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BEHIND THE VISION: Architects Kim Storey, left, and James Brown are the husband-and-wife team that's transforming Dundas Square into a focal point of civic pride.

Dundas Square coming to life

Decaying strip redesigned with rich granite, fibre-optic lights

"We knew in 1972. The Eaton Centre was a black hole that would suck the life out of Yonge Street."

So say architects James Brown and Kim Storey, whose elegant, energy-infusing Dundas Square, at the corner of Yonge St. and Dundas St. E. in Toronto's busiest tourist district, will open at the end of June, replacing a block of rundown buildings expropriated by the city.

The Eaton Centre, for all its negative impact on the Yonge St. strip, attracts more than 100,000 people every day. That's close to one million a week — 52 million a year, including Ryerson University students — but they tended to avoid Yonge St., which by the late '90s was infested with marginal retail operations that often subleased their show windows.

But that has changed, and at the heart of the strip's revitalization is Dundas Square, where this year's Canada Day weekend will afford Torontonians a new vantage point from which to experience the city: a gently sloping, black-and-green-clad granite "landscape" sprouting fibre-optic lights, fountains and trees, surrounded by huge video screens and big city vistas — similar to New York's Times Square.

Dundas Square will become a major public landmark, a boost to business, and an entertainment venue — where programming by Joanne Smale of Planet3 Communications will range from jazz festivals to street performers, movie nights and ballroom dancing.

"It's where we could have all watched the Olympic hockey game together," says city councillor Kyle Rae, a key player in the struggle to transform the area. Yonge St., he notes, "is where everyone comes to celebrate."

Dundas Square will be its new focal point.

For Bobby Sniderman, owner of The Senator restaurant and jazz club, and his old pal Arron Barberian, of Barberian's Steak House, it's been a nine-year adventure in restoring civic pride to an area that was the playground of their youth. Here they roamed as kids — from Simpsons at Queen St., heading north up Yonge past the Brown Derby and Colonial Tavern to their parents' stores, Sam the Record Man and Barberian's, up to Eaton's College St. on the northern edge of their turf.

Here they still sweep the sidewalks in front of their businesses. Here they decided to stay and fight the urban decay that engulfed Yonge St.

"Bobby and I said, 'Somebody's got to fix this dishevelled mess. If not us, else?'" says Barberian, over at the Senator.

In 1993, they co-founded the Yonge Business and Residents Association, known as the Downtown Business Improvement Area, which, by the way, supplements its cleaning by spending much of its own money, members, to remove litter

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from Yonge St. (It also removes graffiti and posters and, from April to October, will be power-washing the sidewalks.)

When they looked for guidance, they found a mentor steeped in civic pride: David Crombie, the former mayor. He recommended a consultant, Ron Soskolne.

An architect, former chief city planner and former senior executive with Olympia and York, the international development firm based in Toronto, Soskolne was retained by the BIA "to figure out what to do about Yonge St.," as Soskolne puts it.

It was 1995, shortly after he had left O&Y, which went bankrupt during the recession of the early '90s, along with its greatest project, Canary Wharf in London, England. (It was ahead of its time. Today, Canary Wharf is the crowning glory of London's revitalized docklands area and O&Y's Paul Reichmann is part of the consortium that owns it.)

Soskolne's conclusion? A major change was needed at Dundas and Yonge — in the form of a public square that "would draw people into the area in evenings and weekends and create a brand new sense of place."

But Dundas Square wasn't the only piece of the puzzle: Soskolne helped locate the Metropolis development, planned for the northeast corner of Yonge and Dundas. It will be home to an AMC movie multiplex (24 screens), Virgin Records, Future Shop and four themed American restaurants, including Wolfgang Puck.

And in an innovative approach to use of space, AMC's high-tech theatres will convert to lecture halls by day, for Ryerson University.

(The developer of Metropolis, PenEquity Management Corp., delayed construction over the past two years and is not scheduled to start until sometime in the spring. "I'm not trying to be evasive," said PenEquity's Keith Travis, "but we like to control the press when we have an announcement to make.")

PenEquity is also involved in Sniderman's plans for the southeast corner of Dundas and Victoria St., where they've announced Olympic Spirit, a \$32 million structure with a glass tower called "the torch on the square." With giant video walls, the complex will celebrate Olympic athletes, show various sports events and advertising, and engage visitors in interactive displays in which they can participate as

competitor, judge or commentator. Olympic Spirit is supposed to break ground in the next few months, and open in the fall of 2003, says Sniderman, who is general manager of the project. It will also have restaurants and bars.

Just west of Olympic Spirit, Hard Rock Café has spent \$9 million renovating its space, "in a building it doesn't even own," says Kyle Rae. Which stands as testimony to the business activity anticipated in the neighbourhood.

At its centre is Dundas Square. "We picked Brown and Storey's design because of its restraint and serenity," says Soskolne, who organized the international competition that attracted dozens of high-calibre contenders. "Its modernity is a brilliant foil to the pop culture that surrounds it."

For Brown and Storey, Yonge and Dundas has such intensity that a too specific, too intrusive design would have closed down opportunities for human interaction. "It's a good design that holds back and allows life to happen," says Brown.

Today, walking across the granite squares that are being installed with painstaking craftsmanship to form a subtle lattice pattern, the husband-and-wife team of Brown and Storey is elated to see their vision become a reality. Talking at one end, pointing this way and that: "Look, they've just poured the concrete for the plinth," a raised stage over the entrance to the parking garage. Here the architects

turned an apparent design impediment into an advantage.

The plinth will be covered by a small canopy made of steel with a zinc roof that can be expanded or retracted as necessary — "like a dining room table."

"There, three big lighting towers will go there, 17.5 metres high, for major event lighting... a raised canopy will run along the north side of the square, signalling the entrance to Ryerson, mediating between the edges of the square and Dundas St."

The one-acre granite surface slopes up from Yonge St., offering opportunities to make edges and seating. The fibre-optic lights and water fountains embedded in it can be programmed and orchestrated.

Storm water will be collected in troughs around the edges of the square and recycled into the fountains. Pedestrians will be able to access the parking garage beneath and its public washrooms through two entrances that open into Dundas Square. An elliptical form — a stainless steel grill over a steel framework — creates an opening for granite stairs connecting to the subway, with an elevator that makes it accessible.

Says Brown: "The square is porous. We're moving water through it, people through it, growing trees out of it — it's the new landscape, artificial, man-made, though the granite is real, natural. But we're making it porous, connecting the underground systems, pedestrian linkages, lighting, electricity, water, subway, everything that serves the upper surface. We're applying the same principles in any ecological system to the surface. That's what's interesting about the square. It's also about cultural infrastructure."

Indeed, people from all walks of life will connect as they pass through the square, coming off the subway, on their way to work, to the theatre, to shop, to enjoy the city.

What's most interesting about the square, Brown adds, is "what it allows people to do. It's how people can use it. It's not a spatial idea, it's a temporal idea. In architecture school, you're taught about time, place and occasion. Here, time and occasion have priority over space."

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NEW LANDMARK: An architectural model shows how Dundas Square will look when it opens in June. It features a black-and-green granite "landscape" with a raised stage at left, foreground, and a canopy at right, made of steel with zinc roof. Fibre-optic lights and fountains can be programmed.

