



The city's "hottest neighbourhood," according to the *Toronto Star*, is not an arty downtown enclave or an "up-and-coming" east end community with affordable real estate — it's Willowdale in North York.

Many people attribute Willowdale's success to Mel Lastman's negotiations with developers and community groups as North York's mayor in the 1970s and '80s, but the radical changes to the stretch of Yonge Street between Sheppard and Finch avenues go back to the mid-1960s, before Lastman began his political career. James D. Service, the first mayor of North York township and then borough, championed Willowdale as the site of what he referred to as an avant-garde urban experiment that would rival the best that Modernist architecture and urbanism had to offer.

Shortly after being elected to office in 1965, Service unveiled the first civic centre plan, prepared by Ray Skelly, the former chief planner for Edinburgh, Scotland. Skelly's plan separated cars from pedestrians, creating an elaborate above-ground pedestrian centre overlooking Yonge Street. This plan was just a hint of what was to come.

In 1966, while finalizing negotiations to purchase 20 acres of land in Willowdale for the future civic centre, Service enlisted two of Canada's foremost architects and urbanists, John C. Parkin and Murray Jones, to prepare a new detailed plan — called the Yonge Redevelopment Plan — to give this growing borough a "downtown" destination. The results were bound to be spectacular, as Parkin had designed many of the most noted Modernist buildings in Don Mills, including the Bata International Centre (1965) and the old Don Mills Shopping Centre (1959), while Jones had championed a number of urban renewal projects in Canada, including downtown Hamilton.

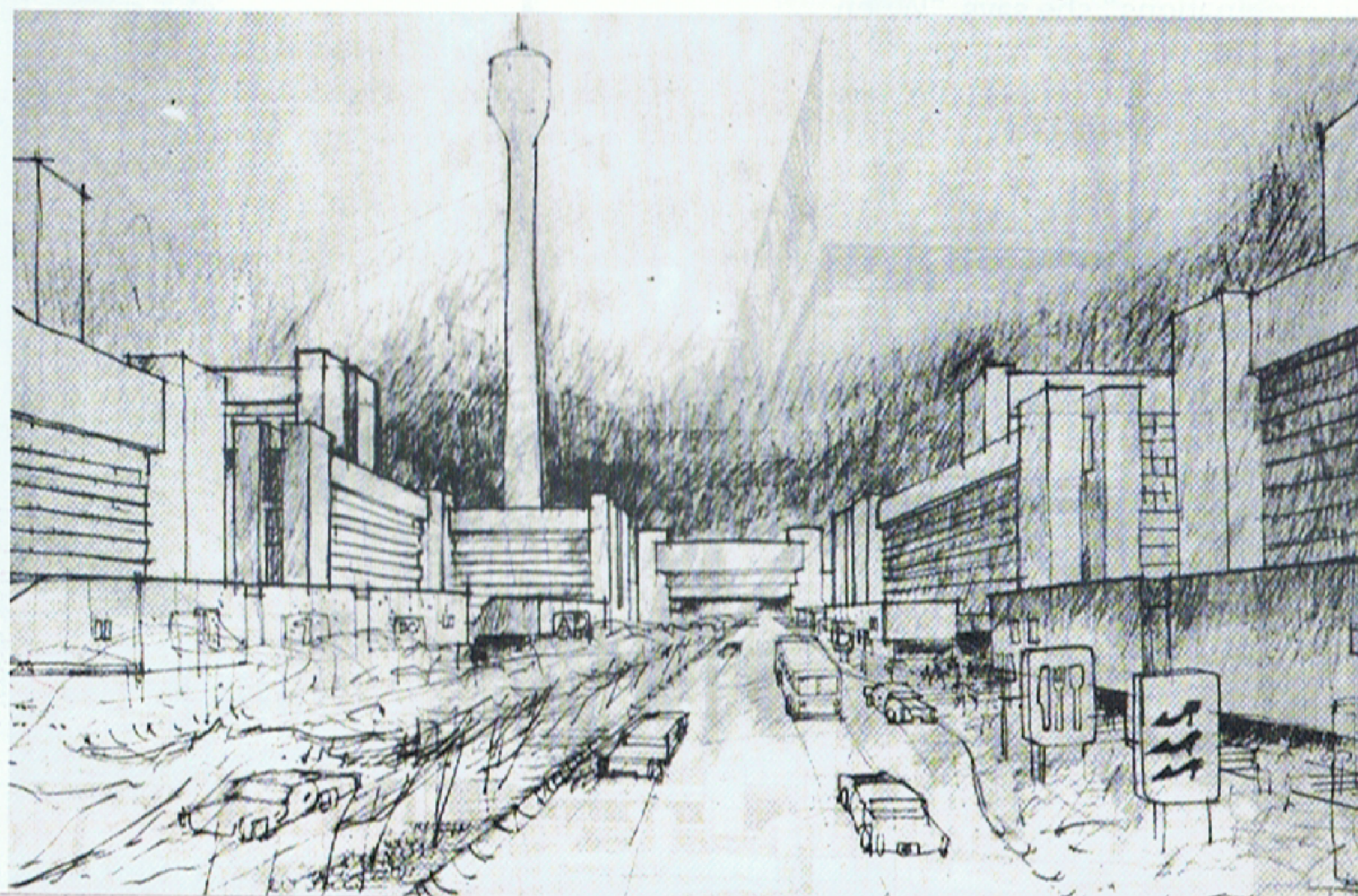
Parkin and Jones wanted to use Wil-

# WILLOWDALE MOD

## The jaw-dropping 1960s plan to develop 'downtown North York' into a futuristic city

lowdale as a test site for a new species of "metropolitan sub-centres," which planners would later call more simply "downtowns in the suburb." The aim of the Yonge Redevelopment Plan was to reinvent, guide, and plan high-density urban development in the age of car-dominated growth and prepare the area for the arrival of the subway (which would eventually be extended to Finch in 1974), all the while preserving the suburban idyll of the surrounding streets. The plan was marked by its monumental gestures: a new civic centre that would include a communications tower with a revolving restaurant at the top — this was before plans to build the CN Tower at its current location — and a city hall straddling Yonge Street, reminiscent of Skelly's above-ground pedestrian centre.

In one of the plan's most outlandish recommendations, Jones and Parkin called for the removal of sidewalks and pedestrians from Yonge Street. Yonge Street's two-storey buildings with retail at grade along with those pesky pedestrians were completely designed out of the street and replaced by office and residential high-rises, with landscaping and advertising scaled to the speed of the car. All the pedestrian traffic would be moved to the pedestrian malls running parallel to Yonge Street on both the east and west sides, where shops, outdoor restaurants and other services would be located in low-rise buildings. To cross the major intersections, people would go either underground, something akin to the PATH system downtown, or above-ground.



Although Willowdale's residents supported the construction of the Spadina Expressway (which was eventually cancelled in 1971 and now exists as a stub known as Allen Road), they were not impressed with the plans that Jones and Parkin put forward. In February 1969, Willowdale residents packed a meeting room carrying placards reading "Burn the Model" and "Nuts to Hi-Rise Living" and roundly booed Mayor Service's monumental plan (the "Service Era" would end later that year when he chose to not run for re-election).

By 1974, a new plan was in place for a "low-profile, non-monumental, people-oriented" civic centre, according to its new architect John Bonnicksen, that did away with the grand gestures of the earlier plan, eventually scrapping all the attempts to remake the pedestrian landscape. In the following years, there was public consultation with residents' associations, one of the leading figures of which was Jack Layton. Layton was the spokesperson for a coalition of ten ratepayer groups that feared the consequences of unchecked development on Yonge Street. They insisted that the street feature mixed-use pedestrian development and be bicycle friendly; Layton argued that non-motorized vehicles had a right to this people-oriented downtown, and he called for bike lanes on Yonge Street and on Sheppard and Finch avenues.

This scaled-back development would set the stage for the mega-development of the 1980s and '90s that would see Yonge Street and "downtown North York" transformed and come to represent a key moment in Toronto's modern, suburban history — the beginning of a "downtown in the suburbs" approach that has become standard practice in regional planning today. †

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rendering from Yonge Redevelopment Plan (1968)