

the Jenny Revue

20TH ANNIVERSARY!

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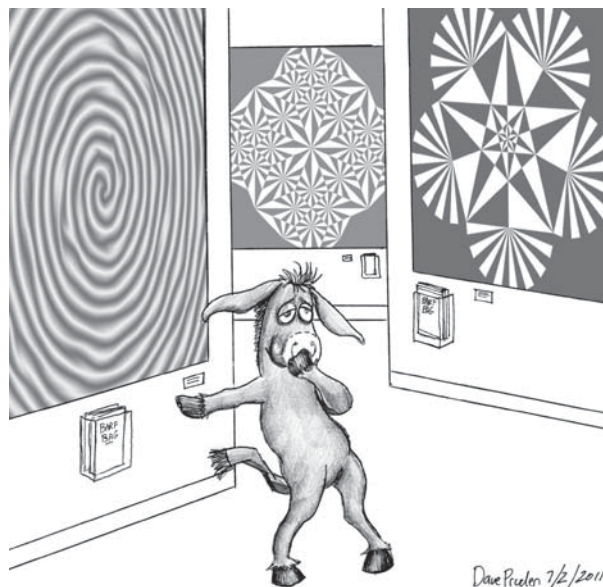
FRINGE EFFECTS

One of the major benefits of the Winnipeg Fringe is the change it makes to the downtown landscape. Thousands of people ignore warnings from right-wing columnists about how dangerous downtown Winnipeg supposedly is, and turn the Exchange district into a minor league version of Mardi Gras. The Fringe has also given Winnipeggers a glimpse of what other cities have learned: a downtown area that has a gathering place can really enhance city life. And as someone who works in the area during the year, I also love the sense of camaraderie and goodwill that seems to take over the Exchange district during the Fringe.

In the early Fringes, the changes were minor: a beer tent and some vendors in the open space between the old Royal Bank building and the building that holds The Poutinery. Then came the Kids Fringe and the weekend closing of King Street to increase the seating capacity of the King's Head. Last year the street vendors' area moved to Albert and Arthur Street, and these streets were closed to traffic.

Gradually, then, the Fringe has expanded its pedestrian zone to resemble what many other cities have year-round: a downtown area that encourages people to walk about and enjoy a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Think of the Sparks Street mall in Ottawa, or similar areas in Quebec City, Calgary, Montréal, or even Halifax. Somehow, Winnipeg hasn't managed to pull this off except during the Fringe. The Fringe is a great theatre and performing arts event, but the downtown transformation it creates enhances life for everyone who experiences downtown, regardless of whether they ever see a play.

This year, construction has changed the site again. Red River College is converting the old Royal Bank building into instruction and residence space, and this has disrupted pedestrian traffic,



Dave Pruden 7/2/2011

closing off one east-west route, and lengthening the walk between the portable toilets and the beer tent, especially if you are nervous about stepping down from ground level to the pit area in front of The Cube.

Ah, yes, The Cube. Last year it replaced the visually appealing but functionally challenged stage area that existed before. It's the kind of architecture that Prince Charles would call a carbuncle, and last year it was not quite ready for use. The menacing aluminum curtain would not retract properly. Instead one corner was pulled back, giving the impression that anyone using the stage was trespassing, and that at any moment the curtain might give way and sweep trespassers off the stage, catapulting them into the audience like a perverse mosh pit. This year the curtain retracts properly, but it is still far from a welcoming presence in the square. Besides that, its cube shape blocks sight lines and therefore closes off the square, making it appear smaller. It makes me sad when I think of how well the public performing space integrates into the landscape in downtown Chicago.

Then there are the Street vendors. As a shopper, I like the more open areas that Albert and Arthur Street afford. How has this move worked out? In some informal interviews with vendors yesterday, one expressed a preference for the new location, another said business was better at the former location, and another said it was a trade-off between better sales at the new location that came at the cost of more shoplifting. The proprietor of the Haberdashery on Albert said his business improved during the Fringe, even though some street vendors sell competing merchandise. One thing that I have noticed is that the variety and quantity of merchandise does not seem to have expanded with the expanded real estate.

The other change that has evolved in the past few years is the increasing use of active transportation, or bicycling, as the layperson would call it. The strongest evidence for this is the large bank of bicycle racks in front of Artspace this year. I bicycle downtown most days, and these racks have been very well used. It seems that more and more people are resisting the temptation to pay for all-day parking when they can save money and get a little exercise by biking downtown. It will be interesting to see how this trend plays out as the heat wave continues.

It will also be interesting to see how the Fringe changes the landscape, and vice versa, in years to come. For one thing, my employers promise me that the Building renovations will be complete next year. That will mean that the Culinary Arts Program will be in the downtown campus, with potentially beneficial effects for the nutrition of Fringers.

If we are lucky, we might even come to a Fringe in an area that is moving towards a year round (summer round?) gathering place. We'll still have The Cube, though.

Kevin Longfield

The Jenny Revue is a proudly independent publication NOT affiliated with the Winnipeg Fringe Festival

