



# Small-scale neighbourhood retail in Vancouver

## An inventory of stores and an assessment of opportunities

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# Executive summary

## Local context

In the past, small-scale neighbourhood retail played a larger role in Vancouver's residential neighbourhoods. These shops emerged at a time that was less auto-oriented, where people walked to the corner store for their daily needs. The shops that survive today are valued for their character and contribution to neighbourhood identity. Despite their charm, neighbourhood shops are highly vulnerable to loss because they are not well recognized in current policies and procedures.

## Purpose of study

This project consisted of inventorying the remaining and former small-scale neighbourhood retail sites in Vancouver. This project focuses particularly on retail sites that are:

- non-conforming with current zoning
- conforming – and classified as neighbourhood grocery stores in a residential zone
- conforming and located within a small cluster of 1-3 legally conforming C-1 sites

## Methodology

Vancouver's existing and deactivated small-scale retail sites were inventoried primarily through archival research and ground truthing. Sites were mapped to showcase how neighbourhood retail has evolved over time and what remains today. 5 interviews took place with representatives of 6 Vancouver-based businesses that are located on small-scale neighbourhood sites.

## Key findings

The inventorying process led to the discovery of:

- 19 active isolated C-zone retail sites
- 25 active neighbourhood grocery stores
- 100 active non-conforming retail sites
- 123 deactivated neighbourhood retail sites (but the storefront typology remains)
- 364 demolished neighbourhood retail sites

## Values

Stakeholders highlighted values that come with neighbourhood retail:

- Neighbourhood shops have long been valued for their role as community anchors
- Neighbourhood stores can promote healthier, walkable and complete communities
- While historically used for convenience or grocery shopping, these shops are evolving and becoming social gathering spaces

## Challenges

Several challenges were also identified with this model of retail:

- Bureaucratic barriers
- Low foot traffic
- High operating costs
- Competition from larger and online retailers
- Parking issues, especially for loading and deliveries

## Ways to better support small-scale neighbourhood retail

Small-scale neighbourhood retail could become more viable in Vancouver through the following interventions:

- Introduce additional uses to zoning districts that surround neighbourhood retail
- Rezone neighbourhood retail sites to commercial to protect the retail use
- Expand the Neighbourhood Grocery Store classification to other types of retail as it is the only use category that recognizes retail in a residential zone and not reflective of all of the businesses that are operating within these stores
- Lift the 6 month restriction of the Grandfather Clause as it only protects non-conforming retail uses if there has not been a gap in operations for more than 6 months
- Streamline and reduce wait times for permitting and licensing
- Provide informational guidelines to assist operators who are interested in setting up a neighbourhood-based business
- Use heritage preservation strategies that acknowledge the intangible values of these legacy businesses

# Table of contents

<b>1.0 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Purpose of study	2
<b>2.0 Methods</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1 Methodology	4
2.2 Limitations	5
<b>3.0 Local context</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 Social value of neighbourhood retail	7
3.2 History of neighbourhood retail and policy in Vancouver	8
<b>4.0 Literature review</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>5.0 Research findings</b>	<b>18</b>
5.1 Inventory findings	19
5.2 Typologies	21
5.3 Interview findings	23
<b>6.0 Ways to better support small-scale neighbourhood retail</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>7.0 Conclusion</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Appendix A: Interview guide</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Appendix B: Neighbourhood retail by decade</b>	<b>36</b>
1900s retail	36
1910s retail	37
1920s retail	38
1930s retail	39
1940s retail	40
1950s retail	41
1960s retail	42
1970s retail	43
1980s retail	44
1990s retail	45
2000s retail	46
2010s retail	47

# I.0 Introduction



Hawks Grocery at 701 Hawks Ave (1960); City of Vancouver Archives.

## I.1 Purpose of study

In the past, small-scale neighbourhood retail played a larger role in Vancouver's residential neighbourhoods. These retail outlets provided access to groceries, household goods and other services, all within walking distance. These shops emerged at a time that was less auto-oriented, where people walked to the corner store for their daily needs. Families at this time often survived off of a single income and mothers stayed at home to tend to the children. Those shops that survive today are valued for their charm and character and how they contribute to the neighbourhood identity of communities. They provide easy access to useful goods and services and support the creation of walkable, compact communities.

The purpose of this research is to develop a comprehensive inventory and related analysis of the remaining and former small-scale neighbourhood retail sites in Vancouver. This project focuses particularly on retail sites that are

- (a) non-conforming with current zoning; or
- (b) conforming and classified as neighbourhood grocery stores in a residential zone; or
- (c) conforming and located within a small cluster of 1-3 legally conforming C-1 sites.

This research looks at the City of Vancouver's continuum of retail services and analyzes neighbourhood retail sites that are vulnerable, threatened or already lost.

## Key research questions

How many small-scale neighbourhood retail sites remain existing in Vancouver? Where are they located? What are their key attributes, as well as similarities and dissimilarities?

What are the factors that contribute to the success of small-scale neighbourhood retail outlets? What challenges do they face?

Are there potential policy interventions that the City could investigate to support existing or potentially new small scale neighbourhood retail businesses?

## 2.0 Methods



A&B Grocery and Produce at 1902 Victoria Drive (captured between 1960-1980); City of Vancouver Archives.

## 2.1 Methodology

This project consisted of inventorying small-scale neighbourhood retail sites and key informant interviews with business owners. The following details the methodology that guided the project:

### Inventory of existing and deactivated neighbourhood retail sites

Following a literature and policy review on neighbourhood retail, Vancouver's existing and deactivated small-scale retail sites were inventoried using the following methods:

#### Archival research

Occupancy data was collected by decade from the BC City Directories for the years 1903, 1913, 1923, 1933, 1943, 1953, 1963, 1973, 1983 and 1993.

#### Ground-truthing

As the BC City Directories were discontinued in 2001, data for more recent neighbourhood retail sites was gathered through site visits and ground truthing. Site visits were also conducted to analyze the unique features and typology of the retail.

#### Supplementary research

Research into historical atlases, fire insurance maps, previous zoning maps, master plans, historical newspapers and local archival photography collections was also used to identify existing and deactivated retail sites.

Data was coded based on the type of business located at each address. Research using VanMap software was conducted to confirm current zoning of past and present retail sites and other related information. Once all of the small-scale retail sites were inventoried, they were mapped using GIS software to showcase how neighbourhood retail has evolved over time as well as what remains today.

### Interviews

5 interviews took place with representatives of 6 Vancouver-based businesses that are located on small-scale neighbourhood sites. The stakeholders included owners of 4 different stores that are classified as neighbourhood grocery stores and 1 owner who operates a restaurant on a non-conforming site. An interview guide (see **Appendix A, p. 35**) was developed to facilitate the collection of rich and nuanced data that is difficult to grasp through quantitative methods alone. Stakeholders were asked about the challenges they face, what has made their business successful, their role in the community and how they could be better supported. The majority of interviews were conducted in person, but one interview took place over the phone. Responses were transcribed and coded into thematic and sub-thematic groupings.





Little Cottage Confectionery and Grocery at 901 E Ave (captured between 1960-1980); City of Vancouver Archives.

## 2.2 Limitations

The scope and methods used in this research present some limitations. This study only investigated zoning districts that do not include retail as an allowable use and did not consider districts that permit a mix of commercial and residential uses. As this study was conducted over a short period of time, historical research into the BC City Directories only covered a sample of years and retail categories. Neighbourhood retail was investigated by decade and the categories were selected based on their likelihood to fit within a neighbourhood setting. They include grocers, confectioners, delicatessens, dairies and general stores. While these categories were useful for sorting and identifying businesses, especially of previous eras, this method falls short of capturing the entirety of businesses that encompassed Vancouver's neighbourhood retail, such as laundromats, butchers and so forth. Ground truthing and site visits supplemented this research and resulted in additional findings, especially for more recently active neighbourhood retail sites (**see Appendix B, p. 47**). Further research should include additional categories of retail. Moreover, additional Vancouver neighbourhoods should be thoroughly ground truthed, especially neighbourhoods that resulted in fewer findings from the archival research.

Moreover, only a small sample of business owners was able to take part in the interview process. Future research should include additional interviews with customers who frequent these stores and people who live within close proximity to neighbourhood retail. This could help further ascertain the values and challenges that come with this kind of retail. It would also be worth interviewing more neighbourhood businesses that are operated by new Canadians as they had less uptake in comparison to the other stakeholders who participated in this study. This research could also benefit from observations of neighbourhood-based stores, which could provide a contextual understanding and greater depth into the experience of these shops. The information that is presented in this study should not be considered representative of all the aspects that relate to small-scale neighbourhood retail.

## 3.0 Local context



Deactivated retail at 2099 W 3rd Ave (2019); Jacqueline Hunter.



The Wilder Snail at 799 Keefer St (2019); Jacqueline Hunter.

### 3.1 Social value of neighbourhood retail

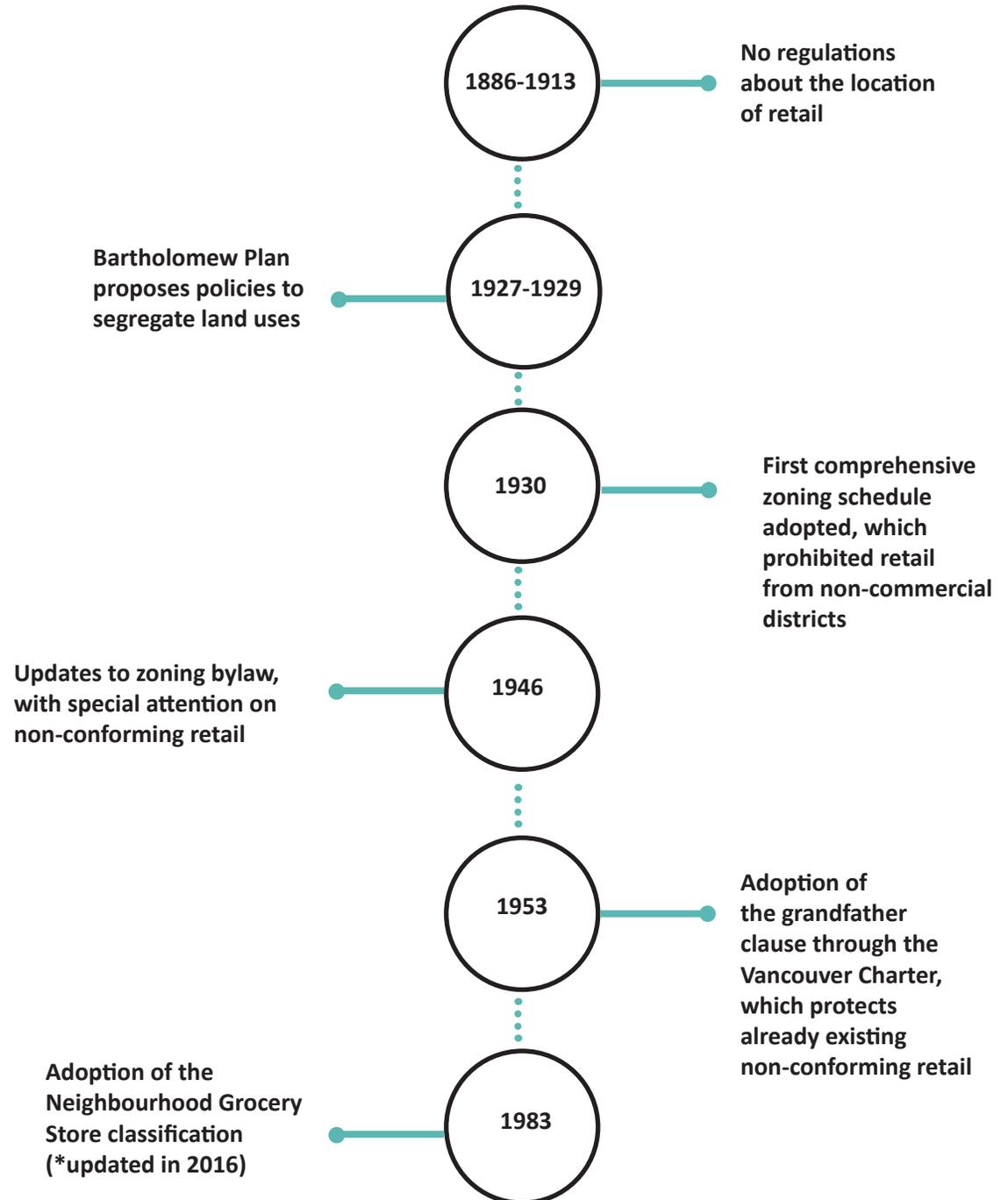
Neighbourhood shops are cherished largely for their social value. They are an important part of lived experience as most people can relate to walking to the corner store for milk, eggs or any other daily provisions. Several of Vancouver's corner stores were built in tandem with local public schools, meaning they have been sustained by students who frequent their premises for candy and treats.<sup>1</sup> These shops tend to be located in Vancouver's historically more diverse and working class neighbourhoods. Many new immigrants, including Italian, Chinese, Irish, Japanese, Portuguese, Eastern European and Scandinavian families, ran Vancouver's neighbourhood grocery and corner stores and lived on-site in an upstairs apartment or attached bungalow. Local shopkeepers often are deeply connected to their neighbours. They have been known to keep tabs on local families and even offer credit to loyal customers.

A recent study found Metro Vancouver to be lonely and isolating. The report reveals that Vancouver is a hard place to make friends and residents are becoming less active in community life.<sup>2</sup> Small-scale retail spaces serve as community anchors because they allow neighbours to meet and form connections. Today's affordability issues, however, are placing significant stress on the survival of the stores. In recent years there has been a renaissance of neighbourhood retail with some traditional groceries and corner stores becoming cafes or restaurants. This evolution highlights the ongoing social value of these stores and their use as gathering spaces. These spaces should continue to be maintained because they foster neighbourhood connections and strengthen community.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Kluckner, *Vancouver Remembered* (2006), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Vancouver Foundation, *Connect & Engage: A Survey of Metro Vancouver* (2017), retrieved from <https://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/sites/all/themes/connengage/files/VF-Connect-Engage-report.pdf>.

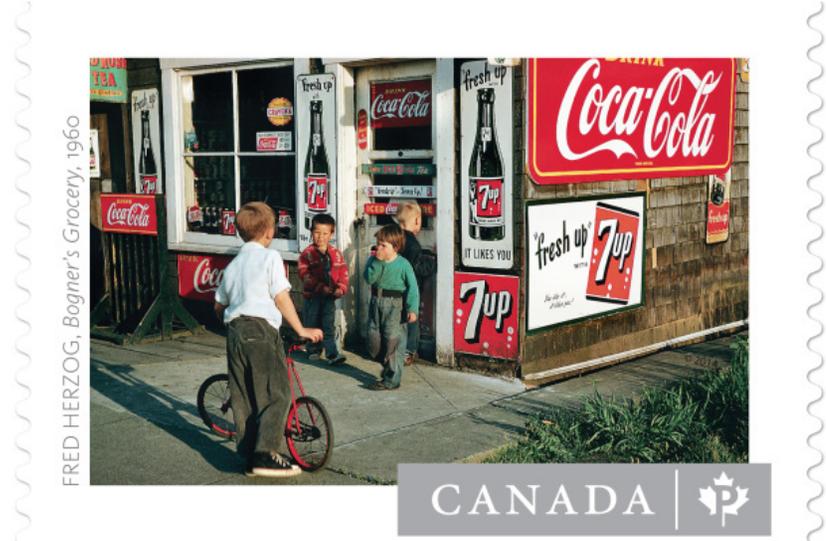
## 3.2 History of neighbourhood retail and policy in Vancouver



Much of Vancouver's neighbourhood retail is attributed to the historic streetcar and interurban rail lines that were built starting in 1890. Several of Vancouver's neighbourhoods, including Grandview-Woodland and Kitsilano, were distinct villages centered around street car stations.<sup>3</sup> The presence of neighbourhood retail today is largely a legacy of the walkable, transit-oriented and self-sustaining communities of Vancouver's past.<sup>4</sup> Most of Vancouver's neighbourhood retail sites arose before the onslaught of zoning. From 1886-1913, no regulations existed for the location of retail. Vancouver City Council established the Vancouver Town Planning Commission in 1926, following passage of the British Columbia's Town Planning Act in 1925.<sup>5</sup> This gave municipalities the authority to prepare and adopt official town plans, to enact zoning bylaws and to establish a town planning commission. Vancouver's first comprehensive town plan was prepared by Harland Bartholomew and Associates in 1928 and revised in 1929 to include the newly added municipalities of South Vancouver and Point Grey. The Bartholomew Plan recommended the separation of land uses and the relegation of retail to commercial high streets.<sup>6</sup> It also recommended the exclusion of retail and commercial "intrusions" from residential neighbourhoods. Bartholomew made it clear that removing retail uses from residential neighbourhoods was partially intended to protect property values.

Not all of Harland Bartholomew's plans were adopted by the City of Vancouver, but his ideas were highly influential, especially as they relate to zoning. Vancouver City Council adopted an interim zoning by-law in 1927 with the assistance of Bartholomew, followed by the first comprehensive zoning ordinance in 1928 and then a comprehensive zoning schedule in 1930. This segregated Vancouver into industrial, light industrial, commercial and single family districts. Only major streets within residential areas became

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Macdonald, "Vancouver Neighbourhoods," *The Great Vancouver Book*, ed. Chuck Davis (1997), 77.  
<sup>4</sup> Vanessa Kay, *Neighbourhood Retail Change: The Evolution of Local Shopping Areas in Vancouver, BC* (2010), 17.  
<sup>5</sup> Frances Christopherson, *Bibliography and Chronology of Regional Planning in British Columbia* (2000), 59.  
<sup>6</sup> Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *A Plan for the City of Vancouver, British Columbia* (1928), 221.



Bogner's Grocery at 158 W 5th Ave, taken by Vancouver photographer Fred Herzog in the 1960s and featured in Canada Post's Canadian photography stamp series.

***"The scattering of stores promiscuously throughout residence districts has done considerable damage to the city's appearance. The nearly universal custom of building stores out to the street line has hurt the appearance of a good many residence streets and at the same time has injured adjoining lots by making them less desirable for living purposes and reducing their saleable value. The zoning by-law will remedy this condition and tend to prevent residence districts from becoming blighted."***

**- Harland Bartholomew**

zoned for commercial purposes. The implementation of the comprehensive zoning schedule into the 1930s was slow, however, as the depressed economy led to constant expenditure cuts by City Council.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 1930s, the Town Planning Commission prioritized the implementation of a comprehensive zoning schedule, which was largely based on Bartholomew's recommendations.<sup>8</sup>

As communities developed after the 1930s, opportunities for neighbourhood retail became increasingly limited. A preliminary report on zoning in Vancouver in 1946, authored by Harland Bartholomew, recommended that non-conforming uses be given definite periods, such as 40 years, within which the non-conforming uses must be eliminated.<sup>9</sup> The report argues that non-conforming uses have not been eliminated fast enough because they possess substantial advantage as monopolies and owners desire to maintain them. The report calls for zoning bylaws be amended to ensure elimination of non-conforming uses and to remove "unsightly features" such as "metal signs, of variegated colours and sizes, attached to stores advertising various commodities, nationally distributed."<sup>10</sup>

However, already existing storefronts have been allowed to continue operating through the City of Vancouver's "Grandfather Clause," which was adopted in 1953.<sup>11</sup> The Grandfather Clause allows for the ongoing operation of non-conforming sites as long as the non-conforming use is not discontinued for a period of 90 days. The Board of Variance may also extend this period to a maximum of 180 days. While this policy has preserved some of Vancouver's non-conforming retail, these sites are still at risk of being lost if they cease business operations for more than 180 days.

Beyond segregating land uses, shifting retail and transportation patterns also started to work against neighbourhood retail in postwar Vancouver. Vancouver's streetcar and interurban rail lines were replaced by trolley and diesel buses in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> The widespread adoption of the private automobile encouraged larger shopping trips outside of one's immediate surroundings. Larger-scale department stores were able to offer lower prices and more



Figure 1: An advertisement for Shelly's 4X Bakery reflecting the racial anxieties of the time.

variety as they could achieve better economies of scale. Many Chinese-Canadian families started to take over the operations of Vancouver's existing corner and convenience stores, earning them the nickname of "Chinese groceries."<sup>13</sup> The changing nature of neighbourhood grocery proprietors led to some anxiety and racial prejudice amongst Vancouverites. **Figure 1** conveys an advertisement for Shelly's bread is sold only in grocery stores where parents could feel confident sending their children, reflecting the increasing anxiety over Asian operated neighbourhood groceries at the time.<sup>14</sup> Some argue that racial prejudice also contributed to the loss of corner grocery stores in Vancouver and the rise of modern supermarkets.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John Bottomley, *Ideology, Planning and the Landscape: The Business Community, Urban Reform and the Establishment of Town Planning in Vancouver, British Columbia 1900 - 1940* (1971), 1-310.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *A preliminary report upon zoning, Vancouver, British Columbia* (1946), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 51-54.

<sup>11</sup> Vancouver Charter, SBC 1953, Chapter 55, Section 568, retrieved from: <https://bylaws.vancouver.ca/zoning/appendd.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Kay, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver: The Last 25 Years* (2012), 72.

<sup>14</sup> William Curtis Shelly Fonds, Scrapbook 3, CVA, AM 163, Box 558-G.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Shackles, *Around the Corner: The Life and Death of Grandview's Corner Grocery Stores* (2015), 17.



Despite their exclusion from non-commercial districts, various City planning efforts have recognized the value of the few surviving neighbourhood-based retail sites and have created policy to protect them. As mentioned previously, the Grandfather Clause allows for the ongoing operation of non-conforming sites provided that the non-conforming use is not discontinued for a period longer than 6 months. Moreover, a policy for Grandview-Woodland that dates back to 1979 called for the upgrading of corner grocery stores in residential areas.<sup>16</sup> Similar policies for the preservation of corner stores in Mount Pleasant, Kensington-Cedar Cottage and Riley Park have also been cited in past municipal planning efforts.<sup>17</sup> The 2017 Grandview-Woodland Community Plan also includes policy that protects non-conforming retail sites.<sup>18</sup> One of its policies requires non-conforming sites in Grandview-Woodland 's RT (Two Family) area to be rezoned to commercial (C-1) to protect the retail use. The inclusion of ground floor commercial is also required as part of any future rezoning of existing non-conforming retail sites (that are zoned RM). The Plan also lists sites with former small-scale retail uses that have since been converted to residential. These specific sites require the inclusion of ground floor commercial as part of any future rezoning.

<sup>16</sup> City of Vancouver, *Grandview-Woodland Area Plan, Part 1: Grandview-Victoria (Single Family, Duplex and Conversion Areas)*, Standing Committee of Council on Planning and Development (1979).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> City of Vancouver, *Grandview-Woodland Community Plan (2017)*, retrieved from <https://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/grandview-woodland-community-plan.aspx>.

Since 1983, the City of Vancouver has recognized already existing neighbourhood grocery stores as a conditional use in most residential districts. Neighbourhood grocery stores (or NGS's) refer to "the use of premises in a residential district for the primary purpose of selling groceries and convenience goods, and may include selling and serving prepared food and beverages for consumption on or off the premises, but does not include the sale of beer, wine, spirits or other products that are intended for human consumption, containing more than 1% alcohol by volume."<sup>19</sup> Neighbourhood grocery stores are permitted as a conditional use in most residential zones as long they have been existing as of July 29, 1980. While this policy has allowed already existing stores to remain, it has disallowed new shops from being built. The role and function of Vancouver's neighbourhood grocery stores have also started to evolve in recent years. Many traditional corner or grocery stores have transformed from a more convenience model of retail into social neighbourhood cafes or restaurants that have added coffee, baked goods and artisanal items to their offerings. In 2016, Vancouver City Council made changes to the zoning regulations that govern the NGS definition to allow the sale of prepared food as long as the sale of groceries and conveniences goods remain the primary purpose.<sup>20</sup> While this has recognized neighbourhood grocery stores that also operate as cafes and restaurants, their present-day uses and functions are not necessarily reflected in the current policy. The sale of grocery items still need to be prioritized as the primary part of the business. Moreover, functions like liquor, which one might associate with restaurants and cafes, are specifically disallowed.

### The official regulations for neighbourhood grocery stores include:

- Neighbourhood grocery stores existing as of July 29, 1980 are permitted in any R district except for the FM-1 district.
- The maximum permitted frontage for a site is 15.3 m.
- The maximum permitted floor area for all retail and storage space is 110 m<sup>2</sup>.
- The maximum permitted number of indoor and outdoor seats is 16.
- Live entertainment is not permitted.
- Before granting a development permit, the Director of Planning must:
  - notify the surrounding property owners and residents; consider:
    - the design of any proposed building addition;
    - the proposed solid waste program for collecting, storing and disposal of garbage and recycling; and
    - the impact on adjacent property owners and residents of a proposed building addition or solid waste program.
- The Director of Planning may relax the provisions of this section 11.6 with regards to maximum frontage and the applicable zoning district regulations with regards to setbacks, floor space ratio or site coverage, in order to facilitate the rehabilitation of an existing neighbourhood grocery store or dwelling unit in conjunction with neighbourhood grocery store.

<sup>19</sup> City of Vancouver, *Zoning and Development By-law: Section 2 Definitions* (2018), retrieved from <https://bylaws.vancouver.ca/zoning/Sec02.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> City of Vancouver, *A By-law to amend Zoning and Development By-law No. 3575 regarding definition of theatre, sites in floor plains, laneway houses, neighbourhood grocery stores, bonus density and miscellaneous amendments* (2016).

On a broader scale, many City of Vancouver initiatives support the creation of compact, walkable and complete communities, including the Healthy City Strategy, Greenest City Action Plan and Transportation 2040.<sup>21</sup> The availability of local shops and services are a key component of this as they support sustainability goals, strengthen the economy and increase food security. Current planning efforts, including City-Wide Plan, Making Room and neighbourhood-scale planning projects support initiatives like local retail that improve transportation, accessibility, health and community.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the preservation of neighbourhood retail aligns with the City of Vancouver's recently adopted Climate Emergency Response, which aims to limit warming to 1.5 °C.<sup>23</sup> One goal of the Climate Emergency Response is to have 90% of people within an easy walk/roll of their daily needs by 2030. Neighbourhood shops play a big role in the formation of compact and complete communities as they offer services and provisions within walking or rolling distance of where people live. Moreover, these stores support the City's resiliency work as they foster community building and connection, which will lead people to more easily help each other and access resources in the case of an emergency.



706 Victoria Dr, formerly the site of Scott's Grocery (2014); Jason Statler Photography.

<sup>21</sup> City of Vancouver, *A Healthy City For All* (2014), retrieved from [https://council.vancouver.ca/20141029/documents/ptec1\\_appendix\\_a\\_final.pdf](https://council.vancouver.ca/20141029/documents/ptec1_appendix_a_final.pdf); City of Vancouver, *Greenest City 2020 Action Plan* (2011), retrieved from <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Greenest-city-action-plan.pdf>; City of Vancouver, *Transportation 2040* (2012), retrieved from [https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Transportation\\_2040\\_Plan\\_as\\_adopted\\_by\\_Council.pdf](https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/Transportation_2040_Plan_as_adopted_by_Council.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> City of Vancouver, *Vancouver City-wide Plan* (2019), retrieved from <https://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/vancouver-city-wide-plan.aspx>; City of Vancouver, *Making Room Housing Program* (2019), retrieved from <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/making-room.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> City of Vancouver, *Climate Emergency Response* (2019), retrieved from <https://council.vancouver.ca/20190424/documents/cfsc1.pdf>.

## 4.0 Literature review



Norquay Store at 4743 Slocan St (1978); City of Vancouver Archives.



McLean Grocery at 1178 McLean Dr (captured between 1960-1980); City of Vancouver Archives.

Small-scale neighbourhood retail includes commercial establishments that are within walking distance of their customers' residences. More commonplace before the advent of the automobile, these shops have been in steady decline as retail and transportation patterns have changed. However, the neighbourhood shops that remain are considered highly desirable as they help produce healthier and safer communities. This section summarizes the current literature on neighbourhood retail and how it impacts community, walkability, public health and local economic development.

Scholars have highlighted the role of neighbourhood stores as community institutions. For example, a study based in Galway, Ireland investigated the relationship between neighbourhood design and social capital. The study indicated that people who live in more walkable neighbourhoods have higher levels of social capital because they are more likely to know their neighbours, trust others and be socially engaged.<sup>24</sup> Jane Jacobs writes about the role of "public characters," often local shopkeepers, who help ensure neighbourhoods are safe and predictable by keeping their eyes on the street.<sup>25</sup> Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg believes that life is balanced between three realms of experience: the home, the workplace and the third place. Oldenburg defines the third place as the setting for informal public life.<sup>26</sup> These include places like the local tavern, laundromat or general store. They offer residents neutral ground for conversation, shared fellowship and playful sociability. Oldenburg warns that third spaces are disappearing as suburbanization and mass corporatization change the face of local retail.

Neighbourhood shops tend to have a strong social purpose. A Toronto-based study, for example, found that some small ethnic grocery stores offer social

credit schemes to customers. The credit is predicated on existing social relationships and it allows low-income residents to afford food and other amenities in a dignified manner as they are able to pay later without penalty or interest.<sup>27</sup> Neighbourhood shops have also been valued for their role in the new immigrant experience. New immigrants, especially racialized women, often are shunned by formal sector jobs and find refuge in entrepreneurship.<sup>28</sup> A study of communities in Ontario discovered that immigrant-owned mom and pop shops foster community and resilience by hiring marginalized people who deal with underemployment issues.<sup>29</sup> These stores operate in socially conscientious manner by working against labour inequality.

Independent retailers are also known for their ability to foster placemaking and neighbourhood identity.<sup>30</sup> Their ability to offer a unique and local experience provides customers with a sense of authenticity. Journalist and author Alan Ehrenhalt writes nostalgically about a time when every consumer product was sold in a local store and predicated on genuine human interaction.<sup>31</sup> He calls for the reintroduction of authenticity and neighbourhood identity into local commerce. He highlights attempts at this, both successful and unsuccessful, such as the "town centre" movement which furnishes suburban malls with town squares, sidewalk cafes and pedestrian friendly streets. While this recreates traditional retail in a physical sense, Ehrenhalt argues that it is cheapened by the fact that it tends to be occupied by large scale, nationally-operated retailers. The author contends that the resurrection of neighbourhood retail is more successful in cases where niche merchants revive historic shops to sell local items. Ehrenhalt notes that heritage preservation strategies can renew retail that fosters a strong sense of place.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin M. Leyden, "Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Public Health* 93 (2003), 1546-1551.

<sup>25</sup> Jane Jacobs, "The uses of sidewalk: contact," *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1992), 55-74.

<sup>26</sup> Ray Oldenburg, "Our Vanishing "Third Places,"" *Planning Commissioners Journal* 25 (1997).

<sup>27</sup> Morris Komakech and Suzanne Jackson, "A Study of the Role of Small Ethnic Retail Grocery Stores in Urban Renewal in a Social Housing Project, Toronto, Canada," *J Urban Health* 93:3 (2016), 414-424.

<sup>28</sup> Caroline S. Hossein and Semhar A. Berhe, "Why immigrant Mom & Pop shops are really social ventures," *The Conversation* (2018), retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/why-immigrant-mom-and-pop-shops-are-really-social-ventures-100076>.



Cardero Grocery at 1078 Cardero St (1978); City of Vancouver Archives.

Many neighbourhood-based shops were built prior to World War II and the rise of the automobile. As such, today's surviving neighbourhood-based shops tend to be operated in older buildings. Jane Jacobs argues that neighbourhoods with a mix of older buildings are inherently livelier than neighbourhoods that consist of only new construction.<sup>32</sup> This is because not all businesses are able to sustain the high cost of new construction. Older buildings create more affordable conditions for experimental and riskier businesses, such as foreign restaurants, independent stores or pawn shops. Jacobs argues that these businesses foster vitality and draw people into a neighbourhood. Jacobs calls for the safeguarding of older buildings to sustain the organic, complex and spontaneous systems that are part of every healthy city. However, Jacobs also warns that the preservation of older buildings should not hamper conditions that generate heterogeneity. The strategic integration of newer buildings with older buildings is essential to the creation of diverse neighbourhoods. Another characteristic of neighbourhood retail is that it tends to be located in smaller retail spaces. Researchers have argued that smaller units, like those that house general or corner stores, serve as lower-risk stepping stones for local entrepreneurs who are looking to break into the retail market.<sup>33</sup>

The conception and location of neighbourhood retail is largely attributed to gendered ideals of community and domesticity. A study of female shopping patterns in the U.K. claims that neighbourhood shops were built to facilitate convenient shopping for housewives, particularly those with young children.<sup>34</sup> These shops are often located in areas where shopping trips can be combined with other domestic daily journeys, such as taking children to school. Feminist

geographer Sophie Bowlby argues that these stores emphasized “the existing separation of areas of domestic labour from those devoted to production on waged labour.”<sup>35</sup> Sociological changes in retailing economics and shopping habits in the postwar era have undermined the viability of neighbourhood shopping districts. As women started to work more, dual income households offered an expanding new market to retailers. Improved distribution methods, rising incomes and increased car ownership led to the rise of the supermarket. While grocery shopping continues to largely be seen as a woman's task, supermarkets offer a modern experience where shopping can be done quickly and efficiently.

Despite the prevalence of larger-scale retailers, neighbourhood shops are highly valued for their ability to foster compact and self-sustaining communities. The revival of local shops aligns with neighbourhoods becoming less car-oriented and more conducive to walking, cycling and transit riding, especially for non-work trips. Neighbourhood-based retail can help shift travel patterns to reduce energy use and carbon emissions. For example, a study based in Austin, Texas revealed that local shopping districts give residents the option to drive less.<sup>36</sup> Another study suggested that households decrease vehicle miles traveled when they are exposed to higher neighbourhood accessibility, including walkable shopping.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, research conducted by Susan L Handy compared non-work travel patterns in historic pedestrian-oriented neighbourhoods and more car-oriented areas in the San Francisco Bay Area. She found that those living in more historic, mixed-use neighbourhoods made two to four more walk or bicycle trips to neighbourhood shops than those living in areas that

<sup>29</sup> Caroline S Hossein, *Social innovations in Ontario: An analysis of self help groups, cooperatives, diaspora businesses and social enterprises among African-Canadians and racialized people* (2018).

<sup>30</sup> Linda Laniado, *Place making in new retail developments: the role of local, independently owned business* (2005), 1-103.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Ehrenhalt, “Community and the corner store: Retrieving human scale commerce,” *The Responsive Community* (1999), 30-40.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, “The need for aged buildings,” 187-200.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Carley, Karryn Kirk and Sarah McIntosh, *Retailing, sustainability and neighbourhood regeneration* (2001).

<sup>34</sup> Sophie R. Bowlby, “Planning for women to shop in postwar Britain,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2 (1984), 179-199.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Susan L. Handy and Kelly J. Clifton, “Local shopping as a strategy for reducing automobile travel,” *Transportation* 28 (2001), 317-346.

<sup>37</sup> Kevin J. Krizek, “Residential Relocation and Changes in Urban Travel: Does Neighbourhood-Scale Urban Form Matter?” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 69:3 (2003), 265-281.

<sup>38</sup> Susan L. Handy, “Regional versus local accessibility: New-traditional development and its implications for non-work travel,” *Built Environment* 18:4 (1993), 256-67.



Sunkist Grocery at 1101 E 13th Ave (1978); City of Vancouver Archives.

are served by more car-based, strip-retail establishments.<sup>38</sup> As such, it is clear that the integration of retail and other services into residential areas helps to create communities that are self-reliant and less dependent on automobiles.

Several studies have found neighbourhood-based amenities like local shops to be associated with the health and wellbeing of residents.<sup>39</sup> Retail that is within walking distance from one's home not only promotes increased levels of activity and sustainable travel choices, but also access to healthy food. A study in Baltimore, Maryland, for instance, found corner stores to be helpful with the promotion of nutritious food in low-income urban communities.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, several studies have shown lower rates of obesity to be associated with walkable access to healthy food stores.<sup>41</sup> A New Orleans-based study discovered that fresh vegetable availability within 100 m, or about one city block, of a residence is a positive predictor of vegetable intake.<sup>42</sup> Other studies, however, have shown that convenience or corner stores promote the sale of unhealthy items, especially in low income or minority neighbourhoods.<sup>43</sup> Regardless, neighbourhood-based shops highlight the role of environments in shaping dietary behaviour and food security.

It is important to note that the viability of neighbourhood retail can be challenging. A study conducted in Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, found that neighbourhood retail to be related to parking, zoning and neighbourhood

opposition issues.<sup>44</sup> It can also be difficult for isolated neighbourhood-based businesses to attract the foot traffic that is necessary to stay operational. However, researchers have found that creating additional opportunities for neighbourhood retail can foster an ecosystem that attracts more customers.<sup>45</sup> Neighbourhood stores are also often left in the role of small convenience or grocery stores that charge high prices to stay afloat. Economist Frederick Guy attributes this to the competition from car-oriented and larger chain stores, which raises prices and reduces variety in walkable shops.<sup>46</sup> This also poses an unfair burden on non-drivers who depend on walkable retail.<sup>47</sup> Further, Noreen C. McDonald et al. argue that changes in cultural behaviour have led parents to be reluctant to let their children walk freely to the corner store to buy a treat, a practice that small corner stores often rely on.<sup>48</sup> Scholars have noted that the rise of online retailing has also interfered with the success of small-scale retailers and independently owned stores.<sup>49</sup>

This review offers an understanding of the foundational literature that pertains to neighbourhood-based retail. Many of these studies are context-driven and their applications will inevitably differ from what can be applied in Vancouver. Nevertheless, these studies highlight the role of neighbourhood-based stores as community resources and amenities.

<sup>39</sup> KG Bauman et al., "The physical environment and physical activity: a critical appraisal of review articles," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 32 (2007), 361-369. GW Heath et al., "Task Force on Community Preventive Services: The effectiveness of urban design and land use and transport policies and practices to increase physical activity," *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (2006), S55-S71.

<sup>40</sup> Hee-Job Song et al., "A corner store intervention in a low-income urban community is associated with increased availability and sale of some healthy foods," *Public Health Nutrition* 12:11 (2009), 2060-2067.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Rundle et al., "Neighborhood food environment and walkability predict obesity in New York City," *Environment health perspectives* 117.3 (2009), 442; Cathleen Zick et al., "Running to the store? The relationship between neighbourhood environments and the risk of obesity," *Soc Sci Med* 69:10 (2009), 493-500.

<sup>42</sup> J Nicholas Bodor et al., "Neighbourhood fruit and vegetable availability and consumption: The role of small food stores in an urban environment," *Public Health Nutrition* 11:4 (2008), 413-20.

<sup>43</sup> Kamila Kisko et al., "Corner Store Purchases in a Low-Income Urban Community in NYC," *Journal of Community Health* 40:6 (2015), 1084-1090.

<sup>44</sup> WP Macht, "Bringing downtown to Charlotte's suburbs," *Urban Land* 68:1, 94-95.

<sup>45</sup> Dina Botwinick, "Saving mom and pop: zoning and legislating for small and local business retention," *Journal of law and policy* 18:2 (2010), 607-653.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Guy, "Small, Local and Cheap? Walkable and Car-Oriented Retail in Competition," *Spatial Economic Analysis* 8:4 (2013), 425-442.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Noreen C. McDonald et al., "Why Parents Drive Children to School: Implications for Safe Routes to School Programs," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 75:3 (2009), 331-342.

<sup>49</sup> Jill Grant and Katherine Perrot, "Where is the Cafe? The Challenge of Making Retail Uses Viable in Mixed-use Suburban Developments," *Urban Studies* 48:1, 177-195.

## 5.0 Research findings



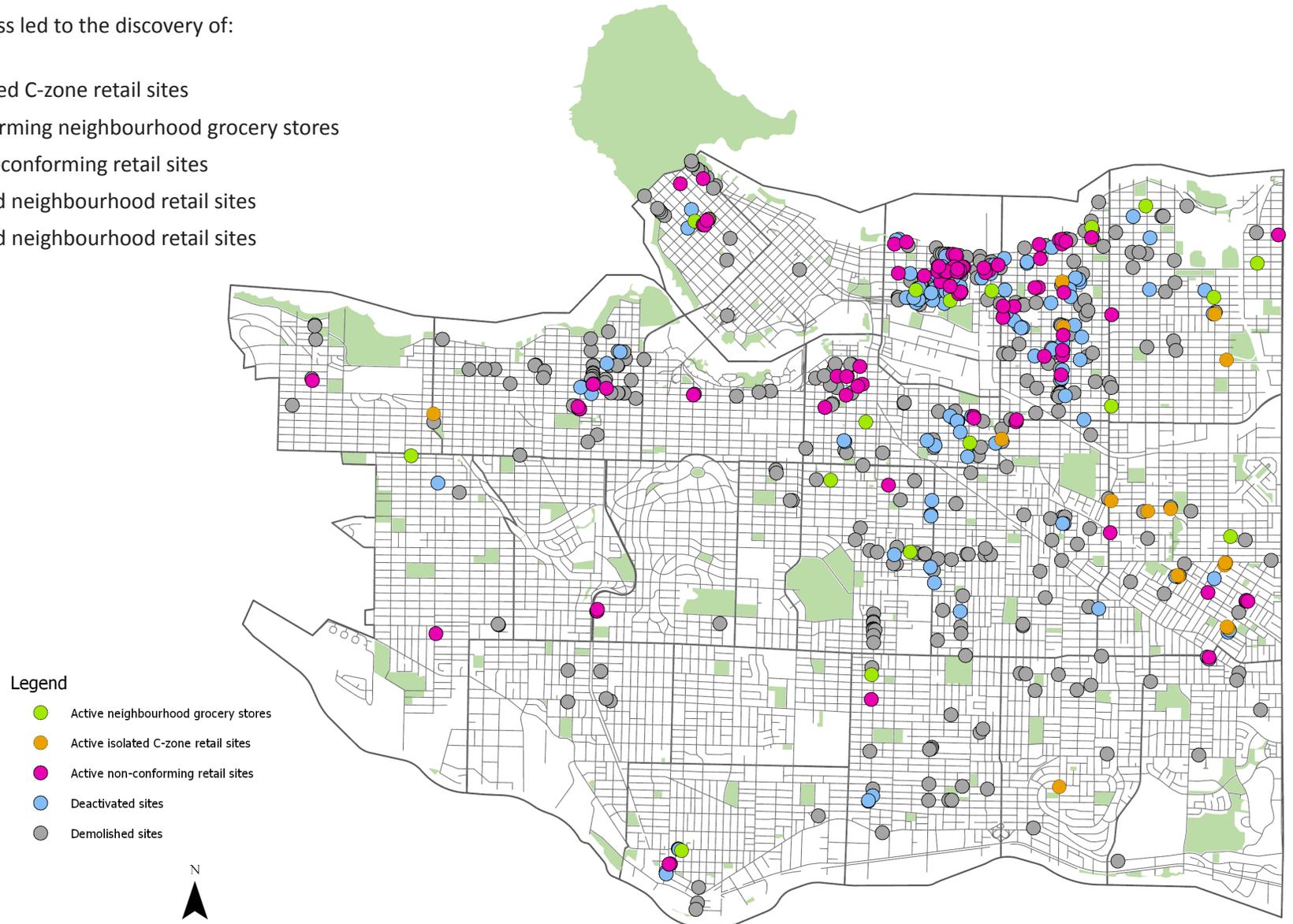
Cheramy's Grocery at 2262 Nanaimo St (1978); City of Vancouver Archives.

# 5.1 Inventory findings

This section details the neighbourhood retail findings that resulted from research into the BC City directories, archival research and ground truthing.

The inventorying process led to the discovery of:

- 19 active isolated C-zone retail sites
- 25 active conforming neighbourhood grocery stores
- 101 active non-conforming retail sites
- 123 deactivated neighbourhood retail sites
- 364 demolished neighbourhood retail sites



A large majority of active and inactive neighbourhood businesses were found to be on the Eastside of Vancouver, with relatively fewer found in Vancouver's Westside neighbourhoods. This might be attributed to the fact that retail has often been isolated to commercial high streets in Westside neighbourhoods. The land that was granted to the Canadian Pacific Railway by the provincial government in 1885 only permitted retail along arterials. Neighbourhoods like Shaughnessy Heights have long been dedicated to residential uses.<sup>50</sup> However, the Kitsilano neighbourhood reveals a cluster of retail close to where the interurban line used to run and where the Arbutus Greenway is today.

Neighbourhood shops and retail have a historic pattern of being located in Vancouver's historically working-class and diverse neighbourhoods.<sup>51</sup> Higher concentrations of previous and existing retail appear in Vancouver's Strathcona and Grandview Woodland neighbourhoods, in particular. Strathcona has 41 active small scale neighbourhood businesses. Strathcona also has the highest amount of deactivated neighbourhood retail sites (48), meaning that the use has changed but the storefront typology remains. This suggests an opportunity to reactivate these spaces and reintroduce additional neighbourhood retail into these neighbourhoods.

**Appendix B** (p. 36) includes maps that showcase neighbourhood retail by decade in Vancouver from the 1900s to the present. The maps reveal increasing instances of neighbourhood retail until the 1930s and then a significant decrease starting in the 1940s. This is likely as a result of the Bartholomew Plan segregating land uses in 1928 and labeling retail in residential neighbourhoods as intrusions. While 632 sites of neighbourhood scale retail have been identified through this project, only 145 active businesses remain today.



Chuck's Grocery at 2076 Venables St (1978); City of Vancouver Archives.

<sup>50</sup> City of Vancouver, "Shaughnessy," (2019), retrieved from <https://vancouver.ca/news-calendar/shaughnessy.aspx>.

<sup>51</sup> Kerry Gold, "Corner stores mean solid neighbourhoods," *The Globe and Mail* (2013), retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/corner-stores-mean-solid-neighbourhoods/article14310188/>.

## 5.2 Typologies

### Types of retail

While neighbourhood retail is traditionally associated with grocery and convenience stores, the inventory of residential and industrial districts revealed many other types of retail. Below include the categories of retail that were identified, separated by non-conforming and legally conforming sites:

#### Non-conforming neighbourhood retail businesses:

1 Alterations service	1 Brewing supplies shop	2 Furniture shops	1 Pet grooming service
1 Antique shop	7 Cafes	4 Grocery stores	1 Pharmacy
6 Artist studios	1 Cheese shop	2 Hair salons	1 Printing service
2 Auto service shops	4 Clothing shops	1 Ice cream parlour	24 Restaurants
1 Bakery	7 Community services organizations	1 Jewelry shop	1 Spa
1 Bar	4 Convenience stores	1 Life coaching service	1 Spice store
2 Barbers	1 Educational service	1 Mattress store	1 Sporting goods store
1 Bike shop	2 Electronics service shops	1 Military surplus shop	2 Flooring service shops
1 Book shop	1 Equipment supplies store	1 Moving company	1 Toy shop
2 Breweries/ Wineries	1 Flower shop	6 Offices	1 Yoga studio

#### Legally conforming neighbourhood retail businesses:

1 Bike shop	1 Educational service	1 Insurance service
1 Chiropractor	3 Electronics service	1 Newspaper service
1 Community services organization	15 Grocery stores	1 Restaurant
3 Convenience shops	11 Grocery stores + cafes	1 Wedding store
1 Dentist	1 Hair salon	

### Small size

Neighbourhood retail sites in Vancouver tend to be small, usually around 250 to 1000 square feet. This means less space for storage, refrigeration, inventory and seating. Their small size limits their capacity as a business as they are not able to achieve the same economies of scale as other larger businesses. This limits a neighbourhood shop's ability to refrigerate perishable items. Deliveries often have ordering minimums, which is also difficult for shops with storage constraints.

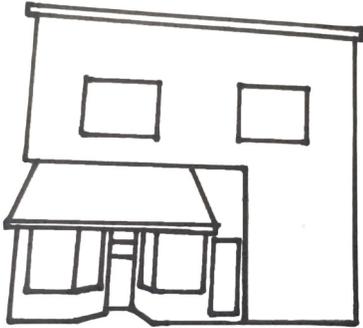
### Proximity to other shops

Research has shown that isolated retail often attracts less foot traffic compared to retail that is close to other shops and services.<sup>51</sup> **92 out of the 145 active** inventoried neighbourhood retail sites are situated within 100 metres of active or deactivated retail. This suggests that these shops are perhaps surviving off of nearby retail or have been previously sustained by neighbouring shops of the past. These unique shops could become more frequented if policy permitted the (re)introduction of additional retail uses within these non-commercial districts.

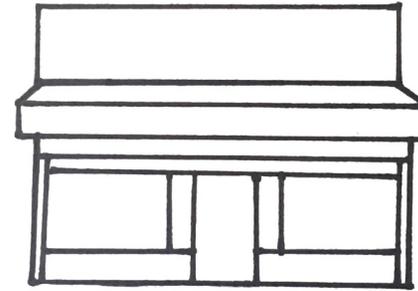
<sup>51</sup> Dina Botwinick, "Saving mom and pop: zoning and legislating for small and local business retention," *Journal of law and policy* 18:2 (2010), 607-653.

## Typologies

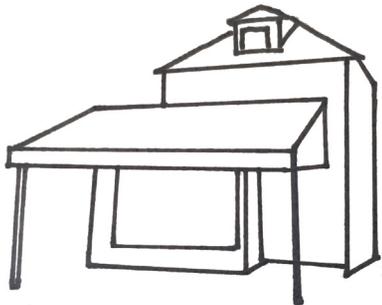
There are a number of different neighbourhood retail typologies that exist in Vancouver. They often feature minimal setbacks, sheltered doors and large transom windows. Below include some of the main neighbourhood retail typologies that exist in Vancouver:



Shop on the ground floor and residential unit(s) on the second floor



Small, box-like single-storey shop



Shop that is set within the front yard of an attached single family home



Shop within the ground floor of a single family home



1078 Cardero St, formerly the site of Cardero Grocery (2019); Jacqueline Hunter.

## 5.3 Interview findings

This section summarizes the feedback that has been received through interviews with operators of small-scale neighbourhood businesses.

Interview respondents were first asked to share the story of their business and how they got started. The amount of time that respondents reported operating their businesses for ranged from 7 months to 11 years. Every stakeholder reported that they took over the business from someone else, highlighting the grandfathered nature of neighbourhood retail and the unique legacy of these stores in Vancouver's landscape.

The majority of respondents indicated that customers are either walking or cycling to their premises, with a few citing that some customers drive, especially if their business draws tourism or if they offer specialty items. Similarly, most respondents stated that the majority of their clientele consists of locals or people living directly in the neighbourhood. Every business engaged with sells their products in store, but a few indicated that they are considering taking their sales online as well.



## 5.3.1 Values

Interview respondents also invited to share what they enjoy and value most about operating a neighbourhood-based business:

### Community

Many responded that they enjoy the community connection that comes with operating a neighbourhood business. As one business owner reflected: “getting to know our neighbours is the coolest part about opening this place.” Business owners indicated that they value becoming part of their customers’ everyday routine. We heard that some of these shops offer credit to loyal customers. We also heard that some of these shops offer specialty and more affordable items to low-income residents, such as toilet paper by the roll instead of the entire package. The connection that these shops foster also increases neighbourhood safety and camaraderie. For instance, one owner of a neighbourhood grocery store reported that neighbours came to her assistance after someone broke into her shop. Her neighbours helped her call 9-11 as English is her second language.

### Healthy living

Other respondents suggested that small-scale neighbourhood retail helps promote healthier lifestyles. For instance, one operator of a NGS that specializes in health food indicated that his store has shifted the behaviours of customers who live in the neighbourhood. He states: “usually people have to drive to health food stores. But ours is one that is offered in a neighbourhood, right out front of people’s doors... it changed the way people think about their lifestyles.” While neighbourhood retail has the potential to promote healthier choices, corner and convenience stores are also known to promote surgery items and other snacks that lack in nutritional value. There has to be a level of intention on the types of products offered for this type of retail to promote healthier lifestyles.

### Neighbourhood amenities

Stakeholders revealed that their shops serve as neighbourhood gathering places. We heard that this type of retail is unique because it is removed from the commotion that often accompanies shops on high streets. As one respondent highlights, “the energy of not being on a main commercial street is so nice.” Another stakeholder indicated that, with the high cost of living in Vancouver, “you can’t host people in your small little unit anymore.” Cafes and restaurants that are within walking distance of one’s front door become neighbourhood amenities that allow people to extend their living rooms. A few respondents even indicated that their shops have been featured in promotional materials for local real estate listings.

### Heritage

The heritage value of neighbourhood retail in Vancouver was also brought up in our interviews. For instance, one respondent bought a grandfathered-in restaurant that was non-conforming in a residential zone and had been operating for over 62 years. He attributes his interest in the business to its heritage significance, stating:

“people would have been really upset if the restaurant had just closed and gone away. So we identified an opportunity to continue this legacy and property... It makes good business sense to be able to leverage those stories.”

This highlights the historic role of non-conforming neighbourhood retail and how it is highly valued by the community. These sites are also highly vulnerable to loss, as neighbourhood grocery stores or grandfathered in non-conforming retail sites lose their retail use if it is a gap in operations. If the business owner had not bought the restaurant within 6 months of the previous owner’s closure, this neighbourhood institution would have been lost forever.

## 5.3.2 Challenges

When asked about the challenges they face with operating a neighbourhood-based business, interview respondents highlighted the following issues:

### Permits

The majority of the stakeholders reported that permitting is a major challenge that comes with setting up a business in a non-commercial district. This is likely attributed to the fact that neighbourhood retail is not well recognized in current City policies. We heard that long wait times and onerous processes can bankrupt a business because they are forced to remain unopened and pay expensive rents while waiting for permits to be approved. One stakeholder even suggested that people interested in neighbourhood businesses should leave Vancouver because permitting is such a barrier. We also heard that the arduousness of it all encourages proprietors to operate illegally and avoid the permitting process altogether.

### High operating costs

Not uncommon to all small businesses, several respondents cited high operating costs as a challenge to their business. One interview respondent revealed that she kept an additional full time job during the first year of operations so that she could adequately pay her staff. Another respondent revealed that “I would make the same amount of money operating it as I would renting it.” Increasing construction costs, increasing taxes, high rents and rising labour costs limit profit margins and hinder the viability of small businesses. This is especially true for businesses that are off of a main commercial street or located in less trafficked areas.

### Neighbourhood grocery store classification

While already existing neighbourhood grocery store are permitted in most residential districts, this use category is the only zoning and planning bylaw that recognizes retail in a residential zone. We heard of a number of issues that come with the NGS classification, with two major challenges coming to the forefront:

#### Sale of groceries

Neighbourhood grocery stores are permitted to sell prepared food as long as the sale of groceries is the primary part of their business. While this has allowed more cafe or restaurant-style operations in traditional neighbourhood grocery stores, they are still forced to prioritize the sale of groceries. One respondent who runs a cafe under the retail use of a NGS reported that: “90 per cent of our revenue comes from the café side of the operations. Only 10 per cent is driven by grocery sales.” This suggests that the regulations that apply to neighbourhood grocery stores should be rethought or expanded to apply to different types of retail.

#### Seating

Neighbourhood grocery stores are allowed to have a total of 16 indoor and outdoor seats on their premises. We heard that seating limitations can make it difficult for neighbourhood cafes or restaurants to reach the volumes necessary to stay operational. Customers are not necessarily using these shops for quick shopping trips, especially with the lower prices and variety offered by today’s supermarkets. We heard that customers are instead drawn to the ambiance and charm of neighbourhood cafes and restaurants. They want to be able to sit with their coffee and enjoy the space. Stakeholders expressed a desire for more seating to better reflect the nature of their business.

***“It was definitely a challenge to have City Hall understand our vision.”***  
***- Interview respondent***



## Competition from larger and online retailers

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we heard that neighbourhood based-retail faces competition from larger chains and supermarkets. As one business owner puts it, “we have Buy Low right there and there’s Save On and No Frills over there. Our buying power is so small that there’s no way that we are able to compete with any of the larger grocery chains.” These shops also receive less foot traffic compare to retail located on high streets or within commercial districts. This suggests that neighbourhood shops survive off of the niche products or the unique ambience that their store provides.

## Building upgrades

The majority of small-scale neighbourhood businesses in Vancouver are located in small and older buildings. These buildings are often in need of significant upgrades, which tend to fall on tenants and lease owners. One respondent, who operates a neighbourhood cafe in an over 100 year-old building, was faced with a \$35,000 BC Hydro upgrade shortly after she signed the lease. These kinds of costs can bankrupt a small business. There are also huge financial penalties if a tenant chooses to break a lease. While these older buildings are charming, their condition can present challenges to business operators.

## Parking

Several respondents indicated that parking can be a challenge. One business owner reported some of his customers drive long distances to his shop because he offers specialty items. The lack of customer parking is challenging because his business is located in a residential area. Another respondent said that they do not have a loading zone near their store, which makes deliveries difficult. While neighbourhood retail promotes walkability and more active forms of transportation, parking is sometimes necessary, especially when it involves the deliveries and loading needs of a business.

## Other challenges

Other challenges mentioned by stakeholders include the shelf-life of products, especially if they are selling baking products or produce. Moreover, a few business owners stated that they faced a brief period of neighbourhood opposition when they first opened, but they eventually became supported and valued by the community.

***“We are on our way to becoming a Starbucks city.”  
- Interview respondent***



2146 Yew St (2019); Jacqueline Hunter.

### 5.3.3 Opportunities

Business owners were asked to share their ideas on opportunities for small-scale neighbourhood retail in Vancouver. Below are some ideas that arose out of those conversations.

#### **Making use of previous storefronts**

One business owner felt it would be a benefit to the community to make use of the various empty storefronts that are located in non-commercial areas. She states:

“there are so many cool buildings out there... Before the major grocery stores were created, this is how it used to be. And now they are just sitting there vacant. It would be so cool to just be able to walk and have a coffee and pick up a carton of milk and not have to cross a major intersection or drive to do it.”

Vancouver’s affordability crisis is placing pressure on all sectors, including retail and small businesses. The push for housing, especially, is placing pressure on existing affordable retail space and resulting in the ongoing loss of valuable spaces. It is important that affordable retail space is retained and enhanced for the future of economic, social and cultural activities. Allowing the reintroduction of retail or into empty neighbourhood storefronts or introducing additional uses to zoning districts could be way to maintain accessible spaces for the future.

#### **Pop-ups**

Another business owner spoke of the opportunity of hosting pop-ups in their store with other local makers and artisans. Increasing rents and property taxes make it difficult for retailers to operate in a brick and mortar fashion. Sharing retail space can help offer more affordable spaces to small businesses and local entrepreneurs.

#### **Tourism and film**

One of the operators that we spoke to has received numerous international accolades in the media for his neighbourhood cafe and shop. This has brought in many tourists to his business, suggesting that neighbourhood-based retail offers a rare and sought-after experience to customers. This business owner has also rented out his shop for movies and filming, bringing to light an interesting connection to Vancouver’s film industry. This reiterates the value of these shops and indicates how they play into other industries that go beyond retail.



### 5.3.4 Factors for success

Interviewees were asked to share what has made their neighbourhood-based business successful. They were also asked to offer advice to those who are interested in getting involved in this kind of work. Below include some of the main indicators of success for small-scale neighbourhood retail.

#### Community connection

Every respondent mentioned a strong community connection as integral to their success as a neighbourhood business. One participant mentioned that her customers are always asking how her grocery store is doing and choose to frequent the premises often so that she can maintain a good business. Moreover, one operator explained that the community led a petition with 80,000 signatures to save his business when his shop was at risk of being shut down for permitting reasons. This community response led Vancouver City Council to change the policy that governs neighbourhood grocery stores to legitimize shops that also operate as neighbourhood restaurants or cafes. Clearly, this type of retail is valued by the community and maintaining a neighbourhood connection is key to operating a successful business.

#### Hard work

Interview respondents stressed that the amount of work that goes into a neighbourhood business should not be underestimated. Several respondents cited that having previous hospitality experience is an asset. One business owner mentioned that it's helpful to have a detailed business plan prior to opening. He states: "you have to focus on your end user and what they need and what forms their daily habits. At a value offer that they're going to respond to. So context of your neighbourhood is critical there." Several other respondents indicated that there are always challenges that come along the way so it's important to also stay adaptable and ready for unforeseen circumstances.

#### Other factors

One participant owns the building where he operates his cafe. This has brought in different income streams because he is able also to rent out the apartments upstairs. While this has helped keep his business afloat, owning the building, especially in Vancouver's expensive real estate market, is not necessarily within reach for all small business owners.

## 6.0 Ways to better support small-scale neighbourhood retail



Marche St. George at 4393 St George St (2015); Megan Stewart.

After interviewing operators with neighbourhood retail experience, some of the main learnings were compiled to provide guidance for the creation of policy to support neighbourhood retail:

***“City Hall’s role is not to hinder business. Their role is to think about how can we make this work.”  
- Interview respondent***

### **Land use regulations through rezonings**

Past municipal planning efforts have preserved some neighbourhood stores by rezoning the site to commercial. This allows a variety of commercial uses within the retail space and helps to preclude future property owners from converting the space to another use. Continuing to use rezonings as a tool to protect retail uses can help maintain these shops for the future.

### **Introduce additional uses to zoning districts**

The viability of any shop is challenged in non-commercial districts. Any business needs foot traffic in order to survive. Looking at land uses that surround Vancouver’s neighbourhood shops and introducing additional uses to zoning districts could encourage more opportunities for neighbourhood retail. This could foster the emergence of new shops around already existing neighbourhood-based stores. Additional shops would attract more customers and foot traffic and would help keep this unique type of retail sustainable.

### **Updating the Grandfather Clause**

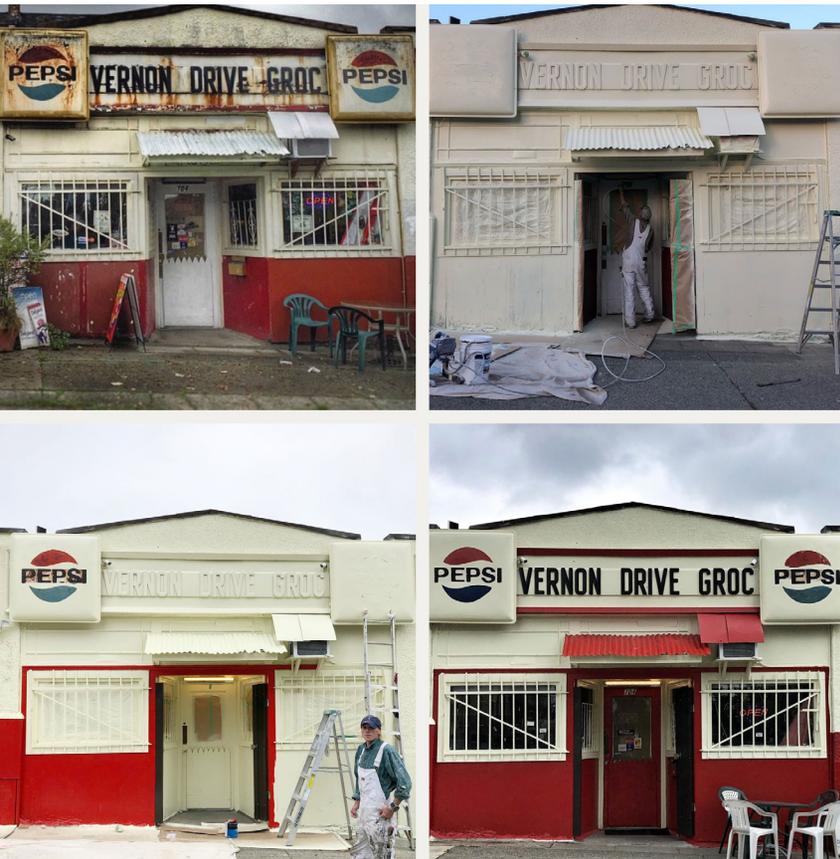
Neighbourhood retail is highly vulnerable to loss because the Grandfather Clause only protects businesses that have not had a gap in operations for more than 6 months. Lifting the 6 month restriction of the Grandfather Clause (re: Chapter 55, Section 568 of the Vancouver Charter) could create opportunities for the restoration of previous storefronts that have been converted to a different use.

### **Update the Neighbourhood Grocery Store classification**

While the Neighbourhood Grocery Store classification was updated in 2016, it is still dated and not necessarily representative of how these stores are used today. As mentioned previously, the NGS use category is the only zoning and planning bylaw that recognizes retail in a residential zone. While this definition adheres to a more convenience-based model of neighbourhood retail, these shops are evolving and many becoming social gathering spaces.

Additional opportunities for neighbourhood retail could be created if the NGS use category was updated:

- To permit more than 16 seats;
- To no longer prioritize grocery sales as a primary use; and
- To have the “existing as of July 29, 1980” provision removed as this has only protected existing NGS sites, but prevented new retail sites from being built.



Vernon Drive Grocery at 700 Vernon Dr (2019); Andrew Morrison.

### Permitting and licensing

Participants indicated that the current permitting and licensing procedures that are associated with small-scale neighbourhood retail are overwhelming and discouraging to prospective business owners. Reducing wait times and streamlining permitting would ease the process of establishing a neighbourhood store.

### Informational guidelines

The creation of a checklist or toolkit would provide guidance to neighbourhood business owners. This checklist could include information on tenant and landlord responsibilities, permitting and licensing information, what to consider before signing a lease, food and beverage requirements, etc. This would help remove the confusion that surrounds setting up and operating a small-scale neighbourhood retail business.

### Heritage preservation strategies

A heritage lens could be used for the protection and preservation of neighbourhood retail in Vancouver. There is precedent for this in previous planning and land use efforts in the City of Vancouver. Heritage incentives that permit density increases and infill development, for instance, have led to the retention of a few neighbourhood stores that are housed within a heritage building. However, mechanisms that look beyond the physicality of the building and acknowledge the intangible heritage of neighbourhood shops as legacy businesses could provide further assistance with the preservation and restoration of these stores.

# 7.0 Conclusion



Deactivated retail at 2851 Manitoba (2019); Jacqueline Hunter.



Kong's Corner Store at 898 E Georgia St (1978); City of Vancouver Archives.

This study and inventory reveals that neighbourhood retail continues to play a vital role in Vancouver's communities. These shops are rare and treasured, but the current policy makes them highly vulnerable to loss. Planners should recognize that there is a need for additional policy measures to preserve these spaces. There is also a need for additional policy that acknowledges how the uses of these shops are evolving. Further, as Vancouver strives to become a model for complete communities, planners and policy makers should consider ways to create additional opportunities for neighbourhood retail.

Future research is necessary to further understand the unique nature of neighbourhood retail. Beyond the limitations already mentioned, insight is needed to understand the ownership of neighbourhood stores in Vancouver. This could include information about the amount of stores that are operated by new Canadians or immigrants and how that might be changing over time. It would also be helpful to know how many of these stores have been operated by the same family for generations versus how many have been handed over to new ownership. As these shops offer considerable benefit to communities, it would also be worth studying if they are contributing to land lifts or the gentrification of neighbourhoods, especially for those shops that are operating as trendy cafes or restaurants. More information is still needed to understand the risk of larger and corporate retailers taking over these spaces, especially as they become more valuable to neighbourhoods. Further insight is also needed to understand how online shopping and the evolving retail landscape is impacting these stores. Research is needed to understand how the proximity of other shops attracts additional foot traffic to neighbourhood retail. Finally, it is recommended that a full transportation analysis take place to fully understand the walkability and bike-ability of these stores, as well as the parking requirements, particularly those that relate to loading and deliveries.



Arbutus Coffee at 2200 Arbutus St (2019); Jacqueline Hunter.

# Appendix A: Interview guide

1. How long has your business been operating?
  - What's the story of the business?
  - How did the business get started?
  - How long have you personally been operating the business?
  - How long has the business been operating? Is it a longstanding business?
  - Was it inherited?
  - Did you have any trouble getting started in a residential neighbourhood?
2. Who forms the majority of your clientele?
  - Are your clients mostly local, or do they come from elsewhere in the city?
  - Is the store all "in person" or do you have an online component?
3. From what you have observed, how are your customers travelling to your premises?
  - Are your customers walking to your store? Cycling? Driving?
4. What's it like operating a small-scale and non-conforming site?
  - What do you value most about operating a business on a small-scale retail site?
  - What sorts of challenges do you face?
  - What sorts of opportunities are there?
  - What are the factors for success? What has made your business successful?
  - What advice would you give to someone thinking of starting a small, neighbourhood scale business like this?
5. What would you like to see for the future of small-scale retail? Are there key priorities that you think the city should focus on to support local business?
  - Business taxation?
  - Increasing retail opportunities around this business (e.g. making more of a retail cluster or hub?)
  - Supporting efforts to enable redevelopment where retail is included as part of other uses like housing?
  - Heritage designation?
  - Public realm improvements?
  - Increasing housing choices in the surrounding area (i.e. more population = more customer base)
  - Other supports?
6. How do you see your business contributing to the broader neighbourhood? What role does the business play in the community?

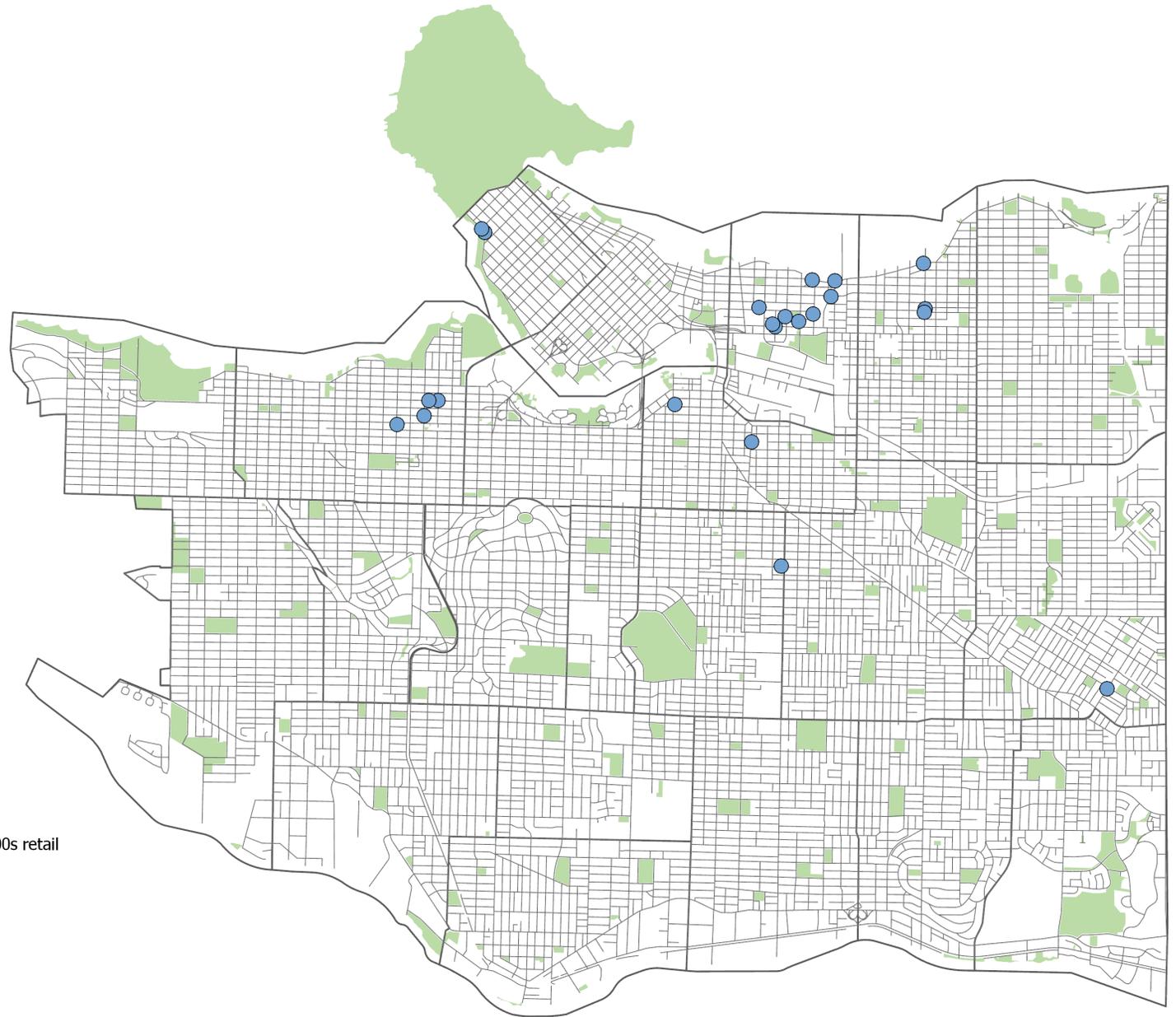
# Appendix B: Neighbourhood retail by decade

## 1900s retail

24 sites

Legend

● 1900s retail

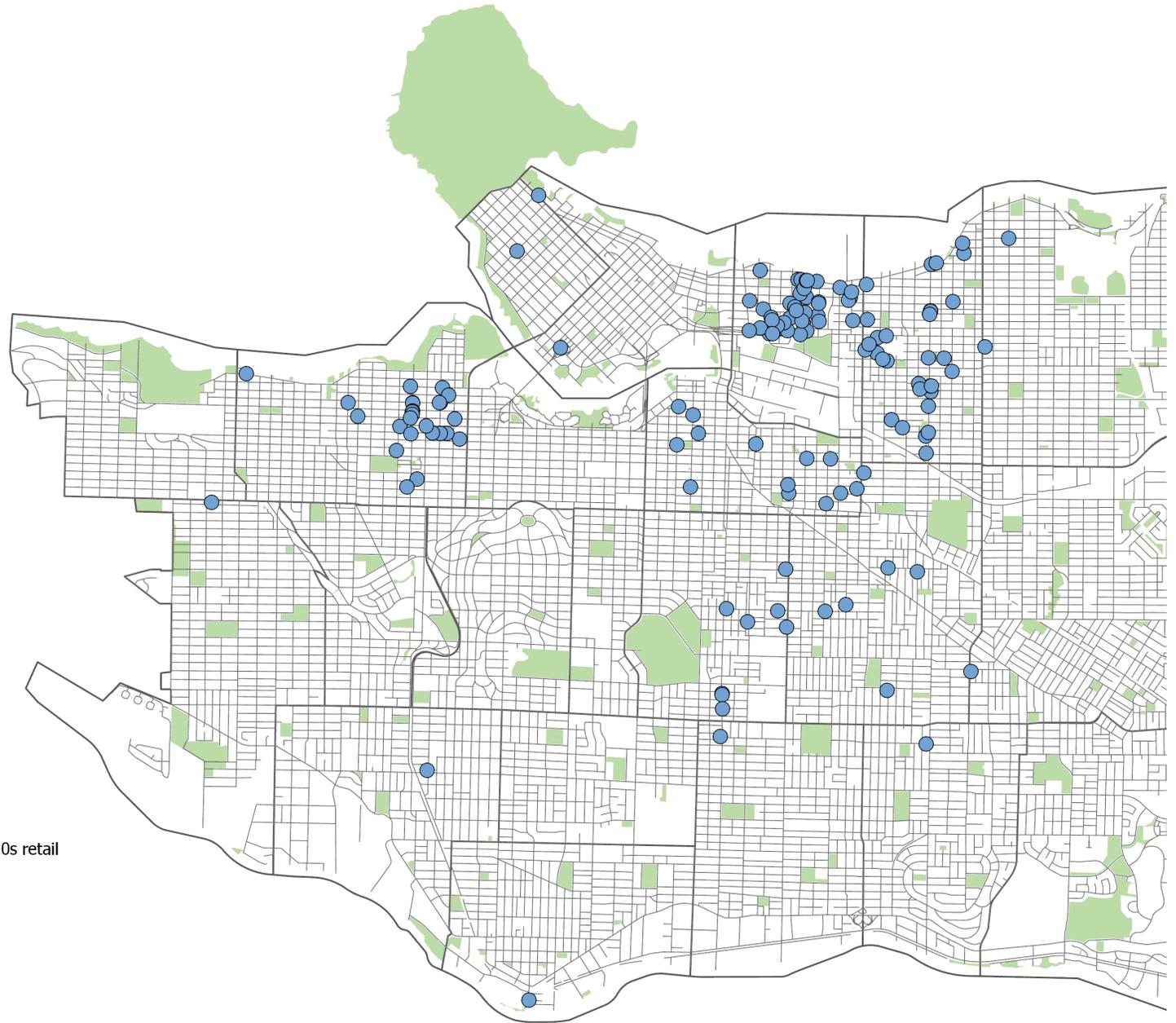


# 1910s retail

124 sites

## Legend

● 1910s retail

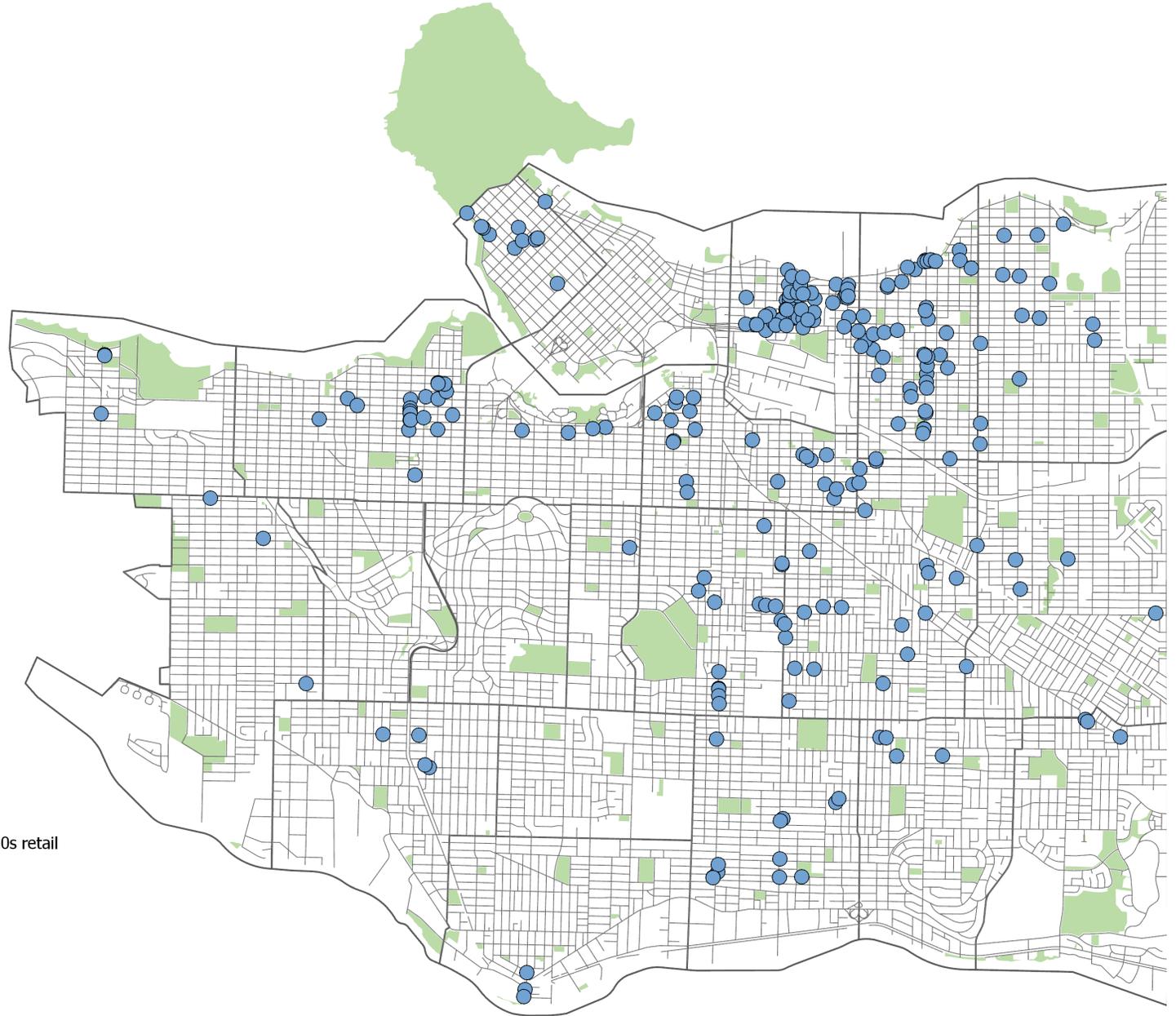


# 1920s retail

257 sites

## Legend

● 1920s retail

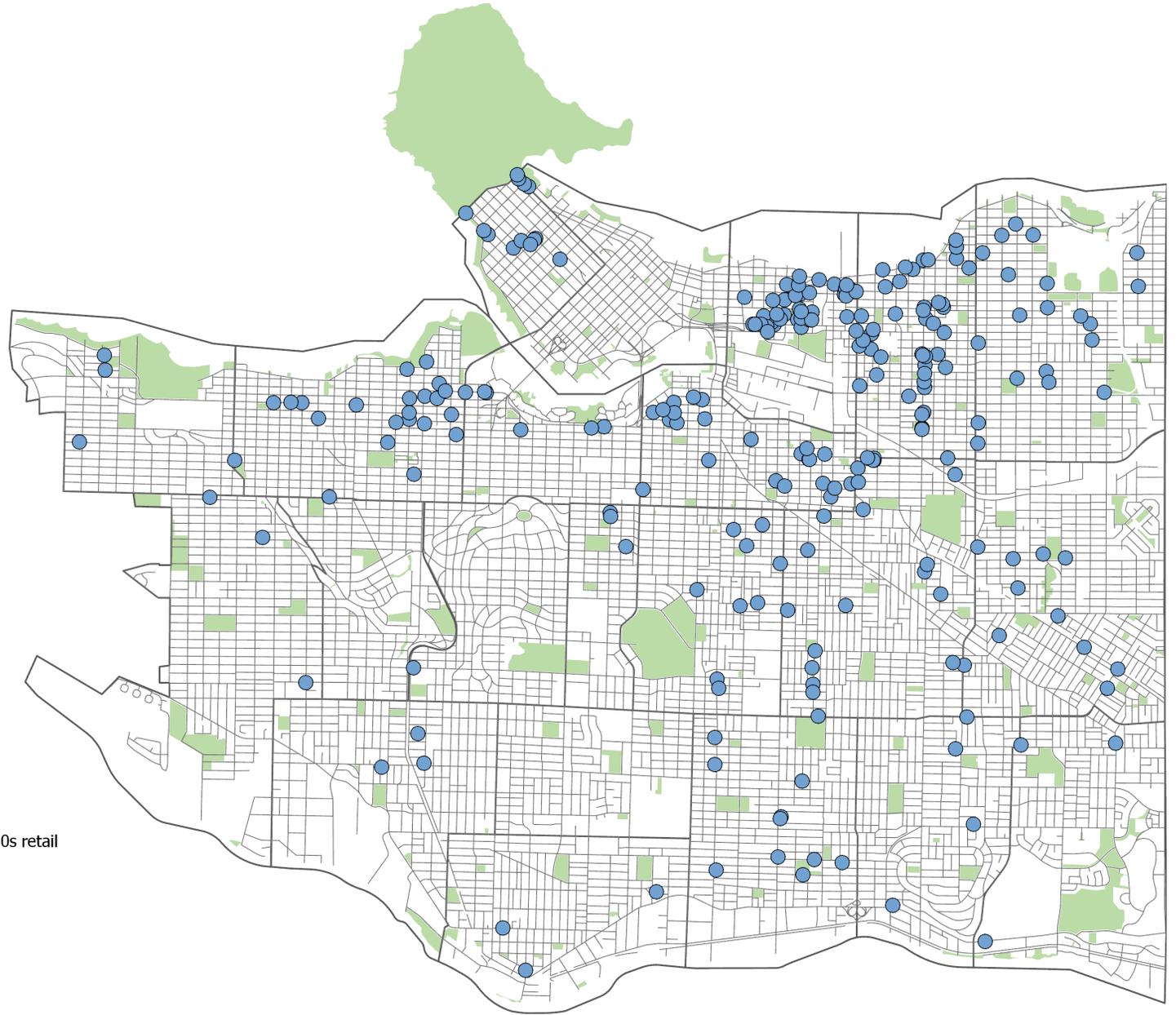


# 1930s retail

249 sites

## Legend

● 1930s retail

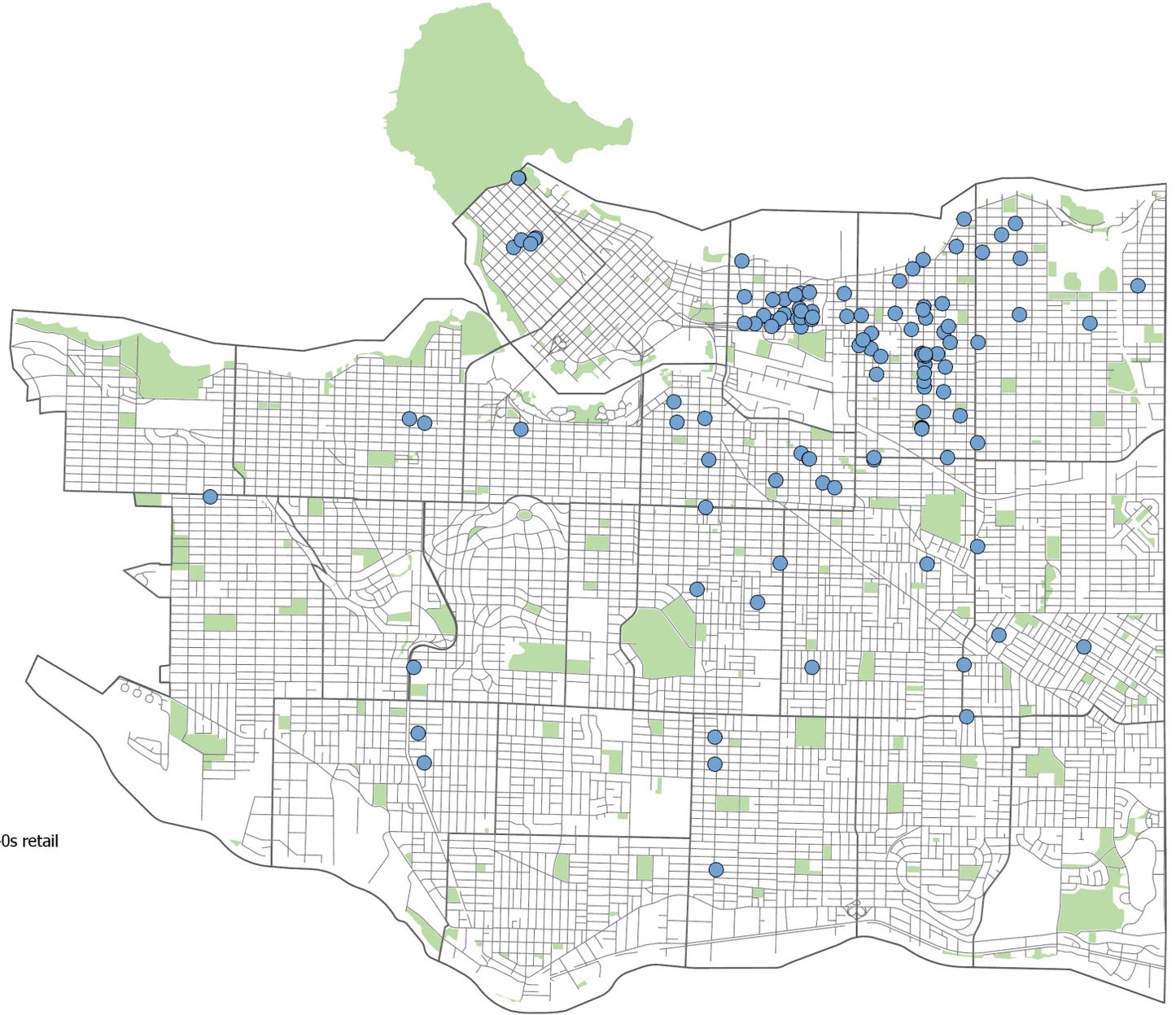


# 1940s retail

114 sites

## Legend

● 1940s retail

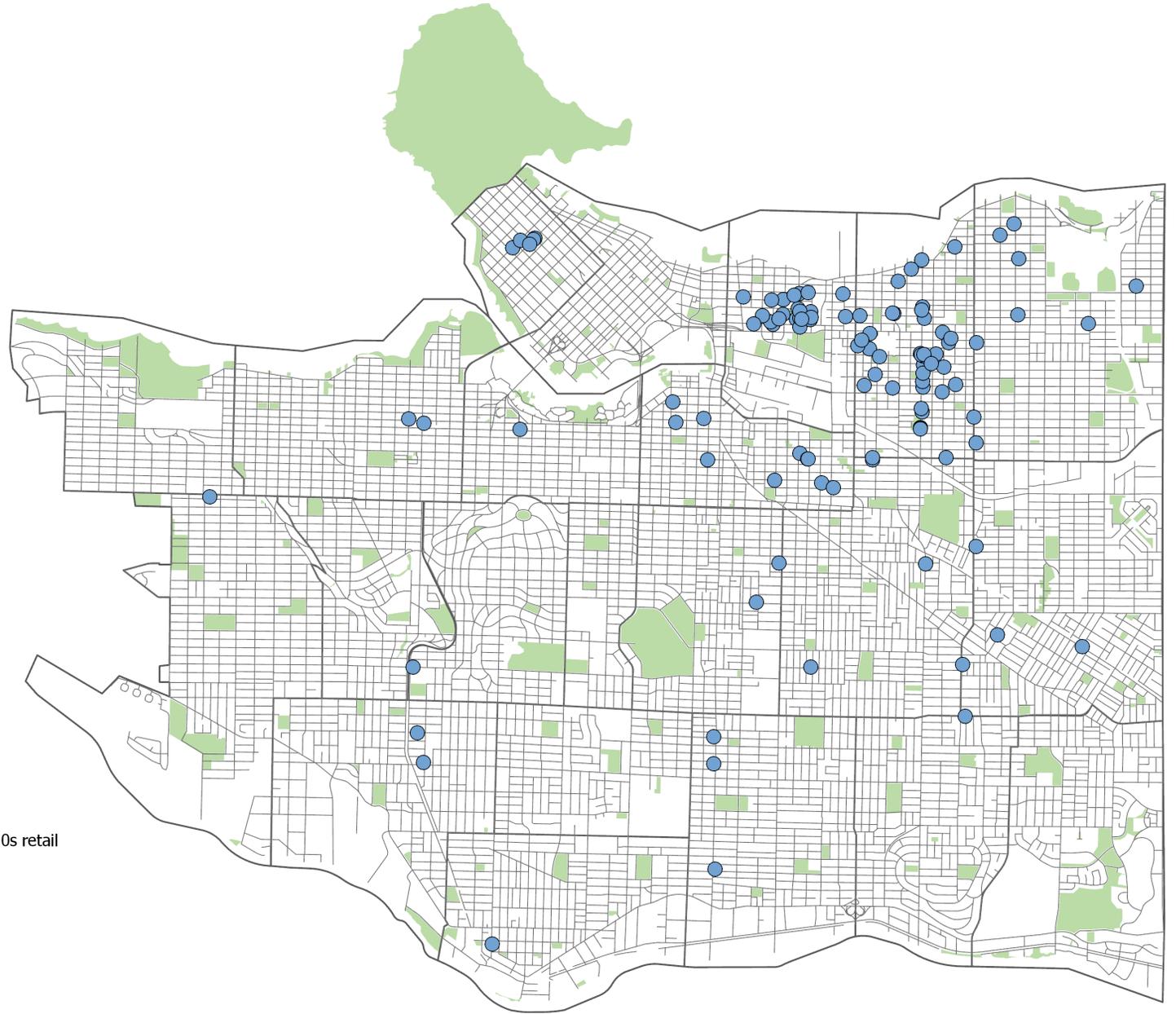


# 1950s retail

111 sites

## Legend

● 1950s retail

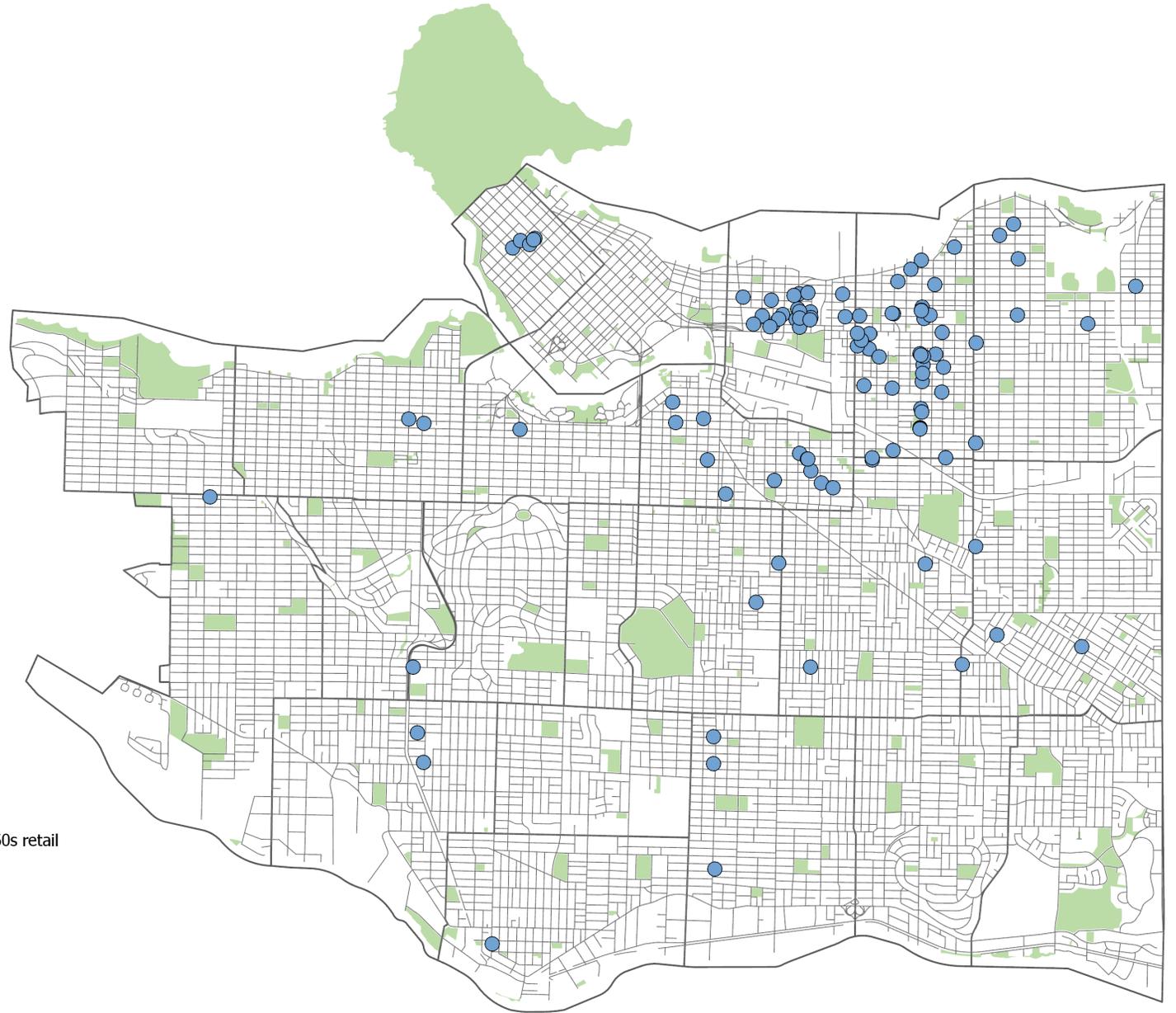


# 1960s retail

106 sites

Legend

● 1960s retail

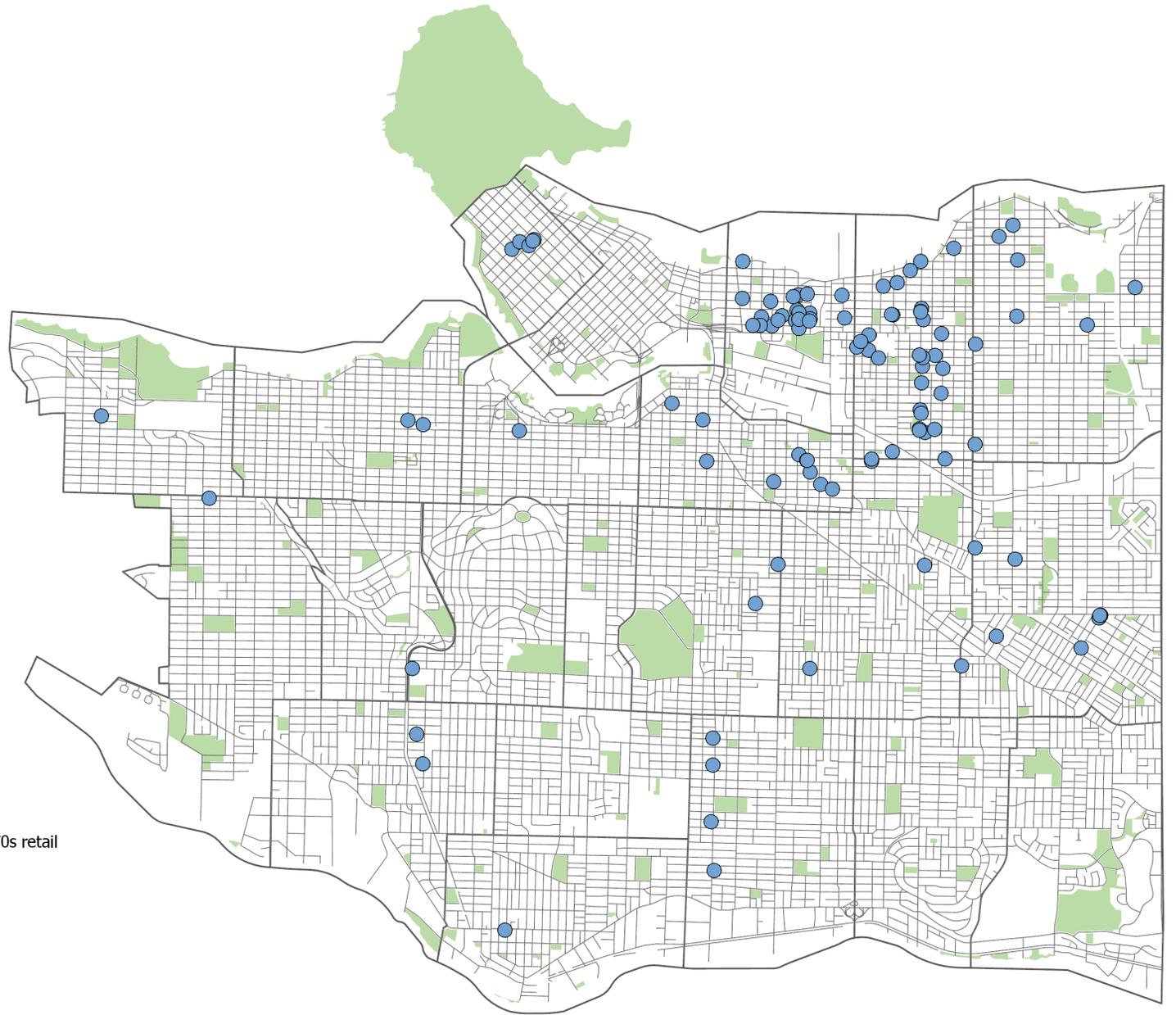


# 1970s retail

105 sites

## Legend

● 1970s retail

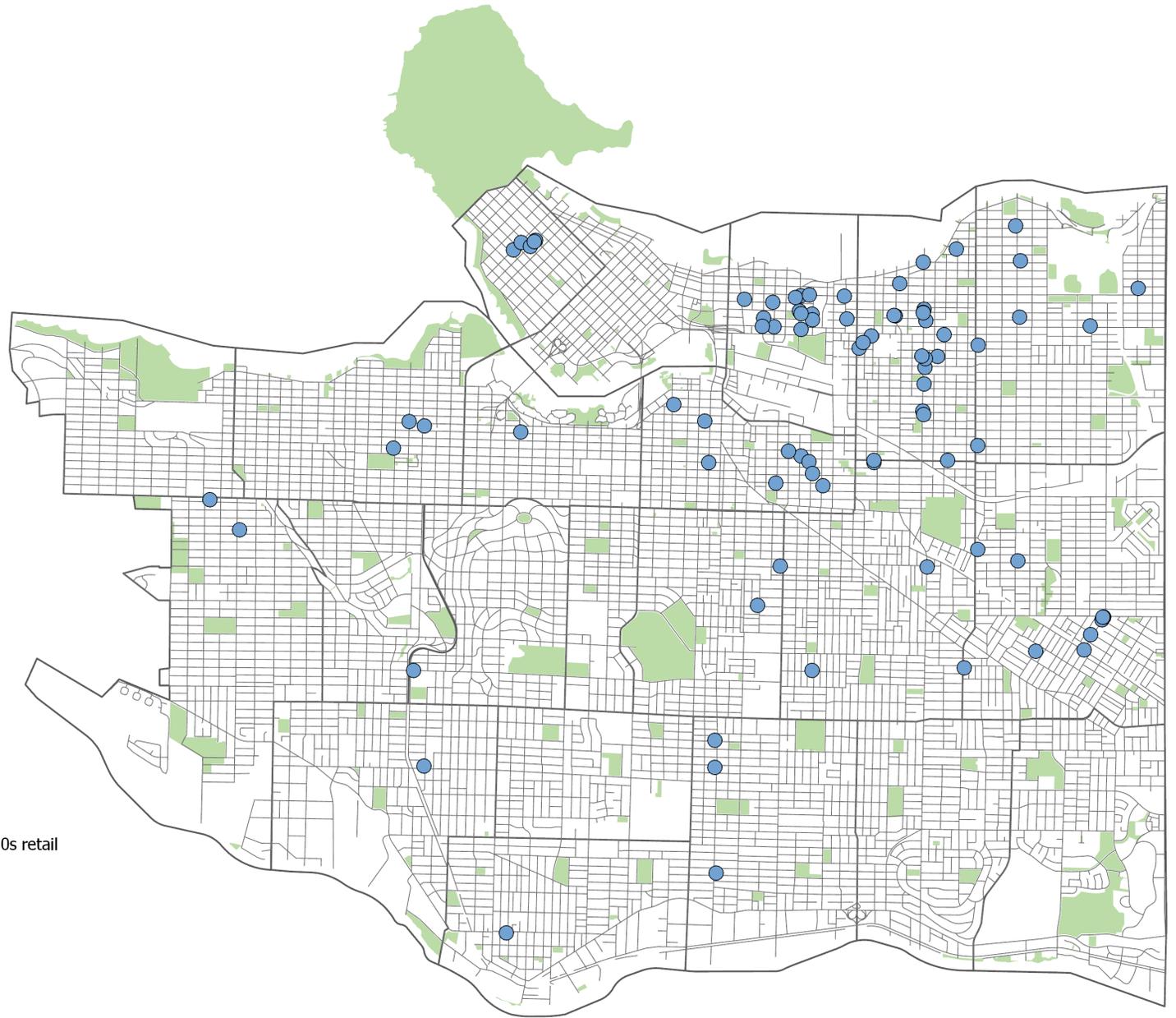


# 1980s retail

86 sites

## Legend

● 1980s retail

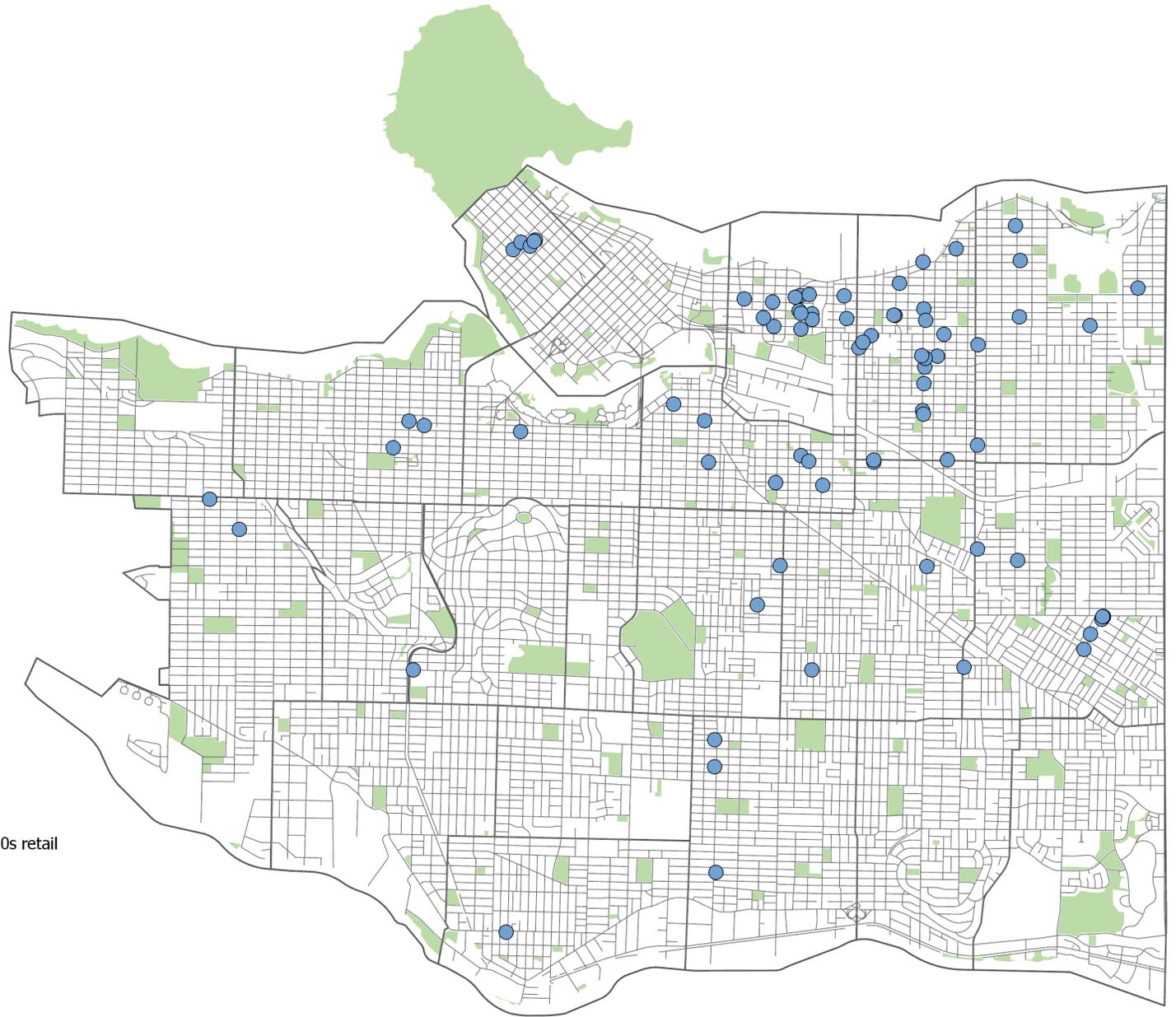


# 1990s retail

78 sites

## Legend

● 1990s retail

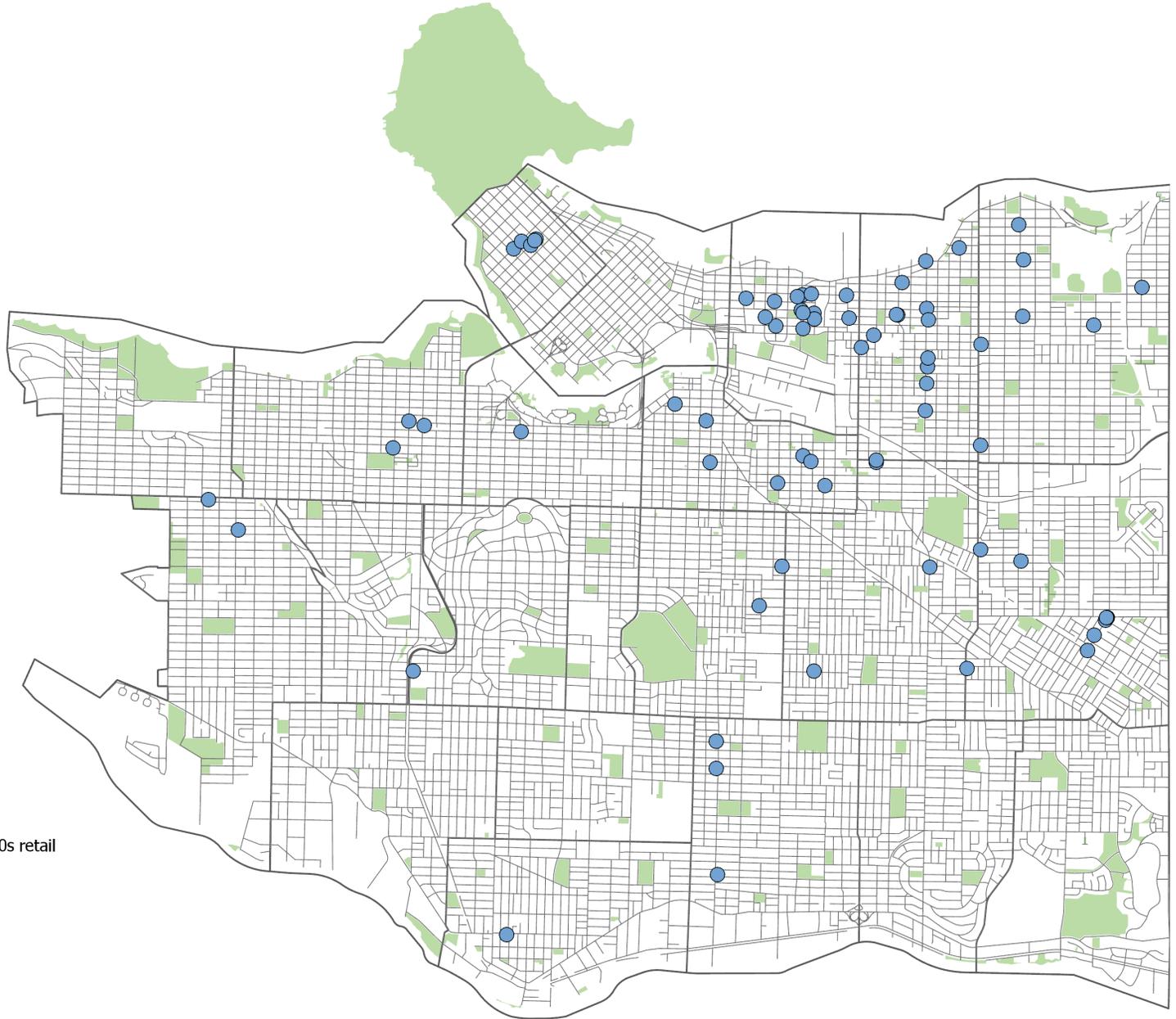


# 2000s retail

72 sites

## Legend

● 2000s retail

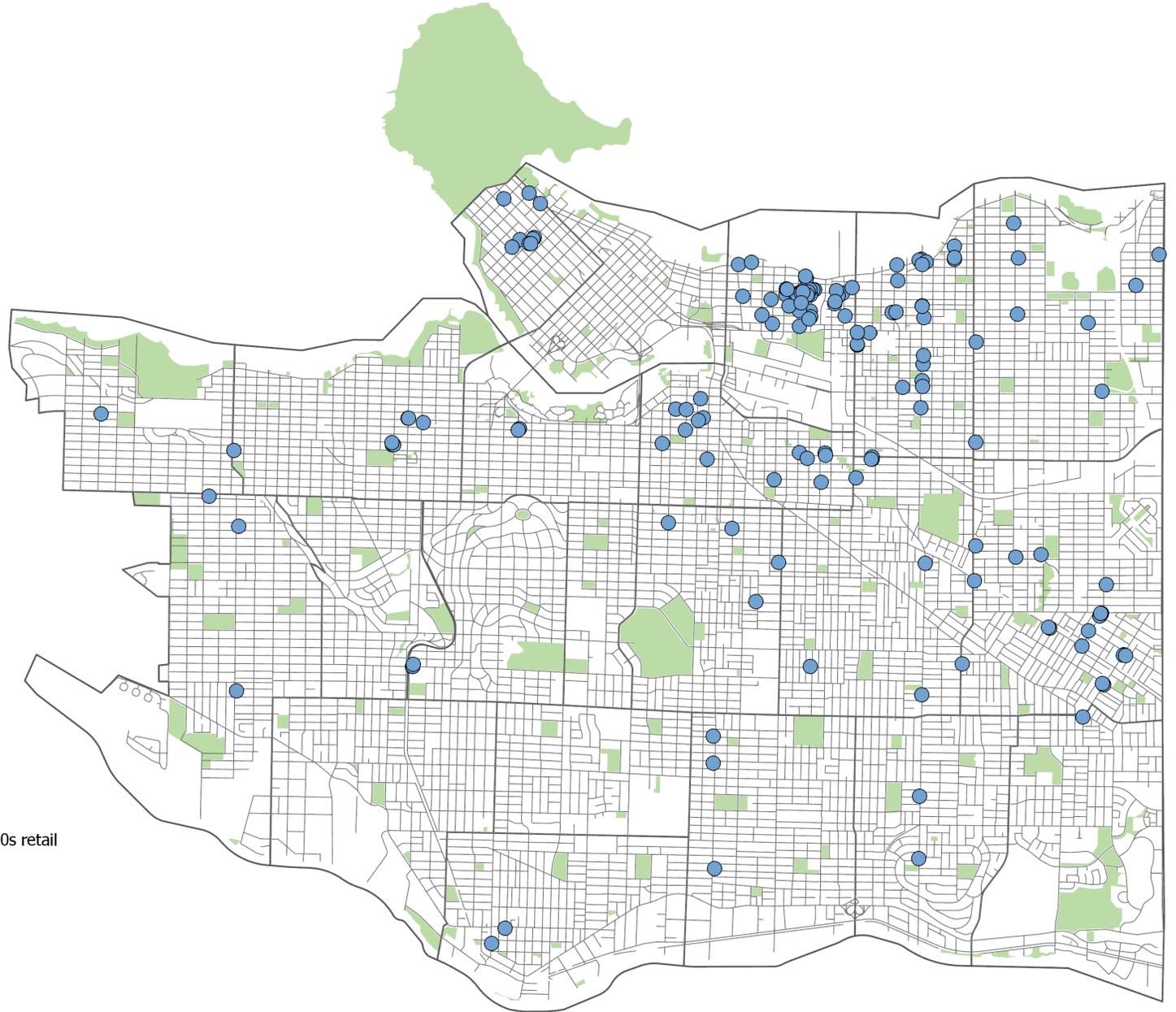


## 2010s retail

163 sites<sup>52</sup>

### Legend

● 2010s retail



<sup>51</sup> For more recent decades, ground truthing and site visits resulted in additional inventory findings beyond what the archival research was able to identify.