

by Patty Winsa

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Our city square that never sleeps

With its large, flashy signs, Yonge-Dundas Square's resemblance to N.Y. or Tokyo is no accident

Icon or eyesore? Whatever side you come down on, the digital dance of light and advertising now flashing night and day over Yonge-Dundas Square has forever changed the face of downtown T.O. Zoning allowances in that one city block have created a blaze of colour that rages over the surrounding buildings, creating a look that is singular to the city, but may be familiar to anyone who's visited New York's Times Square or downtown Tokyo.

And that resemblance is no accident. "We wanted to create a different type of public space in the urban core," along the lines of Times Square, says Corwin Cambray, a senior planner. "We wanted to give a strong urbane feel to the place – a sense of arrival at the heart of Yonge and Dundas." It was thought the signage could achieve that.

Most of that advertising is now up, a mixture of backlit vinyl, Trivision – with pyramid-like slats that flip from one add to the next – and video boards (the city has asked that all the lights and boards be shut down for Earth Hour this March).

But there's even more to come on Canada's busiest street corner.

Bylaws are in place that will allow advertising on the roof of the Toronto Life Square building, but the city isn't looking for the kind of run-of-the-mill signage seen along the Gardiner. "We're hoping that the advertising in Yonge-Dundas Square, as it continues to evolve over time, becomes a lot more playful," says Cambray.

The advertising is the icing on the cake – or more appropriately the candles – on a plan that originated more than a decade ago.

In the early '90s, the Yonge St. strip was down on its luck, home to fast-food restaurants, arcades and even daytime drug deals. Area business owners banded together and hired a consultant who worked with the city to identify a plan that would bring significant change to the area. Around the same time, a group of city planners went to New York. That city's downtown core had experienced a similar downturn in economic fortunes, but the planners were there at a time when the city was trying to rejuvenate the Times Square area and 42nd St.

As the Toronto planners were developing the project back home, the large format signage in Times Square, and downtown Tokyo, was always on their minds.

"I think the notion was that we couldn't start expropriating the whole Yonge St. strip, but we could look at one intersection," says Gary Wright, the project manager at the time and now the city's acting chief planner. They identified Yonge and Dundas as their best bet.

He notes that although the signage was always part of the concept, "it would be an area that first of all, had a public space – the square."

The project wasn't a slam-dunk. Local opposition meant the proposal would go to the OMB, and those panel members themselves would end up in New York "to see the impact of the signage and what it added," says Wright.

Today, that signage at Yonge and Dundas sets it apart from the rest of the city.

As Times Square endures gridlock and pedlock – where people literally cannot move at the busiest times of the day – it also suffers severely from a lack of space, unlike Yonge-Dundas. The area's only public components are a traffic island and Duffy Square, an area half that of Yonge-Dundas.

"The problem traditionally with Times Square is it's this really dynamic public space," says Tal Aviezer, a marketing associate at Times Square Alliance, which runs the Manhattan version, "but there's never been anywhere to stand or sit to observe it."