

**International Downtown Association
2018 Downtown Achievement Awards Submission
Public Space: Argyle & Grafton Shared Streetscape**

The History

The first sidewalk patios in the area started appearing as temporary enhancements for the G7 Economic Summit, in 1995. By 1997, Downtown Halifax Business Commission (DHBC), on behalf of its members, was lobbying the city to invest in a high-quality street, to enhance the now annual patios. In 2013, Argyle Street was identified as a top streetscaping priority. A new vision, of a shared street, was crafted by the community. In 2015, Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) and Downtown Halifax Business Commission launched a successful shared street pilot project. Halifax Council approved the budget for the new streetscape project in 2016. The Argyle streetscape, 20 years in the making, was launched in November 2017.

The Streetscape

Halifax's Argyle & Grafton Shared Streetscape project was the first of its kind in Atlantic Canada and revitalizes the entertainment district of Downtown Halifax. The goal was to create a flexible plaza-like environment that prioritizes pedestrians over cars on three city blocks. The curbless design promoted a pedestrian-oriented streetscape by slowing traffic, removing on-street parking in favour of pedestrian space, supporting local businesses with year-round patios, and fostering social interactions through public amenities and art to reinforce Argyle and Grafton Streets as a destination.

The design was to make the street *feel* like it was for people and not for cars. This is why Ekistics, the design firm, introduced human scaled, high-quality materials such as concrete and granite pavers in interesting patterns – which, of course, included a subtle abstraction of the Argyle pattern.

The urban forest of the area was reinforced by introducing new soil infrastructure to ensure the health of the trees. The curbless design prioritized accessibility and the safety of the visually and mobility-impaired communities by removing barriers. The use of tactile strips and the strategic introduction of curbs helped every user understand how to use the space, and were especially helpful to service animals and those with visual impairments.

The integrated approach used in designing this most public of spaces means that Argyle and Grafton Streets will continue to contribute to the urban life of Halifax as a healthy, complete, Downtown neighbourhood.

Open for Business

Replacing an entire street was incredibly disruptive. It could not be done in winter, so the 2017 sidewalk patio season was eliminated, which created hardship for the businesses and additional challenges for the contractor, whose mandate was to ensure continuous access to each and every business.

To survive construction meant HRM and DHBC had to work closely to promote the district, host events, provide regular updates, maintain open lines of communication, and respond quickly to complaints. Mitigating the impacts of construction was one of the most challenging aspects of doing this kind of work.

It was great when general interest stories came out, like the infamous “tunnel to George’s Island” was discovered (actually an old sewer line). This story was shared hundreds of times on social media and drew positive attention to the project and the area. A great affinity for helping local business survive this period of construction also helped. Cash mobs supported some businesses. Local leaders ensured they arranged lunch meetings on Argyle Street, etc. DHBC’s marketing fund was given over to the businesses to prioritize how to best use it to support the area. This gave them a sense of ownership in the marketing plan.

Communicate, Communicate, and then Communicate Some More

The team of landscape architects, engineers, technologists, and planners worked together to balance all of the competing/conflicting needs of eventual users, businesses, various municipal departments, and utilities. There was a lot of apprehension and aversion to risk so a solid case had to be built to convince people – not only of the design but the merit of shared streets in general. This involved the Ekistics design team and municipal planning team working closely together with the business commission and the affected businesses.

Communication with local businesses was stressed as a key requirement with the contractor. The city also hired a planning summer student specifically to be the liaison for this project. DHBC held weekly communication meetings, hosted larger stakeholder meetings at key points, and communicated via a weekly newsletter. Business owners felt updated on the progress of the project, and were able to get individual complaints dealt with in a timely manner.

Time to Celebrate

When the Argyle & Grafton Shared Streetscape project was complete, it was time to celebrate the end of 22 weeks of construction, a beautiful new pedestrian-friendly shared street, and a revitalized entertainment district. Downtown Halifax Business Commission threw the ultimate street party on November 4, with 12 hours of family-friendly programming during the day and a free outdoor concert in the evening. The Argyle Grafton “Share the Street” Party was a full day of family fun, games, six live musical acts, on-street performances, two beer gardens, and a showcase for businesses in the area, and headlining DJ at night.

The people of Halifax love this project. Right after the street re-opened, the project won silver in the category of "Best Effort to Improve Halifax" from The Coast Weekly.

The streetscape also won the People’s Choice Award for “Best Urban Street Transformation” from Streetsblog USA, beating out many larger cities. DHBC also had calls from other cities commending our accomplishments and asking for advice on their upcoming projects.

Links

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9mRaWb719c>

<https://www.halifax.ca/about-halifax/regional-community-planning/argyle-grafton-shared-streetscape-project>

<https://www.halifaxtoday.ca/local-news/twelve-hour-street-party-celebrates-argyle-and-grafton-streetscape-project-757582>

<https://downtownhalifax.ca/news/thousands-celebrate-argyle-and-grafton-streets>

Downtown Achievement Award Criteria

Innovation: Pedestrianizing streets has often been unsuccessful in a North American context. A shared street, although accepted elsewhere, is still an innovative approach to downtown streets in Canada, and was a way to ease concerns about negative impact on business.

Replication: Most downtowns have a street like Argyle Street. The design would be replicable in many urban cores. The approach to construction would be replicable everywhere.

Representation: This was a community-based project from start to finish. The initial design was community-led. The prioritization of this project was a result of the input of a Strategic Urban Partnership. The pilot project was led by Downtown Halifax Business Commission. The streetscape funding came from the city of Halifax. The final design was done by Ekistics, a local design firm, and the ongoing construction mitigation was a partnership between the city and DHBC.

Sustainability: This streetscape is designed to be sustainable for decades to come. Though it is new, it uses timeless principles of urbanism. The investment in the street will be paid for through increased visitation and business, resulting in increased assessments.