

Spacing  
Environment issue  
Pedestrian malls  
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By Jay Somerset

It's late June, 1974, and the cover of the *Toronto Star* features a photo of a father walking barefoot along Yonge Street, his barefoot daughter perched on his shoulders. It's the opening day of the Yonge Street Mall. For the third summer in a row, most of Yonge from King to Bloor was closed to traffic, the cars replaced with 400 trees, 450 flower containers, 200 geranium baskets, 38 gardens, a fountain, 160 benches and 100 tables. More Moroccan than Metro, buskers played acoustic guitar as pedestrians browsed handmade leather belts, sand candles, jewelry and beads while snacking on ice-cream cones and popcorn.

A few weeks later, the *Star* ran another story on the Yonge Street Mall, calling it "Toronto's sun-time extravaganza that throws together the hustlers and the grandmothers, the junior executives from the TD Centre and the leather belt hawkers, the Jesus freaks and the families from Willowdale." Yep, it was hippy heaven, and the last time Toronto had a city-led long-term pedestrian zone.

By August, public opinion had turned against the stretch, mainly because of the well-publicized "sin strip" between Dundas and Gerrard: 975 feet of retail with 10 bars, five skin-flick cinemas, five dirty bookstores, a striptease theatre and 10 rub-and-tug massage parlours. Metro police described it as a "scene of lawlessness," while *The Globe and Mail* declared, "You can't have Eden in front of a pornographic movie house." By the end of the summer, "mall" had become a four-letter word and the city closed it down three weeks early to avoid traffic congestion during a pending TTC strike. The day it closed, amateur gardeners looted the park, walking away with flowers, plants and trees.

It may seem strange to put a pedestrian mall in the heart of the seediest section of Toronto, but by 1971 Yonge was the only significant shopping street left in the city core. The 1960s saw the creation of 313 suburban

shopping centres and more than 5,000 new stores in Metro, accompanied by the demolition of a million square feet of street-level retail on old main streets. Yonge was the only viable option for a pedestrian zone, but it wasn't ready, and 43 years since its closure, the Toronto is still recovering.

While the Yonge Street experiment didn't work out, the idea behind creating a walking street in the city core is sound. It creates an oasis that reminds us that people live in cities, not in cars. Environmentally, we get a break from the torrent of steel and choking gasoline fumes that pollute our city, and socially, we get an opportunity to interact with people and to browse the streets rather than speeding past them.

“There's been a long-standing bias against pedestrian-only streets because of the Yonge Street Mall,” says Daniel Egan, manager of pedestrian and cycling infrastructure for the City of Toronto. “There's a notion that it cannot work here; that retailers will lose business. But if you look around the world, you see almost without exception, businesses located in pedestrian areas are the most successful—the most expensive real estate.”

No-car streets or neighbourhoods have existed in the majority of European cities since the 1960s. These areas are almost always located right in the city core, with parking lots or park-and-ride (transit) lots. The idea: drive to the city, get out, and walk or take transit. In North America, the idea is still quite young, with about 30 walking streets in the U.S. and about five in Canada, if you count Toronto Island. And unlike Europe, where the streets wind and conjoin with other walking streets, here it's usually single streets, or a section of a street, often tarted up to appear “olde.”

Canadian opponents to pedestrian streets often point to Ottawa's Sparks Street Mall, which often sits empty, especially during winter. “The problem is a lack of ground-level retail,” says Egan. He adds another problem: nobody lives in the neighbourhood; it's surrounded by government buildings and bars, but no housing. “Successful [pedestrian-only] streets need people living close by.”

While Toronto has many one-day special-event street closings, such as Taste of the Danforth, the closest it gets to long-term regular street closings

for their own sake is the “Pedestrian Sundays” that began in Kensington Market. And even these wouldn’t be happening if it weren’t for volunteer-based Streets Are For People, which has been organizing and fundraising P.S. Kensington for four years. “The first year was every Sunday for seven weeks—way too much, for us, for the community,” says P.S. Kensington organizer Yvonne Bambrick. “The merchants and the community embraced the idea, but the next year there was no more funding from the city, so we were only able to have four days.”

Part of the problem: Toronto doesn’t distinguish between pedestrian-only days and special events such as the Pride Parade and other street festivals. “We need a permit that makes it simple for any community to have car-free days,” says Shamez Amlani, another P.S. organizer. Each car-free Sunday costs \$1,500 in permits, insurance, barriers, pylons and police. “It’s nutty. In other cities, you don’t need to go through all this bullshit just to shut out cars for a day. There aren’t cops and yellow barricades.”

Egan believes the city will soon have a special permit for pedestrian days. “These aren’t special events,” he says, “but just regular days without cars.” Once the permit comes through, it will be easier for other communities to host their own pedestrian-only events. This year, Mirvish Village and Baldwin Village each hosted their own car-free days. “Each time we do this, other communities get interested,” says Bambrick.

So what about a permanent pedestrian zone? Isn’t Kensington the perfect candidate? “Pedestrian zones significantly raise property value, which is shifted to the tenants,” says Bambrick, “so Kensington would lose its smaller vendors, the very people that give the Market its charm and identity.” Besides, she adds, “it’s already very pedestrian-friendly as it is.”

Both Bambrick and Amlani see John Street as a prime candidate for a pedestrian mall. “It has a park at the top, goes through the central hub of Queen and down toward Metro Hall and the SkyDome,” says Amlani. Paradise found, it seems, except for the underground parking lots accessible only from John. “This poses a huge problem,” says Egan. After all, where would people park?