

Toronto march boosts Dundas Square



Christopher Hume

Dundas Square opened quietly last November but it really became part of the city yesterday, when tens of thousands showed up to protest the looming war on Iraq.

The peace rally was the first event held in Toronto's newest public square, which turns out to be an ideal venue for a mass demonstration such as yesterday's. Sitting on the southeast corner of Yonge and Dundas, the relatively confined space of Dundas Square seemed to expand to accommodate the growing crowd.

At its height, the crowd spilled out over Yonge and Dundas streets, blocking traffic in all directions. The northeast corner of the Eaton Centre, indoors and out, became part of the square temporarily, as did the

intersection of Dundas and Victoria.

Attention was focused on speakers who addressed the throng from the stage at the east end of the square, where it is at its narrowest. The practicality of this arrangement, which allows Yonge and Dundas to be incorporated into the action, also came clear.

By contrast, Metro Square, where the peace march ended, failed in its role as a civic venue. The difference between the two squares was instructive, however, especially in how they relate to the rest of the city.

It was obvious yesterday that an event held at Dundas Square is one that encompasses its surroundings. No one could have passed by the area Saturday afternoon without being aware of what was going on, or even becoming part of it.

But at Metro Square, the demonstration seemed to vanish behind a wall of office towers. The hard granite surfaces at Dundas gave way to the icy grass patches of Metro Square and even walking became dangerous.

Suddenly the protest lost most

of its street presence and pretty well ceased to be an event taking place within a larger context. Perhaps that's not surprising, since many Torontonians have never heard of Metro Square, let alone seen it. For the record, it's directly west of Roy Thomson Hall, bounded by King on the north, Wellington on the south and Metro Hall to the west.

The fundamental flaw is that the square bears little if any relation to its surroundings. That's why, although it opened in 1989, it has never really become part of life in Toronto. If yesterday was any indication, it never will; the square feels just too isolated and, therefore, irrelevant.

No one would make that claim about Dundas Square. Location may lie at the heart of its vitality, but there's more to it than that. What yesterday revealed was just how well the space is integrated into the urban fabric. Even the wall of media trucks lined up on the Yonge St. sidewalk wasn't enough to act as a barrier. They were simply engulfed by the crowd.

"It's just thrilling that the first use of the square is something

like this rather than a commercial event, or a social event," said Toronto architect Kim Storey, anti-war demonstrator and co-designer of Dundas Square. "I think it's a fantastic way to inaugurate the place."

Storey and her partner, James Brown, won a competition to design the facility more than five years ago. The decision to expropriate the property and build a civic square was one of the last acts of Toronto City Council before it was dissolved to make way for amalgamation.

The hope was that the square would be the catalyst to halt the decline of the Yonge/Dundas neighbourhood and bring about the regeneration of this crucial but stressed-out downtown precinct. It's still too early to tell whether it will succeed, but at the least yesterday's rally indicates that the new space has already opened up the corner and changed the way it functions within the city.

Before the square, Dundas and Yonge was a location. Now it's a destination, one that can only get better as the possibilities are explored.