

# Our Yonge Street Vision

Our vision for Yonge Street concerns that portion of the street that runs from Dundas Square to Yorkville. That's "our" Yonge Street. It's our immediate concern. Our vision is presented under five headings. Details follow this summary.

## 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

Yonge Street is widely recognized as "Toronto's Main Street". It was the first street in Upper Canada. It was the commercial heart of Toronto by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has a central place in the Toronto mind-share of Canadians. It could, and should, become a "great" street. The current developer interest in the street should be harnessed to move the street towards recognizable "great" status.

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.

We would like to see this happen along the entire length of Yonge Street, but that's a goal well beyond what we can help make happen. 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 of Dundas Square. It can be the northern anchor for “our” Great Yonge Street.

**NOTE: Great Street Ideas**

Allan Jacobs wrote the definitive text on great streets – *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. An outline of his ideas about great streets is available online at: <http://www.downtownalton.com/members/docs/greatstreets.pdf>, The US Project for Public Spaces provides its own definition for great streets – <http://www.pps.org/reference/qualitiesofagreatstreet/>. Our list of desirable great street characteristics have been developed with Yonge Street specifically in mind.

## **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.

**NOTE: Patterns and Pattern Languages**

The idea of architectural patterns goes back a number of years – there are published 19<sup>th</sup> century books of architectural patterns. The use of patterns here draws more on the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 definition:

“Each pattern is a three-part rule, which expresses a relation between a certain context, a problem, and a solution.

“As an element in the world, each pattern is a relationship between a certain context, a certain system of forces which occurs repeatedly in that context, and a certain spatial configuration which allows these forces to resolve themselves.

“As an element of language, a pattern is an instruction, which shows how this spatial configuration can be used, over and over again, to resolve the given system of forces, wherever the context makes it relevant.”

Historical Yonge Street can be understood as expressing itself through the use of a pattern language that was appropriate for late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial architecture in Toronto. Many of those patterns can be used directly in 21<sup>st</sup> century new buildings. But the Yonge Street pattern language can and should be extended to distinguishing elements that would make “Celebrate Yonge” a basic part of the fabric of the street.

### **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 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.

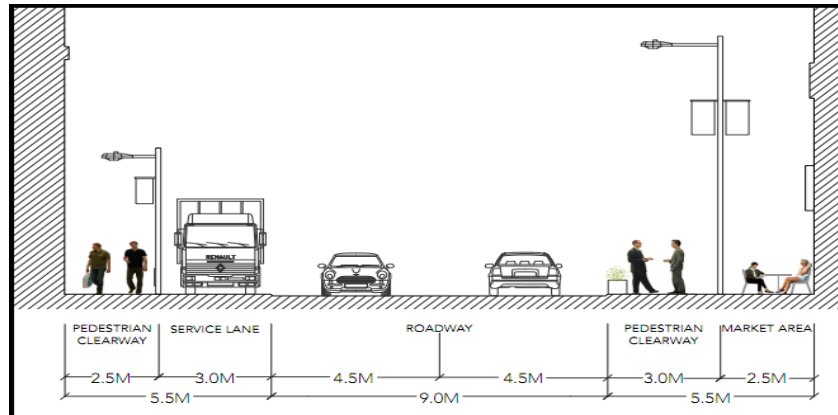
#### **NOTE: Yonge Street Lane Reduction**

The “Yonge Street Planning” report from KPMB & Greenberg that Councillor Wong-Tam sponsored suggests what can, and should be, done to make Yonge Street more pedestrian friendly

“WIDEN SIDEWALKS AND REDUCE TO 2 LANES OF TRAFFIC

“Following evaluation of the pilot project, adjustments may be considered in redeveloping the public realm. A long-term goal of enhancing the streetscape to become more pedestrian-friendly would involve reducing traffic permanently to 2 wide lanes. Sidewalks would be widened to support greater pedestrian traffic and active storefronts, and rolled curves will allow for serving and loading vehicles to stop in designated areas.”

The report illustrated what was being proposed with a cross-section view of the modified Yonge Street.



#### 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 this year 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 fol-

low 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 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.

#### **NOTE: Toronto Pedestrian Destination Retail Locations**

The "Five Thieves" at Summerhill is already a downtown pedestrian destination retail location on Yonge. 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 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 be allowed to 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.