



Ontario
Professional
Planners
Institute

2021 Conference:

FREE STREETS

Planning and Economic Development:

A White Paper on meeting the challenges of modern city building.



Because cities
are important.



1.0

Executive Summary



FREE STREETS is an exercise in reshuffling the deck and a demonstration of what can happen when a community changes its perspective on what is deemed important. It rethinks what our zoning by-laws encourage, or discourage, in terms of a healthy urban core. It encourages a sense of community, and is key to the economic and social recovery of our mid-sized cities in a Post-Pandemic era.

The city's current urban core development policies and the mindset of a community need to consider:

- That current planning policy requires street level retail to activate the street, which does not reflect current trends in bricks and mortar retail
- That current planning policies require amenity spaces on the upper floors within new developments, creating underutilized “Backyards in the Sky” and decreased housing affordability
- The significant value of arts, culture, and creativity to create an urban culture and lasting experiences for visitors
- The important role that free and/or cheap space plays in the organic growth of a community's social and financial economies, and equally important need to limit gentrification

FREE STREETS offers a new approach; altering the zoning regulations to allow developers to use the money they are already required to invest in projects, to create more experiential activity on the street level for both condo residents and the community at large.

The result — vibrant and stimulating street spaces that increase pedestrian traffic, community engagement and retail success; the kind of environment that attracts newcomers and that citizens of all ages can thrive on.



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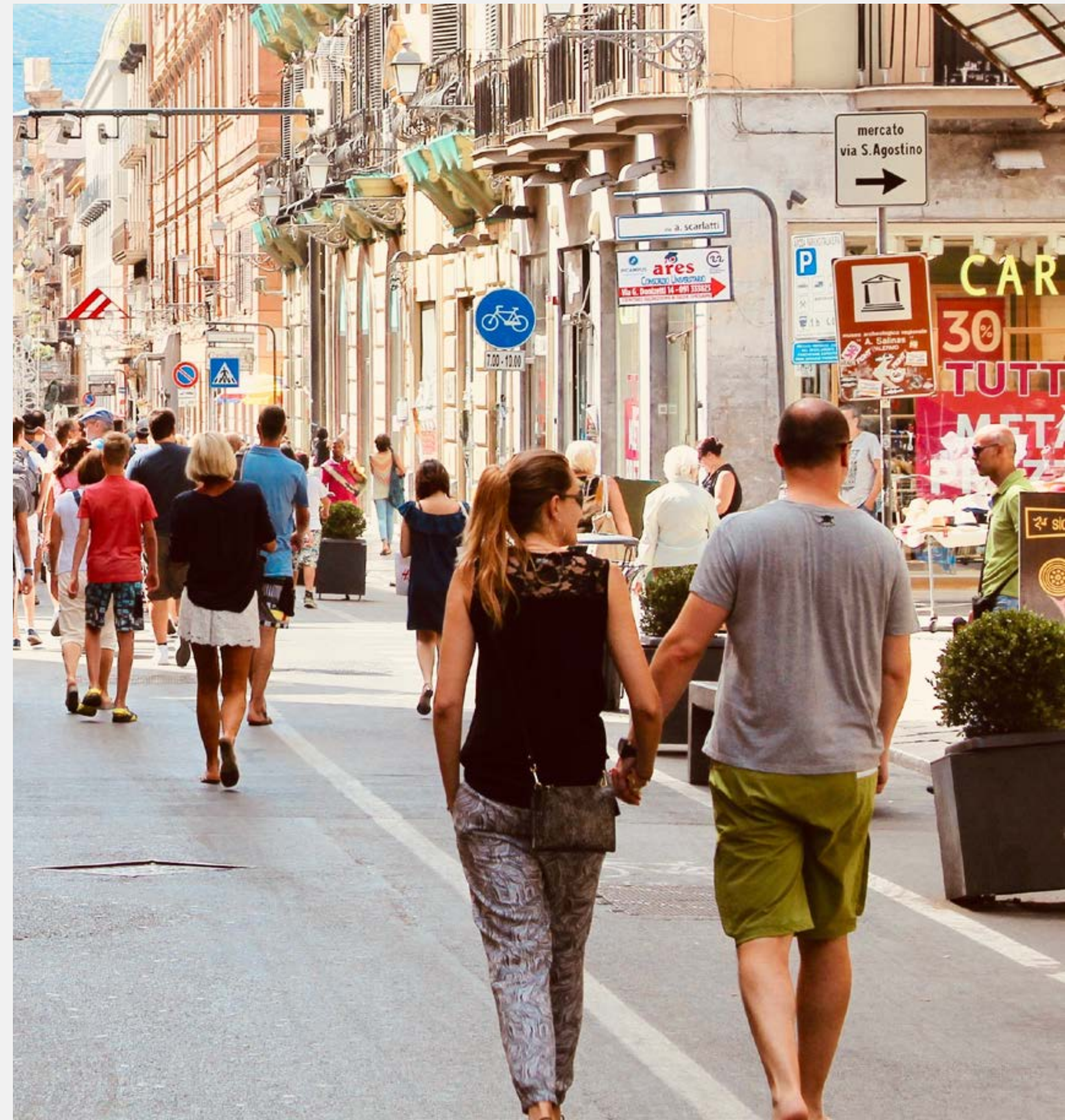


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Introduction

One of the questions being asked during this conference is “how can planning policy pivot to meet always-changing market demands and economic trends, while still maintaining focus on the public interest and sustainability”? We believe the concept of FREE STREETS is part of the answer to this complex question.

These are dynamic times for mid-sized cities in North America. Our cities need to be thinking about the next frontier of economic development, and how planning policies can align to attract talent and create joy in our communities. We need to reflect and assess the success of our cities on how much fun can people have for free.



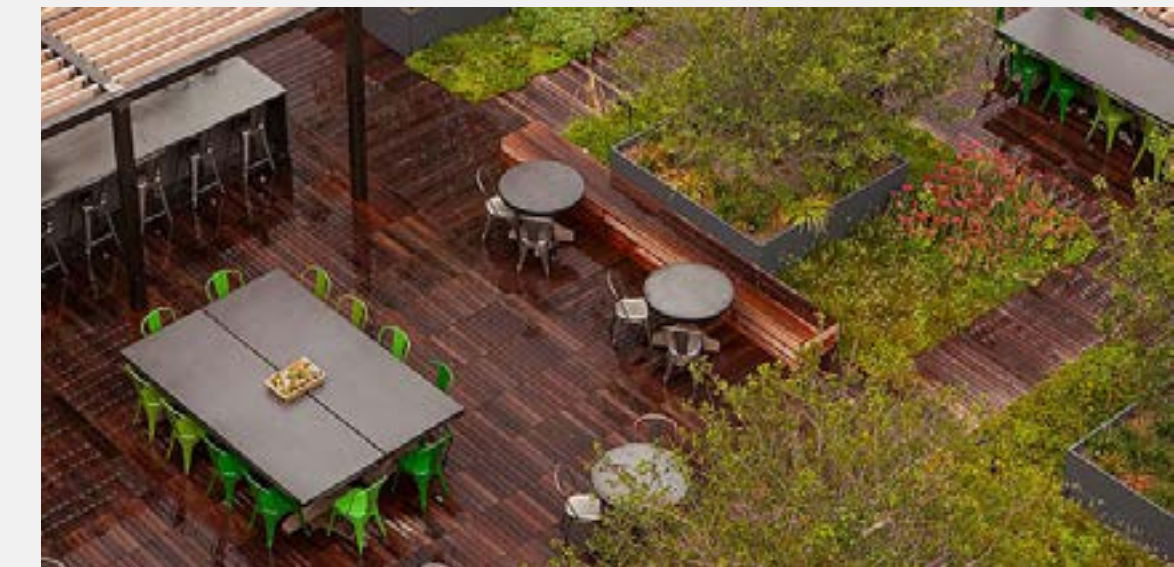
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Betting on the urban core

Many people hope that the growth of real estate development in our urban cores, including large condominium towers, will help our cities become more competitive and appealing at a social level. However, a closer look would suggest that we are poised to repeat the mistakes made decades before in the suburbs.

Current zoning and planning policies for condominiums require the ground floor to be dedicated to retail usage to activate the street. As a result, the developers of condos must shift amenity spaces to the upper floors; creating “backyards in the sky” and inadvertently encouraging residents to remain in their buildings.

FREE STREETS asks what if we gave developers the freedom to blend amenity space with public space on, or near, the ground floor?



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Trouble on the retail horizon

The negative affect of ground floor commercial policies is heightened by the current realities facing bricks and mortar, retail. The industry has been severely wounded by Amazon and other e-commerce competitors which has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

As an example, consider the following fact: from 2011 to 2017, availability rate of U.S. storefronts rose from 4.7% to over 23%. All data suggests that this trend will only increase, and in a post-pandemic world, this trend will be amplified.

Considering these realities, the new retail space being mandated by zoning by-laws has a high likelihood of remaining vacant or being filled with predictable national brands that add little to the ambiance of a city and its cultural identity.

to blend amenity space with public space on, or near, the ground floor?

FREE STREETS points out that perhaps we do not need more retail space, and asks if there is a better way to activate our streets? It suggests that we amend current zoning policies to allow condominium developers the ability to offer rent-free space to commercial tenants of their choosing (creative entrepreneurs, maker spaces, artist studios, high school tech clubs etc.).

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Creativity: The engine of urban growth

The creation of urban neighbourhoods, that drive significant economic innovation and cultural change, have followed a consistently similar path. They offer creative and entrepreneurial minds an environment that supports their desire to experiment with new ideas, mediums and technology.

SoHo in New York City is a familiar example:

- In the 1960's SoHo was a depressed area of Manhattan; full of abandoned factories and warehouses
- Throughout the 60's and 70's, creative people took advantage of low rents and developed a network of studios, lofts and workshops
- The energy and output of these creative minds attracted the broader community
- A "scene" developed spinning off restaurants, bars, galleries and shops that carried the products of the local creative talent
- Socially and economically SoHo became the place to be. It gave the city an identity and influenced the culture of North America

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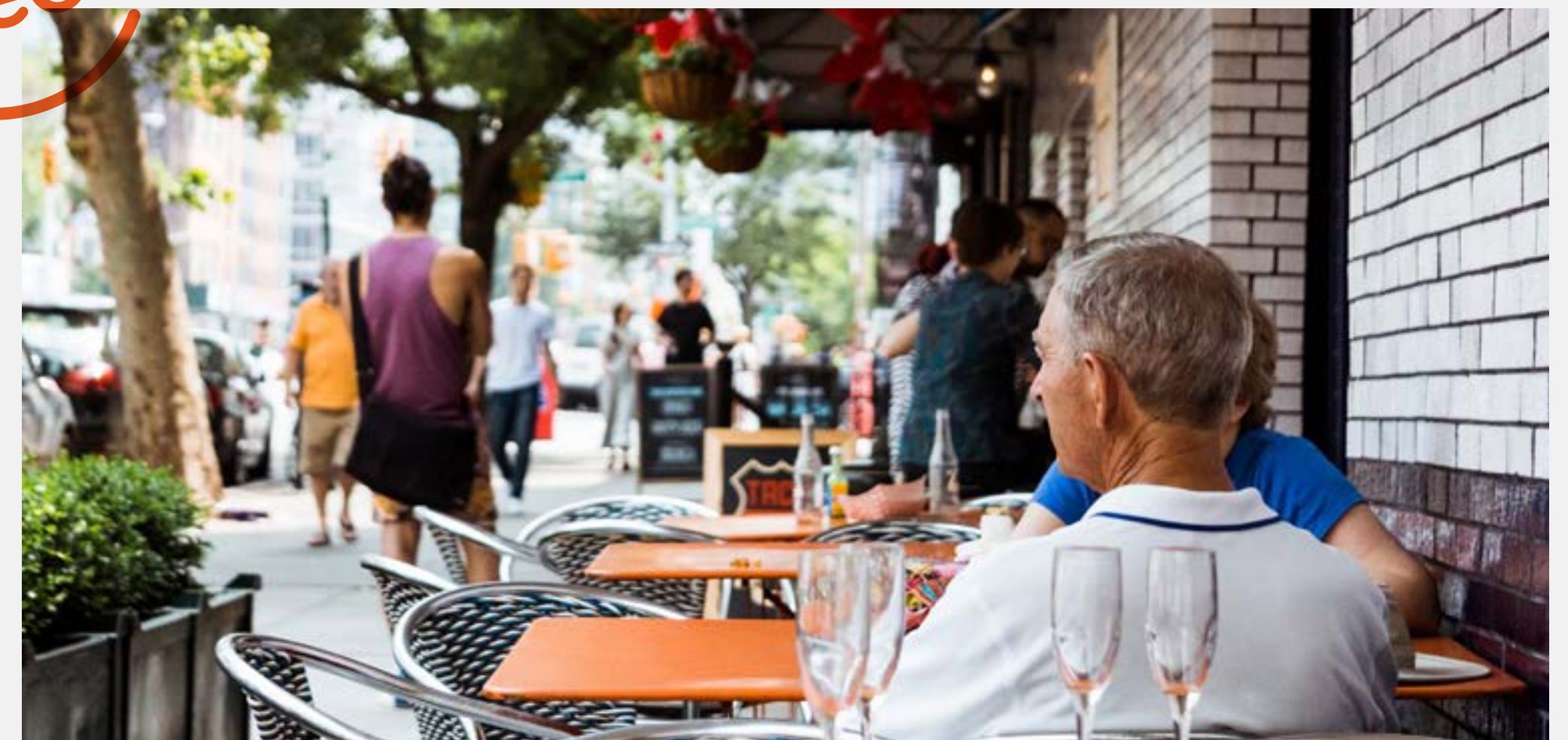
Improving the model — **FREE STREETS**

Free space has the side effect of leading to the creation of interesting neighbourhoods, which leads to increased activity and draws residents and visitors alike to the area. The unintended consequence of the cheap rent model is that its success leads to gentrification and high rents. The neighbourhoods are no longer able to offer talented people the space for experimentation. As a result, the creative energy that brought the area to life moves somewhere else. Think London, SoHo, Brooklyn and San Francisco.

FREE STREETS offers a long term planning solution to this creative social sustainability challenge.

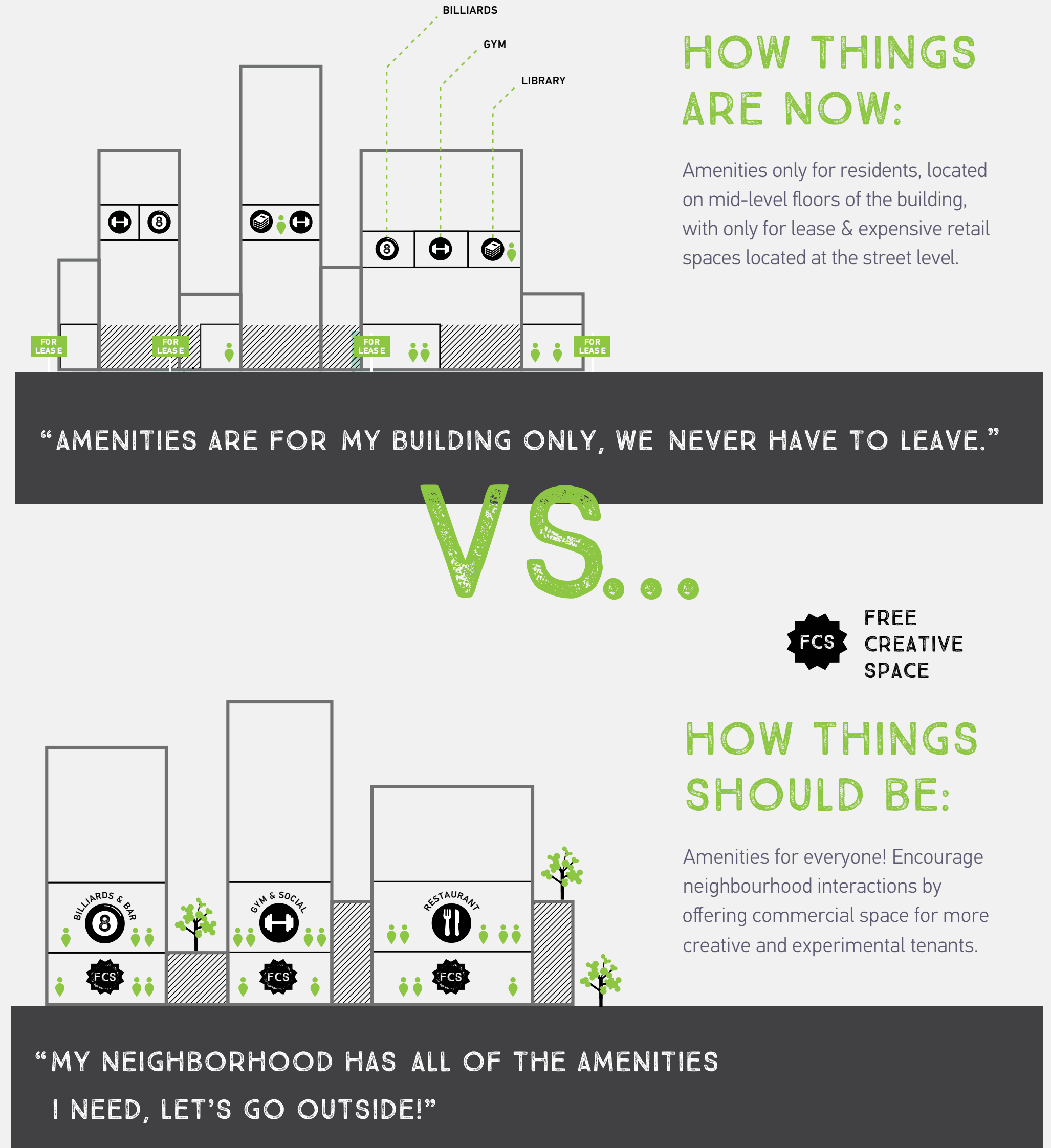


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Developers, using the money they are already required to invest in projects, would be able to create more experiential activity on the street level, and encourage residents to step outside their building and engage with the larger community.



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The result — a big win!

- Residents will feel that their ground floor is their most important amenity; where the lines between private and public realms blur
- Stimulating and experiential retail will have an opportunity to take hold and grow in a new, sustainable model
- Our urban cores can offer the whole community a reason to venture out from their backyards on a regular basis
- Invention, creativity and stimulation will fill the streets
- Pedestrian traffic will increase; improving the viability of all retail and hospitality vendors
- Lower operating fees without the burden of maintaining underutilized amenity spaces in condominium buildings, resulting in lower condo fees and increasing housing affordability for owners
- A city for everyone





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In conclusion

Real estate developers have a vested interest in ensuring our downtown cores have critical density and can offer stimulating experiences. This is the ecosystem for their future success. FREE STREETS, allows them to allocate their existing project investments in a way that contributes to that type of public environment.

FREE STREETS is an opportunity for planning & economic development departments to strategically collaborate with land developers to:

- Update planning policies and economic development strategies to think long term
- Tackle the challenges that face cities as a result of a rapidly declining bricks and mortar retail sector
- Attract and retain talent, and encourage urban experiences that create joy among a community
- Invest in the survival of their downtowns in a post-pandemic era



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