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BRENDAN STEWART

PARADISE IN A PARKING LOT

A PRAGMATIC, PARTNERED APPROACH TO ENHANCE THE PUBLIC REALM OF SUBURBAN MAIN STREETS

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The big idea is to create a form of social infrastructure and local economic development that is tailored to the conditions of the suburbs, where the need for public realm enhancement is often great, but difficult to achieve due to the limited amount of land in public ownership.

FR_LP+ STATIONNEMENT FÉÉRIQUE

Une approche pragmatique et partenariale pour valoriser l'espace public des axes routiers de banlieue

1 MUCH OF THE PUBLIC REALM OF SUBURBAN MAIN STREETS – THE SPACE BETWEEN THE SIDEWALK AND BUILDING FRONTS – IS PRIVATELY OWNED 2 WEXPOPS FROM ABOVE.

PHOTO 1 TRIPLE POINT MEDIA 2 JUSTIN LUTH

A model for community and economic development along suburban main streets

“plazaPOPS”, is a collaborative initiative that enhances the public realm through publicly accessible pop-up installations within the privately owned parking lots of commercial strip-malls. It is a partnership-based, community-driven process that generates a suburban main-street specific strategy that supports community life *and* local business.

My project partner Daniel Rotsztain and I coined plazaPOPS as a term to describe this particular typology of suburban intervention, and it is also the name of

the not-for-profit organization that we have incorporated to further research and develop the model. “POPS” refers both to the temporary, pop-up nature of the interventions, as well as the idea that strip-mall parking lots are an important but under-recognized form of POPS: Privately-Owned, Publicly-Accessible Space.*

The big idea is to create a form of social infrastructure and local economic development that is tailored to the conditions of the suburbs, where the need for public realm enhancement is often great, but difficult to achieve due to the limited amount of land in public ownership (Image 1).



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Working on private land requires partnerships

Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) are an important platform for enhancing the public realm of commercial districts, and plazaPOPS is being developed as a suburban BIA tool, although we also envision these installations popping up in non-BIA commercial districts, too. Responsive to the shape and structure of the suburban main street and its public realm defined by privately owned parking lots, the idea hinges on the proposition that commercial landowners and the local business community will see enough value to offer a few parking spaces and participate in a community-oriented, city-building project.

Through this foundation of partnership, the initiative invites traditional public space uses into an often-hostile pedestrian landscape. Under the dynamic lights

of strip-mall signage, adjacent to the smells and sounds of a truly international assortment of restaurants and shops, and surrounded by cars, plazaPOPS invites the community to linger and meet itself.

To give the reader an initial impression, Image 2 shows our first plazaPOPS prototype, a grant funded pilot project called 'WexPOPS' installed for six weeks in Wexford Heights, Scarborough, in summer 2019.

The challenge of securing pilot sites to test the model

One dimension of the WexPOPS pilot is the all-important issue of securing the site, which illustrates a key operating reality that underpins the larger initiative – the idea that plazaPOPS installations are created where they are invited, not necessarily on the most optimal sites. Ultimately, when the initiative leaves the proof – of-concept phase, we hope to transition from pitching

the opportunity to find willing hosts, to having local organizations instigate the development of their own plazaPOPS at strategic locations. The project has been opportunistic in this sense; working where we find partners and making the best of the circumstances.

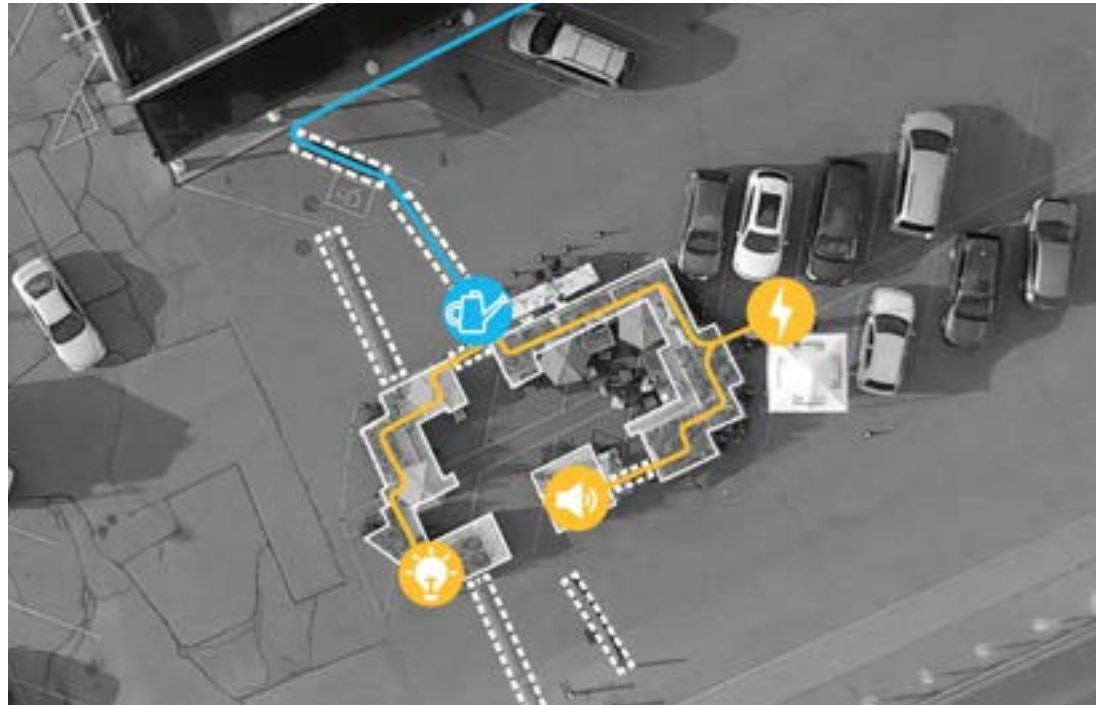
We set out in late 2018 to find a landowner to host our pilot plazaPOPS, working alongside Linda Raeside, the executive director of the Wexford Heights BIA as a partner. This suburban BIA is known for its creativity, its annual "Taste of Lawrence" street festival, and the over 60 diverse restaurants within its two-kilometre jurisdiction.

Nevertheless, securing a site proved difficult and required perseverance. The first landowner we approached had a corner property fronting on two busy bus lines, a large pylon sign with a concrete base that pedestrians sat on, and an angled parking

layout that would have allowed us to create a large space with minimal impact on existing parking. It had high visibility and would have benefitted from frequent use by bus users, but despite our best efforts, the landowner politely declined to participate.

Next, we looked at a plaza at the far west end of the BIA that featured several busy restaurants – food as a social lubricant was prioritized in our search criteria – and with whom the BIA had existing relationships that suggested a potential fit. One of the local businesses was interested, but we learned that this strip-mall, despite its on-the-ground appearance, is divided into multiple properties with separate owners, a type that our later research came to classify as a “fragmented ownership” strip-mall. Parking impact concerns resulted in strong resistance to the project from a property manager involved with this site, so we cut our losses and moved on.

The third landowner we approached was immediately to the east of the corner lot that was our first choice. The Wexford Heights Plaza (which serves as the setting of the excellent 2016 independent film *Wexford Plaza*) is a strip-mall owned by the family that operated the Wexford Restaurant, a local landmark that closed in 2020 after 63 years in business. A “consolidated ownership”- style plaza with only one property owner, the site features dynamic illuminated signage, vibrant businesses and, most important, the plaza owners were intrigued by the project and agreed to be our hosts on one condition: that nothing could be sold in the space (as landlords, the family did not want their tenants complaining about competition).



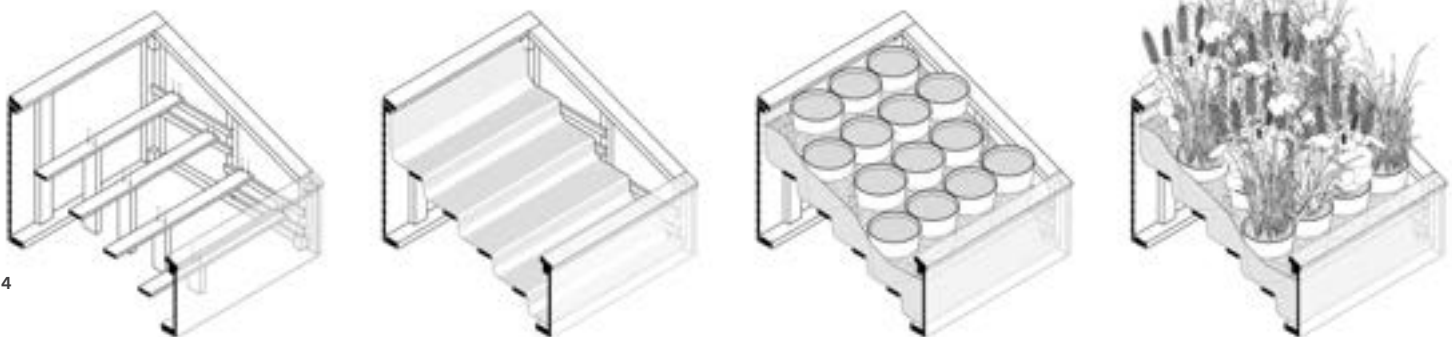
The owners indicated an area of 10 angled parking spaces in the middle of the parking lot that we could use. With a drive aisle to the south and to the north, we thought of it as an “island condition” that presented a set of safety and wayfinding challenges, but which created the opportunity to make an enclosed outdoor room and came with electricity and light from an adjacent light pole and easy access to water. Our hosts would supply utilities and offered that if we could get the garbage and recycling to the back of the plaza where collection happens, they would receive and handle the waste (Image 3).

Having convinced the owners that we were well-intentioned, trustworthy and capable of pulling off the project, we entered into a hand-shake agreement and focused our energies on the community design process, and planning the intervention itself.

A hiccup at the eleventh hour

In late spring 2019, with the installation date fast approaching, we re-focused on formalizing the agreement with our project hosts. Supported by legal advisors within the University of Guelph’s research office, we drafted a land-access and licencing agreement that described proposed activities and included an insurance policy that indemnified the landowner. Having kept the plaza owners informed about the design process through a series of face-to-face meetings over the intervening months, we sent the draft agreement by email, confident that what remained was a matter of crossing t’s and dotting i’s.

What transpired was an important lesson in understanding the culture of the environment in which one is operating. The agreement that we had emailed had already been pared down from what our





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legal advisors had initially proposed, but still contained a significant amount of legalese that, as it turned out, did not sit well with the landowner. Mere weeks before opening and after months of effort, the viability of the project was suddenly on the line. The message was clear: this is not how we do business in Wexford Heights. Scrambling, we worked with our legal advisors to further simplify the agreement and returned an updated draft that thankfully passed muster and was signed.

Creating a safe, accessible and comfortable gathering space in the middle of a busy parking lot is a novel design challenge. WexPOPS was designed to balance a sense of enclosure, creating a physical barrier from cars navigating its exterior, and openness, featuring three clear points of entry and exit, and the creation of an inner “room”. From a social life perspective, WexPOPS fostered a lot of pro-social behavior and attitudes: 70% of visitors reported meeting someone new, 87% of visitors felt welcome, 93% felt positive about the design and 69% felt physically comfortable.

The plazaPOPS model prioritizes identifying and working with existing and available cultural resources and systems, forming a dense web of local partnerships, and adapting to local ways of collaborating and collectively getting things done. To realize WexPOPS, we drew on a can-do spirit that we have come to describe as “positive opportunism”.

Research and development continues

The initiative has grown over the past three years. The seeds of the idea were developed in Daniel’s MLA thesis that led to our grant-funded pilot. Staff from several divisions of the City of Toronto expressed interest in further development of the initiative and, in 2020, joined the research team in a successful Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant with a goal to develop a framework for the creation of a sustainable plazaPOPS program.

The SSHRC research involved a working group of 10 City of Toronto staff from multiple divisions, who provided input and oversight through a series of virtual workshops in fall 2020 and spring 2021. The partnership led in July 2021 to a grant from the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario (FedDev). Part of a larger Main Street Recovery and Rebuild Program that responds to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the FedDev project involves the planning, design, fabrication, installation, and programming of a series of new plazaPOPS installations from 2022 to 2024, with the design of an initial cluster in the north Etobicoke neighbourhood of Rexdale, well underway at the time of writing. A second SSHRC grant was also secured in spring 2022, which will



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evaluate, document and communicate the social and economic benefits of this new round of plazaPOPS pilots. **LP**

** plazaPOPS, which Brendan co-leads with Daniel Rotsztain, received grants from Park People’s Public Space Incubator Grant (funded by Ken and Eti Greenberg and the Balsam Foundation); the City of Toronto’s BIA Kickstarter fund; and SSHRC Partnership Engage and Partnership Development programs, as well as SEDRD. The interested reader can learn more in issue 49 of Ground magazine, and in an exit report and documentary film that is available at www.plazaPOPS.ca. We are immensely grateful that the project continues to enjoy support from an incredible group of engaged community, municipal, and educational partners.*

3 WATER SERVICE (IN BLUE) AND ELECTRICITY (IN YELLOW) WERE INTEGRATED INTO THE DESIGN. TEMPORARY SPEED BUMPS WITH CONDUIT CHANNELS (IN DASHED WHITE) WERE USED TO CONCEAL AND PROTECT A HOSE AND EXTENSION CORDS, WHILE ALSO CALMING TRAFFIC **4** MODULAR WOODEN PLANTERS DEVELOPED WITH FABRICATOR BEN O’HARA WERE DESIGNED TO FLAT PACK TO INSTALL QUICKLY, SAFELY, AND WITH MINIMAL DISRUPTION. **5** INSIDE WEXPOPS DURING AN EVENT. **6** OUR 15-MEMBER COMMUNITY WORKING GROUP INFORMED THE DESIGN THROUGH THREE WORKSHOPS, CREATED IMPORTANT LOCAL CONNECTIONS THAT INFLUENCED THE PROGRAMMING OF EVENTS, AND THE SOURCING OF CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS AND SERVICES, AND ENSURED LOCAL STEWARDSHIP OF THE PROJECT. **PHOTOS** 6 JUSTIN LUTH 4 GRAPHIC BY FRANCO CHAN AND JUSTIN LUTH 5 KAT RIZZA 5 TRIPLE POINT MEDIA