

UPCOMING DATES

JANUARY

- 20 Board of Health, 9:30 a.m.
- 21-22 Budget Committee (budget subcommittees – public presentations on 2025 Budget), 9:30 a.m.
- 22 Toronto Design Review Panel, 1:00 p.m. - CANCELLED
- 23 Planning & Housing Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 24 Budget Committee (2025 Budget wrap-up), 9:30 a.m.
- 27 TTC Board, 10:00 a.m.
- 28 Executive Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 30 CreateTO, 1:30 p.m.
- 31 Preservation Board, 9:30 a.m.

FEBRUARY

- 5 Council (Special), 9:30 a.m.
- 10 Board of Health, 9:30 a.m.
- 11 Council (Special – 2025 Budget), 9:30 a.m.
- 12 Preservation Board, 9:30 a.m.
- 19 Etobicoke York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- North York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 20 Scarborough Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- Toronto & East York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 24 TTC Board, 10:00 a.m.
- 25 General Government Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 26 Economic & Community Development Committee, 9:30 a.m.



■ CITY LOOKS TO SUPPORT, ENHANCE TORONTO'S STRIP MALL PLAZA CULTURE
AMID INCREASED REDEVELOPMENT PRESSURES

PONDERING OUR PLAZAS



Lana Hall

The City of Toronto is exploring the future of its strip mall plazas, many of which are located within inner suburban neighbourhoods and on sites considered prime land for redevelopment. In a new report titled “Prospects for Plazas” City planning staff consider the role of strip malls in their communities, how to mitigate displacement of small businesses within plazas being redeveloped, and how to enhance the public realm of existing strip mall plazas.

These strip mall plazas are prevalent across Toronto’s inner suburbs, home to more than 3,100 establishments, and as of 2023, accounting for just under 13,000 jobs, according to City data. These low-rise commercial forms have evolved from what were intended to be a temporary solution in the mid-1950s to 1980s—to provide local access to goods and services in a sprawling metropolis—into a permanent fixture of Toronto’s retail scene.

As the report highlights, strip mall plazas play strong economic, social and cultural roles in their communities, especially in neighbourhoods with lower household incomes and higher proportions of immigrants and racialized people, where these plazas tend to be located.

Of the study’s 300 survey respondents, 58 per cent reported visiting strip mall plazas once a week, while 70 per cent of those reported visiting two or more businesses on a single trip to a plaza. Plaza visitors reported that proximity to their home, access to a variety of services, and the ability to support small and local businesses attracted them to local strip malls, while

business owners valued the more affordable rents in these spaces than in other locations. The report also found that strip malls tend to contain ethnic food retailing and food offerings, fostering local communal spaces for cultural expression. Thanks to digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok, these spaces have also begun drawing visitors from other parts of the city, eager to find “hidden gems” and other kinds of cultural cuisine.

“Even though they’re more suburban in style, [strip mall plazas] are these really important Main Streets, even though we don’t always look at them like that,” says City of Toronto planner **Evan Sinclair**, who

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- Evan Sinclair

NRU PUBLISHING STAFF

Ian A.R. Graham, Publisher
iang@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 222

Irena Kohn, Editor
irenak@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 223

Matt Durnan, Senior Reporter
mattd@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 225

Lana Hall, Senior Reporter,
lanah@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 226

Peter Pantalone
Planning Researcher
peterp@nrupublishing.com

Jeff Payette
Design/Layout
jeffp@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 228

Samantha Lum
Sales and Circulation
samanthal@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 224

SALES/SUBSCRIPTIONS
circ@nrupublishing.com

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Corporate Address
NRU Publishing Inc.
41 Roxborough Street East
Toronto, ON
M4W 1V5

Mailing Address
NRU Publishing Inc.
P.O. Box 75016
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Toronto, ON M4W 3T3

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worked on the report.

But Toronto's strip malls and the businesses within them face two major challenges. Many of them end up being redeveloped into residential or mixed-use communities, which often displaces those businesses. Plazas that remain intact have often been designed as "islands in a sea of cars," and may lack easy pedestrian access or an attractive public realm in favour of plentiful surface parking.

According to City of Toronto data, there are currently 33 strip mall plazas with active development proposals in the city. Though most applications propose some

replacement of non-residential gross floor area (GFA), the amount being replaced is often less than what the original strip mall contained. In fact, the replacement rate of non-residential GFA on these sites is only 56 per cent.

Sinclair says the report's intention is not to advocate for preserving all strip mall plazas in their existing form, but to protect and support the businesses within them to the extent it is possible to do so. "We know, given a lot of the information we looked at, that they are quite prime for redevelopment, whether they're located really close to an incoming higher-order transit line or station, whether they're located in an area where other

investments are happening, or even more permissive policies are going to be put in place," he says.

The report determines three themes staff say should consider when integrating strip mall plazas into municipal policies or programs going forward. The first is supporting small businesses in existing plazas. The second is enhancing the physical plaza experience, perhaps through programming

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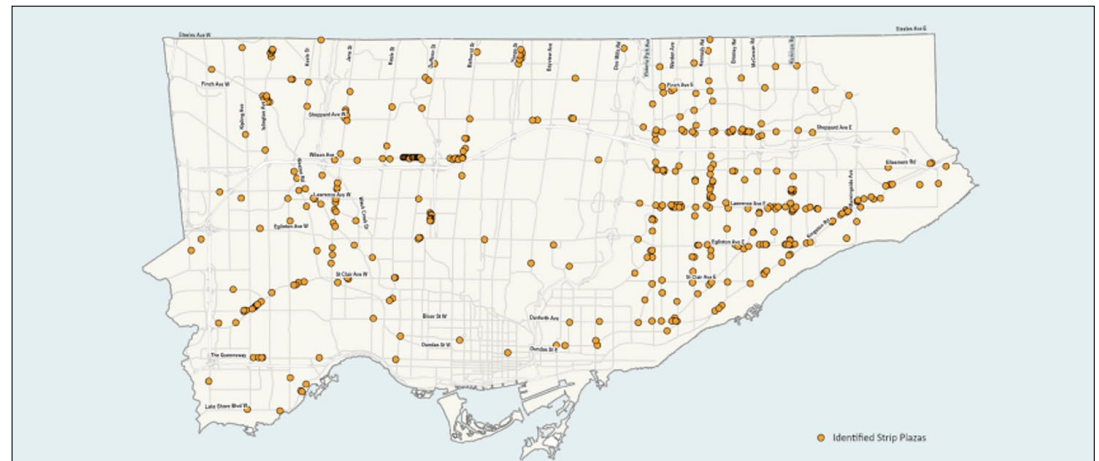


Figure 3.1: Toronto Strip Plaza Locations

Most strip plazas are located in Scarborough at 51%, followed by North York at 25% (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2: Distribution of Strip Plazas by Former Municipality

Map showing the locations of strip mall plazas across the city. In a report released last month, City of Toronto planning staff consider the role of strip malls in their communities, how to mitigate displacement of existing small businesses within plazas being redeveloped and how to enhance the public realm of strip mall plazas being retained.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

Photo of a strip mall plaza on the northeast side of Warden Avenue and Lawrence Avenue East in Toronto. In a report released last month, City of Toronto planning staff consider the role of strip malls in their communities, how to mitigate displacement of existing small businesses within plazas being redeveloped and how to enhance the public realm of strip mall plazas being retained.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO



PONDERING OUR PLAZAS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

or public realm improvements. The third is mitigating displacement of small business during redevelopment of plazas.

“That’s really challenging,” says Sinclair of mitigating displacement. “I think it’s what we spent a lot of time thinking through, and what a lot of those emerging directions start to get at: ‘How can we continue to provide the functions that the plaza provides today in a new development that brings in really important things like more housing?’”

Other plazas, says Sinclair, may not be good candidates for redevelopment, or may have landowners who have no intention of taking on a development project. Those strip mall plazas may instead be candidates for public realm improvement, which is where the report’s second theme of ‘enhancing the physical plaza experience’ comes in.

Many of these strip mall plazas, says Sinclair, contain large, underutilized surface parking lots, which could lend themselves to forms of activation that improve the public realm. This could take the form of adding landscaping or seating, such as through the **PlazaPOPS** initiative.

Since 2019, PlazaPOPS has organized 12 temporary

installations in privately-owned plaza parking lots across the city, mostly in the form of parkettes or seating areas. PlazaPOPS director of design and research **Brendan Stewart** says their pilots have resulted in a broader diversity of strip mall visitors than what these plazas might normally see, with various age and cultural demographics attracted to what he calls a “third space” that public activations often provide.

Stewart says these activations work best in parking lots that already have an oversupply of parking spaces, are close to a transit stop, and have high-volume businesses close by, such as restaurants, libraries, or other neighbourhood services.

“We would definitely like to see a scaling up of PlazaPOPS, and we do think there’s a lot of potential for the model we’ve developed to spread throughout the city,” says Stewart.

In North York, which is home to 25 per cent of Toronto’s strip mall plazas, ward 6 York Centre councillor **James Pasternak** says plaza redevelopment proposals should be required to replace any retail or commercial space being demolished.

“It is crucial that we protect

the various businesses—both large and small—that make up our suburban plazas. These locations are often the commercial and social centre of a community and provide local residents access to vital shopping, business, and medical services.”

While the City’s report does not provide specific recommendations, staff are hopeful it will eventually inform the creation of policies, programs, or tools that might help achieve some of the report’s directions in terms of supporting and enhancing the businesses within the city’s strip malls.

Sinclair says that will require conversations with other City divisions, including economic development and culture, and finance.

“We don’t want this to be a siloed project. We want to plug ourselves into other initiatives happening at the City because we see that as being our best opportunity to have [these themes] actually go somewhere,” he says.



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