

# PERSPECTIVES ON PLAZAS

PlazaPOV Study: Background Report





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# 01.

## INTRODUCTION

Strip plazas, also known as strip malls, are a common fixture in cities across North America. Typically built as a row of attached retail, commercial and service establishments with storefront parking to accommodate users, and often held in single ownership, strip plazas provide a mix of goods and personal services to a generally local trade area. Over time, throughout Toronto's inner suburbs, strip plazas have evolved from simple convenience centres to serve multiple functions, often providing informal community gathering spaces and affordable retail spaces for small businesses, including those catering to ethnic populations.

Increasingly, due to their low-density form of development and location along major arterial roads, strip plaza sites are experiencing redevelopment pressures, which in turn may threaten the loss of affordable spaces, specialty stores and community hubs. The City Planning Division is studying Toronto's strip plazas to understand their current and potential future role in the neighbourhoods where they are located,

and in Toronto's evolving urban landscape. This background report provides an overview of findings resulting from:

- an academic literature review of the history and development of strip plazas in Toronto and beyond;
- an environmental scan of efforts to redevelop, renew and retrofit strip plazas in North America; and
- an overview of recent media attention on strip plazas.

This report is accompanied by a current conditions report ([Positioning the Plaza](#), City Planning, 2023) that provides a general assessment of the location and characteristics of strip plazas in Toronto, as well as a demographic summary of the communities surrounding them. This analysis will form the basis for research questions to further evaluate the importance of plazas and their future within the City of Toronto.

*Since many commercial centres of this type often include the word “plaza” in their name (e.g. Wexford Heights Plaza), the term “strip plaza” or “plaza” will be used in this report. Strip plazas are also often referred to as “strip malls” or “convenience centres” in the literature.*



## 02.

# EARLY DEVELOPMENT

In North America, early strip plazas emerged from an urban form called the “commercial strip” that can be dated back to the late 19th century<sup>1</sup>. The extension of electric streetcar lines from urban downtowns led to suburban growth, increasingly improving the value of lands along expanding transportation routes. For tax purposes, developers built small commercial strips quickly and cheaply as placeholders until the land was deemed appropriate for more intensive redevelopment. These became

known as “taxpayer strips” which served nearby residents<sup>2</sup>. As post-war suburban expansion continued in the 1950s and beyond, so did the number of strip plazas, providing convenient shopping opportunities catering to automobile drivers, with pull-in parking immediately off the street. Initially intended to be temporary in nature, their simplicity and flexibility proved suitable for a large range of potential tenants, resulting in readily available and sustainable profitability for landowners<sup>3</sup>.



Image 1. ‘Taxpayer Strip’, Belvedere, CA, 1924

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- 1 Hickey
  - 2 Hickey
  - 3 Manning

Toronto's development follows a similar pattern. Prior to amalgamation in 1998, Metropolitan Toronto consisted of the former municipalities of Toronto, Etobicoke, York, North York, East York and Scarborough. Certain areas of the city that were developed before widespread automobile use consisted of high density, mixed-use residential areas within walking or streetcar distance of main streets and employment opportunities. By contrast, suburban development throughout much of Scarborough, Etobicoke and North York expanded at unprecedented rates in the post-war era, attributable to the 1946 National Housing Act and the new Canada Mortgage and

Housing Corporation which afforded increased accessibility for home ownership, as well as the expansion of automobile expressways<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, the built form of the inner suburbs was designed to accommodate private vehicle use, generally comprised of low-density commercial buildings along multi-lane arterial roads and tracts of single-family housing, with clear separation between commercial, residential and industrial uses. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, around 75% of the city's population was living in Toronto's suburbs<sup>5</sup>, increasing demand for commercial strip plazas catering to the needs of local residents.

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4 Rotsztain

5 Hickey

# 03.

## ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

### 3.1 Social Spaces

Strip plazas emerged to respond to the basic needs of new suburban dwellers for convenient shopping and services in their neighbourhoods. The decentralization of cities in the post-war expansion era led to people in the suburbs identifying less with the main central business district in the urban core, and more with their local neighbourhoods and the commercial centres that serve them – creating a “common ground” for the entire surrounding community<sup>6</sup>. Since the 1950s, many shopping centres were purposefully designed as community hubs to encourage socialization – a means to attract foot traffic that also made up for a lack of public gathering spaces in the suburbs<sup>7</sup>.

Strip plazas have become vibrant gathering places in the tradition of the “Third Place” – spaces outside of the home and work where people socialize and build community. While many urban thinkers, supported by current planning policies, tend to view strip plazas as unattractive and ripe for redevelopment, others argue that the focus on aesthetic concerns should be balanced with considerations for the people who use these spaces<sup>8</sup>. The 2023 closure of Toronto’s first strip plaza, Sunnybrook Plaza, was met with nostalgia for the personal memories and “palpable sense of community” forged there over its 62-year existence<sup>9</sup>. This connection between residents and their local plaza is increasingly apparent as neighbourhoods originally built to accommodate automobile use are housing low-income and new immigrant communities with low rates of car ownership<sup>10</sup>.



Image 2. Sunnybrook Plaza, Toronto, ON, 1950s

6 Dimitrou

7 Manning

8 Linovsky

9 Semley, Flack

10 Rotsztain



## 3.2 Ethnic and Cultural Hubs

Multiple academic and media articles have noted the proliferation of ethnic businesses locating in lower-rent suburban strip plazas as supporting Toronto's reputation for multiculturalism and diversity perhaps more than its Downtown<sup>11</sup>. One author who interviewed many ethnic business owners found that strip plazas are highly desirable by those who cannot find affordable retail space for small business elsewhere in the city<sup>12</sup>. Businesses may also be attracted to locate in strip plazas that already serve a specific ethnic community, or may have strong relationships with local religious or ethnic community organizations – examples in Toronto include a Pakistani Islamic learning centre and a Filipino Church<sup>13</sup>. These kinds of

specialty businesses or services may draw from a broader trade area, leading to a preference to maintain readily available parking for patrons travelling from further afield<sup>14</sup>. Toronto's strip plazas are recognized both here and abroad as cultural cuisine hubs featuring authentic dining establishments and food stores<sup>15</sup>. This further supports ethnic communities by providing opportunities for new immigrants, both within and beyond the immediate neighbourhood, to interact with people sharing their own background. Because rents are affordable, restaurant owners are able to focus on providing excellent, innovative food options<sup>16</sup>. As a result, Toronto's strip plazas have been observed to be “bustling with life”, “busy and prosperous”, and valued places in their own right<sup>17</sup>.



Image 3. Mixed-use strip plaza on Albion Road, Toronto, ON, 2014

11 Rotsztain, Mathuria, Keenan, Lorinc

12 Linovsky

13 Ahmed

14 Rotsztain

15 Bhandari, Onishi

16 Liu

17 Lorinc





**Image 4. Iranian Plaza (Little Persia), North York, Toronto, ON**

This is not just a Toronto phenomenon. In the United States, as car traffic was driven from arterial roads by the expansion of interstate highways, the decline of strip plazas along those corridors led to lower rents, in turn providing opportunity for new business ventures<sup>18</sup>. Several scholars have observed that ethnic immigrants seeking to open establishments will often forego central city locations in favour of more affordable spaces in suburban areas<sup>19</sup>. As a result, ethnic entrepreneurs play a vital role in attracting social interaction, clusters of cultural activity and suburban placemaking in strip plazas<sup>20</sup>. One author compared the diversity and vitality of a strip plaza to the less animated, unleased spaces of an indoor shopping centre in suburban Florida<sup>21</sup>. Among the reasons cited for the strip plaza's resilience were the granularity of small and adaptable retail spaces; the mutual independence of individual businesses not relying upon the success of their neighbours; and low overhead costs owing to the 'bare bones' nature of the environment. These factors supporting start-up enterprises, especially small ethnic businesses, were also observed in Maryland, Georgia, North Carolina and California<sup>22</sup>.

### 3.3 Entrepreneurship Opportunities

Typical plazas contain 5 to 15 commercial units with an average of 1000 square feet per unit; and their management structures are often informal, as opposed to large institutions and real estate investment trusts (REITs), that tend to own larger commercial properties. Strip plazas offer an environment that is particularly conducive to independent businesses<sup>23</sup>. For example, plazas typically have commercial spaces that are highly adaptable for multiple purposes, meaning new businesses can move in without the need for substantial renovations<sup>24</sup>. While mixed-use redevelopment sites are encouraged to include non-residential space at grade, it is difficult to replicate the diversity found in strip plazas within newly built retail spaces, as they are often larger in area, higher in rent and controlled by a condo board or management company that may not offer similar flexibility<sup>25</sup>.

Through the COVID-19 pandemic that saw drastic limitations on typical retail operations, the physical form of strip plaza sites offered easy drive-up access to sustain businesses providing take-out service, or contactless pickup for purchases made online. Even after the pandemic, while retail real estate generally struggled to recover, some analysts have observed that strip plazas can be more resilient than traditional malls against market factors given their smaller leasable spaces, locally serving shopping function, diverse tenant base, visibility from the street and future opportunities for redevelopment<sup>26</sup>.

18 Manning

19 Manning, Hopper

20 Ahmed, Zhuang and Chen, MacCallum, Linovsky

21 Herriges

22 Herriges, Gorman

23 Linovsky, Lorinc, Rosztain

24 Lorinc

25 Lorinc

26 Dillingham, PYMNTS.com

# 04.

## APPROACHES TO STRIP PLAZAS

### 4.1 Redevelopment

Since the late 1990s-early 2000s, strip plazas have often been characterized as lacking a sense of place and community, despite the variety of important roles they have been shown to serve in some communities. In turn, municipalities commonly identify strip plazas as a redevelopment opportunity to densify growing urban centres<sup>27</sup>. For example, a design competition championed by the University of Alberta called for solutions to reviving strip plazas that were “dying, bleak and waiting for intervention”<sup>28</sup>. In the United States, where average strip plaza vacancies were reported to be 11% in 2011<sup>29</sup>, numerous academic and industry advocates have pointed to these sites as having significant potential to correct urban sprawl while providing much-needed residential units<sup>30</sup>. With increasingly widespread opinion that the car-centric built form of strip plazas is outdated, North American cities are seeking to change the classic strip plaza formula as they prepare for transit investments. Transit-oriented development policies are intended to create more walkable, dense communities, such as zoning changes to prohibit drive-throughs and front-facing parking lots<sup>31</sup>. In Huntington Beach, CA, shopping centres are “triaged” for redevelopment opportunity, prioritizing those with low long-term profitability and near planned transit<sup>32</sup>.

A common approach to the redevelopment of strip plaza sites leverages their prime

location along major arterial roads and transit routes. In Toronto, the highest and best use is often identified to be mid-rise, mixed-use development, supported by current Official Plan policies to create complete communities in proximity to transit<sup>33</sup>. Sunnybrook Plaza, noted above, closed in 2020 to accommodate higher-density residential development to be served by the planned Eglinton Crosstown Light Rail Transit line<sup>34</sup>. Toronto planning policies generally favour plaza sites for redevelopment because they are seen as underutilized lands that can support denser, mixed-use buildings, especially along those corridors identified as **Avenues**<sup>35</sup>. The intensification of plaza sites can achieve a number of objectives to “retrofit” the suburbs:

- removal of surface parking and limiting vehicular access to promote active transportation and transit use;
- establishing pedestrian-scale built form close to the street frontage to create a comfortable walking environment;
- providing larger residential units suitable for families with access to community amenities;
- replacing existing or creating new retail opportunities to promote entrepreneurship and economic diversity; and
- creating a supply of purpose-built rental buildings to improve affordability.

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27 Beyard and Pawlukiewicz, Flack, Gorman, Trudell

28 Patchett and Shields

29 Hopper, Gorman

30 Leslie and Calthorpe, MACP

31 Lindeke

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32 Gorman

33 Hickey

34 Ahmed

35 Lorinc

## CASE STUDY: Mashpee Commons, Mashpee, MA

*The New Seabury Shopping Centre was a 350,000 square foot strip plaza located in the south side of Cape Cod at the intersection of three major roadways. Built in 1968, the automobile-focused design of the original strip plaza contributed to the declining character of the surrounding area over the post-war period. The property owner was inspired to apply new urbanism principles and a walkable, mixed-use approach to redevelopment after receiving community feedback through a design charrette. The site was subdivided to introduce narrow, pedestrian-focused streets, along with civic and community uses, and residential units above shops. Festival marketplaces were introduced to provide event programming with various community activities. Later stages of redevelopment have been focussed on including*

*smaller sized, “missing middle” housing that caters to empty nesters, middle income workers and young professionals who prefer to live in walkable neighbourhoods. The transformation of this strip plaza into a new town centre was achieved by revisiting auto-centric planning policies and addressing community concerns around density.*



Image 5. New Seabury Shopping Centre, Mashpee, MA, 1960s



Image 6. Mashpee Commons today



Image 7. Mashpee Commons today

## 4.2 Infill Development

Another revitalization model for strip plazas described in both scholarly and industry articles is infill development. This may involve expanding and diversifying uses, creative reuse of vacant space, and enhancing the physical environment to solidify the plaza as a focal point for the community<sup>36</sup>. Specific strategies include:

- modernizing retail offerings to suit current customer preferences;
- adding food stores, medical facilities and service-oriented businesses to drive regular patronage and secure longer-term tenants;
- introducing residential uses onto the site;
- integrating public transportation; and
- government tax-based incentives for landlords to help negotiate better terms for tenants and reduce vacancies<sup>37</sup>.

## 4.3 Adaptive Reuse

Some articles make a case for considering strip plazas as a heritage resource, pointing to the uniqueness of their built form representing a new, influential pattern of post-war development<sup>38</sup>. They argue that because the redevelopment of plazas can lead to gentrification and displacement, they deserve the same kind of attention, preservation efforts and tax incentives developed when traditional main streets fell into decline in the 1970s-80s. From an environmental perspective, the re-use of existing buildings and spaces is promoted as a more sustainable option for capturing embodied energy. Aging or abandoned strip plazas have been adapted for reuse by churches, public libraries, theatres, government offices, schools, museums, and medical facilities, attracted to these locations by their visibility, ample parking, low cost, and familiarity to the community<sup>39</sup>.

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36 MACP, Dimitrou

37 Ritter, Brewer, Kayden and Watkins, Rosu

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38 Manning, Noble

39 Manning



## CASE STUDY: Brookhollow Shopping Center, DeSoto, Texas

DeSoto, TX is a low-income suburb located 16 miles from downtown Dallas. The Brookhollow Shopping Center, built along a five-lane arterial roadway, was an underperforming strip mall, containing 50,000 square feet of retail space including a vacant, 26,000-square-foot anchor space. In 2016 a local developer purchased the property with the intent to bring positive economic change to DeSoto's community. The central focus was to subdivide the commercial space to be repurposed as an entrepreneurial and micro-retail incubator for up to 60 small businesses. Zoning for the site was changed to allow for expanded retail uses, food trailers, residential uses on-site, and reducing parking requirements. The entire redevelopment process, including market study, plan development and construction, took under two years from purchase to opening. Due to the modest and incremental nature of the changes, the redevelopment encountered minimal barriers.



Image 8. Brookhollow Shopping Center, before renovations



Image 9. Brookhollow plaza reuse, conceptual rendering



Image 10. Grow DeSoto Marketplace business incubator



Image 11. Inside Grow DeSoto Marketplace

## 4.4 Site Improvements

Improving the visual quality of strip plazas through landscaping and planting can increase foot traffic, generate more spending and enhance real estate values, while also promoting low-impact development practices to counter the effects of asphalt parking areas<sup>40</sup>. While patrons, area residents and planning policies may favour public realm improvements such as enhanced landscaping, tree planting and seating, these features can pose challenges for business owners who value the availability of parking for customers and visibility of their store signage. Additionally, such features can add maintenance costs for landowners that are likely to be passed on in the form of higher rents<sup>41</sup>.

The Business Improvement Area model in Ontario, which assesses a special levy on businesses within a specified area or corridor, can support promotion and public realm improvements. However, this program has been found to be less successful along suburban arterials, as they tend to span larger areas and spread available resources too thinly to be impactful. With typically fractured ownership, lack of trust in government programs and disengaged business communities occupying strip plazas, it can be challenging to coordinate design-based solutions to improve their built form and aesthetic qualities<sup>42</sup>. Although adding density along Toronto's arterial roads helps provide much-needed housing and can address issues with suburban built form, a nuanced approach is needed that complements and supports existing commercial space in plazas, to recognize their value as "Third Places" and ensure a diverse and equitable city<sup>43</sup>.

Several articles provide recommended approaches to improve the physical environment, build trust with the business community, enhance connections and support active mobility on strip plaza sites<sup>44</sup>, such as:

- Consider temporary agreements to implement specific streetscape improvement projects adjacent to plaza sites and access to City programs;
- Focus streetscape and pedestrian enhancements at transit nodes to leverage potential partnerships with the TTC;
- Explore non-traditional, low-cost approaches of "tactical urbanism", such as temporary pop-up interventions and event programming to activate the space;
- Retrofit parking lots to introduce community spaces, offer patio seating and provide shade;
- Create accessible and equitable translated communications about available programs and their benefit for non-English speaking business owners; and
- Create accessible design guidelines and best practices for parking lot activations, installations and landscape elements, and guidance on by-law considerations.

Such measures can recognize and amplify the social value of strip plazas to the local neighbourhood, contributing to community cohesion and informal interaction while also enhancing the public realm.

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40 Wolf

41 Rosztain

42 Gorman

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43 Rosztain

44 Rosztain, Ahmed, Patchett and Shields, Yeung

## CASE STUDY: PlazaPOPS, Toronto



Image 12. PlazaPOPS temporary parking lot installation at Wexford Plaza, 2019

*A unique example of activating under-utilized spaces is the community led, high impact and low cost PlazaPOPS initiative. PlazaPOPS is a not-for-profit organization that works to transform strip plaza parking lots with temporary installations to create free and accessible gathering places, providing economic, social and environmental benefits and amenities along arterial roads in under-served inner suburbs. The initiative is funded by grants from the public, private and institutional sectors, and supported by partnerships with local land and business owners, arts and culture organizations, community service providers and municipal agencies<sup>45</sup>. Their original pilot project, called WexPOPS,*

*took place in the summer of 2019 at the Wexford Plaza in Scarborough, in partnership with the Wexford Heights BIA. Following a community-led design process, the project tested the viability of utilizing 10 parking spots for a community gathering space on private commercial property. Physical elements consisting of modular planters, illuminated benches, tables, umbrellas, signage and over 500 native plants, were assembled on site in two days. Various programming and events took place over the six-week project period, including music and dance performances by local artists, co-curated by Scarborough Arts, and urban ecology workshops led by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.*

45 Plazapops.ca



*The project met its social goals by attracting a diversity of users, improving the sense of safety with temporary infrastructure, engaging local youth through job and volunteer opportunities, and by creating a neighbourhood hub that reflected local culture. Its economic goals were met by highlighting local businesses in a neighbourhood restaurant directory, minimizing the impact of lost parking spaces, and creating a visible landmark destination. By enhancing the local ecology with native plantings, minimizing waste with three stream trash receptacles, and encouraging active transportation to the plaza by adding additional bicycle parking, PlazaPOPS also achieved its environmental goals.*



**Image 13.** PlazaPOPS installation at an Albion-Islington area plaza, 2022



**Image 14.** Movie Night at WexPOPS: Wexford Blooms, 2023

*These early successes have guided further considerations for future PlazaPOPS installations, such as ensuring youth representation, partnering with more local organizations for programming, introducing market stalls for local entrepreneurs, and providing more robust physical infrastructure to stand up to the elements. After the WexPOPS pilot, the project was granted three years of federal economic development funding. PlazaPOPS expanded to four parking lots within the Albion Islington Square BIA in 2022 and returned to Scarborough with Wexford Blooms in 2023.*



**Image 15.** Portable planting boxes previously located at WexPOPS



# 05.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Academic literature, industry publications and media articles present a wide range of opinions and approaches regarding strip plazas. Key takeaways from this background review include:

- Initially intended to be temporary in nature, strip plazas have endured in the suburban landscape. Since their inception, strip plazas have helped serve the basic needs of suburban communities, a key role they continue to play today.
- Focusing on their physical and aesthetic qualities alone, strip plazas are seen to contribute little to the built form and public realm of the surrounding environment, with automobile-centric design features that do not support walkability or connectivity.
- Despite these physical qualities, strip plazas have proven to be more resilient through economic uncertainty than other types of retail, due to the adaptability, flexibility and smaller size of their commercial spaces suitable for startup businesses.
- Affordable rental rates found in strip plazas provide entrepreneurial opportunities that tend to attract small immigrant and ethnic businesses, which in turn help build community, create cultural hubs and contribute to Toronto's diversity.
- While strip plaza sites offer significant opportunities for residential and mixed-use redevelopment, care should be taken to not disrupt or displace the commercial and community functions they serve.
- Where ownership structures and tenant relations are more fractured and disengaged, strip plaza sites may not be targeted for near-term redevelopment if the commercial spaces remain profitable.
- Potential solutions to enhance the continued vitality of strip plaza sites while improving the physical environment can include strategic landscaping, reduced parking requirements and temporary installations to accommodate community programming.

This background report provides an understanding of past, present and evolving attitudes toward strip plazas and the role they play in the suburban landscape. The key findings above will form the basis for further consideration of policies and programs affecting strip plazas within the city of Toronto.

# APPENDIX

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## B. Image Credits

1. 'Taxpayer Strip', Belvedere, CA, 1924 (Credit: The Huntington Library)
2. Sunnybrook Plaza, Toronto, ON, 1950s (Credit: Toronto Past Archive)
3. Mixed-use strip plaza on Albion Road, Toronto, ON, 2014 (Credit: Sunjay Mathuria, [plannersnetwork.org](http://plannersnetwork.org))
4. Iranian Plaza, also known as 'Little Persia', Toronto, ON (Credit: Radio-Canada/Rozenn Nicolle)
5. New Seabury Shopping Centre, Mashpee, MA, 1960s (Credit: Mashpee Commons)
6. Mashpee Commons today (Credit: Mashpee Commons)
7. Mashpee Commons today (Credit: Congress for New Urbanism)
8. Brookhollow Shopping Center, before renovations (Credit: Ash + Lime)
9. Brookhollow plaza reuse, conceptual rendering (Credit: DeSoto EDC/Options Real Estate)
10. Grow DeSoto Marketplace business incubator (Credit: Dallas Business Insider)
11. Inside Grow DeSoto Marketplace (Credit: Philip Kingston, Dallas Observer)
12. PlazaPOPS temporary parking lot installation at Wexford Plaza, 2019 (Credit: Metroland)
13. PlazaPOPS installation at an Albion-Islington area plaza, 2022 (Credit: Tupac Espinoza)
14. Movie Night at WexPOPS: Wexford Blooms, 2023 (Credit: Kat Rizza)
15. Portable planting boxes previously located at WexPOPS (Credit: University of Guelph)





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