

The Toronto Star

Through the roof in Don Mills

Apr. 19, 2006. 01:00 AM

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They make a fine noise when they are angry, the men and women of Don Mills. More than 700 of them came to Inn On The Park one night last week to hoot and hiss at Cadillac Fairview.

The people are angry because the developer is going to raze and rebuild the Don Mills Centre. Demolition starts at the end of May. That's not the problem.

The mall was originally to be rebuilt in stages. It was to remain open during construction. But the developer changed plans, and now the mall is to be razed and rebuilt, and there will be no new mall for a couple of years. That's part of the problem.

The independent shopkeepers are relocating elsewhere, or they are going out of business. That's another part of the problem.

The new mall will not be enclosed.

That's the damn problem.

The people who live in Don Mills use their mall the way Europeans use the town square: They come for the daily passeggiata — they flirt, they banter, they gossip, they sit, they have a bite to eat and they do a little shopping.

That is life, in its rich fullness.

And the people of Don Mills seem to know what the developer does not: In Toronto, you cannot do this stuff outdoors. You need a cool place in the summer, a warm place in the winter, a dry place when it rains.

It was some hot meeting.

Various city councillors were greeted with hisses; such is their lot, which they bore smilingly. The councillors avowed that they were as one with the people, but they did not say they could, or would, or even that they should turn the developer from its course.

And an official from the planning department said, in effect, that the city's hands were tied.

And then it was the turn of the developer, whose posse included the project manager, an architect, a public-relations flack and a lawyer. These worthies were hooted at by the people of Don Mills, especially the lawyer.

I am eager to give credit where it is due. The posse seemed as if they wanted to hear the people and to answer at least a few questions.

To aid discussion, they brought many attractive architectural drawings. In some of those drawings, there were depictions of happy shoppers frolicking outdoors in the snow. The people snickered and jeered. The people are familiar with the concept of wind chill.

The posse said they would not answer questions unless the people stopped jeering. The men and women of Don Mills rolled their eyes. How else are you supposed to behave when you are summarily deprived of your public square? The men and women of Don Mills may be old, but they are not dead. Prick them and they bleed; bulldoze their agora and they hiss.

The architect said the new mall would be "special and unique with many positive features." He said it would be "distinct and memorable." The people waved a petition signed by 4,543 of their neighbours who do not care a fig for "special" and "memorable." They just want a roof.

The developer said the new mall would be like Bloor West Village. The people said, "This does not fit our community." The developer said the stores in the new mall would have overhangs to protect the shoppers from the elements. The people said, "How often does rain and snow fall in a vertical manner?"

Alas, some of the councillors seemed to think that what the people really want is a community centre, and the developer said that a community centre might be possible, as if that was some sort of compromise.

But one of the people stood and said, in a strong voice, "I've never heard so much spin in all my life, and I'm 80, going on 90." He said the people want a roof.

Oh, said the developer, but the new mall will feature special "streets," down which shoppers may slowly drive past the nice new shops. A woman said, "You want us to drive by. I can do that elsewhere! Who are you appealing to?" She got no response from the developer, but she got much applause from her neighbours, many of whom no longer drive.

There were, in all, more than 30 questions. There were fewer than 30 answers. The gist? The old mall comes down soon and the new mall will have no roof.

At one point, a high school student in the crowd made reference to the condos the developer is planning to build on-site. She said, "We're not happy at my high school. We're like, 'What is this?' It's getting on our nerves that you don't take us into consideration."

She took a breath and said, "In six years, I'll be 20 But six years from now, I'm not going to buy a condo from you!" The people applauded. Oh, dear.

Cadillac Fairview can do what it wants. Open-air malls are the current fashion. That's life in a democracy. Money talks.

But here is an entire neighbourhood saying with one voice that the plans of the developer are harmful to the elderly, and to the handicapped, and to families with small children, and to people who do not drive, and also to a handful of trusted independent shopkeepers.

If the developer would give an inch ...

Am I a fool to hope?

You can order your copy of Joe Fiorito's new book "Union Station" for \$34.99 at <http://www.starstore.ca>.

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