



162. *The Avenue Road front of York Square, showing the renovated Victorian buildings. Hazelton Lanes is on the left.*

YORK SQUARE

Yorkville Avenue at Avenue Road (NE)
1968 by A.J. Diamond & Barton Myers

Since the 1960s the growth of Toronto's several commercial districts has tended to result from the gradual conversion of existing houses, warehouses, and occasionally churches—for use as restaurants, offices, and stores—rather than from replacing old buildings with new. This tendency has created new commercial space while preserving much of the local character that originally drew businessmen and their customers to a particular area. Nowhere in Toronto has the trend resulted in a wider range of solutions than in Yorkville, along the streets immediately north of Bloor West, between Yonge and Avenue Road—a district long associated with luxury retailing. York Square, with its mix of new construction and renovation, is the most attractive of these modern extensions of Yorkville.

Originally a village just north of the toll-gate at Bloor, Yorkville was annexed to the city in 1883 and became a comfortable middle- and working-class suburb, crowded with houses dating from the 1850s through to the First World War.

Between the wars it acquired a vaguely artistic and Bohemian reputation, and in the late 1950s—when redevelopment began to destroy the artistic community of Toronto's 'Greenwich Village' on Gerrard Street—it blossomed with art galleries, restaurants, antique stores, and coffee houses. Though still a residential neighbourhood, Yorkville played host first to the folk-music culture (from which came Gordon Lightfoot, Malka and Joso, Ian and Sylvia, and Joni Mitchell) and then, in the late sixties, to Flower Power and hippie culture.

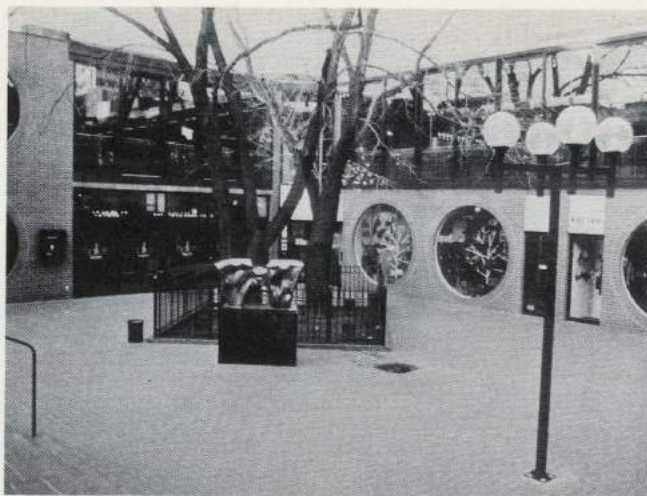
During most of this time Bloor Street, only two blocks away, was becoming the centre of fashionable retailing. The large stores along Bloor presented one aspect of this enterprise. The other aspect—established first by art galleries and antique dealers, and then by a variety of modish purveyors—was seen in the boutique, the small specialty shop, often located in an old house and informally grouped with similar stores along Cumberland, Yorkville, and Hazelton. Here trees

and small-scale buildings preserved the village atmosphere (like that of New York's Greenwich Village, which many Torontonians knew and appreciated), though the district was clearly becoming commercial. An early and effective attempt to complement the old flavour of Yorkville in a new commercial complex was Lothian Mews (1963, by Webb, Zerafa & Housden; mostly destroyed by later renovation), between Bloor and Cumberland—shops grouped around a galleried court, with a fountain and a restaurant.

Of the new developments York Square, which still retains much of its original character, was the most successful. The site, at the north corner of Yorkville and Avenue Road—owned by Laver Investments, whose president was Richard Wookey—was originally occupied by seven Late Victorian brick houses facing Avenue Road. Current theory would likely have proposed a monolithic high-rise building. But Wookey was attuned to the village ambience of Yorkville and hired as his architects Jack Diamond and Barton Myers. Though new to Toronto, they were well acquainted with American, English, and European architecture and to them, Toronto's nineteenth-century buildings (which many Toronto architects of the previous generation had been taught to despise or ignore) were aesthetically pleasing and offered possibilities for combining new functions with old architectural forms.

The four brick houses on the corner of the site were retained and renovated with ground-floor additions for shops, and offices upstairs; the three other houses were completely refaced. Behind them a U-shaped two-storey building was erected to contain shops and restaurants around a brick-paved square, entered from both Yorkville and Avenue Road. Constructed of red brick, in homage to the old houses, it has stark rectilinear windows on the upper floors, and circular shop windows that were originally tied together with large-scale two-dimensional super-graphics that spread across the side-wall of the corner house. The old houses were painted white, and their bays and tile-hung gables became a decorative part of the complex. Inside the square the exterior window forms were repeated on the ground floor; on the second floor a light grid of windows was framed in thin steel. The square itself, shaded by a rangy maple tree, is a quiet haven similar to an urban backyard.

York Square succeeded largely because of its stylized village atmosphere and air of casual commercialism. Some of its basic ideas were borrowed for the larger Hazelton Lanes development to the north, also completed in 1976 (by Webb Zerafa Menkes & Housden, again for a consortium headed



by Richard Wookey). In the early 1970s Wookey had purchased many of the Late Victorian houses on Hazelton Avenue and renovated them as luxurious shops and apartments. On the west side they form a screen for Hazelton Lanes: two long blocks of brick apartments, stepped back with spacious balconies, that rise above two levels of shops. The eastern block is almost invisible from the street; the western acts as a buffer against the Avenue Road traffic. Between is a courtyard—in summer a restaurant and in winter a skating rink—that, unlike the one in York Square, is not casually accessible because of the building's design; and the shopping corridors, though sumptuous, are so labyrinthine as to be disorienting and confining. Unfortunately this development led to the removal of the super-graphics from the walls of York Square, which for much of the year is now merely a passageway to Hazelton Lanes.

York Square provided an object lesson for renovators by successfully using modern materials in the restoration of old buildings—reworking but preserving the original atmosphere of Yorkville—but it was ignored by property owners in the area. Shortly after, a long row of houses on the north side of Yorkville Street was veneered with rough brick and fronted with phony Victorian lamp-posts. Also slotted into the streetscape were three-storey split-level structures that tried to imitate the pattern of bay windows under a gable—traditional in Toronto houses of the 1880s and 1890s. Such changes have given Yorkville a synthetic period flavour—appreciated more by tourists and suburban visitors than by those who are aware of its history and enjoy such authentic architecture as York Square.