

understanding the urban landscape

- [spacing.ca](#)
- [Radio /](#)
- [Atlantic /](#)
- [Ottawa /](#)
- [Vancouver /](#)
- [Montreal /](#)
- [Toronto /](#)



- [spacing.ca](#)
- Browse by:
- [Category ///](#)
- [Writer ///](#)
- [Date ///](#)
- [About](#)
- [Subscribe to Mag](#)
-

Search

Search

[Monday's Headlines](#)

July 5th, 2010

[STREET
SCENE:
Canada Day](#)

[City shying away from shared street on John](#)

By [Dylan Reid](#) // [7 Comments](#)



Last fall, I took part in a walkabout along and around [John Street](#) with an urban planner who was working on a master plan for the [Entertainment District](#) on behalf of the local Business Improvement Association (BIA). Lots of good ideas for the area were discussed, but the most interesting concept was the idea of making John St. into an attractive, pedestrian-oriented “shared street”, in the style of an increasing number of downtown streets in European cities and even some in North America, transforming it into a real destination that could serve as the heart of the district, and a place where artistic installations and a variety of events could be staged.

The idea of a shared street is to create a distinctive space where motor vehicles are made aware that they share the roadway with cyclists and pedestrians. As a result, motor vehicles drive slowly, and the volume of motor vehicle traffic is low (because other routes are faster), creating a safe and comfortable venue for cyclists and a space where pedestrians can overflow from crowded sidewalks or cross easily at any point. It should be designed so that everyone knows to watch out for and accommodate each other.

John Street makes a lot of sense for this concept. It is not a major route for cars, who have plenty of alternatives (such as Simcoe, Duncan and Peter). It’s currently pretty nondescript, but it connects a series of very pedestrian-oriented streets (Queen, King) and destinations, especially a whole series of high and popular cultural sites: from the AGO at the top, through MuchMusic (which often closes it for various events already), the National Film Board and the Scotiabank movie theatre, the club district’s clubs and restaurants, the live theatres and restaurants on King, the Film Festival’s new Lightbox movie theatres, Metro Hall, the CBC headquarters with the Glenn Gould theatre, and finally the Convention Centre, the Skydome and the CN Tower. There is also quite a spectacular potential view of the street north from the bridge over the tracks at the Skydome, although at the moment it’s not much to look at.

Not surprisingly given these destinations, the [majority of the trips on the street are made on foot](#) (PDF) — over 60% at most times of the day, and never less than 49%. That’s the case even now when it is simply a functional street, with mostly standard, uninteresting sidewalks and little to attract people unless they need to use it. Effectively, even without much of interest, it already serves as the connecting corridor of the entertainment district and the various cultural, visitor and employment destinations along it.

If it were transformed into an attractive space, a “cultural corridor” with a real sense of place that was open to special events and installations, it could become an appealing destination that provides the district with a connecting spine the area doesn’t quite have at the moment. The number of people walking there would increase significantly.

With the support of the BIA, the City of Toronto is currently conducting a study of the [possibilities for John Street](#). They’ve looked at [various alternatives](#) (PDF), but while they consider the idea of a shared street (“alternative 2”), City staff have unfortunately backed away from it and instead are advocating a more conventional plan to just widen the sidewalks (“alternative 4” — the road would be reduced to one lane in each direction that would be wide enough for safe cycling — especially since there is no parking).

The study cites “safety challenges” as one drawback of the shared street idea. While it’s natural to be concerned about this issue, shared streets have been implemented safely in many places. Part of the concept is creating ways to signal to vehicles that the nature of the street is different and that drivers should proceed slowly and cautiously, through varied paving and other signals — strategies that have proved effective elsewhere.

Another reason the study doesn’t embrace the shared street alternative is the nature of the evaluation process. If you look closely at the City’s evaluation criteria ([page 6 of this PDF](#)), the “socio-cultural” category seems to in fact focus on the impact on local businesses (while the “economic” category is about the cost to the city). That means that one of the real strengths of the shared street idea — to create a great space for social and cultural activities

— is essentially overlooked.

The impact on business should be considered separately — but even then, it's not clear why the shared street concept would be a problem, since it's the local BIA that has been supporting the idea.

The preferred alternative is certainly not bad — it would make for a much more attractive street that would gain a “sense of place” that it currently lacks and become something of a destination. But it reduces the potential for a truly inspiring and innovative transformation. As well, without a clear plan for slowing vehicle traffic, it's not as clear that it benefits cyclists all that much (although a single wider lane in the southern part of the street will help a bit and may reduce traffic volume).

On the plus side, the preferred alternative sets the stage for a potential evolution of the street going forward. As the street becomes more heavily used by pedestrians and as more events are held there, the desirability of a shared street may become more evident, and additional steps can be gradually taken to move in that direction.

photo by [Bryson Gilbert](#)

Interact

[7 Comments](#)

[Add a Comment](#)

Share

 [Email This Post](#)

 [Facebook](#)

 [Twitter!](#)

 [Stumbleupon](#)

 [Reddit](#)

 [Technorati](#)

Related

More by [Dylan Reid](#)

More in [Culture](#), [Neighbourhood](#), [Pedestrian](#), [Streetscape](#)

Comments

Neither the author nor Spacing necessarily agree with the comments posted below. Spacing reserves the right to edit or delete comments entirely. See our [Comment Policy](#).

The recommended or shared street alternatives work for me.

Certainly more room for pedestrians and a grand beautification will encourage ‘active transportation’ and add to the public realm in a profound way.

I am rather discouraged to see the bike union opposing this in favour of bike lanes yet again.

They ruined the Jarvis street proposal (it will remain ugly and unfriendly to pedestrians);