

# THE RYERSON REVOLUTION

Sheldon Levy, Ryerson's fiercely ambitious president, persuaded students, politicians and Bay Street to bankroll his big idea. Now his once dumpy polytechnic is turning into an urban academic force, swallowing up Sam's and the Gardens and redrawing the downtown

**By Marcus Gee**



*Big man on campus: Leey's greatest love — after his work and his wife — is his motorcycle.*

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**WHEN HE WAS A TEEN IN** 1960s Toronto, Sheldon Levy would take the subway downtown and buy standing-room-only tick-

ets at the great arena where Foster Hewitt broadcast from the gondola in the rafters. He was mad for hockey, and the Leafs were in their glory. Dave Keon and Frank Mahovlich were Levy's gods, and Maple Leaf Gardens was their temple.

Forty years later, when Levy became the president of Ryerson University, in 2005, the Gardens was a silent, empty mausoleum. Levy saw potential in the great hulk on Carlton Street. If Ryerson could grab a piece of the iconic arena, the university would get both desperately needed space and a huge boost to its reputation. Just months into the job, Levy called the head office of Loblaw, the owner of the arena. "You have a building I want," he said. "Sell it to me." It was an act of pure bravado. Ryerson, the poor cousin of Toronto universities, had no money to buy the Gardens, much less turn it into the new athletic centre that Levy had in mind.

Loblaw wasn't interested. The company had purchased the building in 2004 with thoughts of turning it into a superstore. Levy wouldn't let it go: he invited key Ryerson executives and governors to dinner at his house, where they discussed how the university could get its hands on the Gardens. "Some people were just wide-eyed," recalls Peter Lukasiewicz, a Toronto lawyer who chairs the board of governors. "I frequently heard from colleagues, 'Sheldon's got too many balls in the air.'" The idea of getting Ryerson's name on the Gardens was tantalizing. "People walked away saying, 'Wow, this is huge,'" says Lukasiewicz.

At the end of 2007, Loblaw returned with its own proposal: it would sell Ryerson the top floor of a remodelled building while keeping the bottom two for the store. The university rejected the plan, which it couldn't afford.

About a year and a half later, Loblaw came back with a new plan to put its parking lot in the basement, allowing the grocery store to sit at ground level. The cavernous, two-storey space above would go to Ryerson. At the same time, Levy got help from an unexpected quarter: the student body. Students, frustrated with Ryerson's crummy athletics centre—buried underneath a field, with a roof too low for a regulation volleyball game—approached him about holding a referendum to approve an added charge on tuition. The proposed levy of \$126 per student would help pay for the new sports facility, including a new arena for the Ryerson Rams, which currently play at the George Bell rink at St. Clair West and Runnymede. Such campus referendums usually fail, but against the odds, 74 per cent voted yes last spring. Finally, a deal seemed within grasp.

The big question was how to get the rest of the money. Ryerson's endowment of about \$80 million is minuscule compared with U of T's \$1.3 billion, and the estimated cost to Ryerson for the Gardens project is \$60 million. Levy decided to ask Ottawa. Education is a provincial responsibility, and the federal government is not in the habit of giving grants to universities, but Levy played the recession-fighting stimulus card, and it worked. Accompanied by Galen G. Weston, scion of the billionaire Weston family and executive chairman of Loblaw Companies Ltd., he approached the Infrastructure Minister John Baird and other Ottawa contacts with his pitch. They bought it.

The feds agreed to contribute \$20 million, and a fundraising campaign will add another \$20 million. The special levy on students will pay for the final \$20 million, so none of the up-front cost will come from university coffers. In effect, Levy got Maple Leaf Gardens for nothing.

"It was a long shot," he says. Yet, near the end of a crushing recession, he pulled it off. Next year, the Gardens will reopen with a Loblaw's grocery store on the ground floor and a Ryerson athletics facility above. The upstart former technical college once derided



*Net benefits: Levy coveted the Gardens and persuaded Loblaw, the building's owner, to split it with Ryerson. When renovations are completed next year, a supermarket will sit at ground level, and the space above will be devoted to a \$60-million athletic centre with an NHL-sized rink*

as Rye High will have its name on one of the most famous buildings in Canada. The Ryerson Rams will play on a new NHL-sized rink under the historic dome. The facility will also have a 200-metre, four-lane running track, volleyball and basketball courts, a fitness centre and high-performance gym.

It is a remarkable coup for a former math teacher. Since taking over at Ryerson, Levy has led an up-by-the-bootstraps revival of the once second-rate school and its scruffy corner of downtown. He may lack the bully pulpit of a mayor or the financial heft of a Bay Street titan, but he's a wildly ambitious dreamer with a knack for making things happen. "Some people know how to imagine great ideas but can't get things done," says the former University of Toronto president Rob Prichard. "What distinguishes Sheldon is the combination of relentless imagining of ideas with relentless pursuit of their execution."

Levy's master plan for Ryerson envisions a dense urban campus with soaring glass towers, stylish street furniture, eco-friendly green roofs and cyclists and pedestrians traversing a busy campus. He has started construction on a dramatic new photography gallery and brazenly ripped down Yonge Street's iconic Sam the Record Man building to make way for a new student centre. He is talking with city hall about transforming Gould Street, Ryerson's central avenue, into a car-free pedestrian mall lined with café tables and shaded by trees. The idea is to turn Ryerson into Toronto's equivalent of NYU—a prestigious campus in the middle of the city, a fizzing catalyst of urban change.

Levy believes that what is good for Ryerson is good for Toronto.

The reverse is also true. "The higher the quality of the city around us," he says, "the higher the quality of the university."

**LEVY DOESN'T LOOK THE PART OF A BRASH CITY BUILDER. HE'S SEDATE and nebbishy, and has an off-kilter smile and a ponderous way of talking that recalls the actor Donald Sutherland. Unusual for someone of his rank, he has a masters degree but no doctorate—the kind of thing that caused chatter in the faculty lounge.**

Levy was born in 1949 to Jewish parents from Poland and Russia. His father was a truck driver who delivered burlap animal-feed bags, his mother a homemaker. Sheldon and his two sisters—one younger, one older—grew up in a 900-square-foot house near Dufferin and Eglinton. He was an indifferent student who flunked Grade 10 after he fell in with a bad crowd and started skipping school. His fortunes changed when he ran into an exceptional teacher who recognized his talent for math.

He earned degrees from York and went on to become a lecturer in math and computer science at York, then an administrator at York, U of T and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. At Sheridan College, of which he was president in

the late 1990s, he built the reputation of the school's renowned animation program by expanding its offerings in digital TV, virtual reality design and computer animation. Showing an interest in the kind of cool, modern design that he would later bring to Ryerson, he also persuaded government officials to contribute \$7.2 million to the construction of a gleaming, glass-walled animation and media tech building on the Oakville campus.

“Students are turning to their friends and saying, ‘I go to Ryerson, and my school just bought Maple Leaf Gardens’”

Levy and his wife, Tracy Vogrin, a 52-year-old elementary school teacher, live near Bayview and Davisville with her two 20-something children from her first marriage. Levy also has two adult daughters, both schoolteachers in York Region. His job brings a salary of \$350,000, plus \$50,000 in benefits. To let off steam, he takes long road trips on his BMW K1200LT touring motorcycle, a sleek black machine that he loves so much he keeps a picture of it on his BlackBerry. Vogrin sometimes rides on back and complains that he never stops except to get gas or to go to the bathroom.

Soon after taking the Ryerson job, Levy met with the university's board of governors. All of Ryerson's top administrators were there, as were board luminaries, such as the Royal Bank executive Janice Fukakusa and the investment tycoon Jack Cockwell. Levy went around the table and asked each member to name the most important factor in the success of their university. Some said a safe campus, others academic excellence. Levy said no: it's reputation. To climb up the ladder, Ryerson had to establish itself as the place to be.

It was a tall order. Ryerson became a university in 1993, but it's still the underdog among Toronto's schools, dismissed because of its polytechnic past as a vocational college with university pretensions.

To give the place a new sense of pride and belonging, Levy focused investments in research, established new graduate programs and pushed the university into the digital age. Under his rule, the emphasis at Ryerson remains on preparing students for jobs—some 95 per cent are employed two years after graduation—but the stigma of being the place for future barbers and clock makers is largely gone. Ryerson now offers degrees in biomedical engineering and health information management. It has no medical school but offers a four-year degree in midwifery and runs a lab for studies in sleep and depression.

The most impressive expansion, however, has been in the area of new technologies. The faculty at the school's Privacy and Cyber Crime Institute have backgrounds in law, marketing and business, and conduct research in workplace surveillance, identity theft and privacy on social networking sites. At the Digital Media Zone, a sprawling, computer-equipped space overlooking Yonge-Dundas Square, students collaborate on new smartphone applications, robotic equipment for hospital operating rooms, and interactive advertising. Levy set up the facility to help turn promising concepts into commercial products. What does Ryerson get if some kid invents the next iPad? Levy makes a circle with his thumb and forefinger. "Zero. Instead, what we get is reputation—when you're at a cocktail party and someone says, 'Do you know what's happening at Ryerson?'"

Ryerson now gets about 10 applications for every first-year place. That's the highest ratio for any university in the province. The total number of applications has grown 131 per cent over the past decade, compared with 71 per cent for all Ontario universities together. But it isn't yet a destination university: four-fifths of Ryerson students already live in the GTA, compared with under three-quarters of U of T students.

Levy pals around with his students more than most university presidents, much like a store manager who shakes customers'

hands and asks if they're happy with the service. The students call him Sheldon, and some even have his cell number. On Friday nights, he can often be seen in the bleachers in a sweatshirt and ball cap, cheering on Ryerson teams. He meets for half an hour a week with students from each of the two school newspapers. Any good administrator should meet his students, but Levy is doing more than that: he's carefully building consensus among his stakeholders for his plans. It's a crafty strategy, and it paid off when he needed them onside for the Gardens deal.

**MAGE MAKE-OVERS USUALLY BEGIN WITH THE BASICS.** THE first thing Levy noticed when he started his job was how dirty and dishevelled Ryerson was. He ordered cleaners to polish every floor on campus. He set gardeners to planting new flowerbeds. He had washrooms repaired and expanded.

The second thing he noticed was how little visibility Ryerson had in Toronto. Unlike U of T and York, Ryerson does not own vast tracts of land. Most of its 21-acre campus is confined within a small quarter of downtown bounded by Dundas, Yonge, Gerrard and Jarvis. U of T, with about two and a half times as many students, covers 33 times as much land, York 26 times as much. If people knew Ryerson at all, it was as "that school behind Sam's." Levy put up big signs and billboards around campus to shout out Ryerson's name.

With the population of the GTA booming and thousands of new students looking for university places, Ryerson has no choice but to build up instead of out and to make deals with private developers to construct new space. Instead of being a quiet oasis amid the hubbub of urban life—all vines and clock towers—Levy's Ryerson aims to become a part of that hubbub. "The quality of the city, the edginess, the fun—all those things are critical to attracting great faculty and great students," he says. Kyle Rae, the city councillor who helped create Yonge-Dundas Square, says that Levy has "deconstructed the quad." Universities began as cloistered, elite religious institutions, deliberately cut off from the bustling cities. Many faced inward on a quadrangle or square. "Universities have gone from being separate and isolated to being integrated and diverse," he says.

In some cases, the school has purposely blurred the boundaries between itself and the city. At Dundas and Bay, business majors at Ryerson's Ted Rogers School of Management attend classes on the floors above a Canadian Tire and a Best Buy. At the AMC movie complex at Yonge and Dundas, students listen to morning lectures in the same theatres where popcorn-munching moviegoers watch Hollywood blockbusters in the afternoon and evening. The theatres were designed with this unusual cohabitation in mind. They have pop-up podiums for lecturers and portable desktops that attach to the theatre seats so students can take notes. Instead of going to the library, the kids study in between classes in the food court beneath the AMC. The time-sharing arrangement was a great deal for Ryerson, which secured access to the theatres when it sold the space above its parking lot for development. One of the advantages of owning property downtown, says Levy, is that you can get money for the air above existing buildings.

When Levy gives speeches about city building to the school's faculty and administration, he shows before and after slides of



*Popcorn and a lecture: the university, rejecting the ideal of an ivy-covered, cloistered campus, struck a space-sharing deal with the AMC multiplex at Yonge and Dundas. Every week, some 8,000 students take classes in 12 theatres*

Yonge and Dundas: the formerly sleazy precinct with a submarine shop on the corner and touts selling cheap watches from folding tables, versus the square it is today, with its giant billboards staring down on a bustling modern intersection. His next slides tell a different story. One shows the Yonge strip just a block or so north of the buzz of Dundas, where it peters into a dismal streetscape of cheque-cashing stores and strip clubs. Then he shows a slide of Shibuya, a jam-packed, ultra-urban, neon-lit district of Tokyo. Another slide shows the futuristic glass Apple store on New York's Fifth Avenue. The latter two slides are titled "Our Competition."

The stagnation of Yonge drives Levy as near to distraction as a rational, amiable, positive person can get. He blames what he calls "a quiet acceptance of the subpar" for making our city less than great. "That acceptance of mediocrity," he says, "is what bothers me more than anything."

Ryerson's takeover of the Sam the Record Man building at Yonge and Gould is a direct assault on that stagnation. Ryerson had its eye on the corner lot for years. As Sam's faltered, hit by competition from bigger chains and digital music sharing, Levy approached Sam Sniderman, the legendary owner of the store with the two spinning neon discs on its façade. By then in his 80s, Sniderman

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liked the idea of having Ryerson own the property but had signed it over to his two sons and two nieces. The pace of negotiations with the family was slow, and Ryerson grew impatient, threatening to expropriate. (Under provincial law, a university is able to expropriate any land it considers necessary for its use.) Bobby Sniderman, one of Sam's sons, was startled by the school's aggressive tactics. "It was highly inappropriate and very unprofessional," he says. Ultimately, however, he agreed to sell the site for \$23 million. It was a sweet victory for Levy, who used to go to Sam's as a kid to buy bargain-bin 45s.

After much lobbying by Levy, the provincial government agreed to put up \$45 million for a new learning centre on the site. An extension of the adjacent library, it will be an ultra-modern building by Norway's Snøhetta architecture firm and Toronto's Zeidler Partnership. The 10-storey centre will house student services, study spaces and lots of computers, plus retail at street level. The neon Sam's sign, which was granted a heritage designation, is currently in storage and will be remounted on either the new centre or a nearby building.

"Sheldon never gives up," says Linda Grayson, Ryerson's vice-president of administration and finance. "Even when there are setbacks, it's always, 'Let's regroup and talk about how to do this.'"



*Growth industry (clockwise): the \$40-million expansion of the School of Image Arts, designed by Diamond and Schmitt Architects, will open later this year; the Ted Rogers School of Management occupies three floors above a Canadian Tire; the \$76-million George Vari Engineering and Computing Centre, designed by Moriyama and Teshima Architects, replaced a parking lot*



Levy expects the project will prompt more development on the Yonge strip. In fact, it already has: Primaris, partly owned by the Ontario municipal workers pension fund, bought up seven properties north of Sam's on Yonge in 2008 and 2009 but isn't yet divulging what it intends to do with them.

**NOT ALL OF LEVY'S PLANS HAVE WORKED OUT.**

His joint bid with the city to acquire the Brutalist Sears administration building on Jarvis failed when they were outbid by the province, which is using the building to centralize scattered government offices. Levy has had no success in luring private developers to help build more on-campus residences for students (the university needs about 1,500 new residence beds to meet demand), and his vow to close Gould Street to cars by 2008 was blocked by red tape, though a trial closure is set to begin this fall.

There are money problems, too. With the provincial government facing a \$24.7-billion deficit, Levy proposed a three to four per cent budget reduction across the university. The faculty has promised to fight the cut.

Last December, Levy took to the stage at Maple Leaf Gardens with John Baird, Galen G. Weston and Jim Flaherty to announce

**Ryerson wanted Sam the Record Man as a campus gateway and threatened to expropriate it from the Snidermans. "It was highly inappropriate," says Bobby Sniderman**

the three-way deal as Stompin' Tom Connors' "The Hockey Song" played on loudspeakers. The news resounded through the Ryerson community. "Students are turning to their friends and saying, 'I go to Ryerson. My school just bought Maple Leaf Gardens,'" says Amit Shilton, editor of *The Eyeopener* student newspaper.

Now they must get the new athletics centre built on time. To qualify for Ottawa's \$20 million in stimulus cash, the project needs to be substantially finished before April 2011. It's a complicated job, involving an excavation beneath the Gardens to provide parking and the creation of new upper floors that span the huge structure. Grayson compares the project to building a ship in a bottle. The building will likely keep its historic sign, art deco façade and hanging scoreboard. Ryerson's banner will wave

next to the Loblaws sign outside.

What began as a search for space and status has become a push by Levy to transform not just Ryerson but the city around it. He likes to quote Daniel Burnham, the architect who drew up Chicago's grand city plan in 1909: "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood." Acquiring Toronto's defunct temples to music and sport certainly qualifies as big. It also cements Ryerson's place in the heart of the city.

**END**