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## Hume: Big dreams for Toronto's broken boulevard

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Even if just yesterday you happened to walk down John Street, chances are you can no longer remember what you saw. Like many small downtown thoroughfares, it tends to be a bit of a mixed bag, nondescript, even a little dull.

But on second glance, John has a lot more going for it than many Toronto streets. For one thing, it's remarkably well connected. Running south from Grange Park to Front St., it is within spitting distance of a dozen or more cultural institutions, everything from the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Princess of Wales Theatre and the TIFF Bell Lightbox to the Rogers Centre, the CN Tower and the headquarters of both CBC and CTV.

The route also encompasses a number of hotels, the National Film Board, Scotiabank Theatre, Metro Hall and much of the Entertainment District.

Little wonder, then, that in 2009 the city declared John a "Cultural Corridor." Though no one was certain exactly what that meant, it sounded good.

Certainly, the Entertainment District Business Improvement Association liked the idea.

"The BIA did a master plan several years ago that identified John as a priority project," says association president Janice Solomon. "We want it to feel like a destination street, one that has pedestrian priority and event priority. It will be a street drivers don't look to as an easy way to get through."

Solomon hopes that the Corridor could be in place by 2015, when Toronto hosts the Pan-Am Games

The BIA launched a design competition for a square on the southeast corner of King and John. [Five designs](#) were shortlisted and the winner will be announced next week. King and John is not the most exciting stop along the corridor-to-be, which makes it an obvious starting point for the transformation.

In fact, wandering the length of John, one is struck by how many opportunities it presents for improvement, innovation and imagination.

If we were to adopt the strategy pioneered by Janette Sadik-Khan, New York City's much admired traffic commissioner, the possibilities become endless. She's the one who has transformed whole swaths of Manhattan with little more than [paint, planters and a few benches](#).

The technique is simple: Paint dividing lines in the right places, add street furniture and stand back. It turns out that in the public realm, what you see is what you get. If a space looks like road, people drive on it. If it looks like pedestrian space, they walk. The difference can be as basic as a white strip and a few concrete urns filled with plants.

We tend not to do things that way in Toronto; if we did, John could be remade overnight — literally. We prefer to smother a project in consultation, so much you sometimes worry it might be crushed beneath the weight of civic consideration.

The obvious change, of course, would be to close John to regular vehicular traffic. Were that to happen, one could begin the stroll at Grange Park, in the shadow of the blue titanium façade Frank Gehry added to the AGO, and wander undisturbed all the way to Lake Ontario.

There are already an unusually large number of benches in the park; they would continue to the waterfront, providing places to rest and watch throughout the length of the corridor.

Although no one would turn down a square at King and John, a more urgent location for a major intervention might be Front and John. John ends here rather ignominiously as it is swallowed by an underground parking garage exit.

Though this is also the entrance to the Rogers Centre, you'd hardly know it. It looks like what it is: a subterranean loading dock. This is where Toronto's Spanish Steps could be. Given that the CBC Broadcast Centre is just across the road, the Steps could also serve as an impromptu amphitheatre when the need arises.

South of that, the corridor needs to be marked more clearly. For example, unless you know it's there, Roundhouse Park, a destination in its own right, comes as a surprise. Why don't we show visitors the route with decent signage and, again, more benches?

Another challenge will be to knit John into a single entity top to bottom. Right now, it's more a series of disconnected arteries. Perhaps the best way to accomplish that would be with rows of trees running down either side of the street.

Then there's the thorny issue of pedestrians; should they have John all to themselves, or should they share it with cars? Closing the street would raise howls of outrage from merchants and condo owners, but now that Simcoe St. runs all the way to the waterfront, John is under less vehicular pressure.

And with the number of surface parking lots on John, especially north of King, there are opportunities to create a series of squares. Even Pearl St., which runs east of John, has the potential to become a draw. Here is the striking rear façade of the Princess of Wales Theatre; owner David Mirvish hired American artist Frank Stella to produce the large mural that covers the back wall.

But already one can hear the objections of cyclists, some of whom have advocated for John to be a downtown bike corridor. Though such a suggestion verges on apostasy, couldn't cyclists and pedestrians share space? Or is that asking too much?

Probably. Which brings us back to those cans of paint. . .