

Streetcar suburbs and the evolution of Toronto's retail strips

ACO Toronto Conference

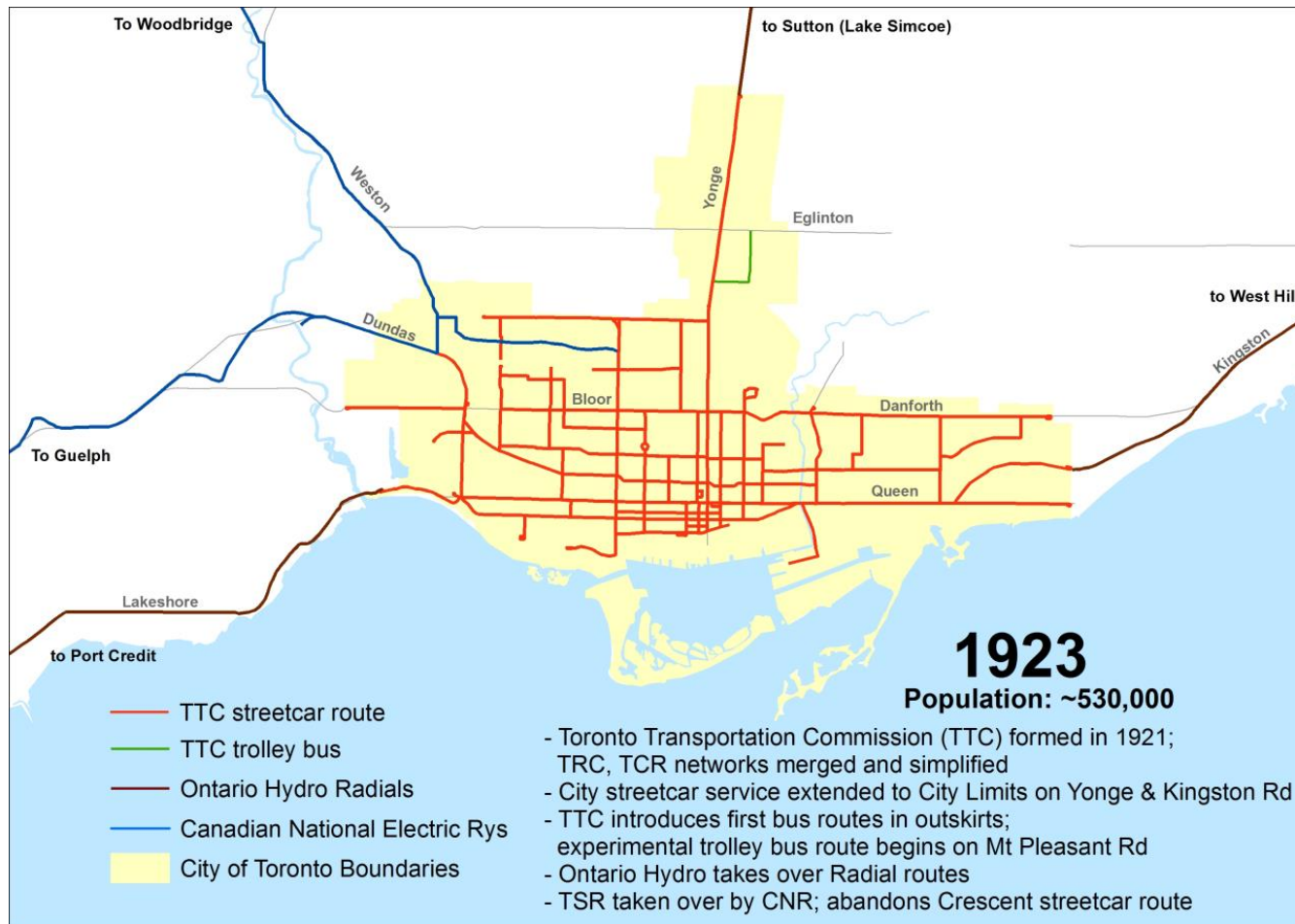
April 6, 2019

Toronto street railways 1912



Streetcar map, 1923

(courtesy Sean Marshall)



Evolution of streetcar suburbs in North America

Driven by several factors:

- Mass immigration, late 19th, early 20th centuries
- Rapid adoption of new transportation technology (electric street railways)
- Private capital (most streetcar companies were initially for-profit businesses with franchises)
- Crowding/poor housing/industrial pollution in historic core areas
- Bans on tenement-style housing (Toronto, Boston, etc.) that drove low and modest-income families

Streetcar suburbs sprung up in many North American cities

- Toronto
- Boston
- Philadelphia
- Los Angeles
- Nashville
- Vancouver
- Many others



(Familiar laments...)

“The impression of great uniformity and monotony within the streetcar suburbs was a consequence of the lack of originality in house design and street layout on the part of the developers and suburbanites.”

- David Ward, UBC geographer, 1964

The case of St. Clair West



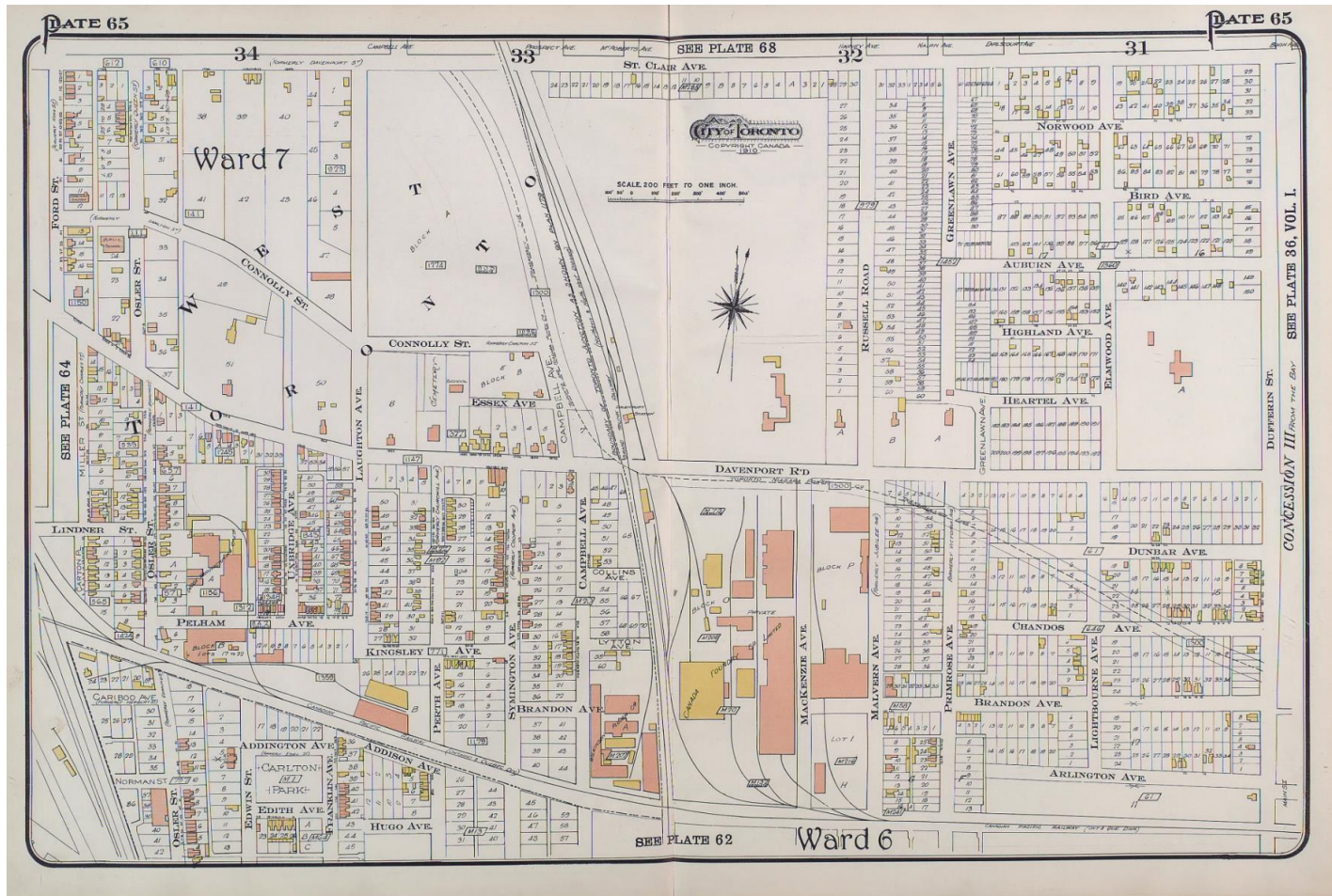
A short time line

- 1913: Toronto Civic Railway opened St Clair West streetcar from Yonge to Caledonia
- 1921: Toronto Transit Commission takes over the TCR assets
- Early 1930s: Route extended to Keele Street/stockyards
- 1930s to mid-1950s: continuous service from Bay & Queen's Quay to Avenue Rd. and west on St. Clair to Earlscourt loop

St Clair West, looking west towards Oakwood (then Ossington), c. 1911



Earlscourt (St Clair w. of Dufferin): a dramatic transformation btwn 1911....



Early St. Clair West retail (1910s)

Earlscourt Photo Studio

Citizen's Store (dry goods/hardware) and I. Lipkin Groceries



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1231, f1231_t0773



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Residential preceded commercial



Completely built out in under a generation (1927)



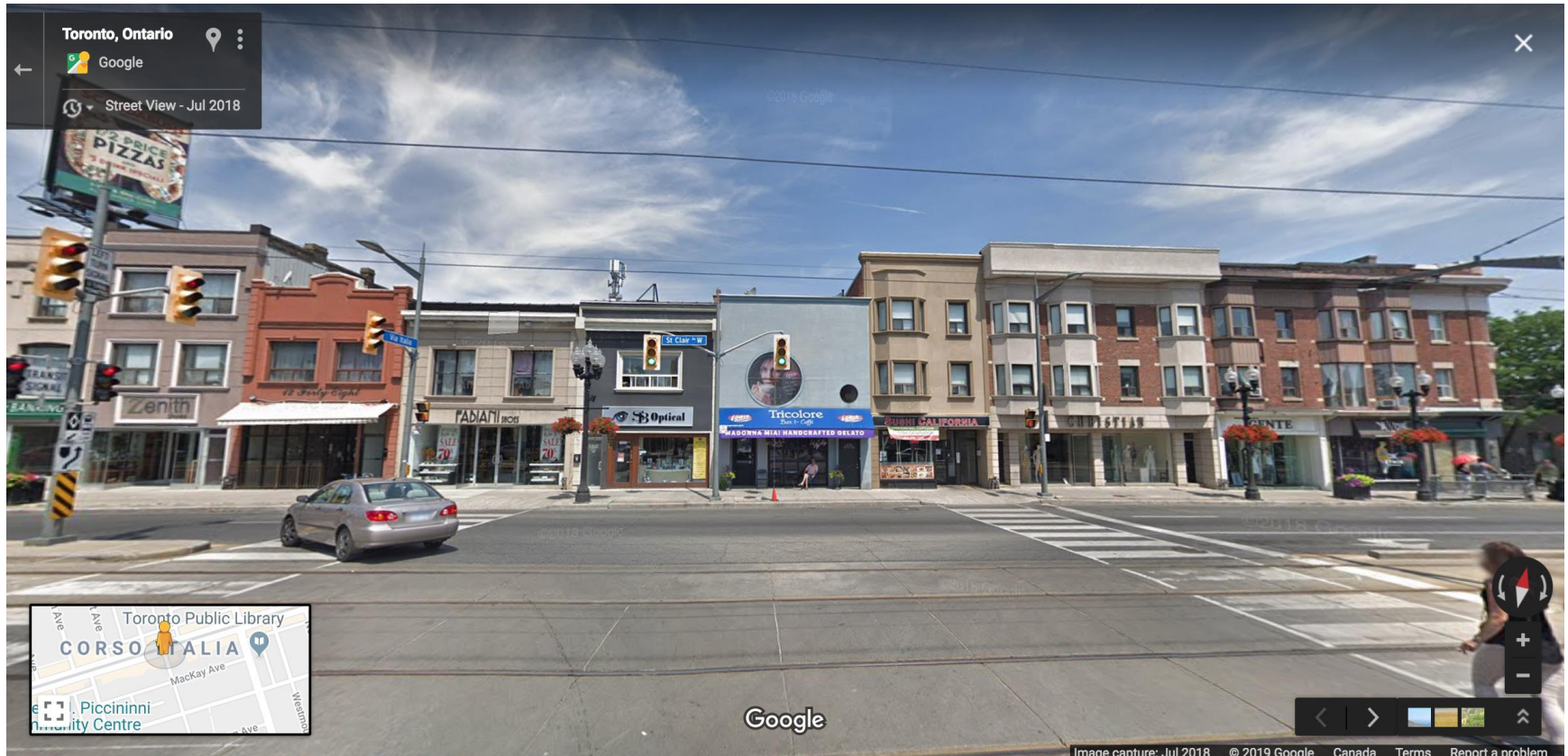
Why are streetcar suburbs so good for main street retail?

- Built to serve people without other means of transportation besides streetcars/feet/bikes
- Sufficient density
- Highly utilitarian commercial profile
- Generous sidewalks
- Short blocks (Jane Jacobs)
- Typology of apartment above store is good for business owners

Other important features

- Store space is highly flexible
- Rear service alleys (loading, etc.)
- Self-curating retail environment, like strip malls will be in our era
- Commercial spaces typically on both sides of the street
- Corner/edge treatments (low-rise apartment integrated into corner store/terrace, etc.)

Aesthetic/architecture entirely secondary to density of shops/population, pedestrian traffic



Temporary/Transitional issues

- Retail mix/empty retail spaces in bases of mid-rise buildings
- Boarded up storefronts
- Stalled development projects/vacant lots
- Demographic shifts in the neighbourhood (older families moving out/younger moving in) not yet reflected in retail mix

Queen East/Woodbine



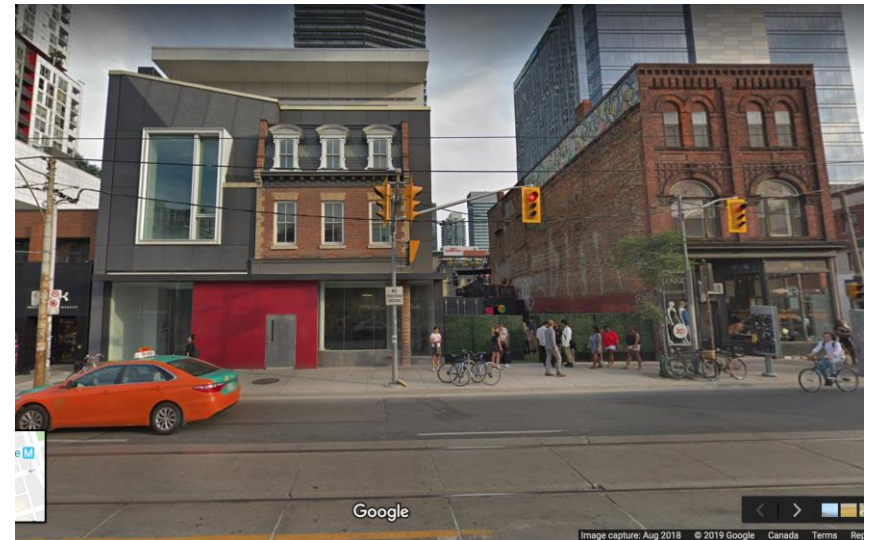
Existential threats

- Commercial property tax rates rising to market values set by mid- and high-rise redevelopment (highest/best use)
- Population decline, adjacent neighbourhoods
- Retail monocultures created by gentrification (e.g., Ossington from Queen -> Dundas)
- Outdoor `mallification' (e.g. Queen West)
- Facadism

Unintended consequences...

Big box store, with big box store construction (not flexible)

Something went very wrong....



Will HCDs help/harm?

