

Special to The Globe and Mail

Standing in a cool, autumn rain, bathed in the fulgent glow of the 15-metre-wide video screen that dominates the western face of the new Toronto Life Square, it's easy to be reminded of the neon-drenched dystopia of *Blade Runner*. The trailer for vampire flick *30 Days of Night* alternates with abstract digital shorts produced by Ryerson students. Three separate signs for the Future Shop shimmer. Billy Joel's *We Didn't Start the Fire* blares from the Hard Rock Café. Okay, maybe the scene is more like the set for a low-budget, made-in-Canada remake of *Blade Runner*.

Almost 10 years ago, then-mayor Mel Lastman proclaimed, with characteristic bombast, that the Yonge-Dundas Redevelopment Project - a proposal which included the creation of a new public square and "urban entertainment centre" - would be "bigger and better than Times Square." The final phase of that transformation, a project of Toronto-based developer PenEquity Management, comes to fruition later this month with the opening of an enormous Future Shop, Toronto Life Square's premier tenant. And while the square, a 500,000-square-foot mixed-use complex festooned with state-of-the-art video technology, can hardly be said to rival New York's most storied crossroads, this singular and spectacular fusion of advertising, retail, architecture and entertainment could revolutionize - for good and ill - the very heart of the city.

A decade ago, this corner of Yonge Street did indeed resemble the seventies-era Times Square that Rudy Giuliani subsequently exterminated: a ragtag clutch of discount-clothing and electronic outlets, adult bookstores and head shops. Drugs and crime were synonymous with the strip. Much of Yonge still retains this seedy flavour - the Zanzibar and Remington's strip clubs, for example, do a booming business just up the street, and one of the area's most tragic crimes, the Boxing Day shooting of 15-year-old Jane Creba, occurred here in 2005. But the 2002 opening of Yonge-Dundas Square, a piazza designed to host free entertainment and community events, fostered a sense of civic engagement heretofore unknown in the neighbourhood.

Toronto Life Square will inspire an engagement of an entirely different kind. "This is the future of this kind of building," says Sharon McAuley, vice-president and group publisher of Toronto Life. "It's been very exciting seeing it come to life." Artists' renderings of the complex depict a utilitarian steel-and-glass structure awash in digital signage, massive retailer logos and other billboards - essentially a scaffolding for advertisement. But on this evening, the unpopulated, gunmetal-grey building looks more humdrum, something like a moored battleship, dwarfed by the dense bustle of electronic imagery that already dominates both the Eaton Centre and the storefronts surrounding Yonge-Dundas Square.

Once the promised panoply of signage is installed, however, the square's concentrated, one-two combination of advertising and retail will be stupefying. When complete (a phased rollout will see the entire facility open in spring '08), the square will boast an astounding 20,000 square feet of outdoor signage (including Canada's largest outdoor high-definition video screen), 30 interior screens ranging in height from one to two metres, as well as shops (a 12,000-square-foot Shoppers Drug Mart) and restaurants (a 7,500-square-foot Jack Astor's) of a size rarely seen outside of suburban power centres. Fifty separate tenants will occupy both retail and office space. Adjoining Ryerson University will use the AMC movie theatre - a 24-theatre multiplex is scheduled to open next April - as classrooms.the arguments

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Leger Xavier, vice-president of leasing and marketing at PenEquity Management, points out that high-profile tenants, such as the Adidas flagship store, will have the unique opportunity to "leverage bricks-and-mortar with media in an environment that the consumer can engage in." In other words, retailers can market and sell their products all in one strategically placed fell swoop. PenEquity's website bills the complex as an "advertiser's dream."

Such a dream, of course, is a nightmare for those who feel the area is already plagued by excessive commercialism. Matthew Blackett, editor of Spacing magazine, which focuses on the city's public space, calls the building "horrendous."

"It's the absolutely wrong approach," he says. "They could have added landmark architecture to the area." Mr. Blackett also questions the genuine value for advertisers, wondering if the complex benefits even them: "It's so saturated, the chances of a product even being seen is diminished."

Councillor Kyle Rae, who supported the project from the start, is frustrated by such arguments. "It's not meant to look like Leaside," he says, mentioning that the area has the highest concentration of pedestrian traffic in the country. "Look where it's located - the square is at the centre of a commercial district." He says it's doubtful that this kind of bright-lights-big-city aesthetic will be tolerated in other parts of Toronto, though he does admit that as soon as the building went up, he was approached by businesses looking to develop farther east along Dundas, towards Jarvis. Stores and restaurants already in the area echo his enthusiasm, unconcerned about competition. "It won't hurt anybody," says Rick Lochan, manager of the Hard Rock Café. "It's just going to bring more people downtown."

It was PenEquity that approached Toronto Life about the naming rights to the complex, which the magazine bought for an undisclosed amount (rumours put the figure at a million dollars). "Toronto Life is about getting the most out of the city," Mr. Xavier says. "And that's one of our goals too." It's a slightly strange fit, however: the tasteful, high-end city magazine (where, full disclosure, I worked until September) and this mall's more prosaic attractions - subscribers expecting to find, say, the latest Jamie Kennedy eatery will have to settle for a new Johnny Rockets. Asked if this augurs an attempt to brand the magazine as more populist, Ms. McAuley demurs, allowing only that the square offers the "potential to expose more people to Toronto Life and what it represents."

And such exposure has also inspired others. The Toronto International Film Festival Group has publicly pondered moving its screenings to the AMC Theatres until its own King Street headquarters is built. And Rogers has just bought the Olympic Torch building (also owned by PenEquity) at the corner of Dundas and Victoria; it will soon house the CityTV and Omni television stations - an eventual Canadian cousin, perhaps, to ABC's enormous, open-concept studio at 7 Times Square.

Indeed, in the decades to come, perhaps Mel Lastman's decade-old boast won't seem so far off after all.