

City Planning

John Street revitalization plans in the works

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Toronto is a city crammed with cultural riches that tend to be confined indoors. Figure it as a Victorian-era tendency to keep the most intriguing goodies shut away in closets. Or because we clear off the streets and retreat inside to wallow in our winter-city pathology.

Take John Street, in the heart of the city's Entertainment District.

It's another of Toronto's dreary, invisible streets – kind to cars and cruel to pedestrians – that happens to connect a remarkable suite of cultural heavy hitters: the Art Gallery of Ontario, Grange Park, CTV's MuchMusic, the Princess of Wales theatre, the TIFF Lightbox, the CBC, the CN Tower. The thrill here is in going inside. But, when the show is over, people retreat to their cars or subways and take off – away from John, the street with no *there* there.

It's time to invigorate John Street into a five-star attraction. A proposal for an animated civic boulevard, a vision spearheaded by the Toronto Entertainment District BIA, presented at a recent public open house hosted by the city, has a chance of actually being constructed in time for the 2015 Pan Am Games – but only if the public and city council get behind it. (Construction on John Street has not been considered in the city's capital works plan, but John Street Corridor improvements have been identified as a priority by city council.) A vote will likely go to city council this fall.

Two proposals designed by the Planning Partnership are being floated around City Hall and at public consultations. But only one – let's call it Option A – is serious enough to be constructed.

That scheme widens the sidewalks and creates much lower "rolling" curbs so that the typical demarcation between sidewalk and roadway is lessened. A herring-bone pattern on the reinvented road with only one lane of traffic in either direction signals that John would become a zone for slowed-down car traffic. Trees would be introduced on the west side and a double *allée* of trees – possibly disease-resistant elm trees – would line the east side of John with generous, people-friendly sidewalks measuring 9.5 metres. Recognizing the potential for street festivals and celebrations, high mast lamps would be installed and special-event crews could simply plug their equipment directly into the street. Nighttime illumination art on John Street could mirror the shifting colour palette of the CN Tower. There's room for café terraces, for pedestrians, for people on bikes, as well as cars.

Consistent with other first-class street revitalization projects, the John Street project could cost up to \$50-million. About \$10-million has already been raised for the project through Section 37 public-realm enhancements collected from the area's developers. Meanwhile, the Entertainment District BIA is having

ongoing conversations with the provincial ministry of culture and tourism as well as with the federal government.

Investing in the public realm of Canada's largest city? Seems like a no-brainer to me.

The other, Option B, has been required to satisfy the city's transportation department, which still seems stuck on a 1950s interpretation of streets as strictly, efficiently car-dominated. In that version, the sidewalks are narrower, the curb is noticeable and the trees are minimized.

"The city has talked for a number of years about John Street as a cultural corridor," says Janice Solomon, the executive director of the Toronto Entertainment District BIA. "You've heard that old saying, 'If you build it they will come.' Here, we have quite the opposite. The cultural events are already happening. We need a street that plays catch-up...we'd really like to have a street that feels animated from top to bottom."

That's a highly laudable ambition, not something to bury with other pleasures in a closet. Travel anywhere, to the elegantly refined Bloor Street, to Kitchener, where King Street has been reinvented as a flexible boulevard, to New York, to Paris, to Copenhagen, where the pedestrianized streets are packed with people – even in the winter – and discover that, around the world, streets are now being interpreted as inside-out public-gathering events. If the stars align, and this street reinvention isn't turned into a political football between new and old regimes, then a reinvented John Street will prevail.

Imagine a Toronto as the people's city, a place where you don't always need a ticket to get in.

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