

## *The Heart of Toronto: Corporate Power, Civic Activism, and the Remaking of Downtown Yonge Street* by Daniel Ross

Ross Fair

Volume 114, Number 2, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092223ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092223ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Fair, R. (2022). Review of [*The Heart of Toronto: Corporate Power, Civic Activism, and the Remaking of Downtown Yonge Street* by Daniel Ross]. *Ontario History*, 114(2), 259–263. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092223ar>

tains some 830 titles which makes this an invaluable source for anyone interested in the Rebellion period along with a comprehensive index. Sadly, Al Anderson passed away before the book was published but the end product is a suitable tribute to a local historian who recognized the neces-

sity of telling stories of importance to the community. All proceeds of the sale of the book will support projects undertaken by Heritage St. Clair.

Dennis Carter-Edwards  
Peterborough, Ontario

*The Heart of Toronto*  
*Corporate Power, Civic Activism, and*  
*the Remaking of Downtown Yonge Street*

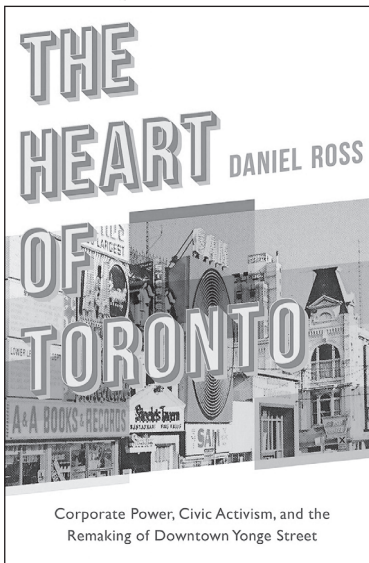
By Daniel Ross

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2022. 240 pages. Paperback \$32.95.  
ISBN: 9780774867016 (<https://www.ubcpres.ca/>)

Daniel Ross' *Heart of Toronto* is a much-needed analysis of a critical aspect of downtown Toronto's postwar development. His clear, engaging writing and concise analysis brings to light important aspects of downtown Yonge Street's twentieth-century development not previously analyzed or contextualized to the extent that Ross provides. Across the five chapters of his book, Ross selects key themes and issues related to specific attempts to remake downtown Yonge Street (comprising, generally, the street from Lake Shore Boulevard north to College Street). He makes it clear that there is much to unpack from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s concerning the understanding of Yonge Street's place and role within Toronto: "Variously understood as a historic landscape and an embarrassing relic, a

transportation route and a people place, a laboratory for modernist urbanism and a haven for big-city sleaze, it was the centre of efforts to reinvent downtown to keep pace with, or even lead, urban change." (4) But what did urban change mean to the era's engaged citizens, politicians, business owners, and others? Ross makes it clear that there is also much to unpack about the motivations among this cast of actors, who "used, debated, and ultimately remade downtown Yonge, spanning a period from the 1950s through the 1970s when the street was seldom out of the news." (4)

Ross' *Heart of Toronto* is successful because he keeps the focus tight to his key subjects and themes. Each chapter "pays attention to the ways in which debates over the street intersected with and were influenced



by contemporary trends.” (8) His is an approach that produces a digestible analysis of attempts to remake downtown Yonge Street while involving a wide range of contemporary actors. His approach may also provide the foundation and framework for other historians to continue his work by exploring similar subjects and themes spawned by the ever-transforming Yonge Street in more recent decades.

*The Heart of Toronto* presents “a very North American story,” Ross points out, because it relates how: “Interventions to rebuild, clean up, and improve Yonge Street were local responses to a broader pattern of urban restructuring whose defining feature, as far as downtowns were concerned, was decentralization.” (5) As with other North American cities, increased automobile ownership and rapid suburbanization after the Second World War altered many of the fundamentals of urban life in Toronto, particularly the “economic and social centrality” of its downtown core. (3) What once drew Torontonians to downtown Yonge Street—shopping, particularly in Eaton’s and Simpson’s department stores, plus movie theatres, and other entertainment venues—could be mostly accessed in newer facilities constructed in the suburbs.

In his first two chapters, Ross examines a range of factors that transformed urban life in Toronto from the late nineteenth century to the years that followed the Second World War, establishing Yonge Street’s centrality “in the civic culture and urban life of Toronto.” (2) These included the establishment of the retail giants Eaton’s and Simpson’s at Yonge and Queen Streets, and electrification and its role in amplifying downtown Yonge Street as the centre of entertainment and dazzling nighttime spectacle. But the rise of the automobile and the resultant polycentric city produced multiple challengers to

Yonge Street’s primacy as Toronto’s central core of social and economic activity. Ross notes that by the end of the 1960s there were 280 shopping centres in the Toronto region, and a dozen enclosed malls. Yet, there was little chance that Yonge Street would be abandoned completely for the future that suburban life promised. As Ross points out, Yonge Street was “an actor in its own right. Its aging built landscape, its diversity, and its essential intractability” inspired and frustrated those who sought to improve it. (169)

In Chapter 2, Ross explores the ways in which businesses and city officials attempted to reinvigorate Yonge Street. In particular, he highlights Eaton’s as a lead actor in charting what urban modernization might be in a remade downtown Toronto. Ross provides an engaging and detailed account of Eaton’s Project Viking, begun in the 1950s and unveiled in 1966, which aimed to replace its own retail store within a modern downtown enclosed mall, while redeveloping much of the area bounded by Yonge, Bay, Dundas, and Queen. The project aimed to transform a collection of old retail buildings and factories into a modern landscape of a mall, plazas, hotel, and office towers that would extend eastward to Yonge Street. Ross informs us of the ways in which municipal levels of government became involved in the retailer’s proposal and the city’s interest in seeing this part of downtown revitalized, considering the planned high-rise towers would reverse decades of declining property values and increase city tax revenues. “Redeveloping downtown became policy not just because it created employment or promised to revitalize business, but because it provided the financing that was the engine of metropolitan expansion and governance,” he argues. (43) But this alignment of interests between retailer and municipal govern-

ment would be short lived. Ross explains how a private company such as Eaton's was unable to independently raise the capital to accomplish its plans, and it cancelled the project. He also explains how anti-modernist voices emerged in response to Eaton's proposal, sparking new politics of urban revitalization. Eaton's plans to demolish Old City Hall was an important spur to the coalescing of local politicians, private citizens, and business owners into a vocal group of civic activists.

In Chapter 3, Ross explores a decision to pedestrianize a section of Yonge Street as an example of "the limited capacity of citizens and government to transform the street without the involvement of the corporate interests that controlled an increasing share of it." (98) By the early 1970s, Eaton's plans for constructing today's Eaton Centre were well underway but, as Ross argues, many smaller, independent businesses and others along the street "did not see their interests and aspirations reflected in projects like the Eaton Centre." (13) He employs the pedestrianization project to analyze the way in which this reshaping of Yonge Street shifted debate from rescuing the street from economic decline to the politics of urban public space. By opening a pedestrian mall, Toronto was following attempts by other North American cities to bring the success of the suburban mall experience to the downtown retail district. Ross notes that the short life of Toronto's pedestrian mall for a few summer weeks between 1971 and 1974 was similar to the disappointing outcomes for many such experiments in Canada and the United States. Yet there were specific reasons for Toronto's pedestrian mall's demise, which included the question of who the independent businesses anticipated would populate the mall and who they saw hanging out there each day. Youths were soon

identified as a problem of the pedestrian mall, a problem amplified by sensational media stories and subsequently dealt with by over-policing.

Ross' examination of the pedestrian mall's ambitions and failures transitions seamlessly into his final two chapters, the first which examines Yonge Street's sex entertainment businesses that caused a section of the street to be nicknamed Toronto's Sin Strip. Ross continues themes introduced in the previous two chapters: emergent and adapting local politics, citizen mobilization, media coverage identifying and portraying urban problems in sensationalist ways. He also continues his examination of Yonge Street as a public place, by exploring the workers and the customers along Sin Strip and how police and governments aimed to forcefully remake the street's character through policies, raids, and licensing. In fact, Ross argues, Sin Strip had been its own remaking of Yonge Street in a very gendered way through a combination of entrepreneurs who opened strip clubs, body rub parlours, adult cinemas, and bookstores. These men, along with the mostly male clientele, relied on the labour of women who performed their range of tasks in Sin Strip's establishments. By the late 1970s, efforts to clean up Sin Strip shuttered businesses that politicians and activists deemed unacceptable. But doing so, Ross points out, served only to unite activist voices within the sex worker community, relocate and decentralize sex work and sex entertainment businesses across the city, while leaving Yonge Street with a considerable number of empty retail locations.

As the pedestrian mall experiment ran its short course early in the 1970s, and as the clean up of Sin Strip intensified during the final years of that decade, Eaton's completed construction of today's Eaton Centre on the west side of Yonge Street

from Queen to Dundas. In Chapter 5, Ross explains how Eaton's learned from its failed Project Viking proposal and secured sufficient private capital for its new project by partnering with Cadillac Fairview. Doing so represented a trend by the 1970s of "investor-owned, professionally managed corporations... [taking]... a leading role in every aspect of city building in Canada," he argues. (135) Moreover, this highly planned and highly curated indoor mall consumed four blocks of Yonge Street and transformed it "into a single modern megastructure [while introducing] new elements of centralization, privatization, and control" that significantly altered Yonge Street's operation as a marketplace and public space. (135) For those reasons, the construction of a regional shopping mall in Toronto's downtown generated a new coalition of opponents, which included reformist politicians elected to city council at the turn of the 1970s, raised fresh debates about "mall[ing]" Yonge Street, and influenced "a new politics of development in Toronto, rooted in participatory democracy and critiques of the corporate city." (14) Ross explains how the Eaton Centre project created a divide along downtown Yonge Street, between those independent retailers in their smaller, older properties, and the tenants of the leased space within the new, indoor mall. Where it had been Old City Hall that became a lightning rod for opposition to Project Viking, in this redevelopment project it was Holy Trinity Church who stood up to defend its property and continued presence, to which the Eaton Centre plans were forced to bend. "People planning" gained significant traction during the 1970s, argues Ross, and by decade's end it affected Toronto's planning system in ways that institutionalized "the shift towards localism, neighbourhood preservation, and citizen consulta-

tion." (149) Meanwhile, Ross concludes, the Eaton Centre "offered a new model of downtown space, publicly used but privately controlled, limited in its liberties but secured from the unpredictability and unwanted encounters of the street." (164)

Ross is correct in observing: "Much changed in character since the 1950s, downtown Yonge Street remains vibrant and contested, a microcosm of the North American city that has grown around it over the last seven decades." (14) In *The Heart of Toronto*, he underscores this observation by imagining a flâneur strolling up downtown Yonge Street from the waterfront during the immediate post-war years, observing the details of the streetscape, and a second flâneur, walking and observing the same blocks of Yonge Street today. For the latter individual, the businesses, the people, and many of the buildings observed would be quite different that what the first observed, yet Yonge Street remains a destination location—the heart of Toronto. That said, in reflecting on Ross' study, one wonders about the emerging post-pandemic Yonge Street. What will fill the empty storefronts to revitalize Toronto's downtown anew? What will be the effect of thousands of new residents, living in tall and supertall condominium towers along downtown Yonge Street? How will the street survive the planned years-long closure of the Yonge and Queen intersection during construction of the Ontario Line subway? And what of yongeTOMorrow, the latest civic plan to improve Yonge Street between Queen and College Streets by reducing car lanes and expanding sidewalks for pedestrians and cafés? Will it improve Yonge Street in the way it anticipates? If so, for how long? Will local businesses, politicians, residents, media, and police be satisfied with the sorts of people who will use the redesigned public



space? Will they be satisfied with *how* they use it? Whatever a future flâneur might observe when walking downtown Yonge Street, Ross' claim will continue to ring true: "each new intervention is shaped by the accumulated weight of those that came

before—that is, by the street itself, actor in its own production." (15)

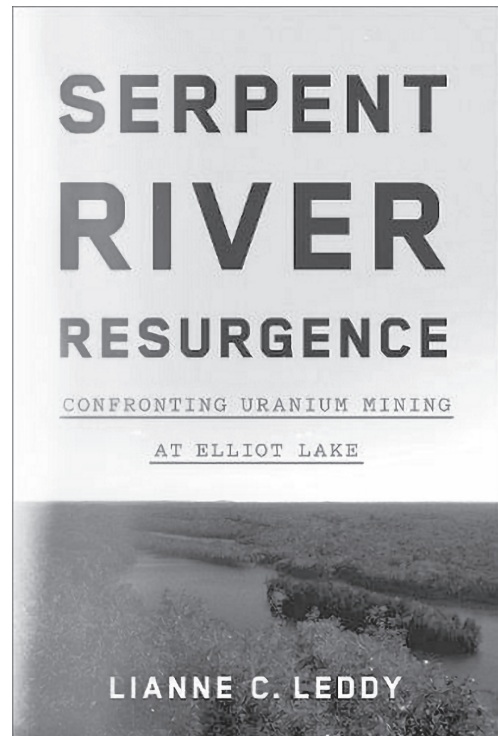
Ross Fair  
Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University)

***Serpent River Resurgence***  
***Confronting Uranium Mining at Elliot Lake***

By Lianne C. Leddy

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 233 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4426-1437-6 (<https://utorontopress.com/>)

In *Serpent River Resurgence*, Lianne C. Leddy examines the environmental history of uranium mining on Serpent River First Nation (SRFN). This historical overview uses storytelling as a methodology by blending the experiences of elders with archival records, newspaper articles, and other published materials. The book opens with an Anishinaabe story of a great serpent that carved the river of its namesake and laid eggs deep in the bedrock. The book continues by situating the history of settlers and uranium mining within this story as those that would come to take the serpent's eggs. Through this approach, Leddy traces the settler colonial history of resource exploitation in the region, culminating in the short-lived history of uranium mining at Elliot Lake in what Leddy terms "Cold War colonialism" (8), and the long-term environmental consequences for SRFN. The book primarily looks at two forms of environmental damage caused by uranium mining in the region: the pollution of the Serpent River from mining tailings located upriver near Elliot Lake and the effects of a sulphuric acid plant on reserve. The book finishes by showcasing how SRFN worked



tirelessly to raise awareness of the environmental impacts uranium mining caused in their community and to seek some form of recompense. Leddy's concluding advice to