

John Sewell: The Impact of York Square in Toronto
(Beginnings of Post-Modernism in Toronto)

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Architectural Conservancy Toronto, four lectures "Toronto Modern to Post-modern: already at risk"

When York Square was completed in 1969, it was lauded by Progressive Architect, the most important American based magazine for architects in its September 1969 issue.

SLIDE photo

The eight page article began "The first urban development to be designed in the new aesthetic idiom proves that bulldozer levelling is not the only means to popular or financial success."

The magazine said the development was an example of 'urban evolution over urban revolution' which says a great deal about how development occurred in North American cities, finally giving some legitimacy to the arguments made by Jane Jacobs in her book 'Death of Life of Great American Cities, published 18 years earlier. The article cites Jane and quotes her praise for York Square. It also quotes Jack Diamond, of the Diamond and Myers firm which designed York Square: "What is new today is old tomorrow; therefore working with the old is perhaps the single most important aspect of design in cities."

SLIDE elevation

I asked Jack how he got this job. After studying with Louis Khan in United States, he came to Canada in the early 1960s and taught at University of Toronto architecture school. In 1966 he was approached by Bill Withrow, then the executive director for the Art Gallery of Toronto - now Art Gallery of Ontario - and was asked to co-ordinate an exhibit with Arnold Rockman called 'The New City' as a way to celebrate the Canadian centennial in 1967. In today's terms the exhibit seems old-fashioned: it has a section on transportation with a futuristic car designed like a jet plane; a child asking the question 'Mommy, where can I play'; stuff about air pollution including a drawing by Joyce Weiland; a panel saying 'I can't get to work in time;' and so forth.

Bill Withrow justified the exhibit in the gallery this way. "The city is traditionally the most important and potentially the greatest work of art created by man and is therefore the proper concern of an art museum."

It was accompanied by a special issue of Canadian Architect with articles by Hans Blumenfeld (advocating a balanced transportation system, that is, including the Spadina expressway), John Rich on social changes that will surely happen although we don't know what they will be, architect Alex Murray, and Charles Tilly. The lead article is by artist Harold Town concluding as only Harold Town could: "The car is a virus carrying a disease that all urban complexes must find a serum for, not a sermon. The time to inoculate is now."

Jack Diamond's article, to my mind, was set at such a high theoretical plane that I am not sure what he was really talking about. It gives no clue that he might be thinking about something such as York Square, nor does the exhibit itself. He made one statement about the exhibit that is of interest: "The most practical problem to be solved in urban design today is how to make public good and private gain collide." It remains a concern today, and is something which Jack has addressed frequently in his illustrious career.

SLIDE drawing with courtyard

The exhibit made a splash, and Jack says he was then asked to join the famous Parkin architecture firm. He says he went to the firm's Christmas party in 1967 and said he would not take up the offer, much as he wanted useful work. He told his wife he would be more interested in selling socks in Eatons than joining the firm.

While the exhibit provides no hint at a York Square, it did get him introduced Bette Stephenson, a friend of Bill Withrow. Ms Stephenson was then the Ontario Minister of Health in the government of John Robarts and she asked Jack and his firm to design a health clinic on North York. He did, and had it costed out by Buster Vermuellen, a person who did the financial estimates for the firm's work for many years. Jack thought the costs too high, and told Ms Stephenson she should not proceed with the project since it was not cost-effective.

Bette Stephenson was so impressed with this responsible approach that when she was chatting with her friend I.R. Wookey, and he mentioned he needed an architect to help with a small assembly he had purchased on Yorkville Avenue, she mentioned Diamond and Myers. York Square was

the result, and it was successful as was Hazelton Lanes, the Wookey development to the north.

SLIDE photo with Hazelton lanes

It is fair to say that many architects would not disagree with Bill Withrow's statement that the city is the most important work of art created by humans. They think their job is to add to that, particularly by doing a stunning building of their own. Of course that meant clearing away a space for the new structure, and then often clearing away space around the new structure so that the world could admire what they had designed. That was one principle of modern architecture: clear away the present to make way for the future.

Another principle had to do with illusion. Modern architecture pretended that what was built was as light as a feather and that whatever weight the structure possessed was unrelated to the ground. It also pretended that the structure did not contain space but transcended it. These were principles quite at odds with classical architecture where it was clear that the walls transferred the weight to the ground, and where space was contained.

York Square challenged these ideas of modernism. First, it took advantage of the existing structures and used them as building blocks rather clearing them away. Second, the development never tried to pretend the structure was anything but heavy. Third, it emphasized the sense of containing space with the interior courtyard.

SLIDE photo of courtyard

Criticism of modern architecture was not new to Toronto, even if it was not so clearly expressed as in York Square. I remember my very first venture of concern about how things were built in the city. I was an articling law student in 1964 and I had discovered the Bank of Toronto building at Bay and King Streets.

SLIDE Bank of Toronto

It was an elegant structure of three stories with Corinthian pillars marching along both main streets; inside was a skylight over the banking hall, impressive marble of various hues, plus iron grillwork expertly done. It was a treasure.

Just as I discovered it, I realized the TD Centre was being built. That development cleared away almost an entire city block of buildings, and it seemed as though it would also clear away the Bank of Toronto. I wrote to

the development company asking that the building be retained, and received a reply that it couldn't be retained because it didn't fit in with the plans for the new project.

SLIDE TD Centre

I learned my first lesson about modern architecture: it had no respect for what was there already, it required everything be cleared away.

A few years later the modernist plan for half a dozen city blocks west of Spadina and south of Dundas was revealed. This was an area the city thought needed to be improved, and the city had learned with Regent Park that the only way to improve a neighbourhood was to demolish it and start over.

SLIDE old street pattern AP

That's what was proposed here: tearing down the houses, getting rid of the grid of streets, and starting over.

SLIDE new plan for AP

Here's the new plan for the area which of course was given a new name, Alexandra Park. Residents in the area fought the plans, but the city didn't want to listen. City councillors and city staff knew the modernists were right. And the new development proceeded once the old could be cleared away.

The next urban renewal area on the city's list was Don Mount, just east of the Don River between Queen and Dundas, and the story was the same: to improve the neighbourhood the city had to first destroy it – it was exactly the same strategy the United States was using at the same time in Vietnam in order to make Vietnam better. Residents in Don Mount fought long and hard, including going to the courts to try to stop this modern inanity, but ultimately were unsuccessful and the community was destroyed.

I was heavily involved in the Don Mount battle and in the next urban renewal project, Trefann Court. The city wanted to destroy Trefann Court to improve it and add it to Regent Park, which was immediately north across Shuter Street.

SLIDE trefann as it was and city plan

People knew South Regent, across the street. They saw the four towers that Peter Dickinson had designed and set so they faced north and south rather

than aligning with the street grid in the area – a modernist trick about purity which made no sense.

SLIDE Regent tower

They thought the buildings hideously wrong – not only because of the little box with the hammer between balconies in case of fire, but also because so many families with young children were forced to live in those high rises instead of in houses with front and back yards. They laughed at the modernist vision on the cover of the 1955 study recommending that the Regent community be destroyed.

SLIDE cover of South Regent report

Those in Trefann would have none of it. Without knowing it, they had reached the same conclusion as Diamond and Myers that demolishing the old to make way for the new was wrong. It was a battle which was not won until 1970 when the city agreed to work with the residents to create a plan that was acceptable – one which kept the good, improved the parts needing repair, and replacing the stuff which could not be saved.

SLIDE the trefann plan

That victory confirmed the importance of York Square as a way to make the city a better place.

There were other signs that the modern era was coming to an end in the central city. Many neighbourhoods were fighting plans to tear down blocks of good housing and replace them with high rise apartments. Diamond and Myers produced a drawing of what seemed to be the vision of city planners to modernize the whole east side of the central area.

SLIDE diamond vision

The gray area in that drawing was an area where a high rise plan was under dispute. This was the corner of Dundas and Sherbourne Streets, the centre of the community where single men gathered to rent rooms, or even live in the open. The city ran a men's hostel on George Street two blocks west, the Salvation Army ran one a block south. It was a desolate and raw part of the city. The priest in the Anglican Church on the south east corner of this intersection expressed a sentiment which many shared: he was British, arriving in Canada after the second world war, and he said he thought the area should be bombed into oblivion like parts of London so the city could start over and solve the social problems here.

I had a slightly different approach. I had moved into this area in 1968 and I had begun to hold meetings of these single men and began to understand they needed secure and affordable housing as a first step. A developer proposed demolishing all but the two most northerly houses on the east side of Sherbourne, as well as half a dozen houses on Dundas, to make way for two 25 storey apartment towers. This was a direct threat to the men I was working with since they would lose two or three dozen large rooming houses. We decided to fight the rezoning for the apartment towers. That fight happened in the latter part of 1971 and the first part of 1972. City Council had no interest in standing in the way of the developer, and the project was approved. We appealed Council's decision to the OMB.

I had another interest in the site: it contained some extraordinary buildings of important heritage value – in fact it had houses built in every decade from 1840 to 1900 – and protecting historical buildings was something I cared about. That concern had meant I ran into Douglas and Susan Richardson who were active in heritage preservation – it was with Douglas that I introduced the idea of listing buildings as the easy way to protect them pending the expense of designation. Our conversation led to the idea that we should try to find an alternative development pattern for this site, one that protected the buildings, which is how I began working with Diamond and Myers.

SLIDE early sketch Dundas sherbourne

Diamond and Myers showed how the buildings could be almost entirely protected, and a new building could be built in the backyards of some of the houses. This would mean the living space in the area could be significantly increased, providing at least as much housing as in two 25 storey towers without endangering many existing structures. It was an elegant solution. We presented that idea to the OMB. The developer showed no interest. But the OMB must have sensed something was in the air: it found a reason to refuse the rezoning, and sent the matter back to City Council for reconsideration.

A month later the 1972 municipal election was held and the reform council, with David Crombie as mayor, was elected. Before the new council could consider the OMB decision. The developer made a decision to move ahead with demolition. This led to a serious confrontation and in April 1973 the site was purchased by City Council to become an affordable housing development. It was a pretty odd turn of events, since City Council did not have a housing department, and did not have a housing program of any kind, but this dispute crystallized the issue. The result was that City

Council decided to build the Diamond and Myers plan as its first affordable housing project.

SLIDE Dundas sherbourne final drawing

SLIDE Dundas sherbourne photo

As a city council with this project we established the principle that the city need not require clearance in order to create useful change. The past and present would not be cleared away as the modernists demanded, but it would be used as the basis of the way forward.

Diamond and Myers had basically created a new way of looking at development – infill instead of clearance. Jack Diamond says that he had his students looking at these kind of possibilities in the late 1960s. He said he asked city planners what their worst challenge was, and they said it was the plan for Toronto Hydro to build a new transformer station to serve the western part of the downtown. Hydro had purchased a block bounded by Baldwin, Beverley, Cecil and Henry Streets for the transformer, and proposed a structure some 18 stories high. Diamond and the students proposed intensification, apparently forgetting about the transformer.

In 1971, London Life, a large insurance company, ran a series of television specials on housing in the city, and Diamond and Myers was contacted. The result was a 1971 program on CTV on the infill housing, including a proposal for this so-called Hydro block. Sadly, I have been unable to locate a tape of this program: CTV archive says the tape is noted in its library, but the spot on the shelf where it should be is empty with no forwarding information. I have just one image of what is proposed but it is pretty clear about what should be done.

SLIDE hydro block design

Happily, the new city council did not stop at the Dundas Sherbourne development. It agreed to buy the Hydro block and do a development there. Diamond and Myers were again the architects, and the plan adopted varied considerably from the London Life image.

SLIDE of new plan

SLIDE of Henry Street

The housing on Henry Street was thought to be in very poor repair, and it was replaced with stacked town houses which meant the number of housing units in the block was increased substantially.

SLIDE of interior

SLIDE of Beverley Street

What is interesting about this new direction is not just the physical results, but the nature of decisions. Modernism was often the product of a Great Man such as Le Corbusier or Peter Dickinson or whoever – just as today many seem to think the important structures which are built only come from the minds of Frank Gehry or Rem Koolhaas or whoever. But in the 1970s in Toronto, the results were most often the result of a committee of local residents working with an architectural firm. There was a significant distrust of architects with a big vision and the best way to ensure they did not hold sway was to require that the architect work with a committee. Some architects found this offensive. I remember Irving Grossman complaining about principles established by the committee which drove the plan for St. Lawrence: “No one ever told me before what colour of brick I had to use” he complained. And it was true: there were new rules about things were done in Toronto. The modernist era was over.

City Council carried this same approach over to private redevelopment. We had all seen what had happened to the St. Jamestown neighbourhood:

SLIDE St Jamestown before destruction

the old was swept away to be replaced by the new – large apartment towers set in a sea of open space and no public roadways.

St. Jamestown built

We wanted to ensure that did not continue. The new city council addressed this concern within the first few months of its existence. In February 1973 motions were introduced into Council to actually repeal bylaws which permitted clearance and new structures. Of course councillors were told that it was illegal to repeal rezoning bylaws, then they were told they would be sued for doing so, but the members of city council who felt they had been elected by communities, not developers, proceeded anyway. The chosen site for tackling the development industry was in the west end, just north of High Park, The former city council had approved a plan which demolished about 100 houses, sold the public street to the developer, and permitted four apartment towers of 30 stories or more plus two dozen town houses.

SLIDE Quebec gothic before rezoning

SLIDE Quebec gothic plan

The motion to repeal these bylaws carried city council, which was followed by several months of silence, after which the developer wondered if there

could be some discussions about what should happen next. Indeed there was. A committee of neighbours was established to work with the developer and city planners, and a new plan was created. It kept the public road, Gothic Avenue; it kept almost all the houses on Gothic Avenue as private residences, and it permitted three modest apartment structures close to Quebec Avenue. Building on the past was much more intelligent – and attractive to Toronto residents – than demolishing everything and starting over.

SLIDE Quebec gothic final

This process happened again, a few months later. Council threatened to repeal the bylaw permitting several thirty story towers on the Windlass site, on the east side of McCaul across the street from the Art Gallery of Ontario, and a new mid-rise development was negotiated known as Village by the Grange.

Let me refer to two other examples of the change in approach following the 1972 city council election. One was the design of the new community which became known as the St. Lawrence neighbourhood. I have already noted that City Council was eager to build new affordable housing. Pierre Elliot Trudeau had not achieved a majority in the 1972 election, and he turned to David Lewis of the NDP for support. Lewis said he needed to enact a new affordable housing program to guarantee that support, a program that followed the lines of what was recommended in a new book by Susan Fish and Michael Dennis – they had authored a book critical of public housing, and asking for an affordable housing program with a mix of incomes. With pressure from David Lewis, a housing program was put in place by Trudeau.

Mayor Crombie hired Fish and Dennis as his assistants in early 1973, and that made the city's housing initiative a reality. We wanted to do something significant, and by early 1974 council agreed to buy 45 acres of desolate and abandoned land south of Front Street, from Yonge to Parliament Street. Of course, we struck a committee to guide the plan and the development process. The planner retained was Alan Littlewood, and on the advice of Jane Jacobs he put forward a plan based on the elements of successful Toronto neighbourhoods.

SLIDE st lawrence blocks

It was called a block plan since the first thing that happened was that the site was broken into blocks by introducing public streets. Nearby streets were extended into the site so it was knit into the city. This was entirely

different from the Regent Park plan – where there were no through streets, or Alexandra Park and other urban renewal plans – and fundamentally different from the suburbs, where a discontinuous series of curvy streets confounded good development and reasonable urban outcomes. St. Lawrence replicated the surrounding street pattern to knit the new with the old.

Development forms in St. Lawrence mimicked what was around the site – nothing was over eight or nine stories – and red brick was used extensively so this appeared to be a continuation of the city. All the streets were public, with public services; doors always faced on to streets with street addresses. Virtually every building had lower income people living there mixed with middle income families. We experimented by trying to do nothing new.

It was the largest downtown redevelopment in North America in 20th century, and to that extent it was miles away from York Square, except that its essence shared the same values – respect for what was already there. In spite of the great success of St. Lawrence, when the planners and the housing department came to the redevelopment of Regent Park – a site almost twice as large - they and city council paid no attention to that success, and they refused to replicate any of the principles which underlay St. Lawrence.

The other example of the rejection of the modernist aesthetic came with the creation of the Central Area Plan. This plan began in 1973 with the passing of the 45 foot Holding Bylaw to prevent the approval of development which would frustrate the replanning of the downtown.

Replanning a downtown was not something which had happened before in North America. It involved thinking about very serious issues: how much office space should there be? What were the transportation modes? Should there be housing in the downtown? What should happen to the structures already there? And inevitably, what kinds of buildings and uses should be permitted?

Until the Central Area Plan, the assumption was that modernist projects should be encouraged – clearance, followed by the construction of big towers located on barren plazas, such as TD Centre and Commerce Court. But just as those ideas were being challenged elsewhere in the city, they were challenged in the Central Area. Architect George Baird played a critical role. He was commissioned by city staff – and by the Core Area

Task Force, the citizen body which gave directions to city staff on the Plan – to think about design issues.

SLIDE on building downtown

His report was called On Building Downtown. It made recommendations on all the serious issues: sun and shade; wind; noise, air pollution, water issues, the street grid and the relation of buildings to it; retaining existing structures of heritage value, and public views. In a word, the modernist architect asking to have a free hand in designing a work of art was no longer welcome in Toronto. The day of the modern architect was over in this city. Baird tolled the death knell of that approach.

In Toronto, York Square was the first project which embodied a different vision.

SLIDE york square

SLIDE york square

It proposed something which was after the modern, hence the idea of post-modern. But post-modern no longer rings true because in architectural terms it carried baggage about a return to decoration on a building. York Square said that the past had to be respected, and that was not something which modernism was willing to do. That was the significant change with this modest development, and it was picked up and quickly became the aesthetic of the reform era of city politics in Toronto in the 1970s. I believe it is what established the character of the present city, a character that as we know is now under attack.

And there is no better example of what that attack is than the current proposal for York Square.

SLIDE current proposal for York square

It might be titled Death from Above. The sketch catches quite clearly the loud squishing sound of a development scheme which shows no respect for the past. Once again the circle turns. It is time once again to put on our armour in the name of being reasonable about paying attention to where we have come from.