



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MUSIC

Farzaneh Hemmasi, Ph.D.
Assoc. Prof. Ethnomusicology
Faculty of Music
University of Toronto
80 Queens Park
Toronto, ON M5S 2C5

RE: Item - 2023.TE6.54 - Kensington Safe Streets proposal

June 21, 2023

Dear Toronto and East York City Councillors,

My name is Farzaneh Hemmasi and I am an associate professor of ethnomusicology at University of Toronto. Since 2017, I have been conducting research in Kensington Market on the relationship of sound, music, culture, and economics. This research has received funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council and by the University of Toronto's Connaught Fund, among others. A major aspect of my work in Kensington relates to listening to the community. This involves listening to the sounds, musical genres, and noises of the neighbourhood, and, most relevantly for this discussion listening to how community members understand what makes their neighbourhood unique and worth preserving. Since 2021, I have been directing the Kensington Market Soundscape Study, a community-engaged research project about sound and noise in the Market, particularly related to the Pedestrian Sundays festival (<https://kensingtonmarket.music.utoronto.ca/public-projects/2022-summer-soundscape-project/>).

I write to voice my strong misgivings about the Kensington Safe Streets plan, on the docket for deliberation at the June 21 TEYCC meeting. In the course of my research, I have attended many community events related to the Kensington Safe Streets plan and have been pleased to be in direct contact with KSS Senior Public Consultation Coordinator Jason Diceman about the plan as well. My thanks to Jason and his team for their open communication throughout the consultation process.

“Not in my backyard” (NIMBY) is a common cry heard from communities resisting unwanted and/or inconvenient changes to their neighbourhoods. In the June 21, 2023 TEYCC meeting, you will hear that Kensington Market community members' objections to the Kensington Safe Streets plan are *not typical NIMBYism*. By and large, they do not voice concern for their own private property, but for Kensington Market's small businesses on the streets that are slated for transformation by KSS.

“Main Street Recovery” is critical to revitalizing the City of Toronto’s economy in the post-pandemic lockdown era.¹ Kensington Market includes some of those “Main Streets,” the very streets on which KSS will remove parking, make loading difficult, and implement pedestrian-only zones. Kensington Market’s small, vulnerable businesses are frequently owned, operated and patronized by New Canadians and people of colour. Like other Toronto small businesses, these faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 period. But unlike other Toronto neighbourhoods, Kensington Market’s current and historical demographic diversity, its openness to New Canadian entrepreneurs, its raw food sellers, and its organic, self-regulating mix of pedestrians, cyclists and motorists are vital to its appeal – both to local community members, to Kensington Market’s many visitors, and to Toronto’s Tourism Board.² *The KSS streetscape changes and the pedestrianization pilot are poised to make it even more difficult for small businesses to operate and thrive. The loss of the neighbourhood’s treasured small business owners will lessen its appeal to regular customers and tourists. KSS will not “bring back Main Street” – it will harm Kensington Market’s Main Streets.*

A review of recent academic literature suggests that pedestrianization has a negative effect on small businesses.³ A study of the pedestrianization of Istanbul’s historic Kadıköy neighbourhood showed that small shops were replaced almost entirely by restaurants and other businesses that could afford the rent increases that followed. Authors Ozdemir & Selcuk recommend pedestrianization plans should attend to “the neglected and unsettling phenomenon of commercial gentrification, and its potentially corrosive effects upon the character and appeal of historic urban retail centres” (Ozdemir & Selcuk 2017:22). While one could argue that the displacement of small businesses will happen one way or another and that pedestrianization will not significantly alter Kensington Market’s future, *there is also no compelling reason to think that pedestrianization will help vulnerable businesses in this important district.*

The insistence on keeping the pedestrianization pilot in the KSS plan is especially surprising given the academic studies that show how poorly North American pedestrian malls have fared.⁴ As a recent history shows, *many of the North American pedestrian zones and malls that were created in the mid-twentieth century have been removed or abandoned because they created commercial dead zones.* The image below, copied from Gregg 2021, shows this negative trend.

¹ <https://www.toronto.ca/news/mayor-tory-launches-campaign-to-help-small-businesses-during-their-pandemic-recovery/> and <https://www.toronto.ca/business-economy/business-operation-growth/business-incentives/toronto-main-street-recovery-and-rebuild-initiative/>

² Multiple Toronto Tourism Board publications highlight Kensington Market’s many small businesses and immigrant past and present. For example, see the Destination Toronto website entry on Kensington Market (<https://www.destinationtoronto.com/neighbourhoods/westside/kensington-market/>); “Dine, Shop, and Walk Your Way Through Kensington Market’s History;” (<https://www.destinationtoronto.com/leisure-blog/post/kensington-market-history/>) and “Kensington Market: Old World Charm, New World Vitality” (<https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/9201-Kensington-Market-route-map.pdf>).

³ Ozdemir, Dilek, and Irem Selcuk. “From Pedestrianisation to Commercial Gentrification: The Case of Kadıköy in Istanbul.” *Cities* 65 (2017): 10–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.02.008>.

⁴ Gregg, Kelly. “Victor Gruen Versus Jan Gehl - and the Contemporary Model of Pedestrianization.” *Journal of Urban Design ahead-of-print*, (2022): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2022.2147491>.

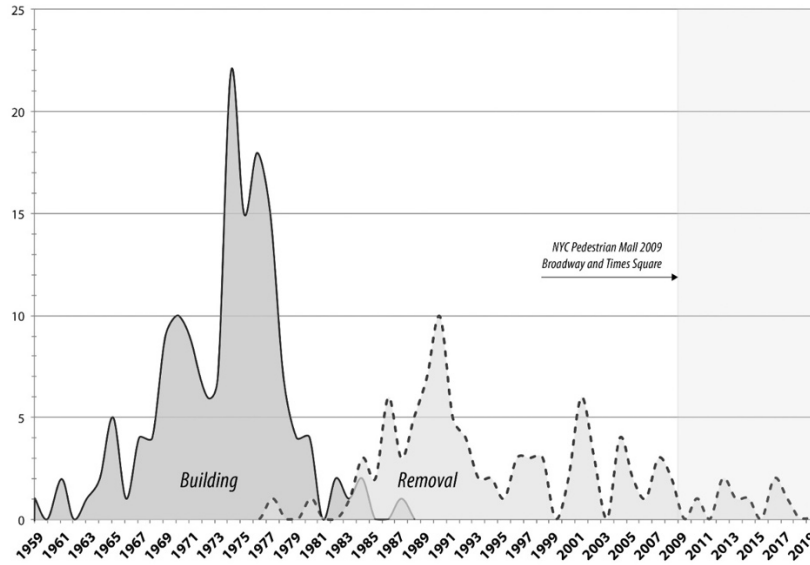


Figure 1. Timeline of post-war pedestrian mall building and removal in America and Canada (Gregg 2019a).

Image source: Gregg 2021: 2.

Acknowledging this terrible history, David Amos writes that “[p]lanners considering new pedestrian spaces should not be deterred by the history of old pedestrian malls, as long as they choose their site carefully and manage the space to keep it safe, clean, and inviting” (Amos 2019: 23).⁵ Experience has shown that Kensington Market community members cannot count on City police or by-law officers to help keep their current neighbourhood nor - if KSS passes, their future pedestrian mall - “safe, clean, [or] inviting.” During the neighbourhood’s Pedestrian Sundays festival in which Kensington Market’s central streets are closed to cars, the neighbourhood can become unsafe, filled with garbage, unwelcoming to many Kensington residents and unprofitable for many Kensington businesses who compete with unlicensed and unchecked street vendors. *When in May 2023 KMBIA board members and other community members asked police, by-law officers and Councillor Saxe’s office for additional enforcement support for Pedestrian Sundays, they were told it was not and will not be available – City resources are already stretched too thin.* There is no reason to believe this will improve in the future.

Given these studies, the City’s own economic priorities, as well as the testimony of those who stand to be directly affected by KSS, why would the City of Toronto agree to implement a pedestrianization pilot in this vulnerable and historically and currently important district? Based on the evidence given by KSS staff, the cost of closing this neighbourhood to vehicular traffic does not match the projected but unproven and unstudied potential benefits of a small, car-free area in the Downtown Core.

Finally, the KSS plan runs counter the City’s own Historic Conservation District study (2017: 104), which states:

⁵ Amos, David. “Understanding the Legacy of Pedestrian Malls.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* (2019): 11-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2019.1656103>

"Heritage attributes that embody the contextual value of the district include: ...coexistence of different modes of transportation (such as bicycling, walking and driving)."

And on page 105 of the same study:

"A Kensington Market Neighbourhood Heritage Conservation District Plan should:

8. Support the ongoing, organic evolution of the district, as related to its contextual values...

16. Promote the respectful co-existence of a variety of uses within a neighbourhood setting."

The proposed transformations of Kensington Market's streetscape contradict the Historic Conservation District study's recommendations, and the value the HCD places on Kensington Market's *current form*.

The KSS plan runs the serious risk of harming the neighbourhood it seeks to "improve." It is for the above reasons and more that I join diverse Kensington Market community members in asking Councillors vote against the Kensington Safe Streets plan and make the watermain repairs with minimal disruption to this important neighbourhood.

Respectfully submitted,



Farzaneh Hemmasi
Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology
University of Toronto Faculty of Music
Farzaneh.hemmasi@utoronto.ca