

LIFE Walk: North Downtown Yonge Street

@ College Park Reflecting Pool

I'm Bob Fabian. My wife and I live just east of Yonge on Maitland. We moved here 12 years ago, ... and it's been a generally good move. Three years ago a developer threatened to put up twin 58 storey towers just outside our west-facing windows. We would get to see a textured metal wall, hiding the required 7 levels of above-ground parking.

I started to pay attention to what was being proposed for our neighbourhood. I'm now co-chair of the Development Committee of the Church Wellesley Neighbourhood Association. We've made some progress. Yonge Street might actually become a recognized Great Street. (And the proposed towers outside our condo windows have been scaled back.) This LIFE walk is about the Yonge Street that was, the buildings that remain, and the changes that are coming.

This location seems a fitting start for our walk. Eaton's College Park store had a considerable impact on Yonge Street. Among other things, it caused Carlton Street to jog north and meet College Street at the northeast corner of the new Eaton's store. College Park remains an art deco jewel, with Carlu Hall preserving a sense of the grace and elegance of the past. It's interesting to note that the original 1928 plan called for the world's largest retail and office complex for the site (which Eaton's began assembling in 1910). The depression arrived and all that was build is what we see today, plus a new mid-rise office tower on College.

And, must not forget Aura. It's almost complete on the southeast corner of this block. It will be Canada's tallest condo when finished (and before the next tallest condo is completed). The empty reflecting pool and the "tired" public space have great potential, yet to be realized. This space has the potential to become a public jewel nestled between the historic Eaton's College Park and the pioneering Aura tower.

Yonge Street has a storied history. It began life as a military road, allowing Lord Simcoe to rapidly move troupes from what is now Lake Simcoe to defend the realm against those revolutionaries south of our border. Construction started in 1794, running north from Eglinton Avenue. By 1833 it was a thriving toll road, but most of the city was clustered along King Street at the waterfront. Horse drawn streetcars were introduced in 1861, and were electrified in 1892. At the turn of the century, Yonge Street was *the* commercial street of the city. Many of the stores from that era can still be seen somewhat hidden behind modern facades. By 1930, the two big departments stores, Simpson's and Eaton's, were open a Yonge & Queen, and the new Eaton's College Park opened. The first stretch of the Yonge Street subway opened in 1954.

Many longer term residents of Toronto, and of Ontario, have personal memories of "their" Yonge Street. I remember shopping for classical records at Sam's on Friday and Saturday evenings. And I remember going to art movies at the New Yorker theater. For those with an interest in popular culture, Yonge Street was where it happened. Yonge Street commands an important element of mind-share for those of us who have been in the city for some time. It's got the history to become a Great Street. It's got the mind-share of a Great Street. Growing numbers of people are interested in moving back downtown. Developers have "discovered" Yonge Street.

Change has always been important on the street, but change is particularly important today. Yonge Street is in store for a tsunami of change. Let me tell you a bit about the "plans", for Yonge Street (between College and Bloor). After considerable work by the

city and by CWNA and by BCCA, the North Downtown Yonge Street Planning Framework has been published and approved by Council. It's now under review at the Ontario Municipal Board. There is a Heritage Conservation District study underway – the inventory has been published and a final report is some six months away from publication. The physical street needs to be renewed, with reconstruction planned to start in 2016. And the Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area has just launched YongeLove, with a public pop-up storefront located on Yonge at just south of the northeast corner of College Park.

The plan for this walk is relatively simple. Mostly, we will not be walking on Yonge – it's too busy to accommodate a crowd. We'll be crossing the street several times, pausing at more open areas on both sides of the street. Before heading off to the next meeting place, let me point out a couple features that will be visible as we move off to the Alexander Parkette, located on Alexander, (two short blocks north of Carlton on the east side of the street). At the northwest corner of Yonge and College is the Odd Fellows Hall.

This building was completed in 1893 for the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. It was designed to be a mixed use building, with retail at ground level, 54 rental offices, and a grand 20 x 46 foot ballroom on the 3rd floor. It was the first public building to include an electric elevator, running from ground level to the 3rd floor grand ballroom. It's soon to be connected to a new 60 storey condo tower, with retail at ground level, located at the southwest corner of Yonge and Grenville. The design review process played an important role in modifying the plans for that new condo so that the Odd Fellows Hall would be appropriately complimented.

Also visible as you walk north on Yonge will be Toronto's oldest remaining fire hall clock tower, located on the west side of Yonge between Grenville and Grosvenor. The site has an interesting history. Clock towers were a standard part of 19th century Toronto fire halls – they told time, and provided a convenient place to dry fire hoses in winter. The fire hall burned down in the 1920s, but the clock tower remained. The St. Charles Tavern open in 1951 in rebuild ground level space. By the 1960's, it was a somewhat infamous gay hangout. More recently, a private developer invested in the site, rebuilding the original clock tower and enhancing the retail and office space in the building.

On to Alexander Parkette ...

@ Alexander Parkette

The Buddies in Bad Times theater began life as a tram shed. It was then home to Toronto Theater Productions starting in 1967, with a newly constructed 300-seat auditorium. Toronto Theater Productions was one of the first great alternative and experimental theater companies. But by 1988 the company was in financial trouble, announcing a redevelopment plan for the site, ... which didn't happen. In 1994 Buddies in Bad Times was 15 years old and in search of a new home. They moved in, and have been there ever since. They begin their 36th season as the world's longest running and largest queer theater.

This location is interesting for a number of reasons. We're actually standing on top of the parking garage for 25 Maitland, the building immediately north of us. And we're standing just east of the Yonge Street subway line which run diagonally across the lot between Alexander and Maitland. That lot sold to Lanterra Developments for \$32.5 million and they came to the city with a plan for twin 58 storey towers on the lot. A number of us had serious problems with this initial proposal. On a personal level, my wife and I would have been confronted with a textured metal wall, only a few meters from the windows on the west side of our condo.

Aside from personal concerns, this proposal raised serious questions about the future we want for our iconic Yonge Street. The initial design was almost a carbon copy of the Murano, located between Grenville and Grosvenor on Bay. A number of us felt the proposed design was unimaginative, and inappropriate for what should be pedestrian-friendly, walkable block. The Councillor, Kristyn Wong-Tam, agreed to a Working Group to consider the proposal. In parallel, a Working Group was struck to consider the North Downtown Yonge Street Planning Framework.

Both Working Groups have achieved a measure of success. The Planning Framework drew attention to the importance of providing a reasonable viewing angle for pedestrians on Yonge Street, and drew attention to the need to protect the remaining historic storefronts along the street. It's already had a noticeable and positive impact on the proposals for sites along the street. It has taken considerable time to get to where we are today. The original proposal from Lanterra was posted in May of 2011, and construction has yet to start. There is to be a promised Working Group for the Site Plan; it has yet to start.

Before we leave this site, it's interesting to point to the three coop building on the south side of Alexander. The buildings were constructed in 1954 when good planning called for slabs or towers in a park. City Park Cooperative Apartments is one of the more successful examples of affordable urban housing sites. Its presence contributes to the diversity that is one of the more attractive characteristics of the Church Wellesley neighbourhood.

Our next stop is the soon-to-be new urban park at 11 Wellesley West. The site runs between Bredalbane and Wellesley. Let's gather on Bredalbane. Those interested may wish to walk along Grosvenor past the downtown YMCA to the East of Bay Park, walking a short block north to Bredalbane. Remember to use the light at Alexander & Yonge ...

@ 11 Wellesley West

This site has an interesting history. The Canadian Opera Company had long wanted its own opera house, not the multi-purpose facility located at Yonge & Front. In 1984, then Premier Bill Davis promised an opera house on this site. The site design competition was won by Moshe Safdie, who came up with a strikingly postmodern proposal. In 1990, Bob Rae was Premier and the economy was in trouble. The SkyDome had seriously overrun its budget. There was no money for a new opera house. Plans for a new opera house on this site were shelved. Two high rise residential buildings went up on Bay Street, but most of the site remained vacant for more than two decades. Last year, the province put up for sale the remaining 2 acre site.

Lanterra was the successful bidder, paying just over \$60 million for those 2 acres. The real estate prospectus from the Province suggested twin towers on the site, with only a very modest expansion of the existing green space. Lanterra was already sitting on the Yonge Street lot between Alexander and Maitland, and had purchased the Sutton Place Hotel with the intention to provide an expanded condo facility on that site, ... just across the street from the site at 11 Wellesley West.

All of this was preceded by an on-going battle to turn this space into a public park. We argued, we petitioned, we marched, we even painted the hoarding that surrounded the site. Our Councillor, Kristyn Wong Tam, and our MPP, Glen Murry, were both involved, with some apparently serious mis-communication between them. We failed to get the entire site turned into a public park. But we had spoken loudly about the importance of a park, and the importance of a high quality mixed use building for the site.

Lanterra, to their credit, was listening, ... and saw an interesting commercial opportunity. They came forward with two designs, a ho-hum two tower proposal that followed the logic in the Province's real estate prospectus, and a second, one tower proposal, that was architecturally distinguished, but rose beyond the recommended height for buildings on that site. The "package" is not yet signed, sealed, and delivered, but the path forward seems reasonably clear.

Lanterra gets to offer a unique, distinguished downtown condo, with a brand new urban park located immediately adjacent to the building. This has the not insignificant fringe benefit of making the condos at the Sutton Place Hotel site more attractive. And the additional public parking to be provided below the new park will reduce the need for visitor parking at the new Lanterra towers on Yonge Street. It's a positive example of what can happen when the community speaks, the developer listens, and our municipal government cooperates. Pity our province could not have been a more positive part of the exercise.

Our next stop is the James Canning Gardens, located just east on Yonge on Dundonald (which is itself located just north of Wellesley). Remember to use the light at the intersection of Yonge and Wellesley. See you there ...

@James Canning Gardens

Welcome to the James Canning Gardens, formerly the Dundonald Street Parkette. We're standing on top of the Yonge Street subway. Indeed, this and the two northern linear parks are a result of the open cut approach taken for this section of the subway. We're also standing in the middle of a gaggle of new condo developments. Some of you may have noticed the sales office at 50 Wellesley East. It's going to be "only" 37 storeys tall. The planned condo just south of where we are standing on Dundonald is an interesting development.

The developers recognized a need to respond to concerns in the neighbourhood. In a sense, they had little option – fitting any condo tower on the site would be problematic. They went out of their way to accommodate the interests and concerns of both the condo at 19 Dundonald and the condo at 22 Wellesley East. They offered to put the second subway entrance to the Wellesley station at the northwest corner of their building. And the design proposed goes well beyond a typical Toronto glass box condo. All in all, a positive example of how a developer can respond to neighbourhood concerns.

Immediately to the west, another new condo is proposed for the block on Yonge between Dundonald and Gloucester. That site is "difficult" - it's not very deep and the combined requirements in the North Downtown Yonge Street Planning Framework substantially constrain what would be approved for the site. The word from Planning is that the developer is likely to creatively respond, respecting the key requirements in the Planning Framework.

Just across Yonge Street another condo is going up, ... it's near its planned height of 45 storeys. The development is another generally positive example of what can be done on Yonge Street. They have invested heavily in preserving the historic stores along Yonge and preserving the first meter of the historic warehouse on St. Joseph. The building is not quite a simple glass box – there is an interesting undulation introduced by the varying depth of the balconies. Granted, it will be a "big" building, but it is set back some 30 meters from the street, and they have paid attention to local architectural history.

On the next block north, one condo has already been approved. It will site behind the Masonic Hall located at the northeast corner of Yonge and Gloucester. The “historic” yellow brick building on Gloucester will be retained, but what’s there today is mostly a reconstruction of the original cottages, with little original materials still a part of the building. The developer was ready and willing to talk to the neighbourhood. One of the features of this block is the presence of Normal Jewison’s office building just opposite the Normal Jewison Parkette. It’s located in a converted warehouse on the lane. As far as I can determine, the Jewison, father and son, disagreed about this proposed building. The son assured the developer there would be no problem. The father publicly opposed approving this proposed building.

In this case, it’s not clear when development will proceed. Timing is all. Has the market for downtown condos peaked? What will the market be like in three, or five, or seven years? The reality of construction is that it will be at least three years between the time when development breaks ground, and the finished condo building is turned over to its first Management Board. Assuming the overall economy doesn’t fall off a cliff, my view is that the downtown condo market is likely to stay strong. More and more young and older Canadians are opting for life downtown. I can see the advantages of being easily able to walk “everywhere” from your downtown condo. That’s likely to be a continuing, long-term trend.

Before leaving here, it’s interesting to note that the lane running between Gloucester and Wellesley is about to be renamed, ... at noon today. The lanes were renamed Wabenose and Chechalk Lanes by order of the Community Council on May 13, 2014. On August 8, 2014, Community Council accepted a motion to ceremoniously dedicate the lanes as “Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.” The entire lane renaming effort is a way to connect the neighbourhood to our historically important past. In this case, it’s recognizing the connection between the location and the native population which preceded the English settlers. If you have the time at the end of our walk, come back and be a part of this celebration of our past.

Our next stop is St. Nicholas. It’s a small picturesque street running just west of Yonge Street between Irwin and Charles. As you’re walking there, pause for a moment to appreciate the historic Masonic Temple at Gloucester & Yonge. See you there ...

@ St. Nicholas Street

There are strong echos of our 1880’s past on this street. The row houses on the east side of the street date back to that era. They were erected as housing for the workers in the mill whose facade is being recreated on the condo going up at St. Mary and St. Nicholas. The street is being obviously and aggressively gentrified. The new condo will be a towering presence, but one positive result is that the Section 37 from this development contribution provided the basic funding for the Heritage Conservation District study now underway.

These Victorian worker’s cottages can and will be preserved. Before we move on north of Bloor, it makes sense to pause to consider the musical history that happened along Yonge Street. There were three theaters located just south of Bloor at 641, 645 and 764 Yonge – the Victoria, the Embassy and the Uptown Theater. This was *the* theater district at the beginning of the 20th century. There’s an echo of the old Uptown Theater hidden behind the facade screen at the Panasonic Theater.

Yonge Street south of College was also home to the famed Edison Hotel, the Coq D’Or and the Brown Derby. The Edison was largely demolished by neglect, and the Coq D’Or

was replaced by the new HMV record store. The Sam the Record Man main store was also located in that immediate area. Ryerson's new student centre is almost finished on the old Sam's site, and Dundas Square has injected new life into the street. This was where Toronto rock and roll established itself, with the large and continuing presence of Ronnie Hawkins. Even Elvis was a part of the scene, appearing at the Maple Leaf Gardens early in his famed career.

We're not going to recreate that storied past, but, with care, Toronto can build a happening place that echos that history. Ryerson student centre and Dundas Square provide a start. It's up to us to encourage future developments that reinforce a connection to that shared musical past.

Our next stop will be the sidewalk clock located on the west side of Yonge, just north of Bloor. See you there ...

@ Walk Thru Clock

We're standing on the site of the 1897 CIBC building that was taken down to make way for the building that's here today, ... and soon to be expanded with 26 and 57 storey towers (proposed). The site also happens to be the location of the Potter's Field Cemetery, and just across the street from the location of one of the early Yonge Street toll gates. The new mixed use building at One Bloor East is already a dominating presence at this corner.

This Great Gulf tower is really the second attempt at a tower on this corner. It's only projected to rise to 75 storeys, ... assuming the developer doesn't go to the Committee of Adjustment to ask for just a few more floors. Maybe just enough so that this and not Aura will be recognized as Canada's tallest condo. Hariri Pontarini are the architects; they have a reputation for going beyond the "standard" glass box condo. They designed the condo at 5 St. Joseph with the undulating balconies, and are the architects for several proposed condo towers along this stretch of Yonge Street which have yet to be approved. As an aside, the price for condos at One Bloor East seems to run from \$1,000 per square foot, ... and up.

There are actually a clutch of new proposed towers in the immediate vicinity. Above Holt Renfrew will be a proposed 71 storey condo at 50 Bloor West. I already mentioned the 26 and 54 storey towers planned for 2 Bloor West, immediately northwest of where we are standing. One short block north at 1 Yorkville will be another condo, rising to "only" 55 storeys. 18 Yorkville was completed in 2005 and rises 36 storeys. The condo rising at Church and Yonge is due to be complete this year and will also only be 37 storeys. Finally, at 37 Yorkville there is a proposal for another condo that is to rise 60 storeys.

Interesting questions about what happens to the pedestrian experience as you move from the granite sidewalks on Bloor to the more pedestrian cement sidewalks on Yonge. Will the high-end shopping spill over, or will some new retail identity assert itself?

Our next and last stop will be the Town Hall Square just off Yonge on Yorkville. See you there ...

@ Town Hall Square

I hope this walk has shown you something of the history of this small southern stretch of Yonge Street. I hope it has also given you a taste for what may be coming. It's up to us, collectively, to guide what is developed on our Yonge Street. My hope is that Yonge

Street can be reborn as *the* street people want to promenade along. We'll need to increase the space for pedestrian and bikes. We'll need to pay much greater attention to small distinguishing architectural details, and reward merchants and landlords who act to reinforce the Great Street potential of Yonge.

The city is moving in the right direction. A Great Yonge Street can run from the funky chaos of Dundas Square; past the Ryerson student centre with a focus on art, architecture, and entrepreneurship; and past the fascinating potential of Aura and College Park. Continuing north from College with its many remaining 19th century buildings, reinforced by what I hope will be the vibrant commercial presence that the thousands of new residents will bring to the street. Terminating at the entrance to Yorkville. It fits the classic Great Street model. Collectively, we can help to make it happen.

Thank you.