

The Politics of Public Space: Toronto's Yonge Street Pedestrian Mall, 1971–1974

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Bad Behaviours and Disorderly Public Spaces
Incivilités et désordres dans l'espace public
Volume 47, numéro 1-2, fall 2018, spring 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064880ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064880ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)
1918-5138 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Ross, D. (2018). The Politics of Public Space: Toronto's Yonge Street Pedestrian Mall, 1971–1974. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 47 (1-2), 89–102.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1064880ar>

Résumé de l'article

Au début des années 1950, des centaines de villes au Canada et aux États-Unis ont fait l'expérience de fermer des artères commerciales du centre-ville à la circulation motorisée au profit des piétons. Les quelques chercheurs qui se sont penchés sur ces rues piétonnes ont souligné l'échec qu'elles ont représenté en tant que stratégie de revitalisation économique. L'espérance que la création de ces nouveaux espaces publics attirerait au centre-ville les consommateurs des banlieues a été déçue, et très peu de ces espaces existent encore. Cet article adopte une approche différente en analysant la vie de ces espaces en tant qu'espaces publics, à partir des riches archives de la zone piétonne de la rue Yonge à Toronto (1971-74). Cet angle favorise la compréhension du centre-ville d'Amérique du Nord à une époque de motorisation, de renouveau urbain, et de réforme municipale. Pendant quatre étés, une série d'intervenants ont insufflé dans le concept de la rue piétonne leurs espoirs et leurs craintes pour l'avenir des villes, et se sont approprié ces espaces à travers différentes pratiques. La rue Yonge s'est acquise en conséquence plusieurs identités : un site de sociabilité et de démonstration de fierté civique, un geste de protestation contre la pollution, une place de marché, un lieu de rassemblement pour les jeunes, et un lieu où la vie du centre-ville s'offre en spectacle. Cet article explore donc les conceptions et la vie de rue ayant contribué à ces identités de l'avenue piétonne, et fait valoir que l'expérience est mieux comprise à travers son caractère d'espace public contesté. Il replace également les différents acteurs et idées qui, à cette époque, ont convergé sur la rue Yonge dans le contexte plus large de la ville nord-américaine d'après-guerre.

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Daniel Ross

Beginning in the 1950s, hundreds of cities in Canada and the United States experimented with closing major downtown shopping streets to automobile traffic and opening them up to pedestrians. The few scholars who have studied these pedestrian malls have emphasized their failure as an economic revitalization initiative: hopes that creating new public spaces would lure suburban shoppers downtown were frustrated, and few are still in operation today. This article takes a different approach, using a rich archive of sources on Toronto's Yonge Street pedestrian mall (1971–4) to analyze its life as a public space. This is a revealing angle from which to understand the North American downtown in a period of automobility, urban renewal, and municipal reform. Over four summers, a range of historical actors invested the mall concept with their hopes and fears for the urban future and appropriated its spaces through everyday practices. As a result, the Yonge Street pedestrian mall acquired multiple identities: a site of sociability and displays of civic pride; a protest against pollution; a marketplace; a gathering place for youth; a spectacle of downtown life. This article explores the representations and street life that created these images of the mall, arguing that the experiment is best understood as a contested and disorderly public space. It also places the different historical actors and ideas that met on Yonge Street in the larger context of the postwar North American city.

Au début des années 1950, des centaines de villes au Canada et aux États-Unis ont fait l'expérience de fermer des artères commerciales du centre-ville à la circulation motorisée au profit des piétons. Les quelques chercheurs qui se sont penchés sur ces rues piétonnes ont souligné l'échec qu'elles ont représenté en tant que stratégie de revitalisation économique. L'espérance que la création de ces nouveaux espaces publics attirerait au centre-ville les consommateurs des banlieues a été déçue, et très peu de ces espaces existent encore. Cet article adopte une approche différente en analysant la vie de ces espaces en tant qu'espaces publics, à partir des riches archives de la zone piétonne de la rue Yonge à Toronto (1971-74). Cet angle favorise la compréhension du centre-ville d'Amérique du Nord à une

époque de motorisation, de renouveau urbain, et de réforme municipale. Pendant quatre étés, une série d'intervenants ont insufflé dans le concept de la rue piétonne leurs espoirs et leurs craintes pour l'avenir des villes, et se sont approprié ces espaces à travers différentes pratiques. La rue Yonge s'est acquis en conséquence plusieurs identités : un site de sociabilité et de démonstration de fierté civique, un geste de protestation contre la pollution, une place de marché, un lieu de rassemblement pour les jeunes, et un lieu où la vie du centre-ville s'offre en spectacle. Cet article explore donc les conceptions et la vie de rue ayant contribué à ces identités de l'avenue piétonne, et fait valoir que l'expérience est mieux comprise à travers son caractère d'espace public contesté. Il replace également les différents acteurs et idées qui, à cette époque, ont convergé sur la rue Yonge dans le contexte plus large de la ville nord-américaine d'après-guerre.

On Monday, 31 May 1971, the front pages of all three Toronto dailies reported a transformation of the city's iconic downtown thoroughfare, Yonge Street. "People Take Over Yonge St.," read the *Toronto Star*; in the *Telegram* a series of photos showed the shopping street first as "its usual dreary self, dominated by cars, with people confined to the cramped, crowded sidewalks," and second as a "people's freeway," with four lanes of vehicle traffic replaced by linden trees, outdoor cafés, and, above all, crowds.¹ Tens of thousands of people shopped, strolled, and loitered on downtown Yonge Street that weekend, inaugurating a four-year experiment in pedestrianization that was both popular and controversial. Between 1971 and 1974, the Yonge Street pedestrian mall grew from a one-week, four-block street festival to a mile-long public space closed to cars—and opened to people—for three summer months.

Toronto was just one of many North American cities to experiment with separating people and cars in the postwar decades. Historians of automobility in the second half of the twentieth century have focused our attention on suburbs, expressway networks, and shopping malls; to that list of urban forms of the motor age, we should add the pedestrian mall.² In dialogue with



Figure 1. *The Yonge Street Strip, looking south from above Gould Street, 1973* Source: tspa_0115320f, Toronto Star Archives/Ray Erikson

the larger urban transformations facilitated by the automobile, communities across North America redesigned downtown spaces around people. By the late 1970s, what some urban observers referred to as “the pedestrian revolution” was in full swing: a dozen Canadian cities and more than 200 in the United States had closed one or more downtown shopping streets to automobiles.³ Scholars who have studied these projects have focused most of all on their failure as an economic revitalization strategy.⁴ Pioneering pedestrian streets like the Kalamazoo Mall, opened in 1959, were held up as symbols of hope for downtown retailers beset by postwar decentralization and deindustrialization, an inexpensive urban intervention that would allow struggling Main Streets to challenge the ascendant shopping mall and “beat suburbia at its own game.”⁵ However, the promised economic benefits of pedestrianization seldom materialized. In cities that had staked their downtown future on car-free streets, initial successes gave way to renewed reports of decline. Ultimately, low-cost, largely aesthetic solutions like pedestrianization did not—could not—address the larger economic problems that beset many North American downtowns in the second half of the twentieth century.⁶ As few as one in ten pedestrian malls in Canada and the United States have survived into the twenty-first century.⁷

At first glance, the story of the Yonge Street pedestrian mall seems to fit into this larger arc of failure. Initially seen as an exciting new planning idea and a solution to a range of perceived

downtown problems, by the time it was cancelled in 1974 it had disappointed the hopes of many early supporters, including downtown merchants. However, this article takes a different approach, emphasizing that there was always much more to Toronto's pedestrianization experiments than frustrated desires to enact urban renewal. Instead of asking why the Yonge Street pedestrian mall failed, in this article I explore how people in Toronto used and debated it as a public space, and how it was entangled with larger urban issues and processes. Historical public spaces, whether sidewalks or cafés, parks or suburban shopping malls, are an important element of the experience of the modern city. In theory accessible to all, such shared spaces are key sites for social activity. In the words of sociologist Sharon Zukin, they “frame encounters both intimate and intrusive” among a diverse urban population.⁸ For this reason, they have often been idealized as pillars of urban sociability and a democratic civil order. But public spaces, scholars of the modern city remind us, are also sites of conflict, thick with competing uses and claims for recognition.⁹ They are produced—inhabited and given meaning—through competing representations and the street-level negotiations, regulation, and exclusion that make up everyday politics.¹⁰ The presence of a rich historical record on the Yonge Street pedestrian mall makes these processes particularly visible; few other public spaces have been so intensively visited, measured, or discussed. This article retraces those visits and discussions using a range of sources, including mayoral correspondence, police reports, the

records of downtown businesses, street surveys, letters from citizens, and hundreds of articles in the local press.

What emerges is a picture of a contested downtown space. Yonge's pedestrian mall was a site of encounter and contention for a diverse group of historical actors, including citizen activists, downtown merchants, youth, sex workers, and municipal officials. They engaged with the street by appropriating its spaces and publicly debating its purpose and future. Through everyday practices and representations, people made and remade the pedestrian mall, always in the public eye. This process, and the urban space it produced, was disorderly. Not disorderly in the sense of contrary to morality or public order—although that was a critique made by the experiment's opponents—but rather crowded, overdetermined, and essentially unpredictable. Disorder, urban theorist Richard Sennett has argued, is not an aberration, but a constant element of modern city life.¹¹ In this article I highlight the Yonge Street mall's anarchic qualities, uncomfortable encounters, and overlapping identities. Was it a revitalization initiative or an impediment to downtown progress? A hub for sociability or a gathering place for undesirables? A street marketplace or a statement against pollution? Each of these images of the street was true for some people, depending where and when they stood on the mall. Individually, they are rich terrain for analysis; together they help to connect the story of Toronto's pedestrianization experiments with the larger histories of the street it transformed and the city around it.

For that reason, the “where” in this story is significant. Toronto's first pedestrian mall was imagined, used, and debated in ways that were profoundly influenced by place. By the 1970s, downtown Yonge Street, here understood as the dozen city blocks between College Street in the north and King Street in the south, had been Toronto's principal shopping and entertainment centre for nearly a century. Anchored by the imposing flagships of the Eaton's and Simpson's department store chains, it abutted to the south the growing financial and office district, and to the west City Hall and the city's administrative centre. This stretch of the street was lined with three- and four-storey Victorian brick buildings occupied by shops, restaurants, and a corridor of neon-lit cinemas, taverns, and rock and blues music venues that defined “the Strip” as a nightlife destination. A site of consumption, labour, and encounter, Yonge Street was a major public space. It was the section of Toronto that was busiest, that contained the most prized real estate, the place for Friday-night cinema and Saturday shopping, people-watching, and first views of the city. Much criticized throughout the years for its eclectic architecture, crowds, and crass commercialism, it was also lauded as the city's beating heart, a “noisy, busy strip, beautiful in its ugliness.”¹² Postwar debate over this iconic but unruly street brought into focus larger changes in the city and society. Between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s Toronto transformed from a mostly British industrial city built around the streetcar to a cosmopolitan metropolis in a sprawling, motorized urban region.¹³ Socio-economic and spatial processes including migrations, suburbanization, and the

shift to a post-industrial economy altered the patterns of city life, challenging people invested in downtown to reimagine it. The idea of Yonge Street as a car-free people place was just one of several futures imagined for this thoroughfare in the decades following the Second World War.

Genealogy of an Idea

The concept of pedestrianization arrived in Toronto in the mid-1950s, with the small cohort of urban experts hired to staff the city's first permanent planning department. Influenced by urban modernism as practised in Europe and the United States, they proposed a series of interventions to order and improve the central city, including a network of separated pedestrian pathways and spaces that would move people more efficiently, make walking more pleasant, and beautify the drab “surveyor's grid” that defined downtown Toronto.¹⁴ After the internationally publicized opening of the Kalamazoo pedestrian mall in 1959, and of Ottawa's Sparks Street mall (temporarily in 1960, permanently in 1967), Toronto planners began to direct their attention to pedestrianization. One area they thought stood particularly to benefit from more people space was downtown Yonge Street. In discussing the idea, planners stressed that Yonge was already “primarily a pedestrian way,” with more foot traffic than vehicular traffic on any given day. Malling would recognize this, while at the same time providing some aesthetic coherence to the street's “heterogeneous jumble” of storefronts.¹⁵ The publication of these exploratory ideas for the first time in the *Plan for Downtown Toronto* (1963) was widely reported in local newspapers, and it was through that coverage that the idea of creating pedestrian malls entered public discourse in Toronto.

The idea of pedestrian malls was next seized on by a group of Yonge Street store owners as a possible solution to their own problems, which they understood through the lens of downtown decline. Shortly after the *Plan for Downtown Toronto* was published, seventeen shoe, clothing, and specialty shops signed a letter to the city asking for the street to be immediately converted into a pedestrian mall. They argued that with competition from Toronto's suburbs and neighbouring Eaton's and Simpson's department stores, foot traffic and sales receipts had declined to the point where their businesses were no longer viable. “For small independent retailers, the downtown area has become a ‘decaying heart city.’ It is not a matter of earning a living, or making a profit, but rather a question of who can afford to lose money and hang on the longest! ... It is felt, that for a relatively small investment, one could make a mall attractive and inviting, and thereby regain some of the lost consumer dollars to this area.”¹⁶

The letter's signatories illustrated their argument about the street's lack of vitality with an enclosed photo of an empty sidewalk—taken, the co-signers explained, on Yonge mid-morning on a business day. Not only did this street-level observation paint a different picture than planners' traffic counts, but the shop owners' bleak assessment of the Strip's prospects was significantly at odds with the generalized optimism of the

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Figure 2. Crowds on the Yonge Street pedestrian mall, summer 1972. Source: *tspa_0115325f*, Toronto Star Archives/Ron Bull

postwar era. Yonge's independent merchants were one group who did not benefit from what was otherwise a period of growth and investment in downtown Toronto.¹⁷ Calls for a pedestrian mall as a means to attract middle-class suburban shoppers downtown were the latest in a series of attempts to enlist the city's aid in pushing back against rising rents, decentralization of the population, and the aggressive business tactics of the department store giants. Like earlier lobbying, the initiative was met with sympathy from city staff and elected officials, but no concrete action.¹⁸

In parallel with the Yonge Street merchants' campaign, interest in street closures developed in a very different context. By 1965 the Yorkville Village, just north of downtown along Yonge Street, had supplanted Gerrard Street as the centre of the city's youthful counterculture. There, as in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury and other hip enclaves across the continent, rebellion from the mainstream became a spectator sport. On summer evenings and weekends Yorkville Avenue was packed with cars, motorcycles, and people, making it impossible to say who was "making the scene"—and who was simply observing it.¹⁹ In an effort to push back against cruising vehicles, gawkers, and journalists, a few Yorkville villagers proposed converting the street into a pedestrian mall. Not only would this allow them to assert ownership of the space, but the idea of banning the car—that potent symbol of consumer capitalism and suburban conformity—also fit into a larger counterculture social critique. By the summer of 1967 the mall proposal had become a flashpoint of tension between hip youth and the civic administration, reaching a peak early in the morning of 21 August 1967, when a mass sit-in calling for pedestrianization was broken up violently by police, who made fifty arrests. Hip Yorkville villagers followed up with a "sleep-in" in front of city hall that, while it failed in its objective of securing a meeting with Toronto's mayor, generated media attention and popular support for pedestrianization.²⁰

As Yorkville's countercultural scene ebbed, new champions of downtown malls emerged among Toronto's growing environmental movement. There was nothing particularly bohemian about the pragmatic, policy-oriented, anti-pollution activists

of Group Action to Stop Pollution (GASP, founded 1967) or Pollution Probe (1969).²¹ Nonetheless, both shared the desire of Yorkville's hip activists and a growing number of citizen groups to fight the unrestricted use of the automobile, increasingly seen as a destructive urban polluter. By the late 1960s, ongoing local debate over the construction of the Spadina Expressway, an urban freeway planned to connect the expanding suburbs to downtown, had raised local awareness of the costs of automobile and linked them to a range of other social and political causes.²² Equally important was the undeniable fact that, with or without expressways, as the city sprawled more and more people were driving downtown. Automobile storage was the second-fastest-growing land use in the central core, after offices, with 10,000 new parking spots constructed in the 1960s.²³ During the 1950s and 1960s the traffic jam, the multi-level parking garage, and the demolition site repurposed as parking lot all became common features of the downtown landscape.

In this context Pollution Probe and GASP sought to engage the public with activities focused on the negative impacts of the car on the urban environment and human health. One of their more ambitious ideas was summer 1970's "Leave the Car at Home Week," which proposed to convert several downtown thoroughfares into pedestrian malls, replacing cars with trees, music, and public space. Following on the heels of the first Earth Day events in April of that year—including New York City's closure of Fifth Avenue to cars—the idea was surprisingly popular with the public and downtown politicians. While Leave the Car at Home Week fell apart in the planning stage, debate over its cancellation led directly to the Yonge Street pedestrian mall of the following summer. The momentum generated by countercultural and anti-pollution activists gave new life to the idea of a car-free Yonge Street, as proposed by planners and independent merchants in the early 1960s.

From planning concept to revitalization project, countercultural protest to green planning, over the course of a decade a series of very different downtown actors incorporated support for pedestrian malls into their agendas for the city. This varied base of support distinguishes Toronto from cities—like Kalamazoo or Ottawa—where pedestrianization was driven almost entirely by the lobbying of downtown merchants. That a broader range of local actors had agendas for the city and the political space to express them speaks to the larger surge in civil society engagement that characterized the late 1960s and early 1970s across North America, a period often referred to as the "long 1960s."²⁴ By the end of the 1960s, when pedestrian malls began to be discussed seriously in Toronto, local politics were being remade through the mobilization of dozens of local interest groups, including resident and business associations, environmentalists, and ethnic associations.²⁵ They were a varied bunch, but well-educated, progressive downtowners—often called "reformers"—were the most politically astute, mobilizing around a platform of increased citizen participation, neighbourhood preservation, and environmental awareness. Reformers and their allies offered sustained opposition to what they saw as destructive

urban modernism and an overly centralized planning process, while promoting human-scaled, participatory urbanism.²⁶ By 1970 the phrase “planning for people”— and, by extension, not for cars—seemed to be on everyone’s lips. Reformers held several seats on Toronto City Council and in 1972 would capture a majority, as well as the mayoralty, with the election of centrist reformer David Crombie. No project was better poised to benefit from this shift than downtown pedestrian malls.

A People Place

Yonge Street will be a pedestrian mall from 00.01am Sunday, May 30th.... There [is] no list of charges. There will be no ticket collectors because the street is being opened up for people and will be free for all.... There will be no special briefings for the Press.... The judge and jury for the success of the mall will be the people of Toronto.²⁷

As captured in this 1971 press release, the Yonge Street pedestrian mall was promoted as a “people place,” a vital new public space at the heart of the city. Notions of public space have often been central to discussions of political expression, civics, and urban sociability in democratic societies. This was particularly the case in North American cities in the 1960s and 1970s, amid the drive for renewed participatory democracy and the perceived threats to public space embodied by suburban sprawl, urban renewal, and privatization. Progressive urban critics of the period, from Lewis Mumford to Jane Jacobs, celebrated town squares and downtown streets as vital sites of encounter and expression that enabled a heterogeneous population of thousands or millions to live and thrive together. In this context, the closure of Yonge Street to cars was imagined as the creation of a public good—open space—for the democratic enjoyment of all. The need was pressing in central Toronto, proponents argued, where parks and plazas were scarce, and virtually every unbuild lot was either devoted to parking or slated for office tower redevelopment.²⁸

Making people space meant, first of all, replacing cars with pedestrians. Mall planners used barriers and police to divert cars, buses, and trucks—and the noise and fumes they generated—onto other thoroughfares, tripling the space available to pedestrians. This was transformative, given that on an average day in the early 1970s downtown Yonge Street’s four-lane roadway was used by approximately 25,000 vehicles—more than 1,000 per hour, or one vehicle approximately every three seconds. In their place came crowds. Pedestrian counts in 1971 suggest that tens of thousands of people visited the mall each day, and at peak times—evenings, weekend afternoons—more than 10,000 people moved hourly through each block, two to three times more foot traffic than during an ordinary rush hour.²⁹ The press and mingling of these crowds defined the mall. Journalists tended to divide the space’s users into a series of types according to gender, age, and their perceived use of the space: lunching office workers; “little old ladies”; appreciative out-of-towners; fashionable young women; unconventional but essentially harmless “hippies.”³⁰ The overall image these reports conveyed was that of a vibrant human ecology that varied according to the hour, the weather, and the location. The mall

was already intensely seasonal, open only from May through September. Furthermore, rain emptied the mall; sun and warm evenings filled it with people.

The fact that the pedestrian mall was popular and that its heterogeneous crowds mixed peacefully was taken as proof of its success. Citizens writing to mall organizers and press coverage referred to the “miracle” of the mall, portrayed as the birth of a new urban sociability. People downtown, they observed, were friendlier during the closure: strangers mingled and shared tables, and Yonge Street was a “sea of smiles.” There was a widespread sense that the mall’s vibrant street life was evidence of a city transformed. After a walk down Yonge Street with a reporter in tow, noted Canadian urbanist John C. Parkin announced the end of “Toronto the dreary ... the city of corridors without a living room” he had criticized in the past. Similarly, *Toronto Star* columnist Jack McArthur observed that the city was preparing a future as a “people-oriented loveable small-town,” rather than an impersonal, business-oriented city. Perhaps nothing captured the enthusiasm and rhetoric of people power associated with the experiment so much as the choice of the Toronto branch of the Ontario Association of Architects to break with tradition and give their 1972 Design Award—usually given to a member of the profession—to “the citizens of Toronto” for their embrace of the mall and “a more livable city.”³¹

Toronto’s changing civic identity was also reflected in the mall’s celebrations of ethnocultural pluralism. By the 1970s this was an increasingly common element of municipal pageantry in Toronto, reflecting both local realities and larger shifts in national identity and state policy in postwar Canada. Migration had long fuelled urbanization and growth in Toronto, but it was not until the post-Second World War decades that it significantly altered the city’s Anglo-Protestant identity. Between 1921 and 1971 the proportion of citizens of non-British origin rose from 15 to 55 percent, as successive waves of migration from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean dramatically diversified the city’s population.³² Historian Franca Iacovetta has studied how, beginning in the 1940s, Toronto civil society groups responded to these changes by promoting a liberal, cultural, pluralist nation-building program that prefigured the official multiculturalism policies of the 1970s. Festivals, cultural exchanges, and other public activities organized in partnership with ethnic organizations staged a (mostly European) multi-ethnic mosaic as spectacle, offering citizens a chance to experience the foods, customs, and folk culture of their new neighbours.³³

Like the Metro International Caravan festival, organized each summer beginning in 1969, Toronto’s downtown pedestrian experiments put the city’s identity as an emerging multi-ethnic metropolis centre stage. In 1971 two of the biggest draws during the Yonge Street closure were Wednesday’s Caribbean steel band and limbo competition, and a Friday-night gala featuring the costumed Zemplin Slovak dancers and other folk dancing groups.³⁴ Following this success, in 1972 the mall’s ethnic content was significantly increased. The Community Folk Arts Council, one of Toronto’s major multi-ethnic cultural

organizations, collaborated with mall organizers to dedicate each of the event's seven weeks to showcasing a national culture. British Week, Italian Week, and Caribbean Week, among others, provide excellent examples of the growing importance of expressions of cultural pluralism to Toronto's public culture in the 1970s. They also demonstrated the ease with which ethnic folk culture could be appropriated to boost sales of T-shirts, pizza, or handicrafts, and more generally as a strategy to revitalize downtown commerce.³⁵

"The Most Pleasant Shopping Experience"

People mattered to the Yonge Street mall as citizens, but most of all as consumers. With or without cars, downtown Yonge Street was primarily a marketplace. Between College and King Streets it was crowded with approximately 300 businesses, the largest concentration of shopping in the Toronto urban region, despite growing competition from shopping malls on the urban fringe.³⁶ Yonge's merchants varied from the block-sized Eaton's and Simpson's stores to smaller diners and shoe stores—the latter categories of business were particularly active in promoting the pedestrian mall, organizing through their advocacy group, the Downtown Council. These mostly independent merchants and entertainment entrepreneurs, including some who had been lobbying for pedestrianization since the early 1960s, depended in all seasons on Yonge Street's sidewalks and foot traffic for their livelihoods. In their view, the value of a pedestrian mall was essentially commercial and could be measured at the cash register and at the lunch counter. For a car-free Yonge Street to be successful, it needed not just to attract people, but to attract the right kind of people—shoppers, diners, people with money to spend. At a time when economic dynamism and demographic growth were concentrated on the urban fringe, Yonge Street merchants saw these qualities as synonymous with the middle-class suburban consumer.

Businesses on Yonge Street leveraged the pedestrian mall as a marketing strategy. The Downtown Council and the larger stores bought radio spots, subway car posters, and full-page ads in local newspapers, promising thrills, special mall sales, and places to relax and linger: "Live it up downtown! ... [T]he most pleasant shopping experience you will find anywhere."³⁷ Eaton's organized street fashion shows with store

merchandise, and the Downtown Council paid for clowns and other street performances that encouraged an entertaining, "family-oriented" atmosphere. Eager to dispel any suggestion that downtown was in decline, merchants branded Yonge "Main Street Canada," referencing the North American myth of Main Street (and, perhaps, Disneyland's Main Street USA), with its associations of small-town friendliness, safety, and simple beauty.³⁸ This image was particularly useful in Detroit, Buffalo, Rochester, and other neighbouring US cities, where Toronto was marketed as a better-functioning, more harmonious version of the North American metropolis, devoid of the racial tensions and rising crime rates that characterized the 1970s urban crisis.³⁹ "People along the border," explained the city's tourist bureau, "would rather come to Toronto than to any American city because it is cleaner and safer." A 1974 survey found that just over 10 per cent of mall-goers were from the United States, suggesting that targeted promotion of the mall was succeeding.⁴⁰

More importantly, merchants' dreams of competing with shopping centres for suburban customers also seemed to be coming true. According to that same 1974 study, one mall-goer in three came from the city's five suburban boroughs; another survey conducted in the inner suburb of North Toronto in 1973 found that three in four respondents had visited Yonge Street during that summer's closure.⁴¹ Early on, small business owners glowed that the mall was "attracting people who haven't been downtown for [years]," and nearly all the businesses participating in the experiment reported increased foot traffic and sales



Figure 3. A promotional brochure prepared by the Downtown Council merchants' group, portraying the Yonge Street pedestrian mall as "Main Street Canada," 1973. Source: Downtown Council/City of Toronto Archives.

receipts.⁴² Some were better able to leverage the mall to create value than others, however. It became increasingly clear that the greatest beneficiaries of the street closure were not Clark's Shoes or Business Girl fashions, but Le Coq d'Or, Circus-Circus Pub, and the other taverns and restaurants that were serving food and (especially) drinks on the street. Between 1971 and 1973, while retailers showed modest increases in receipts, the number of licensed patios on the mall grew from two to ten, boosting the mall as a nightlife destination. People loved this aspect of the experiment, the first time post-Prohibition Toronto had legally sanctioned outdoor drinking. "It's just like Paris," exclaimed one woman, summing up the warm response to the introduction of "European-style" café culture in the heart of downtown.⁴³

The Informal Economy

Alongside this "official" marketplace, a fantastic range of informal commercial activities competed for space on the Yonge Street mall. Some were viewed positively, like the preteen shoeshine boys who set up their stools in doorways and rest areas on the mall. In 1971, an interview with "Little Jimmy Crouse" was used by one *Toronto Star* journalist to press home the point that Torontonians of all types approved of the experiment. This reflected a common practice. Prior to the murder of twelve-year-old shoeshine boy Emanuel Jaques on Yonge Street in 1977, which virtually ended sidewalk shoe-shining in Toronto, Jimmy and his peers were often uncritically celebrated in the press as examples of entrepreneurship or big-city colour, glossing over the circumstances that led them to work on downtown streets.⁴⁴ There was also a certain sympathy for the unlicensed performers who congregated on Yonge during the street closure: jugglers, magicians, and most of all buskers, who seem to have found the mall lucrative enough to stay. Prior to the 1970s, busking entertainers were a rarity in Toronto, but after several summers of pedestrian closures they had become a near-constant feature of the Yonge Street scene in warm weather.⁴⁵

However, the Downtown Council vigorously protested other types of informal commercial activity, and especially street vending. Dozens of street merchants attempted to cash in on the mall's crowds of strollers and impulse buyers by selling candles, flowers, sunglasses, personalized portraits, and jewellery from blankets and tables. Some sold mass-produced products at a discount, others specialized in leather and beadwork and handmade pendants in bone, silver, or wood that reflected the natural aesthetic of the 1970s counterculture. Yonge's established merchants saw this as direct competition and protested the fact that these "capitalists of the counterculture" had free access to mall-going customers when they had been obliged to pay subscriptions and taxes for the privilege.⁴⁶ Mall organizers complied with this lobbying by attempting to corral vendors into "street fair" areas away from the storefronts and the flow of foot traffic. Still, like buskers and shoeshine boys, vendors preferred to stay where the action was. This led to frequent, although never violent, confrontations with neighbouring shop owners, and with city officials when the latter tried to move them

along or issue tickets for vending without a permit. Attempts to regulate the informal marketplace using city bylaws were generally unsuccessful, since most people selling on the street either ignored the tickets they received or considered the relatively low fines they imposed part of the cost of doing business on Toronto's busiest street.⁴⁷

Some of Yonge's most dedicated entrepreneurs were selling ideas. From opening day in 1971 the pedestrian closure attracted a wide range of people eager to use its crowded public spaces as a political stage or recruiting ground. Alternative educational experiment Rochdale College held its 1971 graduation ceremony on the mall, mocking the formality of convocation at the nearby University of Toronto with a kazoo orchestra; federal Conservative leader Robert Stanfield and virtually every municipal politician in Toronto used the experiment to "meet the people" and pose for photo opportunities with supporters.⁴⁸ A stroller making her way up Yonge Street might receive en route a copy of the *Radical Humanist* ("A monthly newspaper on alienation"), an ad for an anti-war music festival ("End Canada's complicity in Vietnam!"), and an invitation to a folk-music night at the nearby Scientology coffee house ("A night especially for people to be themselves"). She could discuss enlightenment and salvation with shaven-headed Hare Krishna devotees and long-haired Jesus People, or art and imperialism with members of the Committee to Strengthen Canadian Culture. The Yonge Street mall was Toronto's loudest, busiest, and most chaotic marketplace in ideas.

Selling Sex

Where the informal and formal economies of the mall met, there was sex for sale. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, attitudes and laws around obscenity and prostitution were rapidly changing in North America, blurring the lines between obscenity and mass entertainment and opening spaces for commercialized sex on busy downtown thoroughfares. In downtowns from Montreal to San Francisco, it was possible to see "the sexual revolution writ large on the urban landscape" in unmistakable neon signage.⁴⁹ Or, more specifically, one gendered version of the sexual revolution: the commercialization of heterosexual male desire in a range of different formats and venues, all based on women's labour. Toronto was no exception. Yonge Street had always been on the cutting edge of entertainment trends in the city, and over the four years of the pedestrian mall, commercialized sex became a key ingredient in the entertainment offered on the street. Taverns hosted burlesque shows, and first-run cinemas began showing B or erotic films; major retailers like Eaton's hired go-go dancers and sponsored street fashion shows featuring bikini and lingerie models in an effort to attract the mall's crowds into their store.⁵⁰ The street's retailers and restaurants also increasingly shared space with sex-oriented businesses: strip clubs, adult bookstores, peep show cinemas, and, most of all, body rub parlours, all operating on or beyond the limits of legality. Yonge Street by night, like other North American sex districts of the period, resembled nothing so much as a playground for heterosexual men.

Between 1972 and 1974, encouraged by the record crowds attracted to the mall, more than two dozen nude massage parlours opened on and around downtown Yonge Street.⁵¹ These changes were localized on a specific section of the street—mid-mall at Dundas Street, where most of the bars and other sex businesses were concentrated—but Yonge's developing identity as "Sin Strip" came to be seen as a problem of the mall as a whole. Although many sex businesses were discretely located on upper floors, their presence had a significant impact at street level. As the owner of Playboy Mini-Cinema explained in a letter to mall organizers, in a competitive marketplace he and other sex businesses relied on aggressive advertising to attract customers from the street.⁵² Sex cinemas and strip shows used loudspeakers, banks of closed-circuit televisions, or open doors to offer pedestrians tantalizing glimpses of the entertainment inside. Female attendants stood in front of massage parlour entrances, calling out to men as they walked by. Outdoor sex workers circulated through the evening crowds on the mall or strolled at its margins in the early morning after the bars closed.

Body rub parlours also extended their influence by producing and distributing a staggering amount of printed material. Teenage boys were hired to hand out coupons and handbills, advertising Caesar's Spa or Relaxation Plus, typically featuring the nude female form and coded language—"complete privacy," "come with me"—emphasizing sexual availability. Most ended up on the ground, creating a serious litter problem according to street cleaning staff.⁵³ More than a few of these promotional leaflets, however, made it into the hands of Toronto mall-goers. From 1972, dozens of body rub ads and coupons were forwarded to the city by outraged citizens, marking the start of a grass-roots campaign against the sex industry that would mobilize thousands of citizens in the mid- to late 1970s. As evangelical churches railed against Yonge's "dens of iniquity" and suburban parents wrote letters to the mayor calling for a police crackdown, by 1973 any discussion of the mall inevitably featured a new question: was it a solution to Sin Strip, or part of the problem?⁵⁴

Fighting Traffic

Conspicuous by its absence, the automobile also played an important role in defining the Yonge Street mall. When Toronto City Council took over planning of a downtown pedestrianization experiment from environmentalists GASP and Pollution Probe in 1970, it was quick to set the new initiative apart from the failed Leave the Car at Home Week. The Yonge Street mall, the city emphasized, was not an "experiment in pollution control," nor was it anti-car; it was about bringing people, and life, back downtown.⁵⁵ But in the charged political context of the early 1970s, it was impossible to exclude larger urban debates from the newly created public space. After all, wasn't the very idea of pedestrian malls a product of ambivalence over the impact of cars on the city? Local newspaper coverage tended to exploit the contrast between the mall and ordinary downtown streets, offering articles that treated the closure as a potential nightmare for drivers—"chaotic traffic jams"—alongside pieces exclaiming

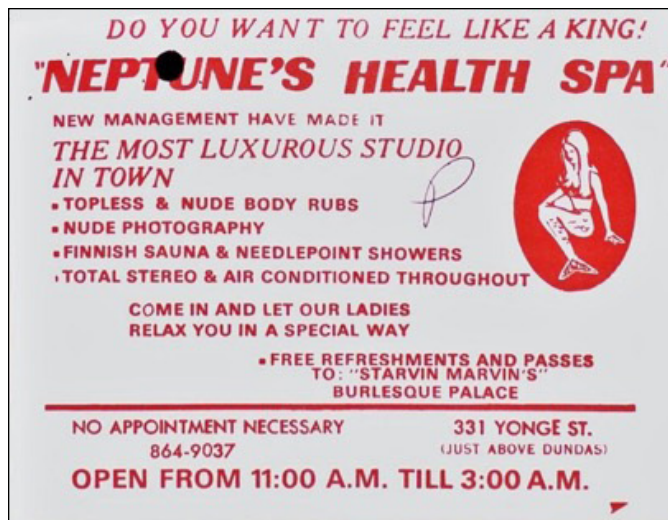


Figure 4. Coupons and handbills for Yonge Street's nude body rub parlours were handed out daily on the mall. This one, from 1973, is typical in its use of suggestive language and the nude female form to attract clients. Source: Neptune's Parlour/City of Toronto Archives.

that an auto-free Yonge was a "miracle" for pedestrians worn out by the noise, smells, and dangers of downtown traffic.⁵⁶

One of the loudest and most sustained public debates over the place of the car in urban Canada was sparked by the Spadina Expressway. Toronto's local version of the North American "freeway revolt" reached its peak in 1969–71, mobilizing a range of community activists and citizen groups into a Stop Spadina coalition and driving a wedge between the minority of elected municipal officials who agreed with them, and the majority who did not.⁵⁷ Planning of the pedestrian mall took place against this backdrop, explaining in part why the project's organizers were so eager to avoid being branded as anti-car, a label that meant taking sides in a heated, ongoing political dispute. Still, the Spadina Expressway came to the mall, one way or another. When on 3 June 1971 Ontario Premier William Davis announced the cancellation of provincial funding for the project, effectively overturning a decade of Toronto transportation planning, members of the Stop Spadina coalition chose to hold their victory celebration on the Yonge mall. Journalists reported that a jubilant group of placard-waving, dancing, and singing protesters took over the pedestrian mall, shouting, "We won!" and "You can beat City Hall!" They went on to explain for the benefit of less well-informed readers that the Yonge Street closure was a "symbol of pedestrian rights" and "the ban-the-car movement."⁵⁸

The Yonge Street mall seemed to lend itself to symbolic appropriation by anti-automobile activists. On 30 May 1971 Pollution Probe organized a mass bicycle parade timed to coincide with the opening ceremonies of the mall. Several hundred cyclists of all ages converged in front of the Ontario Legislature in Queen's Park, before riding eight-abreast down Yonge Street to the mall, in a bell-ringing "cycle army" seven blocks long. As with similar events organized in Paris, Philadelphia, or New York the same year, Pollution Probe saw in the "pollutionless bicycle" an ideal

symbol of resistance to the domination of the cumbersome, chemical-spewing car.⁵⁹ Pollution Probe and other environmentally aware observers viewed the pedestrian mall through the same lens. Their parade drew significant media attention and put automobile pollution firmly back on the agenda at the mall.⁶⁰ It was also an important moment for the fledgling urban cycling movement in Toronto, beginning a decade in which they would organize as a lobby group and convince the municipal government to invest for the first time in cycling paths and other urban infrastructure. In subsequent years other actors would return to the idea that pedestrianization was an anti-pollution statement. For example, it was front-page news in 1973—“Choke! Splutter! Gasp! Yonge St is hard on your lungs”—when researchers reported that the only time automobile pollution on Yonge Street sank to tolerable levels for human health was during the pedestrian mall.⁶¹ Through these and other interventions, the Yonge Street pedestrian mall came to symbolize both the ongoing environmentalist fight against traffic and the possibility of a new urbanism built around people, not cars.

“A Meeting Place for Youth from All across Canada”

The Yonge Street pedestrian mall was a youthful place. The presence of student environmentalists, twenty-something buskers, and teenaged street vendors was part of a larger appropriation of the street by youth from Toronto, the urban region, and beyond. Like other categories of mall-goer, young people came to Yonge to work, shop, or enjoy the spectacles of downtown life; in a downtown landscape lacking open spaces, the street closure provided a place to meet and linger that presented no barriers—physical or financial—to entry and no formal limits to the time one could spend there. Dozens of images taken by media, city officials, and street photographers on the mall testify to the large groups of young people that congregated there, strolling up and down the strip, sitting in circles talking or singing, or simply milling around on the sidewalk or the street, seemingly waiting for something to happen. At times, and on specific sections of the street—particularly on the entertainment corridor north of Dundas Street—young people were the dominant age group. In summer 1974 researchers stopped 2000 people on Yonge to create a profile of the average mall user: nearly half were sixteen to twenty-five years old, as opposed to 18 per cent in the city's overall population.⁶²

It is difficult to determine who exactly these young people were, but a significant number were not locals. During the early 1970s Toronto was a hub for the tens of thousands of youth crisscrossing the country or the continent on their way to and from school or work, or simply in search of adventure and experience through mobility.⁶³ These “transient youth”—as they were labelled by a 1969 national inquiry—naturally gravitated towards the Yonge Street pedestrian mall's central location in search of food, excitement, a bed, friends, jobs information, or even medical attention. Certain spaces on the mall became informal gathering points, including a long landscaped lawn near Yonge and Queen that one teenager referred to as “a meeting place for



Figure 5. The Yonge Street mall was a meeting place and point of entry into the city for transient youth. Here a hitchhiker from Newfoundland speaks with a worker at the Peoples' Information Service trailer just off Yonge Street in summer 1971. Source: tspa_0008410f; Toronto Star Archives/Peter Griffin.

youth from all across Canada.”⁶⁴ Police working during the 1973 closure reported encountering “juveniles from as far away as Yellowknife, NWT” on the mall.⁶⁵ Some transient youth encountered police, but many more found their way to the Peoples' Information Service, a twenty-four-hour office staffed by young summer workers, set up adjacent to the mall in 1971 using a federal Opportunities for Youth grant. Like Toronto's new youth hostels and “tent cities” on the University of Toronto campus and in west-end High Park, this information bureau was part of a national network of government-funded and informal services set up to help cities cope with summer influxes of young travellers.⁶⁶

A car-free Yonge was clearly attractive to young people; but unlike suburban families, their presence was often viewed as an obstacle to the experiment's success. To be young in North America in the 1960s and 1970s was to be under intense scrutiny. Urban spaces in Toronto where young people gathered in numbers also attracted anxieties about misbehaviour and disorder that could rise to hyperbolic proportions, whether framed in terms of sexual promiscuity and rowdiness at fast food restaurants in suburban North York, or acid-dropping and

venereal disease at the “dens” and coffee houses of Yorkville’s hip village.⁶⁷ That last association was important, since as early as 1971 even straight media outlets like the *Toronto Star* were reporting that Yorkville had lost its groove, and that the new centre for Toronto’s youth counterculture was the Yonge Street strip.⁶⁸ Some disagreed: alternative monthly *Guerilla* called the Yonge and Dundas intersection Toronto’s “arsehole” and dismissed the pedestrian mall as “drab and plastic,” although they continued to sell their paper there.⁶⁹ But the idea that the mall was the new Yorkville had stuck in the public imagination. Most Yonge Street merchants saw little economic opportunity in the crowds of youth—longhaired or not—gathering on the mall, where they threatened by their very presence to disrupt the street’s family ambiance and displace paying customers. Of course, negative representations of “hippies” and hitchhiking panhandlers tended to mask the varied ways young people engaged with the mall on a day-to-day basis: young men and women on the mall were just as likely to be shopping for records or hurrying to work as loitering in the way that so irritated certain observers. Students on summer break were responsible for setting up the mall’s decorations and street furniture, for selling ice-cream and waiting tables, for doing pedestrian counts and sweeping up at the end of the night.⁷⁰

An “Orgy of Lawlessness”?

Loitering and nonconformity were not the only problems identified as stemming from the pedestrian mall’s youthful crowds. Over the course of four summers, the experimental closures were increasingly associated with rowdiness in the public eye. In part this came through accounts of individual incidents. For example, in June 1972 a twenty-five-year-old man named Jim Davies wrote to the *Toronto Star* to complain of being attacked on downtown Yonge Street: “Almost 200 people stood and watched early Sunday morning while I was punched and kicked to the pavement in the middle of downtown Toronto. Nobody thought of coming to my aid, nobody called a policeman, and nobody looked me in the eyes when I walked up to them afterward and through bloodied lips asked why they hadn’t helped.”⁷¹

A photo of the author’s puffed, bruised face ran beside the letter in a prominent place on the newspaper’s editorial page. But by the end of the 1973 summer closure the loudest and most widely credited criticisms of the experiment came not from the street, but from within the municipal bureaucracy. In October 1973 Toronto’s chief of police, Harold Adamson, submitted a long report to the city criticizing the mall and recommending that the experiment either be scaled down or halted the following year. Using arrest statistics and excerpts from officer reports on “major incidents,” including several “near riots,” he portrayed the mall as a dysfunctional public space where police were only barely able to maintain order. Adamson’s mall was “an 84-day orgy of lawlessness,” as one *Toronto Star* reporter put it when the report was released publicly a month later.⁷² Over the next year, the chief of police would repeatedly criticize the mall, as part of lobbying the city for a larger budget and other levels of government for increased police powers.⁷³

Just how dangerous was Toronto’s people place? The public was shocked, first of all, by the number of arrests made on Yonge Street in the summer of 1973: 1074, or a dozen each day. However, only 5 per cent (51) of those arrests were for violent offences; the majority were for drunkenness (528), followed by possession, use, or sale of marijuana and hashish (178), the fastest-growing category of offence in Canada at the time.⁷⁴ When compared to the non-mall years for which statistics are available specifically for the street—1977 and 1978—the numbers are comparable, with the notable exception of alcohol-related offences, which were higher during the mall.⁷⁵ Of the fifty-six major incidents cited in the police report, all but six occurred in the evening or at night; more than half took place between midnight and 4 a.m., mostly on Fridays and Saturdays. What this suggests is that Yonge Street, Toronto’s busiest popular entertainment zone—with at least ten pubs and bars in the mid-mall strip alone—had recurrent problems with intoxicated, boisterous crowds on summer nights, with or without cars. Although police did not provide a breakdown of arrests by gender, their descriptions of major incidents suggest that the vast majority of offenders were young men. A certain kind of hedonistic masculinity, similar but not identical to what drove the sex industry on the street, was at the core of the Yonge Street mall’s disorder.

This was exacerbated by the special circumstances of the pedestrian closure. As Adamson’s arrest figures suggest, the Toronto police were very active during the mall. By the summer of 1973, an average of twenty-five officers were on patrol on any given day, and closer to fifty on weekends. They employed a proactive policing strategy that aimed to minimize or remove “control problems,” a phrase used by both mall organizers and police to refer both to illegal or disruptive uses of the space—vending, panhandling, drinking—and to the presence of perceived undesirable populations—transient youth, hippies, motorcycle types.⁷⁶ Notably, this included stopping, questioning, and “warning off” young people who fit a certain familiar description—men with long hair, anyone with a certain mode of dress—a profiling practice that had been at the root of tension between police and youth in Yorkville a few years earlier.⁷⁷ In contrast to previous years, in 1972 revisions to the criminal code had removed three “status offences” widely used by police to move along undesirable persons who had not been seen actively breaking other laws: wandering in public without means of support, being a common prostitute, and begging.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the mall’s expansive public spaces removed the incentive for revellers to disperse after hours; in fact, they made Yonge Street a natural place to congregate, to linger, to continue the party.

These factors contributed to a pattern that began with police engaging with crowds—and especially groups of young men—by attempting to disperse them. This was perceived as harassment, both by passersby and by those being dispersed. Officers were heckled or obstructed, leading them to escalate by calling for backup and making arrests. “July 14th—1:30 a.m. A near riot situation developed at Yonge and Dundas Streets

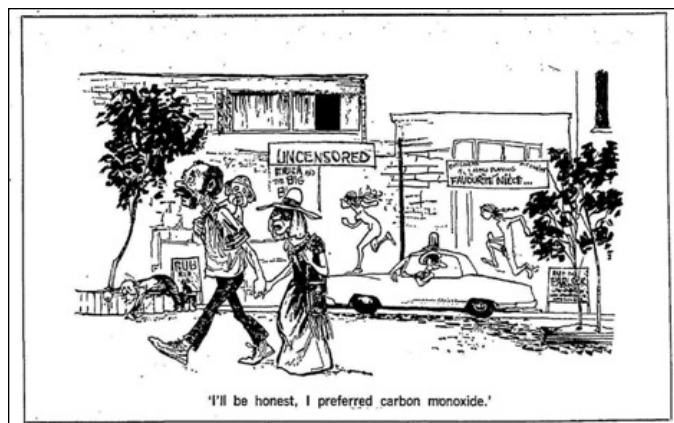


Figure 6. By 1974 the idea that the Yonge Street mall had been taken over by undesirable uses and users was a frequent trope of media portrayals. Source: *Globe and Mail*, 6 August 1974.

when [officers] were arresting females on prostitution charges. Around three hundred and fifty people shouted anti-police slogans." Occasionally police complained of being pelted with clods of dirt from the mall's flower beds, or even physically assaulted: "June 27th—11:45 p.m. As the result of two men being arrested for robbery on Yonge Street a near riot developed. One youth jumped on an officer's back knocking him to the ground, and another officer was attacked by the crowd. This situation resulted in the arrest of twelve persons, for Assault Police, Obstruct Police, and Cause a Disturbance."⁷⁹

When these incidents led to violence, those involved were nearly always men, like the officers who confronted and later arrested them. It was these "near riots," products of a synergy between aggressive policing, antisocial masculinity, and intoxicated crowds, that raised arrest figures and made the mall seem lawless. A car-free Yonge Street was not a particularly dangerous place—but controlling how its public spaces were used presented a significant challenge.

An Obstacle to Progress

If many contemporaries lauded the Yonge Street pedestrian mall as a forward-thinking, innovative urban intervention, others saw it as an obstacle to downtown progress. Since the 1950s pro-growth politicians and business leaders in Toronto had imagined the future of the central city primarily in terms of redevelopment: a process of creative destruction that would usher in prosperity and modernity by replacing obsolete structures with state-of-the-art urban forms.⁸⁰ They saw little intrinsic value in protecting Yonge Street's aging retail landscape and were opposed to limiting automobile access to the downtown core. When pedestrianizing Yonge was first discussed in 1963, the Toronto Redevelopment Advisory Council—a group of executives from major downtown corporations—expressed the view that malls were a distraction from the more important business of rebuilding downtown.⁸¹ Council member Simpson's, whose flagship location fronted on Yonge Street, argued from the early 1970s that the key to attracting suburban consumers was not to

close the street, but to make it as accessible as possible to cars. Company president Edgar G. Burton favoured widening Yonge Street or making it a one-way thoroughfare, if that meant filling his store's parking garage: "The one thing that will turn Yonge St. off as a viable shopping street is if the ladies who drive downtown to shop have to face additional traffic obstacles."⁸² Simpson's was just one of many businesses on Yonge, but its opposition could not be ignored. The company was a major employer and payer of municipal taxes; furthermore, internal city communications emphasize that by 1974 there was serious concern that Simpson's was preparing to sue the city for revenue lost during the pedestrian mall.⁸³

Like its competitor, department store giant Eaton's had modernization plans that did not include a pedestrian street on its doorstep. Since the early 1960s the company had been using its real estate subsidiaries to assemble properties on Yonge Street for inclusion in a major redevelopment project centred on its main store. By the summer of 1971 Eaton's and its developer partner Fairview owned thirty stores fronting on the pedestrian mall, including nearly all the independent retailers who had pleaded with the city for a street closure in 1963. The company's plans, announced the next year, were for an ambitious modernist reimagining of the street.⁸⁴ Five blocks of the west side of Yonge Street, from Queen to Dundas Street, would be demolished and replaced with an urban shopping mall—the Toronto Eaton Centre—lined with 250 modern retail units, and anchored by a massive new Eaton's store and an office tower at either end. In the view of the Downtown Council and other critics of the project, there was little room in this future for healthy sidewalk retail, or for continued pedestrian malls.⁸⁵ The Eaton Centre's climate-controlled indoor shopping street would divert foot traffic from the pedestrian mall; furthermore, after demolition began in late 1973, block after block of Yonge's streetscape was fronted not with viable small businesses, but with a blank, inaccessible wall of construction hoardings. In the short term, Eaton's continued to participate in and support the Yonge Street pedestrian closures. In the long term, however, its plans to create a privately managed alternative to the downtown shopping street threatened to make Toronto's people place obsolete.

Conclusion

Downtown Yonge Street was abruptly reclaimed by motorists on 15 August 1974, three days into a public transit strike that halted buses, streetcars, and subways across the city and jammed the streets with tens of thousands of additional cars. The decision to end that summer's pedestrian closure five weeks early was made, Toronto council argued, to stop the mall from being blamed for downtown traffic congestion. But it also reflected city authorities' frustration after four summers of managing debates over Toronto's most popular and disorderly public space. This became obvious when a small minority in council used the opportunity to present a motion banning any future pedestrianization experiments.⁸⁶ While they failed, the message was obvious: the Yonge Street pedestrian mall no longer seemed so much a symbol of the promise of the future as a reminder of

the problems of the present. By 1974 it was widely believed that banning cars from the street had hastened the growth of the sex industry, increased youth rowdiness, and encouraged illegal vending and proselytizing. While it was impossible to determine whether this was the case—arguments for and against were presented both in council and in local media—it was relatively easy to cease the street closures and return downtown Yonge Street to the status quo, which, while perhaps equally unsatisfactory, required less effort from the municipal administration to maintain.⁸⁷

The Yonge Street pedestrian mall failed, if success meant continued summer closures or, as many of its proponents hoped, a permanent car-free street. Although the latter idea was discussed seriously in the late 1970s and has since been raised periodically by city planners, local businesses, and downtown politicians, it has never moved beyond the planning stage.⁸⁸ In that respect, Toronto's pedestrian experiments of the 1970s can be understood as part of the larger story of the North American pedestrian mall, an urban intervention that never lived up to the often unrealistic expectations of the hundreds of cities that implemented them from the 1950s through the 1970s. While recognizing the importance of this context, in this article I have tried to move past narratives of failure to engage with the Yonge Street pedestrian mall on a more everyday level, asking a few basic questions about it as a public space: Who used it, and how? What meanings and identities were ascribed to it? What conflicts shaped its everyday street life and meanings? How were these street-level processes entangled with larger social, political, and spatial dynamics in Toronto and its region?

The picture that emerges is of a complex and contested urban space shaped by a wide cross-section of the city's population. Like the street it transformed—only more so—the Yonge Street pedestrian mall was at once an urban spectacle, a workplace, a site of consumption, and a space for political expression. Over four summers, these multiple identities coexisted on the mall, sustained and given meaning by the different uses people made of Toronto's most popular downtown public space. Window-shopping or reclining on a grassy lawn; vending jewellery on the sidewalk or serving pints of beer on an improvised terrace; measuring air pollution or handing out coupons for nude body rubs—few of these acts were understood by the people who engaged in them as political, but together they shaped the Yonge Street mall just as much as debates in the council chamber or the advocacy of organized pressure groups. Because of its centrality, because it was charged with meanings and conflicts, the Yonge Street mall is an excellent place from which observe the everyday politics of downtown in the postwar North American city.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Notes

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