Connecting public and private paths for pedestrians in Toronto

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Abstract

This paper looks at the benefits of linking up public and private spaces of circulation in the city of Toronto, a medium-sized North American winter city that is coming to terms with its relationship to many planning decisions made in the last 60 years. Relating specifically to *active transportation*, the concept of *urban filaments* is introduced as an approach with formal strategies, to take back some of the alienating urban spaces in the city. Urban filaments are seen as integral, scalable pedestrian systems that aren't defined as sidewalks or streets—these are the linking elements that weave themselves into the existing flow structures in historic and more recent urban forms.

There are three general types of urban filaments considered as existing or emerging in the city; they are the *interior eventspace, public interior*s, and *ribbons*. In Toronto's urban history, urban filaments have co-existed prior to the automobile, and they were adapted and localized to suit the patterns of movement and urban life prior to the shift from a 'street' based experience of city life to the current 'road' emphasis of circulation in the city's core. But as this paper argues, this too is beginning to change for the better, where there are more options for urban active transportation that bridges *public with private spheres* in Toronto. Contemporary examples of public/private spaces are introduced with possible suggestions as to how connections would improve their use-value.

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Pedestrian Revisions

Toronto offers many unique urban qualities but it also exhibits the planning challenges of every city.
There are many examples of clever and mysterious street variations that twist and turn because of a ravine that crosses the flow of a main artery, or a bend in a major avenue that remains inexplicable, with the reason for its diversion lost to time. But the city is also a textbook of borrowed planning theory put into practice that reinforces some of the errors in judgment that, for instance strand pedestrians on narrow street allowances, encourages wide building footprints with sleek tower forms that integrate poorly with the existing fabric of street-level activity and do not give back in terms of an experience that creates a sense of co-ownership. There is much good work that still needs to be done before most users of the city's public and privately-owned (but publicly used) spaces feel truly comfortable for all; pedestrians. In this paper I will take a walk to some of the pedestrian spaces that benefit from strong public and public/private sponsorship in Toronto. It is not meant to be exhaustive, it will serve as an overview of some districts that have evolved as public spaces that attract pedestrians.

Early Toronto had a confusing relationship with its public spaces.
Land 'which had from early days been designated as free for the pleasure of the public was that which produced the most complicated problems.' (Glazebrook, 1971, p. 121) Here was an example of a public way squeezed out by the railways along the waterfront, cutting off the public's access to the view and pathways afforded there. Symbolically, this cutting off of amenity and pedestrian flow to the water's edge speaks about the marginal status of active transportation with the larger planning orthodoxy in the city, which still continues today, most often seen in street designs where 'traffic' is defined as vehicular and not pedestrian or other.

The change in scale of the city core along with the speed automobiles thirst for on streets made Toronto one of hundreds of cities that succumbed to its allure. 'Urban space, which was previously contained, is now without limits. The rhythm of daily life, which before the automobile, was defined by the movements of one's body, is now determined by the mechanical devices in the city. The automobile has upset the balance of time and space in the pedestrian-scaled environment.' (Ingersoll, 2006, p. 73) It is well established in urban theory that something key was changed in experience for the individual when cinema and automobiles enabled another type of reading of city space to occur. This challenges the primacy of the experience of the pedestrian moving through the city.

When speaking of modern systems of circulation, Camillo Sitte, in his classic text on the aesthetics of urban planning, City Planning According to Artistic Principles, states prophetically that: 'They are of no concern artistically, because they are inapprehensible in their entirety. Only that which a spectator can hold in view, what can be seen, is of artistic importance: for instance, the single street or the individual plaza.' (Sitte, 2006, p.229-230) Artistic importance is not as powerful a force for decision making in the free market and for city governance, so in order for Sitte's ideas to have impact the designers of urban filaments will need to ally their designs with

issues having to do with public safety, the health-giving benefits of walking, etc. in order to build successfully.

Being a young city, there is much opportunity to shape the public spaces to more suited pedestrian patterns. In youth there are mistakes made, and attitudes are shaped that require reflection (and renovation). If we consider that it wasn't up until 1862 not a single public park existed in Toronto (Glazebrook, 1971, p. 120), and we are now in a city that works with local community, public and private partners when realizing new parks, then one can be guardedly optimistic about the upcoming improvements to active transportation in the city.

Disappearing Act

The decades in Toronto from the 50's to the mid 70's were tumultuous in terms of ideas that were based on hope and experiment (not all with a clear goal) that proposed, and in many cases brought in the superblock with proposals that would rid the city of many large, historic structures, including (old) City Hall, and Union Station, both saved by a combination of luck and organized vocal groups. The era also saw the establishment of desirable new homes for young families in the suburban expansion with rings of growth. This fell into line with a rise of expressways, both built *and blocked*, into the historic core and outlying areas. Near the water downtown, the taut speculative banking towers with underground retail (first exhibited in 1968 in the Toronto Dominion building, and designed by Mies van der Rohe) diverted the growing commuting populations off the choked sidewalks and down underground into what is now known as the PATH system.

All these experiments with newness and autonomous blocks did not concern themselves with (the possible) and existing movement patterns of pedestrians, except as extensions of automotive traffic into the underground parking garages. The circulatory needs of urban cyclists and pedestrians were kept to a minimum, and when included in many designs, they appeared in stylish painted gouache birds-eye views amidst the new architecture—pretty and puerile. Private and public spaces were often placed in conflicting juxtapositions, more vividly illustrated in the hovering expressway system that would have sliced the residential districts with off-ramps (figure 1). One can only imagine how long it would take to cross the 'street' in this configuration by foot.

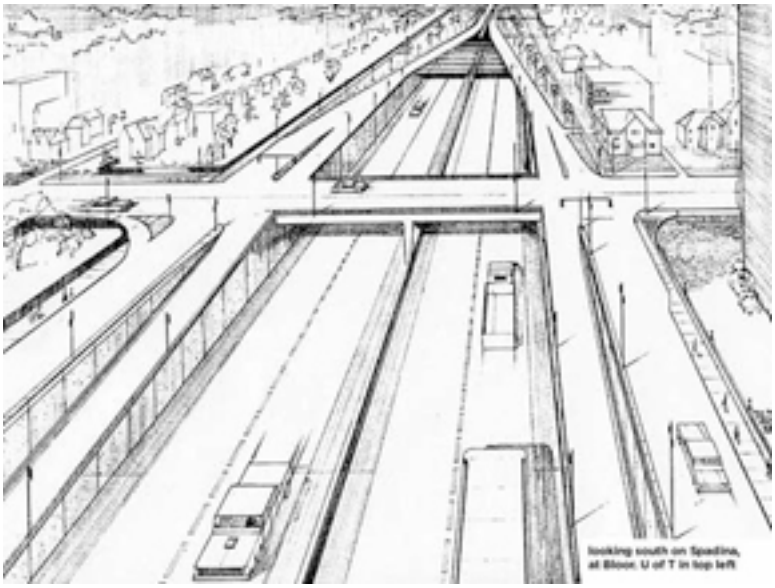

Figure 1 Unknown illustrator. Proposed Expressway image

Paradox

Confusion exists, not only in the city as to what is public or privately-owned land, but on a more fundamental level. There is a tendency to polarize discussion about the public and private circulation realms in terms of assigning a mono-character to our movement; discussion in media and by traffic planners as either-or samples of the population—drivers, commuters (rapid transit), pedestrians. The dominant focus is between the driver and the walker, and much more traction would result in discussions about the design of urban space if we were simultaneously driver/pedestrians/cyclists. Much like a *triathlete's* accepted excellence in different modes of travel, we need to have accepted as a base-line measure that we are all in fact capable of multiple (movement) identities. This is important to establish because it allows for greater flexibility in determining pedestrian options.

Toronto is defined by a strong character of distinct neighbourhoods where often because of scale larger spaces and structures will allow for various quasi-public interactions. The 1974 landmark design guideline study; On Building Downtown (Baird, 1974) was a turning point in the attitude of the city with respect for considering public/private partnerships. In Baird's study there are many examples of wishful proposals, from suggestions to provide many rooftop observatories on tall structures, to designating public view corridors that would concentrate building masses to preserve historic and pleasing views. It was ahead of its time yet also logical in the layout of the suggestions for improving urban space. In one chapter in particular there is discussion about 'linkages,' (Baird, 1974, p.137) these are to ensure that pedestrian travel isn't compromised on the street level (the street is *always* to be dominant concern in this study) and that there is a strong connection between public (public realm= street) and private (often discussed as speculative construction).

Figure 2 Streetscene, summertime in Toronto

Urban Filaments

Urban filaments (Furman, 2010) are the modern spaces of pedestrian transformation in the city. They are the places where movement shifts from the main routes to side streets, enclosed courts, arcade-like transitions through vestibules—all matters of interior/interstitial conditions. These spatial movements in the ebb and flow of the

pedestrian circulatory system symbolize an undervalued social capital that took decades after the 1950's to emerge into something that isn't seen as (just) accidental or ameliorative in design. I am proposing three formal strategies to augment pedestrian activity in existing built instances. These strategies of use may occur in combination or on their own.

Firstly, there is the *interior eventspace*- it flows from the street and back into the street. Its strength is the ambiguous nature of being a space defined by exterior or interior conditions. This space often uses climate and seasonal changes to transform the way it is used—it may be seasonally sealed out to the elements, it relates to the street in a direct way and often uses the street to double-up its own space for events;

The next type is easier to identify because of it being situated within a clearly defined spatial system of walls/other structures/sandwiched between a shared program separating it from the street. These are *public interior*s- this is unquestionably an 'interior' condition, the elements are more controlled than in the eventspace, a roof defines the interior even more than the walls do, it may use an intermediary circulation form to bridge with the street, historic arcades, hotel lobbies, airports, and modern urban mall (meaning that it has at least one party-wall condition) represent this type. Courtyard design would be a part of this category;

And then there are the *ribbons*- these are the most unpredictable forms of the three (and the most extensive/visible). They are the overhead and underground conduits *with* a program. They are sculptural, i.e.: pedestrian bridges, abandoned elevated rail lines, and staircases. And they may also be invisible-as part of vast, underground networks, with the Montreal and Toronto underground retail network serving as an example.

Urban filaments, used in a different context has been used once by noted anthropologist Marc Augé (2000, p. 10) who used the term to describe the effect on the users of spaces such as airports and their physical effect on someone, that deprives a user of control, choice, and variety of freedom—such spaces, he argues are 'non-places' where comfort and freedom aren't the main design driver. I am using the term quite differently; more along the lines of the filaments in my definition, are tools of revision/renovation of zones of public/private space that become freed to link up with the (proper name) streets of the city. Filaments do not treat all architectural perimeters and property lines as sacrosanct—in fact, urban filaments challenge many of these qualities of urban space in order to create linkages, extending the opportunity to see and experience the city in new ways.

Urban filaments in Toronto emerged alongside historical and social changes, spurred on by the growing congestion of major traffic corridors, and responding to the opportunity to provide ameliorative social/cultural space between the existing patterning of public/private space. It will be the work of future research to uncover the missing chapters of Toronto pedestrian-focused development prior to the dominance of the motorcar on the streets. Cars did eclipse any innovation in technology and science that helped to develop the language of urban filaments; a largely pedestrian outlook of travel within the built fabric was replaced with a competing vision of the street-as-technology. Unfortunately many early urban filaments have been rendered unrecognizable due to demolition and renovations into uses that did not encourage pedestrian access through sites mid-block.

Modernism misunderstood

The nature of the public realm is that it is a complex system. Systemic thinking may not be the answer. Cities/designers who propose revisions to the grid need to convince public and private interest groups that it is worth investing in a rich circulation system

for pedestrians. The architect Steven Holl describes a project concept in terms of layers of circulation systems, this illustrates the need for a multi-valenced approach with public/private spaces: ‘our project…organizes urban life in three overlapping functional and temporal layers; a permanent community of in-city residents, semi-transient office workers and urban commuters, and transient shoppers and tourists.’
(Holl, 2006, p. 88) This reinforces the sociologist’s interest in the role of pathways. Lyn H. Lofland expresses how the relationships between strangers and the familiarity with space itself when repeated are ‘often the enabling condition for the establishment of quasi-primary or intimate-secondary linkages (witness the case of the businessman and the homeless person).’ Since the patterns one has with a space, and with other users in that route are ‘experienced as a loss’ when removed or changed significantly, it merits further study to see how significant and large-scale changes in the urban fabric disrupt pedestrian routes. If a case can be made that modification can offer improved choices and quality of pedestrian movements, then pressure can be applied to actively design such urban filaments ‘at the drawing board’ stage, or after, as localized improvements that stitch together a larger ‘path, round, ranges.’ (Lofland, 1988, p. 66)

The following examples illustrate some spatial opportunities and existing pedestrian-focused areas in Toronto.

Strolls through spaces of opportunity

Rogers Centre, Bay Adelaide Gardens and the Cloud Forest Conservatory

The Rogers Centre, is an interesting public/private space in the city because of its size/unique program—serving as an open-air stadium, it was the center of a rehabilitation of the area near the CN Tower and rail yards adjacent to it. Because of the confluence of many different levels of transportation infrastructure that surround it, interesting public walkways, enclosed and open, offer different vantage points from which to experience the city in new ways. The actual stadium keeps itself non-porous to contain the events within, but it serves as the centre of new public life around it.
In comparison the Cloud Garden designed by a team including Architect George Baird, is a small space, situated on top of a parking structure for a tower complex. It has an intriguing series of ramps and stairs that lead to a compact series of modern urban follies, culminating in a greenhouse/ramp that is an elegant public gesture of composed nature. It has since been embraced by the cycling community, as a popular bicycle courier spot is adjacent to the park itself, lending value to the idea that urban filaments ought to embrace and interconnect local circulation patterns and unique groups, so that the spaces feel ‘owned.’

The Distillery District, Kensington Market

The Distillery District was lying closed by 1990 and purchased and renovated 13 years later to acclaim (also being named a historic district in the process) by a private company. It has one of the largest (brick paved network of pedestrian streets in the city, and its stock of Victorian structures have been rehabilitated and left with many elements intact-giving it a mixed touristic/historic sensibility. It is an example of a unique pocket in the city that puts pedestrian activity ahead of parking ease.
Kensington Market is similar in a few ways; it is largely unique as well in its resistance to large-scale demolition of older buildings, and it has resisted previous decades of urban development. Kensington is a collection of distinct shops in a low-rise area that is surrounded by creeping mid-rise redevelopment. It manages to exist largely intact, even with increasing land values. Because it is in an area of the city that experienced waves of immigration, the narrow, densely packed streets aren’t car-friendly. For six years running, the market closes a few of its streets to vehicles on Sundays during the

summer months. Both these market spaces are atypical from many commercial and retail areas in the city because of their large pedestrian and tourist activity/low vehicle use.

PATH system, Martin Goodman Trail

Dedicated city-sponsored pedestrian and active-transportation networks are dominated by the underground PATH retail network that is an ever-increasing privately-owned public walkway in the downtown business area. This structure began as a city-led push by the planning department of the 1960's to bring pedestrians underground to deal with the crowding by commuters on narrow city streets. It was controversial by those who were opposed to the idea that street life would be removed from the core. There are signs that the system is spreading out into nearby areas, but this is slow because of the natural graft to areas where commuter traffic is highest—near the existing subway stations. The PATH is a loose collection of independent property owners who maintain air-locks (steel and glass fire doors) between large tower properties (figure 3).

Figure 3 PATH system, the largest underground interconnected pedestrian network in the world

These air-locks are in fact between two different towers (typically) and the street; interestingly the city in the first few years paid to connect these underground malls, but realized that developers needed to connect to the system since it was proving to be so popular with their tenants/commuters, and so the city stopped funding the street right-of-way connections. The network is dizzying in its bends, and there is only opportunity to view the weather in a few places, so losing ones direction is frequent for those who don't use the system as a daily route. It is most successful in three spaces, interestingly this is where the system isn't normalized. Two are cultural spaces; the Design Exchange is a unique program in the PATH, being an art gallery/cultural institution that is quite permeable on two floors to foot traffic, the other is a simple naturally lit corridor that is a visual extension of Roy Thomson (concert) Hall. The pedestrian is mildly shocked by the lack of retail use and advertisements in this simple glass and concrete passage that looks out onto the submerged garden oasis across a pond.

The Martin Goodman Trail is part of an extensive waterfront trail for the entire region. It covers 56 km of separated active-transportation corridor along the water's edge

(figure 4). It was an important addition to the city's inventory of ravine and cycling networks. Ultimately it will be tied into a strong network of north-south routes in the future, making it a critical public route to access the waterfront.

Figure 4 The Martin Goodman multi-use trail along the waterfront

Scotiabank Nuit Blanche is an example of how a private group can entice the public to roam the city, both public and private spaces in a giant art-crawl that takes place one night every year in October. This year would have been the fifth year of the festival, and it partners with many corporations and organizations to host (official) curated art happenings along with (unofficial) local rogue artist installations, coming in to join in the fun. What is interesting is that both coexist, and the public transforms the city. Similar events that transform the city are the annual Jazz festivals and local neighbourhood festivals, which often close off an arterial street for an evening.

Mount Pleasant Cemetery, High Park

Mount Pleasant Cemetery, is a 200 acre, non-denominational privately-owned space, who's organization has been actively encouraging passive recreational use of the lands. It will be interesting to see how in the coming decades the tension between the desire to increase passive use of the trails (actually paved winding 2-way roads, unmarked) will collide with the need of the cemetery to appropriate lanes for reserved resting places…eventually the dynamic of public and private will likely develop less variables in the pathway choices winding through the land, and result in a more fixed route passing east/west, and reconnecting to the public street-system of cycling and pedestrian routes shared with vehicles. it is a dynamic and important example of public/private linkage.

High Park is a Victorian-era park in the Olmstead mold, except that much of the park is an existing Oak Savannah. The park is the largest park in Toronto's border, and has formal and informal paths for various types of active-transportation. It represents the largest donation of private land to the city for public use, and has maintained its program as a pedestrian-oriented urban park experience. It has connections to two subway stations that connected to the park on its fringe.

Eaton Centre, 137 Yonge Street

Eaton Centre, operating on a parallel system to Yonge Street, had at its inception a

silent, closed face to the (Yonge) street, effectively taking away a naturally desirable condition of the street- the shared open space between two sites was nullified. This condition was modified recently and now many new openings and connections cross-grain through the city-block long mall successfully permeate at street-level. The interior is a successful example of the atrium/retail model—there is sufficient visual activity to allow for people watching in the naturally-lit space (figure 5). #137 Yonge Street was an early example of a through-connection on the main level of this mid-rise office tower. It was active in the 1970's as a 'mini' mall off of busy Yonge Street. In comparison with the Eaton Centre it has proven to be less than cheery and has faced vacant shops with a general lack of upkeep over the years. It is one of many attempts to make a retail space in the city that has suffered because of the pull to the power-centres and large mall complexes that offer more choice. What is unfortunate in this example, is that it is one of very few true 'connections' between 2 streets that read as a clear indoor (private) connection. Compared to the lobby spaces that abound in the city, this was a test case for establishing short-cuts in Toronto. Future projects must learn what went wrong if we elect to create more pathways on ground level through our stock of large buildings.

Figure 5 Toronto Eaton Centre

Conclusion

Toronto is a vibrant city that has an opportunity to improve the connections between its many pathways and pedestrian-zones. There is a gulf separating the different ideologies of what uses define a healthy street; the tired argument that they are strictly transportation corridors to suit automobile/truck traffic is losing ground with a Toronto public who realizes that sharing the street improves the walkability of a community and ultimately to their quality of life. Public/private partnerships and events like Nuit Blance and the success of the large public galleries that are much more public in their outdoor grounds—the Royal Ontario Museum, The Art Gallery of Ontario, point to a public that values design and are willing to support such spaces that allow them to roam and explore the city in new ways.

Toronto needs to continuously absorb and even *re*discover various coping mechanisms to counteract the squeeze on public pedestrian streetscapes. As a result, there are various qualities and kinds of public/private spaces that are arguably urban filaments,

some emerging with other types enduring since before the Renaissance.

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