

A stroll through old downtown

Sunday morning? A summer evening? A good time to have a look at the town's old Yonge Street business block and the fifteen buildings which have been recommended for designation under the Ontario Heritage Act as being of particular cultural value. They are all in the old downtown area: the first block of Yonge Street immediately south of Wellington.

What makes this block so special? On the one hand, nothing: it is a typical small town Ontario main street. That in itself is worthy of preservation these days. Especially in towns like ours, so close to Toronto or other large centres, these old main streets are in danger of massive change, and some have already succumbed.

On the other hand, a closer look at our old main street shows that it has many details of particular interest.

Yonge Street has suffered from devastating fires. The west side of the old business block has been particularly vulnerable. A fire in 1887 destroyed six buildings south of the alleyway leading to the rear, and another six years later removed buildings to the north of the alley. Many of the brick buildings which were built as replacements have a certain similarity to each other, being built over the space of only a decade, but differences will be found in their details. Most of the buildings provided retail space at ground level and residential accommodation above, but one had a meeting hall on the second floor. If you read the front walls carefully you can find it!

The east side of the block had suffered less from fire. There have been gradual changes over the years, resulting in a greater assortment of styles than on the west side.

If strolling, thoughtfully, down the east side of Yonge from Wellington one might notice almost right away that the second building is set back a bit from its neighbours. This structure, in place by at least 1868, was at one time the home of Richard Machell, of Machell's Corners fame. Immediately to the south of that is Aurora's 'skyscraper,' Medical Hall (it housed a drug store), which was built on part of what had been Mrs. Machell's side garden. While the tall white building is no longer the highest in Aurora or even in this block, it still stands out if one is approaching town along Wellington West.

The next two buildings are of an early twentieth century style seen elsewhere in the block, but they are followed by one 'home of Paul's barber shop' which takes us a long way back. A plan drawn up in 1853 shows this small building already in place. It was at some point given a brick veneer and a boomtown front to make it look like its modern neighbours. That false front has since been removed. The Coca-Cola sign painted on the south wall must be of a good age: presumably the company did not put its signs in alleyways and the adjacent building was erected in 1921!

That neighbouring building, now bearing the name 'The Old Town Hall,' was actually built as a bank. Most banks had dignified, confidence-inspiring branch buildings, variations on a standard theme for each bank. The Canadian Bank of Commerce, owners of this building, closed the branch in 1943 because of lack of manpower. The Town immediately purchased the property and it served as the town hall until 1976.

Like banks, post offices tended to have standard designs. Aurora and Newmarket, for instance, both had the Italianate-with-clock-tower style that we see in the next building to the south, our old, old post office (another has been and gone since then). In the days before home mail delivery the post office was an informal community centre, and for more organized gatherings the steps which led up to the front entrances provided good platforms for speakers while the wider sidewalk and a less busy Yonge Street accommodated a crowd.

South of the old post office is a building which even the passer-by can tell was constructed in 1999: it bears a date stone high up on the front wall. If only its neighbour to the south bore the same information! This building also appears on that 1853 subdivision plan. Like the other very old structure in the block, this one was later clad with brick and given a false front at roof level. Here the boomtown front with decorative parapet survives 'and the real roof peeks out at each side.

Another early twentieth century building follows. Some remnants of the ornamental woodwork around the shop windows survive, and a close look the north wall may reveal another painted sign. It is not so elaborate as the Coca-Cola sign farther north, but harks back to one of the businesses which operated here, selling . . . well, find out for yourself!

Next to this modest building, a return to the solemnity of a bank. The Imperial Bank, the 'I' in CIBC, erected this building in 1952, having occupied much older buildings in town for many years. Its essential design is typical of Imperial buildings of the mid-twentieth century: very restrained Art Deco? Modern Classic? You may have to look for the low-relief decoration, but it is there: cool and elegant. This branch closed in 2016.

Finally in this block, two infill buildings and then at the corner of Mosley Street a Mid-Century Modern commercial building. Its first principal tenant, in 1956, was the Bank of Nova Scotia, but as they only rented the space they did not dictate the design of the building. It was meant to be clad in stone, but the developer found that to be too expensive. Still, the building with its sharp

rectangles, posts, and generous use of glass on two public façades makes a suitably emphatic cornerstone for this business block. Enough of the dispassionate description!

Give every property owner a picture of the building in earlier days. Encourage owners to fix up rear areas and make use of those alleyways. Ban stucco panels. Remember that two-story façades were not meant for five-story buildings. Replace the Temperance Street parking lot with a low multi-storey parking building: yes they can be attractive, and even have ?living? walls. Create a block where people walk into buildings, chat, linger on a patio, buy/eat/consult, not one where people enter, insert their plastic keys and then disappear. Allow this block to tell us something of where our town came from and to charm us and our visitors with the character of those times.

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