

FORGOTTEN FACADES / Urban explorers can ill afford to be prim. And no one curious about how an important Victorian

Toronto street looked should skip a visit to the Parkdale strip, a 19th-century streetscape which has survived the city's ceaseless changes

A walk on the wild side



Parkdale offers block after block of buildings from the 1880s and 1890s. (NEIL GRAHAM/The Globe and Mail)

IT takes a pretty good reason to get a Torontonion down to Parkdale's smelly, queasily rundown Queen Street strip. And it takes a strong stomach to stick around long enough to discover the higher pleasures of this west-end neighbourhood.

I know. I spent last Sunday afternoon walking and photographing Queen West between Dufferin and Jameson, all the while trying to avoid meaningful eye-contact with the prostitutes in hot pants working the street corners, dodging oblivious mental patients weaving along the sidewalks, almost tripping a couple of times over addicts slumped in doorways, and witnessing more sad human wreckage per metre of street than I've seen anywhere this side of lower Manhattan. But urban explorers can ill

afford to be prim. And no one curious about how an important Victorian Toronto street looked and worked should skip a visit

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JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

to the Parkdale strip. To my knowledge, no other 19th-century commercial streetscape of such grand extent, or with such architectural *hauteur* and esthetic variety has so successfully survived Toronto's past 100 years of ceaseless expansion, destruction and infill. Looking west along the north side of Queen from the edge of Parkdale closest to downtown — where the eastbound Queen streetcar rumbles down into the stone tunnel under the railway tracks — one is treated to the near-miraculous sight of block after uninterrupted block of sophisticated and often sumptuously turned-out tall buildings from the 1880s and early 1890s, the era of Parkdale's greatest prosperity.

In those decades, the street-level of each tall structure was a large-windowed shop, provisioning Parkdale's economically diverse populace with fine millinery and humble bonnets, bread and carriage fittings and fresh beef, the latest fashion and tough clothes for the working man. (Facing the street are still retail outlets, though they now tend to be places like The Wildside, a bar, countless Vietnamese video rental and doughnut shops, and one discount house after another.)

Above each shop would typically have been a spacious two-storey flat for the store's proprietor, with parlour and large window on the second level, often showing a face of handsome Romanesque Revival brick and stone detail to the street, and with sleeping quarters on the third. Throughout this zone, the street architecture of Queen is self-important, richly ornamented, *slow* — built and adorned to be seen at pedestrian speed, and to be savoured.

For example, Mr. Small crowned his abattoir at 1372 Queen W; with a tall, sumptuous cornice, and set terra cotta heads of cow and sheep on either side of the high bay windows, to advertise his own importance, but also that of street and town. And when, in 1892, the builders of the music school at 1482-1486 Queen W, put very graceful towers atop a window-fabric of fluid Gothic tracery — only one survives — they clearly expected their decoration to be a sign to the world of prosperity, high culture, high aspiration. Contemporary quotes from a pictorial history recently published by the Toronto Public Library Board perfectly illustrate Parkdale's pride in itself as a "floral suburb" of Toronto, a dilute refuge for those seeking "a refreshing coolness that is lacking in the close and sultry city."

Please see SAVOURING—C2



Toronto's Parkdale district: some of the structures on this strip of Queen West date from as early as the 1860s.

(NEIL GRAHAM/The Globe and Mail)

Savouring a remarkable strip

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But Queen Street had a special significance all its own. In the days before Lake Shore Boulevard and the Gardiner Expressway were built, Queen was the chief thoroughway for vehicular traffic entering the city from the west — hence its double role, as an ample, mixed shopping promenade, serving an urban and suburban clientele ranging from the wealthy to the working-class; and a ceremonial entrance to the Victorian city, proclaiming its greatness. All Toronto's mainline architects had a hand in creating the streetscape we see today. "Parkdale was no quaint village," Alec Keefe said as we strolled along Queen together last week. "It always knew itself to be part of the big city."

Though long an admirer of Parkdale, at least at a safe distance, I have Keefe to thank for delivering the historical and architectural background — much of it retailed above — that finally explains the visual ex-

citement of the place. A resident of the neighbourhood, passionate architectural conservationist and local historian, Keefe simply ignores the decay, and openly delights in "an urban form dictated by this fact: the merchants had to cater to a complete society. They had to provide straw hats, as well as Paris originals."

He singles out two low, connected buildings a casual observer would easily overlook, and hails them as perhaps the earliest remaining structures on this strip of Queen West, dating from as early as the 1860s. He delightedly relates that a broad and gracious palazzo-like fabric of shops and flats was constructed in 1898 at 1338-1342 Queen W. as an investment property by the Anglican Church of Quebec, dabbling in real estate at the time. (I assume this fact has nothing to do with the sign reading "Jesus, I Trust You," which hangs from the imposing little balcony, with its Ionic columns, high on the facade.) He proudly points out a multi-colour brick facade he and fellow-activists discovered and

cleaned, after a campaign to remove the metal siding which had long concealed it.

But this remarkable strip, like many another precious urban survival, owes its existence less to the good will of local enthusiasts than to calamities.

One was the abrupt demolition of Parkdale from triumphal entry into a dead corner of Toronto by the creation of the lakeshore traffic corridor. Owners no longer needed to be concerned with keeping the street showily up-to-date, so the old buildings were just left where they stood.

Another calamity was Toronto's indifference — at least this is the way Keefe weighs up the history — when it came to keeping Parkdale stocked with sophisticated public amenities following the municipality's annexation in 1889. (The public library, for instance, is a low, mean block of bricks, "sucking the life out of the street," according to Keefe, and certainly expressing nothing of learning's joy and richness. Among the very few noteworthy newer

buildings of any sort on the strip is the streamlined police station — now an emergency shelter — put at 1313 Queen in the early 1930s by City of Toronto architect J. J. Woolnough, the same *moderne* stylist who gave us the magnificent Horse Palace at Exhibition Place.)

Then came the Great Depression, the mid-century transformation of Parkdale's large homes into cheap rooming-houses, the destruction of whole streetscapes to make way for glowering highrises packed with crowded renters, the takeover of almost all properties south of Queen by absentee landlords — all of it contributing to the general squalor into which Parkdale has sunk so deep.

At the top of this story, I said urban explorers cannot afford to be prim. I'm ending it with another admonition. Nor can urban explorers afford to ignore the many high-style beauties which, through no fault of their own, have been allowed to slide into urban eclipse and neglect during Toronto's two centuries of radical capitalist development.