



# **CORNERS**

**accessibility and**

**Portage &  
MAIN**

**January 2024**

Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC) is pleased to present the “4 Corners – Accessibility and Portage & Main” document. This document is the result of multiple stakeholder meetings and ongoing research and analysis into the possibility of opening Portage and Main to the public. It represents an important focal point for community engagement and discussion on accessibility, safety and modernizing our growing city to accommodate the expanding needs and requirements of all citizens.

The ongoing debate in Winnipeg regarding the reopening of Portage and Main has garnered significant attention. Initially opened in 1979 to counteract a declining downtown economy, the underground concourse has since become a point of contention. Despite downtown revitalization, concerns persist, especially regarding accessibility issues and safety.

Opening Portage and Main holds profound significance for persons with disabilities in Winnipeg. The current underground concourse presents formidable challenges for individuals with decreased mobility, requiring multiple ramps, door openers, and elevators to navigate the complex layout. This creates not only a time-consuming process but also poses safety concerns, especially during non-business hours when limited visibility and closed entrances exacerbate the difficulties.

The reopening of Portage and Main aligns with legislative acts and charters that safeguard the rights of those with different abilities, offering a more inclusive and accessible city. By eliminating barriers and streamlining pedestrian routes, the intersection's accessibility enhancement promises a more equitable urban environment, supporting individuals with disabilities to traverse the city more independently and safely. Moreover, the move signifies a commitment to upholding human rights principles, fostering a city where all residents can participate fully in civic life, free from discrimination and impediments. Despite potential minor inconveniences to car commutes, prioritizing accessibility and safety aligns with the city's commitment to legislative acts and charters supporting the rights of all citizens in Winnipeg.

The current closure policy does not address accessibility requirements. This document outlines the necessary accessibility requirements for an open and inclusive Portage and Main. Accessibility must encompass the City of Winnipeg design standard, the AMA legislation and the Human Rights Code. Accessibility must include genuine feedback and insight from community members, grassroots agencies and the general public.

We believe that this document will help generate further discussion on accessibility for Winnipeg and we look forward to the ongoing dialogue that helps promulgate policies of inclusion, participation and equality for all citizens.

**John Young**  
Executive Director

**Ken Shachtay**  
Chairperson of ILRC Board

## Community Partners



Manitoba League  
of Persons with  
Disabilities

**barrier-free**  
MANITOBA



University  
of Manitoba | Department of  
City Planning



CEREBRAL PALSY  
ASSOCIATION  
OF MANITOBA

# 1

## Safe & Accessible Pedestrian Crossings

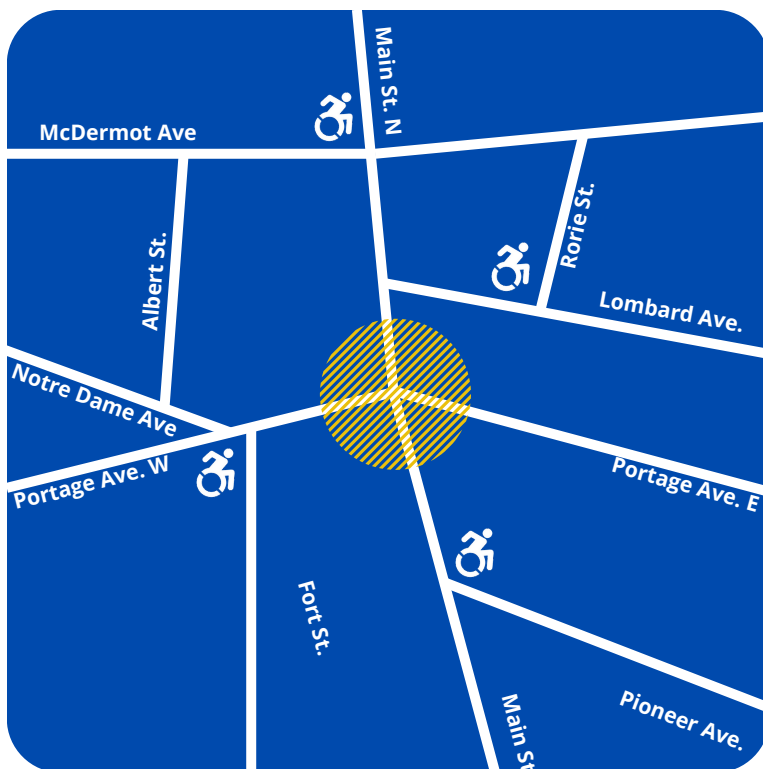
While Portage & Main remains closed to pedestrians, crosswalks at adjacent intersections are essential to accessing both above-ground spaces and the Underground Circus.

The maintenance of sidewalks, curb cuts, roadways, tactile identifiers and snow clearing must be a priority for all visitors to be ensured safe and reliable access.

***Redesigns of Portage & Main will fall short if citizens simply can't get there!***



Crossing at Lombard & Rorie (behind the Richardson Building) can be treacherous.



pedestrian crossing



Underground Circus



Wheelchair users are 36% more likely to be fatally struck by a motor vehicle than able-bodied pedestrians.

*\*Georgetown University, 2015.*



# Accessibility Checklist:



McDermot Avenue

**Sidewalks to curb cuts:** An integral feature of urban design, well maintained curb cuts allow safe access from sidewalks to street level crossings. Pathways should be unobstructed, firm, level and avoid materials like brick and stone which can (as they erode) create barriers for people with disabilities. Unfortunately many of the Exchange District's pathways can be challenging or inaccessible.

**Road conditions:** Aggravating for motorists and a real hazard for pedestrians crossing with mobility challenges, roads cannot be left in disrepair!



Portage & Notre Dame

**Tactile and audible alerts:** These features alert pedestrians with lower-vision when they've reached an intersection and when it is safe to cross. Fortunately the closest four available crossings are well equipped.

**Snow clearing:** Undeniably the most significant physical barrier experienced by all Winnipeggers. The timely clearing of sidewalks surrounding the intersection must be a priority. Training and accessibility awareness for contractors and snow clearers is needed to avoid additional and unnecessary barriers created in the removal process.



Main & Pioneer

**Temporary (e.g. construction) barriers:** When sidewalks are blocked people with disabilities can face very long, unplanned and unmarked detours. Barricades pose a particular risk to those with vision loss. Temporary barriers require (temporary) accommodations like ramps and accessible pathways around construction.

As all City of Winnipeg entrances to the underground are inaccessible, a crosswalk at Portage Ave. E., could eliminate significant detours for pedestrians with disabilities. Presently **the closest crossing is blocks away at Blue Cross Park (home of the Goldeyes)!**



# 2

## Equal Access to the Underground

Everyone deserves safe and reliable access to the underground. People with disabilities need to cross the intersection too and (especially during winter months) connect with the Skywalk system when sidewalks become impassable.

### ***All City controlled entrances are stairs only!***

Private properties provide elevator access to the underground, but are limited to 6:00 am - 6:00 pm Mon-Fri. Able-bodied access is 6:00 am - 10:30 pm every day of the week.

Zero  
accessibility or  
information!?



**All City of Winnipeg "Pedestrian Underpass" entrances are inaccessible and provide no information re: the location of accessible entrances.**



The only City of Winnipeg entrance with access to an elevator is at 210 Portage Ave (left). Unfortunately the elevator is on private property and cannot be accessed after 6 pm or on weekends.

- No power door opener.
- No accessibility information.
- Elevator is locked evenings & weekends.



The RBC elevator is open to the public during business hours. Floors must be preselected using a keypad (highly placed) on the exterior of the lift. No control buttons inside the car can be confusing...and possibly confining for visitors.



An extendable gate (above) separates the public entrance from the elevator. If the gate is closed visitors can try again at the RBC Building (left) at 220 Portage Ave.



# Accessibility Checklist:

**Equal access:** Disability must not determine which hours the underground can be accessed (that is discrimination!), public hours are for everyone.

**Commit to accessibility:** The City of Winnipeg must take responsibility for equitable, safe and accessible access to the Underground Circus.

A 'City' lift connects the underground to 333 Main St....but the doors are locked one-way...a dead end unless you have a keycard or can use the stairs.



The historic BMO (335 Main St.) has a sunken stairwell (no lift), crumbling concrete, and low very low visibility.

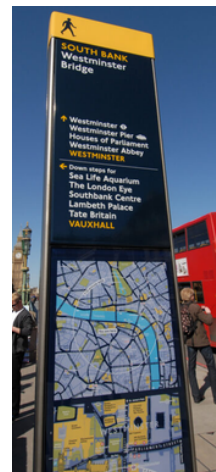
The modern entrance at 333 Main St. has an elevator (6 am - 6 pm), but no signage or info re: underground access.

## Easy to find entrances and elevators:

Private accesses can be adequate but are not always easy to find and use.

## Accessible wayfinding signage should include...

- Accessible entrances and elevators.
- Transit stops.
- Public washrooms.
- Pedestrian street crossings.
- Tactile and braille information.
- Major landmarks and amenities.
- Connection points to the Skywalk system.



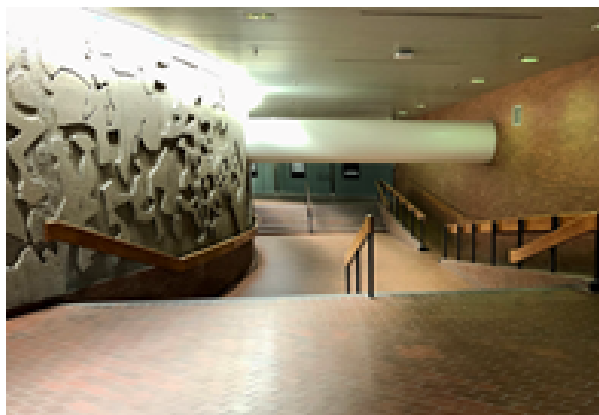
Modern wayfinding signage (systems) have improved pedestrian navigation in London (left), New York (middle) and Toronto (right).

# 3

## Easy Navigation of the Circus

Since 1978 the Underground Circus has been the only way for pedestrians...**who can access it...**to navigate the intersection.

Featuring a broad unobstructed circular pathway, multiple ramps and the largest concrete sculpture in Canada, the circus represents an early attempt at universal design.



Ramps and stairs are needed to accommodate the overhead sewer channels.

### Accessible Ramp Checklist

- Ramp slope between 1:20 and 1:15. ☒
- Tactile (warning) indicators. ☒
- Color contrast at top and bottom. ☒
- Dual handrails for support. ☒
- Slip resistant surface. ☒



With steep ramps (tiring on the way up/dangerous on the way down) and poor signage, navigating the circus with a disability can be exhausting.



*The 'underground' ramps simply do not make the grade!*



\* 1:6 (17%) actual steepness of underground ramps.

- 1:12 (8.3%) maximum allowed steepness\*.
- 1:20 (5%) recommended steepness\*.

\*2015 City of Winnipeg Accessibility Design Standard.



# Accessibility Checklist:

**Accessible ramps:** By following its own 'Accessible Design Standard' Winnipeg has all the tools to make the circular pathway accessible.

## Accessible evacuation routes:

Current emergency signage only provides directional information for able-bodied persons.



**Wayfinding Signage:** The simple maps found around the Underground Circus provide no information on accessible routes to the surface (or Skywalk) and are inaccessible for individuals with vision loss.

**Maintenance of lifts:** Four mechanical lifts, operated by the City of Wpg., connect the Underground Circus to the Portage & Main properties. Accessibility features could be integrated into the modern concourse designs, instead users often find the dated equipment dirty or in disrepair. The Accessibility for Manitobans Act requires posted notices whenever features (like lifts and ramps) are out of order, including the an estimated date of repair and closest the alternative access route.

***Hard to tell, but all wheelchair lifts are owned/operated by the City of Winnipeg (only 1 features the City's seal).***



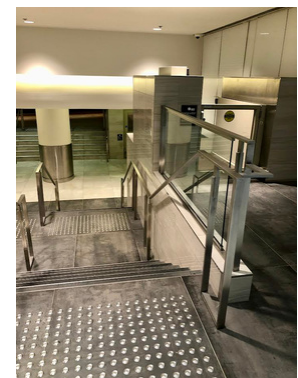
This right angle (under the Richardson Building) is not possible for some wheelchairs and has no button for assistance.



This lift should lead to 333 Main Street but instead leads to a locked dead end.



The small elevator adjoining Winnipeg Square is often in need of cleaning.



Two separate lifts are required to access 201 Portage from the Underground Circus.

# 4

## Universally Accessible Public Spaces

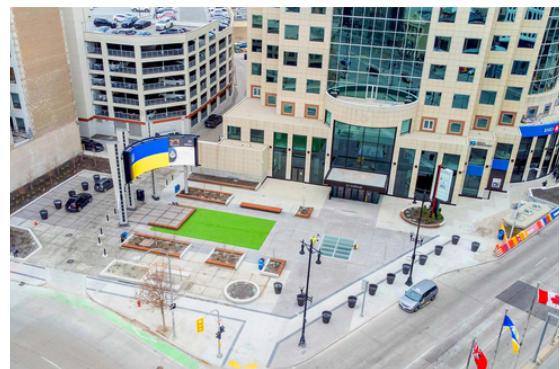


'Monumental public art' is one of several design concepts that notably include accessible elevators (highlighted in yellow) to the underground.

The Portage & Main revitalization study is an exciting opportunity for Winnipeg to integrate functionality, creativity and community into our iconic intersection. For decades many have had to avoid the confusion and delay caused by environmental barriers and inequitable access. Today with new design standards and increased awareness we can create a beautiful welcoming space that is connected, available and accessible to all people.



The Richardson Building (1 Lombard Place) provides open spaces for pedestrians to move or to stay and enjoy the sculptures. Getting there can be a challenge unless coming through the underground.

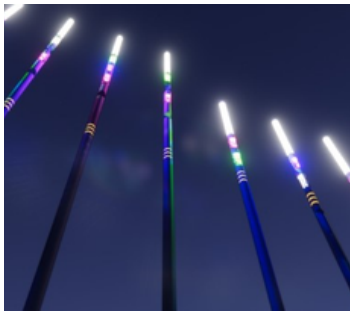


The recently revamped exterior of 201 Portage showcases modern universal design concepts that deserve to be enjoyed and connected to an accessible Portage & Main experience.

# Accessibility Checklist:

**Accessible paths of travel:** Crucial for getting to, going through and enjoying the intersection, pedestrian pathways need to be:

- Clear of obstructions like furniture, signage, construction etc.
- Made of firm, stable and slip resistant material (avoiding building materials like cobble stones and wood chips).
- Maintained year round, including repairs and prompt snow removal.
- **Seamlessly connected to all street crossings, transit stops and accessible underground entry points. A public space is not accessible unless you can get there independently.**



**Visibility and safety:** Illumination is required for safe and expedient wayfinding at night. Reducing glare, eliminating shadows and integrating an inclusive public safety strategy can keep the intersection a safe evening option for everyone.

**Signage:** Expedient and accessible paths of travel should have clear signage (including braille), indicating above and below ground routes to navigate the intersection and reach significant public/private amenities.



**Public Washrooms:** Often difficult to find, accessible public washrooms are integral to life downtown. The closest washrooms should be indicated on wayfinding signage and seriously considered in any intersection revitalization projects.



# Accessibility moves our community forward!



Universal design means creating environments that are usable by all people, regardless of age, ability or status. By emphasizing simplicity and inclusivity, rather than creating separate solutions for different needs, this approach seeks single solutions that work well for everyone. In this way the benefits of accessibility (ramps, curb cuts, power doors, etc.) are extended to all citizens.

The barriers noted in this report reflect the current policy of keeping the intersection closed to pedestrian crossing; a topic not re-opened in the *Portage and Main Revitalization Study* (2023). Unequivocally the concerns raised by the community must be addressed, but this report would be remiss without observing that the current 'closure' policy;

- i) magnifies the impact of existing barriers,
- ii) likely violates the Manitoba Human Rights Code and
- iii) is a systemic barrier limiting the free movement of our entire community.

Several overlapping pieces of legislation should protect the right of an individual to equally access the intersection, regardless of the 2018 plebiscite...**rights are not up for a vote!**

## City of Winnipeg Accessibility Design Standard

**At least one accessible route shall connect accessible buildings, facilities, elements and spaces that are on the same site. It is preferable to have all routes accessible.**

- 2015 City of Winnipeg Accessibility Design Standard 1.1.3 (pg. 34)

## Accessibility for Manitobans Act

**In establishing and implementing its measures, policies and practices, an organization must...seek to remove the existing barriers it is responsible for, so that all persons reasonably expected to seek to obtain, use or benefit from the good or service can do so using the same means.** - AMA Customer Service Standard; 4 (2)

## Manitoba Human Right Code

**In this Code, "discrimination" means...differential treatment of an individual on the basis of the individual's actual or presumed membership in or association with some class or group of persons, rather than on the basis of personal merit; or...failure to make reasonable accommodation for the special needs of any individual or group.**

- Human Rights Code; 9 (1)



The management and redevelopment of Portage & Main is vital to the future of our city. As an iconic landmark it must be accessible to everyone, to adequately represent our community's values of diversity, inclusion and progress. As a bustling intersection, *though not the City's busiest\**, it must be fully functional to meet the basic needs pedestrians reasonably expect to work, play, visit and live downtown...**and it is achievable!**

The access and leasing arrangement between the City of Winnipeg (representing the Underground Circus) and the private property owners (representing the accessible above ground access points) has expired, awaiting another study that will not begin until deliberations re: the Portage and Main Revitalization Study have concluded. The progress of accessibility, and the universal design movement, can be glacial for those that need it the most, ensnared in countless studies, outdated codes and a lack of political will. The individuals and organizations that have united behind the principles of this document call upon the City of Winnipeg to unequivocally stand up for accessibility. We ask our leaders to prioritize equality beyond the scope of any report (present or pending); at the forefront any future designs, immediately working with property owners to end the discriminatory practices and to take bold steps towards finally opening the intersection to the universal benefit of the entire community.



*\*According to Winnipeg's public works department, Portage & Main is the city's third-busiest intersection, behind Lagimodiere & Regent and Portage & Moray (both have pedestrian crossing!)*

