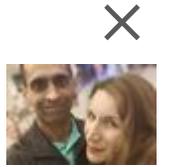


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THE ARCHITOURIST

## A flicker of Toronto's past at a pop-up neon museum



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TORONTO  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
PUBLISHED APRIL 3, 2019

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Mark Garner, executive director of the Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area, Jon Simo, owner of Neon Demon Studio and Brandon Donnelly, vice president of development, Slate Asset Management, sit in Simo's studio.

JON SIMO

There's a photograph circulating online that fascinates me: It's of Yonge Street, south of Sam the Record Man, sometime in the late 1960s or early 70s, when it was awash in neon light. At left, we see the vertical baby blue stripes that frame "Dancing Nightly" on the Edison Hotel (335 Yonge St.); next are the twinkling lights of Le Coq d'Or Tavern, then, after Disney Clothes at No. 327 (not that Disney), the long, colourful blade signs of no less than three movie houses

fade into the inky distance. And, because the photographer understood the power of reflection, the shot was taken while the pavement was rain-soaked.

To certain generations, this photo might represent something seedy: a tawdry, *Taxi Driver*-like scene that needs to be washed away by all that rain. It must, since those generations took down those signs during the following decades and replaced them with backlit plastic (except for Sam Sniderman – he was always flashy); to others, such as those who came of age during that photo (or even to those of us who were born around that time), the photograph represents a fascinating glimpse into a lost world ... and when something is lost, there is always a story that aches to be told.

“That’s the thing about neon,” confirms Jon Simo, owner of Neon Demon Studio, “it’s the only form of light that tells a story.”



Mr. Simo's Carlaw Street studio features dozens of neon signs.

JON SIMO

Mr. Simo, a 31-year-old cinematographer, began collecting neon “stories” only a few years ago. His first sign, a diminutive, 75-year-old FILM – CAMERAS was quickly followed by Perfect Pizza and a glowing crucifix. “I went from three signs to 15 in three months, and then in another three months from 15 to 45, so it really ramped up,” he chuckles. He now rents his glowing studio on Toronto’s Carlaw Street to photographers and advertising executives by the hour or day.





This Perfect Pizza sign was one of the first Mr. Simo collected.

JON SIMO

Somewhere along the way, Mr. Simo heard about Mark Garner, executive director of the Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area, and his efforts to collect, restore and reinstall Toronto's neon past in alleyways adjacent to Yonge Street as the Neon Museum (covered here in October, 2016). Mr. Garner, along with Rebecca Stubbs, have been working tirelessly on the museum concept for years, and now feel they've hit critical mass – last week the pair rescued the fabled Canary Restaurant sign from the bowels of salvage-hunter's paradise Addison's Inc. – and time has come to jump the final hurdles to get the signs repaired, installed and promoted.

That Mr. Simo and Mr. Garner would eventually meet was a given; that they would form a partnership was logical. However, it took a third figure to enter this artificially illuminated landscape for something big and buzzy to happen.



Mr. Simo rents his studio to photographers and advertising executives by the hour or day.

JON SIMO

For about as long as the museum idea has been a glowing kernel, Brandon Donnelly, vice president of development at Slate Asset Management, has been thinking about the lost art

form. When tasked with developing a condominium to replace the old Moss and Lam art studio at 2720 Dundas St. W., he realized the site was a gateway to the gentrified Junction neighbourhood. And since gateways deserve something iconic, early renderings of the building featured a pink neon “placeholder” sign reading “JUNCTION HOUSE” on top.



The Junction House condo sales centre will host the Neon Pop Up from April 12 to April 14..

SLATE ASSET MANAGEMENT

When that placeholder proved popular at community meetings, it was made permanent, and that’s when Slate’s commitment to neon blossomed and Mr. Garner was contacted with an offer of support. So, from Friday, April 12 to Sunday, April 14, 2019, the Junction House sales office will host Neon Pop Up, where signs from Mr. Simo’s and Neon Museum Toronto’s collections will be on display, along with fine art pieces (that incorporate neon tubing) by Floral Islands and Thrush Holmes.

“It’s about bringing neon back to the public eye,” Mr. Simo explains. “I’ve had so many people come through [Neon Demon Studio] asking for public tours, but it’s not really the right space for that, but there is a high demand for it.”

“So really what this is, is forcing the issue,” Mr. Garner says. “It really is saying, ‘We’ve identified the laneways, everybody has blessed the laneways we want to use, now I need to go convince the next layer of bureaucracy.’”





This crucifix was the third piece of Mr. Simo's collection.

JON SIMO

The main lane Neon Museum wants to light, it should be noted, is Victoria Street Lane, which runs north from Shuter Street, where it connects with the back of the Senator Restaurant (which sports a lovely vintage neon sign), crosses Dundas Street East. at the Imperial Pub (which also has a neon sign), and terminates at the Ryerson University campus. However, nearby O'Keefe Lane, which is closer to Yonge and passes behind Fran's and runs north to the Shopper's Drug Mart that was formerly the Hard Rock Café, is also a possibility.

For the museum to generate interest and reach a wider public, however, Mr. Garner insists there must be an internal component and he's eyeing both the derelict building at 38 – 40 Dundas St. E. and, should a long-overdue City of Toronto Museum find its way into Old City Hall, a series of rooms there.

“What we've been able to determine is it's going to cost us close to a million dollars to do this right,” Mr. Garner adds. “It's not cheap to run a museum, and all the maintenance that has to be done [to the signs].”

So, for those with deep pockets who may still be on the fence regarding neon's artfulness, may I suggest a trip to the Neon Pop Up?

It certainly won't be “your grandparent's museum,” Mr. Simo promises: “We're going to make this experiential ... really guiding your path as you go through the space and getting a different experience than you're used to.”

Admission to the Neon Pop Up is free. It runs April 12 to April 14, 2019 from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. at Junction House's sales office, 2720 Dundas St. West.

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