In his book, *Transforming Cities: Revival in the Square*, Corbett writes further, “To an undemocratic administration, a city square is a threatening cradle for unconformist gatherings and demonstrations.” The dozens of protests and demonstrations that take place in and around 800-block Robson is a testament to the symbolic importance that this space holds as a free, safe, and public space.



Above: In the summer of 2012, VIVA Vancouver installed moveable tables, chairs and umbrellas on 800-block Robson. This simple temporary activation converted the road space into a social environment where people could meet, sit and socialize. [Source: City of Vancouver]

As building densities increase in Vancouver and in cities around the world, so too does the need for public space. The social dimension and benefits of public squares are growing in importance, given the growing feelings of alienation and loneliness that

are being reported in large urban areas. A report released by the Vancouver Foundation in 2012 points to the urgency of this problem. Connections and Engagement interviewed 3,841 people across Metro Vancouver to gauge feelings of community attachment. The findings reveal a widespread sense that Metro Vancouver is a difficult place to meet people and make friends. As a result, the study concludes, many people are retreating from community life altogether. Although public squares alone will not guarantee every Vancouverite a new friend, they can provide the forum and setting in which people will come to interact and feel a part of a wider urban community.

Public spaces are a community’s most valuable asset, simply because they belong to everyone. Everyone has a right and responsibility to be involved in the decisions related to the public space’s use, management and design. The most successful public spaces have a high level of community involvement, and foster a strong sense of stewardship and ownership. *Project for Public Spaces (PPS)*, a non-profit organization that provides technical assistance and research on urban planning and design, suggests that the presence of people voluntarily picking up litter can be used as a basic test for the level of volunteerism and ownership that a public square inspires. Through community engagement, these spaces are also attuned and sensitive to the changing needs and desires of the community they serve.

Support for Local Economies:

Much more than accessible gathering spaces, high quality public squares have the ability to support local businesses, attract new business investment and boost tourism. In an increasingly competitive climate, cities around the world are perpetually in search of an economic edge. Cities are now competing in a global marketplace where the image and brand of a city has become increasingly important. In the last half century, mega-projects such as major sports arenas and impressively designed cultural facilities were used to boost downtown activity, create jobs, and generate economic investment. Lately, however, cities have begun investing in modestly priced redevelopment projects such as public squares and urban parks to make their downtown areas more livable and attractive for visitors. The primary reason for this trend shift is that public spaces often generate diverse benefits at greater speed and lower costs than large-scale development projects. Placemaking project such as public squares deliver real economic benefits to its surrounding environment through higher real estate values, higher occupancy rates, increased tourism, and more jobs.

Jobs: Traditional economic and employment development strategies that have involved big ticket, high profile projects often result in cities offering various concessions to private companies, such as free land, and subsidized tax rates. As a result, these projects typically fail to provide long term prosperity and economic growth. Based on their extensive research in over 2,500 communities across the world PPS has concluded that, “secure jobs are tied to place.” In this sense, urban amenities like public squares are much more than tourist attractions; they contribute to the “dense organizational and social complexity vital to the success of so many industries that create and sustain great jobs.”

Private Investment and Trade: In addition to job creation, high quality public squares can improve commercial activity for adjacent retail businesses by acting as a ‘people magnet.’ Research has found that retrofitting and improving public spaces in core areas can increase commercial trading by upwards of 40%, and generate significant spinoff benefits in the form of private sector investment. Similar reports have shown that the economic impacts of public square development can be even more dramatic

if undertaken as part of a wider public realm improvement strategy that includes clearer signage, better street furniture, and greater security. In the search for private investment, public squares can be used as a vital marketing and business tool for cities. Empirical evidence shows that companies choose to locate in cities that offer attractive public spaces that might act as a draw for customers, employees, and necessary services.

Improved Environmental Outcomes:

Effective public spaces prioritize people over automobiles. Whether those people are walking, cycling, or commuting by transit, public squares provide a place of refuge where automobiles are either banned or given secondary status. As such, the creation of comfortable and safe public squares can help enhance the pedestrian realm, and thereby encourage more sustainable means of transportation. Studies have shown that squares around the world have been directly responsible for increased levels of pedestrian activity and public transportation use in the surrounding areas. This, in turn, can help a city reduce its vehicle-related pollution. Sustainable transportation not only creates a healthier environment, but also contributes to healthier populations. Volumes of research have demonstrated the health benefits of creating pedestrian-friendly communities and cities. Improves public health.

Case Study | Granville Island Vancouver, BC

Although not a public square, Vancouver's own Granville Island demonstrates the economic advantages of placemaking developments. Located just south of downtown Vancouver, this 38 acre waterfront ‘island’ hosts a wide variety of public, commercial, and institutional uses, including Emily Carr College of Art and Design, community recreation centre and theatre, a children's museum, local artists' studios and galleries, a hotel, cement plant, and a public market. The public market, which acts as the economic and tourism anchor of the Island, hosts 50 full time local arts, crafts and food vendors. An additional 45 market stall vendors occupy space on a part time basis. In total, approximately 3,000 people are employed on Granville Island, and it generates over \$215 million in economic activity each year. Despite its relatively small advertising budget (\$25,000 annually), Granville Island is one of the most popular tourism destinations in British Columbia.

3.2 Elements of Public Space

The remaining sections of this chapter are dedicated to answering two simple, yet inscrutable questions. First, what makes a public square ‘successful?’ Answering this question requires a deeper investigation into the combination of design, programming, and management elements that can contribute to a well-used and beloved space. Academic literature on public squares reveals that there are basic, yet critical principles to follow in establishing successful civic spaces. When the following standards are applied, public squares become imbued with a sense of place, and begin to take on symbolic meaning to residents and visitors alike. The following describes the four key elements of successful public spaces like 800-block Robson; design, programming and activation, management, and repurposing road space. In addition, each category is followed by three case studies that help demonstrate how these principles can be applied in the real world.

DESIGN

At the broadest level, the design of a public square is determined by its size. In writing on the Forum, Vitruvius said that the size of a square “should be proportionate to the number of inhabitants so that it may not be too small a space to be useless, nor look like a desert waste for lack of population.” Conventional urban design theories hold that spatial containment is the single most important design feature for successful public squares. Squares that are framed by hard and soft landscapes – whether they are surrounding buildings or strategically placed trees – can create an important sense of comfort, security and arrival for individuals using the space.

In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch describes the city as a series of paths, nodes, landmarks, views, edges, and districts. Each of these urban components is connected and interrelated. A public square’s relationship to its surroundings is mutual; the square can be both framed by buildings and landscapes, and designed to exhibit valuable civic buildings to the greatest advantage possible. Moreover, it is important to understand how the public plaza is connected to the surrounding street network. Based on this principle, certain paving and signage treatments should be extended beyond the square onto bordering and adjacent sidewalks. This will communicate a sense of arrival, and draw pedestrian movement into and throughout the square. On the ground floor level, it is important to consider topography and variances in height. Although accessibility must take precedent, tiering can enhance the look and feel of a public square by revealing new views and offering visitors different perspectives and ways to experience the square. Lighting is also essential to the activation of a space. Effective lighting will strengthen a square’s identity and enliven it at night. It can also be used to bring attention to important elements such as entrances or specific spaces in the square

As outdoor spaces, plazas are continually exposed to natural elements that can either boost or hinder their utility and enjoyment. Although little can be done about the climate, plazas can be effectively designed to mitigate the effects of negative weather events, and maximize the benefits of warm temperatures. Due to Vancouver’s coastal climate, exposure to sunlight is highly valued and rare amenity. This is particularly evident during the lunchtime rush in summer months, when people pour out of office buildings. Therefore, public spaces should be designed and positioned in a way that

maximizes direct exposure to warmth and sunlight. Positioning permanent seating in areas that receive abundant sunlight, creating ‘sun traps’ (areas surrounded by walls with an orientation toward the south), and utilizing reflective surfaces are all effective strategies for maximizing sunlight exposure on site.

Similar to sunlight, wind is another natural element that should be accounted for in the design phases of a public space. Wherever possible, protection should be offered from strong winds which can accompany fall and winter rainstorms. During the rainy winter months, overhead weather protection becomes essential. Such protection should be provided in strategic locations such as waiting points and adjacent to major pedestrian routes, where possible. Canopies, awnings, and shelters can all be used to provide effective rain coverage. However, shelters must be used cautiously. Overbearing roofs and structures can decrease visibility, shut out sunlight entirely, and reduce the accessibility of the site. High levels of traffic, industrial and other ambient noises detract from the enjoyment of a plaza. Noise can be partially mitigated by detracting attention from the noise source through the introduction of such elements as fountains or waterfalls.

An effective landscaping plan can be critical for enhancing the comfort of users. Strategically positioned trees and other plantings can provide areas of shade, wind shelters, and help filter out unwanted noise or views. By infusing a space with colour and pleasant scents, natural elements can also stimulate the senses and increase enjoyment. The height and massing of plantings should not reduce legibility, and indigenous plant species should be used whenever possible to minimize maintenance costs. While physical attributes help define a space, the importance of civic squares often transcend design. Through use and attachments to culture and history, public spaces often take on deep symbolic value to residents. Planning professor, Cliff Moughton writes that the “single most important function of an element in the city is the symbolic meaning attached to it.” In the same way, the greatest public squares elicit emotional responses from its visitors, through its design.

Accessibility:

Public squares begin at their edges. Gateways and visual cues should engage pedestri-

ans across the street and signal to them that this space is a comfortable and welcoming environment. Author and city planner Nick Corbett writes, “The more that people in the street feel that the square is an extension of the space they are in, the more likely they are to feel invited to enter.” Following this logic, an urban square must be compatible with the design and programming context of its surroundings. The challenge lies in achieving this compatibility while creating a distinct sense of space. Defining features such as walls and gates add strong edges enhance what Kevin Lynch refers to as legibility. A legible urban space draws people in and offers a welcomed sense of enclosure and arrival. Therefore, public squares must be connected to its surrounding areas, both physically and visually. Visual permeability and the free flow of movement through and to the site will ensure that people will gravitate to the public square. As all people arrive to a public square by foot, the importance of pedestrian movement to a public square’s success is difficult to overestimate. The most urban activity, the highest density of buildings, and the most prestigious city uses tend to focus around nodes with the highest pedestrian flows. Therefore, understanding how people travel within and through the square is essential.

Great public squares must be easily accessible by all modes of transportation. As inherently pedestrian spaces, a square must be easy to reach by foot. Additionally, any barriers that might restrict accessibility to people with mobility challenges should be removed. Therefore, crosswalks should be well marked and traffic on surrounding streets must be slowed to enhance pedestrian security. It is also essential that transit stops are located nearby and within easy access to the square. A public square that ... is bordered by several lanes of fast-moving traffic will suffocate by being cut off from its primary lifeline: people. Finally, the provision of adequate, convenient, and safe bicycle parking will encourage cyclists to visit the space without obstructing pedestrian movement.

From the users’ perspective, the accessibility of a public square is also determined by its real and perceived level of safety. If the site is poorly planned, under-programmed, and not maintained, large segments of the population will become alienated from the site. The physical layout of the square can directly contribute to or detract from the sense of comfort and safety an individual feels when entering the space. This also relates to the importance of balancing strong edges with open views. It is common human behaviour for an individual to seek walls, trees or benches when selecting a place to sit outdoors. Rarely will anyone opt to sit in the middle of an exposed open space.

DESIGN CASE STUDY 1

Sunset Triangle Plaza | Los Angeles, CA

The first street-to-plaza project in Los Angeles provides an inspirational example of the high quality of public space that can be achieved quickly and inexpensively. Sunset Triangle Square is located on a redundant street adjacent to a pocket park in the Silver Lake neighbourhood. It was created in March 2012 by Streets for People (S4P), an initiative of the City of Los Angeles City Planning Commission. As a one-year demonstration project, the design of Sunset Triangle Plaza was kept simple, but the impact has been significant. The most striking feature of the public plaza is the bright green and yellow polka dot pattern painted onto the street. The 11,000 square-foot space includes café tables, chairs and umbrellas. The furnishings were made deliberately moveable to allow people to customize and maximize the utility of the plaza. Bicycle parking racks have been installed at the east end of the plaza, with basketball hoops positioned on the west side. The perimeter of the plaza is lined with potted planters, which act as bollards to demarcate the pedestrian space.

Combined, these simple elements create a community atmosphere and an important space for respite in the middle of a busy neighbourhood in park-starved Los Angeles. Although a farmers market takes place in the space twice a week, Sunset Triangle Plaza primarily functions as an inviting place to rest, enjoy the sun, and socialize. The community quickly and enthusiastically embraced the space by flocking to it throughout the day and hosting 'movie nights' in the summer. Owners of adjacent businesses also demonstrated support for the plaza in a survey administered by S4P six months after the plaza was unveiled. The majority of business owners reported higher volume of sales from increased foot traffic, and claimed a perceived increase in business performance since the plaza was created.

Unlike many public space projects that take years to complete and cost millions of dollars, this 'test park' was completed in less than one year and brought a price tag of \$25,000. Taking inspiration from Times Square in New York, "The City Planning Commission wanted to find a way to quickly and cost effectively bring open space to Los Angeles," explains L.A. City Planning Commission President Bill Roschen. Although the scale and timeframe may differ from 800-block Robson, Sunset Triangle Plaza demonstrates the immediate impact that be accomplished when reclaiming a street to address community-identified needs.



Above: Sunset Triangle Plaza is Los Angeles' first pedestrian plaza conversion. Recognizing the connection between walking and healthier lifestyles, the project was created through a unique partnership between the City's Planning Commission and the County Department of Public Health. It may be argued that Sunset Triangle Plaza is a slightly more formalized and permanent of the closures already occurring each summer on 800-block Robson. Sunset Triangle Plaza represents an interesting next step that the CoV may consider in determining the future of 800-block Robson.

[Source: Streets for People]

DESIGN CASE STUDY 2

Piazza del Campo | Siena, Italy

Renowned worldwide for its beauty and architectural integrity, Piazza del Campo is the primary public space in the historical centre of Sienna, Italy. As one of Europe's greatest medieval squares, the history of Piazza del Campo predates the 13th Century, when it was first established as a marketplace. The square continues to thrive, not only because of its grandeur, but also because of the effective use of its edges. The wide, curved side of the square provides a defined, active edge, and also provides several entry points from narrower streets that spill out into the Piazza. The Piazza is further framed with several cafes, which interact with the promenade and provide seating coffee drinkers and newspaper readers. According to *PPS*, this seamless blend of public and private activity improves interaction, socialability, and “allows for promenading as an activity where promenaders and stationary onlookers enjoy participating in each other's experience. “

With more active uses concentrated on the periphery, individuals in search of passive seating and people watching are drawn into the centre of the square. Informal activities such as conversers, lingerers, and playing children tend to gravitate further into the square, while the more formal activity enjoys the shade and protection of the edges. The simple, yet elegant design of the Piazza allows these diverse users to occupy the space at all times of the day, and with little programming or management required. While these experiences take place on a typical day, the Piazza has also been used historically large-scale public events, including bullfights, executions, festivals, and the famous Palio, a breakneck, bareback 90-second horserace that occurs twice a year.

Applied to a North American context, Piazza del Campo has a great deal to teach when it comes to creating truly social spaces. People have been drawn into this plaza since it was first paved in 1349. This level of success is largely owed to the Piazza's simple, adaptable, and timeless design. Strong edges are formed by the uniform rooflines of the residential buildings that curve along the Piazza. The red brick pattern in the Piazza is dissected with ten lines of limestone, which radiating from the mouth of the the central water drain. The focal point of this square is the looming tower of the Palazzo Pubblico, a 13th Century palace constructed to house the republican government.



Above: The Piazza del Campo is a popular destination for both residents and visitors to Siena. Cafes that line the shell-shaped plaza help animate the site, but the principle activities include socializing, gathering, and people watching. [Source: tuscanypictures.com]

DESIGN CASE STUDY 3

High Line Park | New York City

Although not a public square, New York City's High Line park provides a valuable lesson in designing linear public space and recycling transportation infrastructure for pedestrian purposes. The High Line runs for 1.6 km along a section of elevated railroad in the lower west side of Manhattan. The High Line, which is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Parks and Recreation, was the former West Side industrial railway. The steel structure was originally built in the 1930s for freight trains, but the final train ran on it in 1980.

Beginning in 2005, the railroad was redesigned and transformed into an aerial greenway with naturalized plantings and trees, which were inspired by the self-seeded landscape that grew on the disused tracks. The natural elements are complemented by new and reused hard-scaping that form the gravel and concrete walking trails. Benches and lounges were created by adaptively recycling portions of the original tracks. Open daily from 7 am to 10 pm, the park can be reached through nine entrances, four of which are accessible to people with disabilities. Energy-efficient LED lights illuminate the park's pathways at night. The key feature of the High Line's design is a unique paving system that encourages natural growth. The result has been described as a 'pathless' landscape. Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the firm responsible for the design has dubbed the technique agri-tecture - part agriculture, part architecture.

As a widely celebrated space, the High Line demonstrates the potential to reintroduce natural landscaping into the urban environment, while repurposing former transit infrastructure for comfortable and lively

pedestrian spaces. The Park's linear shape also offers an instructive case study for the 800-block, given the potential to create a horizontal pedestrian area along Robson Street.

While the city paid for the construction costs of the first two sections, Friends of the High Line will cover most of the last section. The group also finances the park's maintenance and its educational and cultural programming. Despite these costs, the High Line Park also demonstrates the potential economic benefits of placemaking, as the promenade has initiated more than 30 new projects in adjacent neighborhoods.



Above: As demonstrated by this image, the High Line Park's simple design accommodates a wide variety of 'self-programming,' from joggers to people watchers. [Source: New York Times]

PROGRAMMING + ACTIVATION

Although design decides an individual's first impression of a space, it is important that form and function are considered together. The great urban space critic, William H. Whyte once said, "It's hard to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished." In reality, activity and design are mutually dependent. Activity is essential for the vitality of a space, which also adds to its visual attraction. In other words, people attract more people.

The concept of triangulation helps demonstrate the connection between design and activity. When certain elements of the square are placed in such a way that it increases the chances of activity occurring around them, triangulation occurs. *Project for Public Spaces* uses the example of a bench, trash can, telephone booth, and bus stop. In isolation, none of these elements create an especially engaging or useful space. By strategically integrating these items together, their utility and convenience is maximized. This approach can also be applied on a social level. Park benches or permanent seating can provide an external stimulus that prompts strangers to engage with one another. When programming for public squares, it is difficult to underestimate the value of passive activity and seating. A central feature of all the world's greatest public squares is the provision of adequate street furniture and adaptable seating opportunities.

As cultural spaces, the presence of public art can contribute aesthetic and experiential value to a space. On a symbolic level, adorning a plaza with art can help reflect the collective identity of the urban area. Sculptures, sidewalk paintings or multimedia installations act as a draw for both children and adults by inviting people to engage, pose, play with, or simply look and observe. Nick Corbett recommends that art is best positioned along the edges of a square "because the works will have a suitable background, be out of the paths of traffic, leave robust spaces in the middle of the square, and...be guaranteed an audience." In a similar vein, the presence of food in or near the square can provide another opportunity for people to engage with a space culturally and socially. In *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Whyte comments on the power of food as a magnetic force in a city. He writes, "If you want to see a place with

activity, put out food. Food attracts people." Allowing space for food carts or kiosks can provide an economic boost to the space, while giving people another reason to visit the square and enjoy lunch in the open air. Whyte concludes, "[Street] Vendors have become the caterers of the city's outdoor life"

Above all, the activities planned and programmed for a site should be made accessible and attractive to diverse demographics. The square's programming should reflect the needs and demands of the city it serves. Appealing to a broad audience will increase community ownership, and help ensure that the space is vibrant during both the day and night, and throughout the year. This can be achieved in the short term by identifying and implementing low-hanging fruit and pilot projects. Simple events or activities like free WiFi or small craft kiosks can create immediate impacts with little maintenance required. Ultimately, effective activity planning is contingent on strong management. The importance of a robust management structure is explored in further detail in the following section.

Adaptability and Seasonality:

A public square cannot succeed with a single design scheme or activation strategy. To ensure long term vibrancy, a public square must be designed to adapt to the changing needs and demands of its users. The ways in which a square is used changes throughout the course of the day, week, season, and year. To account for these variances, flexibility must be integrated at the onset of planning and designing the square.

Diverse activities and programs such as skating rinks, outdoor markets, festival space, and public art can all be used to transition the space from one season to the next. In regards to onsite performance spaces, a temporary and retractable stage may be used instead of a permanent structure to better respond to different scaled events. Providing adequate storage spaces on site is also essential to allow for the immediate removal of chairs, tables and umbrellas to take advantage of opportunities at short notice. In many public squares, adaptability is borne out of the diversity of spaces within the larger site. Appealing to broad demographics can be accomplished by creating a

variety of smaller 'rooms' and attractions such as fountains, sculptures, outdoor cafes, or performance areas.

Brought to the micro scale, adaptability strategies can also be applied to the furniture located throughout the square. According to PPS, the best kind of seating in a public square is the moveable chair. Their reasoning is three-fold. First, chairs are more comfortable than benches. Second, single chairs are less expensive. Although prices vary, roughly ten chairs can be purchased for the price of a single bench. Finally, independent chairs allow people to rearrange the furniture to suit their needs – whether they are sitting in a group or want to move into the sun or shade. This adaptability gives users the opportunity to customize the space and take ownership in the square.

Activation Case Study 1

Warming Hut Competition | Winnipeg, MB

Few public spaces must adapt to such dramatic climate swings as the Forks in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Located near downtown, at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, the Forks is a popular destination among local residents and tourists alike. With relatively sunny, but long winters, the Forks management has been tasked with finding creative ways to activate the space when the temperature drops. Among the site's major winter draws are the 1.2 km ice skating trail along the frozen Red River. In recent years, an innovative design competition has given people new reasons to visit, even on the coldest days.

The Warming Huts competition is an open call for artists and architects to submit design proposals for creative shelters to protect trail skaters from the elements. It began in 2010 as a local competition, but was open to international proposals the following season. The non-profit entity that manages the Forks are the primary sponsors of the event, but has contracted Sputnik Architecture to program and organize the competition. The competition is funded through various grants awarded to The Forks, and through other sponsoring agencies. The allocated cost per hut is \$20,000. This budget covers the materials and construction of each hut, and an honourarium to the winning design teams - which includes an expenses-paid trip to Winnipeg. In 2013, the competition elicited 100 entries from around the world. Winning proposals were selected from design firms based in New York, Montreal, and Winnipeg, with one hut being awarded to students at the University of Manitoba's school of architecture. The program has been recognized by the International Downtown Association, and awarded its Downtown Merit Award in 2012.

This competition demonstrates the potential of activating a space through temporary art installations. According to Peter Hargraves of *Sputnik Architecture*, the Warming Huts competition also provides high-profile opportunities for young architects while celebrating Winnipeg's unique winter culture. For a relatively low cost, these design competitions help infuse a space with creativity, and provide important functionality. In addition to boosting Winnipeg's reputation on the international architecture map, the Warming Huts Competition is a fun and creative way to celebrate the city's challenging but unique winter season. Through similar programming, Vancouverites and visitors could learn to embrace the city's rainy roots, while seeking shelter from the elements.



Above: The degree to which the huts actually providing any 'warming' varies considerably. Form does not always follow function, as demonstrated by the two huts pictured above from the 2013 winter season; Wind Catcher and HyggeHouse (left to right). [Source: Winnipeg Free Press]

Activation Case Study 2

The Porch | Philadelphia, PA

A front porch provides a welcoming and comfortable places to greet visitors as they enter a home. A new public space is seeking to have that same effect in Philadelphia. The Porch is located on a 30' x 500' stretch of sidewalk in front of the 30th Street Station – the second busiest train station in the United States. This pedestrian space has converted a congested parallel parking lane and bland sidewalk into a vibrant linear plaza. The Porch was created in 2012 by the University City District (UCD), a non-profit partnership of institutions, businesses and residents in the West Philadelphia neighbourhood. Due to limited resources and a brief window of opportunity, UCD implemented the Porch in seven short months, using what PPS has referred to as a Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper (LQC) approach. At the onset, UCD's goal was simple; create a fun and humanized space that can instill a sense of civic pride. One year later, the Porch has grown to become one of the most popular parks in Philadelphia, and among the first “truly user-designed public spaces in the country,” according to UCD.

The Porch is divided into a series of outdoor rooms punctuated by trees, plants, and seating. This simple but effective design is supplemented by a diverse roster of events that draw people into the space. In the past year, the Porch has hosted a series of farmers markets, yoga classes, weekend beer gardens, and over 400 free musical performances. In addition to these events, UCD installed a mini golf course and temporary art exhibits. Over 250 movable and permanent seat fixtures and more than a dozen daily food trucks anchor the activity at the Porch.

The Porch is a model example of iterative placemaking. Taking an experimental approach to programming and design, UCD has gradually adapted the Porch to respond to user demands and behaviours. Usage patterns and visitor behaviour was closely monitored at both a micro

and macro scale throughout the year. As the year progressed, UCD experimented with the configuration of the plaza, adding more and new varieties of seating, fresh plantings, and creative events.

As a linear space, the Porch shares many challenges in common with 800-block Robson. Similar to 800-block Robson, the intensity of use on the Porch tends to follow the daily ebb and flow of pedestrian movement. At rush hours people stream onto the Porch from the 30th Street Station. During lunch, dozens of office workers visit the space to enjoy lunch. As such, the Porch and 800-block Robson must accommodate both large crowds without feeling empty during lulls. This presents a formidable programming challenge. Versatile and successful public spaces need to balance the needs of rushing commuters, while providing quiet or contemplative spaces for solitary visitors hoping to read, write, or people watch. Through its iterative and LQC approach, UCD is well positioned to meet these challenges and create a truly user-programmed space.



Above: On weekends, Porch visitors transition from commuters to local residents and tourists. UCD adjusted its weekend programming to accommodate these demographics by introducing beer gardens, the mini golf course, circus performances, concerts, and a craft market.

[Source: University City District]

Activation Case Study 3

Campus Martius | Detroit, MI

In contrast to Detroit's former urban renewal mega-projects, the re-development of Campus Martius cost \$20 million, which was funded through private investors. That modest expense has been returned to the city, 25-fold. It is estimated that \$500 million of new investment has flowed into the surrounding areas of downtown Detroit since plans for Campus Martius were announced. Recent additions to the neighbourhood have included a new office tower directly across the street, new retail shops, and loft developments in several of the area's buildings.

The organization that is responsible for the management, operation and programming for Campus Martius Park is the Detroit 300 Conservancy, a non-profit organization. Under a long term agreement with the City of Detroit, the Conservancy secures private funding from the Park's neighbours and supporters, which covers operational expenses throughout year. The City of Detroit supports the Park by providing utilities, public safety and special event services.

The success of Campus Martius as a placemaking project is largely owed to the diverse programming and activations that have occurred in the square. The site includes grass lawns that welcome people to lie and enjoy the sun in the summer, and informal seating for more than 2,000 people on walls, benches, steps and movable chairs. The gravel walkways that meander through Campus Martius are sensibly laid out, and allow easy access to all areas of the square. In the summer of 2013, DDP converted the square into an urban beach by bringing 150 tons of sand onto Campus Martius. This pop-up activation was widely celebrated and became a popular destination throughout the summer. What is

most notable about the programming of Campus Martius is its adaptability and year-round activity. Supporting the passive features are two retractable stages with light and sound equipment that can be moved around for special events. An onsite cafe is open year-round to sell food and beverages, and offers both indoor and outdoor seating. From November to March a large portion of the park is converted into a popular ice skating rink, which brings thousands of people to the square during the winter months. Moreover, wireless internet is permanently available throughout the park. The space is designed to maximize the number and types of activities that can take place, and is sufficiently flexible to allow for large-scale concerts, winter activities, or community events.



Above: Described from the beginning as a 'placemaking' strategy, Campus Martius is the result of converting a major five-way intersection in downtown Detroit into a park. The space is activated year-round and is widely celebrated as a successful urban revitalization project. [Source: Detroit 300 Conservancy]

MANAGEMENT

The development of new public squares is often celebrated as important placemaking projects. Although design and programming are essential to the creation of ‘place,’ so to is the ongoing process of place-keeping. Place-keeping is not simply about the physical environment, its design and maintenance. This concept also encompasses the interrelated and non-physical dimensions of partnerships, governance, funding, policy and evaluation. For the purposes of this report, the term ‘management’ will be used to refer to these complex tasks, which if done well, will ensure a public square remains a vibrant, accessible and safe space for all residents and visitors.

The management of a public square that occurs behind-the-scenes is essential to the site’s success. The time and resources needed to manage a vibrant square often demands the creation of an organization that operates independently, or at arms-length from the municipal government. The best public squares are managed through close partnerships with key stakeholders on the site. These organizations supplement the financial support provided by private and public sector funders

Like any major civic project, public squares require reliable and consistent funding. Resources provided by different levels of government, non-profit organizations and private sector funders is essential to the day-to-day operations of running a public square. However, creative management organizations can supplement this income with diverse revenue sources such as rent charged to onsite cafes, markets, and other commercial uses. Taxes on nearby properties, film shoots, and fundraising events and promotions can also be used to support a public square financially. A long-term retail and commercial development plan should be undertaken to capitalize on any revenue-boosting opportunities that may arise.

A sound management plan understands the importance of keeping a square safe, lively and attractive. Planning and organization of a square must be done for both the short and long term. Recognizing the patterns of use and promoting the space to both existing and potential users will help maintain existing patrons while attracting new visitors. According to PPS, the best public square managers become so familiar with the patterns of use and behaviour, “that waste receptacles get emptied at just

the right time and refreshment stands are open when people most want them.” To achieve this level of intuitiveness, the public square must be in a constant state of adaptation and maintenance.

The management team should also be tasked with collecting user data on an ongoing basis to monitor progress and measure success. Incremental improvements can instill a sense of assurance that someone cares and is in charge of the space. Communicating this feeling of accountability will encourage users to take greater ownership and pride in the space, thereby encouraging repeat visits.

In their *Mississauga Report*, 8-80 Cities warns of the importance in balancing initial expenses (ie. physical design) with the ongoing costs of management and programming. Once the square is up and running, permitting processes should be made as streamlined and accessible as possible to encourage the regular usage of the site. To ease the burden on the management organization, 8-80 Cities recommends that simple permits for small-scale events be made available at the local BIA office.

Management Case Study 1

Federation Square | Melbourne, VIC

Federation Square is managed by a for-profit organization, whose independent board of governors is appointed by the State Government of Victoria. As a result, Fed Square Ltd. is operated as an 'arm's length' entity from the government. What sets this organizational structure apart is the fact that Fed Square Ltd. is governed by a Cultural and Civic Charter. The Charter provides the conceptual framework that informs their business decisions and program direction. Fed Square Pty Ltd has four Company Directors and operates with a Chief Executive Officer and a small team of professionals with experience across a diverse range of areas including project management, finance, leasing, marketing, media and promotions, event management and operations.

Revenues from the Square are generated through venue hires (private companies renting space in the Square), and business rents in the precinct. Surplus profits are then used to subsidize community and public activities in the Square. The financial success of the Square is owed in part to the manager's openness to corporate sponsorship. Popular venues such as the BMW Edge amphitheatre provide a source of income through corporate naming rights. Thanks in part to its strong programming and organization, the Square operates around the clock with security and cleaning staff present 24 hours a day. This constant maintenance and presence creates a safe and welcoming place at all times. Although an unconventional management structure, the success of Federation Square was immediately apparent. Six months after opening to the public in 2002, three million people visited the site.

Federation Square provides a unifying square for Melbourne, a place to

gather and meet in times of fun and in times of protest. Situated on the busiest intersection in central Melbourne, across the road from Flinders Street Train Station and at the most prominent section of Melbourne's busy tram network, there is no other place in Central Melbourne that is as easy to get to. It is the size of a city block, incorporating an array of attractions, including fine art venues and a vibrant calendar of events, in addition to a broad range of restaurants, cafés and shops.

Melbourne's premiere public space demonstrates how local governments can ensure the public interest is served, while offloading the day-to-day responsibilities to an independent organization. Public-private partnerships are an innovative strategy for managing and programming urban squares, if bolstered by strong policies to hold the operational entity accountable to the public.



Above: Federation Square covers 3.8 hectares and is built on top of a working railway. Its unconventional design is characterized by a series of cascading outdoor spaces or rooms. Buildings open at all angles into the city, creating unexpected connections. [Source: Fed Square Ltd.]

Management Case Study 2

Union Square Park | San Francisco, CA

Union Square Park, commissioned in 1847 to be one of the San Francisco's first public squares, today serves as the ceremonial heart of its downtown. The centerpiece of this sloping 2.6 acre, one-block plaza is a 90-foot high 1903 Corinthian granite column crowned with a bronze goddess of Victory. It is surrounded by one of the largest collections of department stores, upscale boutiques, shops, art galleries, and salons in the Western United States. Bordered on four sides by major streets, an underground parking structure is directly below the park.

In 1997, an international design competition sought to transform the Park from an imposing, seldom used space into an inviting and vibrant urban oasis. The redesign was completed in 2002 with improved access and massive flat granite open space, including outdoor cafés, tiered seating and a symphony-sized stage. Today, the Park boasts combination of permanent uses to encourage longer stays, planned programming to energize the park on a consistent basis and space that accommodates impromptu events for street performers, poets, musicians and speakers.

In 2002, the MJM Management Group was commissioned by the City of San Francisco to manage the site. As part of the initial contract, MJMMG also implemented a comprehensive outreach program with various stakeholders in the area - including City agencies, law enforcement, non-profits groups, local businesses and community organizations - in order gauge existing challenges and potential opportunities to better activate the Park. Since MJMMG assumed responsibility for the Park, more than \$600,000 is generated for the City annually through events

and leases. More than 4.6 million people now visit the space annually.

Each year MJMMG programs and permits over 100 events at Union Square Park, including musical performances, dances, art exhibitions, and rallies which bring thousands of visitors to the site, and contributes to the success of nearby businesses. The Union Square Live performance series, coordinated by MJMMG transforms the Park, and brings thousands of people downtown in support of local businesses. Private and sponsored events also occur in the Park, such as the Nike Women's Marathon, which help fund public events throughout the year.



Above: Union Square is surrounded by one of the largest collections of department stores, upscale boutiques, and art galleries, which make it a premiere shopping destination by day. Hotels and a series of theatres also contribute to the area's dynamic, 24-hour character. [Source: MJM Management Group]

Management Case Study 3

Pioneer Courthouse Square | Portland, OR

Prior to its grand opening, a non-profit organization was created to manage programming and daily operations of Pioneer Courthouse. The organization and its board of trustees is mandated with activating the Square for the benefit of Portland's residents and visitors. The City of Portland, community volunteers, and several private sector partners have made the Square a collaborative effort. They have several year-long media sponsors and several community partners that they work closely with, including the regional transportation authority (TriMet), Portland Parks and Recreation, Water Bureau, Police Department, and the departments of transportation at both the city and state level. Pioneer Courthouse Square's Board of Trustees consists of thirty one elected members. The members are distributed evenly among community members, broader region representatives, and downtown business owners. The City Commissioner in charge of Portland Parks and Recreation automatically serves on the Board.

The directions and projects initiated by the board of trustees are carried out by a six person staff. Although the organizational structure of the Square appears rigid, Portland residents' participation in funding and programming the space has been critical to its success. From the onset, Portlanders were invited to invest both emotionally and financially into the Square. Part of this sense of personal ownership is due to the long and arduous battle that residents undertook beginning in the 1960s to have the space dedicated for public use. It took two decades for the vision of a democratic space to be realized, when the Square was officially opened in 1984. When the time came, Portlanders also opened their wallets to help fund the creation of the Square. For a reasonable

sum, local residents could purchase bricks throughout the Square and have their names etched into it. This provided an important investment boost for the Square, but also brought symbolic importance that this space belongs to the people of Portland. The participation of Portland residents in the management and activation of the Square has continued to this day. Ten spaces are reserved on the Board of Trustees for community members, and productive criticism from citizen groups have led to gradual additions and changes over the years – and by many accounts, most have been positive. The majority of events held in the Square are also community-led and identified. Pioneer Courthouse Square demonstrates the value of developing an urban community space with the public, and for the public. Both City officials and experts abroad agree that much of Pioneer Courthouse's success is owed to the tremendous level of community ownership and pride. Of the Square, Jan Gehl writes, "One reason it works so well is that Portland residents, having fought and paid for it, own it."

PIONEER
COURTHOUSE
SQUARE

Left: Pioneer Courthouse Square Inc. is charged with activating and enriching the Portland's marquee public space. In 2012, the non-profit organization coordinated 12,000 hours of unarmed onsite security, 4,000 janitorial hours, and composted over 9,000 pounds. In addition, Starbucks - the Square's anchor tenant - sold over 1,000,000 cups of coffee in 2012.

Pedestrianizing Road Space

Many cities around the world have recognized the potential to convert road space into public space. There is evidence to suggest this innovation is beginning to resonate in Canadian cities. According to most accounts, the concept of transforming roads into plazas or parks originated over 30 years ago in Bogota. The Colombian capital began prohibiting cars in certain areas of the city on Sundays. The goal was to create safer places for pedestrians and cyclists. As these closures grew in popularity, so too did the number of car-free spaces. The weekly closures now cover more than 70 miles of city streets, and attract over one million residents every Sunday.

Although Bogota is a pioneer in road to pedestrian conversions, their experimental strategy has been replicated in dozens of cities across the globe. For most cities, banning cars in urban areas is a shocking proposition. Therefore, it is important for these conversions to be unveiled gradually as pop-up or temporary projects. This approach was employed in New York City's Times Square. A portion of street in Times Square is being converted to a permanent pedestrian plaza after a three-year experimental temporary closure. Data revealed that congestion on streets in and around Times Square decreased during the three-year street closure, and the temporary plaza improvements attracted significant numbers of pedestrians. Based on this success, Mayor Michael Bloomberg decided to make the closure permanent. The Times Square example is explained in further detail below.

The case studies described in this section demonstrate a spectrum of road-to-plaza options. Times Square represents a full-time closure and creation of a new pedestrian space. Exhibition Road in London, however, has remained open to cars after significant redevelopment. Today, the street functions as 'shared space,' where pedestrian and motorists cohabit the road. Research on this scheme in London and on another shared space intersection in Coventry is revealing the success of the concept. A similar shared space scheme was programmed onto a busy intersection in Coventry in 2007. A recent report indicates that the shared space area has helped reduce traffic accidents and lower speeds on the street. Statistics show that collisions have de-

clined, recorded injury accidents have gone down, and average speeds have reduced from 21.5 mph to 18.5 mph. Given these various strategies, it is important for cities to select the option that best suits their traffic objectives and the exigencies of the site.

The debate over rights to road space is particularly salient on 800-block Robson. VIVA Vancouver has converted the road into a pedestrian plaza for the past three summers (2011-2013), and will do so again for the 2014 season. The closures have generally been very well received by residents and visitors alike. However, many residents of the West End neighbourhood have voiced opposition to a full-time closure. Their lack of support stems from the circuitous rerouting of the #5 bus caused by the closure of 800-block Robson. The #5 carries 9,000 people each day, making it the 16th busiest bus route in the city. Most importantly, the bus provides a vital link for West End residents to the wider downtown area, and is a significant point of access to the broader transportation network.

It is unlikely that 800-block Robson will be permanently closed to traffic until a long-term solution to the #5 reroute is determined. Fortunately, these answers should arise in the winter of 2013, which is when the City and Translink are expecting to complete their downtown bus service review. The #5 reroute was made a specific priority for the review process, which has included considerable public consultation and feedback.

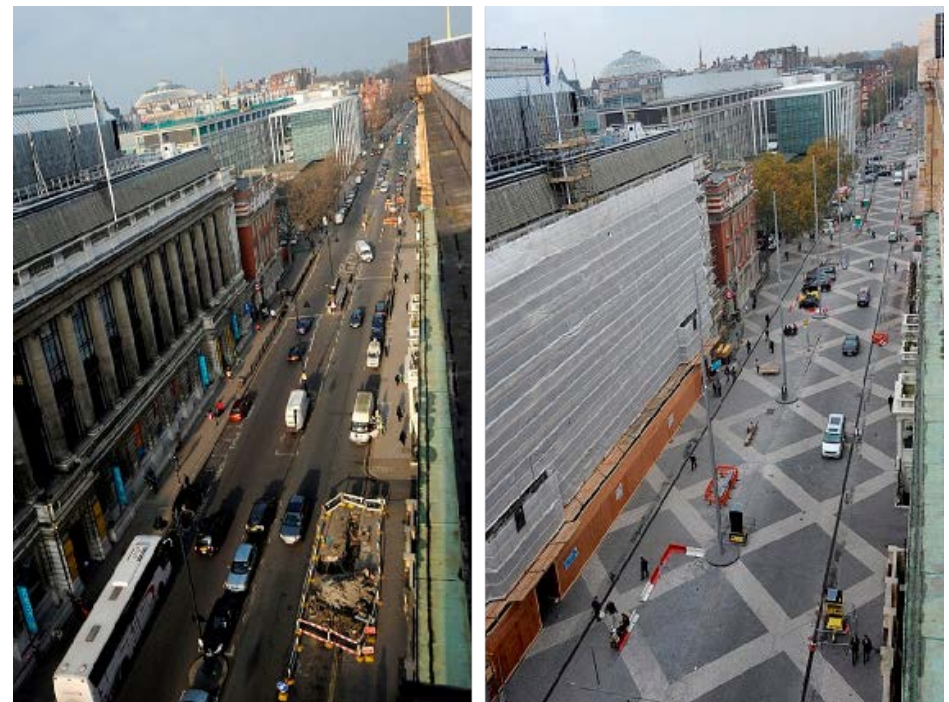
Pedestrianizing Road Space | Case Study 1

Exhibition Road | London, EN

Home to several of London's most popular cultural institutions, New Exhibition Road hosts more than 11 million pedestrians each year. The thoroughfare is designed in a classic Victorian style, and stretches just shy of one kilometre from the Kensington subway station to Hyde Park. Its remodeling in 2011 is now commonly used as an unequivocal success for the burgeoning 'shared space' movement. The redesign was undertaken as a way to 'civilize the street.' With an emphasis on reducing street clutter and maximizing pedestrian movement, the new design abolishes the distinction between road and sidewalk with a single-planed pavement surface. Instead of curbs, benches and bike racks provide a permeable and inviting barrier between the pedestrian-only zone and the slow-moving two-way traffic. Motorists are now encouraged to drive more attentively, and proceed at a cautious 20 mph. Vehicular traffic is expected drop by 30% as a result of the redevelopment.

As an additional amenity and public realm contribution, free WiFi was recently introduced on the road, made possible through a partnership between the municipal council and 02. The refurbished Exhibition Road has received several distinctions from architectural, transportation, and engineering organizations, including a prestigious 2012 Civic Trust, which celebrates projects that have a positive social, environmental or economic community benefits while demonstrating architectural excellence. New Exhibition Road demonstrates the dramatic effects of relatively simple changes to a busy pedestrian and vehicular route. For Vancouver, this shared space scheme illustrates the potential harmony that can be created be-

tween diverse transportation modes. However, this approach would not allow for the full integration of the south and north blocks of Robson Street to create a comprehensive public space. This option may be considered favourable if a reasonable solution to rerouting bus traffic on Robson Street does not materialize.



Above: London's transit agency engaged with a wide variety of interest groups and organizations representing people with disabilities to reconcile the needs of a range of users. The final cost of the project was approximately \$40 million, and was completed in advance of the 2012 Summer Olympics.

[Source: The Guardian UK]

Pedestrianizing Road Space | Case Study 2

Times Square | New York City, NY

When it comes to public space, New York City's Times Square is in a class of its own. Aside from hosting a world class entertainment district, Times Square has a great deal to teach other cities in designing pedestrian-oriented public spaces. More than one third of a million people pass through Times Square each day, making it the busiest pedestrian intersection on Earth. Adding to this astounding pedestrian traffic are the 39 million visitors that flock to the Square each year, which makes Times Square world's most popular tourist destination.

In 2009, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a bold plan to improve the safety of pedestrians, increase public space, and ease Midtown congestion. The strategy outlined plans to discontinue vehicular traffic on five blocks along Broadway, and transform the space into a pedestrian plaza. Initially completed as a year-long pilot project, the street closures and additional public plazas in Times Square are now permanent fixtures. New paving materials and colourful moveable chairs create a fun and social environment for tourists and residents alike to enjoy.

Reports show that the new plaza space has had mixed results on traffic in the area. However, injuries to motorists and pedestrians in the area decreased, and fewer pedestrians were reported walking in the road. Injuries to motorists and passengers in the area have decreased 63%, pedestrian injuries are down 35%, and 80% fewer pedestrians are walking in the roadway in Times Square. Speaking of public health, Times Square was established as a smoke free environment as New York extended its outdoors smoking ban. The policy carries a \$50 fine for any

person smoking within the area. The overall effect has been an increased number of pedestrians in Times Square – a key measure of success for any public space. Despite significant differences in scale, Times Square can be used as a successful precedent, as Vancouver explores the possibility of closing Robson Street to improve safety and increase the quality of public space along the city's busiest pedestrian corridor.



Above: In addition to demonstrating the potential benefits of repurposing roadways, the pedestrianization of Times Square is also a testament to the value of experimental projects. The closure of Broadway was first tested in 2008. Although local merchants and retailers were reticent at first, the majority soon came around to support the project. By 2011, 60% of Times Square workers, property owners and building executives support the redesign as do a whopping 70% of local retail managers. [Source: New York Times]

Pedestrianizing Road Space | Case Study 3

Mint Plaza | San Francisco, CA

Framed by historic architecture, Mint Plaza is a vibrant public space located in a once-neglected alley roadway. Named for the old U.S. Mint building at the south edge of the site, Mint Plaza is lined with cafes and restaurants which offer outdoor seating and patio spaces. The commercial activity on Mint Plaza is anchored by the legendary Blue Bottle Coffee and The Mezzanine, a world-class music and entertainment venue located in a two-story warehouse. While ground floors are activated with businesses, the upper floors of the industrial warehouses have been converted into residential and office spaces. The space is managed by the non-profit Friends of Mint Plaza, which sponsors free community events and art installations. Mint plaza is also rented out for a variety of private functions, with the proceeds generated from user fees being dedicated to the ongoing maintenance, free art and music programs, and general management of the Plaza. Key design features of the 13,000 square foot Mint Plaza include stone promenades, mast lights, colourful chairs, and integrated benches. What truly sets Mint Plaza apart, however, is its integration of natural elements and sustainability measures.

To be sure, closing a dilapidated alley is a simpler concept than shutting Robson Street to car traffic. However, San Francisco's alley-turned-plaza has a good deal to teach Vancouver about replacing road space with sustainable infrastructure. Since its completion in 2008, Mint Plaza has become a model of adaptive public space design that supports the environment and creates a meaningful community space. In addition to a grove of Gingko trees and a series of rain gardens, Mint Plaza boasts an innovative stormwater management system. The topogra-

phy of the site channels rainwater towards treatment gardens and an underground infiltration basin, which reduce runoff. In 2010, the Environmental Protection Agency celebrated Mint Plaza with a National Award for Smart Growth Achievement.

Unfortunately, environmental sustainability does not guarantee economic success. The 2012 closure of two higher-end restaurants that once lined the plaza have raised concerns about adequate levels of foot traffic needed to support nighttime uses. Several have argued that the plaza cannot reach its full potential until the former U.S. Mint building has been redeveloped into a new museum, as current proposals call for. Despite this apparent lack of foot traffic, Mint Plaza still offers valuable lessons for 800 Robson – especially since pedestrian traffic is already strong along Robson Street. However, it serves as a cautionary tale for the challenges of operating restaurants and other vibrant uses when pedestrian activity is not supported.



4.0

Summary + Recommendations

DESIGN

The design and physical layout of the block will need to change if 800-block Robson is closed permanently to traffic. The new design will need to identify 800-block Robson as a pedestrian space, while maintaining the unimpeded flow of pedestrian traffic through the block. The need for a comprehensive redesign process was made evident during the fall of 2011. After PICNURBIA - that summer's VIVA installation - was removed, 800-block Robson remained closed to traffic. The decision was likely intended as an experiment to test the block's performance during colder and rainier months. Unsurprisingly, this experimental pedestrian space was unsuccessful. Although the street was closed, few pedestrians ventured off the curb, and even fewer stopped to enjoy the space. With no additional seating or physical changes to the block, there was little reason for pedestrians to behave any differently than if the road was still open.

The most recent VIVA installation offered a glimpse into how the road could be transformed into a truly pedestrian space. The Corduroy Road installation included a cedar deck, which brought the road at grade with north and south sidewalks on 800-block Robson. Although more durable materials may be needed, raising the road space to meet the sidewalk would effectively connect the north and south sides of the block, reduce tripping hazards, and better communicate the space as a coherent pedestrian area. The paving material used to fill in the road could also be extended to adjacent sidewalks on Hornby and Howe St. to guide pedestrian movement into 800-block Robson.

The street space on 800-block Robson at the corners of Hornby and Howe will effectively act as the welcoming mat for pedestrians entering the space. Returning to a point made earlier in this report, the entrance of a public space should leave the pedestrian with an immediate sense of arrival. As a key pedestrian thoroughfare, this urban design principle presents a particularly potent challenge for 800-block Robson. Nevertheless, features such as unique paving materials, gateways, signage, or perhaps low walls at the intersections of Robson and Hornby and Howe may help communicate the transition into a pedestrian space with its own identity and character.

Take a Seat: The case studies demonstrate the importance of providing abundant and adaptable furniture. The VIVA installations have also helped highlight the value and efficacy of creating simple seating options that invite people to rest, socialize or enjoy their lunch. Although Robson Square presently has a significant number of benches, much of the furniture is not immediately visible or accessible. Installing seating within clear sightlines of the sidewalk, and positioning them for people watching and socializing would help create a more inviting and usable environment. On 800-block Robson, a wide range of seating provisions should be provided – from single moveable chairs to benches for socializing. After three months of observing public squares in Manhattan, William Whyte concluded that there are several factors that have significant bearing on where people choose to sit. Climate and proximity to food were among the most common variables, but the overriding factor that determined where people choose to sit was the availability of places to do so. This fact may seem self

evident, but is commonly overlooked.

Activate the Underground: Secondary ‘rooms’ or subspaces can be valuable assets to an urban plaza, if effectively designed and activated. Creating subspaces can add versatility to a square by allowing a variety of activities and uses to occur simultaneously. Visitors seeking more intimate or contemplative spaces, for example, may find more suitable accommodation in subspaces. From a design perspective, subspaces located in lower levels can add visual depth and variety to the space. The stairs leading to a subterranean level provide ready-made seating for performances or people watching. Coverage from natural elements can also be used to justify the construction of subspaces. Seasonality will be an important consideration in redesigning 800-block Robson. Awnings and rain shelters will be important physical elements if the plaza is to remain active and vibrant throughout the year. However, covered areas should be used sparingly and strategically. Overbearing shelters may reduce the transparency, safety and accessibility of the site.

For these reasons, 800-block Robson should capitalize on the secondary rooms already present in Robson Square; namely, the subterranean level. The glass dome hovering above the underground level at Robson Square provides a significantly sized covered area that could be activated and programming year-round. Any attempts to activate the lower space must be accompanied by plans to improve access to the underground. A great deal could be achieved by providing better signage at street-level to communicate to pedestrians the existence of the space and any programming that may be occurring. Creating visual cohesion between the primary area and its many subspaces is critical to creating a unifying identity to Robson Square as a whole. Cohesion and visibility is also essential for security, as people in the subterranean level may feel segregated and vulnerable without proper sightlines to the street above.

Connect With the North Plaza: As previously mentioned, redesign plans are currently underway for the North Plaza that forms the Gallery’s front lawn. It will be essential to the success of both spaces that the 800-block Robson and the North Plaza are considered as two separate, but closely related and interdependent public plazas. Consistent designs and similar materials will help communicate the mutual dependency of both plazas. It will also be important for the spaces between the plazas are improved to better guide pedestrian movement through the entire Robson Square site. Renovations to the sidewalk during the construction of bike paths on Hornby Street drastically improved the aesthetic appeal and connectivity of 800-block Robson

and the North Plaza. Planting trees and new landscaping along the Howe Street sidewalk would have a similar effect. To achieve this consistency, the City should consider assigning the same team of architects and designers to 800-block Robson that are currently reviewing the North Plaza.

Key Recommendations:

- 1) Create a level surface between the north and south sidewalks on Robson to reduce tripping hazards and more effectively designate the space as a pedestrian plaza
- 2) Provide adequate public amenities, including sufficient seating space. This should include moveable furniture, which will allow people to adapt the block to their needs and maximize its utility.
- 3) Activate the underground. Animating this space with regular programming - active or passive - will be an important strategy in ensuring the year-round accessibility of Robson Square. Improving visibility of entrances to the underground at 800-block Robson is a key part of achieving this objective.
- 4) Coordinate the design process with the North Plaza redevelopment. This will help create two consistent yet unique public spaces that complement each other, and are easily accessible from either site.

PROGRAMMING + ACTIVATION

To reiterate a point made earlier in this report, William H. Whyte once said, “It’s hard to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.” This is where programming comes into the picture. Programming is what draws people into a space, invites them to stay and encourages them to come again. Moreover, this observation is particularly relevant to 800-block Robson. As one of Vancouver’s busiest pedestrian corridors, 800-block Robson sees thousands of people pass through the space each day. The challenge lies in giving a larger portion of these pedestrians a reason to stay, or better yet, to purposely visit 800-block Robson to enjoy a car free environment.

The VIVA installations are a current example of programming on 800-block Robson that achieves these objectives. Corduroy Road, Pop Rocks and PICNURBIA each provided a fun and social atmosphere that acted as both a pleasant surprise for passersby, and as a gathering point or destination. These installations also demonstrate that programming can include relatively simple and low maintenance activations that support playful and passive activities. The events, concerts and celebrations that take place in Portland’s Pioneer Courthouse Square represent the opposite side of the programming spectrum. With over 300 programmed event days each year, Pioneer Courthouse’s scheduling would be more appropriately applied to the North Plaza in front of the Art Gallery. There is greater potential on 800-block Robson to apply lessons learned from the Warming Hut Competition in Winnipeg. If 800-block Robson were closed permanently, VIVA’s activations could be extended into a year-round program, with various installations adapting to seasonal changes. Similar to Winnipeg, there is a great deal of potential in hosting an architectural and design competition to create ‘rain huts’ during the winter months.

As mentioned previously, 800-block Robson could become a vital small-scale event space if pedestrianized. Permanently closing the street would immediately reduce the time and resources required, and inconveniences caused, by temporarily pedestrianizing 800-block Robson for short-term events. Creating clear standards and centraliz-

ing the event programming in a single entity could further streamline the application process for organizations wishing to use the space. The role of 800-block Robson as an event space, however, should not be over estimated. Pedestrian connectivity and physical design elements present significant barriers to hosting medium to large-scale events. Greater emphasis should be placed on the North Plaza and subterranean level of Robson Square when it comes to event planning. In particular, activating the ice rink level of Robson Square would help improve street-level visibility of that space, and thereby infuse the entire area with more energy and foot traffic. To summarize, the open spaces in Robson Square, 800-block Robson, and the North Plaza each serve different event and programming opportunities. It is the role of the management entity to ensure that programming in each of these spaces complements each other, while maintaining the important passive activities that currently take place.

For Robson Square, 800-block Robson, or the North Plaza to succeed as event spaces, all ownership stakeholders would need to agree on an event mandate, which would stipulate the number, size, and purpose of events permitted. Such a policy would ensure that the roster of events is diverse and accessible to all Vancouverites. It would also provide a balance of commercialized promotional events and community-based activities. This can be achieved by offering varying rental rates for corporate and non-profit organizations. Developing an event policy or plan would also help the managers of 800-block Robson identify current capacity gaps that may need to be addressed, including access to electricity, water, public washrooms, and other vital utilities that public events demand. Currently, there are no electrical outlets available at street-level on 800-block Robson. Any events requiring electrical power must provide their own generators – which often cause unwanted noise – or make arrangements with the Gallery to access their power network. Most importantly, an event policy would guarantee that 800-block Robson does not become over programmed with scheduled events. Inundating the space with events would hinder the spontaneity and sense of accessibility that make public spaces succeed. This principle is especially relevant for 800-block Robson, as the space currently thrives on passive activities and impromptu social meetings.

The summertime closures of 800-block Robson have also helped demonstrate the value of food trucks in public space. As with most things in life, it is difficult to underestimate the power of food. To reiterate William H. Whyte’s point mentioned earlier, food has a magnetic ability to draw people into a space, which in turn attracts more people. The management entity responsible for 800-block Robson would have a

direct role in issuing commercial licences and regulating the diversity and quality of food products offered. It would also be advisable to construct semi-permanent food kiosks that complement the overall design and do not obstruct the flow of movement through the space. As an investment strategy, leasing kiosk space can act as a helpful source of revenue for the management entity. If this proves viable, it may be worth exploring other small commercial ventures such as flower or newspaper stands, which might add colour, fragrance, and activity to space.

Fortunately, 800-block Robson and Robson Square have a diverse roster of activations that already occur in the space on a regular basis. The underground skating rink attracts approximately 60,000 people each year. The Jazz Festival stage on 800-block Robson encourages thousands more to stop and enjoy live music as they pass along the sidewalk. In the summer of 2013, the Gallery partnered with the City to extend its annual FUSE event onto 800-block Robson. These and many other temporary events that have been held on 800-block Robson demonstrate the potential and existing capacity to program the space. The management entity of the public space will be responsible for building on this capacity, and broadening the opportunities for programming 800-block Robson. Regardless of what programming is brought onto 800-block Robson, successfully activating a public space requires creativity and community responsiveness.

Key Recommendations:

- 1) Involve the community and key stakeholders in programming decisions. This will ensure that any activations are accessible to people of all ages and abilities.
- 2) Maintain the passive atmosphere of 800-block Robson. Do not compete with the North Plaza to become a premiere event space. Seating is a form of programming.
- 3) Integrate public art onto the site. Design competitions can result in fun and interactive animations that require minimal maintenance, but keep the space exciting and fresh.

MANAGEMENT

Taken collectively, the management case studies demonstrate the importance of having an effective team of professionals to program and maintain a public space. Individually, however, each case study represents a different management structure; including a non-profit organization, an arms-length municipal entity, and a for-profit management company. Each approach has its advantages and downsides. Non-profit organizations are perhaps most likely to be rooted in the community, therefore in the best position to respond to local needs and demands. However, non-profits often rely on funding from governments, which can be subject to change and volatility. For-profit companies such as MJMM in San Francisco specialize in programming and managing public space. This expertise can help avoid common pitfalls for public spaces. However, private sector management may be more susceptible to instituting curfews and heightening security around the space, therefore reducing accessibility.

The current management of Robson Square and 800-block Robson is entirely unique. Due to the complex ownership structure of the space, the City, Province and key tenants like the Art Gallery all participate in managing and programming the area. The underground level is managed by a private company, which has been contracted by the Province. This system currently functions relatively well. Successful events such as the Jazz Festival and the VIVA activations that occur on 800-block Robson would not be possible without the cooperation of all partners. Through interviews with representatives at the Province, City and Art Gallery it is evident that the success of this system is owed to positive working relationships among key staff at each stakeholder. However, system is left susceptible to staffing changes or shifts of opinion on how the space should be programmed. Therefore, it is recommended that a formalized organization is established with a clear mandate to operate and manage Robson Square and 800-block Robson in the best interests of Vancouver residents.

As with programming and design, it is important that the management of Robson Square and the North Plaza be made consistent. The simplest way to achieve this would be to have the same management organization overseeing both public spaces. This will ensure that scheduling and programming is well coordinated, and done so in a way

that each space complements the other. For example, a music event being held on the North Plaza, could be complemented by a temporary outdoor patio on 800-block Robson. As mentioned in the previous section, a centralized management entity would help streamline event application procedures, and ensure a high standard of diversity and community programming is present in the events calendar. Management staff will need to be cognizant of the risks of over programming the space. However, renting space in 800-block Robson can provide an important revenue stream, as demonstrated by Pioneer Courthouse Square. These resources can be used to support the maintenance and operating costs of the space.

The management of public space is an inherently complex problem. The sheer number of legal, community, and professional interests at stake can make it difficult to find common ground. Fortunately, an informal network of professionals and individuals at the City, Province, Gallery, business community, and local residents has taken ownership and responsibility of 800-block Robson. This unofficial management structure has been effective, and offers a strong foundation for moving forward. In considering which management option to pursue, the City, the Province and other community stakeholders must first decide what the primary purpose of 800-block Robson and Robson Square will be. A comprehensive management strategy and maintenance program then act as the mandate for whatever management entity is appointed or created. Ideally, the key staff members of the management entity will participate in this process so that the mandate is transparent and effectively carried out.

The management of 800-block Robson will be instrumental to its success. Without the effective and cooperative participation of legitimate stakeholders, public spaces inevitably fall into neglect and antisocial and unwelcoming activities begins to take grip; graffiti, litter, illegal advertising, and drug dealing are among the many signs that a space is not well managed, and that the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders are unclear. It is difficult, if not impossible, to prescribe a management model for 800-block Robson until firmer decisions have been made on redesigning the space and more work is done on the North Plaza redevelopment. Moving forward, the stakeholder partners should work to formalize the existing management structure for programs and activations occurring in the near future. A permanent entity must be appointed eventually, but an interim organization of stakeholders offers a valuable building block. Whichever form of management model is pursued, it is essential that some form of legally defined decision making organization is made accountable and capable – in both a financial and legal sense - of operating and maintaining the space

for the enjoyment and benefit of all Vancouver residents and visitors.

Key Recommendations:

- 1) Determine the management structure in the short-to-medium term.
- 2) Identify and approach key stakeholders, and invite them to participate in the redesign process.
- 3) Build off the existing relationships that have helped make temporary closures on 800-block Robson a success. This will likely require the City to remain closely involved as a catalyst and connector of all other partners.

REPURPOSING ROAD SPACE

One of the greatest challenges that must be addressed before 800-block Robson can be made permanently pedestrianized is the rerouting of the #5 Bus. This bus is vital to the east-west movement of residents in the West End neighbourhood, which is one of the city's most densely populated areas. However, several precedents across the world suggest that transit and pedestrians can co-exist in a safe, pleasant, and accessible environment. The shared space movement is quickly gaining steam and attention from planners and landscape architects around the world. Shared space projects are predicated on the simple concept that if pedestrians, cyclists, motorists, and buses are forced to visibly occupy the same street, they will navigate that space more responsibly. Motorists in heavily delineated driving zones, in contrast, tend to operate on autopilot, and thereby focus on other cars rather than cyclists or pedestrians.

In between the polarizing options closing the street or leaving it open to cars, a compromise has surfaced. Several public transit proponents have argued that 800-block Robson should be closed to motorists, but remained open for public transit. The rationale behind this argument assumes that the street could be closed to cars with only minor traffic implications for nearby downtown streets. However, the number of people affected by a permanent #5 reroute cannot justify prohibiting buses. Indeed, 9,000 daily riders could potentially be subjected to some degree of inconvenience if a satisfactory alternative route cannot be determined.

To be sure, there are several successful precedents of blending public transit and pedestrian spaces around the world. In addition, nearly every thriving public space is in some way connected a public transit network, or is adjacent to transit stops and major nodes. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest such an arrangement would be suited to 800-block Robson. First, the frequency of the #5 would leave little time when 800-block Robson is not subjected to bus traffic. When Robson is open to traffic, the #5 passes through the 800 block every four minutes. This steady stream of buses would detract from the pedestrian atmosphere and effectively deter

people from utilizing the road space, even if cars were prohibited. Second, in contrast to most 'transit squares' such as Taksim Square in Istanbul, 800-block Robson is a relatively small space to have pedestrians and buses mingling. Although the entire Robson Square site comprises a large pedestrianized area, the majority of visitors will enter or pass through the site on 800-block Robson. As a key gateway, it is essential for this space to make pedestrian feel safe and welcome. The continual passage of buses will not create this effect.

For similar reasons that a transit square is not appropriate on 800-block Robson, it is unlikely that a shared space concept would be successful. Although road calming measures and reduced traffic speeds could be instituted on 800-block Robson, the very presence of cars would restrict many positive changes to the pedestrian realm. Moreover, research conducted for this report could not confirm whether a shared space scheme has ever succeeded on a single city block. Nevertheless, several lessons can be learned from jurisdictions that have implemented shared space concepts on urban streets. Following the shared space conversion of Kensington High Street, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea published the comprehensive Streetscape Guide. The Guide offers seven steps to follow when creating a partially pedestrianized space, but the same principles can be adapted to a fully pedestrianized concept such as 800-block Robson. The principles are: 1) Reduce clutter, 2) Use a simple palette of high quality materials, 3) Respect and enhance local character, 4) Use simple and clean designs, 5) Coordinate colour and design, 6) Maintain existing and improve the environment, and 7) Preserve historical paving and street furniture. These recommendations can be distilled to suggest that a former road space can succeed as a pedestrian area through simple and legible design concepts that maximize accessibility and visibility.

The decision before Vancouver's city council remains a dichotomous one; either close Robson permanently to all traffic, or leave it open to traffic with exceptions for seasonal closures and/or special events. It is the recommendation of this report that 800-block Robson's future as an arterial road be determined only after other external circumstances have settled, which could have transportation impacts in the area. This other factors include; the release of the downtown bus service review; the completion of the Nordstrom's redevelopment project; and the publication of firm plans for the future of the North Plaza.

Key Recommendations:

- 1) A shared-space concept or transit square scheme is unlikely to achieve the desired improvements to the pedestrian realm on 800-block Robson.
- 2) At the very least, temporary summertime closures should be allowed to continue. The success and significant approval rating of the VIVA Vancouver installations provide clear evidence that this should remain an ongoing program.
- 3) The decision to close 800-block Robson should be delayed until more information is available on other factors such as the Vancouver Art Gallery relocation, the North Plaza redevelopment, and the #5 Robson bus reroute.

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Charles Gauthier | Executive Director, Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association. Interviewed: May 8, 2013.

Barbara Fairbrother | Sponsorship and Event Lead, Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association. Interviewed: May 8, 2013.

Andy Schimmel | Strategic Lease Services Advisor, Province of British Columbia. Interviewed: May 10, 2013.

Brendan Hurley | Urban Design Planner, VIA Architecture. Interviewed: May 13, 2013

Tom Meighan | Director of Operations, Vancouver Art Gallery. Interviewed: May 14, 2013

Natalie Marcotte | Public Relations and Communications, Tourism Vancouver. Interviewed: May 14, 2013.

Nick Milkovich | Principal, Milkovich Architects Inc. Interviewed: May 15, 2013

Matthew Soules | Principal, Matthew Soules Architecture Inc. Interviewed: May 22, 2013

Michelle Penney | Manager, Business Development and Events, UBC Robson Square. Interviewed: May 24, 2013

Valerie Watson | LADOT Pedestrian Programs Division, City of Los Angeles. Interviewed: June 4, 2013 (telephone)

Peter Hargraves | Principal, Sputnik Architecture Inc. Interviewed, June 6, 2013 (telephone)

Ongoing consultations with:

Jenniffer Sheel | Senior Engineer, City of Vancouver

Krisztina Kassay | Planner, City of Vancouver

Melanie Marchand | Project Manager, City of Vancouver

Creating a Square in the Heart of the City

Exploring the opportunities + challenges of creating a pedestrian plaza on 800-block Robson Street

Ryan O'Connor

School of Community & Regional Planning
University of British Columbia

2013

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by

RYAN PATRICK O'CONNOR

B.A. (Hons.), The University of Winnipeg, 2010

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in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

School of Community and Regional Planning

We accept this project as conforming
to the required standard

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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