

Daniel Ross, *The Heart of Toronto: Corporate Power, Civic Activism, and the Remaking of Downtown Yonge Street* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2022)

YONGE STREET, which runs from the foot of Lake Ontario in downtown Toronto to the edge of Lake Simcoe in the Upper Great Lakes region, is one of the longest thoroughfares in the world. For close to 200 years, the section of Yonge that traverses the downtown core has been a centre of commerce, politics, and finance in the city. Today, Dundas Square, located at the corner of Yonge Street and Dundas Street and modelled on metropolitan public squares like New York City's Times Square and London's Piccadilly Circus, functions as a symbolic centre of Toronto. Crowds gather there to protest, mourn, celebrate cultural festivals, and celebrate the victories of local sports teams.

In Daniel Ross' new book, *The Heart of Toronto*, he explores a colourful and contentious chapter of the history of Yonge Street: the post-World War II period. Like many North American cities at the time, Toronto experienced an unprecedented period of disinvestment in its downtown core from the 1950s to the 1970s. Suburban strip malls supplanted downtown department stores, while inner-city neighbourhoods fell into a state of disrepair. As these changes took place, Yonge Street became a blank canvas for a series of urban experiments designed to breathe new life into the area. Politicians, citizen-activists, small business owners, corporations, and various subcultural groups all staked a claim to the space, competing for their version of what downtown Toronto might become.

The Heart of Toronto draws on extensive archival research to craft an account of the tensions and contradictions that arose over the revitalization of Yonge Street. Each chapter focuses on a key

episode in the evolution of the area. In Chapters 2 and 5, Ross traces the ongoing efforts to develop the Toronto Eaton Centre, one of Canada's largest downtown shopping malls, which took over twenty years to come to fruition. He also explores Yonge as an epicentre of sex work in Toronto during the 1970s (Chapter 4) and a short-lived experiment to turn the street into a pedestrian mall in the summers (Chapter 5). Through his careful historical analysis, the book contributes new insights to the study of sex work in Canada, urban planning, and politics, as well as the relationship between shopping and urban space. Through this exploration Ross, crafts a work about power and politics that contributes to urban theory while remaining grounded in the empirical realities of mid-century Toronto.

Ross begins the book with an overview of the development of Yonge Street from the early 1800s to the mid-1900s. In its earliest days, Yonge was part of the colonial settlement project in the region. It provided a route for settler expansion into the Mississauga and Anishinaabe territories north of Lake Ontario. Over the next several hundred years, Yonge grew in lockstep with Toronto, becoming a regional centre for shopping and commerce. It was also an important gathering place. The sidewalks swelled on the weekends with people coming to dine out, socialize, and people-watch. As the 20th century progressed, however, the growth of automobile transit led to the "decentralization" of both housing and retail. Yonge Street lost its primacy as the main shopping district in the city.

Chapter 2 launches into the substantive focus of the book by engaging with the redevelopment of Eaton Centre on Yonge between Queen Street and Dundas Street. Ross traces an ambitious and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to create a master-planned retail hub at the site of the pre-existing Downtown Eaton's

store starting in the mid-1950s. The plan, which was dubbed 'Project Viking', after Eaton's homeware line, was linked to the building of a new city hall adjacent to the site. After roughly 10 years of planning, the project was cancelled in the mid-1960s amidst both citizen opposition and funding challenges.

Moving on from Eaton Centre, Chapter 3, "A People's Place," tells the story of the period between 1970 and 1974 when Yonge Street was turned into a European-style pedestrian mall over the summers. Shut down to traffic, the street was filled with sidewalk cafes, vendors, and lively gatherings of young people. Representing a broader trend in North American cities, however, the pedestrian mall gained a negative reputation for promoting outdoor drinking and rowdy behaviour. The local media exaggerated accounts of fist-cuffs and suggested that the street had become "dangerous for families." In 1974, the experiment was ended by the city.

Chapter 4, "Fighting Sin Strip," continues to explore the theme of "urban decline" introduced in Chapter 3. Here, Ross unpacks a growing moral panic about the proliferation of pornography shops and massage parlours in the area. Labelling Yonge Street the "sin strip," community and religious groups lobbied the city to regulate and shut down businesses. Ross artfully describes the cat-and-mouse games that emerged between the police, regulators, and sex workers who were determined to continue serving their clients. The controversy over sin strip reached a climax in the summer of 1977 with the story of Emmanuel Jacques, a 13-year-old who was brutally assaulted and murdered by four gay men. Following the murder, the media portrayed the community as dangerous deviants and a risk to public safety. This ushered in a wider crackdown on sex work on Yonge Street and pushed many massage parlours out of the core and into suburban

strip malls. However, vestiges of this history remain to this day.

The final empirical chapter picks up the narrative thread of the Eaton Centre project, engaging with a revived attempt to build out the site in the 1970s. This time the effort was headed by the corporate developer Cadillac Fairview, which had perfected a new business model centred on building shopping centres. The developer, along with the city, was able to address and integrate the concerns of activists who lobbied for "human scale" and user-friendly public spaces. After getting buy-in from urbanists like Jane Jacobs, the project was eventually completed in 1979. Despite this stamp of approval from the community, Eaton Centre would go on to exemplify a new trend in many North American cities – public-private spaces that are highly surveilled and policed. The mall was and continues to be a popular shopping and socializing hub in Toronto. However, those on the social margins are often subject to harassment, expulsion, and detention by security guards.

All in all, *The Heart of Toronto* tells a compelling and well-researched tale about one of North America's long-living "main streets." Daniel Ross tackles big ideas and concepts, like governance and power, that are sometimes held at arm-length in urban studies. However, he takes us down onto the sidewalk, exploring the political intricacies and interpersonal battles that shape what a city comes to look like. In doing so, Ross provides an exemplary account of what urban history can bring to the table.

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