

hipsters are coming!

Having tamed the wilds of Parkdale, The Junction and Trinity Bellwoods, the cool-kid colonization has moved up to Bloorcourt Village — is gentrification inevitable or can diversity survive among the art?

BY Kate Carraway July 23, 2008 12:07

The action on the western edge of Bloorcourt Village is all about Dufferin station. The doors leading to the subway spit and swallow noisy teenagers, busy-busy commuters, over-it moms with Dora the Explorer headaches and posturing XXL toughs. Watching it happen with a Nova Era takeout coffee, a kicky oldster from the retirement home across the street offers bites of his Drumstick before asking if I'm married or "looking."

This corner is classic Bloorcourt. To the east and the west, though, the neighbourhood paradigm is changing. A short walk west along Bloor towards Lansdowne, into Bloordale Village, reveals the Toronto Free Gallery's "Toronto Free Library" exhibit, a broad and radical take on libraries, art and community. Walk along Bloor in the other direction, from Dufferin toward Montrose Avenue, and you can pick up hardcore 7-inches at Hits and Misses, or play DJ at Disgraceland.

For the purposes of Toronto's indiegenesia, it used to be that Bloorcourt, in particular, was a useful neighbourhood for occasional terror-drinking at the 12:30 (where pints were a quarter or five bucks, depending on the bartender's mood), more reasonable and respectable fun at Hurricanes and Ethiopian food at tiny, delicious Nazareth. Mysterious bars and men's clubs fell between cheque cashing-joints and appliance stores. (Jankie's Place, at Bloor and Dovercourt, was a constant source of fascination when I lived on nearby Shanly Street.) On top of these and on pretty side streets north and south of Bloor, rent was cheap and the Ossington subway stop was handily in the middle.

If your constitution allowed for some crack-pipe encounters and a vaguely bleak curb aesthetic, Bloorcourt had some appeal for a good price. Jonathan "Jonny Dovercourt" Bunce, an artistic director with the Music Gallery and founder of the Wavelength music series, lived for seven years on his namesake street in and around Bloorcourt. (He's been in the Junction for two years since then.) Before his Bloorcourt tenure, he lived just south on College Street. He says, "[In 1997 and 1998] College and Dovercourt was like the wild west. We were escaping the Annex, since it was impossible to find an apartment around there, because no one, or at least no artsies/student types, dared moved west of Ossington."

Now, Disgraceland, the first on-purpose scenester bar, is in full effect, nestled in with Hurricanes and Nazareth. Saving Gigi, a cute and spare Saving Grace brunch outpost, and the Concord Café (also a gallery and venue) are competing with Menalon and the other long-time local restaurants, and dedicated punk-rock record store Hits and Misses, used book, CD and DVD store Zoinks!, and the local designer-supporting Freedom Collective clothing store have all set up shop in Bloorcourt. In Bloordale, the Toronto Free Gallery and, moving this summer, Mercer Union, offer conscientious projects for Toronto's art regulars and interested neighbourhood residents.

On June 21, the city recognized these developments in Bloorcourt and Bloordale by closing the streets for the BIG on Bloor festival, which was messy and fun and sort of weird, featuring bands playing on porches, cops yelling at ice-cream vendors, games of Ping-Pong, and punk kids' dogs getting intimate with the rear-ends of Labradoodles with Lululemon owners. All of it was reflective of a neighbourhood

deep in transition, from a place of concentrated diversity to another quagmire of west-end hipster colonization.

As happens every year in a different 'hood, the “artsies/student types” have invaded Bloorcourt and Bloordale, beginning a sticky process of reshaping a diversely populated neighbourhood in their own image, and towards their own needs and interests. (Leslieville, Little Italy, Trinity-Bellwoods, Beaconsfield Village, The Junction and, notably, Parkdale are all past subjects.)

Though the establishment of a handful of indie-ish businesses isn't heavy enough to constitute straight-up gentrification, it happens to be an inevitable step (between Step One: Skid Row Neighbourhood is Bad Yet Cheap and Appealing and Step Three: Young, Cool Careerists Buy Homes, Demand Bespoke Coffee Grinds and Baby Toys). Whether it's possible to manage the gentrification process so that artsy revitalization might raise living standards for established residents and business owners without squeezing them out remains to be seen, but Bloorcourt's transition is slow enough, for now, that the community might have an opportunity to decide for itself what goes down.

The relaxed pace of Bloorcourt's transition is partly due to its inherent lack of glamour: the slightly stodgy neighbourhood has a seediness that is family-friendly, and it's uncomfortably close to the prissy Annex. Generally, the area has considerably less social cachet than its aggressively gentrifying similars. Bloorcourt differs, in probably a helpful way, from Parkdale, where the apocalyptic emptiness of the waterfront and fading industrialism around the edges of the neighbourhood provide a certain kind of transgressive romance, and The Junction or Leslieville, which are an adequate distance from Sneaky Dee's to offer up that sense of new-wave pioneering that we're supposed to like so much.

Still, Bloorcourt has some inarguable assets, like legitimately cheap rent and accessibility. Bart Harnett is the co-owner of Zoinks!, which has been on Bloor near Dovercourt for two years, after one year further east. “I moved into the area, saw there was no shop like this around here, and figured we'd try our luck doing it. We thought the area could support one.... The Annex is getting kind of pricey; more people were moving into this area.”

Cheap rent is obviously a potent factor for a small-business owner like Pete Genest, who runs Hits and Misses, the punk-niche record shop. He says, “Basically when I moved back, I got off the subway at Dufferin and walked from Dufferin to Spadina, and then Spadina down to Queen, and then to Ossington, and wrote down every place that had a “For Rent” sign. Those ones on Queen Street were just astronomical, even just on Bathurst. My location there would be two and a half times the rent.”

Ian Danzig, founder and publisher of national music and culture tabloid Exclaim!, recently moved the mag's offices to a house on Bloor Street from digs above Tommy Chang's Black Belt World on Bloor at Ossington. Danzig focuses on the accessibility of transit in Bloorcourt. “Being right on the subway line is huge.... Not a tonne of places that are along the subway line are that affordable anymore; this is one of the areas that is.” More than anything, this makes Bloorcourt especially vulnerable to gentrification and its various ravages.

The neighbourhood remains dogged by crime and violence, but locals new and old are optimistic. Bart Harnett says, “I think that the area is kind of becoming a bit more of a positive street. Where we used to be there were more crackheads out front; they seem to have relocated. That was when our store used to be at Shaw and Bloor. It was a bit worse. There was always a cop car across the street.”

Exclaim!'s Ian Danzig has noticed a downturn in active crime over his 13 years living in Bloorcourt. "I don't see the drug dealing that I used to see. It used to be right in front of you. I haven't heard of the break-ins recently. So, on a purely appearances level, it definitely seems like crime is down. Especially at a time when we first moved into the neighbourhood. Thirteen years ago, there was stuff going down in the alleyways constantly."

Reducing crime in the neighbourhood — as well as making the area's green spaces such as Dufferin Grove Park and the Irene Parkette more useable — has been largely instigated by neighbourhood groups. Bloorcourt seems to have an unusual push behind it, with locals willing to stand up to dealers (Irene Parkette in particular was once dominated by drugs) and to the city (the infamous West Side BBQ was shuttered after years of focused violence and crime, while Dufferin Grove Park's active community of volunteers often clashes with the parks department).

Danzig says, "Definitely, there've been huge strides made in the last two or three years, but it's been a gradual improvement over the past 10 years. That's how it's done when it's done well. It's not like someone's coming with a wrecking ball. I really think it's the commitment of the local residents and the local businesses." Creating and maintaining a safer neighbourhood also makes it more appealing, especially to homebuyers with cash.

Still, the overall import of this influx of new, youth-oriented businesses in Bloorcourt and Bloordale doesn't interest everyone. Of the neighbourhood, Lansdowne and College resident Darren O'Donnell says, "I haven't really noticed any change." O'Donnell is the author of *Social Acupuncture* and an associate artist of the Toronto Free Gallery. With the gallery's library project, he instigated a local book drive as part of a larger project to involve the community in the gallery's "creative laboratory." (Invested as they are in the neighbourhood, the Toronto Free Gallery will host an exhibition in the fall, called "Strip Mining for Creative Cities?" on the very problem of gentrification, and the Richard Florida ethos that largely justifies it.)

O'Donnell points out that the social capital of artists and their ilk, or the influence of the businesses that service them hardly matter in moves toward gentrification when developers hold all the real, hard capital. O'Donnell says, "To suggest that artists lead the charge is quite preposterous."

Instead, O'Donnell's work with the Bloordale gallery is focused on providing creative opportunities. "There's a lot of pain in the neighbourhood," O'Donnell says. "There's a lot of drug use in the neighbourhood, that's a famous neighbourhood for that kind of stuff. We have no interest in cleaning that up, or in making their lives better, but they're our friends and we want to continue to build friendships with people who live and work there." The efforts of the gallery provide a small-scale template of the potential for artistic communities to integrate with rather than plunder a neighbourhood like this one.

Still conflicted in its character and prospects, anticipating the future of Bloorcourt Village is precarious. As Bunce says, "It's hard to predict. I'd like to think it will stay 'under the radar' for a bit, which means it might be a while before an American Apparel opens up there."

There's no Starbucks, and the number of cool-dude condo developments seems to be under control. The vast majority of Bloorcourt establishments, like Kash Spots and small-time travel rigs, aren't operated by newcomer white guys. Moreover: listings from June 2006 still hang outside the closed-down Paradise movie theatre, and the West Side BBQ remains empty and unrented.

This isn't Queen Street West — yet. And maybe it won't be. Whatever befalls it, right now Bloorcourt

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