

JANE'S WALK May 2, 2009
By Bobbi Speck

We're standing in front of Spadina Gardens (you can just barely see the initials etched into the door glass), which was built in 1905. During the century it has been home to many notable people – writers, actors, film makers, publishers, opera divas.

But today it seems fitting to remember one of the earliest notable tenants: Sir Henry Pellatt of Casa Loma fame, who lived with his wife on the ground floor of #45. The apartments run all the way to the back of the building, and there are two per floor. Sir Henry and his wife lived in the north apartment (where I live now), and his armour collection occupied the south apartment just across the hall.

I mention Sir Henry because, as you saw in the photograph, Spadina was once an elegant street, the immediate Southern vista for Henry when he lived in Casa Loma. But Henry would have been shocked to see Spadina Road when I moved to this neighbourhood in 1967: it was the most decrepit street in the entire Annex.

And the reason for its decline was because it was destined to become an expressway! In fact, the biggest slum landlord that was buying up and devaluing most of the houses along the route was our own Metropolitan Toronto government – the Overlord governing body made up of the city and the boroughs—which was exercising a form of blockbusting by letting their properties run down, causing domino sales as values plummet.

Now there was no mention of the Spadina Expressway in 1967 when we bought our first house on Brunswick Avenue, in the block between Sibelius Park and Dupont. Imagine my surprise when I read about it in the *Globe*. At that time I knew few neighbors, but I had a waving relationship with another young mother across the street. And I simply *had* to tell someone. Lorraine Van Riet turned out to be a kindred spirit.

Lorraine echoed my concern – not only for this beautiful neighborhood, but for the entire downtown. “Where would they park all those cars?” we wondered. And as a New Yorker newly arrived in Canada, I had witnessed first hand the disaster that was New York’s Long Island Expressway, which was jammed before construction was completed. We learned the lesson: “If you build it, the cars will come.”

“Well,” said Lorraine, “We have to stop it.” “Right,” I agreed. And that was how it all began. The year was 1968.

Now just how do two mothers pushing prams go about stopping an expressway? As newcomers to the area, we were not plugged into the community through schools or other institutions. And remember, this was the ‘sixties: before computers, and before instant printing was widely available. Happily, the option of unlimited local phone calls had been introduced, and this became our greatest tool. And as for information: we relied on the media and libraries.

In the 1960s very few residents in these parts knew their neighborhood was named the Annex. Nor did we know the actual boundaries, although they do form a geographical unity, stretching east-west from Avenue Road to Bathurst, and north-south from the railroad tracks to Bloor.

At the time this was a neighborhood in transition, 87% owned by absentee landlords. The ARA was actually the Annex *Ratepayers’* Association, representing homeowners, not tenants. Despite this limited membership, it was one of the oldest and most powerful ratepayers’ associations in the city.

But the ARA told us we were too late. It was a *fait accompli*, the battle having been lost a decade earlier, and the only concession the Ratepayers achieved was in

the design: the proposed ground-level expressway was to be dropped to below grade from Dupont to Bloor, with pedestrian bridges – much like the Allen north of Eglinton. The ARA admired our pluck however, and invited Lorraine and me on to the Board. But as far as the expressway fight was concerned, we were on our own.

Undaunted, we gathered together the few people we knew from our local park, parents from Brunswick, Howland and Walmer, and met weekly in my house. We called ourselves The Committee of Concerned Citizens, and we adopted a different approach. Where the resident groups in the past had questioned *how* it would be built in their neighborhood, we asked not *how* but *why*: what was its overall relation to the total transportation planning for all of Metro? and what were the socio-economic effects?

In February of 1969 we put together 23 questions and sent them off to the Planning Department in preparation for a proposed public information meeting. We sent copies to our aldermen, Mayor, Metro Chairman, City Controller, our MPPs, various city officials, and leaders of business and resident communities along the route south of Bloor.

The Planning Department took this questionnaire seriously, and enlisted the help of other municipal and Metro departments. The resulting response was shocking: to put it simply, they hadn't done any studies of this type. They only confirmed that Spadina was one of *five* planned expressways or extensions – a sort of five-headed behemoth.

We developed a new strategy. Unable to penetrate the resignation of the ARA and the powerful neighborhoods north of us, we decided to go out to the boroughs and suburbs who wanted the expressway, and convince them that it wouldn't work. There were federations of ratepayer associations in York, East York and North York, and Lorraine and I telephoned them all.

We also learned that ratepayer and business associations in the vulnerable areas south of Bloor were mobilizing, and we kept them abreast of our activities.

The turning point was when we were invited to address a Residents' Association meeting in East York. Lorraine and I hadn't discussed who was to speak, each unaware that the other found the notion of formally addressing a group terrifying. (The phone was easy!)

But I was sitting on the aisle, and when our names were called, Lorraine pushed me out. We were both pregnant at the time, and I waddled unsteadily up to the microphone, an unlikely Paul Revere.

It was our roly-poly shapes which saved us, because there was a *Toronto Star* reporter in attendance whose wife was also pregnant. I'm not sure if it was the pregnant issue or the issue that we all were pregnant that got his attention, but we ended up on the front page of the Metro News Section on April 16, 1969. There were photos of the Spadina construction, and one of me with a telephone, and some dramatic quotes about the "concrete dagger in the heart of the city".

For several days my phone rang incessantly, drawing overwhelming response from all over Metro, representing both sides of the expressway issue, and all very heated. Among the callers were other associations which declared themselves prepared to fight the expressway. In very short order, The Committee of Concerned Citizens became a movement.

We held neighborhood public meetings. By then instant printing was only a short bus ride away, and though it took two trips, with babies in tow, we sometimes even had flyers printed in one day. These went up on trees and hydro poles.

I am not sure which of our early meetings was the first that Jane Jacobs attended. It was either the Teach-In at the JCC on Bloor Street, or the meeting at the home of Fred and Louise Field on Kendal. That's where I first met Jane, though. I had no idea who she was, but she was impressive (and I loved her familiar New

York accent) and afterwards I asked her to become involved. "That's why I'm here, dearie," she responded with eyes twinkling. We discovered who she was later that night when we studied the sign-in sheet. She had just moved to Toronto, and I think was still unpacking!

In the continuing months, Lorraine and I campaigned daily by telephone. Phones were attached to walls in those days, and there were no nannies, so our clever toddlers took advantage of our lack of mobility and let us know how much they resented our lack of attention. I can remember my two-year-old slowly emptying out all the bookshelves within his reach, or wandering around the room with a screwdriver in his hand, searching for the electrical outlet, while I tried to convince a stranger on the other end of the phone to join the fight! I almost entirely abandoned my work as a free-lance editor as well during that year – activism can be expensive.

One year after we began meeting in my home, the newly formed Stop Spadina Save our City Coordinating Committee (**SSSOCCC!!**) took over, creating the extraordinary public movement. Lorraine and I, and some of the others, hung up our generals' caps and marched happily as foot soldiers in the ranks of this most energetic and creative organization.

The ground swell was enormous. We threw our bodies down in front of bulldozers, held picnics in the construction area, and while our numbers increased, new leaders emerged -- like Jane Jacobs and Colin Vaughan, and Nadine and David Nowlan -- who took the fight to greater heights. Our early contacts with residents' associations in the boroughs led to the formation of CORRA and METRA, which were city-wide and metro-wide federations of residents' associations.

The movement's ultimate success in 1971 was engineered through the quiet negotiations of the rarely talked about Spadina Review Corporation, headed by our own Annex heroes, David and Nadine Nowlan, and Jane Jacobs.

Our original little group, The Committee of Concerned Citizens, did not stop the expressway: we were simply the canaries in the mines. And afterwards Lorraine and I found our vigilance was still required: for blockbusting by developers and real estate agents continued in the neighborhood for years after the expressway had died.*

The last remaining remnant of this scourge is the street where I now choose to live, on this very historical street: the still not-so-lovely Spadina Road. The only not-so-lovely street in the Annex. But the Ugly Duckling I love!

**(In fact, Lorraine and I became publishers (!) of The Sunday Brunswick, "Toronto's first Sunday newspaper", printed on both sides of folded legal size paper through the magic of instant printing, and composed and distributed by Lorraine and me in an effort to keep our immediate neighbors informed about very local issues. But that's another Annex tale!)*