As the City of Hamilton prepares for significant redevelopment along the waterfront, LRT corridor and in the downtown, the planning and economic development department is pulling together a staff team that will put a much-needed emphasis on placemaking and public realm.

Led by Hamilton’s planning and economic development general manager Jason Thorne, the city is creating a new section within the tourism and culture division of the planning and economic development department. This new section, dubbed “placemaking, public art and projects,” will be made up of five employees with professional experience in architecture, landscape architecture and public art. The focus will be on enhancing underutilized spaces across the city through effective urban design and public art, and incorporating these elements into city-led infrastructure projects.

“I see a very strong connection between getting the public realm right and promoting development and city-building, especially in a lot of our older commercial areas where we want to drive a lot of activity of pedestrians and foot traffic,” said Thorne.

The synergy between art, placemaking and economic development has been playing out in Hamilton over the past two decades, particularly along James Street North. Budding artists and vendors began showcasing their work twice a month on the sidewalks of James Street North at an event known as Art Crawl. This grassroots event animated the streetscape and brought thousands of people to the area.

“Thorne,

The more you can feed a place with activity, the more people want to come to that place and it kind of has this self-reinforcing effect and I think a lot of really good placemaking is about getting people to go there, and then more people will come,” said Thorne.

With the success of Art Crawl, the community saw an opportunity to organize a four-day music festival along James Street, where artists, chefs, photographers and other vendors could showcase their creations. The festival, known as Super Crawl, attracts 200,000 visitors annually and results in an economic impact of $16.9-million.

“It was a community driven thing, but it shows how the use of public space...can be a really effective economic development tool,” said placemaking, public art and projects manager Ken Coit.

Inspired by the success of James Street North, Coit told NRU the new staff team will attempt to follow a similar formula, looking at how to repopulate under-utilized areas throughout the city through the use of public art and urban design.

One area that the city is looking to revitalize is...
Creating an open, inviting environment to attract riders was a design priority for the 12 Mississauga Transitway stations.

Using the Mississauga Transitway as a case study, IBI Group transit architecture associate director and project lead Lisa D’Abbondanza told Interior Design Show Toronto attendees that transit infrastructure has to be designed with a focus on user experience to encourage use. IBI Group designed eight of the 12 stations.

“Thoughtful design does matter in public transit projects,” she says. “With a focus on user experience and treating each station as a transit node and as a civic space that’s worthy of light, beauty, visibility, and comfort... we can create great public spaces that benefit the public and transform the way we think about infrastructure.”

The Mississauga Transitway is the second grade-separated bus rapid transit (BRT) system in Canada. Ottawa also operates a BRT system. The 18-km transitway begins at Winston Churchill Boulevard and progresses east along Highway 403, Eastgate Parkway and Eglinton Avenue to Renforth Drive. It began operation in phases between November 17, 2014 and November 22, 2017.

In designing the stations, D’Abbondanza says it was a priority to create open environments, which would encourage people to use them, and to employ a consistent design with unique aspects in each station to differentiate them. Stations needed to be well connected to their surrounding neighbourhoods, and to feel “iconic” to users.

“It was very important from the onset—the client had a very strong objective to create a new, highly identifiable landmark identity for the transit system,” she says. “This was a new transit system in a very car-centric condition, and their intention was to be able to draw people to the BRT. What’s going to get you to get out of your car in Mississauga and take transit? So we developed a consistent design language of elements that would be applied at all stations so that they would be recognizable and would serve as a new brand for MiWay.”

She says that several methods were used to achieve this, such as a consistent use of coloured glass, concrete, and wood roofs, along with an abundance of greenery in the

Clockwise from bottom left:
The 18-km, 12-stop Mississauga Transitway began full operation in November 2017.
SOURCE: CITY OF MISSISSAUGA

Openness and design consistency are key aspects in the design of the Mississauga Transitway stations.
PHOTOGRAPHER: SHAI GIL
SOURCE: IBI GROUP

Coloured glass is used differently at every station to provide each with a unique character.
PHOTOGRAPHER: SHAI GIL / STUDIO SHAI GIL
SOURCE: IBI GROUP

Toronto-based artist Panya Clark Espinal created a public art exhibit, which is installed at seven transitway stations. While the theme is consistent across the stations, each is a unique installation.
PHOTOGRAPHER: BEN RAHN / A-FRAME
SOURCE: IBI GROUP
stations. The roofs are also designed to direct rainwater to planters around the exterior of the stations.

“One of the things I’m really impressed with [about the design] is they didn’t really go high-end, they didn’t really go low-end, but they went with a design… that looks warm, looks inviting, [has] lots of glass [and] exposure,” BRT senior project manager Scott Anderson told NRU.

“And by building it up above a minimum standard, the hope was there wouldn’t be a lot of vandalism—that people would actually appreciate the station. And we’ve really noticed that. We’ve had very little vandalism.”

Additionally, Toronto-based artist Panya Clark Espinal was retained to develop public art installations for seven of the stations.

The transitway is also intended to be a catalyst for further growth in the city. Mississauga is expanding rapidly, and is expected to add 500,000 new residents by 2041 to its current population of 721,000. With no greenfield sites left, the city is expanding vertically.

Mississauga development and design director Lesley Pavan says that the areas of greatest intensification are going to be around transit hubs, including the transitway stations.

“We did the Downtown 21 master plan a few years ago where we’re looking at having 70,000 people and 70,000 jobs, and the transitway as it travels along the 403… comes into our downtown,” she says. “As it moves out of the downtown along Eastgate Parkway and Eglinton, we… [prepared] a land use study for the lands east of Etobicoke Creek and focusing on the stations there and focussing on how to get more intensive development around those stations.”

The system is also future-proofed in that it can be easily upgraded to a light rail transit system when ridership demands it, which would be more than double the current ridership.

“As designers, we care a lot about design,” says D’Abbondanza. “Building a new transit system in this manner was bold and ambitious for Mississauga. They’ve changed the nature of public transit in a car-centric community, and it’s set a precedent for future transit projects in the area.”

REVITALIZING HAMILTON

Farr said the city’s new downtown secondary plan also has a renewed focus on urban design, public art and placemaking and that this new staff team will have a vital role to play in facilitating discussions with developers to enhance their proposals, particularly around large-scale developments.

“We are seeing a variety of applications come forward, some are in the works, some are nearing completion so I think there’s a great opportunity there,” he said.

The West Harbour area is also undergoing a significant transformation. Waterfront Shores has been selected to lead a $140-million redevelopment of a 5.4-ha site which will feature 1,500 residential units and 13,000 square metres of industrial space. Adjacent to the development will be a public park, known as Copps Pier, designed by Forrec Ltd. Thorne said he expects the new team will be integral to ensuring placemaking, public art and effective urban design are incorporated into what will be the crown jewel of the waterfront redevelopment.

“I think it’s been shown time and time again, in many municipalities that if you can create really great public spaces, well animated public spaces, you can attract people to an area and that will also have a very significant economic impact,” he said.