

**Na Li. *Kensington Market: Collective Memory, Public History, and Toronto's Urban Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 144 pp., ISBN: 9781442616219.**

Nostalgia often colours our view of the past. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it has frequently blurred the academic vision of researchers trying to determine what made iconic

North American ethnic neighbourhoods throb with a unique vitality during their heyday. Na Li's monograph on Kensington, a downtown Toronto neighbourhood known as "the Jewish market" from the 1920s to the 1960s, which remains a zone of ethnic cross-pollination amidst unique architecture, powerfully situates nostalgia within Toronto urban history and geography. In doing so, she sheds a brilliant light on what precisely makes ethnic neighbourhoods "ethnic" in the eyes of both residents and outsiders, and how to preserve these neighbourhoods in the face of gentrification driven by rapidly rising real estate prices in Toronto's central core.

The core of Li's clarity comes from her insistence on two key concepts: that history is best understood through personal and experiential sources, and that the "collective memory" of residents is the best prism through which to focus scholarly analyses and reconstructions of how urban places impact them. Nostalgia thus becomes part of the collective memories' "sense of space"—in this case Kensington—but its influence is limited by the realization that the cultural memories of North American ethnic enclave inhabitants are vastly different and depend on a host of factors. While some recall only "a place of daily struggle and menial employment", outsiders see as "an enthralling social situation". The truth can only be uncovered by carefully balancing interviews with various area residents who lived in the area during the last sixty years, studying Kensington's history, the architecture, symbolism, and role of key institutions with a deep sense of respect for the resilience of the residents' consistent realization that Kensington was a special place to live.

Li, who loves Kensington, argues its uniqueness stems from its repeated use as an area of first settlement, its unique "architectural inventory", and its cultural diversity. She believes these three elements combine to create a sense of "insiderhood" among the residents that helps define a unique "sense of space". She interestingly observes that the successive immigrant waves that used Kensington's narrow streets were all from cultures in which urban street life played a key role. This heightened their awareness and attachment to Kensington; they became "insiders" very conscious of the value and boundaries of their neighbourhood and its "sense of history." Unique businesses and places of worship mirrored and further cemented this connection. To prove this point, Na devotes considerable analysis to the "geography and memory of place" in her survey of the histories of selected Kensington institutions: the Anshei Kiev Synagogue, United Bakers Dairy Restaurant, Tom's Clothing, the Perola Super-

market, and Hyman's Books. The latter closed its doors after six decades on Spadina Avenue and the restaurant has moved uptown to one of the new centres of Jewish population, but the others still thrive downtown.

These interviews are remarkably useful in separating nostalgia from history by providing short but insightful histories of each site, carefully noting the architectural features that tie them to the area. Only then does Li analyze these interviews, which yield key information she usefully terms "places of memory" and "memoryscapes." All the businesspeople stressed that their stores were not merely businesses, but places where many generations came to shop, meet, mingle, and exchange memories—key activities Na calls "emotional investment in the neighbourhood." She then roots nostalgia firmly into the collected and collective memories that each of these key neighbourhood businesses evoked.

For example, long after Ben Zion Hyman sold his bookstore, he would encounter people who regaled him with stories about their experiences at the store with his father or grandfather. At United Bakers, the co-owner recalled that at least once a day a customer would come who would share their memories of the bustle of Spadina tradesmen, union leaders, and Canadian Jewish Congress officials who packed the restaurant at lunch. Nostalgia doesn't simply exist—it is rooted in the geography of place, which catalyzes memory even away from Kensington's domains. "Places conjoin time and space," writes Na Li, and the moving narratives of the interviews certainly underscores the truth of her observation and her passion for this fascinating neighbourhood.

In the final section of her book, Li addresses the challenges Kensington faces from urban planning and pressure for gentrification. Certainly many residents are aware of the uniqueness of their neighbourhood—but how can they withstand these economic and political forces? Na Li calls on urban planners to act creatively and responsibly to proactively work with residents and local politicians to preserve the unique character of Kensington while ensuring that building also meet municipal codes.

She applauds careful use of historical designation (as in the case of the Anshei Kiev Synagogue) to ensure the survival of unique structures. A good deal of space is devoted to urban planning theory and how public policy must be shaped to recognize local residents' deeply held memories, especially because many of these residents would normally be estranged or aloof from the public planning process.

This is an important addition to the fields Canadian Jewish, Ethnic, and Urban History. Li's passionate understanding of the geography of place and Kensington has produced insightful and vital data on key area institutions and crystallized their emotional role in the community. Its relative brevity makes it accessible to scholar and layman alike, although the latter might find some of her methodological expla-

nations overly long. There are some minor issues with place names; both captions and text often refer to the synagogue as “the Kiev,” when it is correctly known as “the Kiever.” More significantly, Li never discusses the extent to which Toronto urban planners have already engaged her agenda and consulted with “grassroots residents.” Judging from a recent successful effort to ban big-box stores from proximity to Kensington, it would seem that Torontonians and their planners are already onside with neighbourhood preservation. Another significant omission involves the lack of discussion, let alone analysis of how the growing Chinese and South Asian migration into Kensington has affected the area.

This is especially notable because in his interview with Na Li, Tom Mihalik of Tom’s Place observes that Chinese and South Asians are the newest ethnic groups occupying Kensington. Given that the presence of both groups has been growing for the past twenty years, and has created a significant number of commercial, religious, and cultural sites, this is a significant omission. One wonders whether these street-based cultures also share previous generations’ feeling for the area. Certainly, these omissions highlight the ample room for more scholarship here, and that will be to Na Li’s credit. She has laid down a useful pastiche of interdisciplinary methodologies to study a key area of ethnic settlement and ethnic succession in a major Canadian metropolis now famous for its ethnic diversity and desire to preserve neighbourhoods. Hopefully, her methodologies will be transposed to Vancouver, Montreal, and other cities with similar urban features. Certainly this engaging and important work deserves a wide readership and will fill a key gap in the scholarly literature.

**Jack Lipinsky**