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sitelines

BY STEVE COHLMAYER

\$20-M mistake?

*New bridge pricey, but
it'll redefine our city*

FOR the first in this series of articles about architecture I was going to deal with the quality of modern architecture, but instead, I'm going to write about an important new project: the new pedestrian and vehicular bridges linking Provencher Avenue to The Forks and downtown.

The pedestrian bridge has been built on the original alignment between Provencher Boulevard and Broadway (look at a map to see that they really are in line!). The vehicular bridge is built north of the pedestrian bridge, and links Provencher and Water Street. A pedestrian sidewalk runs along the north side of the vehicular bridge, but there is no sidewalk on the bridge's south side.

Access to the pedestrian bridge is a problem for those who want to go east from downtown and have found themselves on the south side of Water Street. They must either detour through The Forks to the pedestrian bridge (perhaps not safe for singles at night), or cross the bridge against traffic to reach the sidewalk (unwise at any time). Those

travelling to downtown from St. Boniface meet the same challenge in reverse.

An additional sidewalk on the south side of the vehicular bridge would have cost approximately \$2 million. This sidewalk would have connected with sidewalks along Water Street and could have been comfortably linked to The Forks. Instead, it was decided to build the complex and less convenient pedestrian bridge for \$20 million.

To put the financial decision into perspective, the total cost to open The Forks in 1990 — including purchase of lands, development of the market, service infrastructure and major public spaces — was \$25 million. The impact of that expenditure on our public psyche has been immense. A friend of mine, a city planner, remarked that the \$20 million spent for the pedestrian bridge would have been better spent to subsidize downtown housing, which would have brought huge economic and social benefits to the city centre.

Now that the structure is a reality, my response to it is somewhat surprising (to me). The practical excess and awkward circulation patterns of this grandiose project are, on balance, a good thing for all of us. The new cable-stay bridge, designed by Wardrop Engineering with Gaboury Prefontaine Perry, is a handsome and remarkable structure that will help redefine our city. Whether the investment in the bridges has a greater effect on the economic and social health of Winnipeg than an equal investment in housing is difficult to measure. It would certainly be nice to find another \$20 million for housing subsidies and not have to decide which is the better use of public funds.

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