



# ACTIVATING EMPTY STOREFRONTS

with arts-based activities

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for Arts Habitat &

MacEwan University Social Innovation Institute

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**The Social Innovation Institute** connects experts and innovators who support commitments to positive change. They bring together community partners for learning and research in social innovation, entrepreneurship, and collaboration.

**Arts Habitat** is a non-profit organization located in Edmonton, Alberta. The organization strives to connect those in the arts industry with space to work and live in.

**RECOVER** is the City of Edmonton's Urban Wellness Plan.



EDMONTON'S URBAN WELLNESS PLAN



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01** Introduction
- 02** The Arts
- 03** The Research
  - 03** Best Practices Scan
  - 05** Site Studies
- 07** Perspectives
- 09** Recommendations
  - 10** Relationships
  - 11** Process
  - 12** Short-term Permits
  - 13** Liability Insurance
  - 14** Inventory Sharing
- 15** Next Steps
- 16** Resources

# INTRODUCTION

**Empty and vacant storefronts are a significant issue in the urban core of Edmonton.** The presence of empty street-facing units can undermine vibrancy, walkability and safety in an area. Empty storefronts can also detract from a sense of community and safety, leading to blight and negatively affecting surrounding businesses.

**Key obstacles to activating empty storefronts include:**

- high rents
- high vacancy rates
- poor building condition

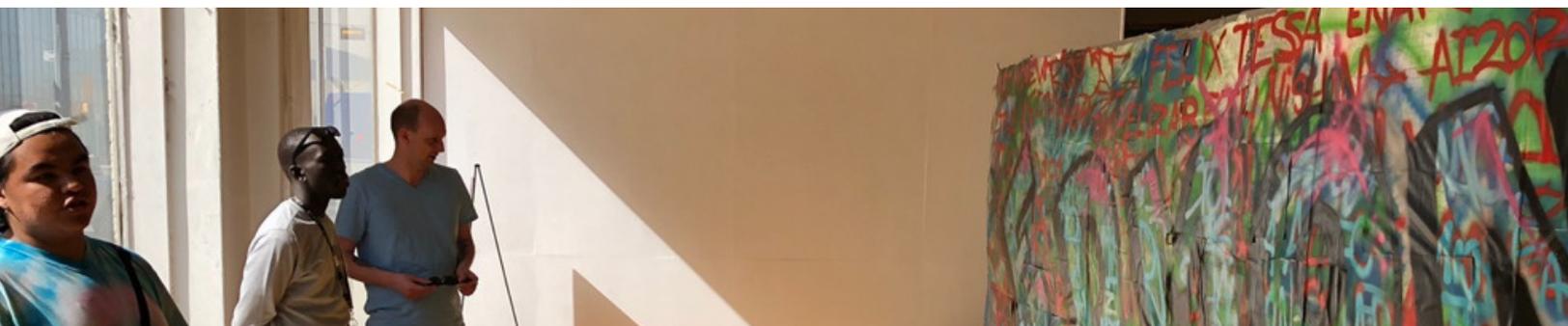


**"It's so sad to walk around and feel like there's nothing here."**

- community member, when seeing empty storefronts

## RECOVER'S Empty Storefronts Prototype

In Spring 2018, RECOVER ran a prototype focusing on empty storefronts. The Empty Storefronts team consisted of members from the City of Edmonton, Government of Alberta, Arts Habitat, Edmonton Arts Council, MacEwan University Social Innovation Institute, and the Indigenous Arts Movement. The GWG Building on 97 Street and 103 Avenue was activated for two weeks with a mural created by artists from iHuman Youth Society and arts and crafts made by the Indigenous Arts Movement collective.





# THE ARTS

Artists and arts space play an important role in a city and can bring positive changes to a neighbourhood in many ways.

Examples include:

- arts events
- shops and galleries
- job creation
- community building
- public art and murals

However, the arts are often under-prioritized and undervalued in city-building in order to make way for "higher-profit" projects.



**Connections & Exchanges: 2019-2029** is Edmonton's 10-year arts and heritage plan. The Plan notes a **shortage of appropriate space for artists** to create and present their work, as well as a **growing desire for collaboration** and sharing of experiences and resources.



## Complexities

The infusion of arts and culture within a neighbourhood can often result in gentrification and "pricing out" the very artists who bring these positive changes.

It is important to remember that gentrification is a process grounded in capital switching between locations in the city, and no one actor alone can revitalize or gentrify a neighbourhood.

Municipalities should aim to provide economic opportunities for residents of an area so they can share in the benefits of revitalization. Gathering a community together to create a shared long-term vision can also help mitigate displacement and identify areas of need and opportunity in a community. An example of this is prioritizing affordable housing and inclusionary housing policies in a neighbourhood.

# THE RESEARCH



**Three methods were utilized to compile data for this research:**

- a best practices scan
- an inventory of vacant storefronts in two central neighbourhoods
- key informant interviews with local stakeholders

## BEST PRACTICES SCAN

**The best practices scan looked what actions were being taken to address empty storefronts in 12 other cities around Canada and the USA.**

The scan searched for relevant bylaws, taxes, policies, programs, and initiatives. The cities were selected based on their similarities to Edmonton, such as size, economy, and climate.

Most have Area Improvement Plans and Business Improvement Districts. Several also have Facade Improvement Programs.

**Area Improvement Plans** are intended to present recommendations for policy and capital expenditure that will encourage social, environmental, and economic improvements in a specific area.

**Business Improvement Districts or Areas** focus on economic development of an area. Edmonton has 13 business improvement areas.

**Facade improvement programs** are present in several cities. This program provides matching grants for renovation of storefronts. Often these storefronts are already in use by a business.

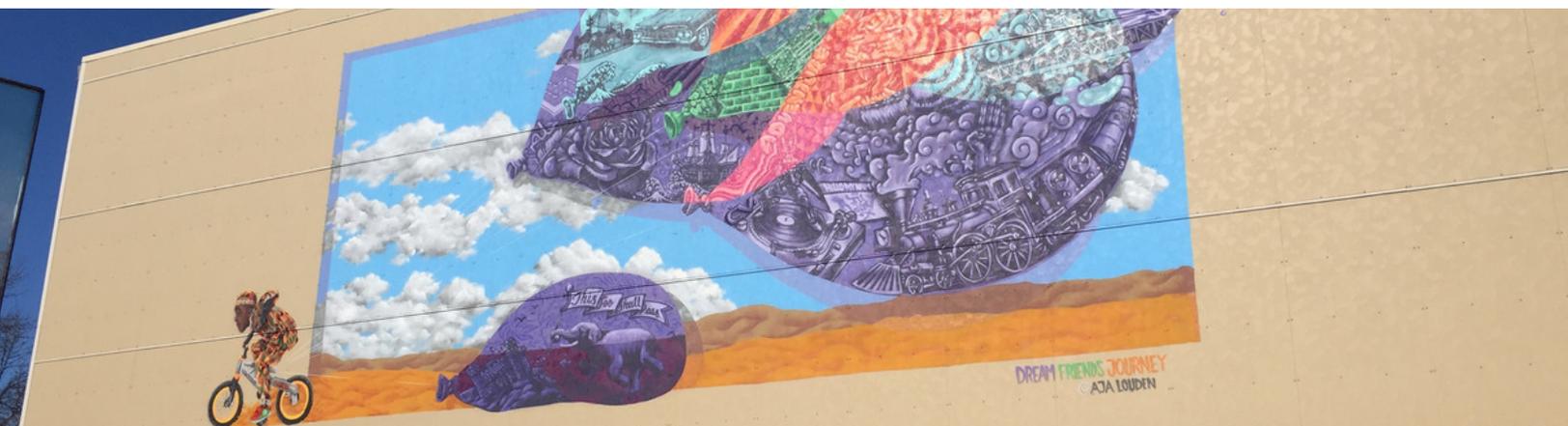
A few cities also have vacant buildings bylaws, which require the owner of an empty storefront or building to register their property with the City and pay extra taxes (which disincentivize leaving the buildings empty).



In **Edmonton**, recently approved changes have renamed the Facade Improvement Program the **Storefront Improvement Program** and decreasing the grant maximums in order to serve more projects. 25 beautification grants have also been created for smaller incremental improvements.

## What about Vacant Storefronts?

Some cities use taxation to disincentivize leaving a storefront vacant, while other cities have introduced shorter-term licensing to allow for temporary tenancy of a building. Initiatives like these are often led by community or business organizations with tangential support from the municipality.



## Vacant Lots

It is important to note that, at least in Edmonton, **there is a bigger problem than empty storefronts**. Parking lots and empty space create significant gaps in the urban fabric. These gaps also contribute to reduced street-level activity and urban blight. Although this is not a focus of this study, it is an important factor to consider when talking about safe, vibrant communities.

# SITE STUDIES

Two study sites were chosen based on the following criteria:

- 124 Street is located in a mature neighbourhood
- The downtown & surrounding area encompasses RECOVER neighbourhoods and parts of multiple BIAs (North Edge, Chinatown, Downtown)
- Both are located within Edmonton's urban core
- Both contain designated Main Streets

A Main Street must serve the following functions:

- Act as a link, or transportation route, to other areas of the city
- Strong community places that tie into business and community revitalization
- At least 350m long
- Support a mix of street-oriented uses
- Designed and maintained to an enhanced standard.

## 124 Street

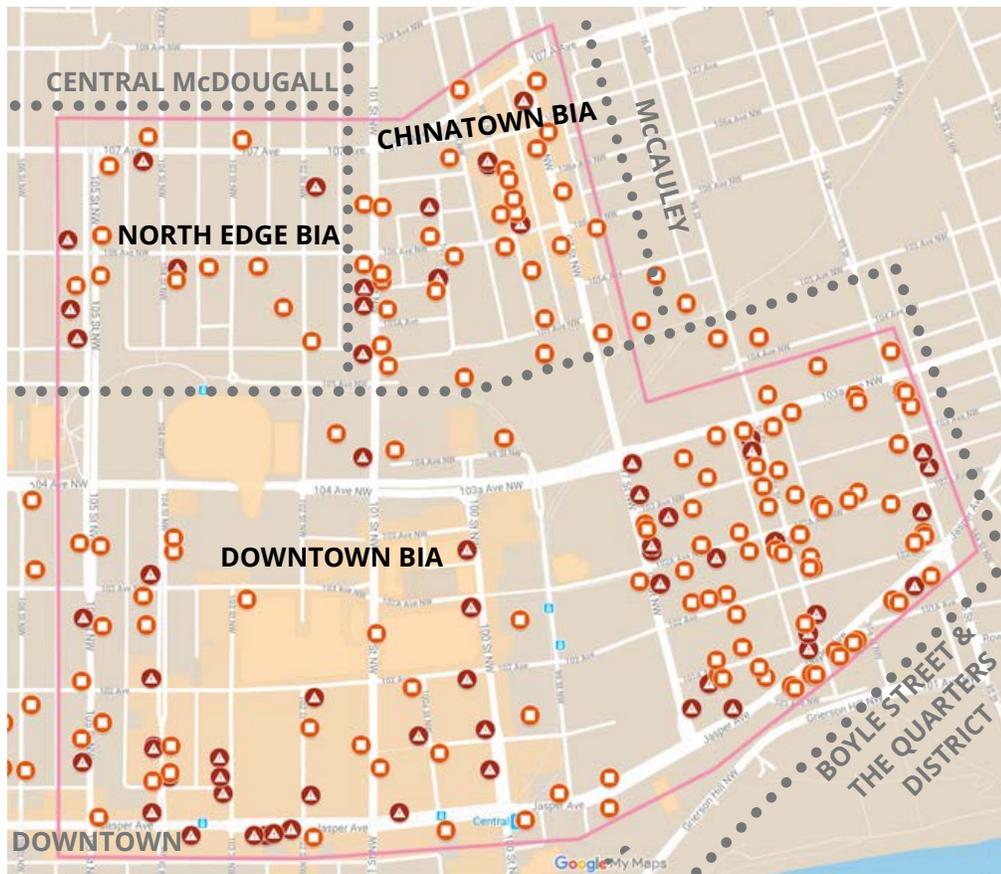
### Jasper Avenue to 111 Avenue

- This study site is located predominantly in the Westmount neighbourhood and is within the 124 Street Business Improvement Area.
- At the time of the site surveys, 124 Street contained **12 empty storefronts out of 221 spaces**.
- Many of the empty spaces were slightly **smaller bays in older buildings** or had "coming soon" signage posted for future business.



— Study Area Boundary  
▲ Empty Storefront

# Downtown & Surrounding Area Jasper Avenue to 107 Avenue 95 Street to 105 Street



## The downtown & surrounding area is in a period of transition.

- This study site comprises parts of **Downtown, Boyle Street, and McDougall neighbourhoods**. The associated Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) are listed on the map above.
- At the time when the site walks were conducted, there was considerable construction in many locations. **61 vacant spaces and 145 empty lots or parking lots were counted.**
- This study area has an extremely inconsistent use of space, with multiple blocks containing stretches of parking or inward-facing buildings and malls and other blocks with high densities of active uses.

# PERSPECTIVES

## Who did we talk to? And why?

**Arts and Culture:** they may occupy these spaces!

**Community Leagues:** they offer an on-the-ground citizen perspective!

**Business:** they also use these spaces!

**Real Estate/Development:** they own and run the spaces!

**City of Edmonton:** they handle all of the permits, zoning, and bylaws!

All stakeholders interviewed agreed that empty storefronts were an issue that contributed to blight in Edmonton. Interviewees also agreed that there is a disconnect between what landlords are asking for in terms of rent and what tenants can afford.

Getting artists to fill the vacant storefronts presents itself as an opportunity with considerable challenges.

Several interviewees as well as initiatives researched in different cities showed that activating an empty storefront is usually easier with installation art, rather than letting people use a space for a length of time.

## COMMON THEMES

addressed throughout the interviews

- The importance of liability insurance for artists & landlords
- Permits & licensing
- Building owner interest & building logistics
- Pop-up spaces



## What is the nature of empty storefronts?

"I don't really see them as issues. I see them more as potentials."

- Artist, on empty storefronts

**The zoning by-law right now does not contemplate very short-term uses.** There are a lot of parts of it that are outdated... In theory, you need a development permit just to go in [a space] and use it even for a short period of time... Our zoning by-law is changing and what will happen in the near future is that you won't have to apply for a change of use.

- Planner

## Is art a suitable temporary solution?

"if you're looking at a **community-backed activation of an empty space I would think that art would be a good way to use it...** when people are walking in a neighborhood they are more aware of the environment than when they're just driving through a neighborhood. I think **awareness is always important both for safety and community cohesion.** I guess that's what I see as the main benefit: **improve the aesthetic of the street, get more people spending time on the sidewalk.**"

- Community member, on activating empty storefronts

## What are some barriers to activating storefronts with arts activities?

There are a hundred different reasons that [a vacant storefront] can exist, but it always boils down to one of two issues. **It's either something's wrong with the building, or something's wrong with the building owner.** There's 100 different arms that that story can reach out to but those are the two root issues.

- Real Estate Broker

"It feels like **older buildings have a lot of financial barriers in terms of fixing up a space. Then newer buildings have a lot of financial barriers in that they just built it and they need to make that money back.** They need to perform well or else it's not going to be worth their investment. All landlords have to work to their investors. They have a due diligence to make sure that they're doing the best they can."

- Property Development Industry Member



# RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations have grown from the research detailed in the previous pages. Many of these recommendations require additional action or communication with many different stakeholders.



Recommendation:

# RELATIONSHIPS

## Build and maintain relationships between arts organizations and real estate companies to better broker the use of vacant spaces.

While some artists may be comfortable approaching a building owner about using their space, having a professional intermediary who can advocate for artists and be sensitive to the interests of building owners would be beneficial for fostering positive connection and future projects.

*" There's nothing that puts arts and culture and heritage planning right at the very beginning of the process and integrates in it."*

*- Artist*

A lot of property owners, they have tunnel vision. An arts group goes, "Well, we wanted your space for 200 bucks or 500 a month." They're like, "No, couldn't be bothered." They don't see the value in that. I'm not speaking for all them, but-- communicate, sit down and have an actual discussion with them. Unfortunately, **you've got to cover some kind of finances** in some regard. That's arts groups, that's always difficult. **Having that middle intermediary somehow, or some group to cover off, again, the insurance and that kind of stuff [would be beneficial]."**

*- Business Representative*



Recommendation:

# PROCESS

## The City of Edmonton needs to consider a more streamlined, user-friendly process for artists trying to access the permits required to use a space.

The cost and time it takes to apply for a permit to use a space is often overwhelming, and multiple interviewees mentioned the complexity of not just obtaining a space, but making sure it meets health and safety requirements. The arts sector is unique, with different needs than a general retail use or entertainment establishment. The City should aim to establish a thorough understanding of these needs in order to better support the arts sector in finding space.

"There were **so many expenses to rezoning and time requirement was extravagant.. it took a while to figure out what the zoning should be,** so that we could do what we wanted to do. It's always trying to fit your project into one of their boxes... **Arts doesn't really fit into a box.** I would say there's more barriers than tools and so, it's a case-by-case basis. Often, things that don't fit will get left to the bottom of the pile. There's a fear of making the wrong decision... **a fear of risk.**"

*- Artist, speaking about trying to open an arts space*



Recommendation:

# SHORT-TERM PERMITS

**The City of Edmonton should adopt short-term permits and licensing in their Zoning Bylaw renewal. Consultation with local building owners, managers, and users should be undertaken to achieve this.**

A Zoning Bylaw renewal is currently underway and is a multi-year process. One interviewee with the City mentioned that short-term permits and licensing will be easier to obtain with these updates, but more research into that is needed.

"... How do we facilitate pop-ups, for example, at the city? We make it absolutely impossible for people to do pop-ups. We have not developed a process where it's easy for people to do pop-ups in empty storefronts. It's not possible..."

- Planner

## In Chicago, USA...

Pop-up licensing is available for entrepreneurs. Licenses are good for anywhere from 1 to 365 days. Licenses are not tied to a location so the licensee can operate in different venues. The user of the space and the host with a space each have their own type of licenses.



Recommendation:

# LIABILITY INSURANCE

**Arts Habitat can assist artists in obtaining liability insurance for a space through either providing it themselves or creating an easy-to-follow process for users.**

Insurance was a major concern for many interviewees. One supportive action that an arts organization could take is making insurance easy and accessible for artists and satisfactory for building owners. This could take the form of in-person workshops or online modules explaining how the tenant/liability insurance works, when and why it's needed, and how an artist can apply for it.

In addition to finding and securing space for artists, Arts Habitat could act as a connector to non-profits, charities, or other organizations who are able to cover artists with their insurance.

"If they're going to have people move through the space who are not literally leasing the space and incurring all the liability expenses then they'll need that covered... Normally what will happen is, if you have a unit in a building that's not filled, and then you allow people to go in and run that unit, you're of course responsible for all the activity in that unit. Of course, the land owner's not on the site present 24 hours a day. They would count on that business accepting that responsibility, and there would be an agreement about insurance."

- *Business Representative*



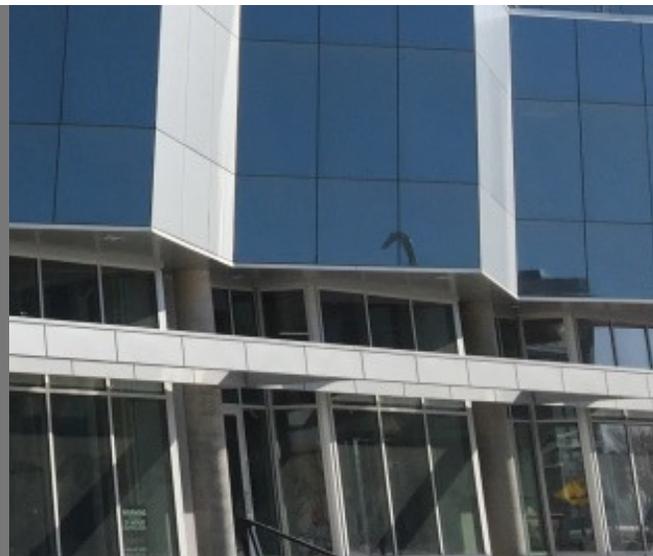
Recommendation:

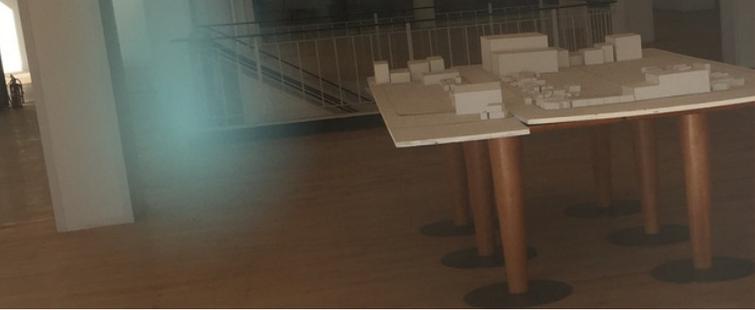
# INVENTORY SHARING

**A vacant storefronts inventory be developed and shared between the City, Business Improvement Associations, and arts organizations to be able to track which spaces are chronically vacant and need intervention.**

In the same way that Edmonton's Open Data keeps track of trees, for example, vacant storefronts can also be tracked on an open-source map. This map could carry different parameters, such as building age, length of vacancy, previous uses, condition, size, and so on. This information could either be crowdsourced from the public or updated by an internal body such as the City, BIAs, or a community league committee. This tool could be applied to multiple neighbourhoods.

**The City of Hamilton** requires owners of vacant buildings to register the buildings, which are then subject to quarterly inspections. Registration involves a yearly fee, and failure to pass the inspections results in fines of up to \$50,000.





# NEXT STEPS

## Further in-depth research into these specific recommendations could take the form of the following:

**Short-term permits/relationship building:** Arts Habitat or other arts advocates can look into forging connections between artists and real estate brokers to activate for-lease spaces with arts installations and/or pop-up events in order to advertise the space and temporarily activate it. Develop a plan for liaising and negotiating between these groups.

**Process:** The City may look into the possibility of streamlining the process for artists to obtain space or hiring a cultural planner to aid in the strengthening of connections and resources between artists and the City. An in-house planner for the City who knows the ins and outs of Connections and Exchanges (Edmonton's 10-year Arts and Culture plan) as well as the City's zoning, permits, and inspections process may be beneficial.

- Additionally, different incentives to entice building owners to rent their space at reduced rates could be explored. Some examples are providing improvement grants, expedited permitting, or tax breaks to building owners who open up their spaces.

**Insurance:** consulting with insurance firms, building owners real estate brokers, artists, and arts administrators to determine ideal insurance packages for artists, arts collectives, various mediums of art, types of spaces, and length of tenure.

**Inventory:** Task BIAs or other community groups to inventory empty storefronts in their area. Incentives to achieve this can be explored by the City and local group.

# RESOURCES

The following are some resources that may be useful to refer to when looking to activate a storefront.

## Edmonton

### City of Edmonton's Storefront Improvement Program

Note: this program is still listed under Facade Improvement Program on the City of Edmonton Website.

**City of Edmonton's RECOVER:** Urban Wellness Initiative

**Empty Storefront Study Inventory Maps** - View the inventory of empty storefronts and other uses that was generated for this research.

**124 Street Map** <https://bit.ly/2MVBsKg>

**Downtown & Surrounding Area Map** <https://bit.ly/2IYfxgn>

**Arts Habitat** lists a number of resources on its website, including a number of guides for opening and operating an arts space as well as the results of an Arts Space Needs & Issues Survey (conducted in 2010).

**Spacefinder** helps organizations working in the arts, community, volunteer, small business, and non-profit sectors efficiently and effectively find suitable users for their space.

**Edmonton Arts Council's *Connections and Exchanges*** is Edmonton's Ten-Year Arts and Heritage Plan. It "seeks to infuse culture, arts and heritage into every aspect of Edmonton's civic fabric, support cultural makers and interpreters, and grow Edmonton's arts and heritage audiences."

**Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues** works to "connect, represent and enable Leagues to preserve and promote the Community League way of life" through community engagement, participation, and communication.

## Outside of Edmonton

**The Empty Shops Network (UK)** encourages prototyping, testing and reinvention of the redundant spaces in the UK's town centres by providing advice, advocacy, brokering services, and administration assistance.

**Made Here**, in Minneapolis, filled 40 storefronts with artwork from across Minnesota.

**Project Pop-up**, in downtown Pittsburgh, was ran through 2012 and has been replicated since. It invited artists, entrepreneurs, and nonprofits to apply for space to activate in the downtown.

**St'ArtUp 317** is a new program focused on matching vacant space in downtown Indianapolis to entrepreneurs, startups, and artists



For questions about this booklet, please contact Sydney at [sgross1@ualberta.ca](mailto:sgross1@ualberta.ca)