

# Downtown Edmonton Streetfront Retail Report 2023



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# Executive Summary

## KEY INSIGHTS

This report is an examination of the streetfront retail landscape in downtown Edmonton, revealing a streetfront retail occupancy rate of 66% within the Edmonton Downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA).

A comparative analysis with other cities of similar size can be found on page 14, highlighting both the complexities of direct comparisons and emphasizing the uniqueness of Edmonton's downtown landscape.

The report also underscores the economic importance of the downtown area and presents a series of insights that can foster future retail revitalization.

This report specifically examines the state of streetfront retail vacancies in downtown Edmonton and does not serve as a safety analysis or a policy review.

## KEY STRATEGIES INCLUDE:

- **Bold steps for the beautification of our urban core** (page 16)
- **Shifting the understanding of a downtown's purpose** (page 17)
- **Equitable investment to support city-wide growth** (page 18)
- **Innovative residential-conversion policies** (page 19)
- **People-centric planning for enjoyable spaces** (page 20)
- **Rethinking what retail can be** (page 21)

By drawing on evidence from other cities, as well as local success stories, this report shows a variety of ways to rejuvenate Edmonton's urban core. It also calls for consistent and transparent data collection in order to monitor changes year over year, as this will contribute to the ultimate goal of a lively, sustainable, and economically robust downtown.

## ORGANIZATION SUPPORTERS:



# Introduction

## OVERVIEW

Over the last decade, city life in North America has been upended. Advancements in technology, changes in consumer behaviour, and the COVID-19 pandemic have all done their part to fundamentally change the fabric of city life—and no area has been affected more than the downtown. It is critical that city planners, business owners, and community stakeholders understand the state of their downtown retail environment in order to plan for its future success. The Centre for Cities and Communities at the University of Alberta, with funding from the City of Edmonton's Downtown Vibrancy Fund, has embarked on this comprehensive study analyzing streetfront retail vacancies in its downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA).

This report presents an in-depth analysis of streetfront retail units within the downtown BIA, a snapshot of the state of streetfront retail vacancies, and insights into the types of businesses that are thriving and those that are facing challenges. By drawing on both academic insights and applied data, this report presents a holistic perspective on challenges that are deep and multifaceted. Like many cities around the world, Edmonton is now adjusting to a new retail reality. By establishing a baseline understanding of retail health in Edmonton's downtown BIA, this report aspires to be a valuable resource for policy initiatives and future planning.

## THE RETAIL LANDSCAPE IN EDMONTON

Much of Edmonton's downtown core was built between 1950 and 1990, when glamorous office towers, restaurants, and distribution retailers were seen as the fabric of what made an effective downtown. While there was some residential development, the majority of housing was located outside of downtown. Because of this existing infrastructure, as well as fundamental shifts in technology and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and hybrid work, residential development remains the most consistent and concrete solution to the problem of retail vacancies downtown.

As a society, we need to look at using retail spaces differently. For most of the 20th century, 150,000 sq/ft department stores were the norm, and the average retail bay in 1990 was 5,000 sq/ft. In 2023, however, that average is closer to 1,200 sq/ft, and even companies like Walmart are looking at new concepts to engage with consumers on a smaller scale.<sup>1,2</sup> Consumer behaviour has fundamentally changed, with shoppers now only willing to venture into a physical environment if the experience is a good one.

At the same time, brick-and-mortar retail is growing—it's just that the type of retail has changed. Switching gears away from distribution retail is difficult, and many cities across North America are facing large-scale retail vacancies in their

## Three ways to read this report:

### 5 MINUTES

For a quick overview, read the executive summary, peruse the maps and charts, and review the key takeaways from each of the six insights.

### 30 MINUTES

For a deeper dive, also take a look at the highlighted sections within the report. These areas, coloured in yellow, will provide a more robust understanding of the research and findings.

### 1 HOUR

For a comprehensive understanding, read the full report, cover to cover. This includes an in-depth examination of downtown Edmonton's retail makeup, comparisons with other Canadian cities, and potential ways to foster growth and sustainability in Edmonton's downtown.

downtown cores. To adapt to changing times, cities need to be intentional with how they pivot and breathe new life into their downtowns.

Such a shift in the retail space was overdue, but it's here now. And there is plenty of opportunity and good news ahead.

# What Is This Report?

## THE STUDY

This report presents an in-depth analysis of the current vacancy landscape in streetfront retail in downtown Edmonton, drawing upon a year of data and following the boundaries previously established by the Edmonton Downtown Business Association (EDBA).

The health of an urban centre's streetfront retail is often a barometer for its overall economic and social well-being. As such, it is our hope that the data and analysis presented here will lead to positive change in the retail landscape in downtown Edmonton and beyond. **In focusing on streetfront retail spaces—pedestrian-oriented, ground-floor commercial retail units that are typically situated on retail-commercial streets—this report was written with the pulse of the local retail environment in mind.**

## WHY STREETFRONT?

Streetfront retail is a significant contributor to a city's economy, as well as a bridge between merchants and the communities to which they belong. It also shapes the character of urban spaces by encouraging social interaction and fostering a particular sense of place.

Active streetfront retail reflects a city's overall economic health and social engagement. Vacant retail spaces, on the other hand, can negatively affect a city's perception amongst residents, visitors, and investors alike, diminishing social interaction and reducing community engagement.

Studying streetfront retail in Edmonton's downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA) is a reminder that small-scale interactions at the street level are, in fact, the lifeblood of our city's character and vibrancy. It also allows us to study broader economic and social urban trends. This, in turn, points the way toward targeted policies that will encourage overall urban vitality and economic diversity.

Please note that in this report, "streetfront vacancy" refers to any unoccupied storefront as of the time of the field survey in May 2023, regardless of its lease or permitting status.

## The aim of this document is threefold:

- 1 To provide the downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA) with a snapshot of its streetfront retail health, thereby establishing a benchmark for future comparisons.
- 2 To use insights from both academic research and practical data to suggest solutions to complex challenges faced by the downtown retail sector.
- 3 To support the City of Edmonton's Downtown Vibrancy Strategy by helping ensure adequate data and information is available to support vibrancy.



# What Is This Report? (cont.)

## INTENDED IMPACT

While this report provides the most information on retail vacancies in downtown Edmonton to date, it remains a first step in creating a broader understanding of the streetfront retail landscape in the city's downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA). By looking at retail-vacancy rates and business types within the BIA, this report has several intended impacts.



**Baseline for Future Studies:** By documenting the current state of downtown retail vacancies, this report provides a baseline against which future developments and trends can be compared.

**Informed Decision-Making:** The data and insights in this report can help stakeholders (including policymakers, business owners, and community leaders) understand the challenges and opportunities facing downtown Edmonton and make informed, evidence-based decisions.

**Fostering Dialogue and Collaboration:** This report aims to start conversations amongst stakeholders by identifying challenges and opportunities that affect the streetfront retail environment as a whole.

**Resource for Broader Studies:** Because the report draws on an entire year of data, it can also serve as a springboard for studies exploring other BIAs, assessing larger trends and patterns, or extending across a longer timeline.

**Encouraging Innovation and Adaptation:** By providing insight into the current retail landscape, this report can stimulate new business models and community initiatives to help rejuvenate the downtown area.

## What Isn't This Report?

### LIMITATIONS

While this report aims to help explain the state of streetfront retail vacancies in downtown Edmonton, it is also important to clarify its limitations.

**First, this is not a safety analysis.** While we acknowledge the importance of safety and its impact on the vitality of a city's downtown, this particular report was designed to focus on retail vacancy specifically.

**Second, this is also not a policy review.** While this report contributes data that could inform policy decisions, it does not directly evaluate or critique existing city policies or suggest amendments to them. Its focus is simply on analyzing the downtown retail environment as it currently stands.

# The Research

## METHODOLOGY

The data used in this report was collected by a team of eighteen people. These team members were then grouped into pairs and each pair was assigned to a different section of the downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA).

As part of their data collection, each pair of team members walked through its assigned section of the BIA, identifying and recording details of all streetfront retail units. Each unit was characterized as either vacant or occupied. The occupied units were then given one of seven additional classifications, as well as a subcategory, based on the type of business in the unit.

When the status of a particular unit was unclear, the unit was visually re-evaluated by a different participant and a conclusion made based on all available information.

After the field survey was completed, the data was then consolidated and analyzed. The resultant report provides a detailed picture of streetfront retail vacancies and the diversity of businesses operating within the downtown BIA.

It's important to note that this dataset does not include the square footage of retail units, as this information is often difficult to obtain. It also does not incorporate interior

vacancies from three major shopping centres—City Centre Mall, Commerce Place, and Manulife Place—as these complexes have unique vacancy challenges that are outside the scope of this report. However, the dataset does include all streetfront retail spaces within these centres.

It's also important to note what distinguishes this dataset from traditional commercial retail data. Typically, commercial retail data is prepared by the businesses being studied, and often includes units that are not at street level. **The data in this report, however, is exclusively focused on streetfront retail units and has been collected through neutral, firsthand surveys, which makes it a valuable resource for understanding the retail landscape in downtown Edmonton.**

The seven business classifications, including their subcategories, are shown on the right.

## Seven business classifications:

- **Food, dining and hospitality**  
Café and dessert | Casual and upscale dining | Fast food and quick service restaurants | Hospitality
- **Professional, aesthetic and personal services**  
Professional services | Higher education | Aesthetic services | Car maintenance and repair
- **Everyday convenience and retail**  
Gas and grocery (pharmacy and convenience) | Retail
- **Arts, culture, entertainment and nightlife**  
Arts and culture | Entertainment and nightlife
- **Health, fitness and wellness**  
Health, fitness and integrative wellness | Traditional healthcare services
- **Liquor, cannabis, vape and tobacco**  
Liquor | Cannabis | Vape and tobacco
- **Religious, community and social services**  
Community and social services | Religious institutions



QUANTITATIVE DATA

# Edmonton Downtown Retail Overview

## OVERVIEW MAP

This map of the Downtown Edmonton BIA presents a visualization of its current streetfront retail landscape. The blue dots represent occupied storefronts, while the white dots represent vacant ones. The balance between these two categories reveals a snapshot of the area's overall retail vitality. The legend accompanying the map, meanwhile, provides a more nuanced breakdown of the occupied spaces, categorizing them into a range of retail categories. These categories, when considered alongside the vacant streetfront spaces, provides a comprehensive glimpse into Edmonton's downtown retail diversity, showcasing the blend of commercial, cultural, and community aspects that shape the urban centre.



**33%** Streetfront Vacancy Rate

**66%** Streetfront Occupancy Rate

- 40.73%** Food, dining and hospitality
- 22.76%** Professional, aesthetic and personal services
- 10.59%** Everyday convenience and retail
- 9.79%** Arts, culture, entertainment and nightlife
- 7.94%** Health, fitness and wellness
- 4.5%** Liquor, cannabis, vape and tobacco
- 3.7%** Religious, community and social services

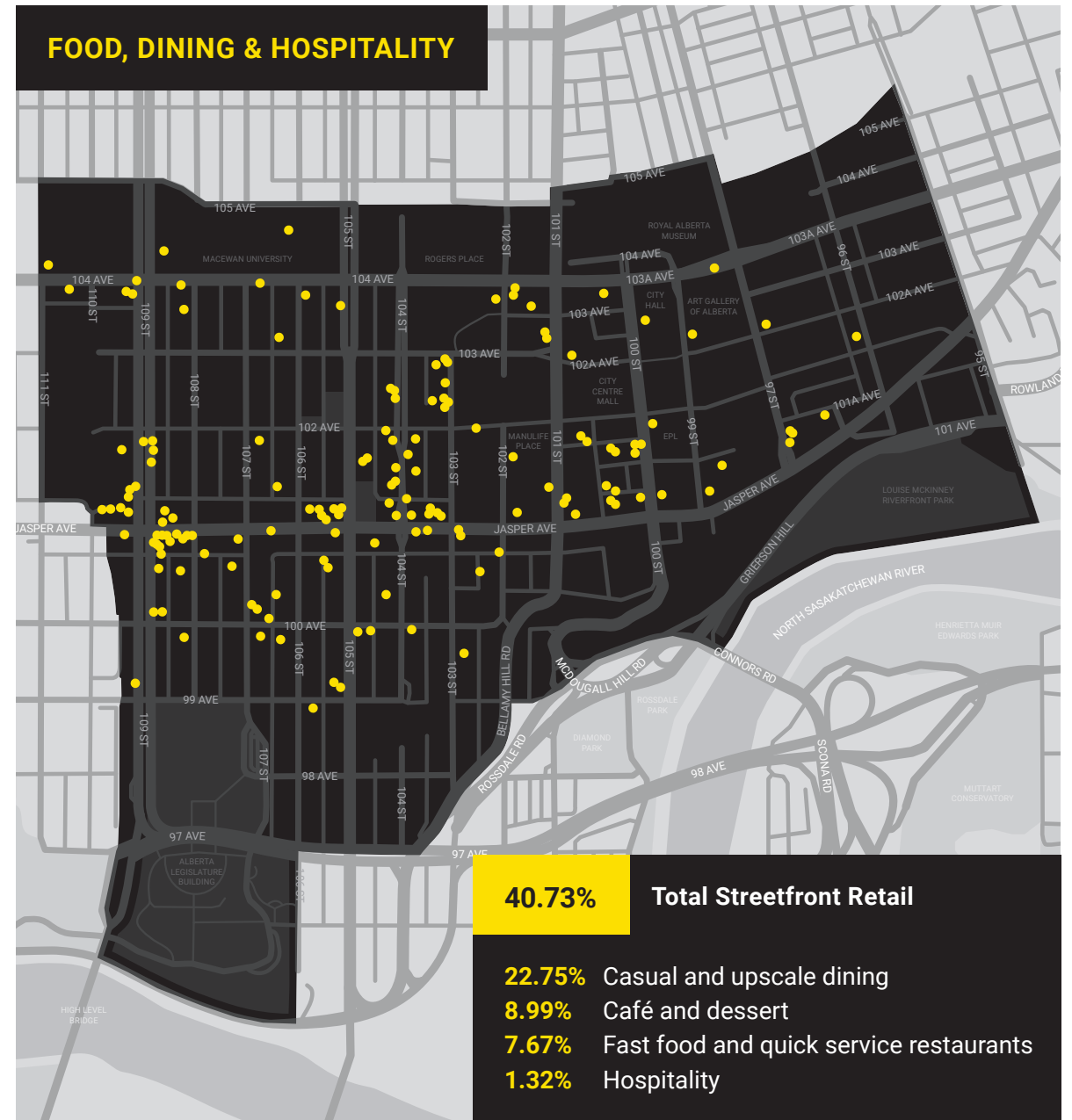
Description of breakdown (out of 100%)

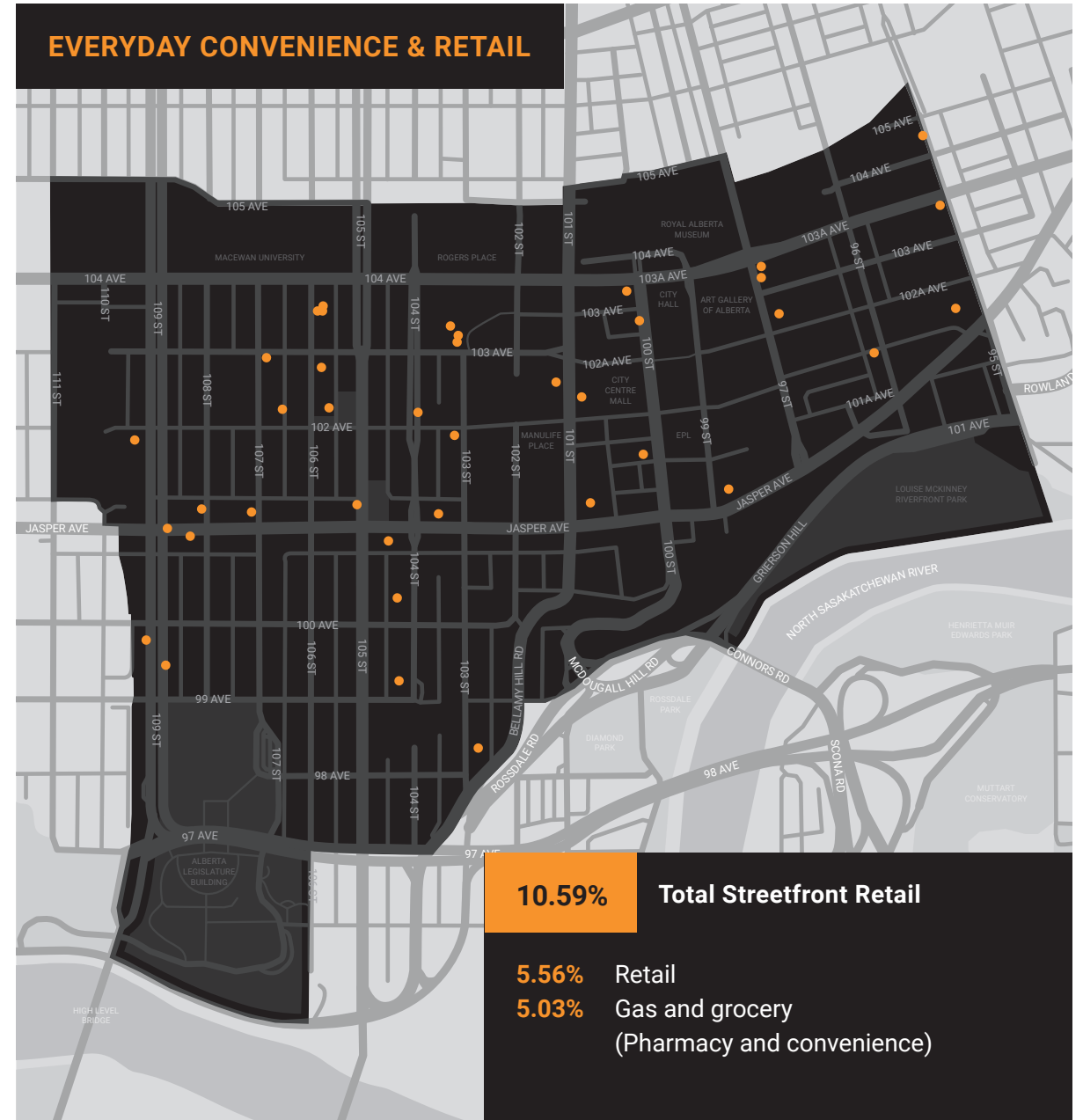
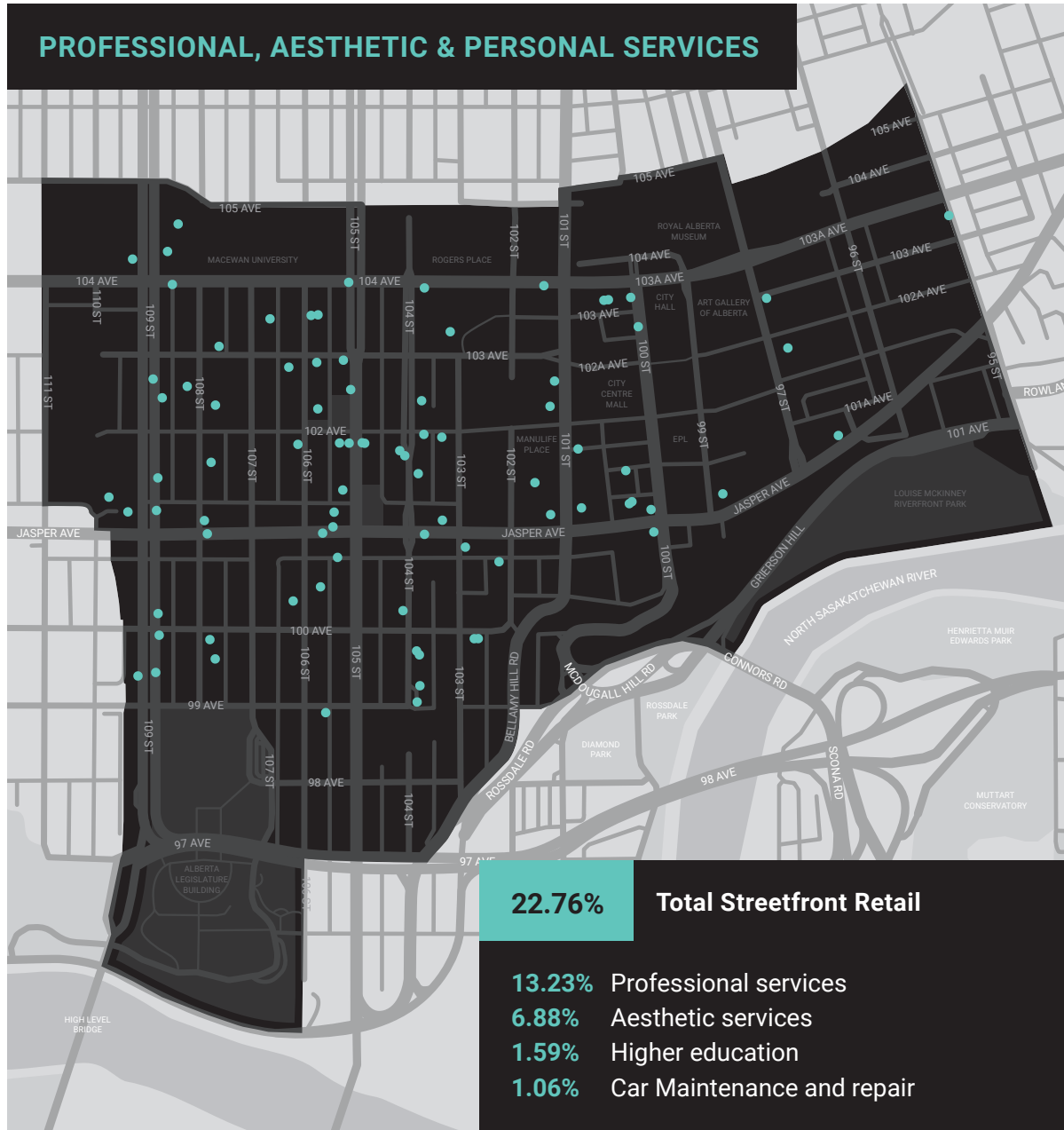
# Edmonton Downtown Retail Occupancy

## MAPS BY THEME

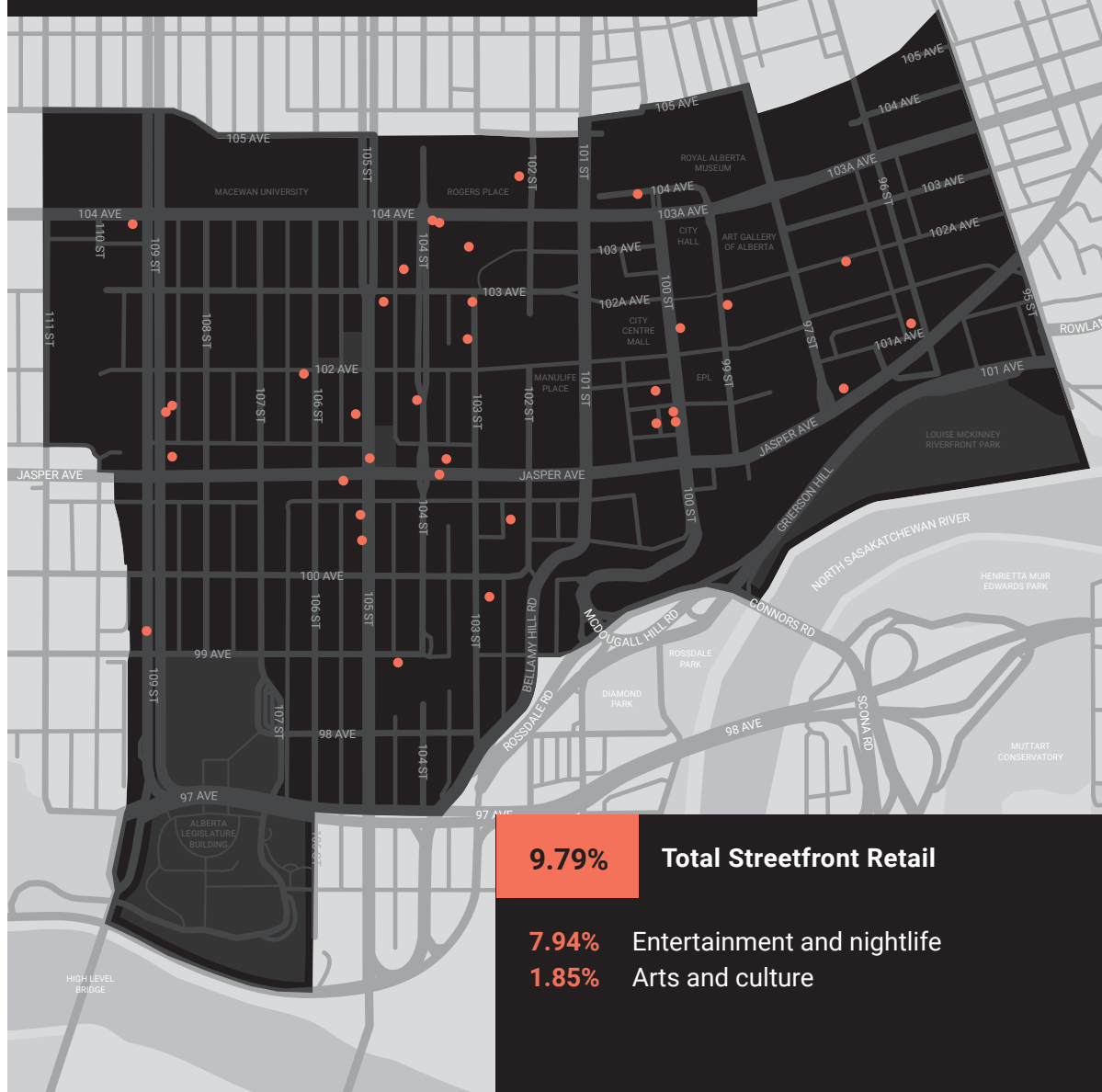
The following seven maps of the Downtown Edmonton BIA show the distribution of occupied streetfront retail spaces in more detail, with each one focusing on a different retail theme and its corresponding sub-categories.

These representations allow the viewer to visually identify different clusters and patterns, showing where certain retail types thrive and where opportunities exist for future development. In total, the maps offer clear and insightful perspectives on a complex retail ecosystem, and can help businesses, planners, and community leaders alike make informed decisions.

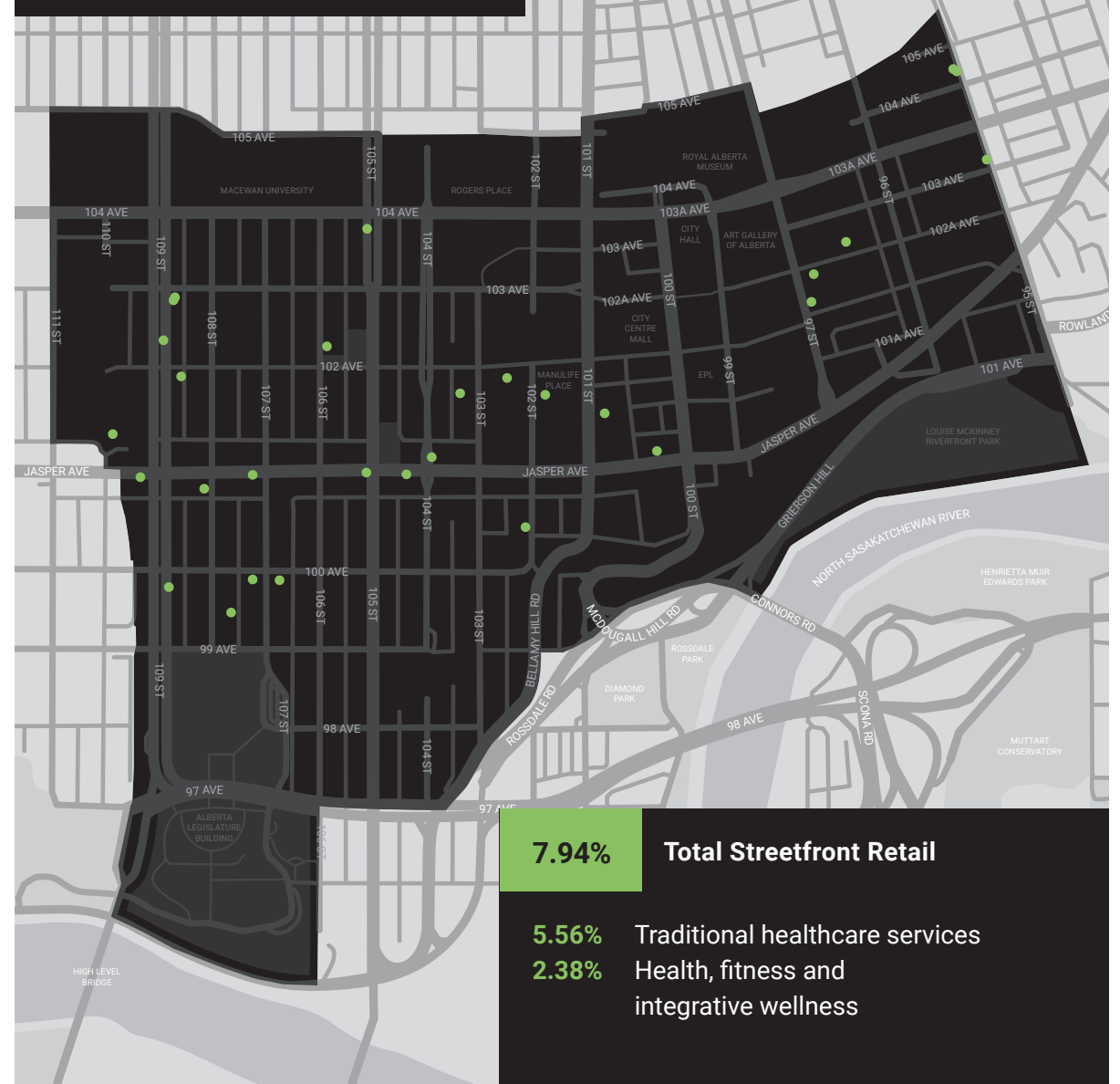




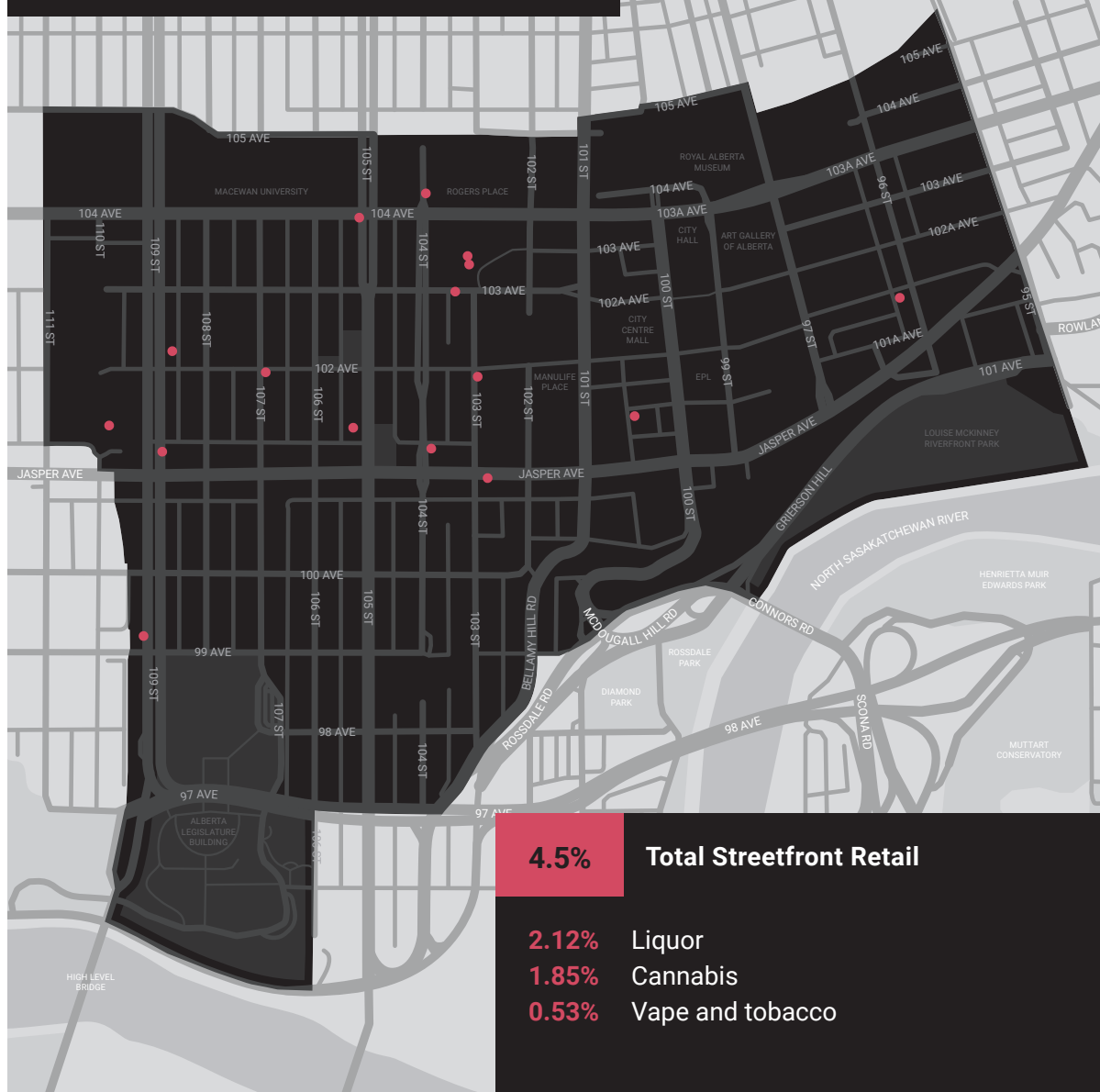
**ARTS, CULTURE, ENTERTAINMENT & NIGHTLIFE**



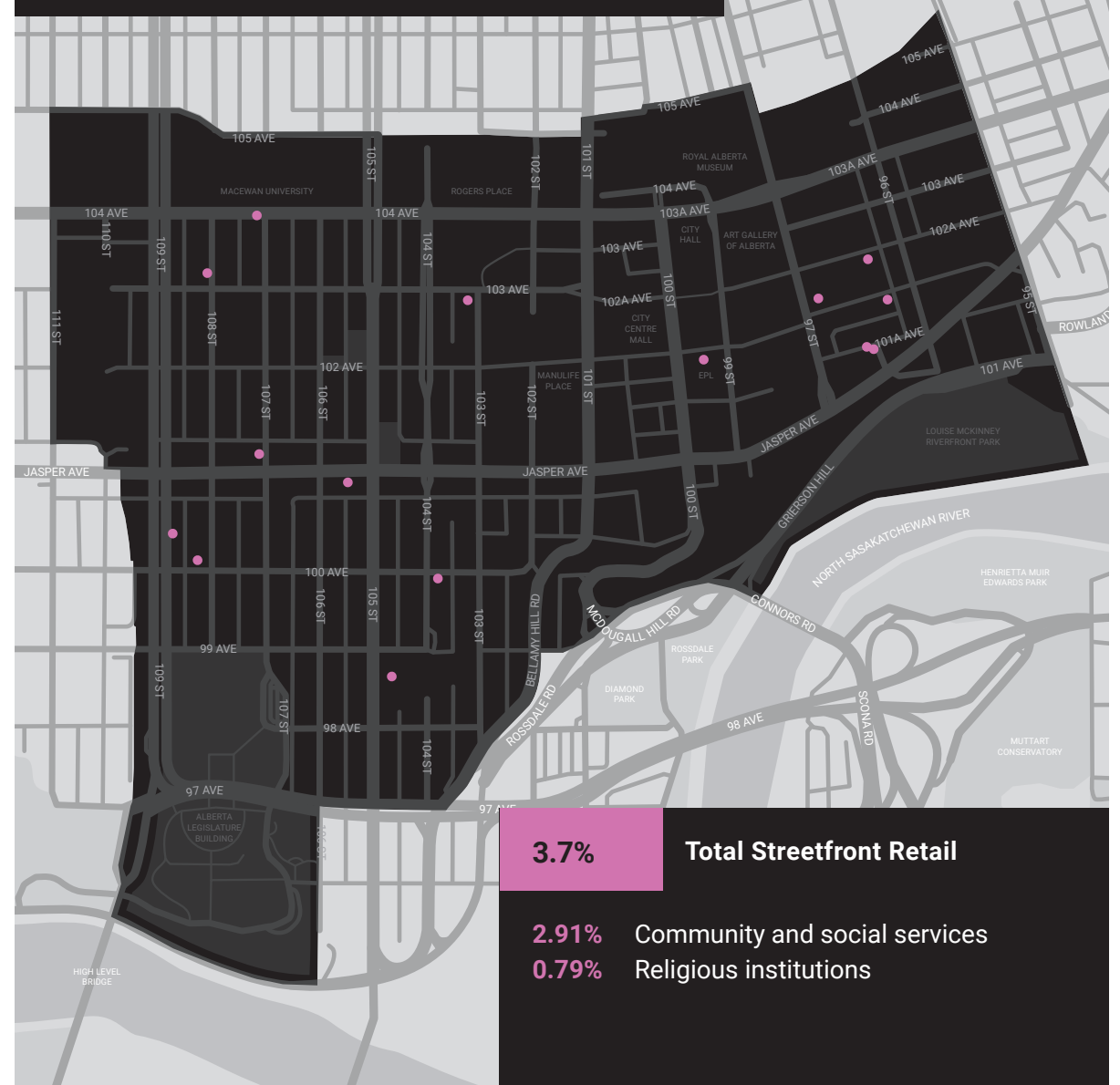
**HEALTH, FITNESS & WELLNESS**



**LIQUOR, CANNABIS, VAPE & TOBACCO**



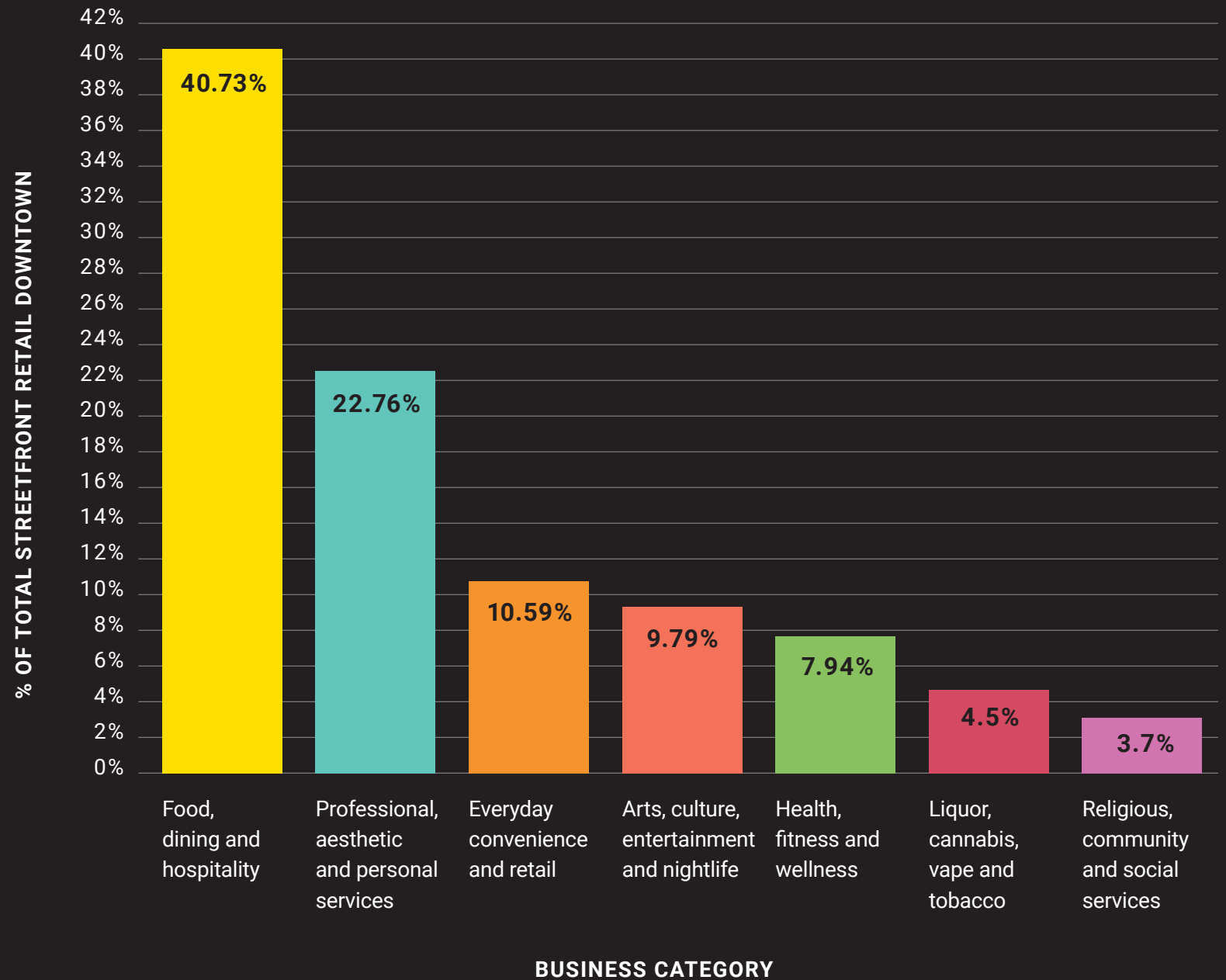
**RELIGIOUS, COMMUNITY & SOCIAL SERVICES**



# Proportion of Retail by Business Category

## RETAIL SNAPSHOT

This chart provides another snapshot of downtown's current retail landscape, highlighting the varied makeup of the urban core and establishing a baseline for future analysis. If this study is repeated in future years, this chart can become a tool for measuring year-over-year changes, reflecting the evolving needs and trends of the downtown core and informing strategic planning and development in the area.



# Comparison Chart of Canadian Cities

## UNDERSTANDING CITY-SPECIFIC COMPARISONS

Vacant streetfronts are a challenge in many Canadian downtowns, which naturally leads to questions about how Edmonton's vacancy rate compares to that of other cities. This study uses physical counting to provide what is likely the most accurate framing of the issue.

However, there are many factors that make direct comparisons difficult. These include variations in how cities define their downtown areas, whether data was collected before or after COVID-19 lockdowns, and inconsistencies in how data was gathered. While this report offers accurate and transparent information about Edmonton's downtown, it also underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding when it comes to city-specific comparisons.

Canadian City	Overall Population Density (2021)	Overall Size of City (2021)	Downtown Population Density (2016)	Size of Downtown (2016)	Downtown Share of Overall Pop. (2016)
Edmonton	1,320.4 people per km <sup>2</sup>	765.6 km <sup>2</sup>	4,869.3 people per km <sup>2</sup>	11.5 km <sup>2</sup>	4.2%
Calgary	1,592.4 people per km <sup>2</sup>	820.6 km <sup>2</sup>	6,443.8 people per km <sup>2</sup>	6.0 km <sup>2</sup>	2.8%
Winnipeg	1,623.3 people per km <sup>2</sup>	461.8 km <sup>2</sup>	5,801.2 people per km <sup>2</sup>	7.3 km <sup>2</sup>	5.4%
Ottawa	364.9 people per km <sup>2</sup>	2,788.2 km <sup>2</sup>	6,466.5 people per km <sup>2</sup>	9.7 km <sup>2</sup>	6.3%
Regina	1,266.6 people per km <sup>2</sup>	178.8 km <sup>2</sup>	2,258.5 people per km <sup>2</sup>	8.2 km <sup>2</sup>	7.8%
Saskatoon	1,174.7 people per km <sup>2</sup>	226.6 km <sup>2</sup>	2,327.1 people per km <sup>2</sup>	5.2 km <sup>2</sup>	4.1%

Citations 3, 4

# Six Things We Can Do Now

<b>1</b>	<b>BOLD BEAUTIFICATION .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>FROM WORK TO LIVE .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>SPEND EQUITABLY, NOT EQUALLY .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>INCREASE RESIDENTIAL CAPACITY .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>PEOPLE-DRIVEN SPACES .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>RETHINKING RETAIL .....</b>	<b>21</b>

## Overview

### CONVERSATION AND INSPIRATION

In attempting to revitalize the retail sector in downtown Edmonton, it is useful to consult the triumphs and setbacks experienced by similar urban areas. This section presents initiatives from other cities not as prescriptive solutions, but rather as points of conversation and inspiration.

The following strategies can be considered potential roadmaps for our local community, inviting us to think about, discuss, and collaboratively work towards practical and achievable steps to rejuvenate retail in downtown Edmonton.



# Bold Beautification

## OVERVIEW

A community's aesthetic appeal is often viewed as a luxury, rather than a necessity. This is a mistake. Studies have shown there is a strong correlation between aesthetic beauty and urban vitality.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, enhancing the look of a community doesn't just make it more pleasing to the eye—it also creates an environment that encourages economic growth.

## KEY ASPECTS

- **Return on Investment:** For every \$1 invested publicly in beautification initiatives, an additional \$3 is generated by the private sector.<sup>6</sup> This strongly suggests that residents seek out and prefer places to work, live, and socialize that are attractive.
- **Details Matter:** It is crucial that public spaces are clean and well-maintained. Small details like sidewalk infrastructure, trees, and trash cans significantly influence the perceptions of consumers, investors, tourists, and residents alike.
- **Being Bold:** Investing in bold beautification strategies—including setting high standards for hoarding, scaffolding, lighting, benches, and business-improvement facades—will further elevate downtown Edmonton.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Beauty plays a vital role in human motivation, and a pleasing physical environment promotes a sense of safety and encourages longer stays, thereby increasing spending. Significant investments in the downtown core can also stimulate private investment, provide an incentive for workers to return to the area, and expand the area's residential base.

## EVIDENCE FROM OTHER CITIES

- **Chicago, Illinois:** Properly maintained parks and open spaces raised abutting property values by 20%.<sup>7</sup>
- **Tirana, Albania:** After painting its entire downtown core bright orange and pink, the city saw a dramatic drop in crime, a tripling of the number of businesses downtown, and a sixfold increase in the area's tax base.<sup>8</sup>

**“Investing in bold beautification, not only attracts people to these areas, but goes a long way in positively impacting retail locations.”**

— PERCY WIREDU, OWNER OF EL JARDIN

## Good-News Stories from Edmonton



### INVESTMENT IN PARKS

New downtown parks like Warehouse Park and Centennial Plaza boost quality of life and community interaction, making the area more livable and vibrant.



### MURAL PROJECTS

Bright walls of local and international art turn dull vertical spaces into vibrant backdrops for all to enjoy.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

Investing in bold beautification isn't just about aesthetics—it's a strategic move towards economic growth. A well-maintained, visually appealing downtown creates a sense of security and pride among its residents, thereby attracting private investment and stimulating economic activity.

# From Work to Live

## OVERVIEW

The pandemic has reshaped downtowns around the world, with a significant shift towards remote work. **As a result, the appeal of downtown must be expanded from primarily a workplace to an around-the-clock destination that draws residents, visitors, and various social activities alike.**

Companies can increase the appeal of working in an office by offering their employees better services, amenities, and surroundings. For example, three new office towers in Edmonton have a significantly lower vacancy rate (5.1% compared to 23.5%), despite having higher than average rents, because they have created physical locations that workers want to spend time in.

## KEY ASPECTS

- **Place Identity/Place Dependence:** These two terms are crucial to our connection to place. *Place identity* refers to the emotional and symbolic significance we attach to a given location, while *place dependence* refers to our ability to pursue specific goals or activities there.<sup>9</sup> By promoting downtown as a space to live and engage, both types of connection are strengthened.

- **Around-the-Clock Community:** The COVID-19 pandemic proved that relying on office workers alone is a risky economic strategy for a downtown. Instead, building an active, around-the-clock community makes downtowns more resilient to future shocks while also enriching the area's cultural and social fabric.

## WHY IT MATTERS

The emotional bonds associated with a given place are closely linked to individuals' experiences with it. Community leaders can also drive interest and community buy-in, which are essential for the ongoing viability of local businesses. When residents are included in decision-making processes, downtown revitalizations are more holistic and successful.

## EVIDENCE FROM OTHER CITIES

- **Pomona, California:** Place-branding strategies, reflecting a place's meaning to its communities, can prevent conflicting interests.<sup>10</sup>
- **Des Moines, Iowa:** A new sculpture park near the city's office core, along with a new public events centre and several riverfront enhancements, attracted visitors to the revitalized areas and transformed them into community gathering areas.<sup>11</sup>

# Good-News Stories from Edmonton



## FESTIVAL INVESTMENT

Investing in festivals energizes the downtown area, attracting residents and tourists alike and fostering a vibrant urban atmosphere that enriches the community.



## FAN PARK

Hosting outdoor concerts and sporting events in Ice District enhances the downtown core's vibrancy, attracting diverse crowds and enhancing the neighbourhood's appeal.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Changing the downtown narrative from "return to work" to "return to live" can help build a vibrant and resilient community that doesn't solely rely on office workers, but also includes residents, visitors, and a variety of social activities. Encouraging people to live and engage downtown promotes a sense of place identity and place dependence, which is crucial for its social and economic vitality.

# Spend Equitably, Not Equally

## OVERVIEW

Downtown is the main economic driver in any given city, and prospective investors and job creators use the state of downtown, particularly the main street and its ground-level experience, as a bellwether for future decision-making. Revitalizing downtown, therefore, has a return on investment that extends well beyond the core itself.

## KEY ASPECTS

- **Efficient Investment:** Financial investments in downtown support the growth of the city as a whole. This means it is essential to invest more than simply the amount of property taxes generated in the core district, thereby supporting the city's overall economic and cultural health.
- **City Policy:** Currently, there is no city policy in place to ensure an appropriate level of investment within downtown to support the economic health of the city as a whole.
- **Return on Investment:** Investing in downtown provides not only outsized economic benefits, but also a higher return on investment for arts and culture, tourism, and social services. Edmonton needs a better plan to distribute property-tax revenue in a way that encourages city-wide growth, rather than simply equally, which risks neglecting downtown and harming the overall civic economy.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Downtowns generate far more tax revenue, per square foot, than any other neighbourhood, and investing in the downtown area is a proven net gain for the city as a whole. In Edmonton, downtown represents 1% of the land in the city, and 9% of the overall tax base. An investment in downtown, therefore, generates tax revenue at a higher rate than it would in other parts of the city, resulting in a larger tax base for the city overall.

## EVIDENCE FROM OTHER CITIES

- **Denver, Colorado:** Investing in city-wide focal points, like sports arenas, diversified the city's economy, attracting new businesses and expanding the tax base in the process.<sup>12</sup>
- **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:** Investing in downtown arts and culture, such as improvements to local theatres and museums, created a ripple effect that boosted local retail sales.<sup>12</sup>

**“A strong downtown leads to a strong city. The image of major cities stems from the impression people and investors have about that city's core.”**

— DAVE YOUNG, MANAGING DIRECTOR, CBRE

## Good-News Stories from Edmonton



### DBA RETAIL ATTRACTION PROJECT

This program is designed to attract and incubate retailers, and to minimize the risks associated with launching physical stores in the downtown area.



### THE CLEAN CITY INITIATIVE

\$2.5 million was allocated towards cleaning the downtown core, thereby contributing to a more inviting and vibrant urban environment.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Investing equitably means prioritizing downtown, rather than investing equally across the entire city. This will have larger economic benefits, a faster growth of the tax base, and added cultural enrichment, as well as creating a trickle-down benefit for suburban areas. Strong policy and strategic planning will be required to ensure that downtown receives the appropriate level of investment required to drive citywide economic prosperity.

# Increase Residential Capacity

## OVERVIEW

Increasing the residential capacity of downtown leads to higher foot traffic, which significantly reduces retail vacancies. By converting underused office spaces into residential units, cities can increase foot traffic and thereby support local businesses.

## KEY ASPECTS

- **Conversion Policies:** Creating city policies that help convert office buildings into residential units is an effective way of reducing retail vacancies by bringing residential tenants to the core. Bold development incentives are needed to attract investors and convince entrepreneurs to take the risk to accelerate housing development.
- **Flexible Zoning:** Modifying zoning laws—such as eliminating parking requirements, increasing the maximum height of buildings, and removing density limitations—can allow for more flexibility in the repurposing of buildings.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Pave the path for more productive partnerships between the city and developers that will realize all parties' goals while promoting downtown as a destination for investment.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Increasing residential capacity downtown not only helps reduce retail vacancies, but also contributes to urban revitalization. **More people living downtown adds to a feeling of vibrancy where residents can live, work, and shop in the same area.** It also promotes sustainable urban living by reducing commute times and encouraging the use of public transit.

## EVIDENCE FROM OTHER CITIES

- **Rotterdam, Netherlands:** A non-binding covenant to reduce office vacancies resulted in the conversion of more than 3.2 million sq/ft of office space into residential or other uses.<sup>13</sup>
- **Calgary, Alberta:** The city's incentive to owners and developers to convert at least 40,000 sq/ft of office space resulted in an overall conversion of approximately 675,000 sq/ft of office space into more than 700 new residential units.<sup>13</sup>
- **Buffalo, New York:** The city's flexible zoning laws led to the creation of 224 multifamily housing projects, including more than 10,000 apartment units.<sup>13</sup>

## Good-News Stories from Edmonton



### LOBLAWS CITY MARKET

The opening of a full-service grocery store enhances the convenience of living in the downtown core and contributes to a more vibrant and self-sufficient community.



### PEAK TOWER

The former Enbridge Tower's potential conversion to residential units exemplifies innovative urban renewal, adding modern living spaces and boosting downtown vibrancy.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Increasing residential capacity, with the help of new conversion policies and flexible zoning, can help revitalize downtown and reduce retail vacancies. Public-private partnerships can also play a key role in facilitating and speeding up this conversion process.

# People-Driven Spaces

## OVERVIEW

Accessibility and transportation are key factors in creating vibrant downtown areas. By focusing on people-centric policies—such as enhanced public transit and pedestrian-friendly urban design—downtown spaces become more inviting and accessible. This can lead to increased foot traffic and reduced retail vacancies.

## KEY ASPECTS

- **Transit Optimization:** Restructuring transit routes for improved coverage and frequency, providing economic incentives to encourage the use of public transit, and making concerted efforts to accommodate all demographics, particularly those with limited mobility.
- **Pedestrian-Friendly Planning:** Creating a downtown that is easy to navigate by foot, bike, or public transit. This fosters a more sustainable urban environment, boosts social interactions, and drives more traffic to retail outlets.
- **Place-Based Investments:** These include vacant land management and neighbourhood greening, both of which have been shown to improve property values, quality of life, and quality of neighbourhood.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Developments that promote walkability have significantly fewer retail vacancies. Optimizing public transit and pedestrian-friendly planning can transform downtown spaces into vibrant areas where people linger, shop, and participate in the city's social life. This approach also aligns with environmental objectives, which positions downtown areas as leaders in sustainable urban living.

## EVIDENCE FROM OTHER CITIES

- **Toronto, Ontario:** A bike-lane pilot project led to a significant increase in retail traffic, while the percentage of cyclists making retail stops climbed by 12.2%.<sup>14</sup>
- **Montreal, Québec:** Closing Mont-Royal Avenue to vehicle traffic led to a drop in the retail-vacancy rate from 14.5% to 5.6%.<sup>15</sup>

**“Downtown holds the heartbeat of our city, and it’s absolutely critical that we have a 24/7 vibrant energy made up of office, retail and residential uses.”**

— HENRY EDGAR, PRESIDENT, AUTOGRAPH DEVELOPMENTS

## Good-News Stories from Edmonton



### RICE HOWARD WAY

With a vibrant cluster of restaurants, bars, and cafes, this area has successfully become a dynamic retail space worth emulating in other parts of downtown.



### BIKE GRID

Investing in a bike grid improves sustainable transport and boosts downtown retail by reducing congestion and increasing foot traffic near businesses.<sup>16</sup>

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Transit optimization and place-based investments are critical elements of downtown revitalizations. They can increase community building, property values, and retail activity, thereby contributing to the overall vibrancy and economic health of downtown spaces.

# Rethinking Retail

## OVERVIEW

Commercial landlords have traditionally treated retail spaces as a revenue stream to be maximized. However, uncertainty created by the work-from-home movement means that landlords must start looking at retail in new and creative ways in order to maintain occupancy levels.

## KEY ASPECTS

- **Reducing Barriers to Entry:** Incentives like lower rent or taxes can be offered by landlords or the city, and encourage retailers to invest in downtown locations. Maintaining these incentives can also help retain tenants during economic downturns.
- **Retail as an Amenity:** In the same way that many office buildings now include gyms and conference centres, streetfront retail spaces can also be geared to benefit the occupants of the rest of the building. This provides a relationship that benefits retail and office workers alike.
- **Creating Demand on Non-Event Nights:** Retailers often see less foot traffic outside of normal working hours and on non-event nights. Identifying and promoting destination retailers that attract people from outside the downtown core can increase foot traffic during these times.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Retail is the lifeblood of downtown. In order for downtown to thrive, services and amenities need to be desirable and easily accessible. A variety of retailers will attract office and residential tenants alike, increasing the downtown tax base as a result.

## EVIDENCE FROM OTHER CITIES

- **Southeastern United States:** Local shopping is seen as a form of activism/civic engagement. Consumers enjoy supporting their downtown economically while also building relationships with store owners.<sup>17</sup>
- **Austin, Texas:** Long-time businesses can be displaced by larger-scale corporations, leading to a more diverse retail mix and overall neighbourhood improvement but fewer locally owned options.<sup>18</sup>

**“I love seeing vibrant streetfront retail act as the connection point between a community and its residents.”** – CHAD HELM, OWNER OF THE HELM

## Good-News Stories from Edmonton



### LUI-CHI'S

The lively cafe elevates office leasing above, demonstrating that retail can be an amenity and innovatively boosting commercial value and downtown appeal.



### THE HELM

This menswear store doubled down on downtown by moving to a new retail location on 103 Street. The brand-new location features three floors of fashion options.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

Rethinking retail as an amenity rather than solely a revenue stream can help landlords maximize occupancy and contribute to a thriving downtown. By reducing barriers to entry, filling retail gaps, and creating demand during non-event nights, downtown can become a place that caters to office and residential tenants alike.

# What Happens Next

## NEXT STEPS

This study of downtown Edmonton's streetfront retail landscape is only the first step. Using the results of this report as an entry point, here are some suggested next steps:

1. **Annual Data Collection:** Given the changing nature of retail landscapes, new data must be collected on a consistent schedule. By tracking the changes year over year, stakeholders can monitor trends, evaluate the impact of any interventions, and make data-informed decisions.
2. **Collaborative Conversations:** This report should be a conversation starter among stakeholders, including business owners, city officials, and community members. It can inform discussions on policy changes, interventions, and strategic planning as it relates to creating a vibrant retail scene.
3. **Expanding Scope of Study:** This report can also serve as a prototype for similar research in other BIAs in Edmonton. Comparative analysis across different areas can reveal unique challenges and opportunities, fostering a city-wide approach to retail vibrancy.

4. **Comprehensive Urban Planning:** While focused on street-front retail, this report also touches on larger themes of urban development. It can therefore feed into more comprehensive discussions about downtown revitalization, including placemaking, transit, and residential development.
5. **Advocating for Policy:** Using this data, stakeholders can advocate for policies that support the downtown retail scene, such as business-friendly regulations, infrastructure enhancements, and incentives for entrepreneurs.

Our hope is that this report will be part of the journey that many advocates are already on towards an improved downtown. It is a tool to understand, plan, and act for the betterment of Edmonton's urban heart, promising a brighter future for our city.



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# Appendix

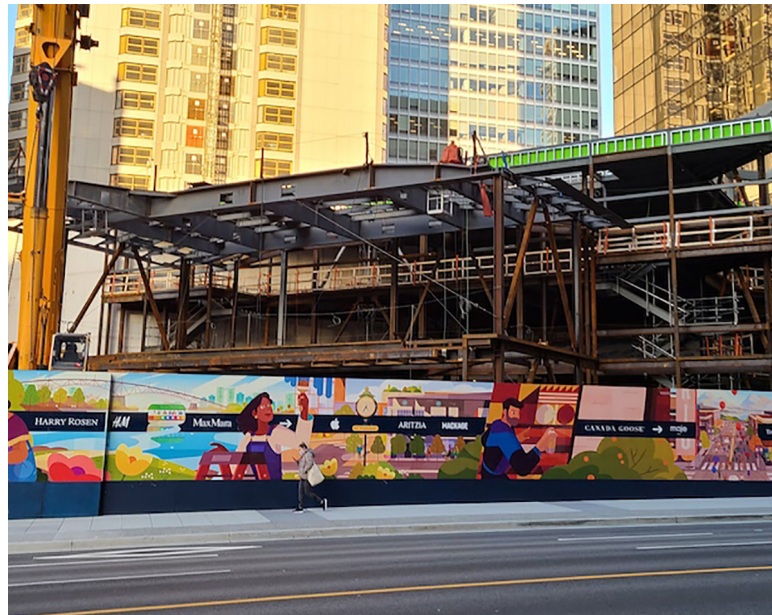
## WHAT DOES 'BOLD BEAUTIFICATION' MEAN?

This idea refers to increasing the visual appeal of a place by intentionally investing in beautification and general aesthetic enhancements. While surface-level improvements like flower pots are nice, they are not going to increase consumer confidence unless there are other, bolder changes to the image and appeal of the downtown as a whole.

"Bold beautification" refers to a creative and effective approach to enhancing a consumer's experience in a particular place. Here are a few examples of investments communities, such as Edmonton's downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA), can make to see a significant impact.

## HOARDING AND SCAFFOLDING

Hoarding, scaffolding and all construction containment materials should be viewed as an opportunity for beautification, lighting and marketing. Hoarding is crucial to the optics of vibrancy.



Construction hoarding covered with printed art for the Apple flagship store construction site at CF Pacific Centre, taken February 26, 2021. (Kenneth Chan/Daily Hive)



Photo courtesy of Urban Umbrella

# Appendix (cont.)

## LIGHTING

Lighting can create a broad spectrum of emotions and feelings with consumers. Lighting can be good for profits in various ways, primarily by enhancing the overall customer experience, increasing visibility, improving the ambiance of a business establishment and increasing overall safety.



Photo courtesy of James Newton

## FUN BENCHES AND SEATING

Encouraging people to spend their time downtown leads to higher chances of consumer transactions. Seating is a great way to encourage consumers to increase their time in a particular area. Vibrant seating options are great for the overall aesthetics, are family friendly and allow for optimal activation. Fun seating facilitates joy in consumers.



Photo courtesy of Andrew Craft/The Lafayette Observer

## BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT FACADES (BLADE SIGNS AND AWNINGS)

Giving dimension to a street provides the consumer a sense of belonging. Blade signs and awnings allow businesses to have better sight awareness to the consumer (driving and pedestrian) as well as visual appeal and historical charm.



Photos courtesy of City of Edmonton and Carolyn Hebbard/Getty Images

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