

Toronto Star: Don Mills gathering place is gone

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The going-out-of-business sales were winding down in the mall. There were still a few deals on clunky flats at the shoe store, and deals on Christmas wrapping at the hardware store. But there were no shoppers.

There was, ominously, some yellow caution tape strung at random across the corridors of the Don Mills Centre.

What happened here?

Simone Gabbay is still trying to answer the question. She sat on the edge of the food court on a recent afternoon and stared at the silence.

A bit of history:

The Don Mills Centre is being redeveloped. Cadillac Fairview had planned to keep the mall open during renovations, in order to cause the least inconvenience to customers and businesses — and by the way, that's not unlike what's happening at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum.

But then the developer changed course, choosing instead to raze the mall to the ground and start from scratch. There will be no mall for two years. The new mall will not be covered over.

A blank slate certainly makes life easy for the developer, but it is hard on the families in the neighbourhood; hard on the old people who came here to shop, stroll, gossip and get away from the weather in summer and in winter; hard on those who live close enough to come over in their wheelchairs and walkers; oh, and it's lousy for the independent family retailers who were a mainstay of the Don Mills Centre.

They're gone now.

Simone was one of the leaders of the battle against the developer. She lives nearby. She is a home-schooling mom, a freelance translator and editor, a gentle soul and the unlikeliest of activists.

Perhaps not so unlikely after all.

She pointed to her wrist. "This is a \$10 watch from the hardware store. My shirt is from Tabi; so is my top and my skirt. My sandals are from Walking On A Cloud." You get the point.

And yet she fought the developer, not for herself but for her neighbours.

"People moved here because of the mall. They gave up their cars. They came here every day. This was their outside world." She did not want to see that change.

I don't blame her.

We don't live in Europe. The mall is what we have instead of the piazza. It is where we go for a cup of coffee, a bite to eat, a place to stroll, to see and be seen.

Simone spoke softly. She was tired. Hers was the fatigue of defeat. She remembered trying to gather names on a petition last winter.

"The first weekend in February I spent walking around the mall. We had seven merchants willing to carry the petition. The others were afraid. I felt like a criminal."

No merchant wanted to confront the developer openly.

Simone, who had never protested anything in her life, said, "I just made up the petition. It rolled on from there. It wasn't something I had to push. It wasn't a conscious choice."

In the end, she and her stalwarts gathered more than 5,000 signatures.

You'd think that would have been enough to give the developer pause. You'd be wrong. She said, "We did the best we could do. It took hundreds of hours. I had no time to see my friends. I'm freelance. I don't get paid unless I work. But I gave my best to the cause." Her best included working the phones, developing lists, sending mail, putting up posters, distributing flyers, pestering city councillors, holding planning meetings in her home and organizing demonstrations.

Not bad for an amateur.

As a last gasp, she even went to the Ontario Municipal Board. The OMB did not deign to shove her case in her face. They simply ignored her, just as the developer ignored the wishes of the people of Don Mills.

Simone said, "This was a planned community. The community grew together. The developer smashed it. They broke the connection between the people and the merchants."

The battle may be lost, but it will not soon be forgotten. The high point for Simone? "The meeting at the Inn on the Park in the spring. A thousand people came. I was hopeful. I saw people resisting."

At that meeting, there were lawyers, architects and various suits representing the developer. They were wildly outnumbered by angry residents.

And the people hissed at the suits and they mocked the fancy slide presentation and they laughed at an artistic depiction of happy shoppers frolicking outside the mall in the snow in the middle of winter. In the end, however, the people were powerless.

How does Simone feel now?

"I feel sad, personally. I feel a crime happened in broad daylight, with everyone looking. But at least we tried."

Will she shop at the new mall?

"I don't know. If it's high-end stores, I won't be able to afford it. I'm not interested.

Perhaps if there's a bookstore ..." She let that thought trail off, and then she added this: "People will come because there's nothing else."

That sounds like a perfect slogan for the new mall in Don Mills. "Shop here because there's nothing else."

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