Rapid Placemaking to Bring Back Main Street

A Pandemic Recovery Toolkit for Local Communities

BRING BACK ▶ MAIN STREET

Canadian Urban Institute — Institut Urbain du Canada

Happy City

PROCESS

In most cities, car-dominated streets take up nearly 30% of total land. This use of the public realm far exceeds what is allocated for parks and public spaces. Recognizing this disparity, and in dire need of more outdoor space for people to move and linger while maintaining physical distancing, cities are rapidly adjusting policies and practices to create more main street space for people.

A timely response is critical, but this does not mean that processes for implementation should be overlooked in favour of outcomes. Evidence is emerging from a number of cities that a rush to implement has resulted in more amenities in wealthier, whiter neighbourhoods, despite the fact that these areas tend to have greater access to open space. Conversely, neighbourhoods with lower household incomes, often home to higher shares of Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) people, and with less access to open space, are seeing fewer interventions. This risks reinforcing existing inequalities, and deepening urbanism's complicity in systemic racism and deprivation. At the same time, societies with high levels of inequality report lower levels of happiness than more equal ones. To support a just pandemic recovery, create a better normal for those who need it most, and boost society-wide wellbeing, it is critical that a fixation on design outcomes be replaced with a focus on effective processes.

Engaging People in Rapid Placemaking

Rapidly reallocating main street space – from parking or traffic to people and local businesses – is an essential part of holistic pandemic recovery. Tactical urbanism is often hailed as a way to test ideas and adjust based on feedback; however, in a time where outcomes are prioritized and municipal budgets are tight, community input risks falling to the wayside.

Without engagement and the opportunity to make adjustments, interventions actually risk diminishing wellbeing. A sense of agency directly contributes to people's feelings of meaning and belonging in the public realm. It also indirectly influences sociability, ease and resilience.

Process > **Outcome**

Case Study: Oakland

Oakland, California's "Slow Streets" project was focused on process, and it allowed for an outcome that was new and inclusive.

Image: City of Oakland

When the initiative first rolled out, it seemed like Oakland's communities of colour were skeptical. But the City's engagement team conducted another round of dialogue with groups that had been underrepresented the first time. The team realized that these residents wanted to ensure the mobility strategy prioritized safe access to essential services, rather than just prioritizing leisure. Oakland responded by rolling out the Essential Places program, which slows down streets that improve access to grocery stores, food distribution sites and COVID–19 testing sites.

By moving through the process of equitable engagement with genuine curiosity and openness to pivoting, Oakland's transportation department was able to create something new and inclusive.

Equitable Process

Working rapidly does not mean that corners must be cut. When framed as prototypes, rapid interventions can be understood as tools for continued community engagement. Once in place, you'll need to take an idea, shape it and reshape it by looking through the lenses of diverse experiences of place, equity and reconciliation. You can't do this alone. Placemaking projects that benefit community are most often shaped by community: Not just at the beginning or end, but in dialogue throughout. Viewing rapid interventions as part of a process, rather than an outcome, is especially valuable for bringing back main street. Reclaiming street space with rapidly implemented people-friendly solutions is vital for local recovery in the near-term. But imagine if these public spaces, patios and plazas were transformed into enduring fixtures embraced by main street communities across the country.

Equitable placemaking isn't actually about a physical output. It's about what you create while working through a process. This is more important now than ever. As people take up main street space to grieve and protest the racist treatment of Black and Indigenous peoples within communities and by police, urban planning and street design has been asked to grapple with inequitable foundations and systemic racism. Communities who've traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes frequently have less trust in decision-makers. This may not strike you surprising, and yet, marginalized communities continue to face limited engagement in 2020. Equitable placemaking, with space for real community input, is an important part of a just pandemic recovery.

Thank you Cheryll Case, Sierra Tasi Baker and Ajeev Bhatia for emphasizing these ideas during the BBMS Studio

WE ARE HERE

Pandemic
Spring 2020

Rapid Solutions
Summer/Fall 2020

Sustained Success
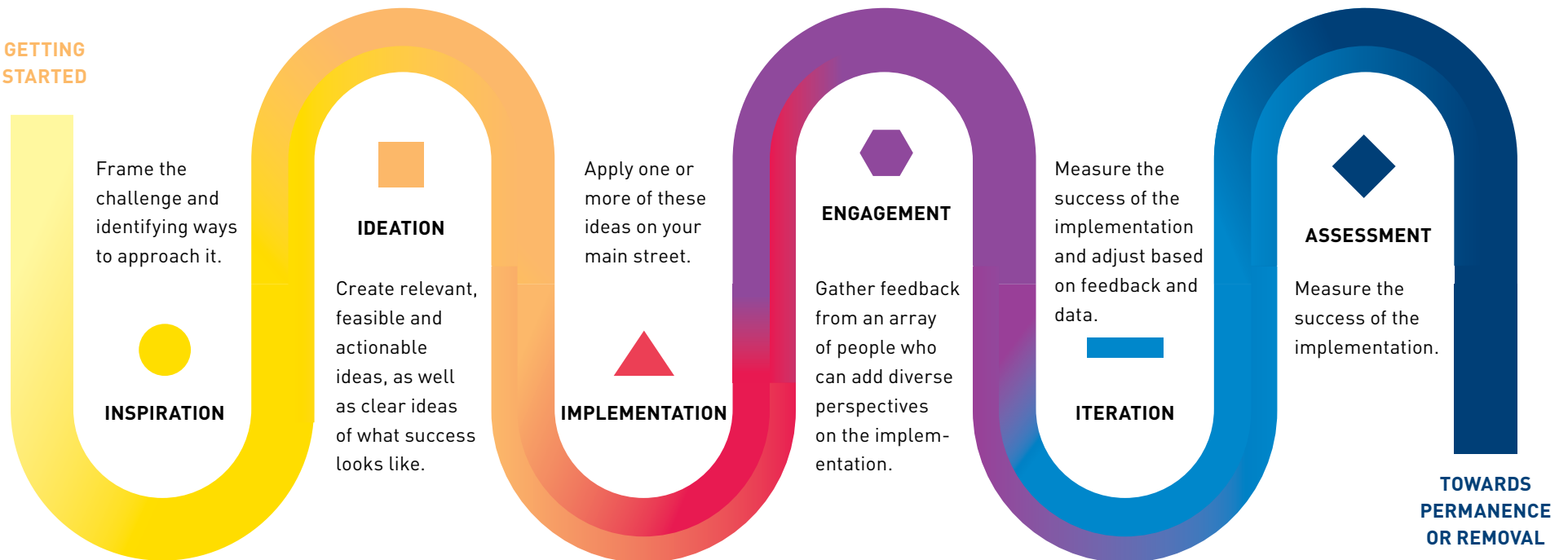Post–Vaccine

RAPID PLACEMAKING PROCESS

The rapid placemaking process is best framed as a series of overlapping stages, rather than a linear sequence of activities. We have identified five stages for this work: Inspiration, Implementation, Engagement, Iteration, and Assessment.

It is important to underline that getting things done quickly doesn't mean steps need to (or should) be skipped.

Engagement can happen in parallel with ideation, implementation or iteration, while assessment could begin as early as the implementation stage, to inform the iteration, and subsequently be re-assessed, or simply occur after iteration.

Once you've got an idea, try pulling it apart into steps (which may overlap) using the double loop below.

GETTING STARTED

Frame the challenge and identifying ways to approach it.

INSPIRATION

IDEATION

Create relevant, feasible and actionable ideas, as well as clear ideas of what success looks like.

Apply one or more of these ideas on your main street.

IMPLEMENTATION

ENGAGEMENT

Gather feedback from an array of people who can add diverse perspectives on the implementation.

Measure the success of the implementation and adjust based on feedback and data.

ITERATION

ASSESSMENT

Measure the success of the implementation.

TOWARDS PERMANENCE OR REMOVAL

WHOSE LAND ARE YOU ON?

If you haven't already, take the time to learn which Indigenous group(s)' land your project takes place on. Native-land.ca is a good place to start.

In Vancouver, for example, we are situated unceded territory of the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations. When we say these lands are unceded, we mean they were never signed or given away. They were stolen.

The events you host should begin with an Indigenous land acknowledgement. But this is just a starting place. Each city and town across Canada has been shaped by colonialism and systemic violence against and exclusion of Indigenous people. This violence continues today. We must take responsibility for the exclusionary ways in which decisions about cities are made. This applies to even the smallest pieces of land, as we practice placemaking and tactical urbanism.

Decolonizing your tactical work must go beyond merely including Indigenous groups in consultation. It is an ongoing process to reconciling relationships, which involves questioning the narratives and hierarchies that inform your beliefs about who and what make a space useful, utilized, beautiful, and safe. It also involves actions including:
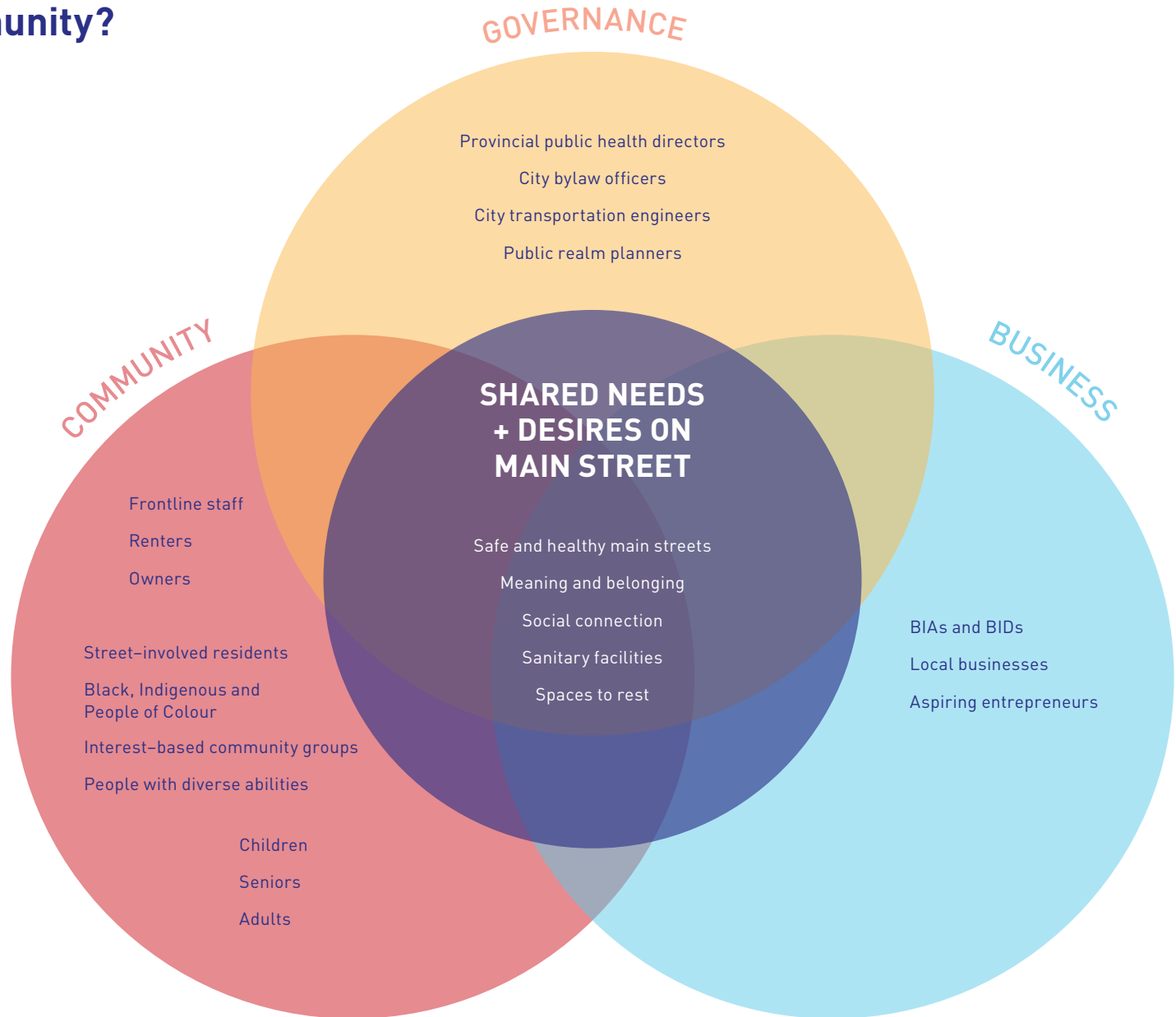
• Returning land control to Indigenous communities

• Moving beyond consultation with Indigenous people, toward redistributing real decision-making power to those who have been excluded for too long

• Creating spaces for Indigenous people to share work, stories, and experiences

• Creating space for Indigenous gatherings

• Renaming spaces that have names connected to colonial legacies

• Paying Indigenous consultants and collaborators to direct design and programming

Thank you Sierra Tasi Baker for sharing these teachings during the BBMS Studio

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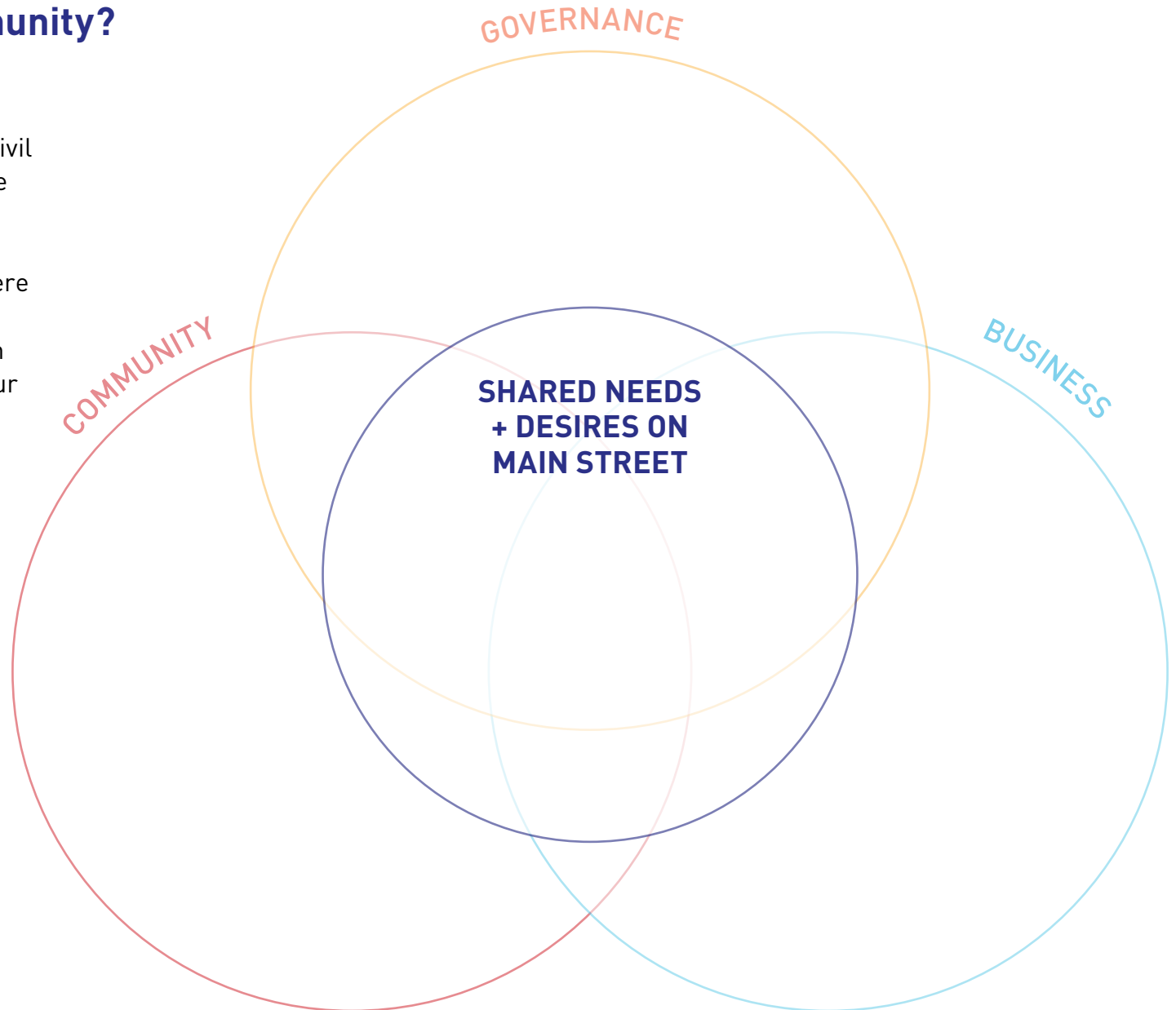
ACTIVITY 01 –
Who is in your community?

No matter how long you've lived, worked, or hung out in a neighbourhood, you've only seen it from your own perspective. That's why it's essential to start every project by mapping out the people and organizations that exist in your community. This process will help you identify the right people to speak with to ensure your work is inclusive and in line with community priorities.

GOVERNANCE

Provincial public health directors

City bylaw officers

City transportation engineers

Public realm planners

COMMUNITY

BUSINESS

SHARED NEEDS + DESIRES ON MAIN STREET

Safe and healthy main streets

Meaning and belonging

Social connection

Sanitary facilities

Spaces to rest

Frontline staff

Renters

Owners

Street–involved residents

Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

Interest–based community groups

People with diverse abilities

Children

Seniors

Adults

BIAs and BIDs

Local businesses

Aspiring entrepreneurs

ACTIVITY 01
Who is in your community?

Use this template to identify communities, businesses and civil administration that have a stake one your main street. Ask yourself: Where do their needs, desires and goals overlap? Where do they diverge? Many people have identities that overlap with multiple descriptions used in our non-exhaustive list below. Consider the way these intertwined elements may influence the way they feel on main street.

GOVERNANCE

COMMUNITY

BUSINESS

**SHARED NEEDS
+ DESIRES ON
MAIN STREET**

ACTIVITY 02
Clarifying your goals

Rarely is an urban planning decision good for all: access to main street space has always been contested. At any given time, most streets host an ecosystem of stakeholders and uses. An activation likely won't serve everyone in your community. Instead of making something that aims to serve everyone, identify a specific problem, experienced by a specific group or groups.

For this exercise, we asked, "How could this idea connect seniors and children while maintaining social distancing?"

WANTS

Space to socialize

Maintain physical distancing

Sanitary facilities

Activities to observe

GOAL

Connect seniors and children on main street while maintaining social distancing

PRINCIPLES

Ensure the health and safety of everyone on main street

Create main streets that are welcoming for all ages

Support intergenerational engagement

AUDIENCE

Seniors and children

ACTIVITY 02
Clarifying your goals

Use this template to define your goal, the communities your project will serve, the wants that your audiences have, and the principles that guide your work or organization.

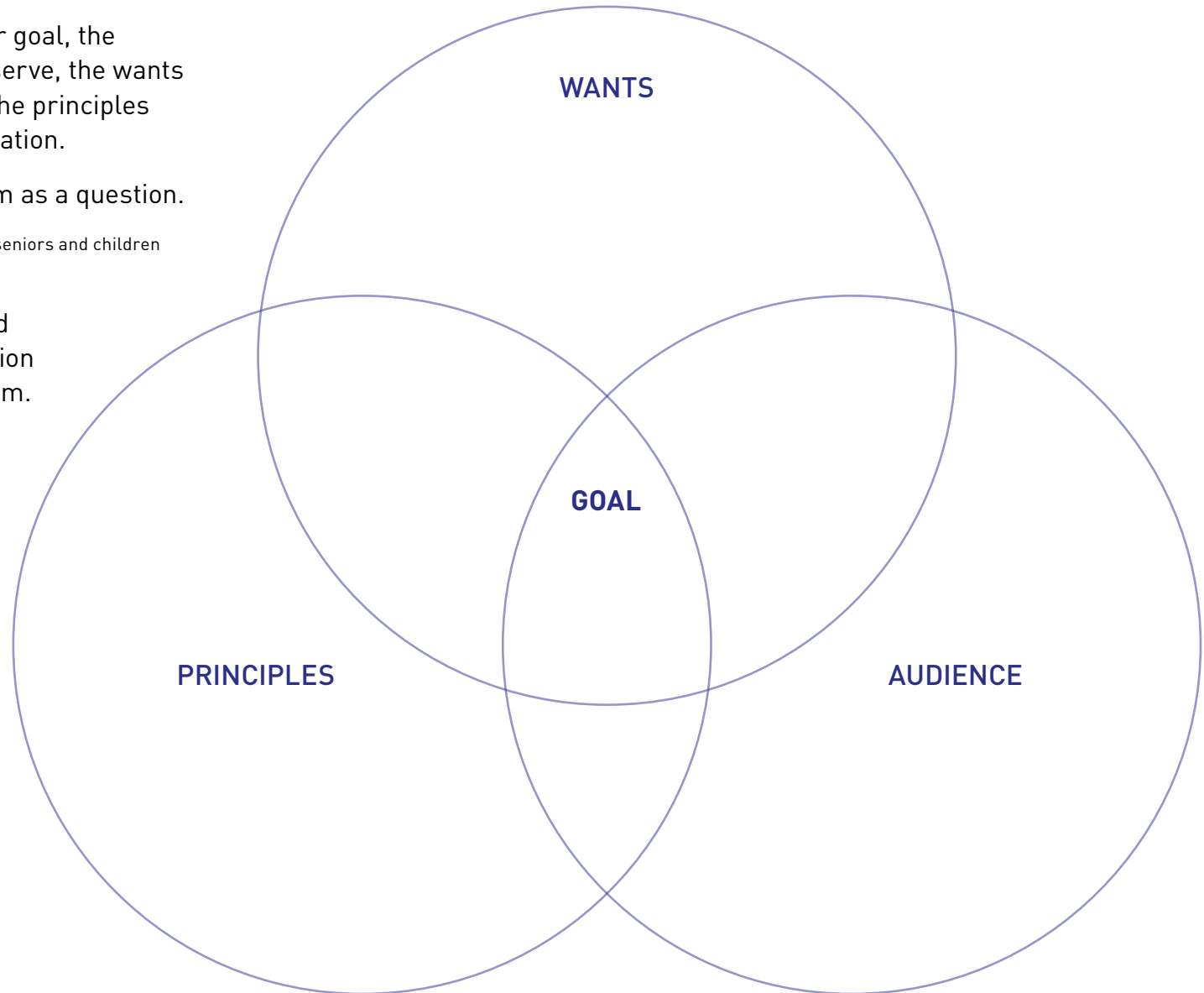Start by proposing your problem as a question.

- For example: "How could this idea connect seniors and children while maintaining social distancing?"

Next, troubleshoot the idea, and strengthen your problem question by filling in the following diagram. Ask yourself:

- Who is the community I'm aiming to serve?

- Do I understand the needs and desires of the communities I'm hoping to serve?

- What principles should underline the work? (for example, will your project support public health, local economy, and social inclusion?)

Finally, use the information you've developed by answering these questions to define a clear goal for your project.

WANTS

GOAL

PRINCIPLES

AUDIENCE

This toolkit is intended to help bring back main streets hit hard by the pandemic. To do so, solutions that support business and community are important, but solutions that do both are fundamental. The most resilient main streets are the ones where both communities and businesses feel a connection. The following activity is intended to help you identify how an idea works for businesses, how it works for communities, and most importantly, how it can work to support both. We looked at the toolkit, and potential beneficiaries, for this sample activity.

BUSINESS

Creative ways to safely attract and retain patrons

New and broader range of clientele

Competitive advantage over big box stores

Expanded patios and retail space

FOR BOTH

Interesting programming that draws people to main street

Design solutions that create a welcoming public realm for everyone on main street, and enhance the experience for business patrons

Stronger main street identity

Enhanced connection between business and community

More resilient main street

Exposure to new culture and ideas

COMMUNITY

More inclusive main street

Opportunity to showcase identities

Literal and figurative space to exist on main street

Support for healthier lifestyles

ACTIVITY 03
Connecting business and community to bring back main street

For our example, we look at how this toolkit benefits businesses, community and both. First, we consider how the toolkit benefits businesses and communities. In doing so, we identify aspects that benefit both. These are defined in the space where the two circles overlap.

BUSINESS   FOR BOTH   COMMUNITY
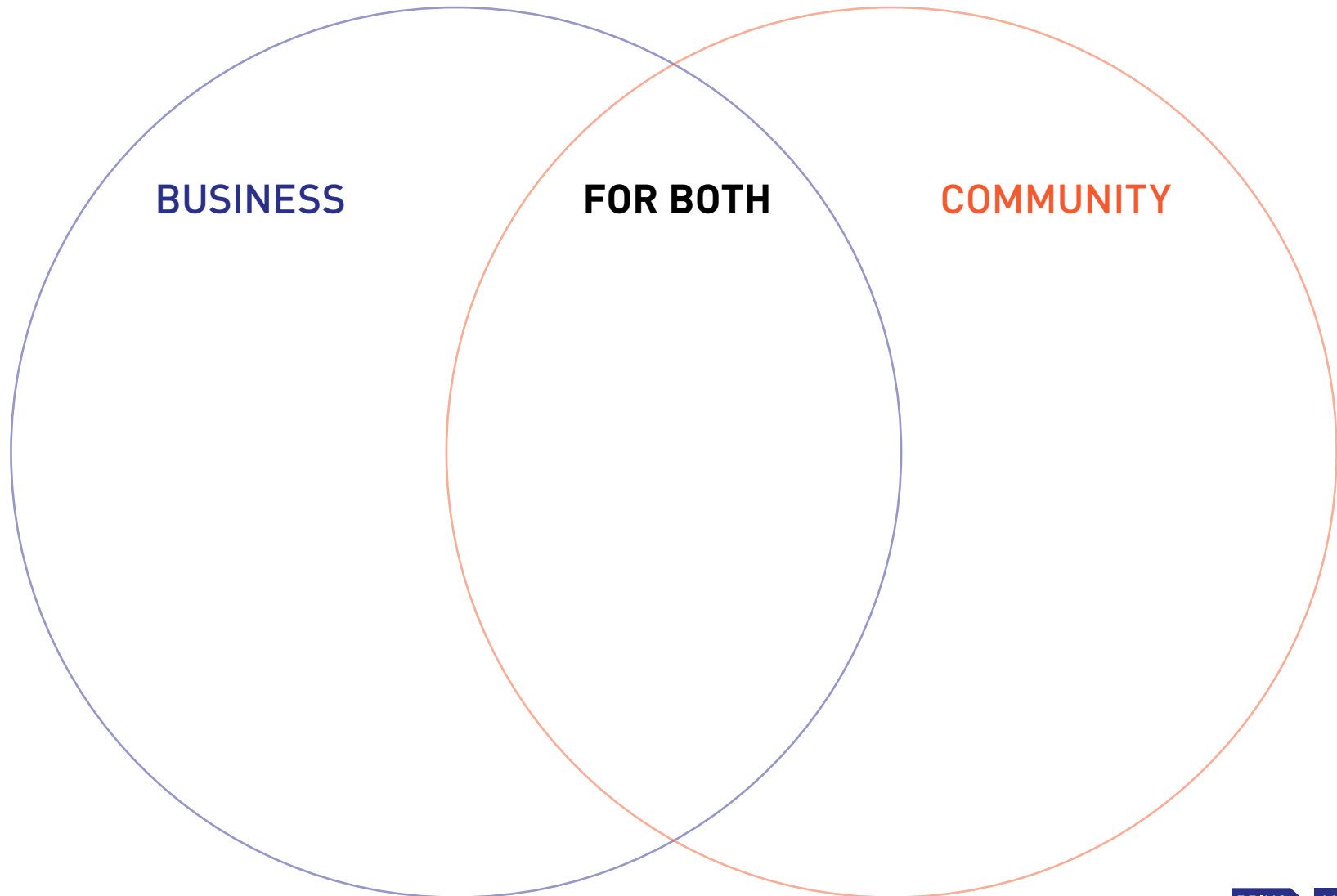
ASSESSING THE OUTCOMES

Your programming and interventions are in place! Now what? It's important to assess the outcomes of these interventions to ensure they are working well for the community. Each neighbourhood will have different priorities and desired outcomes. To measure what matters for your main street, define what success looks like, then determine ways to measure it, and set a timeline for reviewing the outcomes.

When defining success, consider both qualitative and quantitative measures. Metrics, or measures for success, can vary widely depending on the type of programming or intervention being undertaken. A number of potential measures are detailed in the Program Guide and Intervention Guide, later in this toolkit. These can include:

People's Feedback: Community and business feedback is the foundation on which the success of programming and interventions can be determined.

Services and Material Sourcing Methods: Have your procurement policies contributed to a just pandemic recovery? Have you considered procurement from local sources or marginalized groups?

Public life studies: Consider wellbeing intercepts and behavioural observations to gain a better understanding of how people are feeling and acting at your interventions. For more details and resources on conducting public life studies, consider reaching out to Happy City.

Extent of engagement: Determine who you have reached, and who you have not reached.

Business outcomes: Are local businesses benefiting from your efforts? Privacy concerns can limit quantifiable analysis, as can pre-determined views about re-allocating parking, but conversations with business owners can provide a deeper understanding of how the changes are influencing your main street economy.

Safety: Are your interventions aligned with local public health directives? Are people able to participate safely and in comfort?

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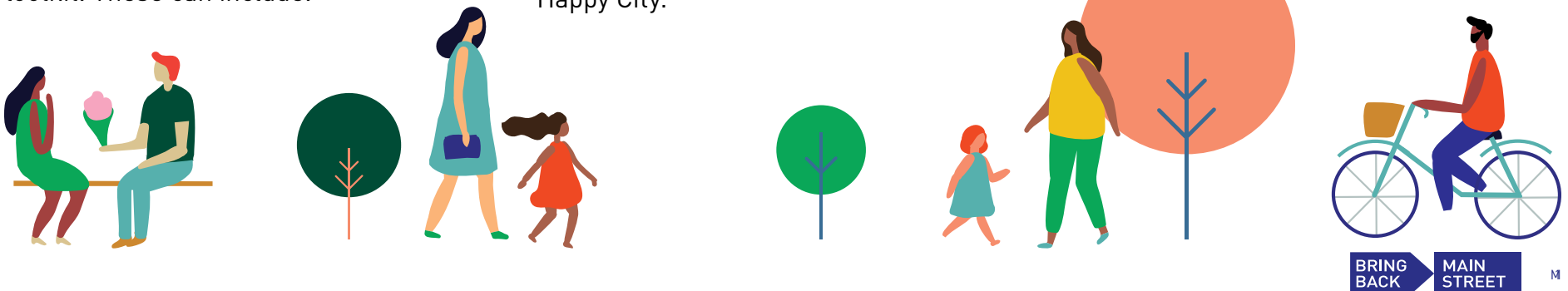
ASSESSING THE OUTCOMES

Wellbeing Intercepts

Multiple studies show a strong relationship between the emotions of residents and long-term success of streets and cities. Here, you can ask people a series of questions about how they feel in the moment. Multiple choice questions can be tailored to gain an understanding of perceptions of welcomeness, safety, social interaction, trust and more. This will allow you to understand the influences that interventions and programming have on the people who are on main street. To ensure an effective response rate, design your intercepts to be completed in 3 minutes or less.

"If you were to lose your wallet in this spot today, how likely do you think it would be for a stranger to return it to you?"

– Sample subjective wellbeing question to assess trust

Behavioural Observation

To understand the behavioural effects of main street interventions, observation can be a helpful approach to determine who is using each space and what they are doing while there. While observing space users and activities is insightful, it's also important to determine who is not using the space and what is not taking place there. People may notice that someone is observing, and shift from natural behaviour to performing, or altered behaviour. Accordingly, consider conducting observation from locations where people watching may be perceived as natural, such as patios, or more discrete public spaces. Depending on the nature of your programming or intervention, consider gathering data on activities that people lingering at the site are engaged in, as well as data on mode and frequency of people moving through. Bring Back Main Street has developed a Pedestrian Counting Tool to facilitate these efforts.

There are a number of ways to determine if the programming or interventions you've conducted are working for the communities and businesses on your main street. The vital steps are to a) determine if it is working b) determine who it is working for and c) understand how you can better meet the needs of people who aren't feeling welcome on main street, yet.

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.
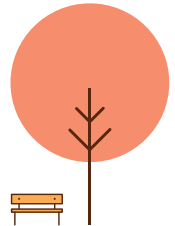
Speaking to Cities

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.

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.

Desk Research

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

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.

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.

Overview

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@thehappycity.com.

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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.

A main street is only as powerful as its community.

Thank you Cheryll Case and Harry Olson for advancing this idea during the BBMS Studio
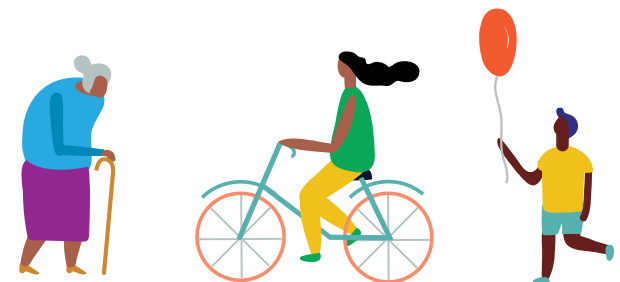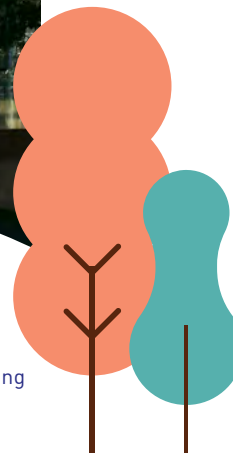
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THANK YOU

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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