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Shopping for Bay redevelopment

Downtown landmark has exciting possibilities

By: **Brent Bellamy / On Architecture**

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The Bay downtown should be preserved as an important component of the district. There are many creative alternatives for a makeover of the 85-year-old building.

On a cold November morning in 1926, Mayor Ralph Webb handed \$1.25 to a young clerk, purchasing a dark-green necktie for his son. Minutes later, 50,000 eager Winnipeggers flooded through gleaming brass doors to celebrate the opening of Hudson's Bay Co.'s new downtown department store.

For the next several decades, the Bay and Eaton's, its red-brick rival down the street, would establish

Portage Avenue as the commercial and social heart of our city. By the 1980s, however, the rise of suburban malls and power centres had diminished the role of urban retail in cities across the continent. In an unsuccessful effort to combat this shifting tide, Winnipeg built Portage Place in 1987. But inevitably, a decade later the Bay would lose her Portage Avenue companion and begin her own slow decline.

After reducing its presence in the iconic store to three floors from six, it has been reported recently the HBC is now considering the option of selling its landmark building, casting doubt on the company's future in the downtown.

This news has brought us to a historic crossroads along the 175-year journey that Winnipeg and the Hudson's Bay Co. have travelled together. It is clear the opportunity to implement a development strategy that preserves the Bay's downtown retail presence might soon be lost forever.

The public redevelopment of urban department stores is a challenge other western Canadian cities have faced. We can look to their success as a template for our own.

In 2009, the iconic and long-vacant Woodward's store in Vancouver's beleaguered Downtown Eastside became the centrepiece of a \$400-million urban renewal project that partnered three levels of government and the private sector. The innovative mixed-use development incorporates social housing, condominiums, office space and retail markets with Simon Fraser University's downtown campus. The development has been celebrated as one of Canada's most significant urban renewal projects, bringing together students, shoppers and mixed-income residents in an active and dynamic environment.

The Bay building in Edmonton saw its own transformation in 2006 when the University of Alberta purchased the empty structure and established a downtown campus, today called Enterprise Square. With help from all levels of government, the new facility has become a symbol of Edmonton's urban rebirth. Along with the university, the mixed-use project is home to retail and office space, an art gallery and television studios.

These two projects exemplify the opportunity a department store redevelopment represents to the economic, social and urban quality of a city. The fundamental difference in Winnipeg is that we have the unique opportunity to emulate this success while maintaining and enhancing the original department store's retail presence in the building.

An active mixed-use redevelopment would not only be an important urban focal point and economic catalyst on the western edge of downtown, but the added foot traffic in the building might make the Bay itself vital and prosperous.

There are several opportunities that could be brought together within the grand Tyndall walls of the old building. An expanded Winnipeg Art Gallery, student residences and new classroom space for the University of Winnipeg, an urban campus for the University of Manitoba, a boutique hotel, restaurants, office space and even apartments or condominiums could all be part of a vibrant, mixed-use facility sharing space with the Bay and Zellers.

Realizing this type of development and securing the store's long-term presence in our downtown will require proactive and motivated civic leadership. Private-public partnerships (P3) as well as innovative, government-led strategies such as the Downtown Residential Grant Program and the SHED tax-increment financing zone (TIF) around the MTS Centre have proven to be successful tools for guiding privately financed urban renewal in our city. The Bay stands as an essential component of that revival and requires similar creative strategies to ensure its prosperity.

Residential density has long been seen as the driving force behind downtown revitalization. We have

invested millions of public dollars to attract residential development to the core, and at long last these efforts are showing success. The Bay represents a significant amenity that makes this downtown living attractive. If we lose the opportunity to maintain its presence, it will jeopardize the investments we have already made and slow the momentum of urban renewal happening in our city. The importance of sustaining the Bay's retail presence is not nostalgia for a lost era, but the contribution it makes to the everyday livability of the downtown. Once it is gone, nothing like it will ever return.

Preserving the Bay should not be seen as an effort to save the building's stone and mortar, but more importantly, the retail presence the HBC has had in our downtown for 131 years. With urgency, creativity and strong leadership, we can seize this fleeting opportunity and ensure the Hudson's Bay Co. is a significant contributor to the livability and urban vitality of our city long into the future.

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