

PEDESTRIAN CLEARWAYS FOR TORONTO

Gordon Brown and Richard Gilbert

Toronto's first civic official was the Pathmaster, appointed in the late eighteenth century to ensure that property owners maintained the wooden sidewalks across the fronts of their properties. Toronto was then the Town of York, known as 'Muddy York.' (It became the City of Toronto in 1834.) Sidewalks were as necessary to pedestrians as they are today.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Toronto's sidewalks were being provided and maintained by the City, but with little enthusiasm. They were readily narrowed or even removed when space was needed for road traffic. Today, on Avenue Road just north of Bloor, the sidewalks have been curtailed to such a degree that pedestrians passing one another run the risk of being hit by road traffic. Similar treatment is proposed for St. Clair Avenue West, where sidewalks will be narrowed to maintain space for automobile traffic when a streetcar right-of-way is installed.

Where Toronto's sidewalks do have a reasonable width, adequate space for pedestrians often seems to be the last thing that is protected. The top photo shows typical cluttering of the sidewalk—on College Street—that makes it difficult for pedestrians to move, let alone pass each other. By-laws and policies protecting pedestrian amenity are ignored by businesses and remain unenforced by the City.

In other places, in Europe and South America, and even in Quebec and the U.S., pedestrians are given more respect. The other photos show how 'pedestrian clearways' are provided in four rather different places.

A common feature of these scenes from elsewhere is a straight, wide path for pedestrians—a 'pedestrian clearway'—provided at or near storefronts, even where it means locating patios on the curb side of the sidewalk.

Putting the pedestrian clearway at or near the storefronts means that the pedestrian route can be as straight as possible with less scope for encumbrance. These features are especially important for the visually impaired, and for people in wheelchairs or pushing strollers, but all pedestrians benefit from a safe predictable pathway.

Businesses benefit too, even the restaurant owners whose sidewalk patios are now a little further away. Pedestrians walk close to *all* storefronts, rather than missing those next to patios, as happens now. With curbside patios, pedestrians walk, in effect, *through* restaurants, ready to be impressed by good food, drink, and conviviality. Restaurant owners in Philadelphia credit their clearway/curbside patio system as being the main factor in the revitalization of the now vibrant Market Street district.

On June 14, Toronto City Council is to debate conducting a trial for such a system on College Street between Spadina and Bathurst, an initiative of the local residents'

association. A successful trial, and subsequent adoption throughout Toronto, could transform our pedestrian spaces, as has happened elsewhere.

Enhancing pedestrian amenity and sidewalk vibrancy will bring other benefits. Few things contribute more to the impression visitors have of Toronto than our sidewalks. Presently we do not rate well in this respect compared with other places, but this can change.

A related issue to be addressed by City Council on June 14 is a proposed set of guidelines for the design and placement of Toronto's street furniture, i.e., litter bins, traffic poles, light standards, litter receptacles, bike rings, benches, bollards, newspaper vending machines, etc. The staff report, *Vibrant Streets*, calls for replacement of most current street furniture with components characterized by "exceptional design, universal accessibility, safety, quality maintenance, pedestrian-oriented placement and sustainable components". We applaud this proposal.

Vibrant Streets also suggests that much of the cost be funded from "revenue from advertising on some elements." We are not against some advertising on our sidewalks, but are fearful on account of the City's recent disposition to put advertising ahead of everything else. We refer to the placement of massive structures, often in the path of pedestrians, notionally serving as litter bins or information kiosks but in reality designed to display large amounts of advertising.

Providing usable attractive sidewalks is a basic municipal service that should be mostly funded from the taxes we pay.

A 1978 report by Ray Bremner, works commissioner for the former City of Toronto, noted how an early Pathmaster, one D'Arcy Bolton, was taken to court for neglecting his duties. We don't believe his successor, if there is one, yet deserves such a fate, but we will be watching carefully to see if City Council makes the right decisions for pedestrians on June 14.

Text is 729 words

Gordon Brown and Richard Gilbert are on the board of the Harbord Village Residents Association, which is dedicated among other things to improving the pedestrian environment on College Street and elsewhere.

(Photos on next page)

1: Cluttered College Street, Toronto



2: St. Jérôme, Quebec



3: Santiago, Chile



4. Philadelphia



5. South Beach, Florida

