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Spadina Avenue

A Photo History

Peter Wollheim

Of all the buzz-words to emerge out of neo-liberal apologetics, the term 'community' is most transparent in affirming its own virtual nonexistence. In times less pluralistic than our own, communities were recognizable by virtue of historical and geographical unities, temporal permanence, and the kinds of self-identification and coherence which only arise with repeated face-to-face interaction. In the late twentieth century many of those qualities have been industrialized out of the realm of possibility, and the word community is more often than not used in reference to temporary aggregates of individuals, or the loose, shifting alliances of special interest groups — 'gay community', 'medical community', 'banking community', and so on. And when not used as a euphemism for a political lobby the concept of community is adopted by developers who feature athletic facilities, pubs, satellite antennae, and shopping facilities within high-density housing projects.

Toronto, of all the cities in Canada, is seen in

this mold more than any others: 'Toronto the Good', the boardroom community for Scarborough, York and Etobicoke; its politics governed by its position as *de facto* capital of Anglo Canada; its history tied to the railroads, the mining companies and commercial banks, Eaton's, and southern Ontario industrialism; its urban development controlled by Trizec, Cadillac, and the Campeau corporations. Toronto's reputation as Canada's 'Hogtown' goes back to the mid-nineteenth century Toronto Tory group which was staunchly monarchist, anti-Catholic, and responsible for laws which later prohibited public sunbathing, movies on Sundays, and the display of navels in bathing suit advertisements. Toronto's long-standing ethnic homogeneity, based upon a population predominantly from the British Isles, also favored the growth of residential districts stratified by purely economic factors, making class lines extremely visible. Offsetting all these factors, however, is an abundance of building materials close at hand, so that

Toronto has had the highest proportion of house owners in eastern Canada. Many of the city's political issues have evolved around the struggles between the forces of industrial expansion and those of neighbourhood preservation.

From its earliest days, the Spadina area has been one of the more atypical in Toronto. The Avenue itself, with its broad street, was one of the first civil amenities created by private citizens, and its location significantly west of the downtown core has insulated it from modernizing pressures. Once a fashionable neighbourhood, Spadina is shown on land use maps of the forties as consisting of "third rate" residential housing, interlaced with warehousing and light manufacturing. At the turn of the century, following the second wave of European immigration to North America, Spadina contained the seeds of Toronto's present-day ethnic diversity, which began with the arrival of Jews from Poland, Russia, and the so-called Pale of Settlement. Semi-skilled or unskilled, often illiterate in English, the



Spadina Avenue, looking north from King Street (1978), a Public Works photograph, City of Toronto Archives

eastern European Jews were quickly absorbed by the needle trades, and intensified its nascent drives toward unionization. At this point, Red Spadina enters the history of Toronto the Good as an epicentre for class conflict, an event which is consistently ignored in most histories of the era.

Since the publication of Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973) there have been a number of efforts to use photography to recover elements of history which have been suppressed or censored. Similar in many ways to the techniques of "oral history", what might be called photohistory has also been used to change our perspective of the past, by replacing political history with a greater attention to the conditions of social life. Essentially populist in outlook, photohistory av-

ails itself of archives, snapshots, newspaper clippings, and other visual evidence whose origins are historically un-selfconscious. Photohistory finds more meaning in mundane events than in formal, often elitist 'portraits of greatness'.

Spadina Avenue: A Photohistory (A Space, Toronto, August 15-September 15) is one of the best examples of this genre to date. Curated by Rosemary Donegan, *Spadina Avenue* works on many levels at once, its ingenious construction speaking not only to professional historians, but also to local residents who sense that there is more to their city than 'Toronto the Good'. Many parts of the Metro area would have lent themselves to this type of treatment, but in choosing to concentrate solely on Spadina Avenue, Donegan has x-rayed a source of colour otherwise over-

looked because of its surface drabness. Unprepossessing in its choice of subject matter, *Spadina Avenue* shows how much has been hidden behind the nominally obvious.

On their first level, of course, old photographs are postcards sent to us by the past, and this is especially noticeable in the view or perspective shots that were taken of Spadina's major intersections. In the physical layout of the show these were posted as introductions to the viewer, and were juxtaposed with the running commentary of Peter MacCallum's building-by-building documentation of both sides of the street as they look today. This panoramic effect, the visual backbone to the show, was also used to anchor together the collage of photos, drawings and newspaper clippings that provided the historical



Street-Scene (1950s), Camden and Spadina looking east, an anonymous photograph from the Kenny Collection, Fisher Rare Books Room, University of Toronto



Installation view of Spadina exhibition at A Space, Toronto

narrative about life in and around the street. Architecturally, Spadina is an area in which visual appeal is concentrated on the ground floor, and pedestrians tend to feel oppressed by the gray, featureless stories of warehousing. Donegan has heightened the sense of discovery in this show by counterpointing the anonymity of these facades with events that took place behind them, using also MacCallum's contemporary photographs to give a sense of how much went on within walls that look so ordinary. Visitors to the show would often walk in and out to look at the street again, their sense of these buildings more intensified and animated.

The history that Donegan uncovered is extraordinary, not only for its colour and social implications, but because so little of it has been previously researched. The presence of the needle trades, for example, with its labour force living in the neighbourhood, made Spadina a hotbed of political radicalism until the outbreak of the Second World War. Spadina's economics depended on those light industries which, until recently, have been labour-intensive and subject to organization by the 'aristocrats of labour', the craft unions. Labour militancy was also intensified by the fierce competitiveness of the many entrepreneurs who ran small-scale workshops, and fought to keep wages to the minimum. Members of the workforce, many of them refugees from the Revolution of 1905, were noticeably receptive to the ideals of utopian socialism, and Spadina not only protected Emma Goldman and the Mexican revolutionaries in exile, but provided the constituency for the Labour-Progressive Party as well as for the Trotskyists, anarchists, and other left-wing groups which cooperated under the aegis of the Arbeiter Ring. With the Red scares of the 1920s, Spadina became a literal battlefield for the defense of free speech in Canada, a site of police clashes with those who defied the legislation prohibiting pub-

lic addresses given in any language other than English. Strikes by the ILGWU in the thirties were also contested, in part, on the basis of civil rights, and photographs show strikers and demonstrators being led away by policemen on horseback, their fur coats and pointed caps making them indistinguishable from the tsar's Cossacks. Much of Canada's first legislation against child labour and unsafe working conditions was precipitated by this labour agitation, as were the initial steps towards anti-combine regulations.

While Spadina's labour history is central to its character, the exhibition also demonstrates the rich cultural history that grew along side it. Much of the early colour of Spadina was contained in the lunch hour delis, grocery stores, bars, restaurants and diners where working people congregated, places bearing names like Shopsowitz's, The Crest Grill, United Bakers, and the Victory Burlesque House. By the mid-sixties many of the second wave immigrants had moved out of Spadina, spurred on by the post-World War Two economic boom, yet the bars and eateries stayed in the area. Close-by to the U of T and Ontario College of Art, many of these establishments changed character or were replaced by live-music nightclubs such as El Mocambo, which became focal points for the beat and early hippie scenes in Toronto. One of the great strengths of Donegan's exhibit is the sense of continuity it establishes, in linking these developments with previous ones, and of suggesting how dissent has managed to locate physical turf on which to contest the Establishment. Spadina in the sixties changed in character, from a battlefield to an enclave, sheltering Diggers, draft-evaders and counterculture artists; one of the high points of its life came in 1970 when Milton Acorn was given "The People's Poetry Award" in Grossman's, after being rejected for the Governor-General's. And Spadina probably came closest to becoming a traditional community during the struggle

against the infamous Spadina Expressway, a conflict which made allies out of small businessmen, U of T intellectuals, and predominantly Chinese immigrants. Spadina remains a force with which to be reckoned, handily rejecting the Liberal candidate 'parachuted' in last September, and electing Dan Heap, N.D.P., as its Member of Parliament. Heap's victory depended upon rallying Anglo working class support behind him, but its success was capped by his appeal to Chinese, Portuguese and Italian voters who had been seen as traditional, if somewhat quiescent Liberal supporters. And with the recent raid on A Space itself, by police acting under antideluvian censorship laws, Spadina continues to maintain its identity as the 'other' Toronto.

Spadina, in its physical layout and presentation, maintains an understated and successful balance between the archive and the photoalbum. Supplemented with personal interviews and recollections which caption some photos, Donegan's collage technique combines the personal with the political in a convincing and unforced fashion, and individuals in various organizations have been identified by name wherever possible. Many of the visitors to the gallery came to find images of themselves or their relatives, to show them to their children, and thereby to locate themselves within Spadina's story. At the same time, Donegan's extensive research has unearthed material previously hidden from academic historians, and part of the importance of the show lies in the fact that the number of serious histories of Toronto can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Donegan's concept of photohistory is not merely a welcome relief from the self-congratulatory photos currently featured in the T.T.C. subways; it is also an approach to photohistory which recognizes its immediacy without negating the larger and long-term issues. □



photo: Peter MacCallum



Peter MacCallum, *Gangway and Roof Gardens* (1984), east side of Spadina (right and bottom)