



Walk Toronto Queen's Quay Walking Audit - October 15, 2016

By Mark Jacobs, Member, Walk Toronto Steering Committee

Members of the local pedestrian advocacy group Walk Toronto gathered on Saturday, October 15, 2016, at the foot of Spadina Avenue to conduct a walking audit of the revitalized Queen's Quay West. Joining the audit was Gord Brown, an acquaintance of the group and critic of the Waterfront Toronto-led initiative to reshape one of the City's prominent waterfront streets. The purpose of the audit was to survey the design of the new street and identify various pros and cons as it relates to the pedestrian environment. A particular lens was given to the accessibility needs and interactions between different users and their modes of travel.

Queen's Quay West is the City of Toronto's "Main Street" along the central waterfront. The portion west of Yonge Street is for the most part built up, while east of Yonge, the street is in the midst of redevelopment from a predominately industrial area to a mixed-use environment. When the time arrives to redevelop the eastern portion with the implementation of the proposed East Bayfront LRT, lessons can be learned from the revitalized Queen's Quay West, completed Summer 2015.

Queen's Quay West has undergone incredible transformations over the decades from an industrial and shipping district to one incorporating a multitude of uses. Today there is a variety of residential, commercial, office, retail, tourist and industrial uses. With the number of people living and visiting the area growing, the street infrastructure was in need of changes. Following a design competition held by Waterfront Toronto, Queen's Quay West would receive a facelift with the goal of creating a more multi-modal street with two vehicular lanes replaced with dedicated lanes for bicycles and widened sidewalks. There would be no vehicular lanes on the south side of the separated streetcar right-of-way (ROW) and driveways were consolidated where feasible. After years of planning and construction, an enhanced streetscape emerged with an abundance of street trees and benches, and sidewalks with granite paving stones.

Once the fencing and barriers were removed and the street opened to the public, issues with the designs began to emerge. With a major transformation to the street, some growing pains were inevitable. The most common issues were vehicles crossing and entering the streetcar ROW resulting in confused drivers and a few collisions with streetcars. Vehicles entering the streetcar tunnel leading to Union Station continues to

be a problem for TTC operations, with several hours of service interruptions a result of unauthorized entry and subsequent rescue.

Conflicts between cyclists and other road users increased as well when the east and west sections of the Martin Goodman Trail (“MGT”) were finally connected through this portion of the Central Waterfront. While the MGT lanes are separated between blocks, the new “mixing zones” at intersections have led to calls for these zones to be redesigned.

It was at these “mixing zones” where Walk Toronto members felt improvements were needed the most. While the intersections share commonalities with regards to design and engineering standards, the performance of each intersection design behaves uniquely based on a combination of factors such as size of the cross-street or driveway and vehicle/bicycle/pedestrian volumes. The following commentary is based on observations from a number of intersections, all from the south side of Queen’s Quay West.

Queen’s Quay West and Spadina Avenue

Walk Toronto began our audit at the intersection of Queen’s Quay West and Spadina. Of particular concern were the potential conflicts between pedestrians walking north-south across Queen’s Quay West and cyclists riding by along the MGT. Because Spadina does not continue south of Queen’s Quay West, there are no traffic lights at this intersection for cyclists like there are at many of the other intersections.

Blue cycle boxes were painted on the MGT on both sides of the intersection to advise cyclists to “Watch for Pedestrians”. Upon closer inspection, the cycle box used to read “stop here on red”. Were there once signals for cyclists? Either way, it was felt by the group that blue was a poor choice for colour as a warning to cyclists of pedestrians. While blue is appropriate for the “waterfront” theme – a colour that is prevalent along the entire MGT – it is not traditionally a colour used for bicycle infrastructure. After crossing the cycle box, the surface material for the trail changes from asphalt to the red granite paving stones used along length of Queen’s Quay West to indicate a pedestrian area, another subtle cue that pedestrians may be crossing.

For pedestrians crossing the MGT, there is a small “Look” sign on ground. We assume this is to be aware of cyclists. This sign is not very visible; pedestrians do not see it, nor are they looking out for cyclists. With the streetcar right-of-way adjacent to the MGT, the waiting area to cross Queen’s Quay West north is very small for pedestrians. Several pedestrians were observed to be standing in the path of cyclists as they wait to cross the street. The pedestrian crossing button is also located in this small area, drawing pedestrians to this space. The granite paving stones continue across the MGT and the waiting area. This gives pedestrians the sense that they have priority – however, it leaves them directly in the path of cyclists. It was suggested that “zebra crossings” should be painted in the trail crossing. These lines would be consistent with the lines painted across the City for pedestrian crosswalks at intersections.

Another point of observation (or lack thereof) was the absence of cues of where to wait to cross Queen’s Quay West for those who are visually impaired. Tactile plates may help, but there does not appear to be space for this form of provision. Lack of

accessibility awareness became a common theme throughout the remainder of the audit.

401 Queen's Quay West

East of Spadina, the space along the south side of the street car right-of-way narrows in front of 401 Queen's Quay West, an 8-storey condominium building. Along this stretch the separation between the sidewalk and multi-use trail consists of a narrow "gutter". A generous amount of space between the streetcar ROW and MGT is provided for street trees and utility poles. While there are traffic lights, north-south crosswalks are not present. "No crossing" signs are also posted.

On the south side, the driveway to 401 Queen's Quay West is approximately 8 metres wide. The amount of time the "walk" sign was lit was timed at 5 seconds; meanwhile, the flashing "Don't Walk" sign was lit for 24 seconds. It is technically illegal to cross a street when the "Don't Walk" sign is flashing. For such a short span across the driveway, the amount of time allocated for each phase is imbalanced. The blue cycle boxes seemed to be a fair distance from the driveway in both directions, even without the N-S pedestrian crosswalks.

Lack of benches along this block was observed – possibility as a result of the narrow section relative to other stretches of Queen's Quay.

339 Queen's Quay West

The next set of traffic lights to the east is at the entrance to the Toronto Fire and Toronto Paramedic Services station. There is only one north-south crosswalk at these signals. The east side does not have a crosswalk. There is a "No Crossing" sign posted on the north side, but it is rather small and could be easy to miss. The blue cycle boxes are also set far back from the actual driveway in both directions – especially so on the east side where the lack of a north-south crosswalk negates the need for a "mixing zone".

Queen's Quay West and York Street

The intersection of Queen's Quay West and York sees a significantly high number of pedestrians coming to and from popular destinations such as Queen's Quay Terminal to the south and Union Station to the north. There is a small amount of space for pedestrian to stand while waiting to cross Queen's Quay West, leaving many in the path of cyclists. The white brick markers indicating the path of the trail becomes less noticeable in the large mixing zone.

It was observed that the traffic signals for the MGT are located too far from where cyclists are supposed to stop. Moving the traffic signals to the near side of the intersection, instead of the far side, could better inform cyclists where to stop on a red signal. Cyclists were observed to stop at the driveway, past the stop line, impeding pedestrian movements crossing north-south.

Visual clutter on surface of sidewalk gives too many cues to pedestrians as they cross, and can be confusing. Examples includes:

- Maple leaves patterns in ground
- Painted manhole covers

- Decorative brass fish

General Comments

Overall, the revitalized Queen's Quay West attempts to provide a place for multiple modes of transportation while keeping their separation to a minimum. Along the mid-block stretches Walk Toronto made numerous observations where design elements provide physical and visual cues that distinguish areas for pedestrians and non-pedestrians.

A common form of separation between bike lanes and sidewalk are gutters that provide a dip between the sidewalk and multi-use trail. Unfortunately the gutters are not noticeable for those with impaired vision. The dips are not pronounced enough and could be missed by stepping over. More effective separation required.

Street trees also provide another form of separation between the sidewalk and MGT. Grates around the tree wells will make them flush with pavement eliminating tripping hazards.

Bicycle posts have also been employed to separate the sidewalk from the MGT. Some blocks were full of bicycles, meaning additional bicycle in the area is required.

The "Wave Decks" along Queen's Quay West became an attraction to the waterfront since they were first installed. Interesting design features are the "Accessibility" dots that provide a step-free guide to top of decks. The dots are subtle but effective. With the Wave Decks and numerous other attractions along the waterfront, Queen's Quay West should be designed for those who don't normally walk along busy, multi-dimensional streets. Lots of tourists may be unfamiliar with various nuances and conditions that local pedestrians encounter frequently. Wayfinding should be easy to understand.

When lanes for different modes of travel are beside each other, the greater the variation in speed, the greater should be the separation

- vehicle < > streetcar <--> MGT <-----> sidewalk

As noted at the studied intersections, blue is not an appropriate colour to use for painted cycle boxes. Blue is used most commonly for accessible parking spaces. Traffic lights/signals for cyclists are too far from where bicycles are supposed to stop. The signals for cyclists should be relocated to where the stop line is. The height above ground should be reduced as well.

Where there are mixing zones at intersections, black bricks could be used for the MGT instead of asphalt. It would provide a visual cue to pedestrians that there's a multi-use trail crossing. As a different surface texture, it will also give cues to cyclists to slow down where there are pedestrians crossing.

Benches along Queen's Quay West are good as they provide a place for people to rest and people-watch. There should be more of them, placed at regular intervals so that seating is available on all sections of the street. Benches perform another useful function: separating bicycle lanes from sidewalk. Backless benches that face two ways

are versatile, usable for both pedestrians and cyclists. However, some benches should have a back, in order to provide balance to those who need to hold on to something while standing up. Lots of extra benches at Harbourfront Centre were observed. Some could have armrests, providing a place to hold onto while standing up.

At streetcar stops there is little refuge space for people exiting streetcar, with wheelchair users having insufficient space to manoeuvre in.

A mid-block crossing between Rees and Simcoe should be installed as it is an excessive distance between these traffic signals considering the number of pedestrians in the area.

Conclusion

The revitalized Queen's Quay West is an improvement from the previous condition of the street where more space was given to vehicles than pedestrians and cyclists. Designers had immense challenges to overcome when the initiative commenced. It would nearly impossible to design a "perfect" street. While many considerations were made, there are plenty of places where further improvements can be made. The City of Toronto and Waterfront Toronto have made improvements and we hope that there are more to come with additional feedback.

As the East Bayfront continues to grow with construction sites present on almost every block, there will be thousands of new residents, students, workers and visitors traveling to, from and within the burgeoning neighbourhood. Reconstruction of Queen's Quay East will bring a future Streetcar ROW and the opportunity to enhance the pedestrian experience. It is hoped that lessons learned from the Queen's Quay West revitalization will be applied east of Yonge Street and beyond.