



## Background

### Context

- McCauley is a vibrant, walkable neighbourhood in Edmonton's inner city. However, it experiences dwindling economic opportunities, deteriorating infrastructure, and growing social challenges.
- In particular, one strip mall, the Piazza, attracted significant drug activity and violence.
- In response, the Edmonton Community Development Company (ECDC), an organization that seeks to promote sustainable development, partnered with residents to create the McCauley Development Cooperative (MDC) to buy the strip mall and repurpose it to become a family-oriented community hub.
- Crime, substance use, and violence reduce residents' sense of safety and social cohesion, which, in turn, is associated with poorer health outcomes.<sup>1</sup>
- Placemaking is the act of transforming public spaces to strengthen the connections between people and the places where they live, work, and play.<sup>2</sup>
- Placemaking initiatives have been an effective tool for communities to foster social cohesion, sense of community, and safety.<sup>2</sup>

### Research Question

- *What have been the immediate effects of the Edmonton Community Development Company's placemaking initiative on residents' and business owners' sense of community belonging and safety in the neighbourhood of McCauley?*

### Methods

- Using a qualitative description design, 22 residents and local business owners were interviewed regarding their lived experiences before and amid these repurposing efforts. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

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## Results

### Before

- Before the MDC bought the strip mall, it housed a coffee shop, a pharmacy, and a sports betting bar.
- The gambling services, illegal goods trading, and drug dealing enabled by these entities "took advantage of the most vulnerable people" and "facilitated a lot of criminal transactions."
- These factors contributed to an atmosphere in the neighbourhood that was neither safe nor welcoming, with residents commenting that it was "very ill at ease" and "just enough to be uncomfortable."
- These sentiments compounded into helplessness and frustration when previous efforts to remove these businesses "couldn't get anything to happen," alienating residents from the community in which they live, work, and play.

**"We did everything. We talked to the police, we talked to different organizations, we just couldn't get anything to happen."**

—McCauley Business Owner



The Piazza before the MDC's purchase<sup>3</sup>

**"Just being able to walk around your own neighborhood, that feels like it could be a nice thing to just do."**

—McCauley Resident



The Piazza after the MDC's purchase<sup>4</sup>

### Positives

- After the MDC bought the strip mall, the problematic businesses were shut down and replaced with new tenants who share a similar vision of uplifting the neighbourhood.
- The impacts of these efforts were felt immediately, with residents and business owners witnessing a new, "vibrant" atmosphere that was "more family-friendly, especially with the park" where "more kids [were] around" than before.
- The safety brought about by the MDC's efforts had residents physically reconnecting with their neighbourhood and cultivating a renewed sense of belonging; as one resident put it, "just being able to walk around your own neighbourhood, that feels like it could be a nice thing to just do."
- Residents and business owners shared a newfound optimism towards their community and its potential, with a "sense of momentum that things are getting better or going to get better."

### Challenges

- One of the shut-down businesses reopened near the Piazza in a building that the MDC does not own, leaving the MDC powerless. As a result, residents find that the issues and precarious activities that came with this business are "coming back over again."
- Residents report that these activities are not at the same degree as before. Still, their disappointment highlights the ongoing nature of the challenges that come with placemaking and community economic development.
- The MDC has faced financial strain and slow renovations that fail to attract "higher quality tenants." As put simply by a business owner and member of the MDC, "I don't think we anticipated that level of vacancy," speaking to the challenge of balancing the need for improvements with the financial constraints of a community-owned venture.

**"I don't think we anticipated that level of vacancy"**

—McCauley Business Owner and MDC member

## Discussion

- Similar to placemaking efforts done by other CDCs in North America, the ECDC's Piazza takeover and renovation has, so far, enhanced the levels of safety and social cohesion in the neighbourhood of McCauley.<sup>2</sup>
- With time, we hope to understand the longer-term impact of the ECDC's placemaking initiative on residents' sense of safety and cohesion, their behaviours, and, ultimately, their health.
- Given the link between community health outcomes and neighbourhood safety and social cohesion, we seek to gain insight regarding the potential of placemaking initiatives as health promotion initiatives and the role CDCs can play in this space in tandem with community revitalization.<sup>5</sup>
- We are also interested in understanding the specific mechanism by which placemaking initiatives that enhance community safety and social cohesion impact residents' health in McCauley and any population-specific nuances that may exist among highlighted sub-groups in the literature: youth, parents, and older adults.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup>

## References

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