

Growing up in a suburb outside of Toronto, I remember the long drive through the city to the Eesti Maja in familiar detail. As we grew older, life became busier, and the benefits of the community were compromised by the inconvenience of the commute. Leaving the GTA later for university in Montreal, I found it hard to remain actively involved with the people that represent an integral part of my identity.

To keep our Toronto Estonian community strong, I believe it is important to continue to promote the participation of those within and outside the Toronto area. With a younger generation that is becoming increasingly mobile for education and work opportunities, we need to invest in a cultural centre that can accommodate the similarly changing needs of the community and allow for greater accessibility and centralization. The proposed new centre, at Spadina and Bloor, could address these issues, offering an advantageous location both within the city framework and in context to Tartu College, plus the opportunity to design a new space.

The need for a space for our community is a singular problem, albeit a multi-faceted one. We need a centre to allow multiple generations to come together to speak our language, share cultural practices and educate our youngest. Currently, the location of the Estonian House on Broadview is far from the downtown core and fragments people between Tartu College and the Danforth. The lone subway line that runs out to Broadview gives it low accessibility from much of the city and it is less convenient to commute to from out of town. We risk losing the participation of many if we do prioritize accessibility for all.

Conversely, a downtown location at Spadina and Bloor is accessible from the intersection of two TTC lines, multiple alternative public transit routes, and is more advantageous for out of town commuters, with proximity to Union Station with the GO train and UP Express lines. Positioning our community centre near a high concentration of post-secondary opportunities further creates access for young students who commute downtown for school. Solving the issues of accessibility and centralization will enable an increasingly diffuse community to better involve younger and mobile constituents, those through whom the community will continue to grow. Finally, the proximity of the proposed centre to Tartu College can promote integration between various groups, strengthening our Toronto-Estonian network.

The Eesti Maja on Broadview was an important meeting place for the growth of our community and I will always cherish the memories I have there. I hope for the creation of a new geographic heart for the Estonian community, where we can continue to grow. There is an opportunity for a development project that can bring together multiple generations of Toronto- Estonians and create a space that honours the past while looking towards the future. I hope that its success can allow the next generation of Toronto Estonians to be able to reminisce with similar nostalgia of a prosperous community, in a new space.

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