

ACO Toronto 2019 Symposium

DISAPPEARING MAIN STREETS: BUILDINGS AND BUSINESSES

Summary Report, May 2019





A Brief Summary of Symposium Proceedings

May 2019

On April 6, 2019, over two hundred people – architects, planners, designers, small business advocates, students, and members of the heritage community – gathered for ACO Toronto’s Annual Symposium. Hosted at the Grosvenor Street YMCA, the venue’s proximity to Toronto’s Yonge Street brought new relevance to the symposium’s theme, Toronto’s Disappearing Main Streets: Buildings and Businesses. Three sessions discussing the Background, Current Context, and Interventions and Responses formed the structure of the event. Each session followed a basic format: individual speakers gave “short and sweet” 15-minute presentations summarizing their positions. The session then concluded with a moderated panel discussion in which dominant themes and tensions were addressed.

Beyond speaker sessions, two film projects – a set of footage gathered in the late 1980s by filmmaker Bay Wayman, and a 2016 documentary entitled “The World in Ten Blocks” – offered glimpses of our constantly shifting city, and of the streets, buildings, businesses, and people that make it vibrant.

Among the crowd were three volunteers; Emily Cheng, Abraham Plunkett-Latimer, and Candace Safonovs, each contributed summaries of the proceedings in order to produce this record of the event. What follows is an adapted version of these initial records. Compiled and edited by Alison Creba with support from Penina Coopersmith. Document design is by Stephanie Mah.

Panel I: Background

What are we talking about when we are talking about Toronto's main streets?

Where and what are they? What characteristics unite and distinguish them? In establishing the background for this conversation, the panelists of this first session sought to extrapolate the inherent qualities of main streets in order to articulate some possible strategies for protecting them.

In Catherine Nasmith's presentation, "Main Streets as an Old-Growth Forest," she argued that historic main streets should be treated with the same care, protection, and consideration as old-growth forests. Main streets, like old-growth forests, evolve over long periods of time and are continuously reshaped. What makes main streets precious is their "diverse ecosystem" of public space and independent retailers. Nasmith warned of "invasive species" threatening the survival of main streets, including tax policies, rent increases, and the loss of fine-grain property ownership through land amalgamation which often lead to condominium developments and corporate retail anchors.

Main Street as Old Growth Forest uses analogies from the environmental, conservation and ecology movements to describe the value of our rapidly disappearing Main Streets with regard to their types, states, complexity, diversity, and other attributes.

Main Streets that are still the retail core of their communities (steady state) are compared to those in decline or rehabilitated through preservation.



Catherine Nasmith is a practicing architect; president of the ACO Toronto Branch; Jane Jacobs prize winner (2010) and publisher of Built Heritage News. She has been observing Main Streets since the 1980's.

Above: A slide from Nasmith's presentation, explaining her Old Growth approach.

Julian Smith's presentation, "Main Streets as Cultural Landscapes," examined the characteristics of main streets as cultural heritage landscapes as they are defined under the Provincial Policy Statement, with emphasis on their intangible aspects such as ritual and experience. Using his innovative work on Ottawa's Byward Market, Smith argued that understanding how a space is experienced by diverse user groups (e.g., tourists, students, vehicles, and farmers) is critical to the success of urban design. Citing the work of Jane Jacobs and Rachel Carson, Smith advocated for representation of diverse voices when conducting cultural landscape studies. Challenging restrictive design guidelines, Smith suggested instead that proposed changes be integrated by retaining the scale of existing retail at grade. Understanding that public engagement is moderated and motivated by multiple factors, he suggested that retaining a proportional physical framework will discourage a utopian monoculture typical in heritage districts and instead, encourage natural cultural evolution.

Covering the period from the end of the 19th century to present day, **John Lorinc's presentation, "Evolution of Retail: From Streetcar Suburbs to Strip Malls,"** examined how transportation shaped Toronto's urban form. Chronicling the evolution of Toronto's St. Clair West streetcar line, Lorinc pointed out that mass transportation predated both residential and commercial growth. Laying tracks long before it was necessary, the streetcar has proven to be beneficial for main streets as it promotes efficient and compact density. Delaying the need for individual vehicles, streetcar and pedestrian traffic sustained diverse retailers along the street. Generous sidewalks, shorter blocks, retail on both sides of the street, and a typology of buildings with retail at grade, apartments above, and rear alley access all support successful main streets. Lorinc drew parallels between older streetcar-based main streets and contemporary strip malls, both of which offer affordable spaces for independent business owners today.



Above: Smith's examples of three maps of Byward Market demonstrate how different values are represented by different communities.

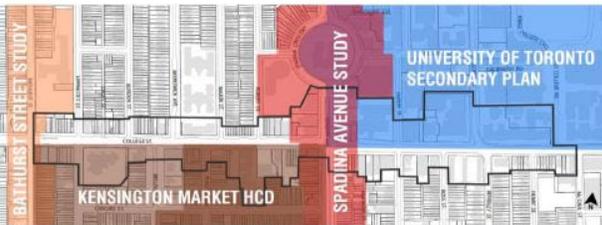


Above: Image from Lorinc's presentation depicting St Clair West, looking west towards Oakwood (then Ossington), c. 1911.

Urban Design Guidelines: College Street Listing on the City's Heritage Register



Map of the Study Area



Map of Concurrent Studies near the Study Area



Above: Slide from Anson-Cartwright's presentation.

Tamara Anson-Cartwright's "Main Streets: City Planning's Approach and Tools for Identifying Heritage," provided a review of the discourse on main streets within the heritage sector, and the City Planning Department's current efforts to identify and protect them. Recognizing that notions of architectural value have shifted through time, the City's current methodology consists of identifying landmark buildings, examining avenues and character areas through field observations, and utilizing the Official Plan's "tools to identify heritage." Anson-Cartwright offered brief summaries of recent main street studies, including those for Eglinton Avenue, Danforth Avenue, Bloor Street West, West Queen West, Cabbagetown, Riverdale, and College Street. Also discussed was a proposal to modernize the City's Heritage Register, the implementation of pilot projects, and changes to tax-rebate incentive programs for heritage building owners.

Following individual presentations, a **panel discussion facilitated by Penina Coopersmith** addressed the concept of change on main streets. Though the panelists each represented different viewpoints, it was agreed that main streets go through cycles of use, and that existing fine-grain buildings can accommodate contemporary uses through flexible and creative interpretations. The panel critically addressed restrictive legislation and policies, and suggested that much can be learned from looking at examples of successful conservation efforts elsewhere. Precedents in New Brunswick, Portland, Seattle, and Hamilton were mentioned. Perhaps one of the most salient comments came from Julian Smith who proposed inverting premise of Heritage Impact Assessments (HIAs). Instead of articulating how heritage assets will be impacted by proposed developments, he suggested that developers should be required to "prove that their plans will make the city will be a better place." Reframing the relationship between past and future use of space, this proposal received audience applause and invigorated the event with a critical and aspirational tone which carried through subsequent sessions.

Panel II: The Current Context

What factors affect the viability of Toronto's main streets today, and what can we do about them? Each of this session's four panelists responded to these questions by addressing current problems and potential solutions. The key issues raised had to do with the impact of new development on existing commercial main streets; strategies for preserving the streets' social and economic vitality; and the challenge online shopping is posing to traditional bricks-and-mortar operations.

In his presentation “**Urban Taxidermy**”, **Robert Allsopp**, Partner at DTAH, contended that the current practice of preserving the first thirty feet of commercial buildings while allowing condominium towers to be built behind and above them greatly hampers their ability to function as social and economic centres in their neighbourhoods. This practice, which he calls “urban taxidermy” hollows out the three-storey buildings leaving only remnants of ground-level retail space. Whereas multiple businesses previously occupied a stretch of sidewalk frontage, the new, shallow floor plates promote a single retailer to use of the entire street-level space. Allsopp joked that this often results in a confusing experience for pedestrian who find former entrances closed. For Allsopp, this disrupts the synergy between businesses and the street and leaves behind a “dead” streetscape diorama that merely simulates “intrinsic social, cultural, or commercial vitality.”



Right: Illustrating the effects of urban taxidermy, Allsopp identified the obsolescence of former entranceways. The effect is a confused interpretation of the architectural form.

In her presentation “**Taxed Out: Illustrating the Impact of Tax Policy on our Main Streets,**” **Claire Nelischer** of the Ryerson City Building Institute spoke to the tensions between development and conservation by addressing the indirect impacts of the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation’s “highest and best use” process to determine a property’s value. She noted that the emergence of high-value towers on Toronto’s main streets, influences the taxes of neighbouring small businesses – which are reassessed based on their potential to be similarly developed, rather than on their current use. Nelischer’s study quantified the impact of intensification. For owners of small buildings and businesses, these conditions yield unsustainable financial burdens, often leaving little choice but to sell their properties to developers. Nelischer suggested that the qualities of main streets must be identified and supported through a tax system sympathetic to small businesses.

John Kiru, Executive Director of the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA), presented his observations on recent trends for businesses along main streets. Most notable is the impact of online shopping which has shifted main street activities away from retail uses. And while barber shops (“you can’t get a haircut online”) and restaurants provide essential services that cannot be replicated virtually, the disappearance of small-scale hardware, grocery, and other specialized shops represents a shift away from an empowered and intimate relationship between residents and local businesses. For Kiru, it is ownership that empowers small businesses to ride out economic fluctuations.



Above: Illustrating the untenable spike in property taxes which led to the demise of several main street fixtures.

Alex Spiegel's presentation on **“The Changing Retail Landscape”** offered a developer's perspective on current conditions and approaches to addressing the current situation. Spiegel used The Plant – one of Windmill Development Group's current projects – as a case study. Located on Sudbury between King and Queen Streets, the project adapts a previously industrial site for new commercial and residential use. The Plant is designed to support multiple uses while also encourage sustainable main street activity. Whereas typical condominium developments often treat the design and leasing of retail spaces as afterthoughts, at The Plant retail space is a priority. The architects designed deep commercial floor plates to ensure that storefronts would be narrow and sidewalks wide. Above the street-level retail, Plant's second floor is devoted to office space so that the building will be occupied by different people at different times of the day. In seeking tenants, the developers aim to create a unified “experience” of the space by clustering related goods and services.

Moderated by Michelle Senayah, much of the post-presentation panel discussion focused on how to manage intensification while also sustaining the quality and character of Toronto's main streets. Panelists agreed that intensification has both positive and negative impacts, and that concerted initiatives must identify and foster the qualities of main streets we collectively value. Key strategies involve creating small retail spaces and supportive regulatory environment for local businesses. Collectively, the panelists articulated the value and vibrancy of Toronto's main streets amidst the challenges they are facing. In illustrating their complexity, the panel also suggested that equally dynamic solutions – ones which integrate interdisciplinary perspectives – will be necessary to address them.



Above: Windmill development's The Plant - a project that aims to incorporate many of the principles of supporting main streets.

Panel III: Interventions & Responses

Having received background and contextual diagnoses on the issues facing Toronto's main streets, the final panel presented their interventions and responses, which aim to alleviate pressures and reinvigorate Toronto's main streets.

Founded by Daniel Rotsztain and Brendan Stewart, PlazaPOPS is a program designed to support the owners of small retail businesses in strip malls by creating public amenities in privately-owned public space (POPS) – namely, in their front parking lots. Home to many diverse businesses, strip malls are a unique commercial typology located primarily in Toronto's suburbs. Rotsztain and Stewart advocate for the potential of these spaces because, while designed for cars, the communities that use them rely on public transportation and pedestrian-scale infrastructure. In this sense, the residual parking spaces offer an opportunity to enhance both local retail and neighbourhood activities. Working with community groups, PlazaPOPS draws

CREATE A POP UP COMMUNITY GATHERING SPACE THAT:

- (1) Supports the public life of the neighbourhood with social infrastructure
- (2) Celebrates the cultural value of mom & pop retail
- (3) Demonstrates model for strip mall urbanization that supports existing small businesses in the context of change



Above: Slide from Rotsztain and Stewart's presentation.

on students of the Master of Landscape Architecture program at the University of Guelph to create a shared vision of lively spaces and co-design installations for the plazas' parking lots. The goals of the project are to support the public life of the neighbourhood with social infrastructure, celebrate the cultural value of mom and pop retail, and demonstrate a model for strip mall urbanization that supports existing small businesses in the context of change. Addressing themes of vacancy (and the perception thereof), infrastructure, and vulnerability, PlazaPOPs aims to enhance capacity for diverse activities and spaces through enhancing existing networks and relationships. The program's focus on social infrastructure and cooperation has meant that PlazaPOPs responds to the habits and lifeways of the areas in which they work.

In her presentation “**Intangible Values, Interdisciplinary Approaches,**” **Ellen Kowalchuk** communicated the importance of intangible heritage values and the felt aspects of main streets, which include the unconscious experiences of residents and visitors. A sense of place, she explained, is made of up built form (blocks, streets, open space, infrastructure), the activities that take place (practices are allowed, promoted, prohibited – all of which can change), experiences (senses, perception), and memory and meaning. Kowalchuk suggested that the intent of heritage professionals should be to create opportunities for the latter, as public space is the “scaffolding upon which we can make and create our memories.” In her opinion, it is the local communities – rather than heritage professionals – who are the experts in identifying important aspects of their space. These values are embedded in overlapping and entwined communities, and the collective knowledge they embody.



Above: What activities are allowed, promoted, created, discouraged and prohibited? Kowalchuk used paintings to illustrate how certain activities (and the restriction of others) defines places. Image: Christopher Griffin, Saturday on the Rideau, 2007.

Kim Storey of Brown and Storey Architects presented the firm’s design framework for protecting main streets. Their design strategy, **“Un-Avenues,”** introduces a new and high-density housing typology in adjacent residential areas known as “the Yellowbelt.” Suggesting that the prosperity of main streets is directly impacted by the function and form of these residential zones, the proposed architectural forms aim to alleviate the pressures on main streets by providing density and shared public space. Although Storey’s Un-Avenues architectural intervention offers many inviting elements such as green space and courtyards, the potential, for developing the Yellowbelt is limited by strict massing and zoning regulations. Storey’s Un-Avenues project considers the future residents of an area. Infill in the Yellowbelt would allow more people to live in central areas and support main streets. Storey suggests that new building forms could be the catalyst for encouraging current residents to embrace density in their neighbourhoods. Quoting Buckminster Fuller, Storey’s Un-Avenues approach adheres to the understanding that “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new mode that makes the existing model obsolete.”

Finally, **Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam’s presentation “On the tip of my Yonge,”** addressed the municipal challenges and responses of protecting her self-proclaimed favorite street in the city: Yonge Street. For her, protection is about more than just saving the bricks and mortar of heritage buildings, it is about defending the vibrancy of main streets. Responding to the 2018 Taxed Out study undertaken by Ryerson’s City Building Institute, the City convinced Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) to reassess the property tax rate of the businesses on Yonge Street by citing its designation as a heritage conservation district (HCD). This designation limits property owners’ level of allowed development, and thus their “highest and best-use” potential, which MPAC uses to set rates, and means they cannot be compared to properties outside of the HCD. However, as Wong-Tam pointed out, this is only a short-term solution. Recognizing the importance of community engagement in both heritage protection and development, Wong-Tam also acknowledged that public discourse is often dominated by a vocal few. Councillor Wong-Tam pointed out, however, that this not the only way to get your voice heard, and cited an independent report released by KPMB



Above: A scheme for “Un-Avenues” on Ossington Avenue – Storey and Brown propose a new residential typology which opens green space while increasing density.

Architects and Greenberg Consultants that charted projected changes along Yonge Street. Later used as a reference tool by City officials, this study highlighted the role for independent initiatives within municipal planning frameworks.

Moderated by Shawn Micallef, the concluding discussion collected panelist’s conceptual approaches, design solutions, and policies to address Toronto’s disappearing main streets. Invigorating these final sentiments, Micallef drew on collective themes of cooperation and engagement as a key strategy for both protecting and encouraging vibrant futures for the city’s main streets.

Yonge T0morrow EA

Special Thanks to:

- Downtown Yonge BIA
- Ryerson University
- Church-Wellesley Neighbourhood Association
- Bay Cloverhill Community Association
- KPMB Architects
- Greenberg Consultants
- Toronto City Planning
- Toronto Revenue Services
- ... and all of our stakeholders and partners!



**Kristyn
Wong-Tam**

Above: Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam advocates for community collaboration and contribution to municipal policy.

Conclusions

Through presentations, discussions, and visual documentation, the symposium explored some of the background, current context, and urban interventions available to us as we seek to articulate multiple perspectives of streets themselves. While we addressed some questions and identified themes, many more emerged.

We understand that main streets are the result of accumulating of forces. For Nasmith, they are as diverse as an old-growth forest. Smith says they are inherently messy public spaces that serve multiple communities. Lorinc described their evolution along lines of transportation, noting that they often thrive when both sides of the street are active. To successfully adapt to evolving demands, we must attend to their rhythmic patterns of use while also allowing for a full spectrum of creative expression. Main streets do not follow a single form. In downtown Toronto, fine grain patterning on a human scale offers diverse materials and services from a narrow frontage. But the vibrancy of main streets also takes place amidst strip-mall plazas in the



Above: ACO Toronto's Annual Symposium, hosted at the Grovesnor street YMCA. Photo by Shawn Micallef.

suburbs. They are relational entities defined through the interactions which take place. In Toronto, the challenges facing main streets are connected to the taxes assigned to the perceived potential of the land on which they stand. Nelischer's overview of the current tax structure demonstrated the effects of unfettered taxation for small businesses, while Allsopp illustrated the spatial implications of "urban taxidermy." While for Kiru, business ownership provides individual agency to interpret and influence space, Speigel's multidimensional model of sustainability can be addressed through the thoughtful occupation of space. Anson-Cartwright suggested that we must bridge silos of communication and modernize the frameworks used to record value. For Kowalchuk the value of main streets is observed in simple interactions which demonstrate care and respect towards neighbours.

The values of these places are distilled in community. Rotzstain and Stewart's PlazaPOPs project demonstrated a dynamic approach to looking and listening

to community members to manifest their ambitions. In contrast, Storey's Un-Avenues proposal emerged from observed stresses and an alternate framework for density and leisure. Councillor Wong-Tam encouraged us to get involved in municipal processes by participating in citizen-led initiatives to shape the city.

Cutting across these themes, numerous speakers advocated for the inclusion of diverse voices in the making and shaping of assessments of future proposals for a given cultural landscape. Taking this to heart, we conclude our reflection of the symposium by asking how we have represented Toronto's main streets. What voices were left out of our own discussion? How can future events fill these gaps? An ongoing challenge, question, and opportunity, ACO Toronto's Symposium on Disappearing Main Streets sought to contextualize longstanding issues and present new strategies for a dynamic and evolving issue. We hope this day of inquiry has motivated future actions and collaborations on the subject.