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Beyond Aesthetics: Assessing the Value of Strip Mall Retail in Toronto

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ABSTRACT Many city planners are increasingly focusing on urban design guidelines to shape future growth. However, the social implications of this type of planning rarely appear in city plans. Toronto's new planning policies are shown to establish a polarized view of the city, focusing on aesthetic concerns rather than the use and users of spaces. Interviews with small business owners and local planners were used to establish the benefits of, and threats to, strip malls. The findings reveal that strip malls provide affordable retail space for small businesses not available elsewhere and the spaces are seen as highly desirable by many ethnic business owners. This paper highlights some of the problems associated with design-centric planning.

Introduction

Tenants have come and gone at the strip plaza on the northwest corner of Bathurst Street and Wilson Avenue, but one thing has stayed the same for at least two and a half decades: *It looks like hell.* (McDowell, 2007, author's own emphasis)

As a reporter for a national Canadian newspaper succinctly described: "strip malls look like hell". Elsewhere in the press, strip malls have been described as grim (*Toronto Star*, 2010a), a war zone (Hume, 2009a), a wasteland (*Toronto Star*, 2009), a disaster (Boyle, 2007) or even simply dismissed as garbage (Whyte, 2009). Yet it is not only the press that defines strip malls by their surface ugliness: politicians (Scheuer, 2007), planners, designers and economic development staff have echoed this sentiment. Endorsing Toronto's new official plan in 2002, which advocated for strip mall redevelopment, then mayor Mel Lastman said: "Strip plazas have got to go. These things are a holy mess. Their time is over" (quoted in Kuitenbrouwer, 2009). Regardless of their existing uses, strip malls are often held up as ideal sites for redevelopment (Hume, 2009b; *Toronto Star*, 2008, 2010b, 2010c), where "almost anything represents an improvement" (Hume, 2009a). Official city policies reinforce this idea, implying that strip malls have the same development potential as vacant lots (City of Toronto, 2003a, 2003b). While the language may vary, the denigration of strip malls is widespread.

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So why should urban planners care if ageing strip malls are replaced by the type of attractive, mid-rise buildings as described in design guidelines such as Toronto's recent *Official Plan*? The benefits of strip mall redevelopment are often repeated: development will result in more intensive land use and the opportunity to create pedestrian-friendly, visually appealing environments. While this vision of the city is seductive, one wonders about the impacts of encouraging major redevelopment in these areas. The question remains: do we appreciate what we stand to lose by advocating for the redevelopment of strip malls?

Despite the condemnation of strip malls by politicians, planners, and in the popular press, it is unclear whether there are social benefits associated with their specific building form. The study that follows analyzes three strip malls in the Toronto area in order to understand the nuances of their uses and assess the difficulty with uncritically advocating for their redevelopment. The goal of this paper is to assess whether there are benefits to strip mall development—paying specific attention to the availability of rental space for small businesses—and the degree to which urban design guidelines are able to account for advantages that are specific to their built form.

As the desire for compact urban growth intensifies, there is increasing pressure to redevelop older, less intensive built forms. This paper argues that many strip malls, such as those profiled here, have a level of complexity that is unacknowledged by current planning and design policies. While city policies treat all strip malls similarly based on their aesthetic or visual character, this paper argues that although they may share a built form type, they are not all the same: many strip malls have significant social and economic value that are unaddressed by design policies. If better understood, these social and economic benefits of strip malls should provide a solid foundation for re-evaluating their redevelopment potential. By looking at the specific case of strip malls, this study provides a basis for the argument that design policies should promote equity through supporting functional concerns, not only visual considerations.

Assessing Strip Malls: The Context

Strip malls have been studied through a variety of lenses over the years, and yet the benefits associated with strip mall development and how they are tied to a specific built form are not well understood. One is a historical examination of the development of strip malls, plazas and other car-oriented retail forms, such as those by Jakle & Mattson (1981), Gillete (1985), Liebs (1985), and Longstreth (1997a, 1997b, 1999). These works address the evolution of various retail types and shifts in the built form typology. There are also works that offer examples of strip mall redevelopment. Other articles, typically found in publications with broader, non-academic audiences such as *Planning*, *The New York Times* and *Business Review*, offer examples of strip malls that have been razed and developed into mixed-use shopping developments (see, for example, Homsy, 2002; Martin, 2005; Miller, 2005; Jackson, 2006).

This article draws on works that examine the social structure and functional use of strip malls, and retail uses more generally. In one of the first studies to tackle strip development, Southworth & Lynch (1974) concentrated on the design and management of arterial strips while seeking out opportunities for improving current and future arterial developments. While the physical environment is examined in great detail and recommendations provided for aesthetic and urban

design improvements, the social environment of the strip is left out. In contrast, the study by Loukaitou-Sideris (1997) of residents living near three major commercial strips in Los Angeles laid the foundation for a user-centred approach to built form analysis and retrofit. A later article on the same strip malls (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2000) went on to examine the business owner's perspective on their location and how local governments, community organizations and merchants themselves can assist in the rehabilitation of these areas.

The body of literature surrounding commercial and new-build gentrification is also pertinent to the analysis of strip mall redevelopment policies. As Davidson & Lees argued (2005), third-wave gentrification is not only restricted to 'blighted' or 'disinvested' neighbourhoods or to residential development. In fact, the argument has been made that new-build construction is an indicator of state-led, post-recession gentrification (Hackworth, 2001, 2002; Davidson & Lees, 2005). Similarly, Curran (2004) argued that the displacement of industrial space from the inner city for residential uses is a form of gentrification. While Curran's (2004, p. 1256) argument that "gentrification is one of the ways in which urban space is reshaped to make it more attractive to the upper classes" is related specifically to manufacturing, similar links can be drawn to retail uses that are actively targeted for residential redevelopment. In this context, it is necessary to examine the social and economic consequences of design policies that purport to be focused on aesthetic and quality-of-life concerns.

There is a significant literature on the ethics and equality of urban design (Rubin, 1979; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996; Banerjee, 2001; Day, 2003). These contain attempts to go beyond the view of urban design as an aesthetic practice and address the political nature of design. As Rubin stated:

Urban 'ugliness' and urban 'blight' variously defined, have been employed as rhetorical gambits in propaganda campaigns to control the use of appreciating urban space. Typically, the costs of aesthetic programs ... have been borne most heavily by those who benefit from them the least. (p. 361)

A serious look at who will be shouldering the negative impacts of urban design policies is clearly warranted in many instances of urban design policy and practice. The argument by Loukaitou-Sideris (1996, p. 97) for socially responsible planning when many urban designers "seem to have become more ignorant and disconnected from the larger social problems facing the city" significantly informs this analysis of strip malls.

This paper seeks to place a current planning issue—the redevelopment of suburban arterials—within a framework of urban design that is sensitive to the realities of culturally diverse cities. It is hoped that this study will advance existing arguments about the functional importance of strip malls through focusing on the social and economic benefits that are unique to these spaces (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996). Unlike previous studies, this paper examines strip malls that are facing high redevelopment pressure, expressed through both planning policy and developer interest. Placed in the context of policies directed at their redevelopment, the strip mall's role as a source of affordable retail space highlights the considerable impacts of aesthetically-centred planning.¹

A Note on Terms

There are significant differences in retail built forms, with strip malls being a fairly unique type of post-war construction. Two major types of retail development emerged during the post-war boom. The first was the shopping plaza, a comprehensively designed group of stores, usually leased from a single owner, with free, off-street parking. The earliest shopping plazas often had major department stores and were always unenclosed (Longstreth, 1997a). When the pace of development slowed in the 1960s, fully enclosed regional shopping centres began to dominate the retail scene. It was also during this period that strip malls began to appear, along arterials in suburban areas (Longstreth, 1997a). The organization and location of the retail sector evolved immensely in the post-war period. Changes in retailing formats continue to occur with the rise of big-box stores, ethnic specialty malls and other new forms (Simmons *et al.*, 1996; Wang, 1996; Doucet & Jones, 1997).

While there are several definitions for strip malls, this study looks at a very specific type of car-dependent, post-war retail development. Strip malls are defined as multiple, conjoined retail units arranged parallel to the street with free surface parking abutting the right-of-way (Figure 1b). Unlike a plaza (Figure 1c), parking is limited to two or three spaces per unit. In the Toronto area, strip malls are located along many suburban arterials² and may have second-storey residential or office uses.

Differences in retail formats are often defined by scale. While retail types are somewhat location specific, big-box centres (Figure 1d) are usually defined as “large-format stores that typically range in size from 20,000 to over 150,000 square feet” (Doucet & Jones, 1997, p. 234). By contrast, shopping malls (Figure 1e), which are traditionally enclosed, have upwards of 500 000 square feet and are regionally focused (Jones, 1991). Post-war strip malls, despite being characterized by front-loading parking, are more similar in scale to traditional ‘main streets’ (Figure 1a) than plazas or shopping malls, averaging 1000 square feet per unit and 5–15 units per development.

A key characteristic of strip malls is the placement of parking, yet much of the literature does not differentiate between strip malls and traditional retail strips where stores face directly onto the public sidewalk (see for example, Simmons *et al.*, 1996; Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department 1977). The distinction is important, as city policies treat buildings with front-loaded parking differently from those without this feature. Retail strips without front surface parking lots will be referred to as ‘main street’ retail.

Methods

For this study, interviews with business owners in strip malls that have been targeted by city design policies as appropriate sites for redevelopment were used to evaluate the social benefits of strip malls. These strip malls, located in Toronto’s post-war suburban fringe, are contrasted with a strip mall redeveloped according to the mid-rise principles advocated in design policies. While strip malls line many Toronto arterials, this research specifically targets those facing potential redevelopment pressure, as demonstrated by:

- (1) Identification in the Official Plan as an *Avenue* to which new development should be directed (see Figure 2).

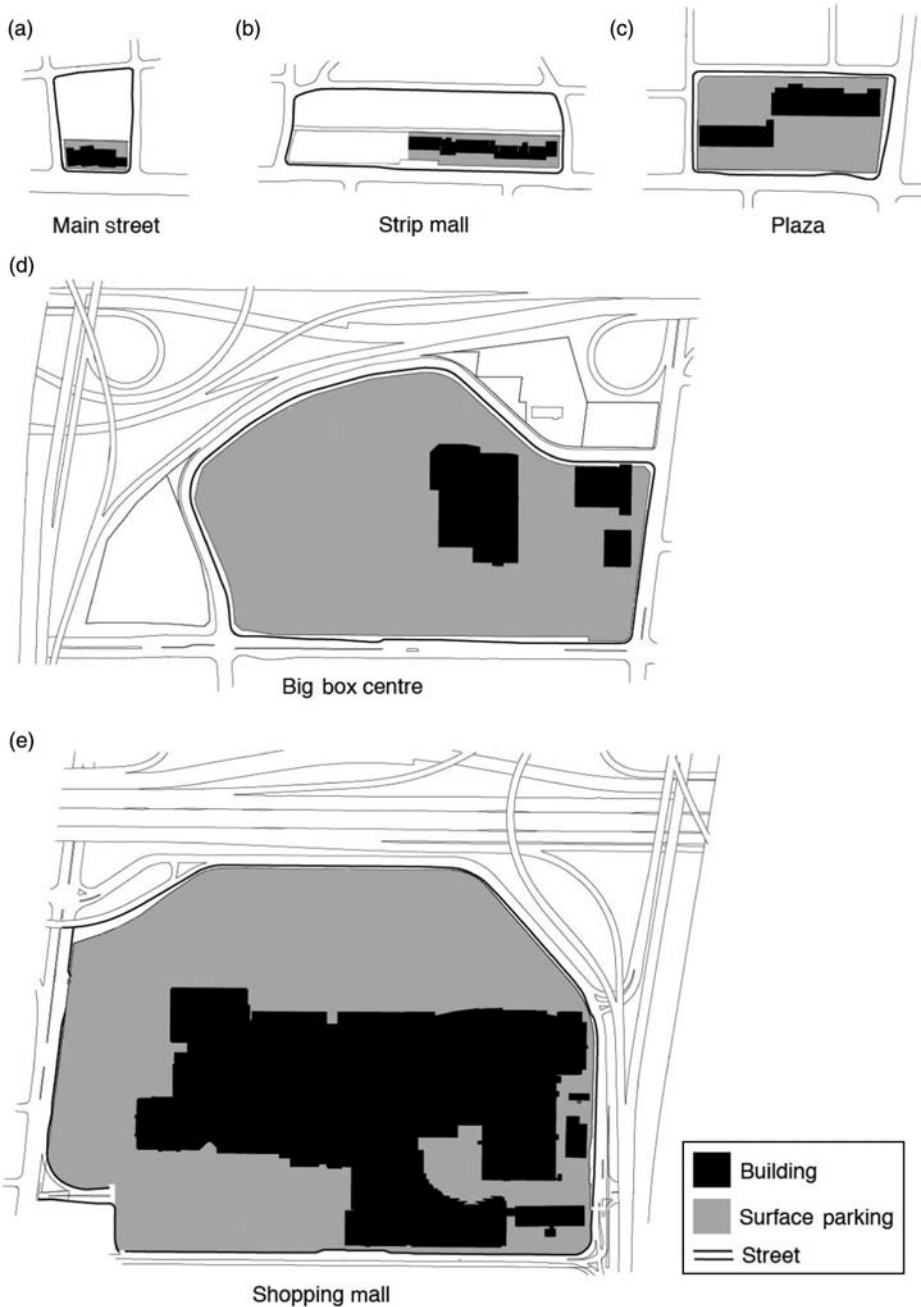


Figure 1. Scale comparison of retail forms

- (2) Their location near a recently constructed subway station.³
- (3) The recent redevelopment of existing strip malls in area.

Using these criteria, only four arterials were identified as experiencing potentially high redevelopment pressure—Dufferin Street, Sheppard Avenue, Wilson Avenue and Yonge Street—and were selected for preliminary study.⁴ Twenty strip malls located on these arterials, closest to existing subway stations, were assessed on

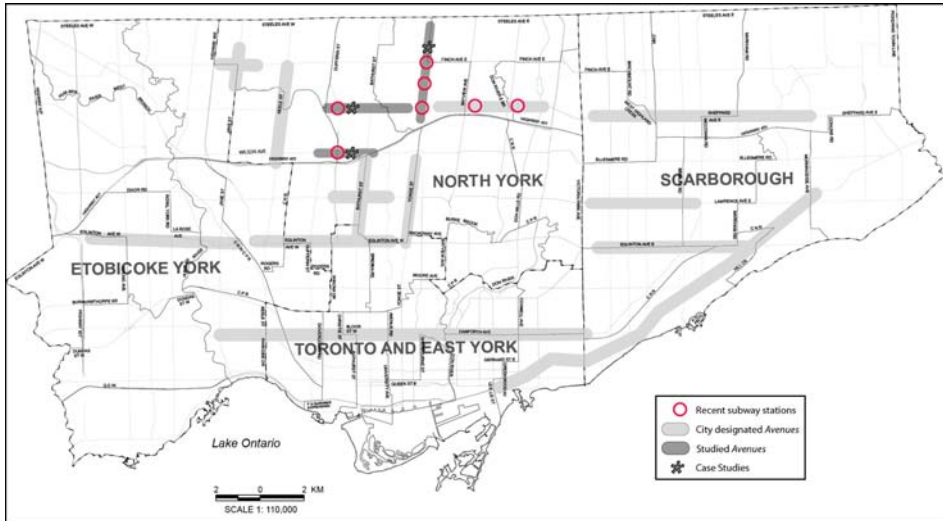


Figure 2. City of Toronto-designated Avenues and location of research sites (City of Toronto, 2002, altered by the author)

basic characteristics such as vacancy levels and number of non-local chains. These form a set of case studies of strip malls in inner-ring suburban areas.

Based on interviews with residential developers, three major arterials, Yonge Street, Wilson Avenue and Sheppard Street were identified as demonstrating the most development pressure and were selected for in-depth study through interviews with business owners. A cohesive development along each of the chosen streets was examined using several fieldwork methods, including:

- Semi-structured interviews with business owners in the strip. Every owner in the strip was asked to participate in a 20-minute interview in their shop, with the author taking notes on the discussion. Interviews were organized into several sections: (1) location choices and experiences; (2) strip design and parking; and (3) affordability and alternative retail locations. Of the 30 owners contacted, 14 volunteered to participate. Two attempts were made to contact all owners in the strip;
- Systematic photographic documentation of each strip, focusing on its built form, relationship to the street, signage and parking;
- Structured observation of pedestrian traffic, public transit levels and users. For each strip, observations were undertaken during weekday evenings and weekend day times.

Another aspect of this study was gauging the views of design staff towards the benefits of strip malls. Interviews with city staff in the Planning, Urban Design and Small Business Development departments were conducted, specifically with staff exhibiting a range of experiences. Interviewees included senior planners, development planners, urban designers and the director of the Small Business Development department. Finally, interviews with Toronto area retail and residential developers were undertaken. These developers were asked questions about the redevelopment potential of strip malls and barriers to small retail development. Interviews with both staff and developers were structured along several key themes, but questions were purposively left open-ended to elicit

discussion. The themes that emerged from these interviews with business owners, planning staff and developers were used as a framework for evaluating the case studies presented here.

The Changing Suburbs: A Brief History of North York

Political factors were instrumental in shaping the built form of Toronto's inner-ring suburbs. Widely regarded as an exemplary model of regional planning, the formation of the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto in 1954 had a significant impact on suburban growth and infrastructure development. Metro Toronto, an upper-level government that included the City of Toronto as well as the former municipalities of North York, East York and Scarborough, was instrumental in shifting resources and ensuring transit developed somewhat equally throughout the region. For example, suburbs benefited from the city's commercial tax base while public housing was dispersed throughout the region. Most importantly, Metro Toronto was able to restrain the growth of new suburbs outside the City of Toronto, resulting in a relatively more compact built form (Bourne, 1996). Unlike many other North American cities, unchecked suburban growth was limited in the Toronto area due to the strong regional council. The two-storey strip mall, with rental housing or commercial space above retail units, is a by-product of this planning regime. Furthermore, significant apartment development along arterial streets created pockets of relatively high residential density near strip mall developments.

Toronto is not unique in that its post-war suburbs now look remarkably different in both urban form and social structure from when they were first built. While the legacy of a post-war road network continues to influence the built form, these areas have become some of the most diverse in the city. Toronto has historically been a reception city for new immigrants to Canada but changes in the settlement patterns of both recent and established immigrants have had a significant impact on suburban demographics. While immigrant groups have traditionally settled in inner-city neighbourhoods, moving to the suburbs as they became more established, those arriving in Toronto in the 1970s and later often settled directly in outer areas (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003). With the movement of many established immigrant communities to suburban areas, questions have been raised about the endurance of inner-city ethnic neighbourhoods and the niche markets they often serve (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003). However, as will be shown here, suburban ethnic communities are continuing to exhibit vitality.

As of 2006, almost half of Toronto's population was born outside of Canada. The areas studied here have attracted specific ethnic communities that continue to grow. While the neighbourhoods addressed here reflect the rest of Toronto with regard to percentage of foreign-born residents (50% in the City of Toronto, compared with 48% in Wilson-Bathurst, 52% in Wilson-Sheppard, and 63% in Yonge-Finch), they differ in the concentration of visible minorities. For example, the Filipino population in the Bathurst-Wilson area is 14%, compared with a city average of 4%. Similarly, 9.4% of residents in the Yonge-Finch area identify as Arab/West Asian, compared with 2.4% in Toronto as a whole (City of Toronto, 2008). All the neighbourhoods discussed here showed an increase in the dominant visible majority between 2001 and 2006.

Finding Affordable Space: Economic Opportunities for Diverse Communities

Bathurst Street

The Bathurst-Wilson area became part of the core of Jewish settlement following World War II. While Jews had previously been predominantly concentrated in one inner-city neighbourhood, in the 1950s the community began to move northward, especially along the Bathurst Street corridor (Murdie & Teixeira, 2003). Today, local businesses are targeted at the Jewish and Filipino communities, which both have a strong presence in the area.

The retail uses in this area are incredibly diverse. This case study strip (see Figures 3 and 4) comprises 20 units, including low-level retail (convenience stores), specialty food shops (Filipino, Jewish and European bakeries), hair salons, fast food restaurants, and other specialty shops (plumbing supplies, glass/framing shop, and a tailor). Not limited to strictly commercial uses, this strip mall, as well as others in the area, contains religious uses. The Mizrahi Bayit, a synagogue and learning centre, fronts onto the back lane and the Drildzer Society, a Jewish benevolent society and synagogue (see Figure 4), is located next to a hair salon and takeout pizza shop. Other religious uses observed in strip malls include storefront churches, Filipino congregations (see Figure 5) and other Jewish religious centres. The variety of users is similarly reflected in the signage; this small strip contained signs in English, Hebrew, Russian and Filipino.

Although the strip malls studied could appear to be cohesive units, each unit is individually owned. Some businesses rent their space from a landlord while others are owner-operated. This system of ownership creates a significantly varied tenure system. Among businesses that rented a unit in the strip, their length of tenancy varied from 2 weeks to 2 years. The businesses that owned their space had been in the same location for 19 to 20 years. This creates the unique situation of having a stable business population interspersed with shorter-term tenancies. While the design staff interviewed expressed the belief that strip malls often have a quick turnover of businesses, this was not found to be true in this example, with over half the tenants located in the same location for longer than 10 years. The mix of tenancy options provides a retail environment that can suit a variety of business owners.



Figure 3. Wilson Street strip mall showing internal sidewalk, retail units and abutting parking



Figure 4. Wilson Street strip mall with religious uses (Drildzer Orthodox Jewish synagogue and society, right)



Figure 5. Wilson Street strip mall with religious uses (Ang Dating Daan, Filipino church, centre)

Despite the wide range of tenancies, both owners and renters identified affordability as a major issue in finding suitable business space. Renters generally expressed frustration at the difficulty in finding affordable retail space in the city and often stated that they had located here because there were no other viable options. For example, answers to the question “Why did you choose to locate here” included:

It was the only one I could afford.

[It was] the only one that would rent to me.

There was no other choice.

Two unit-owners stated that they had originally bought their unit in the 1970s because it was affordable and they were able to own their own space rather than rent. Owners who had been in the strip for as long as 20 years felt they would not be able to find affordable space elsewhere in the city.⁵ For the unit-owners in the

strip, relocation was not considered an option. The general sentiment was that unit-owners were more likely to close their business than relocate.

There are a variety of built form factors that contribute to the affordability of the retail space offered in strip malls. For the strips addressed here, the characteristics most frequently mentioned by developers and real estate professionals were the age and prestige of the units.⁶ The derisive comments about strip malls detailed above are related to one of their significant benefits: lower rents. Several developers expressed the belief that the combination of their age (over 30 years, in most cases) and their image as neglected or run-down led to them having low rents, despite low vacancy levels.

Another issue related to the availability of retail space for smaller businesses is the leasing policies of management firms. The owner of a tailoring shop on Wilson Avenue explained that she had tried to lease space in several shopping malls in the Greater Toronto Area. In each case, she was told by the management that the mall already had a tailor and would not rent space to a second. Retail management companies are concerned about determining an 'appropriate' retail mix, and have the power to enforce what they determine to be appropriate, making it difficult for independent businesses to obtain space (Shaw, 1985).⁷ Furthermore, major chains are often able to dictate leasing policy in centrally managed retail environments, through restrictive lease policies or 'right-of approval' clauses that permit major tenants veto power over new tenants (Schear & Sheehan, 1976). The threat of losing a major tenant is enough to discourage managers from renting space to businesses that may be seen as competitors (Schear & Shanahan, 1976, Shaw, 1985). With no central control, the problem of limiting competition is not evident in strip malls. This issue reinforces the complexity of determining access to retail space, making it a deeper problem than just affordability.

Interviews with business owners demonstrated that strip malls play an important role in the city that is not often evaluated when opportunities to redevelop are considered. Strip malls cater to a sector of the retail market that may not be able to compete in other locations because of both economic and structural issues. Affordability and a unique management structure create an environment that is especially conducive to independent businesses. Due to their somewhat marginal status, strip malls often contain a diversity of uses that add richness to the city.

The New Chinatown: Strip Malls as Ethnic Business Enclaves

Yonge Street

Yonge Street, one of North York's main arterials and connector to the downtown core, has been in use since the 1800s, but was home to farms and agricultural land as late as the 1950s. Rapid development in the 1960s resulted in a low-rise, low-density built form, including strip malls, that still exists in small pockets along the corridor. However, by the late 1970s there were concentrated efforts to develop a North York 'downtown' in order to relieve congestion in Toronto's central financial district and encourage businesses to disperse northwards (Relph, 1991). The majority of this development took the form of high-rise residential and commercial towers. Unlike green-field suburban city centres, development has been constricted by the existing street pattern, and is interspersed with older two and three-storey strip mall developments. New development along the Yonge

Street corridor has occurred at a phenomenal pace. High-rise buildings have quickly replaced most of the two-storey buildings that once lined the street. Even though development continues to push north, some small-scale strip malls still exist between Finch and Steeles Avenues. This case study discusses these strip malls located in an area with proven and significant development pressure.

High-rise condominiums are now an integral part of the residential landscape. The area also has substantial office and retail uses, as well as large-scale commuter surface parking lots with local and regional bus stations around Finch subway station. The strip mall chosen for further analysis has a structure similar to that of other strips, with second-storey commercial uses and parking adjacent to the street. This particular strip is distinguished by a deep colonnade that offers pedestrian protection for the internal sidewalk (see Figure 6). The space for surface parking is also deeper on this site, with two rows of perpendicular parking and a double-width access row. This strip has 15 units on the ground floor and no vacancies at the time of the survey. One of the most distinctive elements of this strip mall is the amount of signage. Toronto's staid sign by-laws seem to have had little impact on this stretch of Yonge Street.

Of the 15 units, 13 have signs in Persian and cater specifically to this community. In addition to several specialized food stores and bakeries (including one open 24 hours a day), the strip contains a Persian video store, currency exchange and travel agent. Regardless of their services, most shops contain signs in Persian. Even second-storey commercial uses had extensive signage (see Figure 7). This strip mall's role as a focal point for the Persian community was described extensively by the business owners who were interviewed.⁸ Many of those surveyed said that they expressly chose this location because of its reputation as a Persian centre. As one owner explained:

We didn't consider any other location because we are a very specialized store. It's not like we can move to Bathurst and Steeles [a predominantly Russian and Jewish neighbourhood]. We have to be in this location because we are a Persian video store.

When originally constructed, all units in this strip mall were held by one owner. In interviews, the current owners explained that the units were eventually sold off individually, resulting in multiple owners. All businesses in the strip that were surveyed rent their units and have been located there between 2 and 18 years.



Figure 6. Yonge Street strip mall with internal sidewalk and colonnade



Figure 7. Yonge Street Persian strip mall with multi-lingual exterior signage

While this form of ownership has resulted in several problems, mainly surrounding collective maintenance and snow clearance, there is also no mode for controlling what types of businesses locate there, other than by individual owners. While the strip mall mainly contains stores catering to the Persian community, the lack of central control means there are few limits on the types of uses that can occupy units. Evidenced by several tenants that would appear to be in conflict with other owners, such as a sex shop located next to a halal butcher, the unique ownership structure allows this diversity of businesses to flourish.

Interviews with business owners reiterated that this strip has a very different function from the 'bleak' view of strip malls constructed in the press. Rather than just providing space for marginal businesses, this strip mall attracts storeowners because of the unique mix of businesses and specialization. In this sense, the Yonge-Finch case study strip mall is more similar to urban ethnic shopping strips such as Chinatown or Little Korea than to the 'automobile-oriented uses' described by official city documents. Other business owners expressed this sentiment and even suggested that this particular strip was more expensive than other ones in the same area because of the high desirability created by its specialization. Strip malls nearby include Persian stores as well, but not in the same sort of intense concentration as found here. Interviews with owners strongly contradicted the assumption that only marginal uses locate in strip malls.

In this area, business owners also identified affordability as an issue in finding retail space. However, a major difference in this area compared with the others studied is how business owners felt about their location and its impact on their perception of affordability. Most of those surveyed in this area felt that it was difficult to find affordable space in the city. One long-time renter mentioned that he would not be able to find another unit elsewhere in the city if he was forced to move. Despite these pressures, owners rarely mentioned that their primary reason for moving to this location was affordability. As one owner remarked:

This place is more expensive than the strip mall down the street but it has so much more foot traffic, it is worth it.

The attractive location extends beyond the immediate strip mall. He went on to state that the location was also in high demand because of all the Persian stores located in the wider area.

The discussion of affordability with businesses owners in this strip represents just one of the major differences that can exist between strip malls, and should therefore draw attention to the difficulty in applying a single urban design strategy. Affordability of retail space was identified as a concern, although not to the same extent as for businesses in other strips. Not all strip malls exist only as space for marginal businesses. Some of these developments that are treated as redevelopment sites by city policies are thriving, and successfully attract vibrant businesses.

A Unique Mix of Elements: The Difficulty in Replicating Strip Mall Diversity

Sheppard Avenue

The retail space in strip malls is available to tenants who might otherwise not be able to find space elsewhere in the city, either because of the high rents associated with other types of retail space or due to specific barriers faced by small businesses that attempt to locate in newly constructed buildings. It is questionable as to

whether these types of benefits can be successfully replicated in different types of buildings, especially the mixed-use buildings advocated by city planners. This last case study contrasts strip malls with new mixed-use construction, highlighting some of the institutional and structural barriers that affect independent businesses with regard to choice of location.

Several of the strip malls around Downsview subway station on Sheppard Avenue have been redeveloped following the City of Toronto guidelines for mid-rise, mixed-use buildings with at-grade retail space (City of Toronto, 1993; see Figure 8). These buildings are often touted as models for arterial redevelopment (see, for example, see City of Toronto, n.d. *Mid-Rise Symposium*). A closer examination of these buildings reveals several important issues that should be central to the discussion of the viability of maintaining affordable and accessible space for independent businesses.

The residential developers interviewed expressed the belief that the Downsview-Sheppard area was considered a prime location for redevelopment due to the proximity of the recent subway extension. All three buildings in this case study area have ground floor commercial space, as required by city regulations, but here it is occupied exclusively by office or medical uses, with window blinds facing the sidewalk (see Figure 9).⁹ Although both commercial and retail uses are permitted on the ground floor, retailers seem to be facing significant obstacles. While there is the general sentiment amongst the city staff interviewed that retail uses will 'just come' when market conditions are favourable, mid-rise buildings on suburban arterials have not had success in this respect. The ownership and management structure of these units has significant implications for maintaining affordable and accessible retail space.

Retail units in new construction are dealt with mainly in two ways: either as individual condominium units or as leased units, managed by the residential condominium board associated with the upper residential units. Both of these management structures create serious barriers to small businesses. The most obvious one is the significant investment required for condominium units. This investment may be beyond the means of most retailers, regardless of market fluctuations or decreasing value as the building ages. With few independent retail businesses able to finance the purchase of a unit, the result is a high number of office uses or chain stores in mid-rise buildings.



Figure 8. Mid-rise redevelopment, Sheppard Avenue



Figure 9. Street level uses, Sheppard Avenue redevelopment

Furthermore, developers are increasingly challenging the requirement for ground floor retail space. Several condominium buildings in the area have converted their street level retail space to resident-only amenity uses such as exercise rooms. While these are in contravention of the zoning regulations, developers have argued that they are unable to fill these spaces with retail businesses. Whether these spaces in newly constructed buildings are accessible to strip mall tenants is debatable. It is clear, however, that there is a strong push from the development community to eliminate these spaces altogether.

The other common mixed-use model has rental retail units managed by the condominium board of the upper-floor residences. With this structure, the types of uses permitted on the ground floor are highly controlled by the board due to concerns about noise, parking, odours or other perceived conflicts. The planners interviewed about this have observed that condo boards would rather have retail units unoccupied—often achieved through setting artificially high lease rates—than deal with a possibly problematic use such as a restaurant. Similar to shopping centres, the retail uses in board-managed buildings are highly controlled (Schear & Sheehan, 1976). Design-oriented studies (such as Southworth & Lynch, 1974, pp. 600–602) have called for the unification of strips to improve their aesthetic quality. However, the lack of central control in strip malls has allowed a wide variety of businesses to flourish whereas newly constructed buildings have significant barriers, with little evidence that they are able to replicate the diversity of strip malls. While this is not to say that it is impossible to achieve similar uses in newly constructed buildings, it is important to draw attention to the factors that limit access to the types of buildings being proposed in place of strip malls.

The Planners' View: Evaluating Retail Accessibility

With strip malls providing affordable and accessible commercial space as well as operating as ethnic centres, it is evident that they have an important place in the urban hierarchy. However, aesthetically focused planning policies can be ill equipped to deal with the nuanced nature of strip malls. To understand how current planning documents address strip developments, the urban design guidelines for the case study areas were studied, as well as the city-wide design guidelines and master plans (City of Toronto, 1993, 2003a, 2003b, 2004).

One of the most important functions of strip malls is to provide affordable and accessible retail space. With management firms and condo boards often controlling the tenant mix in different types of retail, the issue of access to space becomes as important as affordability. While city plans state that proposals should seek to 'strengthen local retailing', there is no provision for evaluating access or affordability. Both urban designers and community planners interviewed had difficulty explaining how to evaluate this requirement, and none of the staff felt that maintaining affordable retail space should be evaluated or considered by city planners or designers. The designers interviewed were especially emphatic that ensuring retail space remained accessible was not part of their role as design professionals. Several community planners and even small business development staff used an economic reasoning: retail uses should not be regulated because 'the market will correct itself'. The desire to ensure that retail uses develop and the difficulties in regulating market conditions are thorny issues for planners and designers to address, much less resolve.

Although retail uses are often required at-grade in new developments, area planners do not address the ownership structure of new units, a key aspect of their affordability. There is no provision for determining whether retail units are being replaced with units of similar size, cost or ownership structure. The problem that arises from these new types of development is that new retail spaces are being created with fundamental barriers to access that the units they are replacing did not have. While strip malls often provide affordable retail units that are difficult to recreate in newly constructed buildings due to changes in land development practices, they are actively being targeted as potential redevelopment sites.

Fundamentally, the City of Toronto's design guidelines encourage the redevelopment of much of the city's existing strip malls. Despite the role they play in providing affordable retail space, design guidelines for the Bathurst and Wilson area state:

The urban intensification of Wilson Avenue requires greater emphasis on transit and pedestrian movement. This will require changes in the pattern of site access, parking and reorientation of buildings ...

The elimination of the existing built form is further reinforced through imagery. The guidelines present two diagrams illustrating the streetscape concept (see Figures 10 and 11); in the first image, Wilson Avenue is depicted with the current strip mall development plus the addition of consistently spaced trees and on-street parking. The second image, labelled 'Illustration of longer-term redevelopment', contains a double row of trees, on-street parking and a completely different urban form. In this scenario, all two-storey strip malls have been replaced with mid-rise buildings fronting directly on to the street. The streetscape recommendations are contingent on the assumption that there will be major changes to the built form. The design guidelines betray a superficial understanding of the role of the strip mall in providing affordable retail space, as well as the limitations of new construction in replacing these spaces. While the proposed scenarios may create a more pedestrian-oriented, aesthetically-pleasing

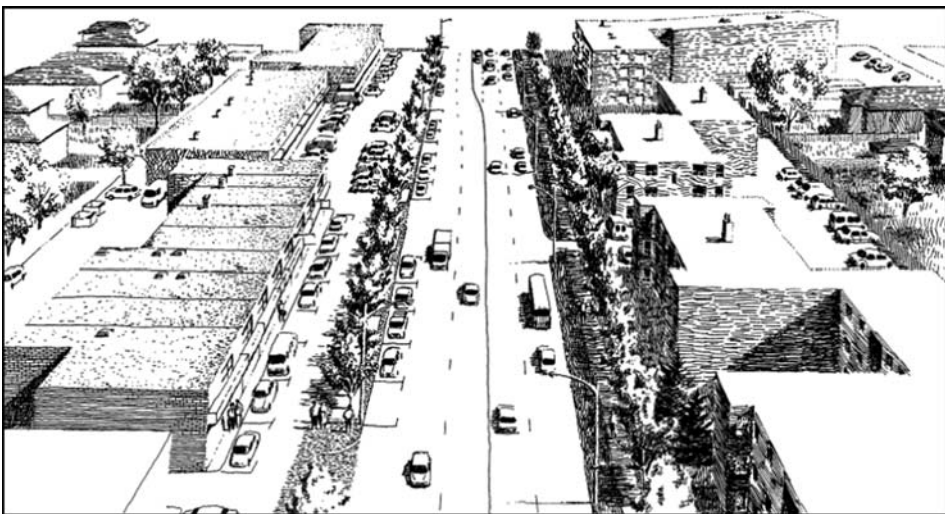


Figure 10. Wilson Avenue 'Streetscape Concept within the context of existing development' (City of Toronto 2004)

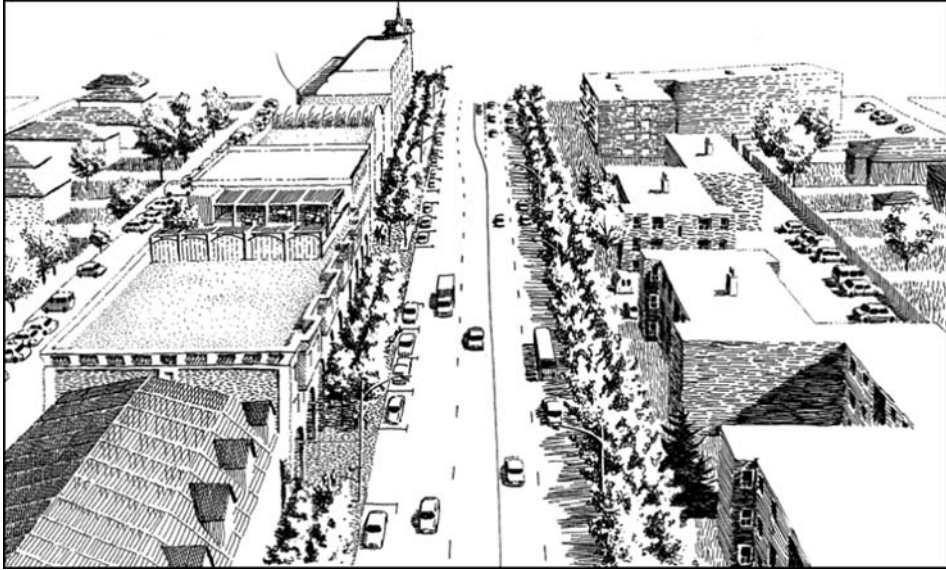


Figure 11. Wilson Avenue 'Illustration of longer term development' (City of Toronto 2004)

environment, there is a lack of attention to both the impacts on current owners of strip mall businesses as well as the longer-term issues with neglecting to plan for access to affordable commercial space.

Conclusions: Redevelopment Potential or Unique Spaces?

With major residential development pressure being felt in many areas of Toronto, planners have identified suburban arterials as the most appropriate sites for redevelopment. The general language of both design policies targeting arterial roads and city-wide policies is unable to address the nuanced aspects of strip malls. The diversity of users of these spaces cannot be tackled by planning policies that are primarily focused on built form and aesthetic coherence. In one design study, the case for redevelopment is based on the need for addressing the "conflicting and unattractive car-oriented uses—the used car lots and 'rundown' motels, the 'unkempt' strip malls" (City of Toronto, 2003b). Similarly, planning policies identify that arterials "characterized by one or two storey commercial buildings, vacant and underutilized lands and large areas of surface parking will be priorities" (City of Toronto, 2002, p. 2.2.3). Policies that assume the same redevelopment potential for two-storey commercial buildings as for vacant land points to a planning regime that is unable to deal with the social aspects of the built form.

It follows from the case studies that certain strip malls offer spaces to business owners and community groups that otherwise would not be able to access retail space. The conflict arises from the treatment of these spaces by urban design policies, namely the indiscriminate targeting of strip malls as sites for residential and mixed-use redevelopment, and their location in areas facing high development pressure. Similar to Curran's (2004) argument that there are instances of viable, industrial uses that would continue to operate if not forced out

by residential development pressure, the current uses of strip malls need to be evaluated *before* calling for their wide-ranging redevelopment. Design policies calling for the redevelopment of the strip malls profiled should be considered in the context of Rubin's (1979) exhortation that the negative effects of urban design policies too often fall unevenly.

While there is a huge diversity in strip malls—from the independent, varied types profiled here to strip malls that have higher vacancy rates and are less successful—current design policies treat all forms in the same manner. There is clear benefit in having some spaces in the city with fewer controls and barriers to access. A form of urban design that accommodates and encourages a diversity of uses and users is an ideal worth striving for.

Notes

1. Affordability is used here to refer to the cost of rental space for business owners, rather than for consumers.
2. Arterials are defined by the City of Toronto's road classification system (2002) as streets where traffic movement is a primary function, speed limits are between 40–60 km/hr and streets accommodate more than 1500 bus passengers per day. This definition of arterials is used by city policies to classify streets for the *Avenues* redevelopment strategy.
3. While the majority of Toronto's subway system was completed by the late 1970s, new stations were added in 1987 (North York Centre), 1996 (Downsview Station), and 2002 (Sheppard Line). These later stations are all in North York and noted in Figure 2.
4. Interviews with two residential developers confirmed development pressure along these arterials, especially for sites located adjacent to subway stations.
5. While not a comprehensive study, retail real estate professionals interviewed confirmed significantly lower lease rates for strip mall units compared to other retail forms. For example, in 2009 newly constructed strip mall units averaged \$18–24/square foot while street front units averaged \$20–90/square foot (Cushman & Wakefield, 2011). Although data were not available for the type of older construction discussed here, it was estimated that rates could be as low as \$9/square foot (Interview with Cushman & Wakefield representative, 2011).
6. Total leasable area is another important factor, as retail leases are usually assessed by the square foot. While most units constructed between 1950–1970s have similarly modest leasable areas, units in new mid-rise buildings have a much larger footprint.
7. A further issue that was not raised in discussion with business owners but was mentioned in interviews with retail developers is the requirement of 10-year leases in many larger shopping malls.
8. As those interviewed identified themselves and the community they served as 'Persian' rather than 'Iranian', this term has been retained in this discussion.
9. Toronto's 'Mixed Use Area' zoning allows for commercial, residential and institutional uses (City of Toronto, 2002). While retail uses are considered a subset of the commercial designation (which also includes the office designation), the *Avenues* Strategy is explicit in preferring retail uses for street-level units. The strip malls studied here had mainly retail ground floor uses, with office space on the second floor, if present.

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