

## 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue needs variety

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I was in Montreal recently. With a newly shaved head and iPod shoved into my ears, I braved the cool spring rain and set out to discover just what makes rue Ste-Catherine one of the great shopping streets of the world. Never mind that the head was the result of a cancer fundraiser not a fashion choice, and that the iPod was pumping out opera, I looked the part. And I learned two things.

First, while the faux-working class fad has thankfully doffed its last trucker cap, something more ominous is on the way. I first saw it in the Ralph Lauren store in Buenos Aires circa spring 2002, and I thought we had fought it off in this hemisphere, but no luck.

The 1980s are fully back in menswear -- bright colours, polo shirts, big-shouldered jackets, even pants with lots of zippers. I shudder to think . . . what's that? This isn't Swerve? Sorry, perhaps my other learning was more relevant to this page.

Dodging people on the street and the sidewalk on this cool day, I thought about all the things that we are told make a lively street, and how Ste-Catherine violates all of those so-called rules.

Rule: People will not go outside to shop when it's cold; that's why we need indoor malls and power centres where you can drive store to store.

In Montreal, the parking meters are set well back from the street, on the other side of the sidewalk, otherwise they would be buried in the huge snowdrifts. Yet, Ste-Catherine is alive 12 months of the year, late into the evening. So are Bloor, Queen and Yonge Streets in Toronto, despite the icy wind-tunnel effect in the winter.

Rule: One-way streets kill street life and downtown streets need to become two-way, traffic impact be damned. Downtown, Ste-Catherine is eastbound only, with parking on both sides. Doesn't seem to hurt any business.

Rule: Great shopping streets reject chain retail in favour of funky independent boutiques. This is the most pernicious myth, parroted

by urban activists, residents and the occasional misguided politician. It's also exactly wrong.

Ste-Catherine works precisely because there are large chain stores -- Brown's and Transit and, yes, the Gap, sit cheek-by-jowl with cool independent clothing stores, a 24-hour McDonald's shares a block with an all-night Egyptian cafe, several Starbucks and Second Cups compete with homegrown coffee chains and independents.

To me, this is the secret of a great shopping street, and we don't have anything approaching such a street in Calgary. Romanticize the Red Mile as much as you like, 17th Avenue is not a great shopping street.

Neither, for that matter, is Kensington, or 4th Street S.W., or Stephen Avenue (though this last one is close). And, if the recent hubbub over the Mount Royal Block is any indication, we're not going to get one any time soon.

For a street like this to work, it needs to attract people who don't live in the neighbourhood. Ste-Catherine, at its commercial hub, is near two universities, but is not a particularly residential area. People travel there, mostly by metro, to shop on foot.

Like it or not, they are attracted by the fact that they can go to the Gap, or to Chapters, and explore other stores while they are there.

Imagine a successful shopping mall turned inside-out and poured onto the street and you'll get it -- it's all about creating customer traffic and allowing the merchants to compete with one another for the attention of that traffic.

(In order for this traffic to bring nighttime liveliness, there also need to be night uses. Not just restaurants, bars and movie theatres, but bookstores and record stores that are open until midnight and fast-food joints where teenagers can linger at 1 a.m.

Streets like this are the lifeblood of great cities. They build community, they reduce dependence on the automobile, they encourage people to live closer in. We need them.

That's why the Mount Royal Block affair was so frustrating to me. The developer, Tonko, was wrong not because it wasn't sensitive enough to local residents, but because it was too sensitive to them. A Shoppers' Drug Mart is probably the single worst use for such a great block. It takes up space, yes, but it also serves only the needs of the local community on a street that needs to attract people from across the city. Who in the world would go down to 17th to pick up some diapers, some Lipitor and paper towels on sale?

I can only hope that the developer and the residents will see the light, and welcome with open arms the dream tenants of the new development -- a huge Gap store and a Chapters. A 24-hour Burger King wouldn't be bad, either.

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