

WINNIPEG EXCHANGE DISTRICT IS LOOKING UP

BY DOUG LONG AND MORRI MOSTOW



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Once marred by dingy factories, warehouses and abandoned buildings, Winnipeg's Exchange District is rapidly becoming a vibrant centre of prairie art, culture and restored early 20th-century architecture. Now a National Historic Site, this 30-block area fanning north from Winnipeg's famous downtown corner of Portage and Main is home to trendy restaurants, nightclubs, galleries, specialty retailers and theatres.



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Cobblestone streets lead from gallery to gallery — there are more than a dozen here and many more throughout the city — while the skyline is filled with ornate cornices, towering pillars, round arches, and decorative stone and terra-cotta details. Thanks to the booming grain trade in the early 1900s, some of North America's most illustrious architects erected dozens of imposing banks and commercial buildings, in such distinctive architectural styles as American Romanesque (or Chicago style), neo-classical and Renaissance revival.

City-backed restoration and subsidized rents have encouraged many artists and arts and community groups to open studios, workshops, galleries and offices. Cafés, fine restaurants and other services have sprung up to serve this influx of artists and workers, and the students at Red River College's new Exchange District campus. Across the way, in Old Market Square, Market Stage presents free music concerts and Fringe Theatre performances in summertime.

We began our gallery tour at Artspace, a visual and literary arts centre in a former dry-goods warehouse now housing some 27 organizations. Here, The Floating Gallery exhibits contemporary photography and mixed media. Nearby, Site Gallery represents contemporary Manitoba visual artists, many with national reputations. Its three galleries are spread over 6,000 sq. ft. of light-filled exhibition space.

At Craftspace, manager Penny Kiesler introduced us to some of Manitoba's most prominent artisans, including Jordan Van Sewell and his whimsical clay allegories. Plug In, Manitoba's first artist-run centre, is a good place to view experimental art and works by new artists. To acquire a big-sky prairie landscape or cityscape, drop into Warehouse Artworks, where you may find Hubert J. Theroux's towering grain elevators and golden wheat fields or one of Roman Swiderek's city scenes.

From May to September, guided walking tours set off from Old Market Square. For a self-guided tour anytime, pick up the free Winnipeg Visitor's Guide to the Exchange District or An Illustrated Guide to Winnipeg's Historic Commercial District (\$2.00), both available at Tourism Winnipeg.

Although the Winnipeg Art Gallery is a dozen blocks west of the Exchange, no art stroll would be complete without a visit to the WAG. Its impressive triangular building of Manitoba Tyndall limestone houses the world's largest collection of Inuit art — some 10,000 carvings, prints, drawings and textiles.



NEED TO KNOW



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WHERE TO EAT

\$ MONDRAGON BOOKSTORE & COFFEEHOUSE: Funky, vegan café and leftist bookstore. (204) 946-5241

\$\$ STEP 'N OUT ECLECTIC CUISINE: Australian dishes in a cozy, romantic setting. Outstanding lemon cake. (204) 956-7837

\$\$\$ 529 WELLINGTON: Feast on Alberta prime rib and steaks, seared to perfection. (204) 487-8325

WHERE TO STAY

\$ MARY JANE'S PLACE: Centrally located, three-storey Georgian-style home. Full breakfast. (204) 453-8104, www.bedandbreakfast.mb.ca

\$\$ CANAD INNS: Whimsical theme rooms and suites let kids sleep in outer space or in a castle. Pool with waterslide. Several locations. 1 888 332-2623, www.canadinns.com

\$\$\$ THE FORT GARRY: This restored national landmark was once a Canadian Pacific Grand Hotel. 1 800 665-8088, www.fortgarryhotel.com

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

MANITOBA MUSEUM: (204) 956-2830, www.manitobamuseum.ca

THE FORKS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE: (204) 983-6757, www.parkscanada.gc.ca/forks

YOU CAN TAKE A VIRTUAL TOUR AT THESE LINKS:

EXCHANGE DISTRICT, www.exchangedistrict.org

THE FLOATING GALLERY CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, www.floating.org

SITE GALLERY, www.sitegallery.ca

CRAFTSPACE GALLERY, www.craftspace.org

PLUG IN INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, www.plugin.org

WAREHOUSE ARTWORKS, www.warehouseart.mb.ca

WINNIPEG ART GALLERY, www.wag.mb.ca

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