Merchants fight to save Victorian houses: Shop owners fear proposal ...
WALLACE IMMEN
The Globe and Mail (1936-Current); Nov 4, 2002; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail
pg. A15

Merchants fight to save Victorian houses

Shop owners fear proposal to build hotel and condo would deal blow to area's character

BY WALLACE IMMEN

The row of three-storey Victorian homes surrounded by throngs of affluent shoppers is the picture-postcard view of Toronto's Yorkville district.

But turn the card around and all you see is a big, empty rectangle.

"If we lose this streetscape, the entire neighbourhood is gone," said Budd Sugarman, who runs an interior-design business in the historic village at ground zero of modern high-rise redevelopment.

Mr. Sugarman and other Yorkville shop owners have been fighting a running battle against a proposal to demolish the 1890s-era, peaked-roof Victorian semis and cover most of the north side of Yorkville Avenue from Hazelton Avenue to Avenue Road with a nine-storey hotel and condominium.

Toronto's new official plan, which was approved by council last week, may promise to preserve the character of neighbourhoods, but if it can't save a place with the character of Yorkville from destruction, it won't change anything, said Mr. Sugarman, 81, who has lived and worked in Yorkville for 50 years. "The city isn't protecting us at all."

The condemnation was echoed this week by residents groups in North Toronto, who complain the new official plan throws out previous zoning rules in an effort to promote growth. The groups fear the new system cannot protect them against massive redevelopment of their communities.

Robert Saunderson, president of the Bloor-Yorkville Business Improvement Area, said a coalition of business and community groups in the district have negotiated directly with the developer, who agreed to reduce the proposed building to nine storeys from 15 to meet community concern.

The BIA has fashioned its own design guidelines, which recommend any new building be set back as far from the street as the present homes and have a façade along the street no more than three storeys tall.

They would still like to persuade York Row Ltd. to preserve the façades, but "it all depends on their goodwill," Mr. Saunderson said.

He said the developer already has permission from the Ontario Municipal Board to demolish the Yorkville houses. The Toronto Heritage Society, which could stop the demolition, does not consider the block historically important because interiors were gutted when the buildings were renovated in the 1970s and modern brick was applied to the outside.

Councillor Kyle Rae, who represents the area, argued that some buildings on the street, such as the stunning Yorkville library and fire hall, are worth saving. But these houses that have become commercial spaces are not.

He believes the new development is essential to revitalize Yorkville, which is facing competition for trend-setting stores from districts such as Queen Street West.

He said that under the new official plan, the limits for development in the area will be essentially the same as under the former zoning rules.

Mr. Sugarman said that means the city will continue to neglect Yorkville. When he first opened a shop on neighbouring Cumberland Street in 1948, the formerly independent village, which has roots in the 1850s, had been on the decline for at least a quarter of a century.

In the 1960s, Yorkville became known as a hang-around for hippies and bike gangs and for clubs that gave singers such as Gordon Lightfoot and Joni Mitchell their starts. In later years, denim made way for Dior, and the area became the city's priciest boutique district.

With money came towering office and residential redevelopment. Mr. Sugarman said he and others had to fight "like crazy" to preserve the historic character that he said is a key element in Yorkville's tourist appeal.

On Bloor Street, a gap in a canyon of high-rises is being filled in with a 26--storey tower. But it includes the art deco stone façade of the former University Theatre.

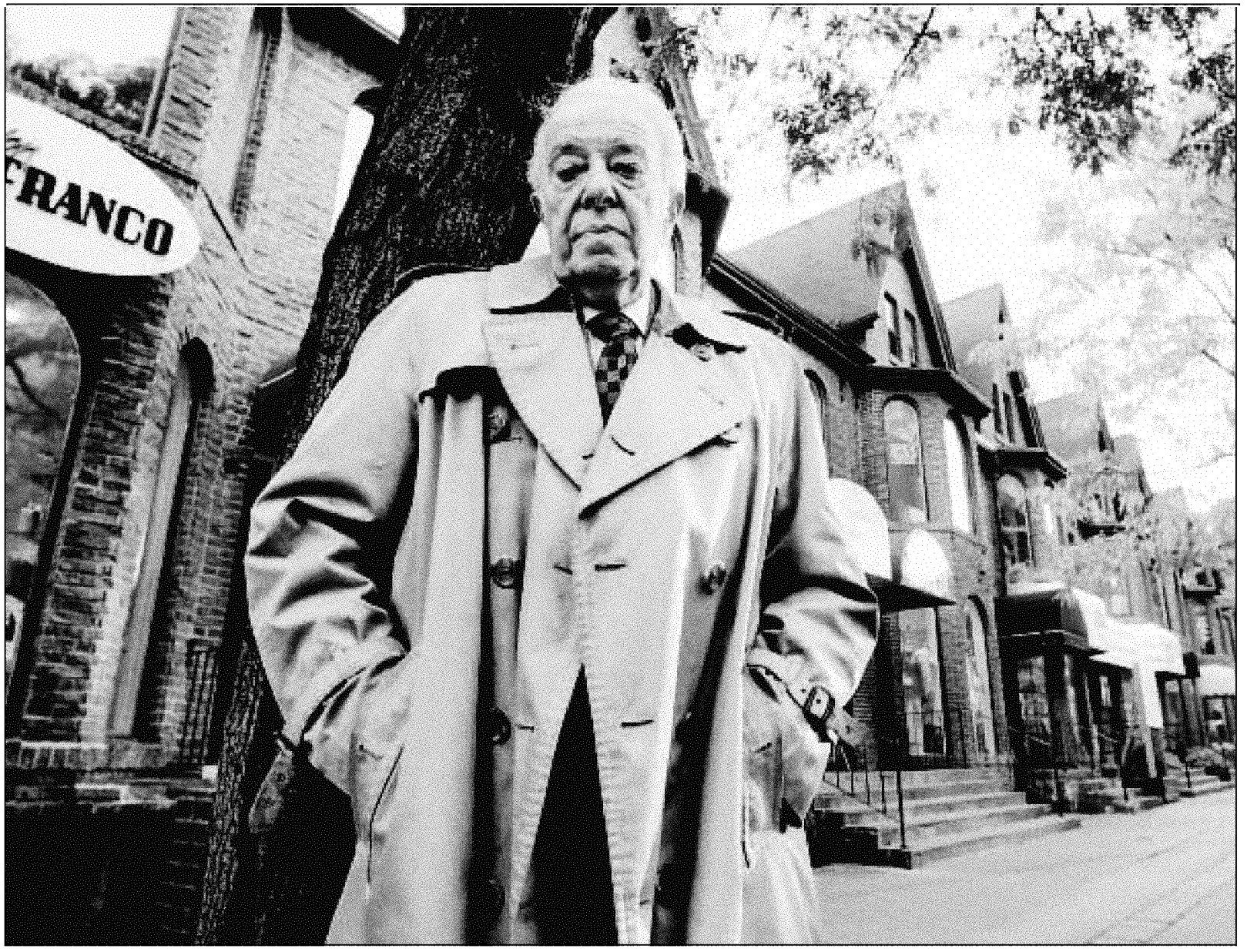
At the corner of Bloor and Avenue Road, a residential building reaches 26 storeys but does not seem that high because it is set back from the street.

On Bay Street north of Bloor, condominium blocks have replaced small shops, but the community won concessions that included open space at the corner of Yorkville Avenue.

More redevelopment is in the works on Yorkville, with a proposal for two more buildings on the north side of the street. One would be an eight-storey condominium that would include the restoration of the building, now boarded up, that was the original Mt. Sinai Hospital. The 19th-century structure is protected as a heritage property. The other is an 18-storey tower that would be built on what is now a parking lot.

Mr. Sugarman hopes the city or heritage board will still step in to save the unique Yorkville row.

"If this goes through, 26 businesses would be relocated and there would only be six stores in the new building. Where do all these little businesses go? Some will probably disappear," he said.



TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Budd Sugarman, 81, stands in front of a row of 1890s-era, peaked-roof Victorian houses on Yorkville Avenue that may be demolished to allow the construction of a hotel and condominium. 'If we lose this streetscape, the entire neighbourhood is gone,' Mr. Sugarman said.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.