

Further Urban Design Experience

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A year ago I reported on my initial experience with urban design (EAP, Winter 2012)). Briefly ... A developer proposed to put up twin 58 storey condo towers 10 meters from my study window. This was downtown Toronto in the midst of a condo boom that's continuing. My early reaction was strongly negative, but I recognized that a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) reaction was unlikely to carry much weight. I turned to urban design and reported on my early experience.

More than a year has gone by. Much has changed, but the towers have yet to be either approved or withdrawn. I feel that I've gained a much better appreciation for the local planning process. It may be unwise to generalize from one major North American city in the midst of an almost unprecedented condo building boom, but some of the insights gained here may be of value elsewhere. It's that hope which informs this piece.

A bit about the planning environment and planning process may help set the stage. Ontario decided to do something about urban sprawl. It published *Places to Grow* in 2006 and has continued to update it (see <http://www.placestogrow.ca>). A greenbelt was established around Toronto. New development was to be encouraged along the major transportation corridors, discouraged in established neighbourhoods and discouraged outside the greenbelt.

A pressure for intensification along major transportation corridors was established. Add a strongly positive economic sentiment about the value of investing in Toronto condos. The race to put up as many downtown condos as possible was on, and continues to this day. One result has been a condo developer enthusiasm for what has been called "glass brutalism" - they're dense, relatively inexpensive, and can offer (at least initially) attractive views.

It was just such a "glass brutalism" development that was being proposed for outside my window. This new development would be literally on top of the main north-south Toronto subway line, and centrally located between the main downtown epicentres. The developer's economic argument was clear, and strong. What forces could be arrayed to moderate this rampant commercialism and bring a measure of context sensitive to the design?

Toronto does have an *Official Plan*, but it's very broad brush. Toronto also has *Tall Buildings* guidelines, but the initial version of these guidelines left this area of the city "blank". I've been told that this was a political compromise that allowed the rest of the guidelines to be adopted. That's a plausible explanation. Updated versions of both the *Official Plan* and the *Tall Building* guidelines were being actively developed.

In parallel, it was decided that there needs to be an area plan that would specifically address this area of the city. A *North Downtown Yonge Street Planning Framework* is also under development. And all of this is coloured by the presence of the Ontario Municipal Board. They, the OMB, have an almost divine right to overturn any planning decisions taken by the city. They are a quasi-legal body whose decisions cannot be appealed (except on the narrowest of grounds). And they only recognize “experts” as having opinions that warrant serious consideration. Developers have a very big edge – they employ the vast majority of those whom the OMB would recognize as “experts”.

Against all of this, how are alternate views and concerns put on the table? The city did run something they called a Charrette. Unfortunately, it was a pale imitation of an intense four or five day interactive design process. Our Charrette lasted less than one day – “we” were given the opportunity to tell “them” our views on those topics which they selected. The first feedback came months later and consisted of “them” telling “us” what they heard. There was no sense of an interactive, incremental or iterative design process.

Our local Councillor did initiate two Working Groups, one to consider the *North Downtown Yonge Street Planning Framework* and the other to consider the specific development being proposed outside my study window. I'm one of the participants on both of these Working Groups. In all of this, the non-experts have what I would describe as a contextual problem. We don't have the established expertise to be allowed to argue from our best understanding of the context.

What's missing was a “vision” for our area of Toronto, and specifically for North Downtown Yonge Street. Yonge Street was the first street in Ontario, (than called Upper Canada). It's certainly the longest street in Canada – some 1,800 km long. It was Toronto's main commercial street by the late nineteenth century, and there are many remaining buildings from that era. It was Toronto's parade street. It was where Toronto went to celebrate. But retail along “our” section of the street has fallen on somewhat hard times.

Early on it was clear that “our” section of Yonge Street (less than 2 km long) could aspire to Great Street status – Allan Jacobs' *Great Streets* (MIT, 1993) provides a compelling description of such streets. We already had a clearly recognized southern anchor place – Dundas Square (Toronto's Times Square – <http://www.ydsquare.ca/web/>). The southern portion running up from Dundas Square was a focal point of this year's Celebrate Yonge! (<http://www.celebrateyonge.com/>). The northern end is naturally anchored where Yorkville meets Yonge (<http://www.bloor-yorkville.com/>).

If developers' enthusiasm for building on and adjacent to Yonge Street can be properly harnessed, we should be able to move the street in the right direction. To that end, we developed a “vision” for our stretch of Yonge Street. This has the great advantage that non-experts can reach supportable conclusions about what makes sense on the street, and what doesn't. It's no longer a game in which only expert opinion counts. Explicate

the context and non-experts can meaningfully enter the game.

Vision for Yonge Street

Our Vision for Yonge Street has five basic elements:

I. Great Street Goal

Yonge Street has the history and the mind share to become a “great” street. Everything that gets done along the street should move us towards that goal.

II. Appropriate Design

New construction should echo the patterns found on historic Yonge Street, and only use new patterns that enhance its “great” status.

III. Enhanced Public Realm

Sidewalks should be widened; bioswale plantings introduced; laneways redesigned for pedestrians; streets shared between pedestrians, bikes, and cars.

IV. Successful Retail

Vibrant, successful retail is of critical importance. New construction must recognize that it has an obligation to provide good retail space.

V. Necessary Limits

There are necessary limits on the height of new construction, and necessary accommodation to respect existing residents.

I. Great Street Goal

We specifically want to see the following characteristics enhanced by all new construction along the street:

1. It's possible to walk with leisure. People are present in sufficient numbers for safety, but with enough space that you can walk at your own pace.
2. The street “walls” have been well-defined. Buildings don't loom over the street, but they do provide a consistent definition.
3. The street has anchor “places” at both ends. The great street portion has a recognizable beginning and end, and both are “places” for people.
4. The street engages the eye. There is a rich variety of textures, patterns, and shapes along the street. Many store fronts are relatively narrow.
5. The design of buildings is complementary. The buildings along the street “work” with each other, but they need not be copies of each other.
6. Construction materials are generally of high quality. The buildings show that care was taken to use good quality materials.
7. There is a substantial “green” presence along the street and at the entrance of side streets. Trees, plantings, and hanging baskets are used.
8. There is a rich retail and recreational diversity. There are different kinds of shops and different kinds of recreation available along and adjacent to the street.
9. The street features great “details”. It might be a great door, or a great window, or a

great bench. Great features stand out.

10. There are recognized “places” along the street and adjacent to the street. These places are destinations and locations where you want to spend time.

Our immediate concern is with Yonge Street between Dundas Square and Yorkville. That's a clearly recognized stretch of the street. Dundas Square is already a recognized “place”. It can be the southern anchor for “our” Great Yonge Street. Yorkville is an already recognized “place” just a few kilometers north. It can be the northern anchor for “our” Great Yonge Street.

Allan Jacobs wrote the definitive text – *Great Streets*, (MIT Press, 1993). The material in this section draws heavily on his work, which has also been used extensively by cities throughout the world.

II. Appropriate Design

The design of new construction is perhaps the most challenging one that needs to be addressed. Wrong or inappropriate new construction can significantly reduce the “great” street potential of Yonge. Doing the wrong things on the street can also have a serious ripple effect all across our downtown neighbourhoods. All new construction should have a recognized responsibility to contribute positively to the street. Building is not just about making money, it should also be about enhancing the built environment for everyone.

Patterns provide one way to describe what should be allowed, and what should not be allowed. New construction should draw on the positive patterns already found along the street. If that's all that happens, the new construction is going to look like an imitation of the authentic buildings found along the street. The result won't be offensive, but will do little to enhance the greatness of the street. New patterns should be allowed, even encouraged, if they enhance and extend the “language” of “great” design along the street.

All of the patterns used by new construction should either draw upon the positive patterns already found on the street, or positively extend the design language that can be used along the street. New building should be harmonious with what already exists and extend the design language in positively distinguishing ways.

The idea of architectural patterns goes back a number of years – there are published 19th century books of architectural patterns. The use of patterns here draws more on the 20th century work of Christopher Alexander. He introduced the idea of a pattern language that (in his case) would be used to describe *the* way in which all buildings should be constructed. His *A Pattern Language* (Oxford University Press, 1977) presented a definitive list of 253 patterns that covered all towns, buildings, and rooms. Our use of the ideas is more modest, but we generally follow his approach:

III. Enhanced Public Realm

The public realm along “our” Yonge Street consists mostly of the street, its side streets, and the parallel laneways. There are a few small linear parks above some of the route taken by the Yonge Street subway, and there is the possibility of a major park just off Yonge Street at 11 Wellesley West. But the street, its side streets, and the laneways remain critically important elements in the public realm.

The number of pedestrians on the street continues to increase. Indeed, there are far more people walking along Yonge Street than driving along it. And this pedestrian volume is sure to increase as thousands of new condo units are developed on and adjacent to the street. Something needs to be done. Our streets should be recognized as a place for people on foot, on bicycles and in vehicles. Based on volume, the fraction of our streets devoted to pedestrians needs to increase.

Celebrate Yonge! (August & September, 2012) provides an example of what can be done. It should be possible to reclaim at least one vehicle traffic lane for use by pedestrians. That would be an important step in the right direction, and would respond appropriately to the significant increase in pedestrian traffic along the street. But it's not just raw space that's important.

Along too much of the street, there is no or minimal green presence. The Bay Cloverhill Community Association demonstrated what's possible with their bioswale project on Bay Street. With some increase in sidewalk width, a bioswale should be established along much of “our” Yonge Street. This would do good to capture and clean runoff water and provide the irrigation required for a healthy green presence along the street.

The laneways running parallel to Yonge Street on both side of the street continue as generally unattractive and under-utilized public realm space. A number of cities throughout the world have taken advantage of their laneways to provide interesting and inviting pedestrian friendly retail environments. Doing the right things with our laneways would improve our retail environment (see next point), and would increase the share of the public realm that invites use by pedestrians.

IV. Innovative Retail

Retail along Yonge Street has been troubled for some time. Relatively few businesses are established and long-standing. There are a significant number of “opportunistic” retail outlets – cash stores, beauty parlors, tattoo emporiums, sex shops, etc. But pedestrian volume is high, and continues to increase. The number of local residents is rapidly increasing. Street violence is low. It's *the* central pedestrian corridor in downtown Toronto – it really is Toronto's Main Street. It ought to be a more successful retail location than it is.

Several economic forces seem to be at work. Real estate land values have now reached almost scandalous levels – an acre of land on or near Yonge Street now fetches \$50 million, or more. One result is that the rents, and taxes, charged seem to increase in step with increasing real estate values. At the same time, most traditional retail businesses are being challenged by global brands, the Internet, and big box discount pricing. Just providing ever more expensive raw space on Yonge Street for traditional retail is unlikely to result in a strong, vibrant retail environment.

If no special provisions are made for Yonge Street, there is little reason to be optimistic about the future of retail on the street. And that poses a fundamental challenge because vibrant, successful retail is an essential element in an attractive, walkable Yonge Street. There is considerable developer interest in the street. But most of that interest is from condo developers. Unfortunately, they are not in business to provide space for vibrant, successful retail – they're in the business to sell condos.

New York City faced a similar challenge on its “Upper West Side Neighborhood Retail Streets”. In June of 2012 they put in place special zoning restrictions covering new buildings and enlargements (on those retail streets). The rules that are being applied are specific to those New York City neighborhood retail streets. But why can't Toronto follow a similar approach and put in place rules for Yonge Street retail (initially between College and Bloor). Yonge Street is already recognized as a “Special Character Street”; it seems only reasonable that there should be special retail zoning similar in nature to the recent new zoning in New York City.

What might be covered?

- Maximum store front width on Yonge Street, at least for a significant fraction of any new or enhanced buildings.
- Minimum store window exposure along Yonge Street, with both minimum vertical and horizontal dimensions of required store windows.
- Minimum percentage of retail space that can accommodate restaurants or bars, specifically with kitchen ventilation services in place.

The logic behind these suggested rules is simple. Relatively narrow store fronts invite the eye and the pedestrian to advance along the street. They're an important element in an animated street. Big windows on stores encourage merchants to animate the street with window displays that engage the eye. They are also important in animating the street. The third rule is aimed at preserving Yonge Street as an attractive home for restaurants. Today, it's relatively easy to add kitchen ventilation to an existing low-rise building, but it could be very difficult to retrofit such ventilation to a new tall building.

In addition these basic design rules, financial incentives should be put in place to encourage retail innovation, at least until Yonge Street acquires a distinctive enough

character to be recognized as a “pedestrian destination retail” location. The retail industry, certainly in North America, has recognized the importance of “destination retail” - typically the big box stores that anchor shopping centres. The automobile is the primary way to reach such destination retail locations.

Yonge Street isn't going to draw automobile traffic to its retail outlets, certainly not in significant numbers. Parking is already difficult and expensive, ... and it's only going to get worse. But Yonge Street draws pedestrians, an increasing number of whom are local residents. It can, and should, become another of the important pedestrian destination retail locations in Toronto. But it's unlikely to happen unless special financial provisions are made to encourage and support retail innovation along the street.

Two “modest” requirements would encourage the kind of retail innovation that Yonge Street needs:

- Require that some percentage of new or enhanced retail be reserved for start-up or new retail ventures. This could take several forms. These special retail outlets could be located along laneways, or on other than the ground floor, or in a special kiosk retail area. The idea would be to allow the launch of a new retail idea at significantly lower start-up costs than directly along (prime) Yonge Street.
- Require that the rent (and taxes) for new or enhanced retail along Yonge Street be maintained at levels that pre-date those developments, at least for some minimum number of years. In effect, this would stipulate that retail not be required, at least initially, to shoulder the fully loaded cost of the new or enhanced space. It's really a balancing act. The sites are attractive, mainly for condos, because Yonge Street is such an important pedestrian and public transit corridor. Part of the cost of developing along the street should be to maintain the conditions which would protect the status of Yonge Street as a pedestrian corridor. The retail space in a condo should be seen as adding value to the condo, not as a means of covering significant development costs.

The “Five Thieves” at Summerhill is already a downtown pedestrian destination retail location on Yonge, somewhat north of “our” section of the street. Kensington Market offers a different, but vibrant downtown pedestrian destination retail location. Somewhat further afield, Bloor West Village is a strong neighbourhood pedestrian destination retail location. And Bloor-Yorkville is another, albeit high-end downtown pedestrian destination retail location. There is no dearth of such locations in Toronto. But Yonge Street, at least between College and Bloor, has not developed the kind of identity required to become a pedestrian destination retail location. Given exploding real estate values, and corresponding increases in rents and taxes, Yonge Street may never become such a location, at least not without some strong support from new and innovative Special Character Zoning Requirements.

V. Necessary Limits

The key limit that needs to be put in place is a limit on the height of new buildings allowed along the street. As a general rule, when a new building steps back from the Yonge Street property line no more than 10 meters, it should not be allowed to rise more than 50 meters above the podium (which should itself be limited to 3 storeys or 14 meters). For buildings that step back further from the Yonge Street property line, the allowed height could increase.

The height of new buildings should be limited to $5 \times \text{step back}$, plus the allowed 14 meter height of the podium. This would effectively put a 20 storey cap on buildings that step back only 10 meters, and a 35 storey cap on buildings that step back 20 meters. The goal would be to provide enough height to make some new development possible, but limit height to levels that would respect pedestrians and neighbours.

In addition, we believe it important to respect the immediate residential neighbours of any new buildings along the street. There should be a minimum horizontal separation between new buildings and the windows of any existing residential units. It's just not right to put a new building only a few (horizontal) meters from the windows of existing residential units. The city already recognizes the importance of 25 meter separation between residential towers, significantly to separate residents of different towers.

A similar horizontal separation would be appropriate between existing residential windows and new buildings, perhaps reduced to a fraction of that ideal 25 meters. We believe there should be at least a 12.5 meter horizontal separation between existing residential windows and new buildings. This would actually require a set back of 6.25 meters on either side of the logical line separating the old from the new. That line would be the property line if the two properties were immediately adjacent or the centre of any laneway separating the two properties.

Progress of Our Vision

This vision has made significant headway. The neighbourhood associations on both sides of (this stretch of) Yonge Street have endorsed the vision, and it has appeared with very few alterations in the draft *North Downtown Yonge Street Planning Framework*. It was one of the factors which led a panel of experts who were charged with a design review of the building proposed for outside my window to conclude that a redesign was required. The dust has not settled and the Ontario Municipal Board has not spoken, but the signs all point to a distinctly better building outside my window. And Toronto is closer to establishing a precedent that moves Yonge Street in the right direction.

The process has taken more than a year and it's not finished yet. Troubling is that getting this far required a considerable amount of dedicated work. Fortunately, there are several of us who are retired or semi-retired. We have the time to attend meetings and

draft position papers. But the process ought not to depend on unpaid volunteers. Even if the resources were not available to mount a full Charrette, that's hardly the only social intervention instrument that could be used.

The Planning Process

I find Open Space Technology attractive (Harrison Owen provides a useful overview at: http://www.openspaceworld.com/users_guide.htm). An open invitation could go out to all of the stakeholders to attend a two-day Open Space Technology conference devoted to developing a vision for an area of the city. There would be no agenda for the conference, only a call to participate in an open discussion. The conference would begin with the participants deciding what topics to consider, tempered by a requirement that the proposer of a topic must commit to a written report on the resulting discussion. At the end of two days, a Vision would emerge, backed by the written reports of all the discussion that took place during the two days.

Open Space Technology has demonstrated that it can work in thousands of examples throughout the world. Groups as small as a dozen or larger than one thousand have successfully undertaken an Open Space Technology conference. There is, however, one critical pre-condition. The sponsors must be prepared to accept whatever emerges from the conference. This is different from Charrettes which have the "virtue" that planners and architects are in control. There is on-going feedback to the Charrette participants, but the "experts" are the ones doing the feeding. Open Space Technology conferences are driven by the passion and commitment of those who choose to participate. The "experts" are not in control.

This isn't an argument for an Open Space Technology conference *per se*. It is an argument that we need to find alternatives to traditional planning. I find strong parallels with the planning process for systems (where I worked before retirement). Traditionally, systems were planned by experts (system analysts) developing extensive requirements and specifications. These plans would be signed off by the users. The programmers would proceed to build a system meeting those requirements and specifications. All too often the result was a much less than optimal.

What often happened was that the system would meet The Uncertainty Principle for Systems (I first used the term in 1998. <http://fabian.ca/modest/modest.html>: "It is impossible to know both the changes a new system will bring and the functions the system needs to perform.") What's required is an iterative, incremental approach. As the stakeholders begin to see the emerging system, they develop a much better understanding of what the system should do, and how it should be done. The same dynamic seems to be at work in urban planning.

Actually, it's worse in urban planning. The stakeholders often can't really understand

what should be in the plan before they see what's being proposed for the plan. That's a central element in the justification for a traditional Charrette. There is a growing body of social science work that examines alternative interactive, iterative development approaches (*The Change Handbook*, Holman & Devane, Berrett-Koehler, 1999). Open Space Technology isn't the only alternative, but it does seem particularly appropriate to the urban planning process, and specifically to the process of developing a vision for an area of the city.

Getting the plan right is challenging, but uncertainty is still present. Our built forms need flexibility so that adjustments can be made in practice. Stewart Brand provided very useful insight into this necessary change process in his *How Building Learn* (Penguin, 1995). One of my concerns is that the engineering and the ownership structure of our new condo towers will make “learning” extremely difficult. We have found creative ways to re-purpose many older buildings. Will our successors be able to find creative ways to re-purpose our new condo towers? That's far from clear.

It was May of 2011 that my learning process began – that's when the developer announced his intention to put up the condo towers outside my window. I've come a considerable distance. I almost understand how planning works, and doesn't work, in downtown Toronto. And I can see echos of my handiwork in the planning that others are doing for my part of Toronto. It's a start.

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