

ACO PANEL- 25 April 2016

URBAN TAXIDERMY and THE YONGE STREET DIORAMA -
Killing, Stuffing and Presenting Yonge Street (2 introductory images)

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Downtown Yonge Street isn't what it used to be.

We rarely walk far along the street - there's not sufficient continuity and variety of shops or the range of sensory experiences to tempt us. The high energy of street life is fast disappearing. There are not many people around. It's no place for the *flâneur*.

We do most of our specialty shopping and eating elsewhere and our chain-store shopping in Eaton Centre or in the many other interior malls, linked by the underground PATH network, that are vacuuming the life and the paying customers from Yonge Street.

The Bay/Simpsons Store is still there in full blooded conversation with the street. Dundas Square and Ryerson U have made a big difference - but their energizing effects seem locally concentrated.

The Condo invasion has hit Yonge Street - but amazingly, the hyper-densities don't seem to produce much additional public life on the Street - (perhaps the street is now too shaded and windy or maybe many of the condo dwellers are off-shore anyway).

The key ingredient of Yonge Street's success is the rows of independently operated, narrow-fronted shops and businesses that collectively support a high intensity of social and commercial activity on the street. What sustains Toronto's Mainstreet is the many comings and goings from shops, cafes, bars and so on at ground floor level and the offices showrooms and apartments on the upper floors. There is an entrance about every 10 or 12 feet along the street – allowing a

kind of life blood to flow onto the street. There's an intense synergy between the repetitive building type and the street. This is gone, or is going, or is getting stuffed.

What we are losing:

1). This example of four narrow-fronted buildings (image), just south of St. Joseph Street, is typical of the disappearing species. I count seven independent shops and business and maybe five apartments or offices on the upper floors, all accessed directly from the street. That is, twelve sets of comings and goings from 60 feet of Yonge Street frontage.

What we are getting is Urban Taxidermy:

2) As we move a little north in the same block we find four similar narrow frontages (3 images) which are combined and integrated into a much larger redevelopment that extends along St. Joseph Street. The back part of the buildings has been severed and the front half "restored".

I count one bank at ground floor level with a single entrance (corporate "double doors") and three blank (and dangerous) non-entrances. Above, with no apparent means of access, are probably apartments entered from the elevator lobby of the condo building behind - but definitely not part of the foot traffic generation of Yonge Street.

3). Next example is between Front and Wellington Streets – part of the BCE/Brookfield Place:

- The old Bank of Montreal, now the Hockey Hall of Fame (3 images) – a wonderful *Beaux Arts* pile - a grand entrance, addressing the street corner, with all the architectural trappings intended to make you feel important about making an entrance – but try it, make your way up the stairs towards the beautifully crafted bronze door-pulls to find "*Proceed to 10 Front Street for entry. Once inside take downward escalator to Admissions on the concourse level*".

- The Movenpick Marche Restaurant (3 images) further up Yonge, combines several of the old 3 and 4 storey *Edwardian* frontage buildings. Their facades are lovingly

conserved/restored, the architectural individuality of their storefronts is maintained yet their entrance doors are “*no entrance*”- they mask the market restaurant that is only accessible from the galleria.

4). The idea of preserving the front 30 feet (10 metres) depth of the narrow-fronted commercial buildings at the base of high rise development, is now enshrined in the recently completed Yonge Street Heritage Conservation District (HCD) Plan (image).

5). The final example is the redevelopment that is underway at Yorkville Avenue (2 images), which reflects the approach to heritage preservation that is adopted in the Yonge Street HCD.

The front part of the heritage buildings and their storefronts are kept and restored, the upper floors are transformed into extensions of the new condo units in the tower behind. How many of the abbreviated street-level shops will be tenanted by multiple independent retailers is unknown but my guess is its not likely that the Cook Book store or anything like it will be back and more likely banks and chain stores will combine and dominate the frontages.

So what is *Urban Taxidermy*?

I turn to Oxford English Dictionary for help; TAXIDERMY: *Art of preparing, stuffing and mounting skins of animals for lifelike effect.*

My definition of URBAN TAXIDERMY: *Art of preserving, stuffing and mounting buildings for lifelike effect; to simulate an intrinsic social, cultural or commercial vitality.*

Urban Taxidermy seems to be the most currently popular compromise between complete heritage preservation and massive, wholesale redevelopment. Instead of facades, we are keeping large fragments of the building fabric. But what remains is an illusion of vital, fully functioning, street-related buildings lining

Toronto's Downtown Mainstreet. What once sustained street life is being replaced by inert material.

The collective effect of these "dead" buildings is a streetscape Diorama – they show well on Google street-view as an interesting visual backdrop but with little capacity to generate the social interaction of street life when the only access is "entrance through the mall" and like a diorama, require the suspension of disbelief.

Q. Is it worth keeping these buildings?

A. Yes, of course, but do we have to kill, stuff and mount them in order for them to survive? They are more than bricks and mortar facades, finely detailed storefronts, sills and cornices seen as historical artifacts. They are part of an economic/social/cultural ecology that cannot be dis-assembled.

If we want to keep and recycle Yonge Street, as part of "the city we want" (as I think we should), we need to consider the whole thing as a dynamic, evolving cultural landscape. And we cannot separate the building carcasses from their intrinsic social, economic and cultural values.

I have selected Downtown Mainstreet Toronto - we have other mainstreets that are under similar attack by the Urban Taxidermists.

As a community, we have to be clear that if we want to keep Downtown Yonge Street and a host of neighbourhood mainstreets, we must encourage them to thrive and we must establish planning, heritage protection and taxation policies to fit those intentions.

Just as it really gets going – I'm already sick of Urban Taxidermy – it won't achieve the City I Want.

