

plazaPOPS

Strategic Plan 2024 -2027

trading parking spaces for people places



April 1, 2024



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Land Acknowledgement

plazaPOPS work is all about the land: in today's Toronto, it's the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and other First Nations that have stewarded this region for time immemorial. Since colonization, this land has been subdivided, speculated on, and paved over, mirroring the treatment of the Indigenous nations on Turtle Island.

Guided by the principles of the [Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt](#), plazaPOPS strives for mutual respect for each other and the land in all of our endeavors. By transforming privately-owned land into communal gathering places, plazaPOPS is committed to fostering stewardship of the land, environmental sustainability, and a culture of sharing and cooperation contained within the Wampum Belt teachings.

We recognize that these days, land acknowledgements are often incomplete and remain far too symbolic, and through this Strategic Plan we commit ourselves to action, particularly through our Strategic Priority 3: "Integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and activity within the organization and sites" (page 13). We are committed to recognizing, respecting, and actively incorporating Indigenous perspectives throughout our initiatives, including planning, implementation, and ongoing activations. Through these efforts, plazaPOPS seeks to honor Indigenous voices, cultures, and knowledge systems, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable urban environment. We recognize that we are constantly learning as we go, and embrace this plan as a living document.

Despite the often bleak symbolism associated with parking lots, we recognize them as opportunities for renewal. Like the chicory, clover, and dandelion pushing through cracks in the asphalt, plazaPOPS sees potential in these overlooked spaces for gathering, learning, and healing through the fostering of robust ecologies and reconciliatory social networks.

April 2024

Introduction

As plazaPOPS celebrates its 5th anniversary of transforming parking spaces into people places, we are excited to share our strategic plan—a dynamic framework crafted to set the course for our organization’s evolution and sustainable growth. A strategic plan is not merely a document: it's the compass guiding us through the complexities of change, enabling us to navigate with purpose and clarity.

At the heart of our strategic plan lies setting plazaPOPS’ north star by clearly articulating our mission, vision, and values. Recognizing the need for community and economic development beyond the downtown core, plazaPOPS is a catalyst for transforming underinvested spaces along **strip mall main streets*** into vibrant community hubs.

By demonstrating the potential of strip mall parking lots to be transformed into dynamic community gathering places that celebrate local culture and support small businesses, a broad range of collaborators and opportunities have emerged.

plazaPOPS now stands at a critical juncture: With three years of operational funding from the Mainstreet Recovery and Rebuild Initiative drawing to a close, we ask ourselves: what can we do to make our current projects the most impactful, and what direction do we want plazaPOPS to maintain our core values and advance our mission, all while building a sustainable organizational model that works for us?

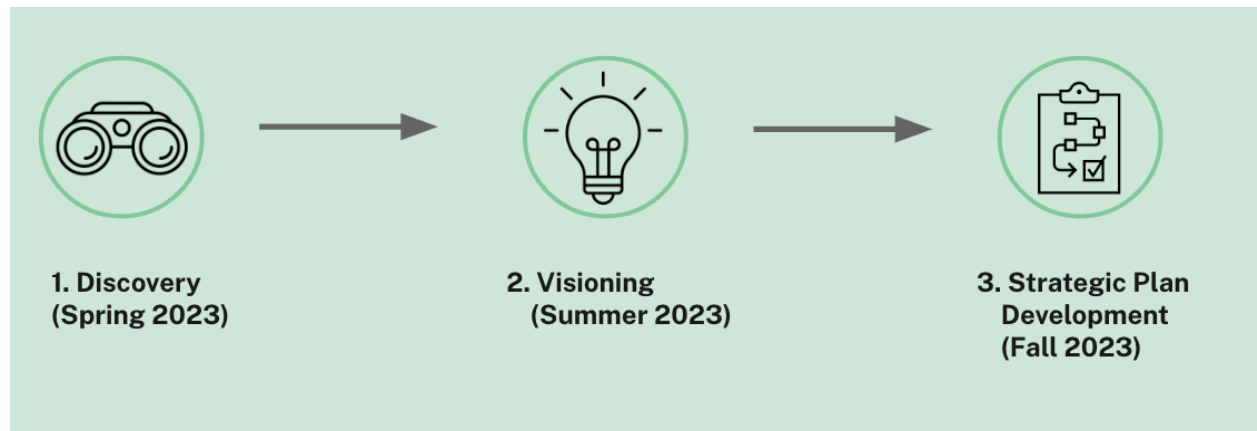
This strategic plan and the priorities we have identified build on our learnings over the past five years, the relationships made and the opportunities identified. It will help us navigate the future while maintaining our core values and principles.

This strategic plan lays the groundwork for our organizational evolution, setting a new vision, mission, and strategic directions that will guide our organization over the next three years as we demonstrate the potential of collaboration across sectors to transform parking spaces into people places. Specifically, our journey over the next three years is marked by deliberate milestones. We are excited to hire a Program Director who will play a pivotal role in steering plazaPOPS towards new opportunities and partnerships, while allowing the Executive Director to focus on partnership development and establishing financial sustainability. While new partnerships are being pursued, we are also anticipating a season of reflection and reset in late 2024 and 2025, creating space for research dissemination and advocacy.

* We’re using “strip mall main streets” to describe the wide arterial roads lined by strip malls that can be found throughout a city. While they were designed for the car, strip malls have become bustling with pedestrians and transit riders attracted to their diverse (and often delicious) locally-owned businesses.

Strategic Planning Process

We took a collaborative approach to the strategic plan, incorporating insights from community partners, funders, the Board of Directors, and visitors to our site.



Who we engaged:

- 10 Interviews with community partners, funders and collaborators
- 2 sessions with Board members
- On-site discussions with plazaPOPS attendees

In addition we conducted background research to understand other similar not-for-profit experiences and models, as well as to learn about trends in the sector.

Key Findings

Overall, through all engagement, plazaPOPS was mostly described as a community-driven, innovative, and collaborative project that creates vibrant gathering places, fosters community and economic development, and bridges the gap between research and practice in urban design.

We heard that there are three key areas that makes plazaPOPS unique:

1. **PEOPLE-CENTERED PROCESS:** plazaPOPS is created with, for and by a diversity of partners and collaborative co-design models. Our work is process oriented and based on relationships and trust.

2. **PLACE-BASED:** plazaPOPS is focused on catalyzing transformations in strip mall parking lots (plazas), and/or other underinvested spaces, where these interventions are needed most, and often hardest to do.
3. **IMPACT (Research and Advocacy):** plazaPOPS conducts in-depth research on the impacts of plazaPOPS, shares our findings broadly and advocates for longer term, permanent changes (specifically pushing for broader supports outside the downtown core).

SWOC Analysis

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trusted and well respected team (in community, with city staff, in broader network) • Team's role as a facilitator and catalyzer: Ability to bring people together and build unlikely bridges, make connections • Technical expertise (design, engagement, landscape) • Connection to university and research • Process-oriented: inclusive community engagement and design process • Durable and innovative designs 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting community and sites onboard (landowners) • Seasonal; lack of continuity in community • Design modules are costly • Permitting process is too intensive and long and costly • Lack of diversity in funding: too reliant on one source
<p>Challenges + Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen existing partnerships and explore new ones • Increased focus on environment and biodiversity • Longer term investment in community stewardship • Indigenous truth and reconciliation focus • Investment in research, advocacy and impact reporting • Diversify funding/work on business model • Figure out how to scale responsibly 	

Vision, Mission and Values

As we developed our organization's vision, mission, and values, we reflected on the core beliefs that unite us and guide our work, as outlined below.

We believe in...

1. **The Power of Social Infrastructure:** Great public places have the power to build and shape a just, democratic, resilient, and reconciliatory future.
2. **The Right to the City:** All neighbourhoods need and deserve accessible, equitable, and inclusive places where the community can meet itself and shape their environment.
3. **There is talent everywhere:** Strip mall main streets are vibrant community and economic hubs because of the dynamic businesses and people that define them.
4. **Expanding the 'public realm':** Even though strip malls are mostly privately owned, they are important shared spaces and should be recognized as such.
5. **Designing for and with people:** The car-oriented design of strip mall main streets need to be updated to better suit the daily life of pedestrians and transit users, including more comfortable and shaded places to sit and gather with greater access to nature and greenery.

Vision Statement

The vision statement identifies the primary purpose of the organization; the direction and north star of plazaPOPS

"The vision of an organization is looking into the future, dreaming together, predicting impact" (Adrienne Marie Brown)

Strip mall main streets* where people connect, small businesses thrive, local culture is celebrated, and nature is nurtured

** We're using "strip mall main streets" to describe the wide arterial roads lined by strip malls that can be found throughout a city. While they were designed for the car, strip malls have become bustling with pedestrians and transit riders attracted to their diverse (and often delicious) locally-owned businesses*

Mission Statement

The Mission statement identifies how plazaPOPS will achieve the vision.

The mission statement outlines our primary activities (what we do, who we serve, and how we serve them). It is a focused statement that typically answers questions like "What is our core reason for existence?" and "What do we do on a daily basis to achieve our goals?" The mission statement provides a clear and practical guide for our daily operations

We turn parking spaces into people places, through partnership, co-creation, research, and advocacy

Partnerships and co-creation: plazaPOPS builds relationships with a range of partners, including local community organizations and initiatives, landowners, small businesses and municipal staff (and more!) to collaboratively transform underinvested spaces, like plazas, into dynamic and welcoming gathering places.

Research and advocacy: We conduct research and advocacy to shape policy and practices that enable plazaPOPS to be created more easily, cheaply and by groups across the country, to inform and inspire the long-term evolution of these spaces.

Values

The value statements are the beliefs that guide plazaPOPS' work and culture. These values provide a framework to guide our Objectives and decision-making

We are committed to...

1. **A culture of care:** Integrating care and responsibility into everything we do. This means making sure our work with various communities, partners, and the environment is healthy and sustainable.
2. **Relationship building:** Nurturing trusting relationships and building unlikely bridges across sectors. Our work is shaped by the relationships we build and the opportunities we create together.
3. **(Re)investing in the community:** Working with the local community, including property and small business owners to ensure our projects benefit them, contribute to local economic growth and keep resources circulating locally.
4. **Flexibility and experimentation:** Each project is an opportunity to learn and strengthen our approach while inspiring an imagination of possibility.
5. **Sharing resources:** Sharing our designs, community processes, research findings to make it easier for others to pop plazas in their own communities.

Our Strategic Priorities 2024-2027

Our goals and objectives are derived from our priorities and are subject to adjustment. While we remain flexible in response to changes these priorities serve as anchor points.

Priority 1: Deepen community connections and relationships throughout the process and on site

The plazaPOPS model is already rooted in reciprocal relationships and community connections. We will explore, expand and execute new strategies to deepen community connections that will create lasting impacts within the neighbourhoods we work with and with our broader partners and networks.

Desired Outcomes:

- There is an increased number of partners and volunteers engaged with plazaPOPS who feel supported and a sense of belonging and stewardship over the programs;
- There are long-term opportunities to stay involved within the plazaPOPS community, even once a pop-up is completed;
- plazaPOPS can be rooted in communities year-round, through site installation or other community connections

Goals:

1.1 Enhance and solidify partnerships and community programming

2024 will be our fourth year running plazaPOPS, and our third year in Wexford Heights. Running the summer pop-up takes an immense amount of collaborative effort. By coming back to Wexford Heights for a third year, we have the opportunity to build on and expand community programming and partnerships.

Objectives:

- Recruit and hire a Scarborough-based Program Director to enhance local presence in 2024
- Refine site design based on community feedback
- Explore and pilot new approaches for the community design and programming process (reconsider and/or go beyond local anchor partners)
- Develop a partnerships framework to ensure the various partners we

engage with are values aligned

- Support partner organizations, new and old, to program plazaPOPS throughout the installation period
- Increase the amount and frequency of programming on site, and the number and breadth of the community that attends
- Develop a volunteer strategy to best support volunteers involved in project delivery

1.2 Deepen opportunities to maintain long term relationships

Through informal check-ins with past partners, we know our reciprocal relationships result in shared learnings and mutual benefit. As we invest in our site partners and programs, we also want to maintain our community connections with past partners and with our broader networks, to continue to create a legacy of reciprocity and impact.

Objectives:

- Initiate a plazaPOPS Alumni program, which could include yearly events (e.g. panels), newsletter updates, or other ways to stay connected
- Maintain and build meaningful relationships with municipal staff and potential partners (whether its an open-source toolkit, webinars, conference attendances, etc.)
- Formalize stewardship model to continue to maintain meaningful relationships

1.3 Strategically experiment and test alternative plazaPOPS programs

As plazaPOPS continues to plan for our yearly seasonal pop up, we are considering how to strengthen our impact through year-round POPS. At the same time, we are being approached by many different potential partners from different sectors to host plazaPOPS in different locations.

Objectives:

- Develop strategies and different scales of plazaPOPS that could be replicated with, by and for diverse partners (other municipalities, BIAs, developers and landowners and community organizations), e.g., consulting for other orgs/developers, full-fledged plazaPOPS implementation projects; working with smaller community orgs
- Explore opportunities to develop and implement year-round version of plazaPOPS (2026)

Priority 2: Develop and advance more robust and environmentally sustainable designs

PlazaPOPS is dedicated not only to creating social and economic impact, but also environmental benefits. While the POPS have incorporated environmental elements, there are real opportunities to prioritize a more holistic planting and microclimate strategy that can enhance biodiversity, test new and different approaches to adapting to climate change/heat waves, and partnering with community groups to advance advocacy work.

Desired Outcomes:

- Enhanced greenery and gardens, promoting biodiversity and providing natural cooling effects, and shade
- Documentation and dissemination of plazaPOPS' methodologies for microclimate management in privately owned public spaces (and becoming a leading example)
- Integration of circular economy principles zero waste initiatives into plazaPOPS sites in Scarborough, aligning with local interests

Goals:

2.1 Strengthen planting and garden maintenance strategy for 2024

- Enhance planting design
- Improve transplanting methods and training to ensure plant health
- Invest in quality control on garden maintenance through hiring of local master gardener or similar to train and supervise

2.2 Enhance and document our approach to circular economies

- Develop waste reduction strategies with local partners
- Document and publish existing circular economy approaches
- Explore new partnerships in waste management and circular economies

Priority 3: Integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and activity within the organization and sites

plazaPOPS is committed to embracing and integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and activity within its organization and sites. This involves recognizing, respecting, and actively incorporating Indigenous perspectives, traditions, and practices throughout all aspects of plazaPOPS initiatives.

Desired Outcomes:

- Integration of Indigenous perspectives and practices into the planning, implementation, and ongoing activities of plazaPOPS initiatives.
- Partnerships with Indigenous communities, providing opportunities for education and celebration within plazaPOPS sites, and allowing Indigenous partners to guide the design and programming of future spaces

Goals

3.1 Integrate Indigenous ways of knowing into organizational practices

- Bring diverse Indigenous perspectives into the organization's structure (leadership)
- Provide training and educational opportunities for plazaPOPS team members to learn about Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives
- Work with Indigenous community members to incorporate cultural elements into community design process, site designs, programming

3.2 Establish meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities, leaders and knowledge keepers

- Begin to foster connections between plazaPOPS and Indigenous communities.
- Invite Indigenous leaders and knowledge keepers to contribute insights and guidance in the planning and execution of plazaPOPS initiatives.

Priority 4: Prioritize research and advocacy efforts

This priority underscores the importance of gathering data, evaluating impacts, and actively advocating for changes that foster the growth and continuity of plazaPOPS initiatives and also larger-scale enhancements to car-oriented stripmall main streets more broadly.

Desired Outcomes

- Informed decision making
- Policy influence
- Visibility and impact more broadly

Goals

4.1 Share insights about our model, impacts and values

- Prioritize website update and launch research digest on website
- Add “open source” resources to website
- Develop yearly impact reports
- Apply for conferences and design/research awards

4.2 Strengthen and diversify our methods and impact assessment

- Enhance measurement of community economic development impact (to communicate to politicians and property owners), looking at broader data sources and methods of collection
- Partner with public health researcher, design research and collect data in summer 2024 (focus on shade, active transportation, social indicators of health)

4.3 Continue to advocate for by-law and permitting enhancements

- Develop an open source toolkit and DIY resources and audiences
- Participate in various municipal-led studies and initiatives focused on strip mall main streets

Enabling Priorities

Currently, Canadian nonprofits are experiencing unprecedented fiscal precarity, and are in an HR and volunteer crisis.¹ While we want to continue to benefit the communities and people we work with, we are in a unique position as a small and nimble organization to guide our growth in a way that is in service to our vision, mission and values. We have therefore taken time identifying how we want to govern and grow (or not grow):

Priority 5: Continue to build organizational capacity, adaptability, care

As a new nonprofit organization, plazaPOPS is focused on building a healthy, stable and value-driven organizational and governance structure. This means developing clear, defined (but also adaptable) roles and responsibilities for the Board, advancing a healthy workplace culture and planning for a long-term, sustainable future.

Desired Outcomes

- Strengthened governance, with clarified Board roles and responsibilities and established policies and committees
- A caring workplace, where staff and community feel welcomed and supported

Goals

5.1 Clarify and expand Board roles and responsibilities to strengthen governance

Objectives:

- Develop Board Governance mandate or policy manual to guide the Board's work
- Develop Committees and/or Task Forces, including Terms of References, to support organizational development
 - Options: 1) HR and Governance, 2) Fund Development, 3) Finance, 4) Strategic Plan implementation, 5) Design and Programming 6)

¹ <https://theonnc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Survey-2022-Policy-Report.pdf>

Research

- Review and Update Board terms and by-laws

5.2 Advance a workplace culture, focused on health and care of staff and community

Objectives:

- Establish structure for reviews, check-ins and supports
- Provide relevant leadership and professional development training for employees and Board members
- Provide health and other benefits for staff (flexible work hours, etc.)
- Develop collaboration agreement or memorandum of understanding for partners, outlining shared values and commitments that prioritize wellbeing of all parties

Priority 6: Pursue fiscal sustainability aligned with vision, mission and values

plazaPOPS aims to secure financial stability while remaining aligned with our core vision, mission, and values. This involves developing a strategic approach to fund development, considering diverse revenue streams, and cultivating partnerships that support the organization's long-term sustainability. As a new nonprofit, we are mindful to not necessarily have a mindset of growth for the sake of growth. plazaPOPS is open to taking a deliberate pause, allowing time for reflection and research mobilization if upcoming projects or funding avenues don't align with our core principles or capacities.

Desired Outcomes

- A clear direction and framework for how to develop fiscally sustainable and value-based partnerships and business models

Goals

6.1 Continue to develop a longer term strategy for pursuing partnerships and collaborations that align with plazaPOPS' mission and values

Objectives:

- Identify and foster relationship with institutions, nonprofits and funders with aligned values
- Strike a Strategic Planning implementation committee or task force, reviewing opportunities as they come

6.2 Develop strategy to diversify revenue streams to support organizational and financial sustainability and health

- Explore fee for service opportunities, aligned with values, capacity, expertise and based on criteria
- Plan for a 5-year anniversary fundraiser (with help from the fund development committee)
- Develop a fund development committee to support this work
- Consider product sales after 2024 season

Next Steps - Measuring Impact

Operations Plan

Once the Strategic Plan is approved, plazaPOPS will develop an operations plan as well as key performance indicators/metrics for the specific goals on an annual basis.

How to measure success - SMART Metrics: To ensure the strategic plan priorities and goals are being met, it is essential to develop SMART metrics (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and within a Time-Frame). Allocating Objectives with those responsible within the Operations Plan will also ensure the strategic plan goals are achievable.

Annual Reporting

This plan recommends intervals at which it can be evaluated and reassessed. The following process is recommended:

- Quarterly meetings to review progress within Year 1
- Annual reporting on the progress of goals
- Review the plan and annual report with the Board to assess its continued relevance and make adjustments as needed.