

Putting the walk back in sidewalk

Jun. 14, 2006. 01:00 AM

GORDON BROWN AND RICHARD GILBERT

Toronto's first civic official was the pathmaster, appointed in the late 18th century to ensure property owners maintained the wooden sidewalks across the fronts of their lands. 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-19th 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 Rd. 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 Ave. W., 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. Some quite wide sidewalks in Toronto have become so taken up with patios, A-frame billboards, and other paraphernalia, it's hard for two pedestrians abreast to squeeze by, and often impossible if one is in a wheelchair. Bylaws and policies protecting pedestrian amenity are ignored by businesses and remain unenforced by the city.

In other places, pedestrians are given more respect. There are strongly enforced "pedestrian clearways" in places as different as St. Jérôme (Quebec), Santiago (Chile), South Beach (Florida), and Philadelphia. A "pedestrian clearway" is a straight, wide path for pedestrians 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 storefronts means the route can be as straight as possible with less scope for encumbrance.

These features are especially important for the visually impaired and for those 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 St. district.

This week, Toronto City Council is to debate conducting a trial for such a system on College St. between Spadina and Bathurst. 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.

City council today is addressing a proposed set of guidelines for the design and placement of Toronto's street furniture, i.e., litter bins, traffic poles, light standards, bike rings, benches, bollards, newspaper vending machines, etc.

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 council makes the right decisions for pedestrians.

Gordon Brown is a controller with Ontario Power Generation. **Richard Gilbert** is an urban issues consultant and former Toronto city councillor.