

A bridge to cross

Steve Cohlmeier

I have a brother-in-law who, when hearing of disagreements about taste says, "That's why they make chocolate, and vanilla."

When the battle is over flavours of ice cream, there is room for chocolate and vanilla. When the battle concerns policies that can have profoundly different effects, thoughts about ice cream flavours seem less insightful.

When the physical form of our city is debated, and two opposite propositions are put forward, it is not always easy for the two sides to co-exist. Physical developments are real and relatively permanent. They either get built, or they remain ideas. If they are built, the group who objected loses the battle; and conversely, if construction is halted, the project proponent loses the battle. A middle road in these circumstances can be hard to find.

A Winnipeg developer and architectural firm, Stechesen Katz Architects, recently purchased a derelict and abandoned bridge, and a right-of-way, adjacent to the Kenaston bridge over the Assiniboine River. Zoning regulations permit reuse of the bridge and the right-of-way for residential or office use on approximately 50 per cent of the purchased land, but zoning must be adjusted in order to permit building on the entire bridge. As has been reported in the *Free Press*, the new owners hope to build condominiums on the bridge, with units looking east over the Assiniboine River.

When I heard about this project, I was pleased that right here in River City someone had the gumption to try something creative and risky; that the market in our slow-growth city can handle an out-of-the-ordinary housing solution; that there is a market for housing close to our city centre; that one of the province's better design firms was behind the project.

There is a group of citizens opposed to this development. Their objections seem to centre on a perceived threat to the enjoyment of the river and loss of a possible recreational walkway across the river. They also claim that the project would violate Plan Winnipeg. Though I do not agree with the points raised, each of the objections could be argued on its merits.

That will happen next Tuesday at about 6 p.m. at the city centre community committee meeting at City Hall.

I spoke with an opponent of the project, who asked if I knew of another such multi-use bridge anywhere else in the world. Though I could think of two excellent examples from 15th century Italy, I had to admit that, no, I knew of no comparable modern projects. The fact that there are no other projects like this was used as an argument against the development.

If no one else has done it how could it be right in Winnipeg?

My own response was the opposite: What better reason could we have to make this happen than that this would be a first in the world?

The two questions — why should we do something new, and why should we not do something new — are really the heart of the matter. They represent two incompatible world views. And with them it is hard to make a chocolate/vanilla swirl.

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a Winnipeg architect.*