



Photo By David Hawe

## Cover Story

### What killed the club district?

The battle between condos and clubs in the Entertainment district is coming to an end, but is the war over nightlife just beginning?

|By Benjamin Boles

Every year in Toronto, a shiny new hot nightspot appears on the scene claiming that it will revolutionize the way we party. This time, however, the bar getting all the buzz isn't a mega-club with lasers and smoke machines – it's a bowling alley.

The Ballroom (145 John), with its high-end lanes and sports on giant flat-screen TVs, is definitely something different for the zone in the core known as the Entertainment District, and many see it as a sign of where the area is going.

The concept seems improbable at first, but the upscale sports bar and bowling facility is already doing good business while the streets surrounding at Richmond and Adelaide are haunted by boarded-up nightclubs.



Clubland past  
Photo by Mark Coatsworth

“Well, this is no longer the club district – that’s evident, right?” says co-owner Thanos Tripi. “All that club energy has left. I wanted to provide something different.”

What was once one of the busiest club districts in North America – throngs of high-spirited revellers, snarled traffic and an over-hyped reputation for rowdiness and violence – became a victim of its own success. We’re now witnessing the end of an experiment in concentrating nightlife that probably won’t be repeated in Toronto.

Too often, the nightclub debate has been framed around simplistic narratives about villains and victims, but there are no clear heroes here. While some might say clubland lost its cool points years ago, I can’t help being struck by what the loss of so many venues will mean, especially since there’s no other practical spot for the party scene to set up shop.



Clubland present  
Photo by Enzo DiMatteo

While some would say the idea was fatally flawed to begin with, the club district made for a great night on the town when it worked, and solved some of the very real problems cities struggle with. It kept the noise away from where people lived and revitalized a desolate post-industrial area in dire need of a second life, and its proximity to the subway helped discourage drunk driving.

Without a demarcated zone, the scene will rub up against residential neighbourhoods wherever it moves, ensuring that dance clubs will forever remain contested terrain.

Late-night partying will no longer define Richmond/Adelaide; the new Master Plan for the area ([see sidebar](#)) is pretty clear about that.

“Let’s put it this way: there are going to be fewer and fewer nightclubs, and there are fewer and fewer properties that can even accommodate them,” says Janice Solomon of the Entertainment District BIA, which sponsored the plan.

Sure enough, the plan aims to transform the streets from a playground for the young and inebriated to something that sounds more like Yorkville. Studies are being done to turn John into a pedestrian-friendly “cultural corridor” extending up to the AGO, and references to nightclubs are conspicuous by their absence in the document.



Clubland present  
Photo by Enzo DiMatteo

“Those days are done,” says Solomon. “It’s not feasible or affordable to take over big warehouses in the downtown core. At the same time, you don’t want things to just shut down and end up with a quiet and dark nighttime – that’s not healthy for an entertainment district, and it’s not healthy for a city.”

Solomon favours operations that aren’t solely dependent on making their money between midnight and 2 am on Friday and Saturday night. “I think we could get all kinds of nightlife in here, and a really good example is the bowling alley.”

For the King-Spadina Residents Association, this shift can’t come soon enough. For much of the 00s, co-founder Donald Rodbard led a campaign against the explosion of clubs. Media stories about an Entertainment District out of control were so common in the last decade, most people had no idea that the peak passed back in 2007 just as the much-hyped, ill-fated Circa nightclub opened.

“We’re down about 50 per cent in terms of the number of clubs,” Rodbard says with a hint of pride.

“That decline was because of the pressure put on them. We’ve heard through the grapevine that they’re moving out to College and Queen West now because there’s not as much pressure from the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario and the police.”

He’s right that his group’s efforts had a major effect on the recent decline, but as with most things in life, the real story is much more complicated. To get a better sense of how we got to this point, you have to go back to the beginning. Way back.

When David Assoon and his brothers opened the Twilight Zone at 185 Richmond West in 1981, this was a very different neighbourhood. The area’s first club was also T.O.’s first truly world-class dance club.



Clubland present  
Photo by Enzo DiMatteo

“The Richmond Street area was basically a lot of empty warehouses left over from the fashion industry,” says Assoon. “It was perfect: close to the hotels, close to the subway, tons of free parking, and there weren’t any residents to complain.”

By the time they closed their doors eight years later, a handful of other venues had followed their lead to the area. While Assoon doesn’t recall many problems with violence, he paints a picture that would horrify residents’ groups.

“We had people lined up from midnight to 4 in the morning. Customers would find the club just by following the sound of the bass. Some nights there were just as many people hanging around outside as inside. I don’t think anyone will experience that kind of thing again in Toronto.”

By the time the Twilight Zone’s impressively long run ended in 1989, the idea of pushing clubs into the desolate maze of empty warehouses had taken root. Says Tony Sbrocchi, part of the team that ran the Living Room through the 90s and into the early 00s, “They were begging people to start up places, and making it fairly easy. The rents were cheap, but it was still a gamble.”

My first experiences of the district as a teenager in the early 90s weren’t even at proper clubs, since I was too young. Some weekends, it seemed that illegal booze cans and warehouse parties outnumbered legitimate clubs. If the cops busted a rave early, the party would often end up moving to one of the clubs after the regular crowd had left for the night. By the end of the 90s, the scene had become enormous, and as the ravers entered their 20s, it shifted to the clubs.

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Clubland present  
Photo by Enzo DiMatteo

Coinciding with this underground youth culture movement was mainstream hip-hop's takeover of the pop charts toward the last half of the 90s. For years it was rare for an Entertainment District bar to play rap on a weekend night, but as the genre came to own the top-40 charts, the clubs finally got over their fears and embraced it as well.

Suddenly you had both the underground and mainstream crowds looking for places to dance, and the free market was more than happy to satisfy the demand. That moment didn't last, though, and soon the vibe started to change yet again.

Money attracts money, and in the early 00s the club boom started looking like an exciting investment. The new generation of club owners saw easy money to be made, usually in the form of cookie-cutter top-40 bars catering to the same mainstream crowd as the others. Those of us searching for something different might still end up in the area for a special event, but increasingly the trendsetters looked elsewhere for places to dance.

Along with the rapid growth of the club scene in the late 90s came zoning changes ([see our timeline](#)) that allowed the industrial spaces the clubs had embraced to be converted into condos. While the influx of new residents helped provide patrons for the bars, it also meant the end of the honeymoon for clubs. A bazillion clubs crammed into one small area is not a good mix with residents trying to get a good night's sleep.

As soon as no longer even agrees with the concept of an entertainment zone. "Toronto is too big now to force the nightclubs into that small of an area. It creates a negative environment. In the club district, no one was doing anything different from anyone else."

Sbrocchi thinks club owners who throw a couple of million into dressing up a space but have no actual concept are partially responsible for the changing atmosphere. "They [think] you can just throw money at a club and it'll make money, but you've got to create a certain vibe and feeling or you end up attracting the wrong crowd."

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Clubland present  
Photo by Enzo DiMatteo

Before long, the hipper aspects of Toronto nightlife started moving out. First, clubs crossed Spadina in the early 00s, where Sbrocchi opened Hush just around the corner from Roxy Blu, Una Mas and Footwork. West Queen West blew up, and the Ossington strip got a new lease on life as karaoke bars were converted into chic lounges.

To complicate things further, the divisions between underground rock and dance music were crumbling, giving the edge to venues that could handle both live bands and DJs. All the while, skyrocketing rents in the club district were reducing already meagre profit margins.

This was the environment that faced legendary NYC club king Peter Gatien when he opened ambitious mega-club Circa in October 2007. He quickly discovered it wasn't going to be smooth sailing.

Opposition from residents and Councillor Adam Vaughan delayed the launch for so long that his initial investors backed out. When Circa finally opened its doors, it was under a huge debt load that would ultimately be its undoing. It didn't help that the hipster crowd he hoped to attract wasn't interested in partying in a club that looked like a mall (and is now slated to become a department store). [Read more of Adam Vaughan's views on clubs here.](#)

So 30 years after it began, Toronto's club scene is back where it started, but the particular conditions that made clubland possible probably won't arise here again. It seemed like a good idea at the time and worked better than most now give it credit for, but the moment has passed for good.

So what now? Does Toronto have to get used to the idea of residents and nightlife living side by side? Is there a compromise to be found between a vibrant city with a healthy nightlife and one where you can enjoy some peace and quiet in your own home? From now on, even if nightclubs aren't in your backyard, they're in someone else's.

**For more on clubland, read:**

- [A breakdown of the clubland numbers](#)
- [One clubland resident's lament for days gone by](#)
- [The future of clubs in Toronto](#)

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