



TORAH CELEBRATION: Members of the Bloor Jewish Community Centre line up to touch a newly dedicated Torah held by centre president Coleman Bernstein.

Bloor Jewish centre to be revitalized

\$10 million plan aims to renew downtown community

BY LESLIE SCRIVENER
FAITH AND ETHICS REPORTER

It's been called the Jewish Y and the Bloor JCC, and soon the worn-down building at the corner of Bloor and Spadina will have a new name — the Miles S. Nadal Jewish Community Centre.

Just a heartbeat away from padlocked doors and insolvency in 1994, the Bloor Jewish Community Centre is now the object of a \$10 million rebuilding campaign and centrepiece of a plan to renew Jewish life downtown.

If all goes well, construction will begin in September. The shabby brick JCC will be transformed into a modern steel and glass structure named for its chief benefactor.

Nadal, who played basketball at the JCC as a child, came forward with a \$1.8 million gift.

Built in 1953, the JCC needed a renewal. Services dedicating a new Torah last Sunday were held in the auditorium — with stains on the ceiling and chipped paint everywhere — because there wasn't room for the crowds in the tiny Michael Bernstein Chapel.

Herb Finkelstein, who'd raised \$15,000 for the Torah — "Listen, guys, we're trying to raise money for a new Torah. What do you say?" — was dancing for joy, as mostly older men carried the sacred scroll through the streets near the JCC.

The parade was symbolically significant, showing that the Jewish community not only survives but thrives downtown.

"Guys like myself, diehards, we knew this place was ours and we were going to save it," said Finkelstein, owner of a quilting factory now run by his son.

After a downturn in the early '90s, some belt-tightening and restructuring — the Bloor JCC separated from the larger family of Jewish Community Centres of Toronto and became independent — the centre experienced a burst of new members and ran out of room.

Membership, open to all, nearly doubled, from 1,700 in 1995 to 3,000 this year. Only 60 per cent of members are Jewish.

While the centre has always



IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: Sunday's procession celebrating the dedication of a new Torah marked a revived sense of the Bloor Jewish centre's role in the community.

been open to the public, it's making a greater effort to bring in neighbourhood groups.

"The JCC actively wants to be the community centre for the Annex," says executive director Bill Emery. "But when you come in the JCC you are coming into a Jewish cultural institution."

The centre offers 450 courses — Suzuki violin, pottery, boxing, summer camps, after-school programs, seniors clubs, Jewish education, fitness classes — compared with 100 a decade ago. Dozens of community groups meet there in the evenings.

Young Jewish families are returning to the area their grandparents left

About 100,000 people use the centre each year. Morning runners arrive as early as 5 a.m., followed by children at JCC's legendary nursery school — for which parents sign up during pregnancy — and older children in the new Downtown Jewish Day School, where enrolment has increased from 10 in 1998 to 70 next September.

Through the day, students from nearby schools come to use the gym, a study group arrives from Narayever synagogue, there's a jiu-jitsu class and belly dancing.

As many as 20,000 Jews live in the downtown core, south of St. Clair. It's believed young Jewish families are now returning to the area their immigrant grandparents left behind as they prospered and moved north.

"What the JCC does is keep Toronto's immigrant culture

alive," said David Lewis Stein, The Star's urban affairs columnist and long-time JCC supporter. "The building is the centre of the downtown Jewish community."

Many of those working to revive the JCC have known it all their lives. Mark Sarner, JCC president, was 5 when he started Sunday-morning visits to the JCC — he still calls it the Y — with his father Wilfred who owned Windsor Frocks on Spadina Ave. Sarner later went to day camp at the JCC, one of his sons has a summer job there.

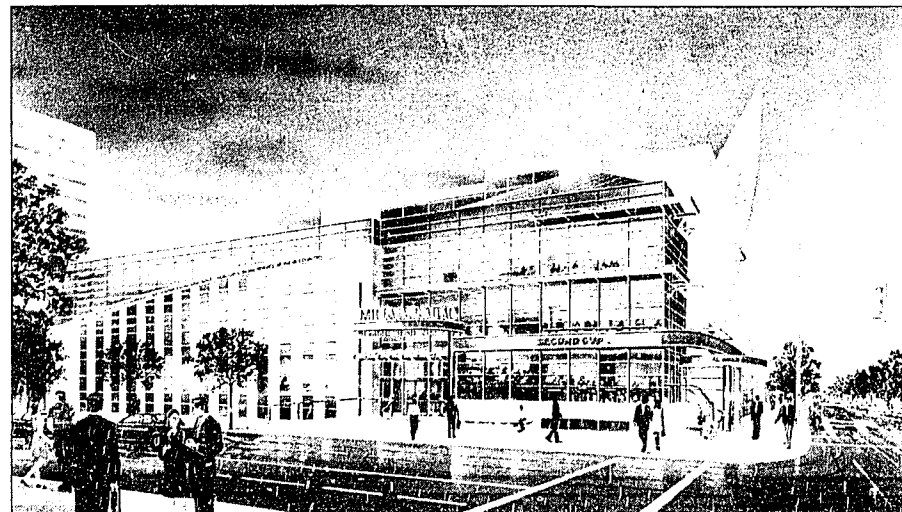
"It's been the most important institution in my life," he said. "I have absolute and total love for it."

"There's no status at the JCC. It's the most egalitarian of environments — the richest and the poorest, the smartest and the most challenged. For 50 years, people have connected with each other through this remarkable place."

In 1999, the Bloor JCC went into partnership with the United Jewish Appeal Federation, the fundraising and umbrella agency for the Jewish community. The federation agreed to cover the deficit arising from interest payments on a debt of \$2 million and to work with the JCC to raise funds for the new centre.

The UJA Federation also signed on a group of prominent businessmen led by Gerald Schwartz to head its development program, known as Jewish Toronto Tomorrow.

The JCC will continue to operate during the conversion. Five retail stores, including a Second Cup coffee shop, will be built on the Bloor St. W. side to provide rent revenue. The building will also include a new theatre, the Green Family Cultural Arts Centre.



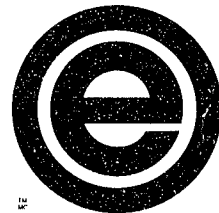
NEW LOOK: An artist's conception depicts the fresh face the Bloor Jewish Community Centre will present to downtown after it is rebuilt starting this fall.



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