

St. Clair is no ‘disaster’ zone: It teems with life

| 27 Apr 2019 | *The Globe and Mail (Ontario Edition)* | MARCUS GEE



Once cluttered with three lanes of traffic, the transitway today has a hospitable, urban feel
Streetcars whisk commuters along St. Clair Avenue West to subway transfer stops at Bathurst and Yonge, which eases the trip to work downtown.

Every time Toronto redesigns a street to calm traffic or make transit vehicles flow better, there is the most tremendous fuss. It happened on St. Clair Avenue West. It happened on Roncesvalles Avenue. It happened in spades on King Street, where merchants said that limiting car traffic was



killing business and turning the street into a ghost town. It is happening in advance on Eglinton Avenue. Messy construction on the giant Crosstown light-rail project has left many residents seething.

Is all the opposition justified or do these projects improve city life in the long term? To find the answer, let's look at St. Clair, the site of the first and fiercest of the Toronto transitway battles.

Storeowners there complained bitterly about the project, which went way over budget and took years to complete. Rob Ford, the mayor at the time, called it a "nightmare" and a "disaster." In 2012, two years after streetcars started running along a new, carfree dedicated lane, he told city council: "People hate the St. Clair. They hate these streetcars."

He made St. Clair Exhibit A in his case to halt a series of aboveground light-rail lines around the city. His brother Doug, now Premier of Ontario, said that putting light rail on Eglinton, Finch and Sheppard was sure to "St. Clairize" them.

Looking back, those claims look even more ridiculous now than they did then. St. Clair is a big success story. The transitway whisks commuters along the street in those sleek new red-and white Toronto Transit Commission streetcars, depositing many at the subway transfer hubs at Bathurst and Yonge and easing the trip to work downtown.

Once a kind of midtown throughway with three lanes of hurrying car traffic, St. Clair today has a hospitable, urban feel. It's pleasant to walk and easier to visit without a car. Merchants' fears that no one would shop there any more because it would be so hard to drive have proved unfounded. The redesign of the street left lots of street parking – arguably too much. Motorists can also park at one of the several municipal lots along the corridor.

St. Clair is far from the smoking ruin that alarmists predicted. It teems with life. New coffee shops, restaurants, butchers and yoga studios have popped up to serve the younger crowd that is moving into the neighbourhood. Many of the established places – hair salons, dentist offices, grocers with flower stands on the sidewalk outside – are still there. St. Clair's gentrification has been gentle. The result is a pleasing mix.

Builders have come in to take advantage of the area's rise. One leading developer, Canderel, is putting up its first mid-rise condo project on St. Clair West. With rare foresight, city hall allowed for this kind of new density without the usual tussle over zoning rules. The new buildings, capped at 12 storeys in some places and nine in others, fit nicely with the scale of the street.

This is just the kind of evolution that city planners have been trying to encourage along Toronto's main streets. The goal is vibrant urban avenues, inviting to walk and live on, easy to travel by transit. Transitways are a good way to make it happen. Instead of showing what a disaster they are, St. Clair proves that they work.

Other examples abound. Transit use is up on a downtown stretch of King Street since the city limited car traffic. After a controversial trial period, city council just recognized its success by making the transitway permanent. Roncesvalles still bustles despite complaints about the new streetcar-stop platforms and bike lanes that went in a few years ago. Eglinton is being redesigned for the 21st century as part of the Crosstown project. It promises to be a much more attractive, welcoming place.

Transitways work. Toronto needs more of them. We should dispense with the ritual fuss and get building.