

The Heart of Toronto

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The Street and the City

In September 1975, Toronto threw its first birthday party for Yonge Street. Downtown businesses, civic leaders, and citizens came together to celebrate the 180th anniversary of the street's opening to traffic and to commemorate its evolution from colonial road to bustling urban thoroughfare. On the densely built stretch running north-south through the city's core, often referred to as downtown Yonge, block after block was decorated with bunting and banners advertising sales and promotions, as the owners of shops, restaurants, and bars made individual contributions to the occasion and tried to direct some of the excitement their way. Each evening for a week, this commercial corridor played host to public events and spectacles intended to draw people downtown. These included free concerts and, on the night of September 5, the lighting atop Canada's tallest skyscraper of "the birthday candle to end all birthday candles," an 11-million candlepower flare visible across the city. The next day, a thousand people watched as Toronto mayor David Crombie gave official sanction to "180 Years Yonge Week," before helping cut and share out a three-hundred-pound birthday cake in front of City Hall.¹

The cake was decorated with a 1795 map of the British colony of Upper Canada – now southern Ontario – just one of many historical references that helped frame celebration of the street. Earlier on the same day, a line of re-enactors bearing muskets and clad in green felt marched down Yonge to commemorate the Queen's Rangers, the soldier-settlers who carved out what was then the colony's first north-south road and the basis for British settlement in the area. Past and present mingled freely as their leader, portraying Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe, bantered about the dramatic changes of the past two centuries. He expressed both pride and amazement to see the muddy little outpost of York – population six hundred

in 1795 – transformed into the modern city of the 1970s, with its sprawl, skyscrapers, and subways. Yonge Street provided a rare continuity between those two scenes, and its anniversary was promoted as an important date for the entire city, not in the least by merchant association the Downtown Council, the main organizer of the event, who took out newspaper ads inviting residents to the “birthday of downtown Toronto.”²

However, any suggestion that the intertwined stories of Yonge Street and Toronto could be reduced to two centuries of progress was complicated by the undercurrent of anxiety that ran through the festivities. Toronto chose to celebrate the street at the moment when its future seemed most in doubt. In the months leading up to the anniversary, local newspapers were full of controversy over the problems of downtown Yonge, including flagging retail sales, the proliferation of street vendors and sex shops, and speculation that the metropolitan municipality planned to widen it into a commuter thoroughfare. The Downtown Council admitted that the anniversary week was intended to draw families and middle-class shoppers back to the area and to counter the perception that it was in decline. This was not the first time that the group, formed to represent business interests on downtown Yonge and in the surrounding area, had mobilized with that goal in mind: its members had spent the first half of the 1970s lobbying tirelessly for street improvements, funding for renovations, and stronger restrictions on sexual entertainment, without lasting success. “Nobody else is going to do it for us,” explained the group’s managing director a month before the event, “so we’ve got to create some positive publicity, promote the street properly, and clean it up.” Commissioned to write a song for the occasion, local crooner Tommy Ambrose captured the mood with the ballad “Long Street Winding through My Mind,” whose lyrics described Yonge as a friend in need, “a loved one that has seen better times.”³ There was hope, but also concern, about what the future would bring.

The story of 180 Years Yonge Week highlights two themes that frame the arguments of this book. The first is the street’s place in the civic culture and urban life of Toronto. Only a small number of the more than 2 million people living in Toronto and its metropolitan boroughs attended the 1975 anniversary, and fewer still bought Tommy Ambrose’s record. But they were all familiar with the street being feted. Yonge Street ran (and runs) through most stories told about the city, from its founding myths of Loyalist perseverance to accounts of its twentieth-century growth into a North American metropolis. In 1873, one of the first histories of Toronto devoted nearly 150 pages to the “great northern highway,” using a trip along its

length to write the city into the larger narrative of British settlement in the region. More than a century later, a popular urban biography framed the street as a microcosm of the rapidly changing city around it. “Toronto grew up alongside Yonge Street,” explained its author, “and Yonge Street is a reflection of the city itself.”⁴ Toronto’s geography, like its past, was often understood in relation to this key artery. Centred on every map of the city, it was the main north-south reference for the street grid, the “datum line where East meets West,” streets change their name, and addresses reset.⁵ Like the Lake Ontario shoreline and the valley of the Don River, Yonge was an organizing force in Toronto’s landscape, but it differed from those formidable natural barriers because it was a connector, pointing the way for expansion and linking the older city with its largest and most affluent suburbs to the north.

Yonge Street’s hold on the public imagination went beyond its importance as a line on a map or a historic transportation corridor. People in Toronto knew it best as a place. By the 1970s, downtown Yonge’s busy sidewalks and brick shopscape had played a key role in the city’s commercial and public life for nearly a century. Anchored by the headquarters of department store giants Eaton’s and Simpson’s and crowded with music venues, theatres, and specialty shops, it was Toronto’s main street, its largest – if not its most modern or attractive – retail marketplace and its showiest mass entertainment destination. Day and night, the strip running from just below Queen Street north to College was a magnet for crowds, a hub where a cross-section of the urban population converged for Friday night thrills, Saturday shopping, or spontaneous celebrations. It was the section of the city that was the busiest, that contained the most prized real estate, that evoked the most vivid memories. It was this aging but popular commercial corridor and public space that people referenced when they described 180 Years Yonge Week as “downtown’s birthday bash.”⁶ To the merchants and civic leaders behind the event, but also for the media and many other Torontonians whose lives and livelihoods connected them to the area, this stretch of Yonge Street *was* downtown.

Second, both the festivities and the associated newspaper coverage record the ambivalence that defined attitudes toward Yonge Street during the decades following the Second World War. By the 1950s, the idea that the street had “seen better times,” as Tommy Ambrose put it, became commonplace. For the first time, changes in the shape of the city and consumer tastes were not just challenging downtown’s economic and social centrality, but threatening to eclipse it. Automobile ownership and mass suburbanization gave Torontonians new options for shopping, living, and

working, and disrupted the metropolitan geography that underpinned Yonge Street's success. The spectre of decline, inseparable from discussions of the urban future in postwar North America, seemed to loom over its iconic commercial landscape, in many places unchanged – except for brighter neon signage and gaudier facades – since the first decades of the century. In an aspirational city, such constancy might spell stagnation, or even obsolescence. Worse still, the changes that were occurring on Yonge in the postwar decades, including the shift from mainstream retailing to nightlife and youth culture, were rarely interpreted in a positive light. Increasingly, the street was seen as both the heart of the city and the piece of the urban fabric most in need of saving.

Tension between those two identities both framed and helped drive urban transformation. In this book, I explore how a large cast of historical actors used, debated, and ultimately remade downtown Yonge, spanning a period from the 1950s through the 1970s when the street was seldom out of the news. Even as its metropolitan hegemony waned, Yonge remained a common reference point for the urban population and a symbol of Toronto whose reach extended well beyond the city limits. Various understood as a historic landscape and an embarrassing relic, a transportation route and a people place, a laboratory for modernist urbanism and a haven for big-city sleaze, it was at the centre of efforts to reinvent downtown to keep pace with, or even lead, urban change. 180 Years Yonge Week was just one episode in that longer history, which over twenty-five years encompassed new municipal policies, grassroots cleanup campaigns, and one of North America's most ambitious downtown renewal schemes. Taking the street as its narrative through-line and spatial focus, *The Heart of Toronto* traces the history of those interventions, their successes and failures, and their connections to wider trends in the city and society. Moving from the sidewalk to City Hall, and from corporate boardrooms to suburban kitchens, this book looks at the contexts in which people became invested in the future of a key urban place and how they attempted to shape it, whether through business decisions, political action, or everyday use.

This book is about how cities change; but it is also about who has the power to shape that process. Downtown politics were defined by their publicness and by wide participation, but they were never a level playing field. Three types of power – state, corporate, and citizen – interacted unequally to set the framework for Yonge Street's remaking. For an increasingly interventionist municipal administration, Yonge was a key site for testing and expanding its influence on the urban process. Beginning in the

1950s, new strategies for promoting and controlling development, regulating streetlife and land uses, and arbitrating between diverse urban actors were all pioneered on downtown Yonge. In many cases, those innovations were responses to private decisions to invest or disinvest. Much of the dynamism in this story is supplied by a small number of corporate actors – department stores, banks, and developers – who during the postwar decades bought, sold, and rebuilt the street. A volatile market in urban land influenced Yonge's mix of economic activities and drove its creative destruction, fundamentally altering its identity and functions as a marketplace and public space. In dialogue with these changes, and as part of the surge in civil society activism that characterized the era, a range of citizens, including small businesses, populist social conservatives, and student environmentalists, mobilized politically to demand a role in working out the urban future. At no time before or since has such a diverse array of possibilities been imagined for Toronto's commercial core. The debates of the postwar decades refashioned downtown Yonge Street both physically and symbolically, and they continue to influence its development today.

Saving the Heart of the City

Toronto was just one of many cities that reimagined their downtown future in the decades following the Second World War, and in that respect *The Heart of Toronto* tells a very North American story.⁷ Interventions to rebuild, clean up, and improve Yonge Street were local responses to a broader pattern of urban restructuring whose defining feature, as far as downtowns were concerned, was decentralization. From mid-century, factors including public and corporate policies, technological changes, and consumer desire interacted to accelerate the shifting of people, jobs, and investment from the centre of the city to its suburbs and hinterland. Scholarship on this process highlights the rise and rapid spread of the mass-produced automobile suburb, by 1960 firmly established as the dominant mode for new urban communities, as well as a powerful social norm.⁸ Equally important was the emergent economic geography of the postwar urban region, whose sprawling landscapes included not just places to live, but manufacturing clusters, drive-in strips, office parks, and shopping malls. That last innovation was particularly significant to this story, since retailing proved to be the downtown activity that was most susceptible to dispersion. In the 1950s, central business districts began to lose customers and market share to the planned shopping centres that mushroomed up at strategic locations on the fringes of every medium- to large-sized city, fundamentally reorganizing urban commercial life.⁹ In Toronto, as elsewhere, postwar

decentralization broke apart the “single-focus metropolis” of centre and suburbs that had been the foundation of downtown prosperity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰

Toronto’s strategies for keeping Yonge Street relevant amid these changes drew inspiration from a dialogue between cities that transcended national borders. Recent research on the postwar era documents how professional networks, the movements of expert consultants, media coverage, and other circuits facilitated exchange of a shared repertoire of urbanist ideas, in the context of a larger transatlantic preoccupation with modernizing the industrial city.¹¹ Throughout the twenty-five years analyzed here, people in Toronto looked constantly to neighbouring communities and to others farther afield in an effort to understand what they saw as a shared set of downtown problems, including shrinking retail sales, traffic congestion, aging buildings, and the decline of civility in public space. Department store executives went on fact-finding visits to Boston and Pittsburgh to learn about their rebuilding schemes and hired top planning consultants from the United States to help them prepare their own. Merchants and activists looked to cities from Ottawa to Kalamazoo for models of a more festive, people-friendly shopping street. Media reports of crime and crisis in downtown Buffalo and Detroit fed anxieties among Torontonians that their city would be similarly afflicted and led people to connect what they saw on Yonge Street to larger narratives of urban decline.¹² The experiences of other urban centres offered both warnings and examples to follow as they worked out the downtown future.

People who were invested in that process argued that more was at stake than a specific configuration of buildings, business activities, and institutions. Seeking support for saving downtown, they turned to its decades-old identity as the vital core of the North American metropolis, insisting that – after some necessary changes – it would continue to ensure urban health and prosperity. Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* echoed one of the main themes of postwar urban discourse when it wrote in 1962 that the “heart of any metropolitan city is the downtown area,” before going to describe recent efforts aimed at forestalling obsolescence and “keeping the aging heart of the city beating.”¹³ Such organic analogies have a long history. As James Winter notes in his study of street reform in nineteenth-century London, “we have always read our built environments with our bodies,” comparing cities to organisms, roads to circulatory networks, and urban problems to illness and rot.¹⁴ In Toronto, references to downtown Yonge as the city’s heart go back to the 1870s, if not earlier, but it was not until the debates explored in this book that they became a fixture of public discourse, taken

up in the media, political deliberations, and promotional campaigns for the street. As in other cities, this evocative metaphor gained the most political traction in conjunction with expert diagnoses of urban “blight” and “decay,” and prescriptions for their cure. Since those sicknesses were largely in the eye of the beholder – on Yonge Street they meant, at different times, aging buildings, outmoded business models, and the presence of the wrong kind of people – the image of the heart of the city helped galvanize support for a range of interventions, from the “drastic surgery” of large-scale rebuilding to more targeted “revitalization” agendas.¹⁵

Sprawl and uneven development, participation in transnational urban transfers, and a search for interventionist cures for downtown all place Yonge Street’s remaking firmly in the larger North American context. However, in this book I argue for the centrality of place to understanding how that process was worked out on the ground. The disruptive effects of postwar decentralization were mitigated in Toronto by an activist metropolitan government, the construction of public transit, and continued demand for office space in the financial and administrative district. As a result, downtown Yonge’s struggles with falling sales and a declining public image took place in a context of metropolitan connectivity, stable or rising land values, and the emergence of the command and control centre of the Canadian economy just a few blocks to the south.¹⁶ Similarly, though policymakers and other actors in Toronto had access to the same strategies as their counterparts across the continent, ideas borrowed from other cities often failed to be “relocated” or were adapted in unforeseen ways.¹⁷ Lacking the federal funding for private redevelopment that was the glue of growth coalitions in the United States, political and business elites seeking to imitate that model in Toronto struggled to establish anything more than ad hoc partnerships. The concept of pedestrian shopping streets failed to gain local support in the early 1960s, only to unexpectedly take on new life almost a decade later as a symbol of political reform and environmentalist critiques of the automobile. National, regional, and above all local factors play a determining role in this story.

The importance of place is even more apparent when we shift our perspective to street level. *The Heart of Toronto* is built around an empirical study of one commercial thoroughfare and the agendas, personalities, and circumstances that shaped it over a quarter of a century. Much of the action takes place on and around a ten-block strip of Yonge and is driven by a large but identifiable cast of historical actors who owned, used, managed, or otherwise asserted claims to that space. At that scale of analysis, urban change cannot be explained as the inevitable result of larger patterns

of restructuring. Instead, it comes into focus as a political process, actively imagined, negotiated, and contested over time, and defined as much by contradictions and unintended consequences as by plans carefully laid and executed. Rebuilding schemes on Yonge were constrained by property arrangements and a built landscape inherited from the past, including a private land assembly that made retailer Eaton's a major player in any project, and several historic buildings whose threatened demolition forced a broad-based negotiation of the public interest. The street's centrality and regional pull facilitated its emergence as Toronto's sexual entertainment district, while at the same time giving conservative backlash against that development a constituency that extended from the city proper to its suburbs and beyond. 180 Years Yonge Week provides a vivid example of the ways in which the street's history and cultural meanings continually erupted into and influenced discussions of its economic marginalization; similar slip-pages and convergences defined the other debates that populate this book. Rather than furnishing a background to the action, a site where sidewalk disputes, improvement programs, or planning experiments played out, the street was a dynamic factor influencing those episodes and processes.¹⁸

Toronto's busiest and most unruly thoroughfare provides a privileged vantage point for thinking about some of the key themes in the history of postwar Canada and North America. Each chapter of this book pays attention to the ways in which debates over the street intersected with and were influenced by contemporary trends ranging from automobility to conservative social movement activism. This approach enriches the study in several ways. First, entangling downtown politics with larger historical processes supplies essential context for the decisions of people who were invested in the street. For example, regional and national restructuring in the real estate development and retail industries created the conditions for an ambitious redevelopment program to succeed on Yonge in the 1970s, where similar schemes had failed less than a decade earlier. Second, the approach I take in this book helps to expand the narrative of urban change beyond the vision and actions of powerful elites, suggesting ways in which other actors and ideas could – and did – influence changes in the street's form, functions, and meanings.¹⁹ Major private and public improvement projects hogged the headlines, but I find that the political mobilization of suburban evangelicals, the get-rich-quick schemes of entertainment entrepreneurs, and the daily occupation of space by street vendors and youth also mattered to Yonge's transformation. Finally, the view from the street helps to rethink wider developments such as the sexual revolution or corporate concentration through empirical study of their interactions with

place. Drawing out these connections underlines the value of doing a kind of urban history that overlaps with and learns from wider scholarship, enmeshing changes in city lives and forms in the social, cultural, and political histories of an increasingly urbanized society.²⁰ This book argues that there is no better place to start that project than on the street.

The Street and Its Archive

In making these arguments about urban change, downtown politics, and place, I have relied on research in a rich and varied archive. From the 1950s through the 1970s, there was seldom a moment when Toronto was not debating Yonge Street's problems and possibilities, and much of what was said and done is preserved in documentary sources from the period. Over three decades, I count at least twenty major reports on the street by City of Toronto staff, citizen groups, planners, and businesses, covering topics ranging from urban renewal to traffic to street advertising; over two thousand letters from citizens to the mayor; hundreds of photographs of buildings, people, and street scenes; and thousands of newspaper articles, all of which represented interventions, in different ways, in the story told here. Surrounding these documents is a larger collection of memoranda, meeting minutes, correspondence, and internal government reports that dwarfs them in size. Dealing with the recent past and with a topic that was of significant public interest at the time, I have rarely been faced, as many historians are, with major silences in the archival record. In telling this story, I have grappled with quite the opposite challenge: how to listen to a cacophony of voices – some much louder than others – weigh them one against another, and bring them productively into conversation.

The first and most readily accessible source employed here is the press. My research began with Toronto's three major daily newspapers – the *Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail*, and *Telegram* (reborn in 1971 as the *Toronto Sun*) – as well as more selective forays into other major Canadian and, occasionally, international publications.²¹ In this study, newspapers are, first of all, used as a source of information and detail. Journalists were keen observers of local affairs, including the day-to-day transaction of municipal business, with privileged access to politicians, bureaucrats, and business elites. This reporting provides the colour that brings past events to life: the attitude of a crowd; the mayor's impromptu comments to the press gallery; images of streetlife, building facades, or development plans. When followed over time, it creates a narrative of the local – with its own particular interpretations, inclusions, and omissions – that is a useful contrast to the official record.

The press also features here as an important influence on city politics. Newspapers helped mould what Torontonians thought about a range of issues, and they created a forum for public discussion, albeit one framed by distinct editorial agendas. Despite the challenges posed by changing tastes and broadcast media, the Toronto dailies remained widely read throughout the period covered here. A 1966 Canadian Facts survey of a thousand Torontonians found that most relied on the major papers for their local news: half of them read the *Toronto Star* on a daily basis, and two-thirds consulted either the *Telegram* or the *Globe and Mail*.²² Each paper had a distinct voice: the *Globe*, “Canada’s national newspaper,” was business-oriented but often socially liberal; the conservative *Telegram* and *Toronto Sun* offered contrarian columnists and populist editorials; the *Star*, Canada’s largest newspaper with a circulation of 300,000 to 400,000 during the period, was staunchly Liberal, with a roster of nationally syndicated columnists.²³ All three took stances on hot-button local issues such as the sex industry or downtown redevelopment and endorsed political candidates at every election. They also devoted substantial space to citizen comment through letters to the editor and the more exclusive or expert op-ed. Throughout this study, I identify instances in which coverage in the dailies influenced Yonge Street politics. Citizen activists were inspired to action by columns they read at breakfast, and business and political elites sought to use the press to take the temperature of public opinion – or to change it. By representing the city, newspapers contributed to making it.²⁴ Where possible, I have also sought out community papers, trade journals, and the alternative press, finding in the latter a particularly rich source of dissenting perspectives.

This study pays close attention to municipal decision making and policy, and here I draw on the vast archive produced by Toronto’s two levels of local government. A substantial portion is in the public record, including planning reports, council minutes, and records of public consultations. A series of access-to-information requests and a research agreement I signed with the City of Toronto opened hundreds of previously inaccessible files for my research, including the official correspondence of the mayor of Toronto and the chair of the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, as well as the internal files of several units of the municipal bureaucracy. These records grew in both quality and quantity throughout the period under study. If in the 1940s and 1950s, important pieces of city business were transacted informally or the records not kept, by the late 1960s the duty to record and preserve was taken much more seriously. As this book tracks, municipal responsibilities had expanded

by then, too. These files allow me to reconstruct how Toronto's bureaucracy thought, how politicians made decisions, and how both types of civic official interacted with an increasingly outspoken public. It was surprising and exciting to find thousands of citizen letters, phone messages, and petitions to the mayor concerning the state of Yonge Street. Folder after folder contained the carefully preserved voices of Torontonians from across the city, downtown, and suburbs, young and old; here was an assertive politics of place that needed to be mapped and understood. Equally significant was my discovery of Toronto councillor William Archer's documentation of the history and daily workings of the Yonge Street pedestrian mall, of which he was the principal organizer. These records highlight both the importance and the complexity of municipal governance in a period of urban transformation.

Finally, several groups of private records provide insight into the perspectives of businesses and citizen activists. This book's discussion of the politics and process of downtown redevelopment would not have been possible without the extensive archive of the T. Eaton Company, one of Toronto's most important retailers, landowners, and corporate citizens. The Eaton's archive is exceptional in that few other Canadian businesses of comparative size, and certainly none so deeply involved in urban land development, have opened up their records to the public in the same way. As a result, in [Chapters 2](#) and [5](#) I am able to track nearly every aspect of the first and second Eaton Centre projects, from the negotiations to make up the land assembly to the ways in which Eaton's executives responded to public criticism and setbacks. Access to this archive allows me to present a narrative of redevelopment that moves beyond planning policy and citizen opposition to interrogate the motivations and resources of capital and the corporations that have been so influential in remodelling the central city. Other significant groups of private records include the files of environmental activist group Pollution Probe, development researchers Downtown Action, and heritage conservationists the Friends of Old City Hall. This study also incorporates several oral history interviews conducted to fill in gaps in the archival record, including a series of conversations about city politics with former Toronto mayor David Crombie and an interview with filmmaker and activist Janis Cole, who documented work in Yonge Street's body rub parlours in the early 1970s.

This archive has its absences. The files of public figures do not include the un-minuted meetings and phone calls that were crucial to the day-to-day transaction of city business; the Toronto police ignored my requests to release additional reports or internal communications for the period.

Many of the small but important players in the narrative – the Downtown Council, for example – left an incomplete documentary record. These gaps can be addressed in part through a careful reading of what is there. The extensive correspondence between police officials and the mayor and Metro chairman included reporting on the force’s practices and in some cases arrest or patrol reports. Yonge Street merchants and their association worked closely with the city councillors who represented them. Other silences are the result of choices made during research. Early on, I decided to focus on the power to effect urban change and the contexts in which it was exercised, negotiated, and contested. This story is driven by investment decisions, public debates, and municipal policy, and its main actors are those who wielded the power to influence them: businesses, media, politicians, bureaucrats, and well-organized citizen activists. I have worked to include other actors and to better understand the place in the urban process occupied by everyday street politics. However, I recognize that the extensive oral history work required to do justice to the perspectives and experiences of sex workers or youth, among others, is beyond the scope of this book. The same could be said for the cultural history of Yonge Street. Other observers have highlighted its role as a hub for the arts – particularly music – or traced echoes of its resonance for Torontonians in film and fiction.²⁵ In this book, I take the street’s role in collective memory and cultural production seriously, but I analyze them in depth only where they intersected with downtown politics.

Outline of the Book

The Heart of Toronto explores the remaking of Toronto’s Yonge Street over five thematic chapters, presented in roughly chronological order. **Chapter 1**, “Making Downtown Yonge Street,” provides an extended introduction to the street, the city, and some of the key concepts and historical actors that feature throughout the book. Beginning in the 1790s, it traces how Toronto and Yonge Street developed in tandem over a century and a half, linking the making of the street to the larger process of urbanization that took place along and around it. Throughout, I argue for understanding Yonge, like other central thoroughfares, as a complex and changing human creation. This sets the stage for the following chapters, which foreground the street’s remaking as a product of both structural transformations and the individual decisions of the people who used and debated it.

Chapter 2, “The City of Tomorrow,” places Yonge Street and its largest retailer at the centre of Toronto’s postwar debates over urban modernization. It shows how, beginning in the 1950s, municipal authorities and

corporate elites converged around the idea that comprehensive physical transformation would save the aging central city, and how department store Eaton's extensive properties became the focus for that vision. The result was the Eaton Centre (1956–67), a modernist complex of towers and plazas promoted as “a new heart for old Toronto,” before being cancelled amid debates over its financial viability and its planners' cavalier attitude toward the area's historic structures. Tracing the history of this unbuilt megaproject reveals the economic imperatives, political alliances, and ideas behind Toronto's postwar drive to rebuild. It also gives us a fresh perspective on the department store as a historical actor, highlighting how changing markets and political pressure cast Eaton's – however reluctantly – in the role of urban powerbroker.

Rebuilding was a strategy out of reach of all but the most powerful commercial institutions. With [Chapter 3](#), “A People Place,” I shift my focus to the loose coalition of downtown actors, including independent businesses, who did not see their interests and aspirations reflected in projects like the Eaton Centre. Instead, they articulated an alternative future for Yonge, premised on protecting and developing its assets as a historic shopping street and public space. The result was the Yonge pedestrian mall, which closed the street to vehicles and opened it to shoppers and strollers for four summers from 1971 to 1974. Invested with great hopes, the pedestrian mall was both popular and controversial. As the experiment expanded in scope, the street was appropriated in unexpected ways, demonstrating the public's appetite for new and better shared spaces while at the same time foregrounding anxieties around youth, bad behaviour, and declining urban civility.

[Chapter 4](#), “Fighting Sin Strip,” explores the rise of a sexual entertainment district on Yonge Street in the 1970s, and the barrage of interventions made to regulate or eliminate it. Toronto's “Sin Strip” gained national celebrity with the murder of 12-year-old shoeshine boy Emanuel Jaques in summer 1977, but the story I tell here is larger than that single episode. This chapter traces how a half-decade of political change, citizen mobilization, and sensationalist media coverage contributed to labelling Sin Strip as an urban problem, and made downtown Yonge a key testing ground for new policies of sexual regulation. While the rise of Toronto's postwar sex district connects Yonge Street with wider changes in sexual morality, the law, and entertainment across North America, its suppression in the wake of the Jaques murder provides a striking example of the influence of populist conservative activism in a period often remembered for its progressive politics.

In [Chapter 5](#), “Malling Main Street,” I return to the Eaton Centre and to rebuilding as a path to downtown transformation. The flagship project of a new wave of downtown redevelopment, the second Eaton Centre (1970–79) was a pioneering urban adaptation of one of the era’s most profitable architectural forms, the suburban shopping centre. Over the course of its planning and construction, debates over the impacts of “mall-ing” Yonge played a key role in the emergence of a new politics of development in Toronto, rooted in participatory democracy and critiques of the corporate city. More than any other intervention of the era, the construction of the Eaton Centre fundamentally transformed the street. Bringing downtown life indoors created prosperity for the Centre’s investors and for many Yonge Street businesses, while at the same time introducing powerful new dynamics of centralization, privatization, and control.

Finally, in the conclusion to *The Heart of Toronto* I return to the book’s main arguments, highlighting how over nearly three decades downtown Yonge Street’s remaking was central to debates over the urban future in Toronto. I also continue the story up to the present day, exploring how historical dynamics established in the postwar period have continued to shape downtown Yonge and the surrounding area. Massive capital investment in redevelopment has dramatically altered block after block of the street. Yet amidst this transformation, attachment to Yonge’s iconic shop-scape has inspired grassroots efforts to improve and celebrate the street, whether through festivals, documentary film, or architectural preservation campaigns. Debates over civility, use, and behaviour continue to erupt periodically in this busy public space, prompting new policing and planning interventions aimed at securing its value as a metropolitan shopping and entertainment destination. Much changed in form and character since the 1950s, downtown Yonge Street remains vibrant and contested, a microcosm of the North American city that has grown around it over the last seven decades.

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