



Area residents get first-hand view as condos slowly march up Sherbourne Street, inching north of Richmond Street putting pressure on some of Toronto's most vulnerable people, including the strip's many homeless, poor and addicted.



Southwest corner of Sherbourne-Queen, a condo will displace Canada Tavern.

The 'city in one street'

Sherbourne is changing. So is Toronto. The future of the GTA's most notorious avenue may hold clues about what's in store for all of us

Story by Mary Ormsby
Photography by Steve Russell

The condominium has not yet emerged from the ground, its cement and iron footings being formed to hold 17 storeys of polished glass and aluminum with suites selling for less than \$300,000. In 18 months, "The Modern" promises to be a landscaped playpen for young downtowners.

A short block north on Sherbourne Street, the city's most damaged, desperate and dangerous roam for drugs, hookers and easy cash. Men with nowhere to go and nothing to do kill time until the shelters open or until sleep overcomes them in Moss Park.

Bookending this 164-year-old thoroughfare is enormous wealth. Elegant stone-and-brick mansions dot the northern tip, vestiges of the moneyed and powerful who once lined both sides of the 3.5-kilometre stretch. Due south on Lake Ontario's sandy shoals, bulldozers clear space for a \$29 million public park to feature waterfalls and play structures.

Street churches, whose preaching was originally for the rich, offer ESL classes and counselling between prayers.

Social housing, gentrification, immigrants, magnificent parkland, the country's highest concentration of homeless, political activists, acts of kindness, acts of violence, health centres, ballparks and a hockey arena all share the two-lane asphalt strip.

Say hello to Sherbourne – skid row to some, the Ritz to others – the most intensely Torontonians of all Toronto streets.

"Sherbourne Street, from top to bottom, is the city in a microcosm," said Jo Nazar, principal of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School which, at 444 Sherbourne near Wellesley, draws most of its students from nearby St. James Town.

"It's not only ethnically diverse. It's economically diverse. It's socially diverse. It's this city in one street."

It has always been so. From its origins two centuries ago, Sherbourne reflected what the city of York would become – a duelling ground where privilege, poverty and politics would battle to shape the metropolis. Those duels aren't over.

Forces changing large parts of the GTA, for better and for worse, are poised to meet at the city's crime Ground Zero, the intersection of Sherbourne and Dundas.

What will happen then? What is the future of Sherbourne? Of the city?

THE UNARMED TEENAGER cried out in alarm. The gunman facing him was unmoved, firing a fatal bullet into the boy's chest.

John Ridout, only 18, died almost instantly. His resolute killer, Samuel Jarvis, returned from the killing to his family's nearby property. A murder charge was filed against the 25-year-old Jarvis, but the son of a prominent family was acquitted.



Fashion TV's Jeanne Beker bought into Upper Sherbourne's charms by investing in a Rosedale home. Restaurateurs Amir Dohbozorgi, wife Farahnaz Arzani, below, did so by opening Teazers & Pleazers Bistro.



"It's gritty and it reflects real life. You don't want something that is homogeneous and, quite frankly, boring."

Fashion TV's Jeanne Beker

The year was 1817. The legacy of the deadly duel – Ridout had fired early in the three-count, his pistol then grabbed by spectators – is still visible today as the first major street east of Yonge bears the Jarvis family name.

The Ridouts left their mark, too.

John Ridout's older brother, Samuel, bought land east of the Jarvis family a year after his brother's death. The acreage had a similar bloody stain: It had belonged to Attorney General John White, who was killed in an 1800 duel.

The Ridout family and neighbour William Allan (donor of Allan Gardens) eventually agreed to open a road between their lands. It was christened "Sherborne" in 1845 in honour of Ridout's English origins. The "u" was added for a reason lost over time.

Though from another century, the gun-slugging gentry were harbingers of the criminal free-for-all that today defines Sherbourne.

A Star investigation this summer found that although other parts of Toronto have higher numbers of violent crime, the Dundas and Sherbourne corridor ranks first in virtually every category based on sheer volume and crime per square kilometre.

Reporter Robyn Doolittle obtained documents that show street robberies, assault-related offences and what police call violent calls for service (including shootings, stabbings, a person with a knife or gun, sex attacks) make that area from Moss Park north to Allan Gardens the most dangerous space in Toronto.

But Sherbourne's dangers aren't limited to that zone of bleakness.

In September, Kamal Hercules was fatally shot at Sherbourne and Front, outside the Rabba Fine Foods in an apparent random attack. He was 21 and popular; a happy neighbourhood kid who had moved with his mother to Harbourfront a few years earlier. Flowers, stuffed animals and handwritten messages paid tribute to a man who loved to dance.

Hercules was Toronto's 39th homicide of the year. It has not been solved.

IN 1996, Jeanne Beker had her own mystery to solve.

Why was the stunning home she was eyeing – a five-bedroom, century-old Rosedale masterpiece – so, uh, well, cheap? It was listed at just over \$600,000, curiously inexpensive, she thought.

"It was perfect, we loved everything about it," said the host of FashionTV, who fretted the listing reflected something "wrong" with the home north of Bloor Street, sitting above the verdant Rosedale Ravine.

Her veteran real estate agent had the answer.

"It's because it's on Sherbourne Street," Beker recalled the agent saying, adding it would be twice the price if it was closer to Yonge Street. That was code for: You're too close to the roughly 15,000 people jammed into the grey residential towers of St. James Town, the seedy Sherbourne Street subway stop and the milling, unsavoury folk further south.

A Toronto native, Beker didn't care. The fashion maven recognized a real estate bargain – which she snapped up – and valued the proximity to Toronto's core.

"Sherbourne has become this enigmatic street in the middle of the city with a high-low mix – and that's why I love downtown," Beker said.

"I don't want a sterile kind of environment. It's gritty and it reflects real life. You don't want something that is homogeneous and, quite frankly, boring."

Condo broker Al Garland moved to Sherbourne about the same time as Beker, but with a different experience. The president of SaleMark Realty was redeveloping a vacant building with partners south of Richmond that "the bums had taken over" as squatters. "When we finished construction and renovations, they could no longer get in the building and, quite often, you'd find your-

self stepping over them to get to the lobby door," said Garland, who lives in the 65-unit building that also houses his street-level office.

"It was as if they weren't willingly giving up their home."

That pioneering renovation was a success, giving developers confidence to target Sherbourne as an affordable alternative on good transit routes to tony, west-of-Yonge condos. Garland said that, in the past 10 years, 3,000 condo units have been built within two city blocks of his home.

"Sherbourne is no longer a dirty word – but only when you're south of Richmond," the agent said.

North of Richmond, it's a different story. There, the destitute, drug-addled and mentally ill – often invisible to comfortable Torontonians in other parts of the city – are in your face, in large numbers, trying to survive. They are gnawing reminders of the GTA's social and economic chasms.

But for how much longer will Sherbourne remain their refuge?

Anti-poverty advocates say the neighbourhood's fragile social infrastructure is under siege by urbanites with a downtown dream – and enough cash to support studio suites, lofts and terraced rooftop patios.

From north and south, the relentless march of the condos is squeezing a critical mass in the middle. Shelters, like the Salvation Army's Maxwell Meighan Centre, are sanctuaries for the homeless and the addicted, while city-managed units, some in once-glorious homes built by the prosperous and prominent long ago, warehouse others.

Long-time street nurse Cathy Crowe has spent 17 years caring for adults and children in downtown Toronto. She wrote *Dying For A Home: Homeless Activists Speak Out*, based on her experiences – which included protesting in Moss Park for more beds and services – and knows Sherbourne well.

Crowe wonders if blockbusting is next for shuttered flophouses and vacant lots north of Dundas. With increasing development, she fears NIMBY-ism will pressure community shelters to close, citing crime statistics as justification to clear-cut the poor. Already, financially struggling people, including families with children, have been displaced to the suburbs, in apartments they may not be able to afford long-term, with no network of support services close by.

Standing at Dundas and Sherbourne, Crowe looks across to All Saints Church – built in 1872, it's been a homeless drop-in centre for nearly a century – and recognizes a man with long, flowing grey hair and a lumberjack shirt walking in the fall drizzle. It is celebrated aboriginal artist Sam Ash, a deaf painter born in Sioux Lookout, Ont., whom she had not seen for a few months.

"I wondered where he'd been," she said, smiling, describing his bold, bright native art. Then her smile fades. After 20 years of living in poverty, she observed sadly, "He's still here."

SHERBOURNE HAS ALWAYS been a home for those from far away.

Two hundred years ago, British and American immigrants settled what would become downtown Toronto. Today, the happy faces of children at Our Lady of Lourdes show that Sherbourne Street's family tree now includes the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Poland, South America and Africa.

Two full-time ESL teachers work in the century-old institution, now a bright, airy new building. The high-density, highrise rental hub of nearby St. James Town is where many students live – and where only 35 per cent of families speak English at home.

Jillian French, the school's nutritionist, is a woman of contagious cheer who runs the healthy snack program for 623 students from her ground-floor kitchen nook. The 39-year-old recruits parents to wash, chop and hand out fruits and veggies daily to students from kindergarten to Grade 8.

"They never say no," said French, whose 11-year-old daughter Autumn attends the school. "Our parents are so good at volunteering."

Next door to the school is Teazers & Pleazers, a cozy, inviting alternative to the street's fast-food joints.

Iranian nationals Amir Dohbozorgi, 44, who was raised in Sweden, and wife Farahnaz Arzani, 34, who lived in Montreal for years, opened the bistro eight months ago after Dohbozorgi spent \$200,000 cleaning, renovating and decorating the restaurant.

Garland said opening a restaurant there five years ago would have been "suicide." But he thinks it's "less of a risk" now, with two large condo projects underway just south of Bloor.

Sherbourne's metamorphosis is complicated. Thorny social issues that prod the GTA conscience play out continuously between neighbours who live, almost literally, cheek-by-jowl along this narrow street.

On this downtown duelling ground, will there be a Ridout and a Jarvis – winners and losers? Or will Sherbourne's micro-communities remain intact, reflecting all that delights and disturbs in Toronto's larger cityscape?

Dohbozorgi invested dollars and dreams in Sherbourne after studying other inner city locations. Like Jeanne Beker, he believes this area has undervalued beauty – he puts his hands on the original exposed brick behind his bar – and hopes to change the perception of "a very nice street but nobody cares about it."

"(Us) coming here shows you can trust this area," said Dohbozorgi, "And I trust myself."

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