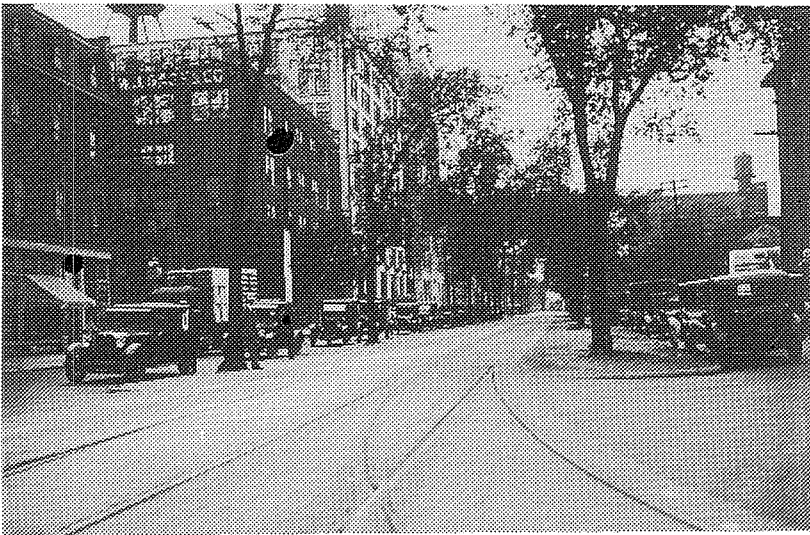


SPADINA AVENUE:

Oral & Visual Images

Rosemary Donegan, curator

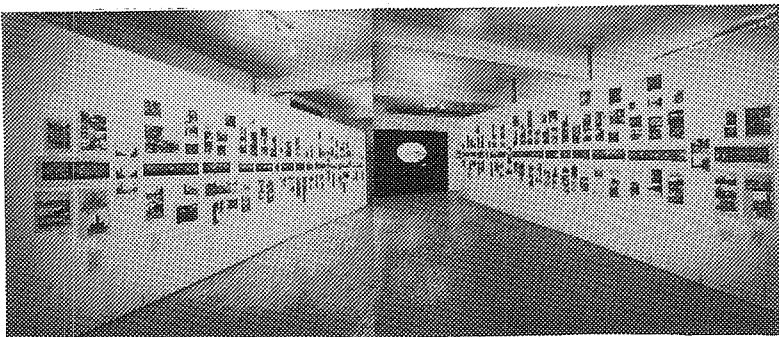


THE BOULEVARD, SPADINA & KING ST.
July 1928
Toronto Transit Commission Archives

Set within a nineteenth century grid, Spadina Avenue represents an anomaly in Toronto: slightly over-scaled, intensely active, yet somewhat unprepossessing. Its long and rich history has been the source of its fame and inspiration as the heart of the 'District'. Yet, most of its history is unwritten. What exists, survives in fragments of colourful stories and lingering memories, in its buildings and current neighbourhoods. In reconstructing Spadina's past, as an exhibition and subsequently as a book, these scattered and incomplete stories and resources were organized to form a composite image -- to connect the collective memory to a present reality and vision.

The exhibition 'SPADINA AVENUE: A Photohistory' opened at A SPACE Gallery, 204 Spadina Avenue in August 1984. The basic concept of the exhibition was that Spadina Avenue is a specific site, a public place. The exhibition was conceived around the idea of re-creating that site. Using a photographic panorama of the present street-wall, historical and contemporary photographs that established the geographic location of events were installed above and below the panorama. The textual material -- labels, extracts from interviews, historical texts, poems and newspaper articles -- was then installed with the photographs. The juxtaposition of the images and the texts attempted to visualize and elaborate the historical process as a complex layering of ideas, events, and issues, as opposed to a linear development of purely chronological events.

SPADINA AVE: A Photohistory/INSTALLATION
A SPACE, 204 Spadina Ave., 1984
Peter MacCallum, photographer



The Interview Process

As part of the exhibition research I conducted a series of interviews with local and former residents, businessmen, political activists, workers, professional politicians and entertainers. I wanted to obtain specific information, names, stories, and events, and also provide a verbal image of life on the street, the public place. The interviews were fascinating. The people I talked to often had highly developed verbal skills and were of a generation whose ability to speak publicly was their most important tool. The process of conducting oral interviews for a visual history was both complimentary and contradictory.

I was, first of all, an outsider. People were curious about what I was doing but somewhat guarded. What evolved was a discussion starting from my concern with the relationship between the physical street and the type of activities, work, politics, and cultural life that occurred there. Starting from the perspective of the street as a public place, as opposed to the more traditional historical categories of politics, labour, or economic history, forced people to rethink their own experience within a broader urban context. Once it was clear that what I was interested in was 'public information' -- opinion, ideas, gossip, rumours -- people were less guarded and quite eager to offer their stories. What I discovered, both in formal interviews and informal discussions, was that everybody had a story about the street whether they had lived and worked on Red Spadina in the 30s or hung out in the bars in the 60s.

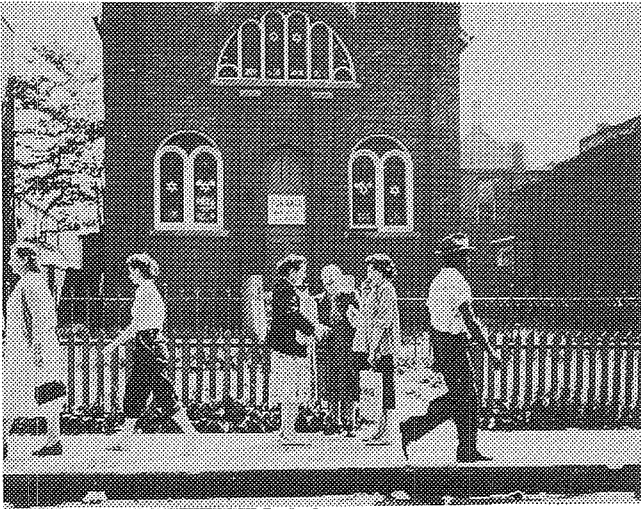
The interviews were stimulating, demanding and occasionally irritating revealing the inherent tension with the interview format. A tension that arose from the conflict between what the subject is interested in discussing and what the interviewer wants to know. Also, the stories that people told were often the 'dominant memory', the type of information that I was already familiar with. But what I never understood until I heard the entire story again, was how the subject would re-inact his or her own role or subjective viewpoint within the story.



DELEGATES TO THE 1929 YOUNG COMMUNIST LEAGUE CONVENTION, #381 Spadina Ave., 1929
Public Archives/Canada

MILTON ACORN RECEIVING THE PEOPLE'S POETRY AWARD, Grossman's Tavern, 1971
A personal memento of Al Grossman





STREET SCENE, AUGUSTA AVE.
Kensington Market Area, 1955
Michel Lambeth, photographer

FUR WORKERS GENERAL STRIKE
Spadina & Dundas, June 1958
York University Archives



The interviews were also an emotional experience -- memories spark wounds, photographs provide physical images of family and events now lost, names of one's closest associates and friends are forgotten. The interviewer, for professional and personal reasons and motives, stimulated and probed memories, often painful and confusing for the subject, and then shut off the tape recorder and went home. What is the responsibility both professionally and personally, of the interviewer to the subject?

Using photographs within the interview was extremely useful as it often elicited stories and events and detailed description of the local stores, strikes, deli's, and so on. Yet the information I would obtain in an interview I would often know was inaccurate, as I was able to relate specific events and dates to accurately dated photographs. Yet the verbal descriptions were, in the end, no more inaccurate than the photograph-as a single image of one place and one time. The oral description elaborated on, for example, the demonstration in the photograph and could usually tell me what was going on in the back alley that actually started the events in the photograph.

For example, there is an often repeated story that the internationally-known Jewish anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman had died above Switzer's, a local deli. I was never able to locate any factual evidence to support it and a death certificate clearly contradicted the story, showing Emma had died at the home of friends on Vaughan Road. Yet the story of her death on Spadina Ave is far more interesting and indicative of local mythology and how it is passed down, than the actual historical facts.

Interviews also enabled me to penetrate some psychological and social aspects of the racism of the period. For example, once I became aware that a substantial Black community had lived in the 'District', I started looking for photographs. But apart, from a single Black child in a school playground or the occasional Black pedestrian in a street scene, Blacks didn't seem to have any presence in the neighbourhood. In discussing this with a local bookstore owner, he wasn't surprised he said "we're not in the

picture, because we were taught to be invisible. You were always a negro walking around pretending you were a white man like everybody else, but we all knew it just wasn't so."

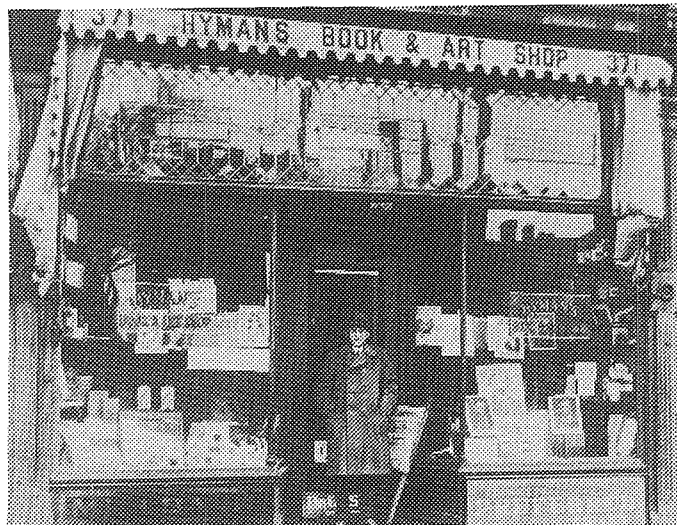
One of the major themes I pursued in both the photographic and oral research was the physical changes that shaped the street. Quite often this did not mean the actual destruction of buildings, but rather their adaptation to new purposes which paralleled the social and political development of the area. Using oral information -- vague memories, suggestions, contradictions -- especially those gathered from local amateur historians, enabled me to make connections and find visual documents that would have eluded my efforts if I had used purely documentary archival approaches.

The Street

Through the process of interviews, photographic research, and documentation, the history and present reality of the street began to take shape. Spadina, although not in itself a single homogenous community, represents a series of shared meanings for the city and the people who work and live there, and operates in a number of ways both physically and psychologically:

- a physical street: a specific place within the city, a traffic and transit artery, an unusually wide street
- a district: a main-street focus for a number of communities and neighbourhoods
- an economic base: a source of production in the manufacturing and service sector, as well as cultural production
- a symbol: for the immigrant and ethnic community as a familiar enclave and starting point
- a pressure point: within local and historical consciousness as a site of political struggle and cultural activity.

By using the physical form of the street as the framework and organizing principle for the exhibition and the book, Spadina Avenue (Douglas & MacKintyre, Vancouver/Toronto, November, 1985) photographic images, documentary texts, and oral interviews combine to provide a vantage point from which to observe the historical and contemporary life of the street.



HYMAN'S BOOK AND ART SHOP
#371 Spadina Ave., 1925
Toronto Jewish Congress Archives

CITY WORKERS
Spadina Ave., May 1919
City of Toronto Archives

