

# Reclaiming Streets for People: Sidewalk Cafés in Downtown Halifax, Argyle Street

## Organization

Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM)

## Status

Sidewalk cafés on Argyle Street and in downtown Halifax are increasing and thriving.

## Overview

In 1995, the Halifax community supported the first sidewalk cafés in downtown Halifax, which were launched on Argyle Street. More than ten years later sidewalk cafés continue to thrive on Argyle Street and in the rest of downtown Halifax, contributing to the success of vibrant pedestrian oriented streets.

Based on two studies and public consultation focusing on Argyle Street's sidewalk cafés design layout and design guidelines, HRM implemented a boardwalk café for Argyle St. One major challenge of the current boardwalk sidewalk café design is that it poses accessibility issues. An alternate sidewalk café design, such as the satellite café design offers pedestrians direct linear paths of movement rather than the zigzags that boardwalks create.

Business owners lease portions of sidewalks, and incur related expenses and offer creative designs to the operation of boardwalk cafés on Argyle Street. The HRM recognizes the importance of sharing financial and creative responsibility and providing a comprehensive sidewalk café application process and design guidelines to business owners.

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## Resources

Halifax Regional Municipality <http://www.halifax.ca/>  
Ecology Action Centre [www.ecologyaction.ca](http://www.ecologyaction.ca)

## Community context

The culture of 'al fresco' dining and drinking contributes to the success of many streets and cities. Sidewalk cafés offer front row seats to the urban theatre of life. Outdoor cafés are an enjoyable component of the streetscape that engage people in street activities at a pedestrian scale. Streets with sidewalk cafés are destination streets with identity, instead of simply being traffic thoroughfares.

Many people in the Halifax community recognize that sidewalk cafés contribute to economic success and provide vibrant pedestrian environments. Sidewalk cafés operate in front of three businesses from May 1 to October 31 annually. Argyle Street is a three block one-way street that serves as a major pedestrian corridor in the downtown core. Argyle Street is used for a diversity of purposes including: cafés, restaurants, shops, upper level residential, hotel, theatre, newspaper publishing, tourist information centre, non-government organizations as well as City Hall, a public space called the Grande Parade and the World Trade and Convention Centre. The unique mixed-use nature of the street provides an ideal environment for outdoor cafés.



*Argyle St. Economy Shoe Shop Boardwalk Sidewalk Café*

## Policy context

For the G-7 Conference in 1995, the HRM approved the transformation of an empty space located across the Grand Parade into an outdoor International Café. The success of the café sparked great interest in establishing sidewalk cafés in downtown Halifax. Also in 1995 HRM approved a

pilot sidewalk café for one restaurant on Argyle Street. Subsequently, other restaurants in the area opened sidewalk cafés.

In May 1997 HRM proposed an Interim Sidewalk Café Policy to provide greater management of the increasing number of sidewalk cafés. This Interim Policy replaced four separate by-laws, streamlining the process for using the street right-of-ways for sidewalk cafés.

In 1998, the Interim Policy was adopted as the HRM Sidewalk Café Policy. Staff cautioned Council that this policy was only preliminary, however it remains as the sidewalk café policy for downtown Halifax.

### Rationale and Objectives

The potential opportunities for sidewalk cafés were quickly recognized by both the HRM and business owners. These cafés contribute to business development and the local economy, attract tourist and engage the community all at the pedestrian scale for downtown Halifax.

The HRM’s guiding principles for the Sidewalk Café Policy included:

- Promoting sidewalk cafés aimed at encouraging: vitality, pedestrian activity, pedestrian scale, traffic movement and safety standards;
- Encouraging participation of Business Improvement Districts and property owners;
- Creating consistent by-laws for sidewalk cafés;
- Standardizing application process and
- Upholding quality design criteria established by consultation process.

### Actions

**Conducting Argyle Street Design Study.** In 1997 prior to the development of the Interim Policy the Argyle Street Design Study was conducted by the HRM, the Downtown Halifax Business Commission (DHBC) and a consulting team. The study’s Steering Committee consisted of three DHBC members, two HRM staff and two landscape architects from the consulting team.

The goal of the study was to evaluate and recommend a street re-design to accommodate the increasing demand for sidewalk cafés on Argyle Street. The study proposed widening sidewalks to allow for sidewalk cafés and the addition of street furniture such as: lighting, benches, refuse bins, trees and flora but permanent sidewalk widening has not been implemented as of yet. Argyle Street could also benefit from street improvements such as public seating and rest areas, however HRM is currently satisfied with the amenities and aesthetics on Argyle Street. Transportation and Public Works replaced sidewalks on

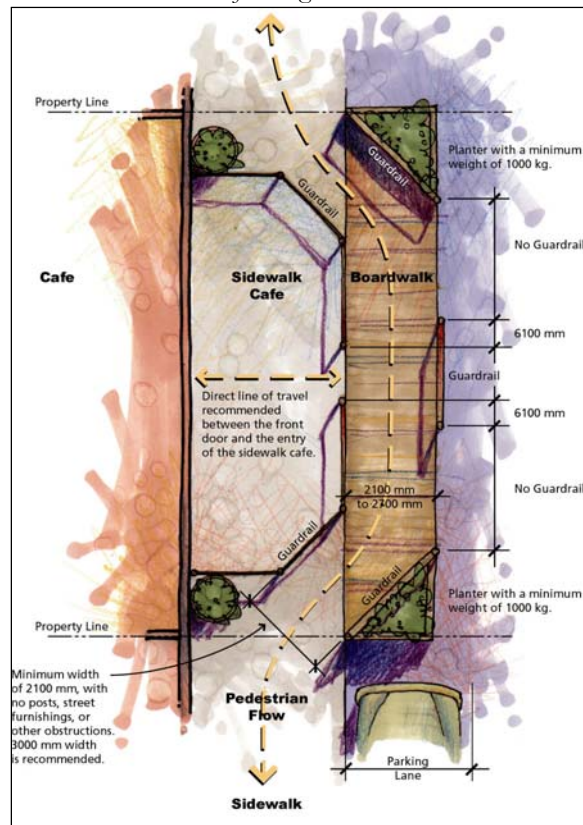
Argyle Street in 2005, which focused on safety issues rather than aesthetics.

**Initiating sidewalk cafés.** The first sidewalk cafés on Argyle Street were also sparked by the vision and initiative of one business owner on Argyle Street. This business championed creative standards for design and construction of sidewalk cafés. The business did not have a sidewalk café permit from the HRM at that time, however the success of that businesses sidewalk café demonstrated the significant contribution that sidewalk cafés offer the downtown.

**Providing public consultation.** The Argyle Street Design Study included a public consultation process. Twenty eight businesses and property owners from Argyle Street participated in the consultation. The discussions brought forth ideas and concerns regarding the design proposal, which were reviewed by the Argyle Street Design Study Steering Committee. The study was then presented to Council.

**Developing sidewalk café design layout for Argyle Street.** The Argyle Street Design Study proposed a boardwalk café layout as the provisional sidewalk café design for the 1997 season, which continues to serve as the current sidewalk café design.

*General Boardwalk Café Design*



*Graphic provided by Ekistics Planning and Design, Downtown Halifax: Sidewalk Café Design Standards*

Boardwalk cafés provide outdoor seating next to the café, which extends onto the sidewalk and directs pedestrian flow onto a temporary boardwalk built in the street's parking lane. Planters located at the ends of the boardwalk provide separation between pedestrians and parked vehicles. A consistent sidewalk café design layout was recommended for the entire length of Argyle Street.

**Designing layout of Argyle Street.** Argyle Street is a one-way street with two lane vehicle traffic totaling approximately 6m in width. Sidewalks measure a minimum of 2.13m and the parking and/or loading lanes are a minimum of 1.82m in width. The temporary boardwalks used when sidewalk cafés are in operation measure approximately 2.10m in width.



*Argyle Street and corner of Blowers Street*

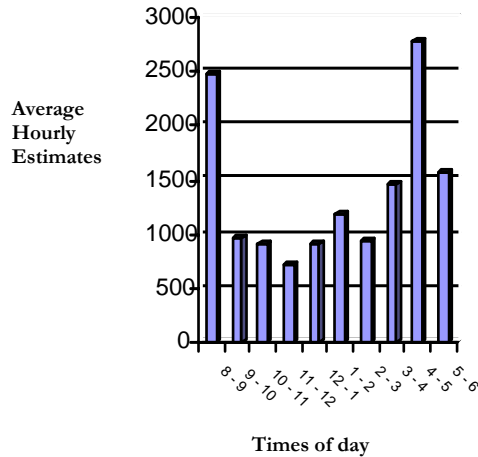
**Sharing ownership of and financing public right-of-way with sidewalk cafés.** The HRM provides opportunity for businesses to share ownership of spaces where businesses operate a sidewalk café with the HRM. HRM encourages businesses to creatively design the boardwalks while ensuring accessible pedestrian movement. Businesses lease a portion of the sidewalk where the sidewalk café is located from the HRM for \$2.50 per square foot of seating area. In addition, businesses pay a \$100 permit fee per season and incur a \$250 fee for every metered parking spot replaced by boardwalk. Seasonal fees to install and remove sidewalk cafés and boardwalks vary depending on the café designs. Businesses are responsible for the finances, construction and maintenance of the boardwalk public right-of-way.

## Results

**Increasing pedestrian traffic volumes.** A 2004 Downtown Pedestrian Study shows that pedestrian traffic volumes in the downtown core increased approximately 29% annually since 1995. On Argyle Street the average hourly pedestrian counts in 2004 were 1,389, compared to the 710 in 1995. Sidewalk cafés as well as other factors such as increased downtown business contributed to the

doubling of pedestrian activity in the downtown and on Argyle Street.

**2004 Day-Long Counts – Average Hourly Estimates for Argyle St. between Blowers and Sackville**



*Table provided by HRM and DHBC  
2004 Downtown Pedestrian Study*

**Improving quality of life in downtown Halifax.** The sidewalk cafés on Argyle Street contribute positively to the street's overall character. The popularity of the sidewalk cafés attracts visitors and locals, as well as increases pedestrian activity and urban vitality. Vehicles are restricted



*Argyle Street Opa and Argyle Street Bar & Grill Boardwalk Sidewalk Cafés.*

from portions of Argyle Street during special events and the street is opened up for pedestrians. Due to the 2006 Juno Awards, sidewalk cafés will open earlier in the season (March 27 rather than May 1).

**Receiving recognition.** The success of the Argyle Street sidewalk cafés is recognized annually by *The Coast*, a local weekly newspaper in the best outdoor/seating patio category. As well, tourism publications list Argyle Street as

an attraction for visitors. Argyle Street is a vibrant and unique destination in Halifax, attracting locals and tourists alike. The HRM's Regional Plan and Cultural Plan both support sidewalk cafés in downtown Halifax.

**Concerning accessibility issues.** Access for varying mobility users poses a serious issue with the boardwalk café design. Citizens using the boardwalks must navigate around the outdoor cafés in a zigzag movement when using the pedestrian right-of-way. A continuous linear pedestrian path is favourable for efficient and accessible public sidewalks. Currently, sidewalk café owners are encouraged to coordinate their walkways to minimize the zigzag effect. For 2006, all of the cafes on one block of Argyle Street will have one continuous boardwalk, designed by one of the sidewalk café owners.



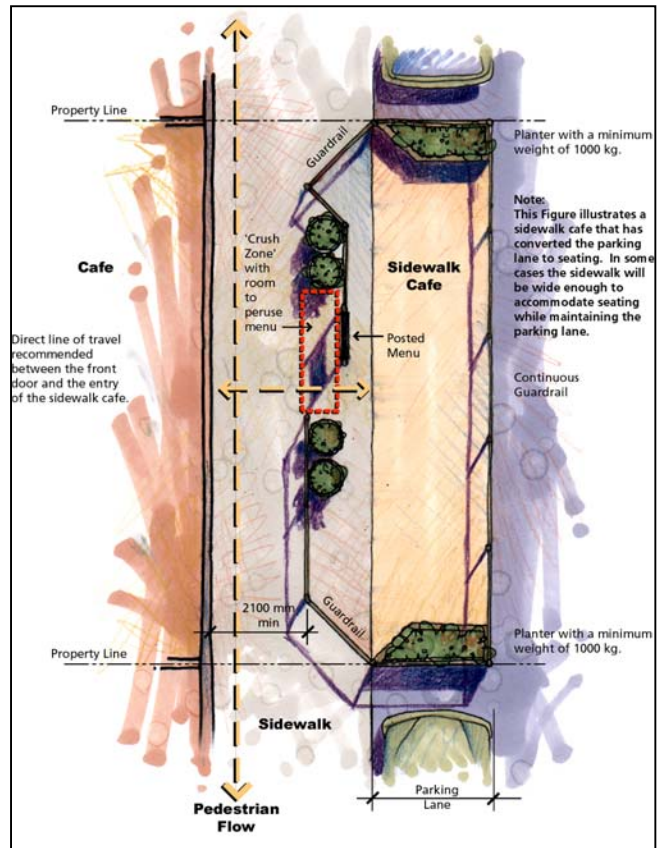
*Argyle Street Bitter End, Dharma Sushi, Piccolo Mondo Boardwalk Sidewalk Cafés.*

**Losing parking spaces.** Concerns arose from some business owners who feared potentially detrimental impacts to business as a result of losing parking spaces located directly in front of their business. In response HRM negotiated the transfer of some loading spaces into metered parking spaces. HRM has also constructed the Metro Parkade as a measure to provide more parking spaces for the whole of downtown, which is located two streets away from Argyle Street.

**Establishing sidewalk café design criteria and guidelines.** Concerns about the operation of the sidewalk cafés on Argyle Street prompted a second study in 2001. The study commissioned by the HRM and the DHBC with the purpose of recommending design guidelines. The consultants proposed a set of Sidewalk Café Design Guidelines to compliment the existing Sidewalk Café Policy. Currently, the HRM provides loose design criteria due to limited enforcements and resources. HRM requires café owners to address clearance, pedestrian ways, railings, plantings, lighting, and construction materials. HRM encourages the use of cedar or hemlock woods instead of wolmanized wood, which poses potential chemical sensitivities.

**Proposing an alternate design layout.** Consultants proposed a satellite café design layout as a more appropriate design layout compared to the existing boardwalk café design. Satellite cafés are located at the curbside and extend onto the parking lane. Pedestrian traffic remains on the existing sidewalk which provides consistent linear pedestrian movement. The satellite café design provides greater accessibility and consistency in sidewalk design. HRM identifies two main issues with the satellite café design: snow removal and servers traveling across the public right-of-way. Presently, HRM has not adopted the proposed alternate design layout as part of their Sidewalk Café Policy.

*General Satellite Café Design*



*Graphic provided by Ekistics Planning and Design, Downtown Halifax: Sidewalk Café Design Standards*

Some sidewalk cafés owners resisted the idea of satellite cafés because they felt the change would not be successful. However, satellite sidewalk cafés have never been tested in Halifax, and conducting a pilot project based on lessons learned from places where satellite café are successful may be valuable.

**Participants**

Halifax Regional Municipality

Downtown Halifax Business Commission

Ekistics Planning and Design

Robert Parker Associates Ltd. Architects and Planners  
with Gordon Ratcliffe Landscape Architects

Business Owners on Argyle Street

## Resources

**HRM Staff.** Staff provided sidewalk café designs, operational and policy recommendations to Council.

**Background studies and design concepts.** Background reports and design proposals were conducted by consulting teams. The studies provided the HRM staff with a greater understanding of sidewalk café designs.

**Budget.** HRM incurred approximately \$20,000 in costs for outsourcing studies to consultants.

Businesses take on the responsibility of all costs associated with the set up, dismantling and maintenance of sidewalk cafés. Costs of sidewalk café infrastructures vary depending on the design.

**Business Owners.** Businesses on Argyle Street contribute financially and creatively to the operation of the sidewalk cafés. The energy provided by the business owners is reflected in Argyle Street's success.

## Timeline

**1995.** G-7 Conference International Outdoor Cafés inspires sidewalk cafés in downtown Halifax.

**1995.** Businesses establish Argyle Street's first sidewalk café.

**Winter 1997.** HRM and DHBC outsource the Argyle Street Design Study to Robert Parker Associates Ltd. Architects and Planners with Gordon Ratcliffe Landscape Architects, which looked at accommodating sidewalk cafés on Argyle Street.

**Spring 1997.** HRM proposes interim policy authorizing boardwalk cafés on Argyle Street.

**1998.** HRM adopts Sidewalk Café Policy.

**2001.** HRM and DHBC hires Ekistics Planning and Design to conduct Downtown Halifax: Sidewalk Café Design Standards report.

## Challenges

**Accessibility.** Careful attention needs to be made to incorporate barrier free and universal design principles in sidewalk café building codes as a means to reduce accessibility issues.

**Maintenance.** The responsibility of maintaining public sidewalks and private café spaces is an issue. Businesses are financially responsible to maintain the sidewalk café and the constructed boardwalk public right-of-way, while the Municipality provides general maintenance of the concrete sidewalk structure. HRM's faces resource limitations to enforce businesses compliance with the conditions of sidewalk café agreements.

**Design and aesthetics.** Marginal design of sidewalk cafés compromises the safety of the public, while the aesthetic details of the sidewalk cafés impacts the potential economic success. Comprehensive design guidelines provide assistance for business owners and the city to assemble consistent design and aesthetically-pleasing pedestrian environments.

**Funding.** Annual construction and design projects require substantial investment by businesses in the HRM to complete the projects, such as in the case of Argyle Street. It is important to gain support for the project from many stakeholders and financial sources.

## Lessons learned

**Select appropriate sidewalk café design layout.** Each block is unique with specific street and sidewalk dimensions, which require analysis to choose an appropriate sidewalk café design layout. Clear linear paths of pedestrian movement and consistent sidewalk café design layout per block are essential to provide accessibility for all users.

**Integrate barrier free and universal design principles.** Barrier free and universal design principles offer excellent tools to design inclusive sidewalk cafés that accommodate all users. Sidewalks used for outdoor cafés connect public and private spaces in a unique way and require great design attention to ensure accessibility for all users.

**Consider permanent sidewalk cafés.** Permanent, all season sidewalk cafés are an attractive feature for two reasons. First, temporary outdoor cafés are a nuisance to assemble and maintain seasonally and store off-season. Permanent outdoor cafés offer the potential for creative winter design solutions, without dismantling at the end of the season. Second, year round outdoor cafés offer opportunity for social activity and engagement all year including the winter.

**Provide comprehensive application process and design guidelines.** The application process provides businesses with assistance in developing consistent and accessible sidewalk cafés in accordance with the municipality's policy. Businesses have the opportunity to creatively articulate each sidewalk café, while the comprehensive application process guides the consistency of general operation and design of sidewalk cafés. Municipal enforcement is important in monitoring

compliance and evaluating the effectiveness of the design guidelines.

**Negotiate appropriate financial responsibility and maintenance of public-right-of ways.** Public sidewalks are an important component of a city and require significant financial responsibility and maintenance. Contracts between business owners and the city addressing the ownership and maintenance of a public right-of-way should be enforced and evaluated.

**Provide public seating and resting areas in places where there are sidewalk cafés.** Public rest and seating areas provide opportunities for a range of citizens to contribute to the activities on the street. Public areas offer citizens equal opportunity to contribute and enjoy vibrant pedestrian streets.

### Next steps

HRM recognizes that sidewalk cafés on Argyle Street contribute significantly to the vitality of downtown Halifax. At this time no official studies or plans are being undertaken to modify the sidewalk cafés or improve the amenities on Argyle Street.

The 1997 Argyle Street Design Study proposed a re-design of Argyle Street into a pedestrian only street. Converting Argyle Street into a pedestrian street would create a special pedestrian sidewalk café district unique to downtown Halifax. However, there is resistance to closing down Argyle Street permanently to pedestrian traffic from the Downtown Halifax Business Commission and some businesses. Further study to research experiences in other cities who implement pedestrian streets and a pilot project would be of value. Many citizens and the DHBC support the closing down Argyle Street to vehicles for special events.

Ekistics Planning and Design propose the idea of establishing year round rather than seasonal temporary sidewalk cafés. Designing for winter climate cities is feasible and beneficial for public citizens, local businesses and develops unique character and usability throughout the year. The Downtown Business Commission and some sidewalk café businesses support the idea of year-round sidewalk cafés.

### For more information

The Capital District at the HRM at:  
<http://www.halifax.ca/capitaldistrict/index.html>

Downtown Halifax Business Commission at:  
<http://www.downtownhalifax.ns.ca/>

Ekistics Planning and Design at: <http://www.ekistics.net/>

Robert Parker Associates Ltd. Architects and Planners  
with Gordon Ratcliffe Landscape Architects

Thesis titled Sidewalk Cafés and Streets For All published by Kim Livingston in April 2004 from Dalhousie University, Halifax NS.

Case Study written by the Ecology Action Centre: Marta Downarowicz, MPLAN, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS  
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