

# Rapid Placemaking to Bring Back Main Street

A Pandemic Recovery Toolkit for Local Communities

MODULE 01:  
WHY THIS MATTERS



BRING  
BACK

MAIN  
STREET



Canadian  
Urban  
Institute

Institut  
Urbain du  
Canada

 Happy City

## About this Toolkit

Rapid Placemaking to Bring Back Main Street is part of the Bring Back Main Street project, a nationally-coordinated research and advocacy campaign committed to finding the best solutions to ensure our main streets recover from COVID-19 and emerge from the crisis more resilient than ever. Bring Back Main Street was developed in the public interest by the [Canadian Urban Institute](#), with the support of BIAs/BIDs, city-makers and researchers from across the country.

This toolkit is intended to support the connection between main street and community by advancing an equitable design process, highlighting programming opportunities and offering design ideas that together bring back main street.



## Introduction

**COVID-19 has radically altered the way humans gather, interact and even walk down the street. Globally, the heightened fear and awareness of this virus – and the vital physical distancing measures that followed – has touched nearly every aspect of people’s lives. In March, main streets across Canada transformed from bustling centres to vacant spaces in mere days.**

In recent months, people have found creative ways to use the main streets around them. Canadians are using streets that typically prioritize cars to: access essential jobs and services by foot and bike, to meet friends and neighbours, and share messages of hope and gratitude. And as reopenings occur, businesses and cities are expanding patios and public spaces into main streets across the country. Importantly, people are taking up main street space to grieve and protest the racist treatment of Black and Indigenous peoples within communities and by police.

Reallocating and reprogramming main street space—from parking or traffic to people and local businesses—is an essential part of a holistic pandemic recovery. Research indicates that the risk of COVID-19 transmission is significantly higher in indoor shared spaces than outdoors. This shift in how main streets are used can support the triple bottom line for health, local business and community.

While it may be less obvious, engaging communities in the process of reshaping and reimagining main streets in towns and cities across Canada is also vital to a holistic pandemic recovery. Research indicates that during lockdown, the most resilient Canadian main streets were those with strong community connections. During this same period, societal inequalities were laid bare, as vulnerable and marginalized communities faced the greatest impacts of COVID-19. As such, equitable engagement can support a just recovery, local business and community. Fundamentally, the success of main streets and communities is intertwined.

This toolkit was produced by Happy City (Mitchell Reardon, Emmay Clayton Jones, Harry Olson, Cheri Hessami, and Charles Montgomery) with input from many city-builders from across Canada. For more information, please contact Happy City at [info@thehappy.com](mailto:info@thehappy.com).

## An evolving response to COVID-19

The content for this toolkit is based on public health direction, research, stakeholder input, expert insight and emerging best practices in June and July 2020. We remain in the midst of a global pandemic. Accordingly, main street pandemic responses remain fluid.

The ideas presented in this toolkit have been developed with a focus on [the broad array of main streets](#) that are found across Canada. Recognizing that ongoing effects of COVID-19 can vary by region, local application of these ideas should be tailored to the direction of relevant public health authorities.

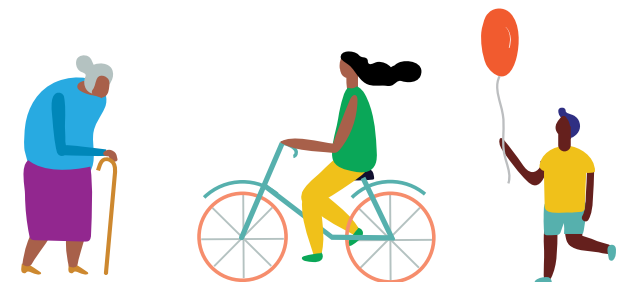
## Who should use this toolkit?

**Anyone who wants to see their main streets thrive in the short and long term as safe and inclusive places to connect, access services, shop and live.**

The Bring Back Main Street Rapid Placemaking Toolkit is intended for Business Improvement Areas/Districts and City staff tasked with retail and public realm recovery work, as well as interested community groups and residents.

## How should it be used?

Whether you're working on main street in a major city centre, a suburban plaza or small town, the activities and ideas here can support your local businesses and community. A just recovery is fundamental to creating a better normal. That's why activities, tips and questions to help you establish an inclusive process are spread throughout this toolkit. You know your main street best. With this in mind, the toolkit includes an array of programming ideas and design interventions for you to pick and choose what's right for you. As you scroll through, you'll all see space for you to write out your process and test your ideas. Feel free to download and markup the PDF, or print it out and write on it, in real life. There are more ideas to bring back main street than pages in this toolkit. We invite you to send in your ideas, and any enhancements you've made to ours.



# WHY THIS MATTERS

Four reasons a rapid placemaking response is vital for main streets and communities.

## Public Health

Public health officials continue to emphasize that physical distancing is a key measure to reduce the transmission risk of COVID-19. Main streets that offer adequate space for people to be, move and shop can provide safe access to shops and services. Importantly, open, slow main streets also provide essential workers with the space they require to move with ease.

## Local Economy

The local economy has been turned inside out. Many restaurants, bars and cafes are relying on outdoor seating and delivery to stay in business, while service and retail shops require room for queuing. By providing spaces for people to connect or simply exist in the same setting, main streets can serve as welcoming, inclusive and social spaces. Importantly, social trust has been shown to be a driver of economic performance. Connected communities are more likely to feel a sense of attachment and contribute to the growth of the local economy.



## Just Recovery

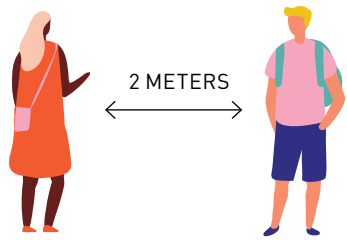
A just recovery from COVID-19 requires putting human needs first, every time. It means recognizing the harm main streets have caused to some. It requires recognizing workers' rights and compensating them accordingly.

## Social Connection

Social trust and social connections are the strongest predictor of the happiness of individuals and communities. Main streets offer a central gathering space within the heart of a town or community for residents to connect. Evidence shows that informal encounters with strangers boost people's happiness as much as contact with friends or family. As natural converging points within a community, main streets can provide an ideal space for both formal and informal social encounters. Not only do main streets provide access to goods and services, they also bring people together and provide space for members of the community to interact with each other.



## DEFINITIONS



### Physical Distancing

Physical distancing measures are the approaches we use to minimize physical contact with people around us, in order to limit the spread of COVID-19. Measures differ from place to place, and change over time, but can include: avoiding crowded places or non-essential travel or maintaining a two-metre separation from others outside your household or bubble.



### Social Inclusion

The process of making all groups of people in society feel valued and accepted for who they are. Social inclusion is an important determinant of health: people who can actively participate in society make more meaningful social connections and are both healthier and happier.



### Placemaking

Placemaking uses arts and culture as tools to animate public and private spaces, and to rejuvenate structures and streetscapes. It brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire and be inspired. The approach leverages a place's existing creative potential and connects arts and culture to larger community revitalization or development initiatives. Creative placemaking advances a shared community vision that honors community distinctiveness through interdisciplinary and cross-sector activities that engage an array of people who call the place home.



### Community

A community can be formed around shared location, cultural identity, interest, or any other quality.



### Public Engagement

Engagement is how you interact with the publics you aim to serve. It can take many forms -- including outreach, consultation, deliberation, dialogue, or activation -- but it's always a two-way street.



### Human-Centred Design

Human-centred design -- or design thinking-- strategies are ways to put real people at the centre of the creation of new ideas, projects and policies. Empathy is core to the design thinking process: it revolves around getting to know the needs, desires and questions of the people our work aims to serve. Human-centred design requires carefully defining a question or problem, quickly ideating and prototyping based on user input, and testing and iterating until arriving at a solution.

# Guiding Principles

A coordinated approach can be challenging anytime an array of actors are working together. Short timelines, emerging ideas and changing situations can further complicate coordination. These evidence-based wellbeing principles come together in a framework that can be used to inform processes, programming and interventions to bring back main streets. We used them to formulate the ideas below.

**You can use them to develop your own ideas, too!**

These principles are based on Happy City's framework. This iteration has been informed through reflections, practices and advice from Ali Grant, Dr. John Helliwell, Dr. Eva Kail, Robin Mazumder, Guillermo Penalosa, Jay Pitter, Gord Tulloch, Dasho Karma Ura, Hannah Wright, and the Bring Back Main Street Studio Participants (bios on pages 69 and 70). The framework also builds on the work of many others who are committed to building healthier, happier and more inclusive communities. Thank you.



# Our Process

## Onsite Assessment

The day after Phase 2 of British Columbia's restart took place, Happy City was out assessing public space along main streets, while maintaining physical distancing.

## Field Research

As public spaces and patios expanded in step with pandemic recovery guidelines, Happy City visited, documented and assessed efforts near our bases in Metro Vancouver and Toronto.



## Engaging People

We spoke with people at different patio and public space interventions to find out what they liked and what could be better. We also made note of who wasn't using these spaces.



## Speaking to Cities

As recovery efforts scaled up, we talked with cities across Metro Vancouver about interventions, engagement, programming and measures of success for rapid placemaking in the public realm.



## BIA+ BID Focus Group

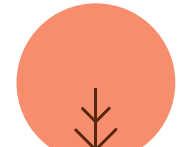
CUI convened representatives from BIAs and BIDs in Halifax, Moncton, Ottawa, Regina and Surrey to learn more about what was happening, who was involved, and what was still needed.

## Studio

A diverse group of tactical urbanists, city planners, urban designers and community builders from across Canada and beyond came together for a process and design studio to strengthen this toolkit.

## Desk Research

Our team relentlessly sought out emerging research and design solutions that could help bring back main streets.



# REALLOCATING STREET SPACE

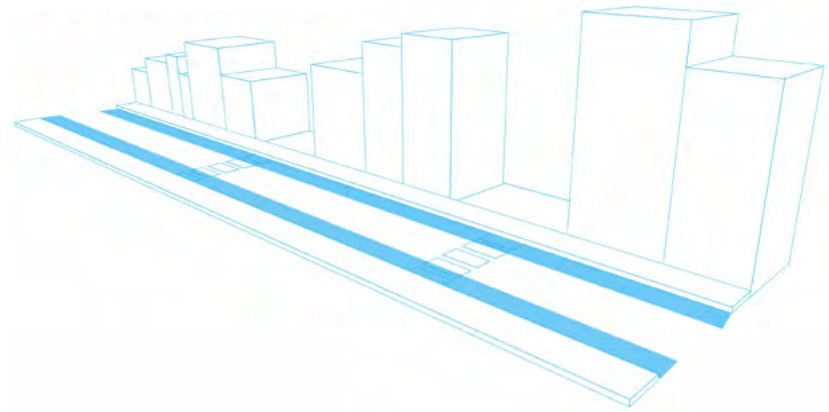
There are a number of different ways to reallocate space for community and business on main streets. Five of the most common and effective approaches are detailed on the following pages. These street allocation approaches provide different opportunities for placemaking.





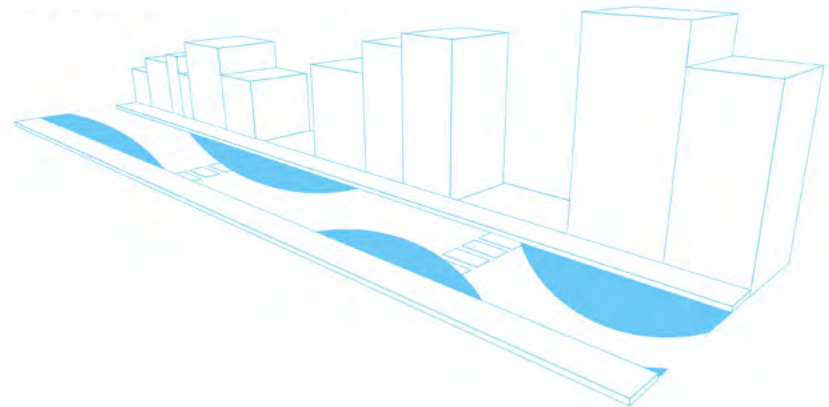
## Extended sidewalks

Space adjacent to sidewalks is reallocated from cars to active transportation or space to linger. Active transportation includes walking, rolling or cycling, while space to linger includes public space as well as private patio or commercial space. Depending on the layout of the street and needs of those who use it, street space can be reclaimed from parking or travel lanes. Ensure that accessible parking spaces are maintained, with adequate space for a person in a wheelchair to enter or exit their vehicle from the side.



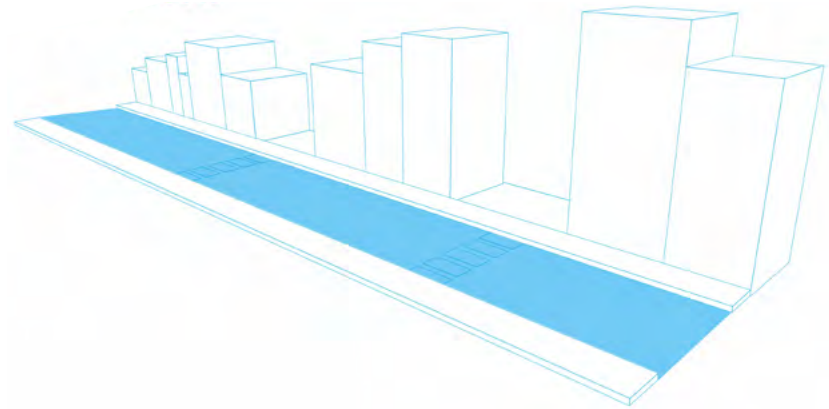
## Chicane

Space to linger is added on both sides of the street. Cars are still permitted, but their speed is reduced through design that uses space to linger to add curves to the street.



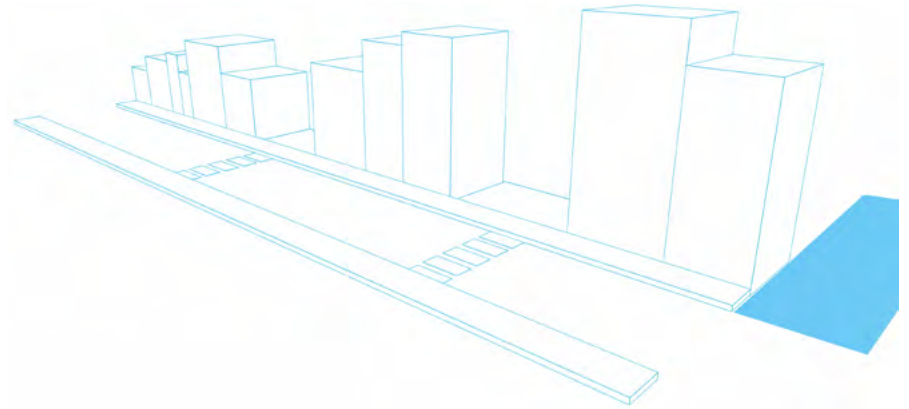
## Open street

The street is opened to people and closed to cars. Additional space for active transportation and lingering can extend across the width of the street. Even without cars, conflict between active transportation users and people lingering may occur. Consider dedicated space for cycling, marked with ground treatment.



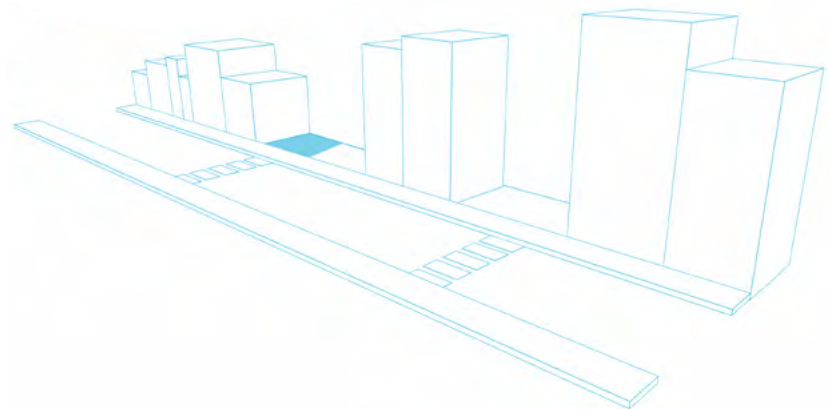
## Side street plaza

This approach focuses on lower traffic side streets that connect to main streets. These streets are opened to people as public spaces, plazas and patios, without altering existing main street layouts. This approach reduces adjacency between people and cars, which can create a more people-friendly environment. This approach may benefit from being located next to a restaurant, cafe or bar that can help to activate the space.



## Parking lot plaza

Small retail plazas also serve as main streets. In many cases, the street is dominated by fast-moving car traffic. Interventions on these streets could put people at risk. Here, excess parking lot space is well-suited for people friendly activations.



# THANK YOU

Thank you to CUI for the opportunity to work on the Bring Back Main Street project, and our Bring Back Main Street Partners. Thank you to all of the BIAs, BIDs and other organizations whose generous support made this project possible.

Thank you to the BIA and BID representatives from Halifax, Moncton, Ottawa, Regina and Surrey who participated in our focus group. Your insight helped establish the direction for this toolkit. See their contributions in the appendix.

Thank you to the array of thinkers and doers whose reflections, practices and advice have contributed to the development and evolution of the wellbeing framework used in this toolkit. For this iteration of guiding principles, this notably includes Ali Grant, Dr. John Helliwell, Dr. Eva Kail, Robin Mazumder, Guillermo Penalosa, Jay Pitter, Gord Tulloch, Dasho Karma Ura, Hannah Wright, and Bring Back Main Street Studio Participants.

We are especially grateful for our Bring Back Main Street Studio participants: Ajeev Bhatia, Ariana Holt, Cheryll Case, Elora Wilkinson, Harry Olson, Houssam Elokda, Karin Pasqua, Lior Steinberg, Paty Ríos, Renée Miles Rooijmans, Rob Leblanc, Sierra Tasi-Baker, TJ Maguire and Will Dunn. This session, full of thoughtful discussion, creative ideas and critical thinking guided our approach and generated excellent process, programming and design ideas. Learn more about these young and rising urban thinkers and doers, and check out their contributions, in their bios on pages 69 and 70.

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