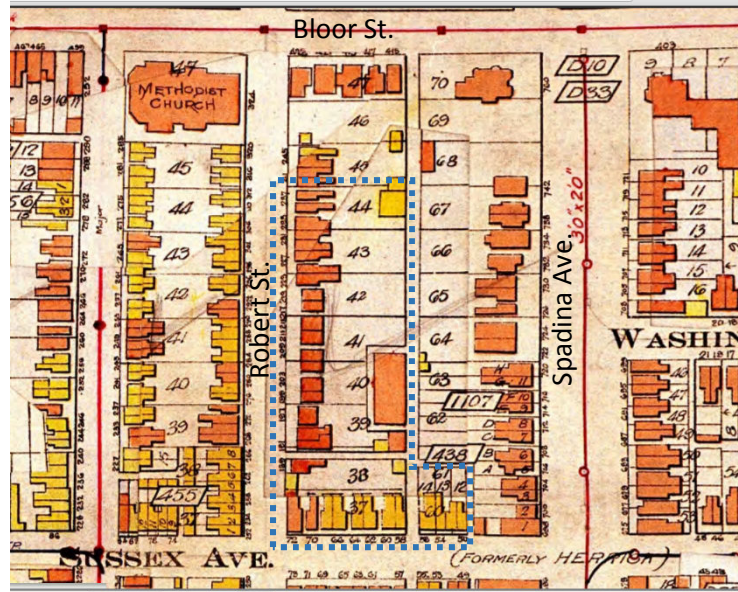


History of the Robert St. Field: can the University of Toronto again exhibit “exemplary” behaviour to facilitate the building of a new residence?

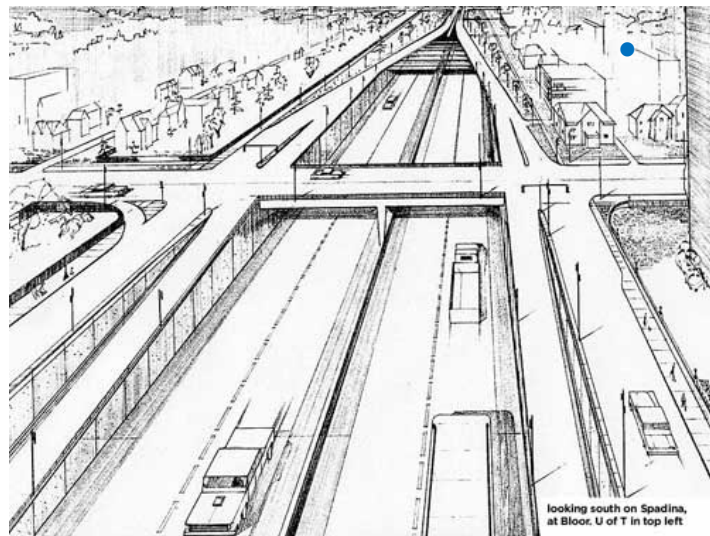
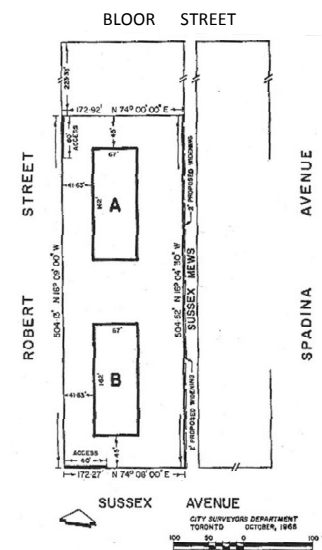
13-November-2017 by Nicholas Provart, nicholas.provart@gmail.com.

Cities grow and change. Municipalities have considerable power to amend zoning bylaws and designate areas for high density development. This is a brief history of how a neglected area in the heart of Toronto came to be, based on events that happened 50 years ago in the quest for modernity.

The City of Toronto, as part of its vision for when the Spadina Expressway would be built, decided that the land on the block surrounded by Robert, Sussex, Bloor and Spadina, should be developed. What better use of the land than to have the off-ramp of the Spadina Expressway at Lowther deliver people to beautiful shiny towers at Bloor and Spadina? It would be like St. James Town! The City rezoned¹, perhaps at the request of Genern, Planet and Berdevco Investments, who had quietly bought up many of the 32 properties² along Robert and Sussex Avenues.



Robert Street field area (blue dashed area on 1924 Goads Fire Insurance Plans) encompassed 32 houses and a small factory until 1968-1969².



Plans from By-law 111-67 amendment (from 1967), permitting the development of two residential towers on the Robert St. field site, with an area not exceeding 256,000 square feet, pending O.M.B. approval. The blue dot on the rendering of intersection of the Spadina Expressway and Bloor Street³, looking south, shows where these towers would have been (they actually appear in the renderings).

¹ No. 111-67 – A By-law to amend By-law No. 20623 (the main set of City by-laws) respecting certain lands on the north side of Sussex Avenue between Robert Street and Sussex Mews, passed March 2, 1967.

² From an [online version of Goad Fire Insurance Plans](#), available from the City of Toronto Archives, and title searches.

³ Image from https://torontoist.com/2006/06/spadina_express_1/, probably from original City renderings.

Area residents were not quiet in these matters. An 80 page report⁴ to the City of Toronto Planning Board for their meetings on April 11th and May 1st, 1967, from the Sussex Area Residents' Association, with Robert Beardsley of 67 Sussex Avenue as the acting chair, requested "that the Planning Board arrange to hold a public meeting with residents of the area so that the planning proposals could be discussed fully and frankly with a view to reconciling the differences of viewpoint which exist". They saw shortcomings (as would many today) in the planning proposals in terms of the loss of affordable housing both for University of Toronto students and owners of the houses in the designated area, increased density, the lack of recognition of the area in serving "a real function in the creation of a Canadian nation" by having absorbed successive waves of immigrants, and limited green space. In June, 1967, the by-law authorizing the rezoning for the two towers was repealed by By-law 256-67.

Perhaps sensing that their plans for the Robert St. lands were going off the rails, Greenwin (likely parent company of Genern and other investment fronts) and the University of Toronto came to an agreement, to which the City of Toronto was party, which has come to be known as the "Aura Lee Transfer".



Ramsden Park in 1947 (top) and in 1973, after the great "Aura Lee Transfer"⁵.

⁴ From City of Toronto Planning Board meetings of April 11th and May 1st, 1967. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 2032, Series 719, File 75.

⁵ <https://ramsdenparkconsultation.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/presentation-by-pma.pdf> - pages 18 and 19

The City was interested in extending Ramsden park, which in 1947 only extended about halfway from Yonge to Avenue (see plans above), between Roxborough and Pears Ave, fully to Avenue Road. The University of Toronto was in possession of a playing field, the Aura Lee Playing Field, just east of Avenue Road, at the west end of Ramsden Park at the time (this had been donated in 1923 to the University primarily for the use of University of Toronto Schools [UTS] students⁶). Greenwin had taken out options from the University on the 9th of February 1965⁷ for purchasing the Aura Lee lands and had also acquired properties along the south side of Pears Avenue. Instead of purchasing the Aura Lee lands, Greenwin exchanged its parcel of land on Robert Street with the University's Aura Lee lands in 1967⁸. By 1968, Greenwin had officially acquired those lands⁹ and, in exchange for permission to build two towers on Pears Avenue, the City of Toronto would receive the northerly 1.6 acres of the Aura Lee lands to extend Ramsden Park westward.

Blithely ignoring (or unaware of) residents' concerns about affordable housing, in 1968-1969 the University tore down 32 houses along Robert Street and Sussex Avenue to create a field where the existing Robert Street field currently is¹⁰. It was well-used by the community¹¹. Plans were drawn up by Nicolas Fodor & Associates for an ice rink and tennis courts on the south end of the property. In 1971, the University built a skating rink on the Robert St. field site, and came to an "exemplary" agreement with the City (the word "exemplary" is actually used in the minutes from Council meetings¹²) whereby in return for access by the public to the facilities (both the field and rink) the City would pay a pro-rated amount of the University's costs for maintaining them, set at 50:50. The City also created a children's play area at the south end of the site, which is now a triste parkette on Sussex Avenue. UTS fund-raised around \$50,000 to have its own change facilities included as part of the rink house. Belatedly, and somewhat embarrassingly, at UTS's request, the University renamed the field on Robert Street to the Aura Lee Playing Field in 1973¹³ (after unceremoniously trading the original lands with a developer).



Gritty urbanism at the University of Toronto's Robert St. Field tennis court¹⁴ and rink.

⁶ <https://www.utschools.ca/sites/default/files/Root/Spring-2012.pdf> and The Globe, Friday April 10th, 1923.

⁷ University of Toronto Archives, Property Committee Meeting of February 9th, 1965 (A73-0025-037(02)).

⁸ University of Toronto Archives, Property Committee Report #340, April 12th 1965 (ibid). The University of Toronto's Vice President (Administration) read a letter which had been sent to the City Clerk informing Toronto City Council of the transfer of the Aura Lee lands to Greenwin in exchange for a parcel of land on the east side of Robert St.

⁹ University of Toronto Archives, Property Committee Report Report #345, March 8th, 1968 (ibid).

¹⁰ E.g. demolition permits for 50-72 Sussex Street, File 5954 – Permit # 2129, issued July 7, 1969.

¹¹ University of Toronto Archives, Property Committee Report Report #358, April 16th, 1970 (ibid).

¹² City Council Minutes Toronto, 1971. Vol.3, Appendix A, page 3341 (Parks, Recreation & City Property Report Number 17, Section 14).

¹³ University of Toronto Bulletin, February 23rd, 1973.

¹⁴ From https://www.reddit.com/r/toronto/comments/6eu8gi/the_new_u_of_t_athletics_budget_seems_legit/. Rink photograph by author.

Fast forward several years to near present day, when the University of Toronto decides to build a residence on the northeast corner of Sussex and Spadina, which it also partly owns. The rink's ice making equipment failed in 1998 (even though the original agreement stipulated that upkeep of the cooling machinery was to be the University's responsibility; although the City did attempt to secure funds for its repair, understandably it was reluctant to invest in private property¹⁵), the University is storing an army of garbage cans (including, oddly, garbage cans labeled "Ryerson") on the rink, someone has put up snow fencing to create the semblance of a net on the pitted tennis court, and U of T grounds crews are using the property formerly occupied by 50-56 Sussex as storage space for landscaping materials (this used to be one of the original 3 tennis courts).

A number of questions and issues remain. Residents would like to know what has happened to the University of Toronto's "exemplary" behaviour in terms of working with the City and the community. Its "Towards 2030 Plan" ostensibly incorporates ways to work with local public, private and non-profit organizations to plan and help make the region "a better place in which to live, work and prosper", but it has consistently tried to block community input in terms of plans for the area¹⁶. It has hired renowned urbanist Richard Florida, and built beautiful buildings on its campus. And yet, here we are. The parkette on Sussex Avenue has received a failing grade (F) from the Annex Gleaner's Parks Review for at least the past 4 years. The University is taking the City to the Ontario Municipal Board over density issues and is appealing the designation of the building housing the Ten Editions bookstore at Sussex and Spadina as a heritage property. The University's campus gets imaginative and contextualized buildings incorporating heritage structures, like 1 Spadina Cr., but off campus it's decidedly "meh" (witness the massive StudentOne residence on College Street, leased by U of T to a private developer). And why are its garbage cans being stored on an ice rink? Is this Richard Florida's recommendation for a gritty urbanism?



Proposal for a Robert Street park from a 2011 Community Survey, and a mock-up of integrating the last remaining historical building in the block into a new student residence¹⁷.

¹⁵ \$100,000 was secured from Section 37 funds in 2006 from the Mosaic condominium developers, according to the Annex Gleaner (March 2006 edition), while \$1.3M was ostensibly allocated in the 2009 City of Toronto budget for repairs.

¹⁶ <https://harbordvillage.com/development-issues/current-development-plans/proposal-spadina-sussex-residence/>

¹⁷ Sketch by John Cook from HVRA community survey in 2011; Photoshop mashup by author based on plans from Urbantoronto.ca.

It would be an interesting exercise for 4th year students from the Architecture program at the University of Toronto to reimagine this area, by both incorporating the last remaining historical building in the block (the University already tore down 32 others – why destroy the last one? Above is a rendering done in a couple of hours by a 50 year old with Photoshop...think of what an entire graduating class could come up with!), and also the desire of the community to have a useful green space at the south end of the field, strongly voiced in a survey conducted by the Harbord Villagers Residents' Association in 2011¹⁸ and subsequently ignored.

Toronto Councillor Joe Cressy delivered exciting news at the 2017 Harbord Villagers Residents' Association annual general meeting in mid-October that Spadina Towers Inc., the owners of the property at 666 Spadina Avenue on the southwest corner of Spadina and Sussex (just across the street from the proposed residence) deeded land to the City such that the outcome is to be a new public park on a parcel of land immediately facing onto Sussex. This is an example of how developers can work positively with the City. We would expect a similar visionary instead of confrontational approach from one of Toronto's leading public institutions. If it is unable to maintain the rinks and tennis courts perhaps the land could also be deeded to the City for much-needed green space (given the history of arrangement for this site), and heritage structures could be incorporated in imaginative ways into a new student residence to expedite the construction of much needed student housing.

I am very grateful to staff at the City of Toronto Archives for help in researching this report, and to Harold Averill at the University of Toronto Archives for providing guidance while digging through U of T planning reports and the like in those archives. In addition, local residents have also been a source of valuable information. Thanks!

¹⁸ <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PVNOGZJ>