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# Downtown development will exemplify quality design

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STANTEC ARCHITECTURE

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*An artist's streetscape rendering of the Centrepoint development under construction at the northwest corner of Portage Avenue and Donald Street.*

*'IT is fatal to specialize... the more diverse we are in what we do, the better.'* — Jane Jacobs

In 1961 Jane Jacobs wrote her landmark book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. It would redefine our understanding of what makes urban areas vibrant, prosperous and safe. Jacobs likened the city to a living organism, where physical elements such as buildings, parks and sidewalks worked in harmony with social and economic conditions to create a spontaneous blend of what she called "organized complexity." She emphasized the importance of buildings that interact with their

surroundings and engage pedestrians along the sidewalk, insisting even large buildings be attractive, welcoming and offer a visually rich experience at the human scale.

Jacobs questioned the effectiveness of single-use neighbourhoods such as entertainment or office districts, instead advocating for a diversity of building types and uses. She argued that a variation of buildings, large and small, new and old, commercial and residential attracts a range of people with different lifestyles and daily routines that populate the city at different times, increasing commercial activity and improving urban safety.

In the past, these diverse neighbourhoods evolved organically over time. The challenge for modern urban renewal is to create space that inspires an instant emotional connection with the community. New buildings that are multi-use and designed to reflect local tradition and character, while connecting to their surroundings on a human level, have the greatest opportunity to become successful contributors to a vibrant neighbourhood.

The Centrepont development currently under construction across from the MTS Centre on Winnipeg's iconic Portage Avenue hopes to become what Jacobs would call a "district anchor" and neighbourhood focal point. It will attempt to achieve this elusive sense of community by weaving a diverse series of independent functions into the fabric of existing smaller buildings along its block.

Designed by Stantec Architecture, the \$130-million project will soon contribute two new peaks to Winnipeg's skyline. On the west side a 21-storey, residential tower named Glasshouse Skylofts will offer modern condominiums with a floor-to-ceiling glass-curtain-wall exterior. Fittingly, the Glasshouse will rise behind the familiar green walls of the Dayton Building on Portage Avenue, Winnipeg's first all-glass curtain wall facade, built in 1955.

With its structural concrete frame currently rising one floor per week, the project's 15-storey east tower will be home to the stylish Alt Hotel from the Quebec-based Groupe Germain. Covered in glass-fibre cement panels from the Czech Republic, the tower will present a playful expression in the skyline with a random array of vertical windows on each side. Thin metal fins extending from the edge of several windows will catch the Prairie light and animate the facade with a patchwork of shadows as the sun moves around the building each day.

As the tower nears completion, it will be fascinating to watch for the Alt's innovative system of prefabricated construction. Completed hotel rooms, built in another Canadian city, will be transported to the site as single units. A crane will plug each white box into the structural frame, like giant storage bins in an IKEA wall unit. Each room pod will be complete with wall and floor finishes and even custom-designed furniture that is secured in place.

With these dramatic towers soaring overhead, the project's true success as a promoter of downtown vibrancy will be defined by its ability to establish an intimate connection to the sidewalk and offer a rich human experience at eye level.

As a starting point, the overall building layout will help to create this pedestrian connection. A five-storey office podium along the street reflects the massing of traditional Portage Avenue buildings and is of a scale that enables a visual connection with the city below. Originally designed to sit above a parkade, the Glasshouse tower will now come to the ground, promoting an interaction between the residential units and the sidewalk, helping to establish a feeling of security for pedestrians.

Ground-floor facades will be transparent and visually engaging as the large complex is broken down to a human scale with two restaurants and a retail space along the sidewalk. Outdoor patios will invite social interaction and soften the line between inside and out.

Each of the major functions will have entrances on different streets, helping to populate the surrounding neighbourhood on all sides. The familiar classical facade of the Mitchell-Copp building will

be maintained as a portal entry to the office space, connecting the complex to the history of its site. The limestone artifact will stand away from the face of the new building to expose a full-height glass wall behind, with internal circulation space animating the transparent facade. The configuration of the entry will create a small courtyard niche for pedestrians and will isolate the former bank manager's office vestibule to be transformed into a small art-exhibition space, creating increased visual interest along the sidewalk.

These diverse and multiple functions weaved together into a single project add significant complexity to Centrepont's design and construction. Three different structural systems, complex ownership and contractor agreements, varied construction schedules and a unique campus geothermal system serving each of the buildings are only a few of the challenges faced during its development.

In the end, this diversity will make Centrepont a model for future large-scale projects in the city. Its complexity and sensitive consideration of the human experience at eye level will hopefully promote street life and act as a catalyst for smaller, organic development that will help transform Winnipeg's downtown into a walkable, living neighbourhood with safe, active sidewalks, flourishing commercial spaces and lively urban character.

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