



Unlocking the Lot: An examination of strip mall parking lot activations for public life

A comparison of two case studies in Toronto

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Executive Summary

Private strip malls and their parking lots fulfill critical functions as places for informal gathering and culturally specific goods and services for many racialized and immigrant communities in Toronto's inner-suburbs. Given this reality, what possibilities are unlocked when we reimagine privately-owned parking lots as extensions of the public realm and as spaces for public life? **This study examines and highlights the potential for parking lot activations in strip mall plazas through two emerging models: the PlazaPOPS program, and the CaféTO private property patio program.** Through key informant interviews, policy and document analysis, and mapping, I ask: What factors enable and challenge these programs in transforming parking lots into spaces for public life? This study contributes to understanding the challenges that impede the growth of parking lot activations, with the hope that they can be used as a tool for cultural placemaking.

Findings from my case study analysis demonstrate that successful activations of parking lots require the balance of multiple components, of which policy change is just the tip of the iceberg (See Fig. 1). As such, PlazaPOPS, a non-profit-led program which mobilizes intensive social capacity through partnerships with BIAs, community groups, the City, and researchers, has seen much more success than the CaféTO private property patio program, which primarily depends on the interest of individual business owners. Highlighted ongoing challenges to parking lot activations include the limitations of designing on private property, limitations due to by-laws, and the need to provide resources that are tailored to support immigrant business owners who are interested in creating parking lot patios.

Key recommendations to grapple with the short- to medium-term challenges of parking lot activations include:

- Prioritizing the creation of accessible and equitable translated communications for immigrant business owners to participate in the private property patio program.
- Creating accessible design guidelines and best practices for parking lot activations.

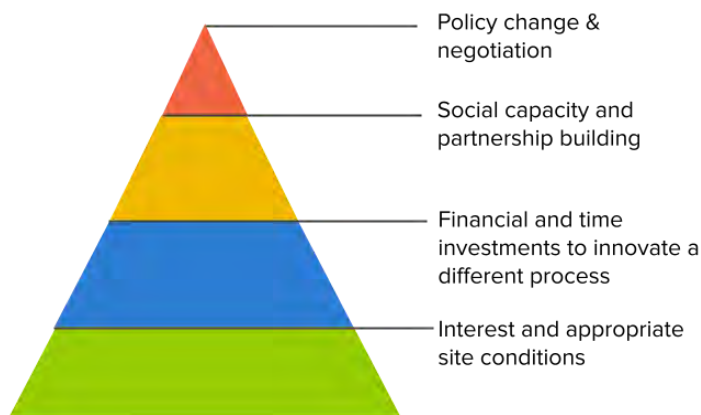


Figure 1. A summary of the several components needed to support parking lot activations.

1. Introduction

1.1 Parking lots for Public Life

Public spaces like parks, plazas, and sidewalks function as essential civic infrastructure for the social cohesion, public well-being and environmental health of all (Mehta, 2022); however, they are not equally distributed in cities. With multi-lane, fast-moving arterial streets, large surface parking lots, and scarce places of respite besides the occasional bus stop shelter, the post-war suburbs are not built for pedestrians and public life. While arterial streets are designed to maximize efficient traffic flow from neighbourhood driveways to commercial plazas and workplaces, the suburban streetscape can also be an incredibly hostile place for many who rely on walking and public transportation in their everyday life (Hess, 2019). This is not to say that public spaces for socializing and recreation do not exist along suburban streets. Instead, multiple studies, journalistic, and personal accounts attest to the social and cultural richness of Toronto's suburban strip malls as places for accessible entrepreneurship (Linovski, 2012), access to culturally specific goods (Ahmed, 2021; Bhandari, 2018), and placemaking for racialized, immigrant communities (Rotsztain, 2018; Zhuang, 2019, 2017). As existing hubs of lively community activity, what possibilities can be achieved when we reimagine privately-owned strip mall parking lots as spaces for public life?

Contrary to their car-centric design, everyday examples like informal lawn chair gatherings (Fig. 2), a community Iftar (Fig. 3), or even post-dinner conversations that spill into the parking lot, illustrate how strip mall parking lots contain a seed of opportunity to be transformed to serve public life, much like sidewalks.



Figure 2. A group of middle-aged men in lawn chairs gather in a parking space under the Colony Plaza sign, Scarborough (Google Maps, 2021 August).

With institutional recognition, organizing, and investment to support this shift in the use of parking lots, important opportunities can be realized to create more equitably distributed public spaces for racialized, suburban communities. While enabling parking lot activations in the inner-suburbs is just the start, the transformation of parking lots into places for public life has the potential to further sprout cultural placemaking opportunities for the diverse ethnocultural communities that use strip malls.

Figure 3. In 2018, a business owner organized a 90 ft long community Iftar during Ramadan in the parking lot of Wexford Plaza, Scarborough (PlazaPOPS [plaza_pops] (2019 April).



1.2 Focus of Research

This study examines and highlights the potential for parking lot activations in strip mall plazas, through two emerging models: the PlazaPOPS program, and the CaféTO private property patio program. What factors and conditions help enable these programs in successfully transforming parking lots into spaces for public life? And what challenges and barriers do they face in their implementation and growth as more permanent models? To this end, this study hopes to shed light on how these challenges may hinder future parking lot activations that transform spaces for cars into spaces for people.

At present time, there are still major knowledge gaps in understanding the potential for strip mall parking lots — as a space in between the public streetscape and private storefronts — to function as spaces for public life. Through my research findings, this study aims to encourage planners and city builders to recognize and amplify the social value of strip mall parking lots, and to further provide the necessary support and policy interventions to enable their growth in Toronto’s inner-suburbs of Scarborough, North York, and Etobicoke.

While this study mainly focuses on two case studies, I refer to these transformations of parking lots as activations, rather than public spaces or pedestrianized spaces. I define parking lot activations as the temporary and time-limited re-use of a privately-owned parking space for activities that center gathering, socializing, connection between people, rather than car movement. This is contrasted to public space, which is more often defined through public ownership and access (Kohn, 2004); or pedestrianized spaces, which represent the prioritization or re-orientation of streets for pedestrian mobility rather than automotive travel (Gregg, 2022).

This report is divided into five major sections: Research methods, a literature review, case study analysis, conclusions on shared lessons and recommendations.

First, I provide an overview of the research methods used to develop each case study. I then contextualize my research of the parking lot activation case studies within scholarly literature on public space and public life, the role strip malls play in ethnocultural placemaking, and research on design and policy interventions for parking lot re-use.

Next, I explore lessons learned from two case studies to investigate how they have innovated opportunities for parking lot activations. The first case study focuses on PlazaPOPS, which was launched in 2019 as a program to specifically create community-led, short-term public spaces in strip mall parking lots. The second case study examines the CaféTO private property patio program, which eased zoning restrictions on patios for outdoor dining as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. For each case study, I provide an overview of their development, the

conditions that enabled these opportunities, and the challenges each program faced as discussed by key informant interviews and document analysis. Finally, I provide a discussion of the contrasting strengths and barriers of each program and conclude with recommendations to City of Toronto staff and PlazaPOPS.

2. Methods

To highlight the opportunities and challenges for parking lot activations in the two case studies, I primarily relied on semi-structured key informant interviews. From there, relevant policy documents and processes were analyzed to supplement interview data. As well, I created map visualizations to compare and ground the different designs and uses of parking lots by both programs.

2.1 Key Informant Interviews

A total of seven key informant interviews were conducted with: the Co-leads of PlazaPOPS, a Senior Project Manager at the City of Toronto's Economic Development and Culture Division (EDC), two Coordinators from the City's BIA Office, a Planner from the City's Zoning section, Planning Division; and the Executive Director of the Toronto Association of BIAs (TABIA). Interviewees were initially selected by recommendation from my CIP outside reader, Daniel Rotsztain, Co-Lead of PlazaPOPS, as well as through contact listings on relevant City webpages. From there, each interviewee was asked to recommend other contacts in their network who worked with both or either programs.

Each interview was conducted virtually and covered questions such as the interviewee's involvement with the respective program(s), a discussion of opportunities and barriers, and recommendations on improvements or future plans for the programs. As well, I asked interviewees about relevant policies and grants that PlazaPOPS or the private property patio program interacted with, to gain a better sense of the institutional context they operated in.

Due to the limited time frame and resources of this study, I was unable to interview businesses on their experiences with the private property patio program or PlazaPOPS. This represents a major gap in data on the private property patio program in particular, as the City does not collect data on participation, and has yet to publish reports with feedback from business owners. As such, the lack of data on suburban business owners' firsthand experiences with CaféTO is a particularly important research gap that should be addressed in future studies.

2.2 Policy and Document Analysis

Following the interviews, relevant policies were analyzed in detail to understand the opportunities they enabled for parking lot activations, as well as any specific limitations they posed to each program. Table 1 and 2 summarize the policy documents and by-laws that were examined, and the particular aspects of interest that contributed to the analysis of each respective case study.

PlazaPOPS

Policy Document	Aspects of Interest
<i>Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 743: Use of Streets and Sidewalks.</i>	Which articles and sections of this by-law impact the physical height and size requirements of installations in the public right of way?

Table 1. Policy documents analyzed for the PlazaPOPS case study

CaféTO Private Property Patio Program

Policy Document	Aspects of Interest
CaféTO Patios on Private Property Guide	<p>What are the size, setback, parking, and fence requirements for private property patios?</p> <p>How did the City of Toronto communicate the process of participating in the program and offer resources and support?</p>
<p><i>Temporary use By-law 237-2022</i> (second extension, active until December 31, 2023)</p> <p><i>Temporary use By-law 197-2021</i> (first extension of temporary use by-law, expired on April 14, 2022)</p> <p><i>Temporary use By-law 910-2020</i> (original temporary-use by-law for private patios, expired on May 25, 2021)</p>	<p>What zones of Zoning By-law 569-2013 were amended to permit private property patios?</p> <p>What requirements for patio dimensions and uses were specified in the temporary use by-law?</p>
City Council decisions and appended staff reports from Transportation Services, Economic Development and Culture, and Municipal Licensing and Services	<p>How did the private property patio program develop from 2020 to 2023?</p> <p>What are the intentions of the private property patio program?</p> <p>What specific considerations were made to support private property patios in Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke?</p>
<i>Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 19: Business Improvement Areas</i>	<p>What powers are granted to BIAs for public realm enhancements?</p> <p>How does Chapter 19 structure the relationship between BIAs and the City?</p>

Table 2. Policy documents analyzed for the CaféTO private property patio case study

2.3 Mapping and Site Inventory

Past PlazaPOPS projects and CaféTO private property patios were mapped in order to visualize and compare the design and uses of parking lot space as well as how each program interacted with strip mall retail and the public right of way. Locations and approximate sizes of installations from PlazaPOPS in Wexford Heights, Scarborough and Thistletown, Etobicoke were retrieved and drawn from Google Earth imagery, the PlazaPOPS website, and the report on WexPOPS (Google Earth, 2022; PlazaPOPS, n.d; Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020).

As the City has not tracked the number or location of CaféTO private property patios, I provide a limited depiction of some of the patios that were located in Wexford Heights. Locations, sizes, and images were estimated from Google Maps Street View images taken in October 2020, April 2021, and August 2021. From what I could observe through Google Maps data, there were no private patios installed in Thistletown. Imagery for summer of 2022 was not available, however, during site visits to both study areas in September 2022, no CaféTO parking lot patios were observed at either location.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Defining Public Space and Public Life

Public spaces are integral places for the social life of cities. As accessible spaces outside the home and workplace, they support everyday recreation and gathering, as well as symbolic functions such as political demonstrations and festivals to celebrate cultural identities (Mehta, 2022). In particular, Margaret Kohn (2004) defines public space by three core features: ownership, accessibility to all without fees for service, and the capacity to foster intersubjectivity.

Still, while public spaces are typically defined as streets or parks, they are not limited to these forms, nor are they simply limited to public ownership (Banerjee, 2001; Hou, 2010; Kohn, 2004). Instead, planning literature points to ways that the “publicness” of public spaces can be understood as a continuum between the private and public realm (Mehta, 2022), and point to examples of hybridized spaces such as:

- *Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS)*, which are publicly accessible but privately owned and maintained urban parks and squares built by private developers, in partnership with the City to offset the impacts of densification (City of Toronto, 2014).
- Privately-owned malls, which may adopt the architectural language of a town square and host public activities including farmer’s markets, free concerts and events, despite maintaining their own restrictions on activities and hiring private security guards (Banerjee, 2001; Southworth, 2005). Malls also often function as community spaces for youth gathering, seniors exercise/, kids’ play, and more, beyond consumption, as often seen in suburban neighbourhoods with fewer public spaces (Parlette & Cowen, 2011).
- *Business Improvement Areas (BIAs)*, which, as a mode of governance supported by the City, leverage member business tax levies to hire contractors for the management and beautification of public streetscapes (City of Toronto, 2022, Municipal Code Chapter 19).

On the other hand, public spaces can also be claimed through informal and bottom-up action to repurpose residual lots in cities as community gardens or underutilized parking lots into informal taco truck spots (Rios, 2014, Villagomez, 2010). While these examples

demonstrate different models of ownership, levels of accessibility, and physical forms, they all share a common capacity to support public life.

Public life can be understood as the vast collection of activities, from discussions and gatherings with neighbours or friends, to passive interactions of simply seeing and being seen by strangers, which cultivate a sense of community or shared identity (Kohn, 2004; Mehta 2022). From there, public life carries the potential for political organization and debate, as well as daily social contact and leisure (Kohn 2004; Banerjee, 2001). As such, public life does not simply disappear without the typical parks, squares, and main street sidewalks. Rather, as with the focus of this study, the diverse uses of suburban strip malls and their parking lots demonstrate the flexibility of privately-owned spaces to be reshaped and function as spaces for public life.

The **public realm** is another term often associated with the symbolic meanings and spatial practices of publicly accessible spaces (Mehta, 2022). It is worth noting that in a practical context, Chapter 3 of the Toronto Official Plan provides a definition of the public realm that is not limited to public ownership. In particular, Policy 1 states:

"The public realm is comprised of *all public and private spaces* to which the public has access. It is a network that includes, but is not limited to, streets and lanes, parks and open spaces, and the parts of private and public buildings that the *public is invited into.*"
(City of Toronto, 2022 March, Chapter 3, p.3-2 [emphasis added])

Additionally, Chapter 3, Policy 3 states that the City aims to work with its partners to "seek opportunities to expand and enhance the public realm" (City of Toronto, 2022 March, Chapter 3, p.3-3). This inclusion of private spaces into the City's public realm helps frame how parking lots as spaces for public life can function as part of the public realm when both the City and its partners invest in their potential.

3.2 Strip Malls, Ethnocultural Placemaking, and Third Places

Strip malls are defined by multiple, conjoined units of one- to two-storey retail, with surface parking lots parallel to the public right-of-way (ROW). The scale of retail units resembles traditional main street storefronts, with units averaging at about 1000 square feet in area and 5-15 units per development, although parking lots act like an extra wide setback from the public ROW (Linovski, 2012).

As a building typology popularized in the 1960's through the growth of car-dependent post-war suburbs, Toronto's strip malls are often located adjacent to major arterial streets. The Toronto Official Plan designates many of these arterials as *Avenues* which have been identified as priority corridors for reurbanization, transit growth, and streetscape improvements (See Fig. 4) (City of Toronto, 2022 March, Chapter 2). As such, strip malls have been the primary target of rezoning and redevelopment to denser residential and commercial uses over the last decade (White, 2015).

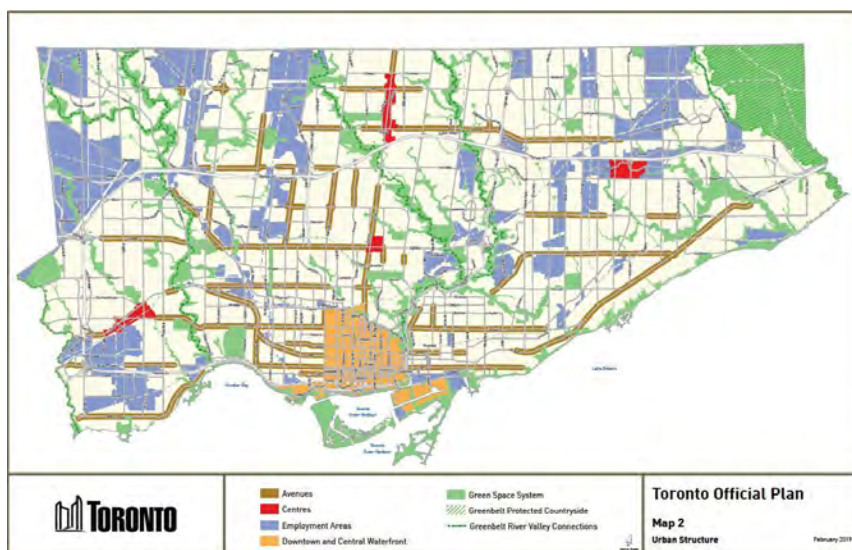


Figure 4. A map of the urban structure in the Toronto Official Plan. Avenues are highlighted in brown (City of Toronto, 2019).

Despite critiques and policy priorities that may frame strip malls as ripe for redevelopment, scholars and community members have highlighted their vitality and importance to immigrant communities that have settled in the inner-suburbs (Bhandari, 2018; Linovski, 2012; Zhuang, 2017). For one, the size and age of strip mall units lends itself to more affordable rents and provides accessible opportunities for new immigrant entrepreneurs (Linovski, 2012). Over time this has created concentrations of ethnic businesses which can act as anchoring points for diasporic communities to find culturally specific goods and services, and even places of worship (Linovski, 2012; Zhuang, 2017). This is the focus of a small but growing

field of analysis, as planning scholar, Zhixi Cecilia Zhuang (2017; 2019) points to the ways that suburban Chinese and South Asian retailers form clusters of commercial activity and shape strip plaza and mall landscapes through placemaking strategies such as signage and shop displays, public art, and celebratory cultural events (Zhuang, 2017; 2019). Together, these placemaking practices perform crucial functions for immigrant communities to “manage alienation and isolation, while establishing a place of belonging in a new environment” (Zhuang, 2017, p.100).

In other words, strip malls can also function as third places – places outside of the home or workplace that facilitate informal gathering, social inclusion, and community socialization to the many regular visitors that they serve (Rotsztain, 2018; Zhuang, 2017). Originally theorized by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989), third places are often defined as ordinary, everyday places that are easily accessible to all, but provide a relaxed environment for conversation among friends, neighbours, and strangers (Rotsztain, 2018). Oftentimes, third places are privately-owned, like strip malls, cafes, or general stores; nonetheless, they provide crucial spaces for community gathering and the formation of the public sphere (Mehta, 2022).

The case studies examined in this study demonstrate potential opportunities to enhance public life in strip mall parking lots that are already active anchors for ethnocultural communities. As shown in research from Zhuang (2019), ethnic entrepreneurs in malls and strip plazas often lack the authority or support to enhance placemaking due to the private ownership structure and lack of support within the planning framework. This study aims to contribute to understanding some of these barriers, with the hope that parking lot activations can be one tool leveraged towards cultural placemaking.

3.3 Strategies to Repurpose Parking Lots

There has been an ongoing interest by designers and planners to reimagine and retrofit vacant and underutilized surface parking lots towards more sustainable, walkable, and livable environments (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2008; Talen, 2012; Villagomez, 2010). Strategies for the re-use of surface parking lots can be understood on a spectrum from short-term activations that serve specific community needs to permanent redevelopment (See Fig. 5). On one end of the spectrum are short-term, one- to two-day activations such as farmers' markets, food truck events, or pop-up festival events. These activations mostly use vacant parking lots as a venue for specific purposes but do not significantly alter parking lot environments. At the other end of the spectrum are permanent retrofits such as the East Scarborough Storefront's MLSE/Jumpstart Sports Court, which permanently transform underutilized parking lots towards new, more sustainable uses — in this case, a play area and green-roof structure (ERA, n.d). In the middle, lies seasonal temporary activations such as the cases examined in this study, as well as Corner Commons which was installed in the parking lot of Jane-Finch Mall in the summer of 2022 (Stewart-Robertson, Aying & Wong, 2022).

This study focuses on seasonal temporary activations in particular, as activations that span between a month- and year-long, and transform a portion of a parking lot towards people-centered uses. Because temporary activations do not completely convert parking lots to new uses entirely, they instead invite visitors to reimagine how parking landscapes in the present could be repurposed for human connection rather than car movement. Additionally, they are less capital intensive than permanent retrofits. As such, temporary parking lot activations hold the potential to expand public spaces in suburban neighbourhoods that have less access to public spaces, without the need for a redevelopment process that may displace existing uses.



Figure 5. A spectrum of parking lot re-uses, from short-term to long-term, with example projects.

3.4 Existing Research: “Enhancing Strip Mall Landscapes in Toronto’s Inner Suburbs”

As most of the solutions and existing research on parking lot reuse are geared towards suburban redevelopment, there is a major gap in research on as-of-right retrofits of parking lots (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2008; Talen, 2015). To this end, Daniel Rotsztain’s (2018) Master of Landscape Architecture thesis “Enhancing Strip Mall Landscapes in Toronto’s Inner Suburbs” is particularly informative to my research as he investigates the potential for different types of design enhancements to existing parking lots, as well as the applicability of the City’s streetscape improvement programs to the strip mall context. Rotsztain evaluates four types of streetscape improvement programs that can be implemented without redevelopment including: Neighbourhood Improvement Projects, patios, Business Improvement Areas, and the Commercial Facade Improvement Program. Through interviews and document analysis, he concluded that most of these programs had extremely limited applicability within the strip mall context as most of them only operated on City-owned property and could not be used for privately-owned parking lots. See Table 3 for a summary of barriers to each program.

Streetscape Improvement Programs	Key Barrier
Neighbourhood Improvement Project	Limited to city-owned land
Patios	Lacked a standardized application process for private property in 2018.
Business Improvement Areas	Most strip malls in inner-suburbs are not organized within a BIA and have less capacity to engage in streetscape improvement. Enhancements are limited to the public property.
Commercial Facade Improvement Program	Limited to aesthetic facade improvements and can only be accessed through BIAs.

Table 3. A summary of the City of Toronto's streetscape improvement programs and their applicability to strip mall parking lots, as identified by Rotsztain (2018).

As a key recommendation, Rotsztain's (2018) thesis proposed the PlazaPOPS program as a model specifically designed for strip mall parking lots; and the first installation, WexPOPS, was launched the following year. This CIP research follows up on Rotsztain's (2018) research, with the perspective of evaluating how PlazaPOPS has innovated opportunities for parking lot activations through an alternate process from traditional streetscape improvement programs.

4. Case study: PlazaPOPS

4.1 PlazaPOPS: Background

The PlazaPOPS program, which is now also an incorporated non-profit, was first launched in 2019 as a pilot to test the creation of low-cost and temporary, publicly accessible gathering spaces in strip mall parking lots. Although PlazaPOPS' installations are located within privately-owned parking lots and may serve patrons of strip mall businesses, they are designed to be accessible to all, without the need to purchase for use. Due to the novelty of the program, each PlazaPOPS project requires intensive coordination between various community and institutional actors to successfully design, permit, build, and program each installation.

As a third-party non-profit, PlazaPOPS recognizes its role as an outsider to the communities and municipal government, and strategically wields their position as a “translator” and “bridge builder” to facilitate relationships between community interests, the local business community, and the City, to forge alternative uses of parking lots (Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022). While the program's process is still evolving, its first two projects have relied on close partnership with the local BIAs, Wexford Heights BIA and Albion Islington Square BIA, to select appropriate strip mall parking lot sites, and negotiate their use with property owners and business owners.



Figure 6. WexPOPS in Wexford Heights Plaza, Scarborough. (PlazaPOPS, n.d)

The program's first project, WexPOPS, was installed in the center of Wexford Heights Plaza, Scarborough (Fig. 6) for six weeks between July and August 2019. It was funded through grants from the Park People's Public Space Incubator grant, the City of Toronto's BIA Kickstarter Fund, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Engage Grant, awarded for research in collaboration with the University of Guelph (Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020). While this first installation served as a "proof of concept" for the model, the organization has since partnered with the City's Economic Development and Culture Division (EDC) through a Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario (FedDev) grant to pilot three more PlazaPOPs installations in the GTA between 2022 to 2024. Most recently, PlazaPOPs launched its second round of installations, The Squares, in the summer and fall of 2022, in the Thistleton neighbourhood of Etobicoke. The Squares builds upon the modular furniture design of WexPOPs, with four different installations spread out across parking lots along Albion Road and Islington Avenue (Fig. 7). Each installation demonstrates different configurations of strip mall activations, as they vary in size and parking lot site conditions (Fig. 8).



Figure 7. A map of the four public space installations for The Squares in Albion Islington Square, Etobicoke (PlazaPOPs, n.d).

As the program enters its 3rd round of pilots, PlazaPOPs has been working hard to advocate for creative public uses of parking lots and spread awareness of the program's success. For example, they have worked with EDC and the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA) to explore possibilities for PlazaPOPs as a model of activation that suburban BIAs could organize, much like street festivals (Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022). As well, through their current SSHRC Partnership Engage grant, PlazaPOPs is also in the progress of measuring the economic and community impacts of the program to build a stronger proposal for the long-term potential of the program (Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

While the project is an emerging work-in-progress, PlazaPOPs' efforts to connect the community with city actors, demonstrate funding potential, negotiate private and public land

use, and persist through legal and permitting challenges, is instructive of the opportunities and existing frictions which restrain parking lot activations. As worded by Rotsztain, one of the Co-Leads, their work is aims to “show what’s possible and unlock a lot of the [administrative and institutional] gates” that prevent projects like it (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022)



Figure 8. ThistlePOPS, the largest installation for The Squares in Albion Islington Square, Etobicoke (PlazaPOPS, n.d).

Goals and Values

PlazaPOPS frames itself as a pragmatic response to bring public spaces to auto-dependent landscapes that otherwise have few publicly accessible open spaces. As mentioned by Rotsztain, their model of intervention works flexibly to “soften” a hard-to-change system and forge alternative uses of privately owned spaces in suburban settings, rather than aiming to eradicate parking lots entirely (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022). As a fairly new model, PlazaPOPS depends on leveraging existing community opportunities, such as working with established BIAs within existing third places, or hubs for community activity, to make installations wherever they’re welcomed. They emphasize the existing lively uses and roles that strip malls play in the lives of community members and position the program as a tool to strengthen social benefits, reflect local cultures, grow economic opportunities for local businesses, and enhance local ecology through planters elements (Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020).

How it Works: Process and Product

A core value of the PlazaPOPS program is to increase community connections through both their design process and physical installations. They point to the negative symptoms of social isolation which stem from car-centric design and structure their co-design process and public space installations as both a means and ends for facilitating interconnections, meeting neighbours, building relationships, and strengthening community capacity overall (Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020). Importantly, this is achieved through a co-creation process where a working group is recruited to identify project principles and participate in the design process. For example, with WexPOPS, a working group of local residents, community organizations, local business owners, political representatives and city staff met over four meetings: firstly, to define the project charter, goals, objectives, and measures of success; secondly, to identify cultural placemaking and programming opportunities, and in the third and fourth meetings, to evaluate and refine design options (Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020). Working group meetings were structured to facilitate community connections, with catering from local restaurants and social activities. As well, to reduce the barriers of participation, members were provided with honoraria, transit fare, and childcare options.

4.2 PlazaPOPS: Location and Designs

WexPOPS - Wexford Heights, Scarborough



Figure 9. An aerial view of WexPOPS in Wexford Heights Plaza in comparison to the physical site (City of Toronto Information & Technology, 2023; 2021; Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020).

The Wexford Heights BIA spans Lawrence E. Avenue from Victoria Park Avenue to Birchmount Road. Within this area, there are 14 strip malls, and about 95 businesses, of which about 40 are food-related and the rest provide various services and retail options that cater to diverse ethnocultural communities (Canadian Urban Institute, 2020). To illustrate, these strip malls include shops for Halal meats, African and Caribbean groceries, and restaurants that serve Bengali, Lebanese, Filipino, and Greek cuisines.

WexPOPS was located in ten parking spaces in the center of the Wexford Heights Plaza from July to August 2019 (See Fig. 9). Although the design team originally intended to site the public space closer to the sidewalk and intersection at Lawrence and Warden Street for easier access, the final location was determined at the discretion of the property owner (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022). This represents a limitation to the design of PlazaPOPS installations, and is further discussed in the Challenges and Barriers section. To counter the safety concerns of designing in a live parking lot, planters and temporary speed bumps were installed to create an enclosed space that also created a path from the sidewalk to strip mall shops. Wexford Heights Plaza has an oversupply of parking lots, and in a parking lot occupancy study conducted by the PlazaPOPS team, they found that there was still a 30 percent parking space vacancy rate even with the installation (Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020). As

such, WexPOPS presents one scenario where excess underutilized parking lot spaces can be repurposed to serve the public.

The Squares - Albion Islington Square, Etobicoke



Data sources: City of Toronto Information & Technology (2023; 2021); City of Toronto Economic Development & Culture (2022)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>■ The Squares (2022)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 24K Corner 2. The Spot 3. Isle Style 4. ThistlePOPS | <p>□ Property Boundaries</p> <p>▭ Albion Islington Square BIA</p> |
|--|---|

Figure 10. A map of the locations of The Squares (July - October 2022)

The Albion Islington Square BIA in Thistletown is centered on Islington Ave and Albion Rd, with about 12 smaller strip malls and over a hundred small businesses (Albion Islington Square BIA, n.d, About Us). In particular, the commercial area has the highest concentration of gold and diamond jewellers in Toronto and hosts a large number of South Asian textiles shops, salons, and restaurants (Albion Islington Square BIA, n.d, Albion and Islington Square BIA).

The Squares was installed from July to October 2022 with a total of four sites: three smaller sites with benches and shade structures, roughly the size of one parking space, and a main site at the corner of an empty lot equipped with a stage and road mural (See Fig. 11). The three smaller sites demonstrate the potential for repurposing single parking spaces in contexts where parking space is more limited. As illustrated in Figure 10, most strip mall units in Albion Islington Square and their associated parking spots are fragmented into several narrow lots with different property owners. Additionally, property boundaries do not perfectly align to the physical parking lot, with entire rows of parking technically within public land. As such, three of the small installations were partially or fully located in the public right of way, resulting in

additional permitting and insurance challenges that are further examined in the Challenges and Barriers section (See Fig. 11).

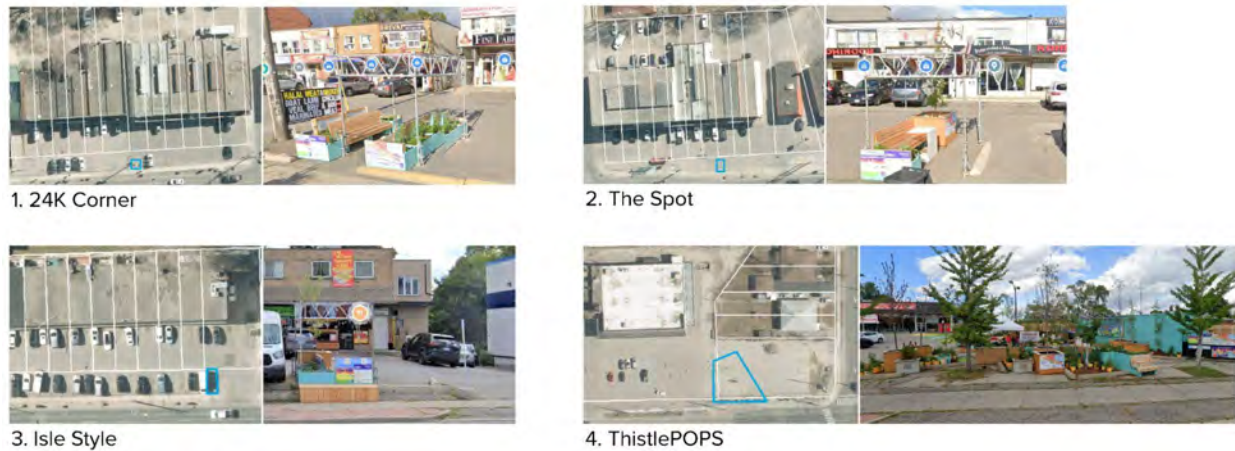


Figure 11. An aerial view and comparison to the physical sites of all installations for The Squares (City of Toronto Information & Technology, 2023; 2021; Google Maps, 2022).

4.3 PlazaPOPS: Enabling Conditions

What factors uniquely enabled the PlazaPOPA program, and were critical to the activation of strip mall parking lots? This section highlights how close partnerships with local BIAs, community organizations, and the City, along with effective site conditions, were wielded to successfully implement projects. These factors also point to opportunities and resources that could be drawn upon for future parking lot activations.

BIA Partnerships

PlazaPOPS relies on local BIAs as core partners to facilitate land use agreements with strip mall property owners and engage business stakeholders in the community. As a mode of local governance that works closely with the City, BIAs carry significant social capital, legitimacy, and institutional capacity, including an insurance policy PlazaPOPS can draw upon (City of Toronto, 2022, Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 19; Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022). Business Improvement Areas automatically include all commercial property owners and tenants within a designated neighbourhood when they are formed. They collect an annual tax levy from all businesses which can be budgeted towards improvements and beautification to municipally-owned land in the area, such as through neighbourhood branding initiatives or temporary street festivals (City of Toronto, 2022, Toronto

Municipal Code Chapter 19). Additionally, BIAs are supported by the BIA Office within the City's EDC Division which provides training resources, grants, and support for streetscape improvements. For example, WexPOPS was kick-started through the City's BIA Innovation Fund in partnership with Wexford Heights BIA.

Community partners

PlazaPOPS involved community partners and organizations throughout the design, programming, and daily maintenance of its installations. Through its working groups, community stakeholders and residents helped shape the intentions and design of the activations. For example, through the co-design process for ThistlePOPS, a picnic table in the shape of a tuktuk, a three-wheeled automobile, was designed to reflect the South Asian community in the neighbourhood (See Fig. 12). As well, in the case of WexPOPS, youth volunteers were hired through the Arab Community Centre of Toronto to serve as site stewards for the set-up and maintenance of the space (Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020). Partners such as Scarborough Arts and Rexdale Community Hub also created programming opportunities to enliven and encourage visitors to socialize, play, and engage with the spaces (Stewart, Rotsztain & Landman, 2020). Overall, PlazaPOPS leveraged an extensive array of community partnerships to involve as many interested individuals as possible and grow opportunities for community socialization and community ownership. These community partnerships also serve as a means of growing opportunities for cultural placemaking and incorporating the diversity of ethnocultural communities that these strip malls serve.



Figure 12. The tuktuk picnic table at ThistlePOPS for The Squares in Albion Islington Square (PlazaPOPS [plaza_pops] (2022 October))

City partnerships

Given the novelty of the project, PlazaPOPS has partnered with the City's EDC Division, to access grant funding as well as navigate the permit processes. In particular, PlazaPOPS is currently partnered with EDC for a 3-year FedDev grant launched through the Toronto Main Street Recovery and Rebuild Initiative (MSRRI). The MSRRI Initiative is a collection of six programs, including PlazaPOPS, which aim to support the economic recovery of small business and streetscape animation following the COVID-19 pandemic (City of Toronto, n.d). Additionally, PlazaPOPS has worked closely with a Streetscape Designer at the City's BIA Office to navigate conflicts with right of way by-laws that they encountered during the building permit process.

Site conditions

Site conditions such as connections to transit networks and the role of strip malls as third places help determine how well used and successful PlazaPOPS' installations are. For example, with The Squares, installations were placed near or next to bus stops to encourage passive uses of the space by pedestrians walking through the space or people waiting for the bus. In particular, Rotsztain highlighted the importance of integrating the ThistlePOPS site with a bus stop as an opportunity to improve upon the "pitiful infrastructure," often provided in suburbs, "like [having] tiny bus shelters, if not just a [bus stop] pole" (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022). The Co-Leads also reported that greater connections with sidewalks and the street helped improve the legibility of the installations as public spaces rather than private patios belonging to shops (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022; Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

As PlazaPOPS aims to "find a way to make community spaces where community already is" (Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022), third places or long-standing hubs of community gathering, served as an enabling condition to the regular use of the activation. For example, with WexPOPS, Brendan Stewart, one of the Co-Leads, recalled how regulars of the Wexford Restaurant across from the site watched the project as it was being built, and later continued to sit and chat in the installation once it was completed (Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

4.4 PlazaPOPS: Challenges and Barriers

What challenges and barriers did PlazaPOPS face in their process and how were these factors navigated? This section highlights some of the main challenges that the project faced with building on private property and the public right of way.

Negotiations and Limitations of Building on Private Property

As most of the parking lots that PlazaPOPS works with are privately owned, the size and location of installations is largely dependent on the generosity of private property owners to yield a part of their property for public use. This requires a significant investment in time and relationship-building with each property owner to work out the details of where the installation could be sited in the parking lot, and how it might interact with strip mall patrons, drivers, and the public. This process can be further complicated depending on whether strip mall ownership is consolidated, owned by one property owner, or fragmented, meaning that shops and their associated parking spaces are divided into separate parcels owned by several individuals (See Fig. 10). The Co-Leads of PlazaPOPS shared that consolidated ownership sites were much easier to work with, while they encountered more challenges with fragmented ownership strip malls (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022; Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022). For example, when planning one installation in a fragmented ownership strip mall for The Squares, a Rotsztain stated that one owner was supportive of the project, while another was not, thus leading to the early de-installation of the site (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022).

Additionally, there may be limitations to the uses and designs of installations depending on the property owner's requests. In the case of WexPOPS, the installation was located in the middle of the parking lot instead of at a more pedestrian-accessible corner of the lot as this was what the owner permitted. The PlazaPOPS team also proposed to include market stalls as a part of the WexPOPS project as a programming opportunity for small businesses. However, this was also rejected by the property owner as they explained that the market would introduce competition for their tenants, although they showed interest in this idea after the project was installed.

This demonstrates how activating privately-owned parking lots requires careful negotiation to strike a balance between benefits for the public, and a property owner's primary interest to serve their tenants. While negotiating the use of parking lot space with property owners requires time and effort, the Co-Lead interviewees agreed that it was still much easier and preferable to designing in publicly-owned land which was subject to additional by-law

restrictions and permitting processes (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022; Stewart, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Policy challenges of designing in the public right of way

Although PlazaPOPS initially worked with privately-owned parking lots, in the case of the Squares, several sites encroached in the public ROW, resulting in a more complex process to ensure that the installations were in compliance with additional by-laws. For example, the Isle Style site was completely within public land, and this triggered restrictions to the set back distance, sight lines, and height of the design following regulations under *Municipal Code Chapter 743: Use of Streets and Sidewalks* (See Fig. 13) (City of Toronto, 2022).

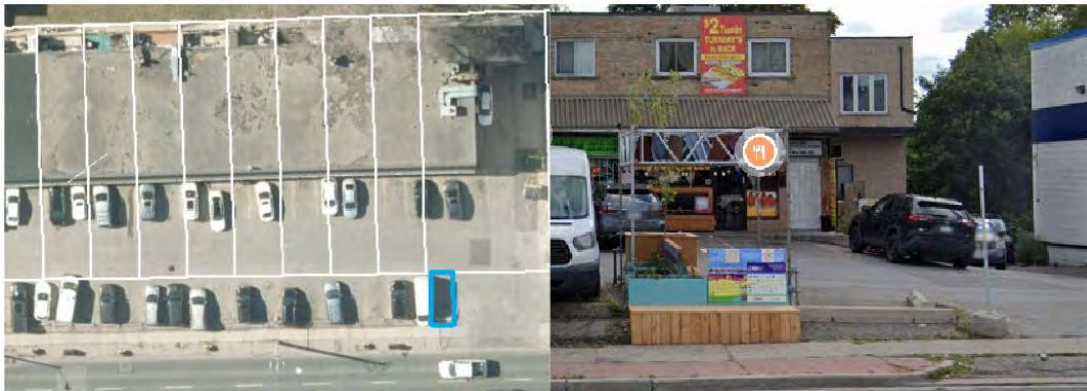


Figure 13. An aerial view of the location of the Isle Style site which was outside of property boundaries and fully within the public ROW (City of Toronto Information & Technology, 2023; 2021; Google Maps, 2022).

Chapter 743, Article IV Encroachments in Streets specifically lays out the permitted distances and heights of elements that encroach onto sidewalks in the interest of pedestrian and vehicle safety, and the City’s clearance of snow and litter (City of Toronto, 2022, Municipal Code 743). For example, Chapter 743-31, Section A limits fences and retaining walls to “0.90 metres in height above the traveled surface of the adjoining road” in order to preserve pedestrian and vehicle sight lines (City of Toronto, 2022, Municipal Code Chapter 743, p. 743-65). This unfortunately translated to reduced heights for less full and lush vegetation in planters as well as lower, less visible interpretive signage for the installation (See Fig. 14). Throughout the permitting process, Rotsztain and City BIA Office Streetscape Designer described that multiple rounds of design revisions were required to comply to the specific By-law restrictions, resulting

in additional time taken before the projects could be built (Ho, personal communication, January 17, 2023; Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022).

Still, the PlazaPOPS design team worked carefully with the City Permit Office and City BIA Office to navigate and creatively interpret by-law requirements where possible. For example, Rotsztain described a particularly triumphant moment when the team realized that defining the installation’s shade structure as a “pergola” rather than a “structure” helped achieve greater heights than allowable (Rotsztain, personal communication, November 9, 2022). Altogether, PlazaPOPS’ experience of navigating by-laws demonstrates the challenges and lessons learned when piloting alternate uses of parking lots within the public ROW.



Figure 14. The Isle Style site. Due to sightline requirements, signage and plant heights were lowered.

Challenges with by-laws like *Municipal Code Chapter 743* are likely to persist into the future and will continue to act as parameters for parking lot activations, rather than aspects that could be made more flexible and open to amendment. This is largely due to the fact that regulation of the public ROW is fundamentally defined through transportation safety for pedestrians and drivers. As emphasized by the Streetscape Designer in an interview, “transportation safety requirements... [are] strict, and there’s a reason why they’re there and the City regulates and enforces [them]” (Ho, personal communication, January 17, 2023). She further elaborated that there is a high level of liability for permitting experimental uses, stating that “the City must consider all safety aspects very carefully to minimize potential issues” (Ho, personal communication, January 17, 2023).

At the same time, projects like PlazaPOPS push for more creative adaptations of parking lots, urging for changes to how the City deals with streets and how parking lots interact with the public ROW overall. As pointed out in an interview with a Manager at the EDC Division, “there's a natural tension within City government — that [they] are both the regulator and an economic developer” (Vaage, personal communication, January 30, 2023). This conflict between the legal regulation of space, and the need to reconsider formal restrictions to make room for alternate uses will thus continue to be ongoing considerations when activating parking spaces that are on publicly-owned land.

5. Case study: CaféTO Private Property Patio Program

5.1 CaféTO: Background

The CaféTO program was initially launched in July of 2020 to allow restaurants to expand outdoor dining space onto sidewalks and curb lanes. As an emergency response to city-wide lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has been incredibly well received as an effective response to help out the restaurant industry and reduce economic impacts on main streets (Visser, 2021).

While CaféTO is known to encompass all sidewalk, curb lane, and private property patios, its regulation and operations are divided into two streams: sidewalk and curb lane cafes which are located in the public ROW and regulated via the City of Toronto's Municipal Code; and private property patios which are regulated by the City's Zoning By-law 569-2013. This is a vital distinction, as it greatly impacted how and where outdoor dining was rolled out, permitted, and resourced by the City.

For example, in order to enable curb lane and sidewalk cafes, the City took emergency measures to amend the Municipal Code, remove permit application fees, introduce a cost-sharing grant, and provide design guidelines. As a result, over 2,600 curb lane and sidewalk cafe permits were issued between 2020 and 2022 under the authority of Transportation Services (TS), EDC, and Municipal Licensing and Standards (MLS) (Municipal Licensing & Standards, 2023; Transportation Services, 2022). Curb lane and sidewalk cafes are mainly concentrated within the downtown core on commercial main streets where BIAs were highly involved with coordinating and encouraging uptake of the program (See Fig. 15).

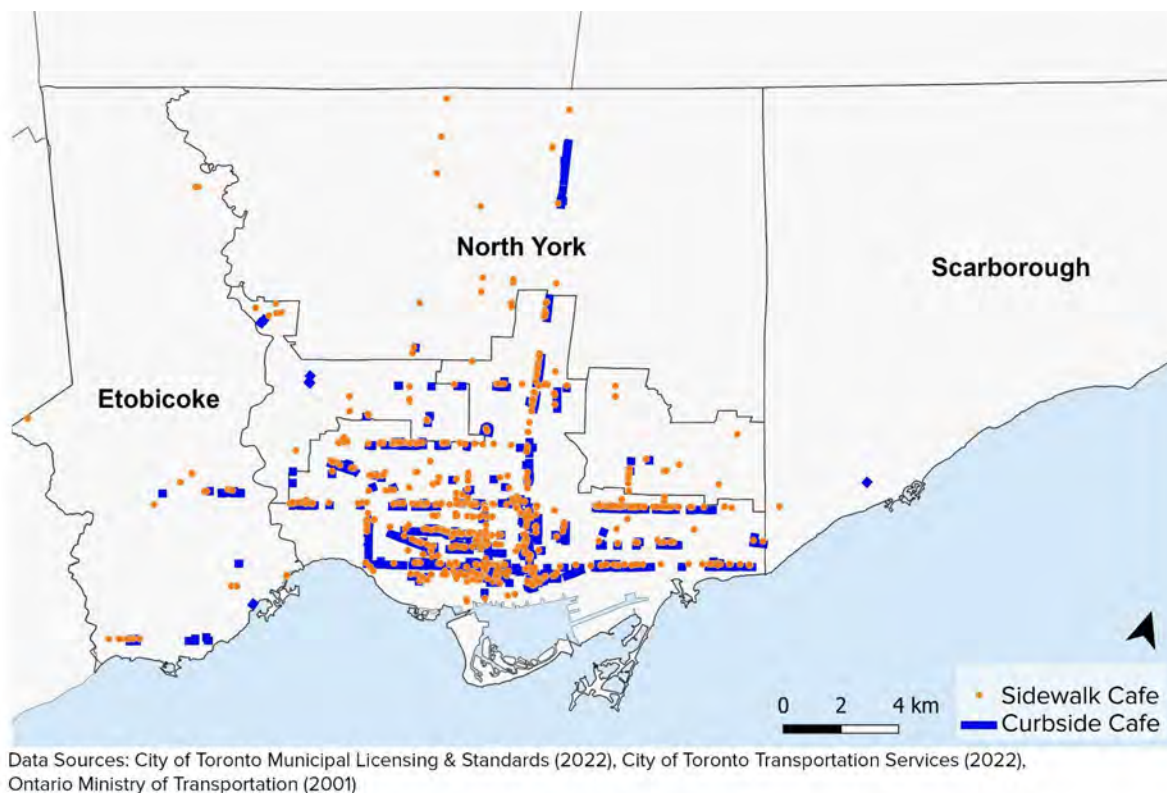


Figure 15. A map of the distribution of CaféTO curb lane and sidewalk cafes.

Private Property Patio Program and Temporary Use Zoning By-law 910-2020

In contrast, the roll-out of the private property patio program has represented a less significant transformation on the suburban streetscape, as it has primarily been enabled through the easing of zoning restrictions. In October 2020, City Council introduced Temporary Use Zoning By-law 910-2020 to allow for larger patios on private parking lots, flankage yards, and rooftops. Under this temporary use by-law, operators may expand patios on their property for the purpose of dine-in and take-out eating establishments, or recreation uses, without the need to apply or register for a permit (See Fig. 16) (City of Toronto, 2023). The main changes enabled through Temporary Use Zoning By-law 910-2020 are as follows:

- Patio spaces of up to 50 m² or 50% of the interior floor area, whichever is greater, was permitted. In comparison, Zoning By-law 569-2013 had previously limited patio spaces to 30m² or 30% of interior floor area in Commercial Residential zones.
- Temporary tents were permitted as long as they are less than 60 m² in aggregate ground area and freestanding.

- Patios were permitted in more zones than previously allowed, including Commercial Local, Employment Light Industrial, Employment Industrial, Employment Industrial Office zones. (City of Toronto, Temporary use By-law 910-2020). Before this, outdoor patios were limited to Commercial Residential and Commercial Residential Employment zones (Zoning By-law 569-2013).
- All patios were required to maintain setbacks of 30 m from a lot in any Residential zone category.
- Patios were permitted in surface parking lots as long as they were not for residential use or accessible parking.

While this overarching permission has made the program more accessible to restaurant owners, the absence of permits also means that the City has extremely limited data on the numbers and geographic distribution of private patios. In a 2022 CaféTO Impact Study initiated by TABIA, only 6 percent out of approximately 1,300 restaurants surveyed featured private property patios (TABIA, 2023). Thus, pointing to the relatively small number of private patios in comparison to cafes in the public ROW. Still, it is clear that the private patio program was initially created to extend the benefits of CaféTO to fit the suburban streetscape, where arterial streets are simply unable to support curbside or sidewalk cafes due to their high speeds as well as the absence of curb lane parking due to surface parking lots.

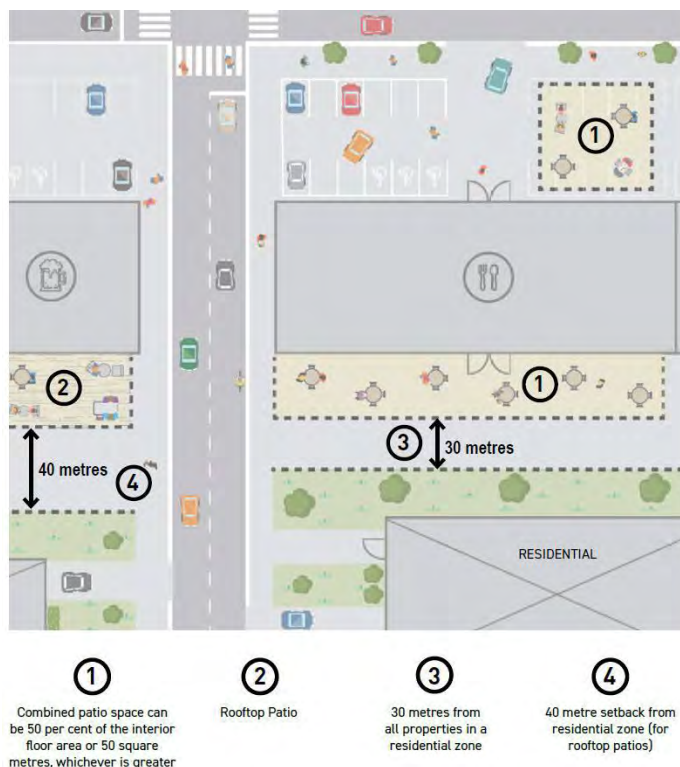


Figure 16. A diagram of permitted private patio uses illustrated in the CaféTO Patios on Private Property Guide (City of Toronto, 2023).

Who was involved and how did it work?

After zoning restrictions were eased, it was mostly up to interested restaurant owners to take up the opportunity, while the City's EDC Division helped advertise the program and provide some support. Restaurant owners were responsible for reviewing zoning requirements, selecting an appropriate parking lot location and size for patios, procuring outdoor furniture, and preparing a logistics plan for the daily operation and maintenance of the private patio. In many cases, strip mall restaurant owners are tenants rather than property owners, so this required an additional step to receive permission to set up a patio by the owner (Sharma, personal communication, January 16, 2023).

In March 2021, the EDC Division held a number of meetings with Scarborough Councillors in March 2021 to identify opportunities to spread awareness of the temporary use by-law through online and print communications (TS, MLS & EDC, 2021). This included postcards with information on private property patios mailed to every business with a B71 (Eating Establishment) business licence in Toronto as well as a social media campaign (TS, MLS & EDC, 2021). A flyer translated into Traditional Chinese, Tamil, Tagalog, Farsi, Russian and French was also made available (TS, MLS & EDC, 2021). While it is clear that EDC and Scarborough Councillors worked to reduce informational barriers and encourage the expansion of private property patios where possible, there was also relatively less capacity dedicated to the program in comparison with sidewalk and curb lane cafes in the downtown core or with PlazaPOPS. This is in part due to the fact that cafes in the public ROW required more coordination due to the planning policy context, thus involving additional staff at Transportation Services, Municipal Licensing and Services, as well as BIAs. This reduced capacity at city hall to serve or respond to private patio operators seems to have impacted the low participation rates in the program. Additionally, it is important to note that independent restaurant owners in the inner-suburbs already faced heightened barriers in accessing pandemic resources, as many are immigrant, racialized, and do not speak English as their first language (Sharma, 2023). These equity challenges to participating in the program are further explored in Challenges and Barriers, and Recommendations sections.

The future of private property patios

As a program that has been identified as an important mechanism for restaurant operators in the inner suburbs, the temporary use by-law has been extended two times, with the current extension, By-Law 237-2022, set to expire by the end of 2023. As such, the Zoning Section of the City Planning Division is currently undergoing a study to examine and survey the

future of the private patio by-law (City of Toronto, n.d., Review of Zoning Regulations for Outdoor Patios on Private Property). So far, this has included a review of current and historic patio by-laws in Toronto, any minor variances related to patios, and a review of the Official Plan for policy guidance (Anonymous, personal communication, February 16, 2023). A Planner working on the study further shared that a consultation plan to survey business owners and the general public about private patios is underway. While the consultation plan is still at a draft stage, the zoning study is interested in exploring how surface parking lots were used for patios and whether future iterations should require fencing for safety. Other questions such as the siting of patios on different commercial and residential zones, recreational use of patios, permissible sizes of patios, and setback requirements may also be explored in the survey (Anonymous, personal communication, February 16, 2023). In all, this study finds that this review process demonstrates a small step towards making private property patios more permanent, creating one pathway towards transforming strip mall parking lots into spaces for public life.

5.2 Caf  TO: Location and Designs

Wexford Heights, Scarborough



Data sources: City of Toronto Information & Technology (2021); City of Toronto Economic Development & Culture (2022)

Caf  TO Private Property Patios 2020-2022

■ Private patio with tent

1. Ghadir Meat & Restaurant
4. Pho Metro
5. Cafe Khost
6. Maroosh/M&Co Burgers
7. FV Foods
8. Diana's Oyster Bar and Grill

● Private patio with fence

2. Johnny Custard
3. Sumaq Iraqi Charcoal Grill

■ WexPOPS (2019)

▲ Pre-pandemic "sidewalk" cafe

■ Pre-pandemic patio

□ Property Boundaries

■ Wexford Heights BIA

Figure 17. Map of Caf  TO private property patios on Lawrence Ave East from June 2020 to August 2021.

As illustrated in Figure 17, a total of eight Caf  TO private property patios were observed between October 2020 and August 2021 on Google Street View (Google Maps, 2021; 2020). Six patios included more simple tent set-ups, while two patios were built with wooden fencing and umbrellas (See Patios 2 and 3 in Fig.18). All patios spanned about the size of one to two parking spaces. Additionally, a number of strip malls in Wexford Heights had permanent pre-pandemic patios with concrete or wooden platforms, as well as a number of small cafes located on the internal sidewalk of the strip mall. Parking lots with private patios tended to be fairly large with multiple rows of parking, thus reducing impacts to customer parking. As pictured in Figure 17, all strip malls with patios had consolidated ownership, which may have eased the process of gaining permission from the property owner.



1. Ghadir Meat & Restaurant - Tent patio



6. Maroosh/M&Co Burgers - Tent patio



2. Johnny Custard - Fenced patio

3. Sumaq Iraqi Charcoal Grill - Fenced patio



7. FV Foods - Tent patio



4. Pho Metro - Tent patio

5. Cafe Khost - Tent patio



8. Diana's Oyster Bar and Grill - Umbrella patio

Figure 18. An aerial view and comparison to the physical sites of eight CaféTO private property patios in Wexford Heights (City of Toronto Information & Technology, 2023; 2021; Diana's Oyster Bar & Grill, 2020 June; Google Maps (2021 April; 2021 August).

Albion Islington Square, Etobicoke

No private property patios were observed in the Albion Islington Square BIA area via Google Maps Street View in November 2020, August 2021 or September 2022. Despite this, there are about 17 restaurants in the area, many of which serve South Asian, Caribbean, and West African cuisines. One reason for the lack of patios may be the smaller size of parking lots which would pose safety concerns for patios and complicate car navigation. Other broader challenges that may have posed as barriers to participation in the private patio program are discussed in the Challenges and Barriers Section.

5.3 CaféTO: Enabling Conditions

This section details some of the limited opportunities and resources which helped enable the CaféTO private property patio program. While the program's main innovation was the enactment of Temporary Use Zoning By-law 910-2020, resources such as the CaféTO Property Improvement Grant and patio furniture rental discounts also helped reduce financial barriers and encourage participation in the program.

CaféTO Property Improvement Grant

The CaféTO Property Improvement Grant was launched in 2021 via federal investment in Toronto's Main Street Renewal and Rebuild Initiative Program. The cost-sharing grant covers 50 percent of eligible property improvements such as permanent patio improvements, permanent landscaping features, and fencing for up to \$5,000 (City of Toronto, n.d., CaféTO Property Improvement Program). Additional funding of up to \$2,500 is provided for exterior accessibility upgrades which meet the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act design standards.

While private patios are eligible to apply for the grant, there are inherent limitations to their applicability as the grant does not cover furnishings such as tables, chairs, or tents. Additionally, the grant may not have been helpful in overcoming the financial challenges of staffing and maintaining the private patio expansions. In an interview, the grant's Coordinator mentioned that the program has been much more successful for curb lane and sidewalk cafes in the downtown core, while there have been significantly less applications by private property patio operators in the inner-suburbs (Vaage, personal communication, January 30, 2023). More barriers to the grant are discussed in the following section.

Furniture Rental Support

In 2021, staff at EDC worked with two furniture rental companies in Toronto to provide discounted patio furniture packages of tents, outdoor tables, and chairs, for private patio operators in Scarborough (TS, MLS & EDC, 2021). Flyers with information on the discounted furniture packages were advertised to restaurant operators by Restaurants Canada and the Ontario Restaurant Hotel & Motel Association (TS, MLS & EDC, 2021).

5.4 CaféTO: Barriers and Challenges

While the removal of zoning restrictions and creation of the CaféTO Property Improvement Grant enabled some opportunities for restaurant owners, evidence from the case study of Wexford Heights illustrates that participation dwindled once indoor dining capacity limits were lifted in 2022. In other cases, like with Albion Islington Square, restaurants had not set up parking lot patios in the first place. What barriers and challenges might help explain this disappearance and low uptake of private patios? This section explores some of the underlying barriers and challenges that impede private patios in strip mall parking lots such as low incentives to reallocate parking space, gaps in knowledge about the program, parking lot site conditions, and limitations to the BIA system. These barriers will be important for city staff to consider as the program transitions from an emergency response to a more permanent model that supports economic development and public life in Toronto's inner suburbs.

Low incentives to reallocate parking space to patios

When pandemic restrictions to indoor dining were officially removed in spring of 2022, private patios ceased to be as important to the economic livelihood of businesses. Instead, patio operators had to reconsider the incentives that patios provided versus the trade-off of losing customer parking space. For many businesses, this meant a practical cost-benefit analysis of whether patio earnings would justify investments into financial and time resources to staff, maintain, and secure storage space for patio furniture (Kiru, personal communication, January 23, 2023). While the City provided some resources such as grant funding and furniture rental deals, it is likely that these incentives were insufficient to overcome the financial or attitudinal barriers to repurposing parking spaces for patios. From Winter 2021 to Summer 2022, the Feeding City SF3 lab at the University of Toronto conducted a study of independent Scarborough restaurants' experiences with pandemic business support programs in collaboration with the EDC Division (Sharma, 2023). The study found that Scarborough restaurant owners, many of which were racialized newcomers, struggled with many challenges including reduced staff, costs of operation, inflation, and supply chain issues (Sharma, 2023). It is likely that these challenges impacted restaurants' capacity, energy, and time to invest in setting up private patios. In all, without adequate incentives to implement and maintain private patios, it is difficult to expect restaurant operators or property owners to transform parking lots from spaces for cars, into places for public life.

Access to information about the program and funding opportunities

This study found three key barriers to accessing information to participate in the private property patio program and the CaféTO Property Improvement Grant. All barriers point to the need for more accessible and equitable communications for small business owners who are newcomers and multilingual. Firstly, a coordinator of the CaféTO Property Improvement Grant at EDC mentioned that the English-only application forms for the funding may have been harder to access for newcomer business owners who did not speak English as their first language or were less accustomed to the regulatory landscape in Toronto (Vaage, personal communication, January 30, 2023). In response to this barrier, the Coordinator mentioned a need for the City to apply a stronger equity lens to communications and the roll-out of the private patio program (Vaage, personal communication, January 30, 2023). This suggestion will be discussed further in the recommendations section. Additionally, the emphasis on digital communications and social media marketing of the private patio program and associated Grant, may have failed to reach many businesses (Vaage, personal communication, January 30, 2023). This finding is further echoed in the Feeding City SF3 lab's study as they reported that technological knowledge and access to social media and online news platforms posed significant barriers to small business owners (Sharma, 2023).

Finally, there was also some uncertainty of whether restaurant owner tenants were eligible to create private patios. For example, while the Feeding City SF3 lab reported that two restaurants expressed interest in private patios, they were uncertain of whether their landlords would facilitate their participation in the program (Sharma, 2023).

Challenges with parking lot site conditions

In other cases, strip mall parking lots were simply not designed to safely support the expansion of patios. Parking lots can be extremely challenging environments to walk and eat in. This can be due to any combination of unique conditions in a strip mall parking lot environment, including how often cars are moving in and out of the lot, whether there are multiple lanes of parking spaces, and where entrances or exits to the street are located, among many other factors. While the CaféTO program never expressly encouraged the creation of patios in strip mall parking lots, examples from Wexford Heights show that some businesses set up tents and fences to design safer, more welcoming patio arrangements in parking lots to counter the challenges of parking lot environments.

While the Transportation Services Division provided detailed design guidelines for curb lane and sidewalk cafes due to the regulatory requirements and greater safety risks of dining in

the street, there is no equivalent design guidance for private patios in parking lots. As such, the lack of design guidelines, best practices, or successful examples of private patio designs in parking lots poses a challenge to participating in the private patio program.

Limitations to Support from BIAs

In both the example of PlazaPOPS and the implementation of CaféTO sidewalk and curb lane cafes, BIAs have been central partners. At the same time, there are significant structural limitations to BIA support to parking lot patios. For one, only 17 of 83 BIAs in Toronto are in the inner-suburbs, with four BIAs in Scarborough, eight in Etobicoke, and six in North York (City of Toronto EDC, 2022). Even if strip mall businesses are located within a BIA, *Municipal Code Chapter 19* limits financial investments to municipally-owned land and buildings, so BIAs are unable to support patios and other exterior private property improvements (aside from façades) (City of Toronto, 2022, Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 19). As such, while BIAs in the downtown core may be able to provide support to businesses and invest in longer term improvements for curb lane and sidewalk cafes within the public ROW, BIAs in the suburbs have much less public land to work with.

6. Conclusion: Lessons from Case Studies

While many strip mall parking lots may already be used as part of the public realm in everyday life, the physical and institutional landscape of parking lots continues to pose ongoing challenges for more formal solutions that transform parking lots into spaces for public life. **As such, the two case studies examined in this study, PlazaPOPS and the CaféTO private property patio program, demonstrate two paths to transforming strip mall parking lots into spaces that support gathering and social connection.** See Table 4 for a summary comparison of the two programs.

PlazaPOPS presents a more bottom-up approach to creating public spaces in strip mall parking lots in Scarborough and Etobicoke, organized through a non-profit and a robust network of local BIAs, community partners, property owners, and researchers, with significant institutional support from the City and BIAs. While the program is still evolving and faces challenges with private property use and policy barriers, they have also shown how a concerted, creative effort to mobilize social capital, interest, and a community co-design process have the potential to work through and lessen the impact of these challenges. PlazaPOPS thus presents a very successful model to parking lot activation that centers community-specific needs for public spaces as well as social and economic benefits.

In comparison, the CaféTO private property patio program presents a more top-down emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was initiated through the removal of zoning restrictions to patios. As such, the program provides business and property owners with the opportunity to activate parking lots primarily for economic recovery, although outdoor dining also contributes to public life. Limited evidence of low participation in the program points to the fact that the removal of legal restrictions are not the only obstacle to strip mall parking lot patios. Instead, the program faces several challenges including low incentives to participation, barriers to accessing information about the program and its associated grant, varied difficulties with building in parking lots, and limited support from BIAs. Without the same breadth of social capacity and network of partnerships exemplified in the example of PlazaPOPS, this case study demonstrates how a policy-based approach to parking lot activation is insufficient. Because the private patio program mostly depends on the interest and incentives

of individual business owners, many independent and immigrant-owned businesses did not have the resources, capacity, or knowledge, to participate in the program.

	PlazaPOPS	CaféTO Private Patios
Approach	Bottom-up, non-profit-led	Top-down, policy-initiated
Intentions	Public space for social, economic, environmental benefits	Economic recovery
Key Partners	BIAs, community groups, property owners, researchers, City of Toronto EDC Division, and City's BIA office	City of Toronto EDC Division and the City's BIA office, individual business owners
Key challenges	Limitations of building on private property, policy challenges of encroaching in the public ROW	Low incentives to overcome challenges of reallocating parking space to patios, difficulties in access to information, safety challenges of designing in parking lots, limited support within BIA structure

Table 4. A summary of the contrasting approaches, intentions, and partners and challenges to activating parking lot through the PlazaPOPS and CaféTO Private Patio Program.

As exemplified through the opportunities and challenges in both case studies, the successful activation of parking lots requires multiple components including: policy negotiation and change, social capacity, partnership building, appropriate site conditions, and significant financial and time investments to innovate a new process where there currently is no clear framework to the re-purposing of strip mall parking lots. As such, PlazaPOPS, as a model which mobilizes intensive social capacity, has had much more success so far, while the CaféTO program will have to grapple with compounding challenges as it moves forward.

Future parking lot activations in Toronto's inner-suburbs will have to consider the balance of these components as well as the levels of the City's involvement in expanding the public realm on privately-owned spaces. What is the City's role in regulating and supporting the public use of private land? And what is the role of community and private businesses or property owners in reallocating their privately owned space for public good? Questions such as these must be grappled with if we are to reimagine parking lots as spaces for public gathering and cultural placemaking assets rather than spaces for cars.

7. Recommendations and Areas for Future Study

The following recommendations stem from findings and interviews for each case study and address some of the short- to medium-term challenges that each program faces.

7.1 Recommendations for CaféTO Private Property Patio Program

Prioritize the creation of accessible and equitable communications

Given the large percentage of immigrant-owned restaurants and small businesses that would benefit from greater access to the private patio program, it is necessary to consider language and cultural diversity in the roll out of the program. This study recommends the City's Zoning, Planning and EDC Divisions to create translated, accessible information in the consultation process for the permanent program, as well as communications for the program moving forward.

This would begin with research on the main non-English languages spoken amongst inner-suburban small businesses to provide appropriate translated information online and in print. For example, the 2021 Census found that some of the most commonly used non-English languages in Toronto on whole, included Traditional/Simplified Chinese, Tagalog, Tamil, Persian, Korean, Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, Gujarati, Hindi, and Punjabi (City of Toronto, 2022 August).

Planning and EDC Divisions could also consider creating culturally-specific communications strategies to reach communities where they are, such as through community groups and liaisons, ethnoculturally-specific supermarkets, places of worship, Facebook pages, and ethnoculturally-specific local newspapers. In particular, the Hua Foundation, a non-profit community-based policy research organization, provides resources on creating accessible, translated communications through its Language Access Project Toolkit (Hua Foundation, n.d).

Consider tracking and publishing participation in the private property patio program

As there is little public information about the geographic distribution and number of private patios in Toronto, the EDC Division should consider methods of tracking and publishing participation in the program. This could be done through an online self-reporting system or

through BIAs if businesses are located in one. Better data on participation in the program could help track geographic clusters of patio activity and help identify areas that may require more support.

Consider producing design guidelines for private patios in parking lots

Similar to CaféTO curb lane and sidewalk cafe design guidelines, this report recommends the EDC and Planning Divisions to consider creating best practices or design guidelines for future parking lot patios, in collaboration with Transportation Services. These guidelines would be important in transitioning the private patio program from an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic, towards a strategy that can be leveraged for placemaking and local economic development. The guidelines would include images of successful patio designs and specifically address safety and parking lot traffic flow concerns to be aware of when designing in a parking lot. These design guidelines should be translated, and written for a small business owner audience that would not have capacity to hire contractors or designers to create patios.

7.2 Recommendations for PlazaPOPS

Consider producing a guidebook on parking lot activations, in collaboration with the City

In the interest of sharing lessons learned and reducing barriers to creating parking lot activations, PlazaPOPS should consider creating a guidebook in collaboration with the City's EDC and Planning Divisions. The guidebook would help provide a check-list of by-law considerations that PlazaPOPS encountered with zoning and encroachments into the public ROW. As well, it would include clear dimensions for installations and landscape elements. Additionally, the guidebook could help communicate the benefits of activations as talking points to discuss while negotiating land access with private landowners, or to present with BIA partners.

While this would be the first step of sharing best practices on parking lot activations, a long term goal would be for this guidebook to evolve to become a part of the City's collection of design guidelines much like the Street Furniture Design and Policy Guidelines (City of Toronto, 2012). These best practices could also act as a communication tool to advocate for amendments to by-laws such as *Municipal Code Chapter 743* and further reduce barriers to parking lot activations.

7.3 Areas for future study

Strip mall parking lot activation is an understudied area, and there are many questions that could not be addressed in this limited study. Future areas of study could address questions such as:

- How can parking lot activations support ethnocultural placemaking and enhance a sense of community ownership?
- What specific challenges do immigrant small business owners face in participating in the CaféTO private property patio program?
- What incentives would help support strip mall business owners in implementing private patios?
- How can parking lot activations specifically create opportunities for pedestrian safety?

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