

Hume: Anatomy of a Toronto street corner

An intersection dissection of Bay St. at Front St. W.

By [Christopher Hume](#) Urban Issues, Architecture - February 6, 2010

In retrospect, perhaps Toronto police should have chosen some place other than the corner of Bay and Front to hand out jaywalking tickets. It might have seemed a good location for last week's "safety blitz" at first glance, but the offences here were committed by city planners and traffic engineers, not pedestrians.

If anything, the corner is a textbook case of how city policies are informed by a deep-seated anti-pedestrian bias. But you don't have to be Jane Jacobs to look at Bay and Front and see an illustration of everything's that wrong with the way Toronto treats those who would walk.

Consider the facts: To begin with, this is the site of the busiest transit hub in Canada – Union Station. According to the city, 250,000 people move through the facility every working day. All of them are on foot. They stream into and out of Union, mostly walking north to the subway and/or the financial district.

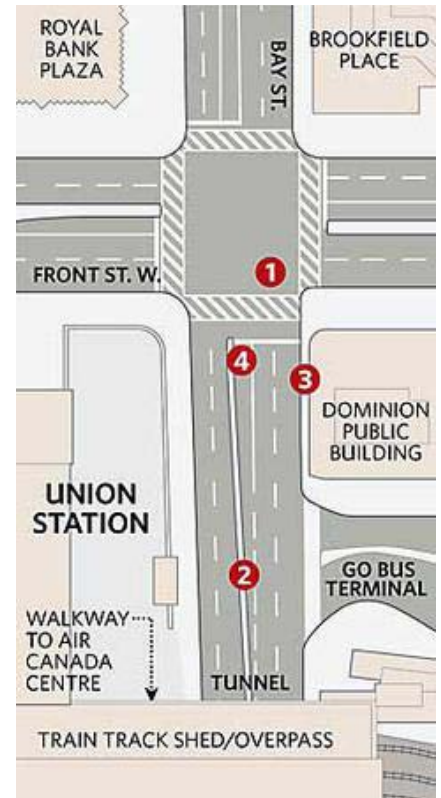
Across the road, on the east side of Bay St. south of Front St. W., in entirely the wrong location, is the GO bus terminal.

Same thing: thousands come and go daily, the vast majority of them also heading north. That's why the terminal should have been put behind Union Station or even beneath it.

And let's not forget the forest of condo towers that has appeared on the waterfront in recent years. They are filled with thousands more pedestrians who walk up Bay on their way to work or transit.

Oh, by the way, there's also the Air Canada Centre, which routinely draws 25,000 people to games and concerts. A good many of those are transit riders and pedestrians.

So why has Bay become a high-speed access route to the Gardiner Expressway and Lake Shore Blvd.? Thoughtfully, the five-lane thoroughfare even has a left-turn lane at Front for northbound drivers. Though not many drivers use the lane, its presence means that the sidewalk on the east side of Bay south of Front is dangerously narrow and exposed.



At the same time, passengers transferring to Union Station from the bus terminal have a choice of climbing two flights of stairs to cross on the overpass, walking up to Front then retracing their steps, or scrambling over the steel barrier meant to prevent them from doing the most obvious and natural thing – crossing Bay in a straight line from east to west, or vice-versa.

But that would interfere with drivers and impede traffic.

Though thousands of pedestrians might also be inconvenienced, irritated, or even endangered, in Toronto vehicular needs come first.

For pedestrians on the east side of Bay, narrow sidewalks aren't the only problem. Hundreds of buses cross the sidewalk daily on their way into the terminal. There's also a lane that runs east along the rear of the Dominion Public Building as far as Yonge St.

In other words, even at the single busiest pedestrian precinct in Toronto and its very epicentre, Bay and Front, the city has stacked the deck against those who travel by transit or on foot. It is they who must walk the extra distance, wait a little longer and endure increased danger. It is they who get fined when the police bother to show up to bully passersby.

The design of the corner says more about Toronto's real attitude to pedestrians than the platitudes we hear from civic officials. What seems clear, however, is that the city that caused the problems is unlikely to be the solution.

Keep in mind that in addition to Bay, the lower sections of Yonge St., York St., Jarvis St. and Spadina Ave. have also been turned into extensions of the Gardiner. This will create even bigger problems as the bottom end of the city continues to be gentrified and condo-ized.

The truth is that pedestrians in Toronto are more imperilled than ever. We have the deaths to prove it. City officials would have us believe they're doing all they can, but not for pedestrians.

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