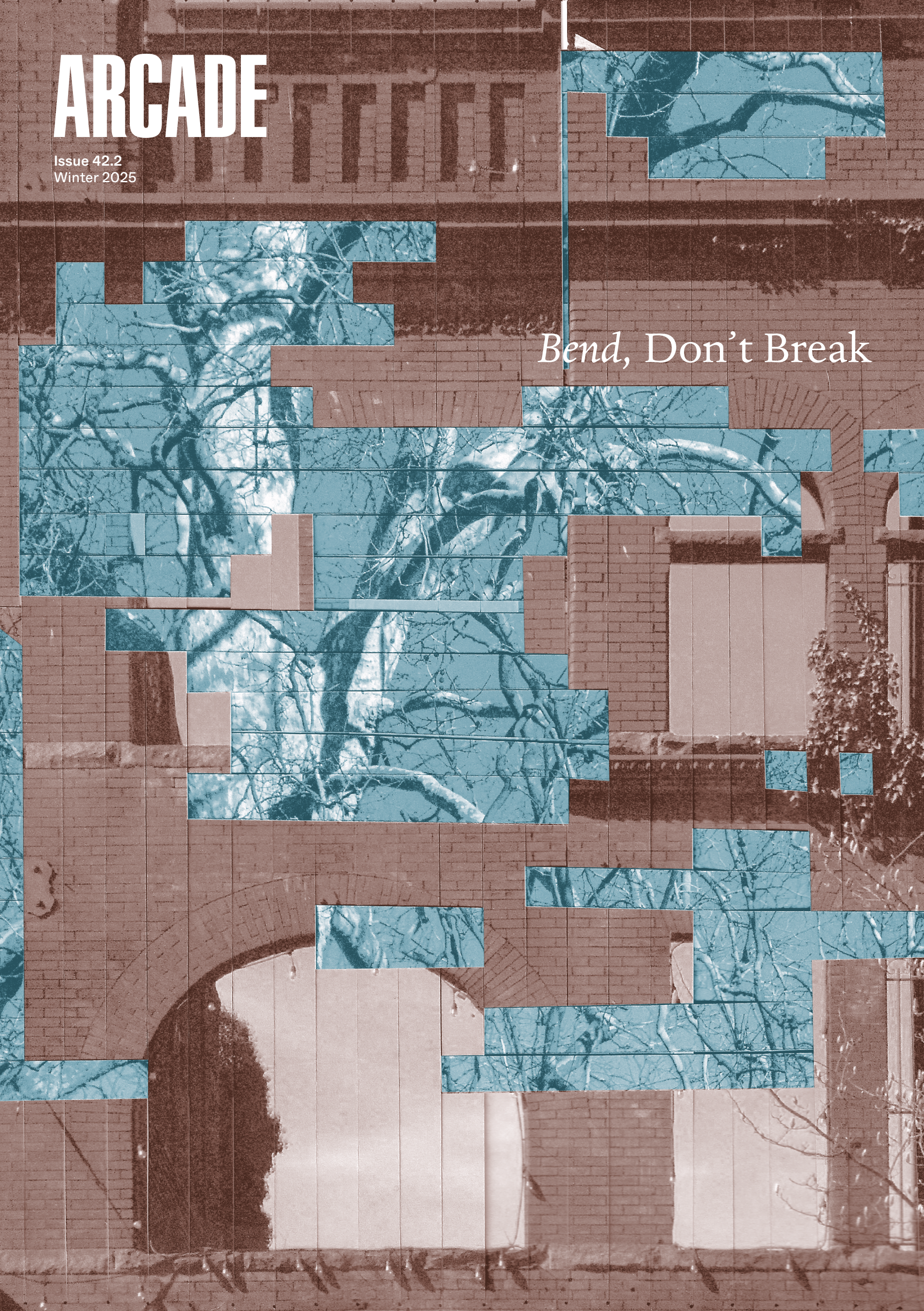
ARCADE

Issue 42.2
Winter 2025



Bend, Don't Break

Bend, Don't Break

Issue 42.2

WINTER 2025

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***Bend,* Don't Break**
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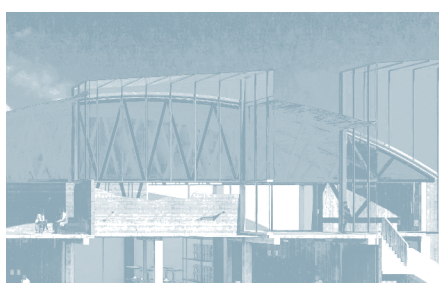
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Letter from the Editors

When we set out to reignite a connection between ARCADE and the University of Washington back in 2023, we weren't sure what to expect. Although ARCADE was born at the university's College of Built Environments (CBE), having been founded by a crew of recent UW graduates way back in 1981, the relationship has taken many forms over the years. Over that time, ARCADE has strengthened its mission of cultivating dialogue on the designed environment, just as UW's CBE has built its reputation as one of the leading design and architecture programs in the west. Today, those two parallel paths are converging with the publication of our second UW x ARCADE issue.

Each article in this issue was written by a UW student about a design-related topic of their choosing during their time in Lauren's CBE writing course, "Storytelling in the Built Environment." More than a writing class, the seminar is a platform for students to explore ideas in the built environment that feel urgent to them—a place to have their voices heard as they hone the craft of storytelling. This year, we left it up to the students to select the theme of the issue, asking them, what topics feel most pressing to you in the world of design right now?

The student-led concept for this issue tackles the trials and tribulations of our current moment, but without taking a side. In a moment when polarization seems to be the norm, our students asked a bigger question: what if design was about finding opportunities to bridge gaps, be flexible, incorporate new concepts and methods. What if we all adopted the mantra, Bend, Don't Break? Our students uncovered places where the means and methods of design could expand and stretch, encompassing more, not less. Theirs is a theme that asks us to widen the lens, considering who we are designing for and who might be left on the margins. Throughout the writing process, a collective question arose: if we shifted the center of design to a point outside the mainstream, would the benefits be felt by everyone?

Reading the essays in this issue, the answer is a resounding yes. Covering topics ranging from informal urbanisms to designing for neurodivergence, the landscape of street vending in Capitol Hill, co-operative and multi-generational housing models, and circular design, the stories in this issue are inspirational and invigorating. They show us a way forward and invite us to be co-conspirators in making the world we want to see. If this issue is any indication, the future of design is thoughtful, inclusive, and most of all, optimistic.

We need these young voices: they broaden the conversation about design in our community. Their stories help us attune to things we may be overlooking or excluding, and give us ideas about how to pave a path forward. Most of all, in these pages, there is hope for the future.

Thank you to the students in this issue for sharing your ideas and your stories, and to the College of Built Environments for providing a home for us to do this work together.

Lauren Gallow & Leah St. Lawrence
Co-Editors

The Serious Business of Growing
A Story of Urban Gardens, Place, and Persistence



Brian Njoroge

Interviewees:
Eric Higbee, UW Professor + Landscape Architect
Elizabeth Golden, UW Professor + Architect + Gardener





(Above) Gardener watering their plot,
Marra Farm 2025

(Right) Simon, a long term gardener,
poses by the threshold to the plots

Everyone's building something. Tear it down! Build it back! Live smaller! Grow denser! Escape the city! Save the city! Own land! Share land! Garden for self-care! Garden for revolution!

Spend enough time online, and it feels like every civic idea is a lifestyle drop. Every solution has a name, an aesthetic, a counterpoint. But beneath the noise, something slower is taking root. On the edges of cities, in borrowed soil, people are growing things. Quietly. Together.

You've probably passed them without a second thought, those patches of green tucked between buildings in cities like Seattle. Urban gardens - at first glance, they might seem like nothing more than a tidy row of kale or a few tomatoes in bloom. Look closer, and you'll find these modest plots hold a deeper truth about how we live together: who gets seen, who finds space, and who is left out.

It all starts with a simple, almost radical question: What if the most powerful civic spaces were planted in dirt?

On a quiet Sunday afternoon at Marra Farm, in Seattle's South Park neighborhood, the work is steady. Airplanes pass low overhead, hands move soil. Rows of garden plots, some freshly turned, others already sprouting, stretch across the field. Spring is urgent: plant now or miss the season. A weathered sign, written in English, Spanish, and Chinese, tells part of the story. This land is shared, and it has never been neutral.

South Park sits on the banks of the Duwamish Waterway, a part of Seattle often left out of the city's narratives. It's a neighborhood bordered by highways and heavy industry, shaped by decades of environmental neglect. The river here is a Superfund site, polluted by decades of industrial runoff. And yet, South Park has never been passive in the face of these conditions. This predominantly Hispanic community has long resisted efforts of displacement, including attempts to convert the area entirely into industrial land.

Marra Farm stands as a testament to that resistance and to what community care looks like. On any given day, you'll see families and neighbors working their plots, weeding, watering, and harvesting. Some grow food to supplement their groceries. Others grow to stay connected to cultural traditions or to earn some income. It's a quiet, collective rhythm, it echoes far beyond this field: across Seattle, nearly 90 urban gardens known as P-Patches foster similar acts of resilience, nourishment, and connection.

To understand the deeper story these gardens tell, we need to look back. Urban agriculture isn't new. Its roots stretch across time and geography, from Mesopotamia to the victory gardens of World Wars I and II. In the U.S., waves of community gardens emerged during the economic and ecological crises of the 1970s, when city residents, especially in low-income and immigrant neighborhoods, reclaimed vacant lots as sites of nourishment and resistance. These were grassroots responses to disinvestment and top-down planning, often met with hostility from city governments. And yet, they persisted.

What feels different today is our attention. In an era of civic fragmentation, climate anxiety, and rising social distrust, the garden has returned not just as a trend or nostalgic gesture but as a necessary civic platform. A classroom. A common.

Landscape architect and writer Eric Higbee is one of the voices helping to frame this shift. His work in community-based design sees gardens not as amenities, but as generative civic engines. "There's something about growing food together where you live that checks all the boxes—connection, health, stewardship, identity," he says. "Community gardens end up being this engine that just keeps going."

Higbee describes these spaces as "mini democracies" and, like any democracy, they can be messy, vibrant, and hard-won. Plot disputes. Broken irrigation. Vandalism. Every challenge in the garden demands coordination and care. Gardeners, from South Park to Capitol Hill, define their own rules and resolve conflicts through shared dialogue. In a time when civic processes feel distant or opaque, these gardens offer a model for something different: a participatory design of daily life.

These gardens don't just happen. Their endurance depends on how they're planned and governed. "The design phase becomes the launchpad for shared ownership," Higbee explains. That turns the conventional model of community engagement on its head. In these spaces, process is everything, and it never really ends. "In the '70s, architecture and planning redefined themselves in response to the environmental crisis," Higbee says. "We're facing a civic crisis now. We need a revolution on that scale."

Elizabeth Golden, an architect and longtime gardener at Thomas Street P-Patch in Capitol Hill, sees this revolution at the level of practice. "A lot of people who start in the garden, they don't know... You just learn as you go," she says. "People around you share knowledge, or you look at what others are doing." That kind of slow, mutual learning is rooted in relationships and lived experience — it grows not just gardens, but trust. A curriculum without walls.

Golden also underscores the fragility of these spaces. Garden plots across the city are full, with waitlists that stretch years. When she tells newcomers that the wait could be five years or more, "you can see the face, like, fall," she says. And even once you get a plot, nothing is permanent. "You're just stewarding a piece of land... someone could come in and destroy it at any minute or do something to it." These are spaces of care that remain deeply vulnerable to development, to vandalism, to displacement.

And yet, they persist.

What makes these spaces radical isn't ideology, it's insistence. They insist on presence. On shared responsibility. On staying. Urban gardens blur the boundaries between private and public, individual and collective, planned and improvised. They challenge the idea that only official institutions or formal plans can generate civic value.

They offer, instead, a counter-public, a point at which Higbee touches on "an alternative way of being in community." One rooted not in scale or spectacle, but in specificity: the drip hose, the compost bin, the quiet greeting of a neighbor who shows you how to prune your tomatoes just right. These are not flashy spaces. They are slow spaces. Honest spaces. The kind that endures.

So, I return to the garden with a challenge, really a set of questions.

While the land here may be somewhat secure, the people who shaped it are not. If permanence is measured by property value, what does that make a garden?

Who gets to stay in the spaces they've cultivated? Who decides what gets preserved and what gets erased?

This is the blur we need to confront: between land and people, visibility and erasure, authorship and belonging. Urban gardens don't offer easy answers. But they teach us to ask better questions. They remind us that design isn't just about building, it's about tending. And that civic life, at its best, is something we grow.

Because the serious business of growing is not just about food.



Street Life on Hold

Policies and Permits Stifle Seattle's Street Vendor Community

Amy Kale

Interviewee:
Hamid, a hotdog vendor in Capitol Hill, Seattle





Location: Chop Suey, Capitol Hill, Seattle
Photo by Amy Kale

On a typical weekend night in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, the streets come alive with music, chatter, and the scent of sizzling onions drifting through the cool air. Situated among the buzz of nightlife is Hamid, a hot dog vendor who's been selling outside of the Chop Suey nightclub since 2008. Originally from Morocco, Hamid started vending almost by accident—he helped a friend one night and stayed on for the good money. Over time, his own cart, Boumba Dogs, has become a staple of the local street vendor scene.

But Hamid's story is more than one of late-night snacks and spontaneous community; it's a reflection of the growing tension between the importance of informal public life and the increasing difficulty of operating within Seattle's street vending permit system. As vendors like Hamid face rising costs, longer wait times, and complex bureaucracies, we must ask: What role do street vendors play in shaping our cities? And what happens when policy changes make their presence increasingly difficult?

Street vending is more than a commercial exchange; it is a cultural and urban force that activates public space. In Capitol Hill, vendors offer more than convenience food to late night patrons. They create landmarks for residents and nightlife-goers alike—social anchors that enhance safety, accessibility, and vibrancy. Street vendors also bring visibility to the city's diversity, often representing immigrant and working-class communities who might not otherwise have access to traditional business models. The presence of these vendors turns sidewalks into destinations and contributes to the unique identity of neighborhoods. Vendors like Hamid are a reminder that informal economies can play a formal role in city life, especially in areas like Capitol Hill, where foot traffic, nightlife, and cultural exchange converge.

While street vendors have become a mainstay of community life across the city, Seattle's vending permit process has evolved into a complex maze. As Hamid explains, "The city made it too hard [to get a permit]. It used to be ten days. Now it's three to six months." The journey to legitimizing a vending business begins with securing a business license, followed by registering with the fire department, submitting detailed photographs and diagrams of the vending setup, and listing proposed operating locations. Once all materials are submitted, the city reviews the application and schedules an in-person inspection to verify the vendor's setup. If everything checks out, vendors receive a physical sticker that serves as a visible sign of legal operation. The sticker system ensures oversight, but Hamid shares that many vendors find the delays discouraging. "It's a process," Hamid says with the weariness of someone who's had to navigate these steps many times. Hamid notes that he must complete this process each time he changes location or setup, making flexibility—a key aspect of street vending— difficult to maintain. During the city's review period, vendors can't legally operate, often losing income and risking the possibility of fines if they proceed without approval. The trials of paperwork, pending permitting fees (footnote 1), inspection, and proposal forms, coupled with a lack of centralized information or clear instructions online, have driven some to operate without permits in the hope that the city does not initiate a crackdown or increased permit verification.

Although Hamid operates legally, he confirmed that many others do not. "A lot of people are opening illegally," he acknowledges. While the city maintains a formal permitting system, its actual implementation appears increasingly out of sync with street-level realities. (footnote 2) Since Hamid began vending in 2008, the neighborhood has changed dramatically. Rising rents, shifting demographics, and stricter policies have made it increasingly difficult for small, independent vendors to gain a foothold. These shifts often affect immigrant and working-class entrepreneurs the most—those without the time, money, or fluency in city bureaucracy to navigate a complex system.

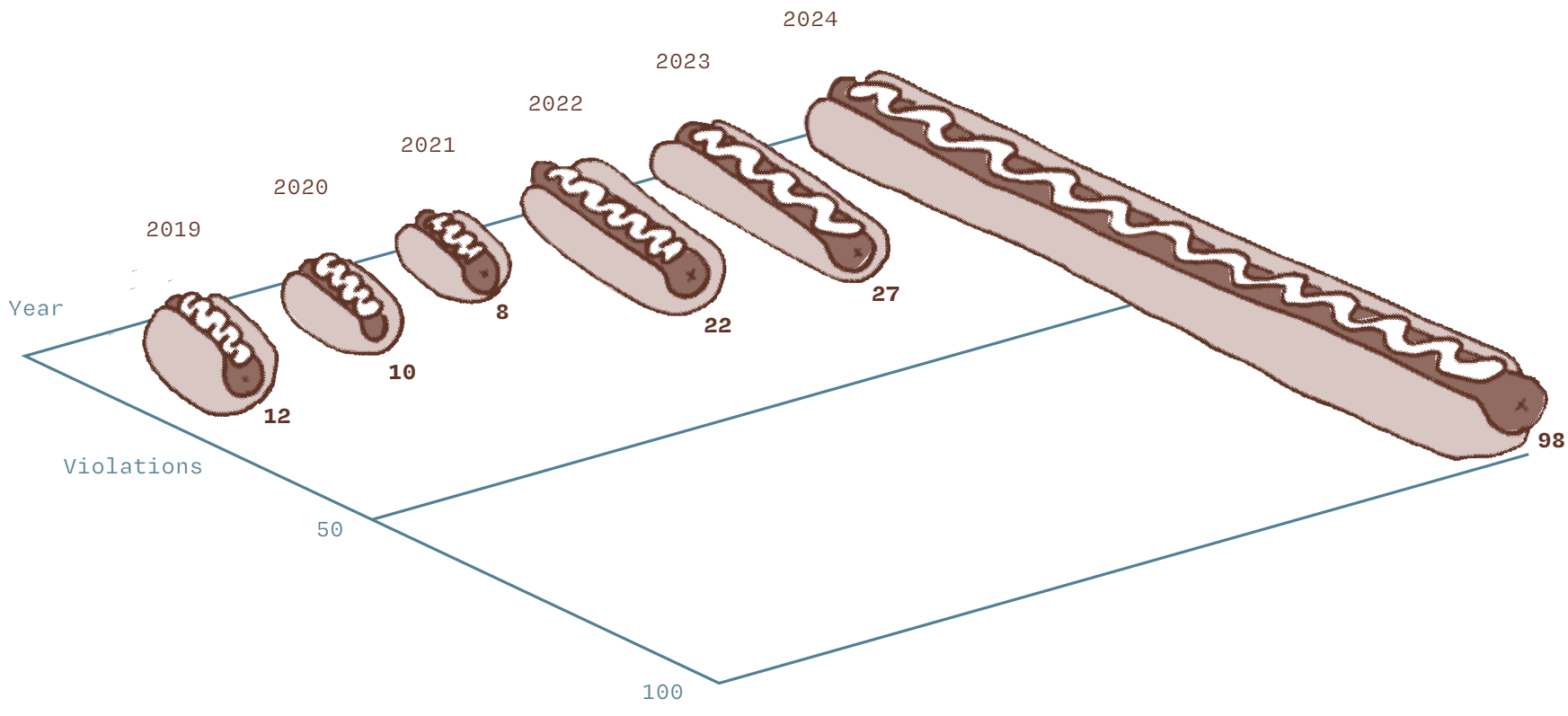
Axios reported in 2023 that just 40 vendors were permitted to operate curbside, while in 2024, The Seattle Times reported that Seattle-King County health officials shut down 98 unpermitted food vendors. These numbers hint at a growing mismatch between the regulated system and the lived experience of street vendors—raising the question of who is being left out, why, and is there a change that can be made to help bring those wanting to operate as vendors into the system so they have the city's support to build sustainable established businesses. In Capitol Hill, firsthand observation suggests this disconnect is especially pronounced. Vendors cluster outside bars and music venues on weekends, selling food, drinks, or small goods to late-night crowds. Their presence reflects an ongoing demand that the permitting system does not seem equipped to meet. And the stakes are not just regulatory—they are personal, economic, and cultural.

Seattle's permitting process—slow, costly, and overly complex—reflects a rigid model of commerce, one that favors those with resources and institutional knowledge. In doing so, it sidelines the very people who animate its streets. By prioritizing regulation over accessibility, the city has generated potential barriers which systemically differentiate between those who are able to participate in public life—and those who are not. If Seattle truly values the vibrancy and cultural diversity that street vendors bring, it must reshape its policies to support—not stifle—the informal economies that help define its neighborhoods. Increased access to information, info graphics, and even a multilingual outreach program to assist in the permitting process could go a long way in stabilizing this often overlooked cultural economy in our neighborhoods.

Hamid's cart outside Chop Suey is more than a business—it's a symbol of inclusion, access, and public life. Yet the barriers he and others face suggests a disconnect between policy and practice. Street vendors are vital urban contributors, enriching our neighborhoods, supporting local economies, and preserving cultural narratives through community, presence, and most importantly: food. As Seattle continues to grow and regulate, it must decide what kind of public life it wants to foster. Should our neighborhoods be bustling places of spontaneity, small businesses, and diversity in community? Or will they become sanitized, bureaucratized spaces that exclude those who can't navigate the system? Will the city continue to make it harder for more people like Hamid to operate—or finally recognize the intrinsic economic and cultural value of making this process even just a little bit easier? Hamid will be out next weekend, grill fired up, music in the background, and a line of customers ready.



Graph representing a boom in unpermitted food vendor violations. Via Public Health - Seattle & King County (Mark Nowlin / The Seattle Times)

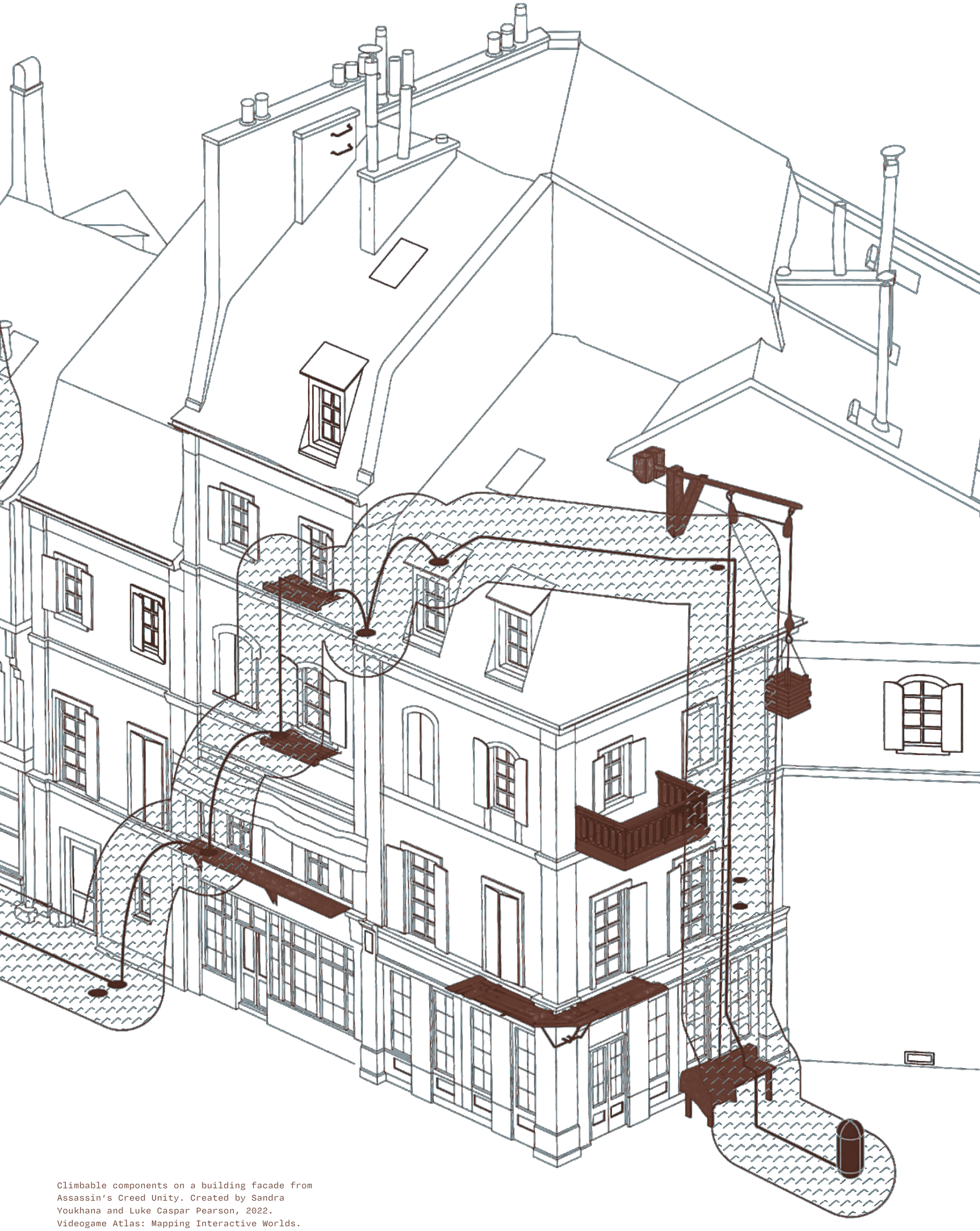




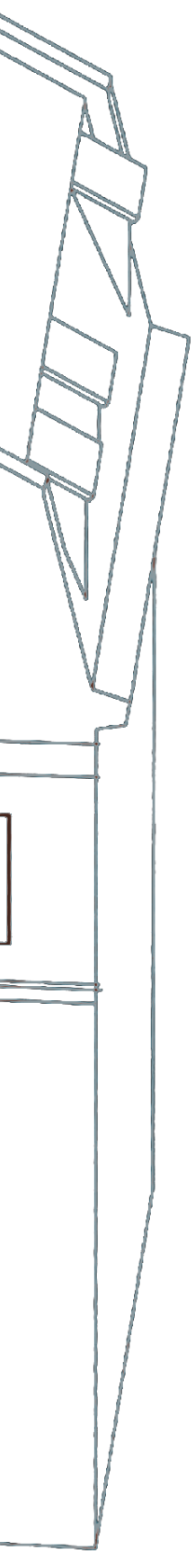
(Above) Hamid posing in front of his cart, Boumba Dogs, in Capitol Hill. Photo by Amy Kale

FOOTNOTES

1. As of the writing of this article, permit fees have been waived for more than a year as a part of the Downtown Activation Plan, but these are set to expire and fees will be enforced again starting December 31st 2025. “By City Ordinance and as part of Seattle’s Downtown Activation Plan, all permit fees for vending in public right-of-way have been waived effective November 5, 2023 through December 31, 2025.
“ https://www.seattle.gov/transportation/permits-and services/permits/vending-permits
2. We reached out to the city permitting office for comment on this article and received no response, we will update on our virtual platform in the event we receive a comment from the city.



Climbable components on a building facade from Assassin's Creed Unity. Created by Sandra Youkhana and Luke Caspar Pearson, 2022. Videogame Atlas: Mapping Interactive Worlds.



Design Through the Lens of Videogames

Shannon Hayamoto

Interviewees:
Joshua Stiksma, Jonathan Teng

"GTA 6 looks better than real life," comments user Mean_Rent_2156 on a Reddit post in which two images are compared: a photograph taken of Miami, Florida's sprawling cityscape, and an uncannily similar screenshot captured from the unreleased open-world videogame Grand Theft Auto VI.

With digital technologies emerging less than a century ago, it's no secret that videogames like GTA 6 would construct their virtual landscapes on the foundation of traditional built environment principles—and the subsequent, rapid evolution of gaming software has only enhanced this level of detail and accuracy. However, such games aren't mere copy-and-pastes of reality.

Through these virtual worlds, in both production and playthrough, civilizations are established, cultures formed, and virtual avatars reflecting our physical selves can freely roam. Developers and players alike seek to expand the world beyond its prescribed meaning. As a result, complex virtual spaces emerge, providing a unique lens through which our own societies and the spaces we inhabit can be studied.

Despite evident similarities, this relationship is still relatively unexplored. Published in early 2025, the book *Architecture and Videogames: Intersecting Worlds* (eds. Vincent Hui, Ryan Scavnicky, and Tatiana Estrina) presented a first-of-its-kind exhaustive study, compiling perspectives from a variety of disciplines to explore how videogames influence our perception of the world.

These authors embrace videogames as viable tools for designers to add to their toolkits; however, the idea is still completely foreign to many. Compared to the well-established built environment professions, suggesting that the newfound videogame industry can provide valuable insight may have the practicing designer scratching their head as they question: Oh, really? How so?

One reason for this skepticism is the preconception that videogames are limitless in what they create. Yet that mindset undermines the often-ignored functional considerations that go into making a game playable. Where the player is allowed to wander, how puzzles naturally blend into the environment, what the physics is like—creativity is often bounded by these very real conditions. Nonetheless, these limitations are still relatively lax compared to that of the physical world's.

Bombarded nonstop with dos and don'ts, real-world designers precariously juggle a chaotic mix of client requirements, budget restraints, existing and changing physical, social, political contexts, building codes, liability concerns, accessibility and energy considerations—in such a restricted environment, is there even room for the type of exploratory play that videogame design allows?

Arguably there should be. Play serves as a medium for designers to dream up never-before-seen solutions, allowing a sort of freedom to experiment within design parameters. One such modeling tool called Platform Sandbox has already been used in some architectural studio curriculums. According to game designer and artist Damjan Jovanovic, the software "challenges architects to relinquish their obsession with precision and control, urging them to embrace the serendipitous and unexpected—it is ultimately not about abandoning structure but about reimagining it in a more fluid, dynamic context." This form of play may help designers navigate the complexities of real-world design through an imaginative lens, without having to forsake one for the other.

As Jonathan Teng, practicing architect at Mahlum Architects and studio professor at the University of Washington, puts it, "Everything always has this duality: we have the technical aspects of what spaces are, but people won't use that space unless it inspires them." In seeing through the actualization of his projects, which range from residential to commercial, he says, "Spaces should spark joy and delight."

The worst kind of space is a boring one—both the virtual and real-world designer can agree on that. With videogames containing powerful examples of these immersive environments, perhaps there's a thing or two designers can take away as they reimagine the physical realm in a more animated, vibrant light.

Videogames are a huge slice of the modern pop culture pie, and they aren't going away anytime soon. Nearly half of the world population plays videogames, and many more have access to a device. With so much of our lives spent online and data encoded within it, the digital footprint is now another form of cultural artifact to be archived by the modern historian.

And the social influence is overwhelming, in its good and bad ways. While videogames have a generalized bad rep for encouraging violence or simply wasting time, there are just as many that contain meaningful and relatable stories—and may or may not lead you to down the path of existential crisis. Both are influential, nonetheless.

"It's not something where I just go and play a game and cool, game's done," says videogame developer Joshua Stiksma, who has worked with virtual reality for nearly a decade, and in the videogame industry longer. "It's something that sits with you, sticks with you, can change how you think and how you perceive things—and that makes it an extremely powerful medium." Before working at videogame developer firm Polyarc, Stiksma worked on multiple projects such as Destiny 2 and the Dragon Age franchise, before diving into the novel realm of virtual reality.

Moss was the first VR project Stiksma directed in its entirety, from the drawing board to its release in 2018. Emulating that of a storybook, the player and their tiny mouse companion, Quill, progress through a variety of panoramic puzzle-filled landscapes, each scene narrated by a calm storyteller's voice. Tapping into the immersive potential of VR, Stiksma and his team of about twenty worked to create a world where both Quill as the protagonist, and the player as their own canonical entity harmoniously exist in the same space together.

Narrative-driven videogames like Moss are becoming increasingly popular. With some based on true stories, others embracing the wild and whimsical, they aim to move the hearts of players through both dynamic exposition and setting. Yet the true influence of these videogames lies in player agency. Unlike books or movies, in Moss the player is not just an observer of Quill's story; they are a part of her story, thus able to form a meaningful bond of companionship with her.

Designers of the built environment have increasingly come to acknowledge that empathy and inclusivity are vital for designing in the contemporary world. Concurrently, the potential to learn from these virtual stories becomes more and more apparent.

"In a world where sometimes empathy is a little lacking," Stiksma says, "a lot of it comes from being able to have experiences that you can then relate to." Many of these videogames often reflect existing patterns from society, told through the way certain tropes are portrayed or how the world itself is expressed. Placed in the literal shoes of another, videogames present an opportunity for designers to have these experiences, fostering a more nuanced understanding of the world's intricacies. With this mindset, designers are not only more prepared to think critically about the places they are designing for but are more willing to have open-minded conversations about them.

Unfortunately, often in the built environment such conversations are stifled before they even have a chance to begin, due to a lack of common language between the public and professional realms. VR provides a fascinating means to bridge this gap.

Not everyone may understand a plan or section, however when one is projected directly into the space, even the non-designer is able to contribute their honest thoughts. Plug-ins integrated into software like SketchUp and Unreal Engine allow quick, realistic, and experiential spaces to be visualized.

Teng recalls how his firm used VR in client meetings, the simple scan of a QR code allowing clients to see and move through the space from the screen of their device. Virtual spaces and user agency—inadvertently, as the profession continues to improve the ways they can quickly and accurately convey their projects, it seems they are beginning to overlap with characteristics of videogame design.

The door is now open for new collaborations. Designers can extend the conversation beyond professional jargon and diagrams. Everyone has an active role, becomes an active player. And the best part is—the foundation of this idea has already been laid, this time not by the architect but by the videogame developer.

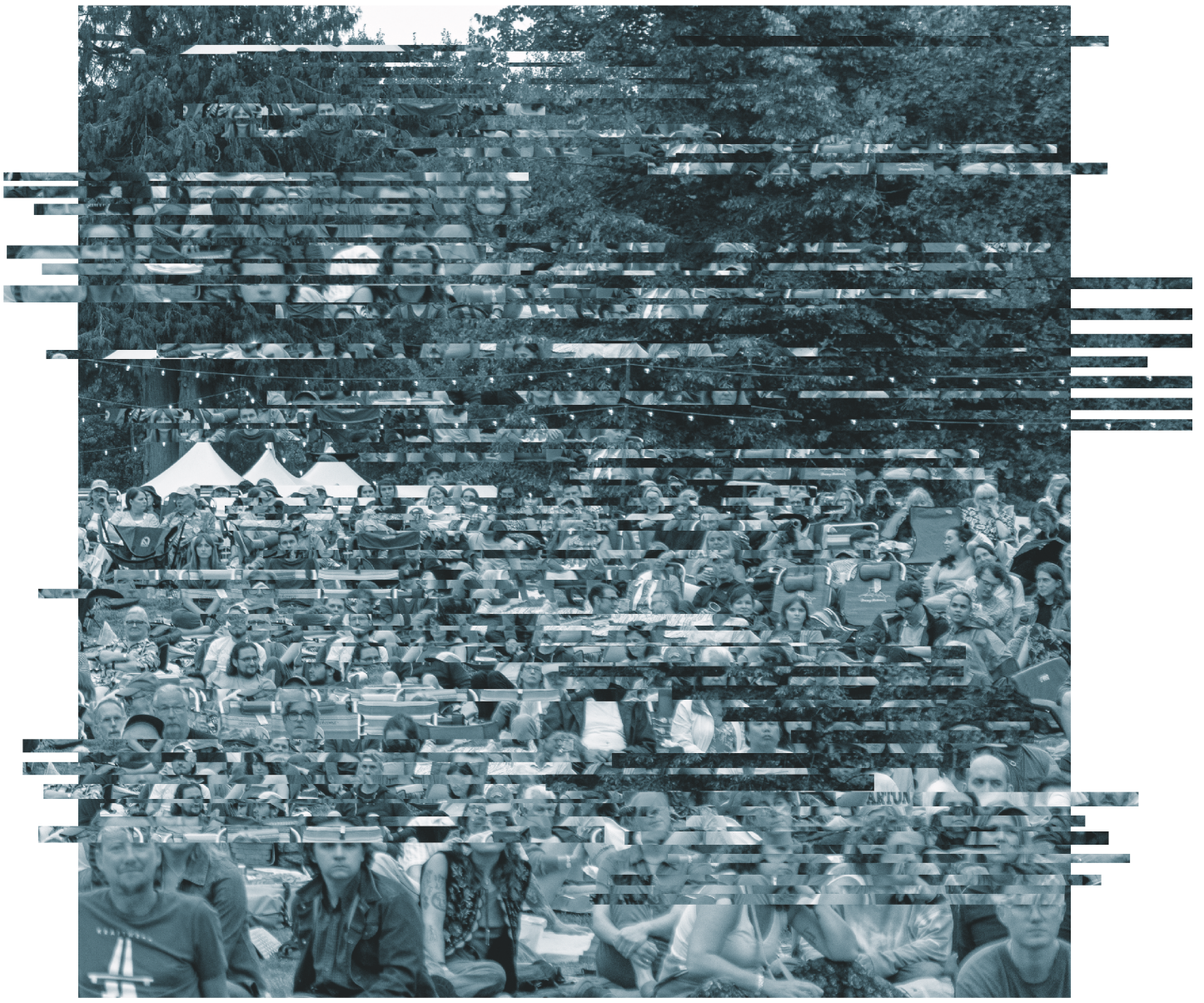
Technological growth is showing no signs of slowing down, whether designers are on board or not. Designing for the physical realm is now inevitably intertwined with the virtual. With one foot already in the door, real-world designers should shed their hesitance, equip their best gear, and take the leap into exploring all the opportunities the virtual realm of videogames has to offer.





Article cover image. Created by Shannon Hayamoto.

Light Sound



Sea-Tac's sensory room reimagines care, access, and public life through inclusive design

Jessica Martinez Vaca

Imagine stepping into a bustling train station: the lights above strobe with an uneven flicker, audio announcements clash against each other in a metallic echo, and directional signage is a chaotic blend of text and symbols that feels impossible to decipher. Now imagine experiencing this every time you enter a public space. For many neurodivergent individuals, like those with autism, ADHD, sensory processing differences, or other cognitive disabilities, this isn't a hypothetical stressor or a design oversight. It is a consistent and draining reality. In these environments, everyday tasks like finding a restroom, navigating a line, or waiting in a terminal can quickly become overwhelming. These spaces, which are meant to serve the public, often unintentionally exclude a significant portion of it simply by not considering how varied sensory and cognitive experiences can be.

Public space is meant to foster connection, equity, and community. Yet many of these environments are built with narrow expectations of how people perceive and process the world. They privilege neurotypical modes of engagement, like favoring constant stimulation, streamlined efficiency, and high visibility, over calm, clarity, and cognitive rest. For those who process the world differently, these spaces are not only unwelcoming but can be actively harmful. Designing for the so-called "edges" of the population, those with less typical sensory or cognitive needs, is not about special treatment. It's about asking fundamental questions: Who is public space really for? And what does it mean to truly belong in it?

A recent project at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA) begins to answer these questions. The airport's newly constructed Sensory Room is a quiet, intentionally designed space created for travelers with sensory sensitivities to regulate and recover. It represents a growing recognition that public design must be inclusive not only in terms of physical access but also in how it supports cognitive and sensory diversity. As a case study, the SEA Sensory Room demonstrates how a well-designed environment can reduce stress, promote dignity, and enhance the travel experience, not just for neurodivergent individuals but for many others as well.

Neurodiversity is a framework that challenges traditional notions of normalcy in brain function. Rather than framing conditions like autism or ADHD as deficits to be corrected, it sees them as natural variations in the spectrum of human cognition. This shift in thinking moves the burden away from the individual and places it on the systems—social, educational, and architectural—that were never designed with their needs in mind. With an estimated 15–20% of the population identifying as neurodivergent, the implications are enormous. Public infrastructure, by and large, still reflects a one-size-fits-all mentality. In practice, this means millions of people are routinely asked to conform to environments that do not support how they process noise, light, space, or social interactions.

Inclusive design addresses this mismatch. It asks: how can we shape spaces that invite, rather than demand, conformity? At SEA, this question became a design challenge and an opportunity. Aviation Facilities and Infrastructure Architecture Manager Heather Karch, who previously served as ADA Coordinator, saw the need for a space where overstimulated travelers could find respite. Alongside Capital Program Development Manager Mandy Xiggores, the team studied similar sensory rooms in public venues and collaborated with a local autism foundation. From early planning through implementation, the project emphasized lived experience and community engagement, not just top-down solutions, but insight from those who would use the room.

What emerged was a compact, 200-square-foot room that feels far more spacious than its dimensions suggest. The design rejects stereotypical "sensory space" aesthetics, often geared toward children and filled with bright colors or toys. Instead, it adopts a calming palette of cool hues, soft textures, and organic forms. Acoustic panels reduce ambient noise, while indirect, dimmable lighting replaces the harsh fluorescents typical of airport terminals. Flexible seating accommodates a range of needs, from solo travelers seeking solitude to parents managing sensory-sensitive children. Everything in the room is

Touch Textures



intentional, from the matte finishes that reduce glare to the gentle transitions between zones.

The room's success lies not just in its design features but in how they are experienced. "One of the first things you notice when you come into the sensory room is how quiet it is," said Mandy and Heather in a collaborative discussion. That quiet is not accidental, it's the result of material choices, spatial buffering, and a philosophy of care. In a space as loud and chaotic as an airport, silence becomes a form of accessibility. The ability to pause, reflect, and self-regulate is built into the architecture itself.

To ensure the room was meeting real needs, SEA collected over 300 user surveys via a QR code displayed inside. "The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with travelers expressing gratitude and asking for more rooms like it," says Candace Field, accessibility program manager at SEA. This data is shaping future projects. Additional sensory rooms are now being planned in the airport's C and S Concourses. These new spaces will be even more integrated, located near single-user restrooms with adult changing tables, equipped with better signage, and designed to reduce the need for verbal or social interaction when accessing the room. These changes reflect a growing awareness that accessibility is not static, and it evolves with listening, feedback, and iteration.

While this progress is promising, barriers remain. Sensory-friendly design features are still often seen as optional, added at the end of a project rather than considered from the start. Many architects and planners receive little formal education on cognitive accessibility, and funding constraints frequently push these ideas into the "nice-to-have" category. But broader cultural shifts are beginning to influence the field. Institutions like the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDEA Center) in Buffalo, New York, are starting to codify best practices and provide training. Programs like KultureCity's Sensory Inclusive Certification are helping venues from sports arenas to museums understand and implement sensory-friendly measures in meaningful ways.

Importantly, these conversations are no longer limited to advocacy groups or disability rights organizations. Neurodivergent individuals are increasingly present in the design process themselves as collaborators, consultants, and professionals. Their presence changes the questions being asked and the assumptions being challenged. Designing with, rather than just for, neurodivergent communities leads to solutions that are more relevant, nuanced, and ultimately more human.

This shift toward inclusive design isn't just about disability, it intersects with broader concerns around mental health, racial and economic equity, aging populations, and universal design. The principles that improve accessibility for one group often benefit many others. In this way, designing for neurodiversity becomes a powerful tool for equity and justice. It acknowledges that environments shape behavior, perception, and opportunity, and that no one should be excluded simply because their brain works differently.

The SEA Sensory Room represents a growing movement to rethink the values embedded in public space. It shows what is possible when we stop designing for the average user and instead embrace human variation as a strength. Imagine if every transit hub, library, courthouse, or park had spaces like this: rooms that signal care, that welcome a pause, that affirm that all people deserve dignity and belonging in the spaces we share.

To design for the edges is to reimagine the center. It is not about accommodation in the narrow sense. It is about asking how design can expand to hold more people, more experiences, and more ways of being. When public space reflects the full spectrum of humanity, not just the dominant mode, it becomes not only more just but also more alive. In this vision, inclusion is not the end goal. It is the starting point for better design.

Building More Than Homes

Skylar Lin

Interviewee:
Grace H. Kim, FAIA



CHUC residents eating together on the rooftop garden.
Image courtesy of Schemata Workshop

In a moment when the world is more connected than ever before, where video calls, likes, and shares zip across continents in seconds, millions of people find themselves trapped in a silent epidemic: loneliness. In May 2023, former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy officially recognized loneliness as a public health epidemic. According to the American Psychiatric Association, 30% of adults in the US experience loneliness with younger people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four even more susceptible to feelings of isolation. Despite the constant buzz of notifications and an abundance of digital methods to stay in touch, the technology built to bring us closer together has instead accentuated disconnection. One solution may begin in a place where we spend the majority of our time: at home.

Ding! Imagine waiting for the elevator to take you up to your apartment. As the elevator doors open, you are greeted by the neighbor who resides in the unit above yours. The neighbor with whom you coordinate dinner, the neighbor who taught you how to grow mustard greens on the rooftop, the neighbor whose pets you take care of when they go on a business trip, the neighbor whom you turn to whenever personal issues arise—this is not a dream but rather a reality for residents who live in Capitol Hill Urban Cohousing (CHUC) located in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle. CHUC is much more than the development of an apartment complex; as stated by the architectural designers at Schemata Workshop, it is the "construction of a community that would nurture both the individual and the family."

Designed by Grace H. Kim, FAIA, one of the founding principals of Schemata Workshop, CHUC is one of the firm's most notable projects. Built in 2016 and located in the bustling Capitol Hill neighborhood, CHUC is a five-story mixed use building with a commercial-oriented space on the street level and nine residential units occupying the four floors above. From the outside, CHUC seems like a typical high-density residential project. However, the magic of CHUC does not reside in its physical appearance. Rather, the innovation comes from the cohousing model embedded in the building's design and taken up by its residents.

The term cohousing originated in Denmark in the late 1960s and comes from the Danish term bofællesskaber, which translates to "living communities." Kim was introduced to the term when she was studying at the Architectural Association in Denmark as a student, and a Danish professor presented a lecture on cohousing. After the lecture, Kim remembers discussing the concept of cohousing with Mike Mariano, now her business partner and husband, and how it would be an ideal way to live. The idea of cohousing began to brew in the 2000s when they recognized how the strong preference for independence in the US was not working when it came to housing. In their eyes, the American Dream did not encourage the idea of collectivism and interdependence.

In 2007, a piece of property on Capitol Hill became available. Capitol Hill was the ideal neighborhood for the couple's cohousing project due to its proximity to downtown, grocery stores, parks, retail establishments, schools, and access to the arts. As design development began, Schemata Workshop endured a slow design review process due to the project's lofty ambitions. CHUC went through many design iterations before ground was broken. In the end, the design was a 17,600 square-foot building with one large commercial space and nine residential units. Construction was completed in 2016.

Each unit houses two or three bedrooms, a full kitchen, and living room. The commercial space at street level became the office space for the Schemata Workshop. A central courtyard was the anchor for the design. Due to a small site footprint, a traditional horizontal cohousing experience was unachievable. Therefore, a courtyard was necessary to foster vertical connections and enable sunlight to stream into the residential units.

Eight out of the nine units at CHUC have entryways and windows oriented toward the courtyard. The architects carefully crafted the units to ensure that the more public areas such as the kitchens and living rooms were close to the courtyard, while private spaces such as the bedrooms could be tucked away around the corner for privacy. Each unit was designed to be entered from an outdoor balcony that overlooks the courtyard. These balconies were intentionally designed to be much wider than King County building code so that unexpected neighborhood conversation could occur.

Directly adjacent to the base of the courtyard is the Common House. Since each residential unit has its own amenities, the Common House is the space that brings CHUC residents together. The Common House is located on the second floor, serves as a community room, and houses a kitchen and dining area for thirty people. I interviewed Kim about the impact of the Common House at CHUC. In our conversation, Kim reveals how the habit of eating and cooking together as a community creates an opportunity to show appreciation, form deep bonds, support each other during times of difficulty, and remove the transactional feel of relationships. This is what has made cohousing successful and sustainable at CHUC. The following transcript highlights the key points from our conversation.

Common House
Functionality and Eating Together

Excerpts from A Conversation between Skylar Lin and Grace Kim

May 20, 2025



Skylar Lin
So one of the things that piqued my interest during your TED talk—you mentioned eating together. So I understand there is a communal dining kitchen area at the bottom of the courtyard. So I was wondering how, in your point of view, does eating together foster social connections?

Grace Kim
Okay. Why does that happen? So the space that you're referring to is called the Common House. And every cohousing community has one. They might be different in size, but the point is to have a space that you can have meals together. Not every cohousing community has meals together. But I have found, as I've probably been to, over 120 or 230 cohousing communities around the world.

GK 00:15:30:17 - 00:15:52:03
And I will say the ones where people eat together on a regular basis, the greater the frequency, the stronger their community is. And so, I think there's a word that my mom uses or that exists in Korean that my mom taught me at an early age.

GK 00:15:52:03 - 00:16:14:17
It's called chung. And it's basically the closest equivalent to English I would say is like bonding. Right. And bonding occurs. Chung occurs when you're doing small tasks together. It's the frequency in the daily routine. You're not, like, having a meeting. You're not scheduling time. It's just over time. As you're doing work side by side, you build a connection.

GK 00:17:19:09 - 00:17:46:04
And in working together in those teams, you get to know each other. You get to learn about each other's families, your backgrounds, all of those things. And so that's kind of part of the great opportunities to build chung. But it also happens at dinner time, like when you're sitting at a meal, whether you're going to only be at a meal for fifteen minutes or you're going to be at the dinner for thirty or forty-five minutes, it's your choice.

GK 00:17:46:06 - 00:18:05:12
But for whatever duration of time you're there, you have a chance to interact with your neighbors. And during that time, you might, you know, figure out that you have a shared interest or that you might be catching up. On a difficult week or whatever is going on with you in your life where you might be planning a hiking trip or planning a birthday party or planning something.

GK 00:18:05:14 - 00:18:32:12
And in those times, I think that it's been interesting to see, I wouldn't even say friendships, but like a very tight-knit group of connections between individuals. So, like, there is a group of women that do wild swimming, right? They, like, convinced each other over time. To go swimming like, you know, it's six in the morning in the middle of winter, out in the lake or in the ocean.

GK 00:20:14:04 - 00:20:39:23
It's not just the eating. Like, eating is nourishment, and, you know, it's enjoyable. There's, I would say, to one family, eating is just a means of putting fuel in your body, and that's all it is for them. But I think for everybody else in our community the meals, like eating and feeding each other is like a, you know, a love language is a way of showing love and respect for each other.

GK 00:20:40:01 - 00:21:01:19
And I think that's true in lots of cultures. So I think, yeah, it's enjoyable. It's fun. And it's a chance to build deeper connections. And that's why I feel like when you, when I go to visit communities where they don't have any meals at all or it's like a once, once a month potluck, I can tell, just by the way people interact with one another.

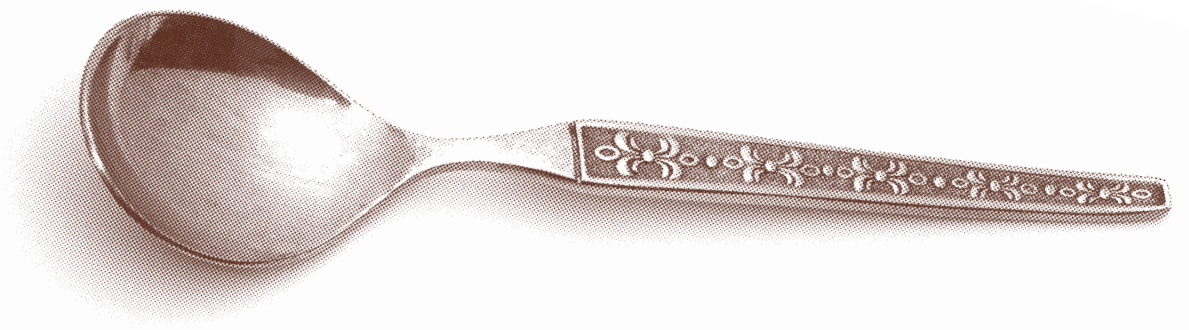
GK 00:21:01:19 - 00:21:30:23
And the way that they experience each other—I feel like the fewer the meals are, the more transactional the community is. Right. So I feel like, in our community, there aren't a lot of transactions, meaning like, we don't pay for the meals, no money changes hands and all. In a lot of other communities, if you have a meal but we cook, we'll say this meal costs X dollars, right?

GK 00:22:52:18 - 00:23:17:19
It's more an act of love or care than it is about, like, making sure I get paid back for the things I make for you. And I think in general there's, I think, income housing in general, there tends to be a lot of sharing. That's the whole point of living in cohousing. But I think if you can take away anything that feels transactional, we often say in our community that we like to have a mindset of generosity.

GK 00:23:17:21 - 00:23:42:05
So rather than everything being scarce and limited and having a price on things, we think about abundance and being generous. And so, you know, if you have ten guests, that's fine. If you have no guests, that's fine. And so, like, rather than worrying about each one of those things, we try to have an attitude of abundance and just everybody can come, everybody can participate.

End Conversation

As CHUC inches closer to its ten-year anniversary, Kim reflects on how far the project has come. In her eyes, CHUC has accomplished many of the goals it was designed for in a more profound way. The low resident turnover rate, regular Common House meals, and a strong connection with neighbors in each unit has validated the core intent of CHUC: constructing a community that would nurture its residents. Relationships within CHUC have been fostered by the community meals organized every other day. Neighbors are no longer strangers, and each resident has become a vital piece of CHUC's fabric. Within the confines of this urban housing complex is a strong community shaped by the spaces crafted within the project. Whether they are a young couple, an established family, or nearing retirement age, CHUC has provided a framework through intentional design of the courtyard and Common House that encourages residents to connect with each other at a personal level. CHUC is much more than a regular high density building. Instead, it's an example of a living, breathing community, one where loneliness is dispelled by design.



And in those times,

I think that it's been interesting to see...





a very, tight knit group of connections

between individuals.

Designing for Displacement in Transitional Housing

Khawthar Eltom

Interviewees:
Rico Quirindongo, Director at City of Seattle's Office of Planning & Community Development
Selam, fled war-torn Eritrea in 2018 and eventually resettled in Seattle

"My conversations with Quirindongo and Selam show that the gulf between policy and lived experience is not inevitable: it is a design problem looking for a design solution, especially within the realm of transitional housing."

Rent hikes, zoning changes, and development pressures, displacement is often discussed in such policy terms. But for those who experience it, displacement is far more intimate as it can mean the sudden loss of a home, the disintegration of community, and the unsettling feeling of being unwelcome in familiar spaces. As cities like Seattle grapple with housing crises and rapid urban development, the idea of transitional housing is rapidly becoming more important in architectural and development discourse. Transitional housing can take the form of shelters, motels, and temporary apartments that serve as first stops for people uprooted by force or circumstance. Can applications of design shift these short-term spaces from mere holding stations into environments that nurture dignity, identity, and healing?

To explore this question, I spoke with two people on opposite ends of Seattle's displacement conversation: Rico Quirindongo, Director at the City of Seattle's Office of Planning & Community Development (OPCD), has experience in design, lending important insight into the built environment's role in supporting displaced communities; and Selam (who preferred not to share her last name for safety reasons). Selam fled war-torn Eritrea in 2018 to eventually resettle in Seattle and she shared what displacement feels like in her body and in her everyday life. These stories reveal the gaps that can exist between institutional definitions and the lived reality of displacement and transition in Seattle. Participatory design can help close this gap by creating transitional spaces where displaced residents can rediscover safety, agency, and a sense of home.

In my conversation with Rico Quirindongo, he explained that Seattle tracks displacement through indicators such as rent burden, median income, and redevelopment activity. "We look at where households are spending more than 30 percent of income on rent and where new construction is likely to push people out," he said. Quirindongo added that these metrics feed into two key policy tools:

1. Equitable Development Initiative (EDI): a city grant program that channels roughly $20 million annually to community-based, BIPOC-led projects aimed at building economic stability, cultural space, and anti-displacement infrastructure.

2. Comprehensive Plan 2025: Seattle's twenty-year land-use blueprint that will guide rezoning, housing targets, and infrastructure investments. The plan's anti-displacement chapter will draw heavily on EDI data and community input.

Selam's definition was one of a visceral nature, rather than numeric. "Being displaced is like losing a part of your identity," she said. "You leave your routine, your neighbors, even your corner store. It's not just moving—it's being pushed." She added that the hardest part is the slow erosion of self-worth: "You start to feel you don't even deserve a home. You're always a guest—or worse, a burden." This tension between data and lived experience surfaced repeatedly in both my conversations. At one point, Quirindongo acknowledged it candidly: "We try to humanize the data, but there's always a gap." When displacement is treated primarily as a statistic, the trauma, grief, and long-term instability people carry can fade from view. While the city may celebrate moving someone into a new unit, the individual may mourn the loss of everything that made them feel at home.

Displaced residents often cycle through shelters, motels, or shared apartments which are spaces intended to be temporary, yet often are occupied by the same individual or family for months or years. Selam recalled her first few months in Seattle: sleeping on a living-room floor with seven relatives, then eventually moving to nonprofit-run shelters. "The walls were bare, the lights were cold, and rules were taped everywhere telling you what not to do," she said. Fluorescent glare and echoing corridors left her "feeling exposed and invisible at the same time." Selam did find respite in her experience of such housing through a modest shelter kitchen, "On Saturdays a few of us cooked dishes from back home. Someone painted flowers on the wall. That room became a place of peace." For Selam, dignity hinged on the ability to leave a personal imprint: "Spaces you can leave your fingerprints on—they feel safe."

Quirindongo stressed that such emotional details are starting to influence city projects. "We're weaving trauma-informed principles into transitional housing—more natural light, acoustic control, and flexible rooms that let families rearrange furniture," he said. Still, he admitted that budget constraints often lead to functional but impersonal buildings. Designers are routinely in a situation where they must overlook subtle yet powerful sensory cues—smell, ritual, food preparation, prayer, cultural needs, and elements of 'home'. For example, in her transitional housing unit, Selam struggled to find a quiet corner to pray or a place to cook her own meals. "You're constantly reminded the space isn't really yours," she noted. A more nuanced and human-centered, trauma-informed approach would put the needs of privacy, autonomy, and cultural continuity alongside maximizing a metric such as shelter capacity. This could drastically improve the experience of those in transitional housing which could ultimately benefit their integration into our city and help the development and sustainability of unique and culturally diverse communities. This work is greater than the sum of its parts, it would have a beneficial effect on our neighborhoods, our citizens, our guests, and our city.

Another major design challenge, aside from privacy and cultural considerations, is one of agency: are displaced people co-creators of their environments or passive recipients? OPCD strives for continual community input through public forums, neighborhood walks, and advisory committees attached to programs like the EDI mentioned earlier. "We try to build relationships, not just extract feedback," Quirindongo said, while admitting the process can remain "too top-down." Selam's lived experience illustrates why this consideration matters: "nobody asked me what I needed. They just told me where to go," she said. Even in longer-term housing, she had no say over layout or amenities. "You feel like a guest, not a resident." Such power imbalances can nullify well-intended designs as they might be suited for the wrong occupant or fulfilling needs not applicable.

True participation and collaborative design decisions demands more than surveys at the end of schematic design. Suggested methods that could improve these issues include: co-design workshops, decision-making roles for residents, and budgets that value local expertise as professional knowledge. Without these shifts, architecture risks repeating paternalistic tropes—designing for rather than with. Bridging the gap between policy and lived experience is not just about closing a disconnect between the residents and the city metrics, it is also about imagining new relationships between people and place in general. If we are to transform transitional housing into environments of belonging, then architects, planners, and policymakers can begin by adopting strategies that reframe the role of design itself.

First, we should normalize participatory design. This means moving displaced residents upstream in the process—co-creating project goals, developing design briefs together, and compensating participants for their expertise. Community-led charrettes (intense, diverse, collaborative sessions) and story-gathering initiatives should be embedded at the start of the process, not added on after the fact.

Second, trauma-informed spatial practices should be centralized. By minimizing sensory overload, providing zones of choice through features like curtains and lockable storage, and using warm, natural materials, designers can make transitional spaces feel calming and responsive. Flexible layouts with movable partitions and modular furniture can also reflect the diverse family structures and cultural rituals that shape daily life.

Finally, we must celebrate cultural expression. Integrating communal kitchens, prayer rooms, and gathering spaces that residents can personalize affirms both identity and belonging. From art programs to landscape design, design details should echo the cultures of those who inhabit these places in order to help people, as Selam said, "remember who they are."

These strategies signal a needed shift in such types of architectural practice; one from designing facades to designing belonging. They also reflect Quirindongo's call to pair policy investments with community-defined outcomes, ensuring public dollars create spaces that heal, rather than just houses. More than a checklist, this is a call to reframe design as an act of solidarity. Displacement will likely remain a reality in many global cities, but our response to this can and should change. My conversations with Quirindongo and Selam show that the gulf between policy and lived experience is not inevitable: it is a design problem looking for a design solution, especially within the realm of transitional housing.

For emerging architects, the lesson is clear: Every space we touch carries the potential to wound or to mend. Cities must become places where even temporary shelter respects permanence in people's identity, agency, and dignity. That process begins not with data, but with listening; not with solving for people, but with sharing power with them. Architecture, at its best, is a vessel for compassion. Designing with displaced communities at the center means building not just for shelter, but for dignity, memory, and hope. One project, one kitchen, one fingerprint at a time.



Where Both Ends of Life Meet

Generational overlap at Providence Mount St. Vincent











Ayami Kawasaki Matsushima

Interviees:
Evan Briggs, Sonia Niaufre,
Veronica Couto, Nona Raybern

Located in West Seattle, Providence Mount St. Vincent is home to 300 seniors. But five days a week, it also becomes a home for 125 children, who share the 300,000-square-foot facility with their older friends. “The Mount,” as the center is called, has operated as a senior care center since 1924. In 1991, it opened the Intergenerational Learning Center—an on-site child-care program designed to bring the joy and energy of children into the heart of its senior community.

Here, in the Mount, elderly residents and pre-school kids share activities five days a week under one roof. The activities range from art, music, games, and group activities such as sandwich-making for a local non-profit serving the homeless. During the brief one to five years of overlapping life stages—often the final years for the elderly residents—children and elders share a mutual ability to live in the moment.

America is aging, and faster than ever before. According to the Population Reference Bureau, by 2030, all baby boomers will be 65 or older.[2] By 2050, the population over 65 is projected to reach 82 million, almost double that of 2022.[3] But aging is not the only challenge; loneliness is on the rise. In a recent study by the University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation, more than one-third of adults aged 50 to 80 reported feeling lonely. Nearly as many feel isolated.[4]

Where do these lonely seniors go? While some older adults can remain at home, many with health issues eventually require assisted living or nursing care—often for the sake of their families’ peace of mind as much as their own safety. However, these senior housing models are often designed in ways that deepen isolation. Residents are typically cared for in a closed-loop system, where staff provide physical support, but opportunities for meaningful interaction with the outside world are rare. Seniors are cast in the passive role—recipients of care, “entertained” with scheduled games or singalongs. The Mount is an example of another path.

“Going to a nursing home as a child was a traumatic experience,” recalls Evan Briggs, director of The Growing Season, a documentary about Providence Mount St. Vincent. “It was clear to me that these people were being warehoused, cut off from society—they were just sitting around waiting to die.” Briggs’ experience, which dates back to her own childhood in the 1980s, still resonates today. Despite decades of change, many care facilities continue to isolate older adults in ways that infantilize them, stripping away their opportunities to give, to teach, or to be needed. These are people with the richest life experiences and perspectives in our communities—insight that doesn’t vanish with dementia or mobility issues. But is living this way something any of us would truly look forward to at the end of our lives?

At the Mount, things are different. Seniors aren’t just taken care of; they also take care. Each weekday, children from the Intergenerational Learning Center, aged six weeks to five years, visit the seniors’ floors. They ask to be read to, or beg their older friends to play. In these moments, the residents become the children’s playmates—adults who have time and presence, who can fully engage. The seniors are no longer treated like children, because the real children are right there in the room, asking them for guidance.

Even for those with limited physical or mental capacity, these small interactions matter. “Everyone—not just my dad—lit up when a group of toddlers walked in,” says Sonia Niaufre, whose father John lived at the Mount from 2011 to 2013. “Just hearing children in the hallway made my dad feel so alive and curious.”

This proximity of having childcare and eldercare under one roof creates a type of low-pressure, everyday magic. “In addition to the planned activities, just because they were in the same building meant that there were opportunities for them to pass each other in the hallway,” Briggs explains. The spontaneous hallway “hellos” and shared mealtimes turn the ordinary into moments to cherish.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Intergeneration Programming at the Mount – Exploring the value and meaning of intergenerational relationships (PDF provided by the Providence St. Vincent)

[2] Population Reference Bureau, Fact Sheet: Aging in the United States.

[3] U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 National Population Projections Tables: Main Series.

[4] Malani, P. N., Solway, E., Kirch, M., Singer, D. C., Roberts, J. S., & Kullgren, J. T. (2024). Loneliness and social isolation among US older adults. JAMA.

[5] Donna M. Butts & Shannon E. Jarrott, Stanford Social Innovation Review, The Power of Proximity: Co-Locating Childcare and Eldercare Programs



Even the so-called shortcomings of the very young and the very old become shared strengths. Because young children speak simply, residents with memory loss or Alzheimer's can enjoy and participate in the conversation. When a senior forgets how to make a sandwich, a four-year-old can teach them—learning empathy and confidence in the process. There's no judgment. Just two people figuring something out together.

Kids here grow up seeing walkers and wheelchairs, hearing slower speech, and learning to be patient with people who don't always respond right away. Disability and death simply become a part of life, not something to fear. Meanwhile, they gain adult role models who are fully present, adults who have the time and emotional space to play, listen, and engage without distraction. In an increasingly hurried world, this is no small gift.

Given all this, the intergenerational model seems like an obvious solution. And the public agrees: a recent Harris poll commissioned by Generations United and the Eisner Foundation found that 85% of Americans would prefer a shared site that fosters intergenerational connection over an age-segregated facility if they or a loved one needed care.[5] Yet across the U.S., there are still fewer than 150 such intergenerational programs, compared to tens of thousands of traditional senior care facilities. Why?

The barriers are real—and multi-layered. The most significant is funding. "What makes it possible for our program to thrive is that our Intergenerational Learning Center relies significantly on philanthropy," says Veronica Couto, communications specialist at the Mount. "A standalone childcare center would find it highly challenging to fund this level of activity through tuition alone." Over 60% of the Mount's residents rely on Medicaid and charitable support. To sustain the intergenerational program, the Mount's foundation provides more than $1 million annually. "It truly takes a village to do what we do," Couto says.

Regulatory hurdles add another layer of complexity. Childcare and eldercare are governed by entirely different sets of codes and standards, including staffing ratios, evacuation plans, and safety protocols. Merging them under one roof requires careful coordination.

Despite all these challenges, the demand for intergenerational living is, and will be growing as our society ages rapidly. Identifying the most impactful elements of intergenerational design and codifying the typology holds real weight. In fact, design can be a powerful tool in making intergenerational interactions happen more frequently and meaningfully. "Simply putting both generations together won't be sufficient for meaningful interactions, as the current norm of age segregation is so deeply rooted," Briggs notes.

Even at the Mount, the design isn't ideal; the childcare center was added much later to a 100-year-old building. Still, newer facilities that integrate eldercare and childcare from the start offer a glimpse of what's possible. They show how intentional design can foster daily, natural interactions between seniors and children, just by placing a shared space like a hallway between the two, for example.[6] "What the Mount pioneered is the concept," Briggs says. "I'm really counting on the architects of today to be the ones to design these spaces to actually be conducive."

To truly iterate on intergenerational design, we need to get more of these projects off the ground. How can we do that? Or more importantly, how can we, as architects, help make intergenerational care more common?

One approach is to start fresh—proposing and designing new facilities with both generations in mind from the beginning. This means working with urban planners, civic leaders, investors, and local communities to create spaces that invite connections across age. Growing awareness is paving the way for policies like the Care Across Generations Act, which could open up more funding opportunities for these programs.

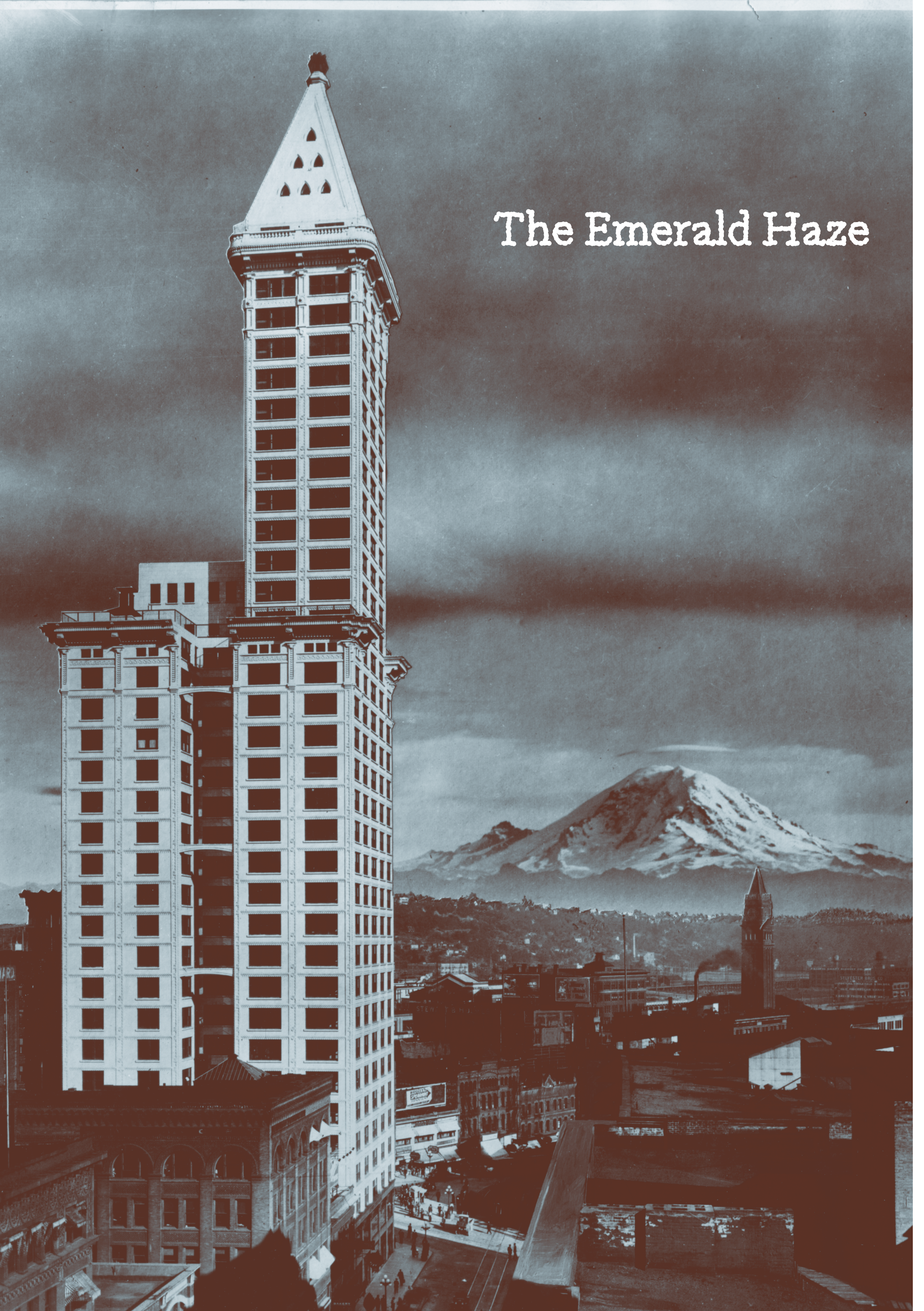
New construction isn't the only answer. We can also begin by linking existing senior housing and childcare centers within the same community. If we have liaison staff, like those at the Mount, who bridge the gap between generations and coordinate shared activities, we can foster similar connections without needing to build entirely new facilities. It's not about creating perfect spaces. It's about enabling meaningful encounters.

New models are emerging. The Nook at Northaven, a recent development in Seattle, offers a different but promising approach—combining senior housing with normal housing units and childcare onsite. While it may still require coordination and facilitation to truly support intergenerational bonds, inviting a broader range of people to live together is a good starting point.

Of course, financial hurdles remain. But momentum is growing. "We support any kind of creative solutions that can help address the unique needs of the communities we serve." says Nona Raybern, Communications Manager at the City of Seattle, Office of Housing.

Intergenerational living isn't a radical new idea; it's a return to something deeply human. Living with people at different stages of life, from infancy to old age, used to be the norm. It's only relatively recently that we've broken those connections apart. As we reimagine how we care for our elders and raise our children, perhaps the path forward is not something entirely new, but something we've missed—and are now ready to rediscover.

The Emerald Haze



The Blurred Truth Behind Seattle's Sustainability Story

Nicolas Farley

Interviewees:
Dr. Rob Peña and Jack Murphy

Seattle has long been seen as a beacon of sustainability, its "Emerald City" moniker conjuring images of a harmonious utopia nestled within the lush expanse of the Pacific Northwest. Yet, beneath the city's green veneer lies a different story: one driven by resource extraction and industrial expansion since its founding in 1851. In a place that brands itself as a leader in sustainability, greenwashing has been a convenient cover for years, masking environmentally harmful practices under the guise of eco-friendly initiatives. The built environment of the city is woven into a diverse ecosystem where the consequences of habitat loss and climate change are impossible to ignore. In 2025, the city's priorities, and those of its people, have shifted: sustainability is no longer a distant ideal, but an urgent necessity.

For generations, naturalists and scholars have been at odds with industrialists, developers, and politicians over the use and misuse of natural resources. In modern Seattle, however, it would seem as though a dramatic cultural shift has occurred: everywhere you turn, there are references to sustainability and nature, with buildings like the "Climate Pledge Arena," "The Emerald," and "The Eco-Apartments" signaling a newfound reverence for environmental stewardship. Yet this apparent trend raises critical questions about what is real and what is smoke and mirrors. While such names and visuals suggest progress, they often mask deeper realities about our ongoing relationship with the natural world.

This phenomenon, known as greenwashing, describes the practice of marketing or presenting products, buildings, or initiatives as environmentally responsible, even when their actual impact is minimal or misleading. In Seattle, greenwashing has become a convenient tactic for developers and corporations whose core motives remain tied to profit and unchecked growth. It's easy to be seduced by the idea that sustainability has become the city's new ethos, but in truth, the balance between ecological health and economic expansion sits on a knife's edge. As architects, designers, and citizens, we must remain vigilant, understanding that our own self-interest can cloud our view of genuine sustainability and the collective action it demands.

L.C. Smith Building (Pioneer Building), Seattle, Washington, with Mount Rainier in the background
Curtis & Miller, 1914. via Library of Congress



To understand the intricacies of this issue, we first need to break down sustainability into three pillars: Ecological Sustainability, Social Sustainability, and Economic Sustainability. Each of these pillars interact with each other and are expressed through our built environments

Ecological Sustainability centers on protecting natural resources and delicate ecosystems, reducing waste and pollution, and addressing climate change, while ensuring the environment's long-term vitality. Our actions determine the quality of our air, water, agriculture, and overall well-being. Social Sustainability focuses on supporting the dignity and well-being of individuals and communities by fostering inclusive, equitable spaces where everyone can thrive. It highlights social justice and opportunity to ensure future generations inherit a fair society. In Seattle, marginalized areas like the International District and Duwamish River Valley have faced disproportionate environmental risks, emphasizing the need to address social and ecological issues together in urban development.

Economic Sustainability revolves around building systems that support long-term prosperity rather than short-term gains. It involves fostering stable economies, equitable opportunities, and resilient livelihoods that respect the delicate balance between financial growth and the health of our communities. In many cases, built environments are green in an ecological sense but cater exclusively to affluent clients, a practice known as eco-luxury greenwashing. For example, The Populus Hotel in Seattle proudly touts its "reverence for nature" and "biophilic design," yet rooms start at a minimum of $400 per night, effectively excluding anyone who isn't already considerably wealthy.. But hey, at least they claim that if you spend the night there, they will plant a tree somewhere.

Decisions on policies that shape environmental and social outcomes are often rooted in economic considerations. Capital flows frequently determine which voices are heard, and which are silenced. These dynamics can deepen divides between social groups, highlighting the importance of integrating economic sustainability into a broader vision of equity and environmental stewardship. The overall implication is that none of these things happen in a vacuum. The people of a society need the freedom and means to make healthier and more sustainable choices. It is through this lens that we need to explore the route to a "greener" world.

For many readers, this will elicit a "Well yeah, but where do we currently stand on these issues?". Talking to locals who have been in Seattle for decades will yield mixed results. Many Seattle residents still remember the Viaduct, built in 1959 and removed in 2019, which traced the waterfront's shoreline and steadily leaked petroleum products and other toxic chemicals directly into the Puget Sound. Older residents may remember a time in which the logging industry floated their logs en masse while coated with lead-based paint and creosote, a practice outlawed in the 1970s. It is fairly safe to say that things are a little bit better now—especially considering that, as of 2023, the Port of Seattle has cut port-controlled emissions by 50% seven years ahead of schedule, and city-led stormwater management projects now treat 260 million gallons of polluted runoff each year, a 35% increase since 2016. These figures highlight Seattle's tangible progress toward a healthier urban environment.

Building technologies have also become increasingly sophisticated, driven by a growing understanding of how the built environment intersects with our natural world. Meaningful progress is being made as more people invest in creating spaces that are not only efficient, but also more harmonious with their surroundings. According to Dr. Rob Peña, professor of Design Technology at the University of Washington's College of Built Environments, about three-quarters of the electricity we produce is consumed by buildings. This means that reducing operational energy use is crucial for achieving long-term sustainability. For Dr. Peña, the key lies in considering the environmental context of each building: how it manages heat



gains and losses, the climate in which it operates, and the ways occupants adapt and respond to these conditions. This holistic approach to design acknowledges that buildings are not isolated structures, but active participants in their local ecosystems- and that's where real change begins.

Sustainability is not always immediately visible. When people think of ecological design, images of solar panels or rooftop gardens often come to mind. Yet, true sustainability is usually more subtle and holistic. Elements like green roofs can indeed add to the upfront cost of a building, as structural loads increase and demand more engineering. At the same time, they can serve as attractive features to unsuspecting consumers. When discussing greenwashing in architecture, Dr. Peña offers a hopeful perspective, stating that "the profession in the last ten years has become increasingly aware of what counts," and that "back then architects and developers had less tools and knowledge, therefore were more susceptible to shiny objects." Solutions can be as simple as changing the color of roofs from black to white, as California ratified into their building code back in 2005. In Dr. Peña's opinion, this kind of policy decision perfectly illustrates how significant change can result from clear, straightforward guidance in shaping societal choices.

Although the profession of architecture is not solely focused on a sustainable route, it remains a client-driven industry, and in many cases, the client holds the power to choose between making a project more sustainable or simply saving money. Jack Murphy, Executive Editor of The Architect's Newspaper has observed this phenomena for over a decade, reviewing hundreds of projects every year. "The problem is in the operating system." says Murphy when commenting on the relationship between communication and prioritization to build sustainably. As an architectural designer turned journalist, he believes that the way sustainability is represented within the field is crucial for creating lasting change. "Architects need to walk their clients through the benefits of sustainable design outside of just the numerical data. How does it feel to be in a space that operates well?". Both Dr. Peña and Jack Murphy emphasize that there is a noticeable change in atmosphere (pun intended) when perceiving spaces that emphasize sustainability and connection to natural forces.

Things are getting better, but we're not there yet. Washington is at the forefront of the movement toward sustainable building practices, and the growing global body of knowledge is creating a virtuous cycle of improvement. Seattle consistently ranks among the top U.S. cities for sustainability and is one of only a few to achieve a 5-STAR rating from STAR Communities, a national sustainability rating system. This recognition reflects the city's progress in areas such as energy efficiency, green building, and community engagement. Still, only a fraction of homes are designed with an architect's involvement; the majority of buildings are driven by developers working from basic blueprints, with little emphasis on long-term sustainability. This is a pivotal moment. Architects: lean into your role as storytellers and stewards of place. Represent sustainability not just with metrics, but by conveying how an integrated, ecologically aware space can feel. Think of its atmosphere, its harmony, and its vitality. Policy makers: recognize the immense power of regulation; a single policy shift, like California's decision to require white roofs, can ripple outward and spark profound change. And to students: cross-learn, embrace the excitement of sustainability, and explore how beauty and ecological responsibility can come together in your work. The future of our cities and communities depends on your vision and your willingness to imagine something better.

Moss covered trees on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, just East of Seattle.

Photo by Cameron Reeder 2024

When Transit Policy Collides with Cultural Vision

As OneRedmond Dreams Big Beside the Light Rail, Students Help Navigate Between Ambition and Feasibility

Alex Huynh

Interviewees:
Edward David Blum, Thomas Nguyen,
Justine Mulholland, Bill Biggs

On a stretch of land near the Marymoor Village Light Rail Station, it's easy to imagine what most developers see: apartment buildings, ground-floor retail, maybe a café or two. It's the kind of site that checks all the boxes for transit-oriented development—dense, walkable, and ready for housing. But the OneRedmond Foundation sees that and more. As Redmond's non-profit economic and community development organization, the OneRedmond Foundation works to attract investment, support local businesses, and strengthen the city's cultural and civic infrastructure. In line with that mission, the group envisions a portion of this unbuilt parcel, in partnership with a non-profit affordable housing developer, as a cultural anchor—one that could meet the needs of this rapidly growing city with arts, science, and community spaces. It's a vision that blends civic identity with economic ambition—but to bring it to life, the Foundation will have to compete in a financial and policy arena that is not necessarily designed for such aspirations.

The new light rail station taking shape in Marymoor Village is a future node of mobility that promises to bring growth, investment, and change to the city's edge. Like every stop along Sound Transit's expanding network, the land surrounding the station is being eyed as prime real estate for high-density, transit-oriented development (TOD). This type of development expands opportunities for all, as direct access to transit can lead to vibrant places that work for residents, and visitors alike.

In addition to affordable housing on the site, the OneRedmond Foundation aims to expand Redmond's civic identity, positioning the site as both a place to live and as a community destination for creativity, learning, and connection. The potential for synergy and partnership between the housing development and an Arts and Sciences Center would make it both a place to live and also to work, gather, create, and learn, meeting Sound Transit's goals of creating "connections between neighborhoods and the region, between jobs and housing, between housing and transit, and between people and vibrant communities."

The challenge? Sound Transit is legally required to prioritize TOD in how it releases public land. That means any proposal that doesn't deliver a competitive amount of housing and walkability risks being dismissed before it ever reaches the table. For OneRedmond's vision to survive, it must do more than inspire—it must comply. That means forming a coalition of development partners, rethinking feasibility, and negotiating a balance between cultural ambition and policy expectations.

To understand what's at stake with the Marymoor site, it helps to know the process that will eventually determine its future: the Request for Proposal, or RFP. When public agencies like Sound Transit make land available for development, they don't just sell it to the highest bidder. Instead, they issue RFPs: formal invitations for organizations to submit competing proposals that meet a set of planning priorities, legal obligations, and performance metrics. These TOD requirements aren't just preferences—they're Sound Transit policies. By conventional reading of current guidelines, the land must be used in a way that supports compact, connected, and sustainable growth.

So how does OneRedmond compete? They are on a path to assemble a coalition of partners, including housing developers, cultural institutions, and mission-aligned investors, who are willing to co-develop a shared proposal. In this sense, the RFP becomes more than a planning document. It becomes a test of imagination, collaboration, and coalition-building. Partnering with a non-profit affordable housing developer to bring the site a significant amount of housing is key to the plan for success. The Arts and Science Center would serve as a buffer between the housing and the nearby SR 520 freeway, while being an amenity to those living in the affordable apartments and surrounding areas.

At its core, OneRedmond's proposal for the Marymoor Village site is about filling gaps. The city, known as a thriving center of technology and innovation, has long been recognized for its economic growth, yet it remains culturally underserved. As a nonprofit with-

Han Zheng - Link Light Rail Line 1 |
Siemens S700 | Mount Baker Station

out its own development arm, OneRedmond envisions transforming the vacant parcel adjacent to the new light rail station into a dynamic cultural hub, combining affordable housing with community-oriented facilities—spaces that Redmond has historically lacked or lost to displacement.

Bill Biggs, former Foundation Board President and MASC Committee Chair at the OneRedmond Foundation, emphasizes that this vision emerged directly from conversations with over 50 local organizations, all pointing to a clear community need for flexible arts and STEM-focused spaces.

"From our interviews, flexible, affordable arts and science spaces, alongside affordable housing, are repeatedly stressed as lacking due to displacement or simply not existing," Biggs explains. Redmond, he notes, is "culturally diverse with an incredibly creative and artistic populace," making the concept of a combined cultural and STEM facility a compelling choice for the site.

The OneRedmond Foundation partnered with student studios from the University of Washington's Community, Environment, and Planning (CEP) program over multiple academic quarters to find out if their goals were possible based on size of site and zoning regulations. Led by Teaching Associate David Blum, student teams conducted detailed feasibility analyses, zoning reviews, and design explorations, test-fitting different options against anticipated RFP requirements. Biggs describes these collaborations as highly valuable, saying, "Their final products offered similarities and differences for us to consider. Recommendations for housing, parking requirements, and determining optimum sizes of community spaces are real challenges we continue to fine-tune."

Thomas Nguyen, a student in the studio, recalls the steep learning curve. "They gave us the lay of the land," he said, "and we had to decide how far we could realistically go." For his team, that meant dissecting Sound Transit's TOD requirements and aligning design choices with housing mandates. "At the end of the day, Sound Transit would rather see more housing, specifically affordable housing," Nguyen explained. The studio ultimately recommended favoring housing to improve competitiveness.

Nguyen described how working under real-world constraints shifted his design mindset. "Seventy percent of our research was making sure things were feasible and realistic. Creativity came after we established the constraints—like putting together a giant puzzle." The students delivered more than concepts—they provided actionable strategies, from site layouts to ownership models.

With Sound Transit's RFP imminent, this is not a theoretical exercise—it's a live scenario unfolding in real time. The decisions made today about this parcel near the Marymoor Village Station will shape Redmond's cultural landscape, civic identity, and urban environment for decades.

The Foundation's strategy, despite being ambitious and risky, could stretch historical s models of developing these types of sites. It suggests a path forward for how bold cultural visions can survive—and potentially thrive—with the input of the community and knowledge and ideas of students and experts alike. If successful, it may inspire similar coalitions, partnerships, and creative solutions elsewhere, demonstrating that the future of urban development lies in blurring boundaries and aiming high.

Whether or not OneRedmond's proposal secures the forthcoming RFP in partnership with a non-profit affordable housing developer, it has already sparked a kind of progress grounded in collaboration, creativity, and community-driven vision. This effort reveals what's possible when people step beyond their traditional roles—when students become co-creators in city-making, and when civic advocates like OneRedmond, rooted in community needs rather than market incentives, push design beyond what policy alone prescribes. "The experience of working with three cohorts of energetic and passionate UW students has been inspiring," Biggs reflects, "and we can't wait to see where their ideas, and those of the greater Redmond community, in partnership with Sound Transit and others lead. It's really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for all of us."

If, one day, a traveler steps off the light rail and finds themselves beneath the glow of a planetarium or the buzz of a maker space, they'll know—something here was imagined with care, shaped by many hands, and built to welcome everyone.



Privately Owned Public Spaces

Janeth Mendez Pacheco



Safeco Plaza. Image by Tushita Mehta



A Tale of Two Plazas

Tushita Mehta

Have you ever thought about who owns the bench you're sitting on? Where you can ride your skateboard? Or get petition signatures? As cities evolve, public life becomes blended with private interests, and spaces that appear open for everyone are often surveilled through cameras and security. The rise of privately owned public spaces has introduced mixed opinions on design intentions and the experience of the urban realm. These semi-public spaces, controlled by private entities blur the lines between access and exclusion within our urban centers and raise critical questions about who's invited, their expected feelings, and the level of freedom they permit.

Privately owned public spaces, or POPS, are spaces such as plazas, walkways, or atriums that are open for public use but are under private ownerships. They are often found around large buildings with the intention of providing accessible open space within the city. Frequently, POPS are built so owners obtain more property in exchange of public use space. In recent years, there has been an increase of POPS which makes it difficult for normal community members to differentiate POPS and public spaces. According to The Urbanist, Seattle's POPS increased modestly from 40 in 2016 to 44 in 2025, while San Francisco expanded from 60 POPS in 2015 to 200 by 2025 showing growth in Western cities. This trend highlights broader shifts in the development of urban public spaces as cities become denser which raises questions of how they impact the broader goals of social connection, engagement, and equitable access.

Being public can be defined as physically open and accessible to all no matter their background, ethnicity, or social status, while allowing the freedom to act, speak, protest, rest, or simply be. However, POPS challenge this ideal as they interfere with this definition through the blurred boundaries of access and engagement. They appear public in design but come with hidden restrictions and private interests that limit who's allowed and its interactions. Locals seem to know about the idea of POPS but don't know details or how to differentiate them from traditional public spaces. Engagement within POPS and public parks is similar: users sit around and chat, owners walk their dogs, and people enjoy time in the outdoors of Seattle. However, in POPS, security conducts laps and cameras always watch you.

This increase and confusion of how public a space is shifts the design of the urban development through its added lens of commercialized and surveilled environment over a truly public one. It alters the forms of cities by adding open spaces which is valuable as cities become denser, providing options to spend time outside or simply take a seat during a walk. Although, people might engage with them in a slightly different way as it limits activities through its rules in which community members such as Savita, who works in downtown Seattle finds POPS to be a safer way to engage with the city as security rarely intervenes and doesn't make one feel invaded. However, members such as Jen aren't fans of POPS as she states, "I don't like the idea of someone else potentially having control of who can enter, have access, or what goes on in a space".

POPS are owned and managed under city agreements which possess a layer of surveillance and regulations such as security personnel, cameras, personal cleaners, and signs instructing rules that must be followed when using the space. "This plaza is private property, available for public use...", "no pets allowed", "no skateboarding", "no soliciting" are commonly seen. Some users don't mind the surveillance as it makes them feel safer while others feel as it invades their privacy and find it rather controlling. As someone who spent time sitting in the Amazon campus in SLU and then Lake Union Park, they both have similar goals and similar restrictions but feel different.

Focusing on my time in the Nessie Plaza, it serves as a connector between the buildings and allows users to walk through blocks more efficiently. As someone who was aware that it was a POPS, I felt relatively safe as the space was well maintained, had greenery, sounds of water and laugher. Although, there were a handful of people walking their dogs which was odd considering all the "no pets please" signs. It made me question how things would've gone if security was around. Would they simply get a warning? Or maybe kicked out of the space? Users not following the rules makes me question if they were aware that they were in POPS or had ever even taken a minute to read any of the signs?

Meanwhile, located north of the Amazon campus, Lake Union Park, owned by the city of Seattle, provides an open park that has arrangements of seating, pathways, docks, and direct access to Lake Union. People walk their dogs, ride their bikes and skateboards, sit at the dock, and children run around in the open space. Although it's a public park, there's still city guidelines that must be followed such as keeping dogs on leash, pet discharge fees, no smoking within park premises, and refrainment from feeding wildlife. These guidelines compare to those in POPS, so why could someone feel less restricted in parks over POPS? As I walked around, I felt a sense of relieve as I knew that there weren't cameras watching or that I could be approached by security. Even through there were rules posted, it's easier to twist or break those rules in spaces like these because of the lack of surveillance- however, morality is usually enough judgment to differentiate what can or should be done within these spaces.

Mark Nicol, principal at LMN Architects Seattle, discussed his experience designing POPS, particularly in urban mixed-use developments. He emphasized the complexity of designing them as there must be balance between public benefit and private control. As these are private entities, developers have "all of the input" in their design but architects have the responsibility to advocate for the public's interest and balancing "creating spaces that the public feels welcomed in- but not too welcomed" which reflect the push and pull tension between public inclusion and private utility. It's emphasized that owners have a major role in the final design and the regulations within as its under their ownership. However, Nicol's notes that even when POPS are at their best form, they can still feel exclusive but believes POPS contribute positively to the urban environment even though "they are not perfect...but the city is [still] better off for having them".

Similarly, University of Washington Urban Design and Planning Professor Keith Harris described POPS

In the dense grid of downtown Seattle, where glass towers shoulder the sky and sidewalks thrum with intermittent foot traffic, a quiet negotiation plays out between architecture and public life. It happens in plazas tucked beside lobbies, on terraces above streets, in courtyards flanked by facades. These are Seattle's Privately Owned Public Spaces—POPS—urban gestures meant to offer respite, pause, or gathering in exchange for zoning benefits.

Many of these POPS were created between the 1960s and 1980s, influenced by New York's postwar zoning incentives. As towers rose—like those at the Federal Building, Columbia Center, or Fourth and Madison—they brought with them austere, oversized plazas. These modernist open spaces, initially imagined as generous civic gestures, now often feel barren—monuments to outdated ideals.

This article zooms in on two such plazas: the windswept forecourt of Safeco Plaza and the compact, recently renovated terrace at 800 Fifth Avenue. Both are POPS. Both have been retrofitted. Yet one struggles to invite anyone in, while the other hums with quiet life. Through these case studies, I explore how scale, context, and intention influence whether a public space truly welcomes people—or merely gestures at doing so.

Safeco Plaza: Monumentality Meets the Wind

Framed by a fifty-story black steel tower—Seattle's tallest when completed in 1969—the plaza reads more like a pedestal than a place. Its granite expanse is lined with occasional planters, sparse benches, and low walls. It is often empty. The wind is nearly constant.

Designed by NBBJ, the plaza reflects the International Style's corporate modernism: a sculptural tower atop a clean plinth. "It was never about pedestrian life," says Professor Jeffrey Ochsner. "It was about the purity of form. And it's still shaped by that DNA." In the 1980s, NBBJ attempted a retrofit—adding textured paving, wind barriers, and landscaping—but they couldn't solve the core issue: the slope.

"If it had been flat," Ochsner says, "you could imagine activity—tables, chairs. But the slope makes it impossible." And while the retrofit tamed some of the plaza's worst elements—today, it won't knock you over in a storm—it never made the space hospitable. It remains difficult to occupy, visually exposed, and lacking in edge activity. A branch bank does little to activate the surrounding blocks. The plaza has the scale of a civic square but the life of a lobby. "It's too big," Ochsner adds. "It defeats intimacy. Even when there are people there, it still feels empty."

800 Fifth Avenue: A Porch for the City

Just four blocks south, the plaza at 800 Fifth Avenue tells a different story. Once a gated forecourt for a stony bank headquarters, it now unfolds as a sunlit terrace with wood seating, movable tables, and planter beds that collect both light and activity. A subtle stair now leads directly from the sidewalk, gently blurring the boundary between public and private.

When Olson Kundig was tasked with the retrofit, the challenge was conceptual as much as architectural. "It was a mono-user financial building," says architect Kirsten Ring Murray. "It felt secure but not welcoming. You couldn't even reach the courtyard from the street." The retrofit, completed in the early 2020s, sought to flip that experience. Instead of a walled-off institution, the design introduced warmth, porosity, and flexibility. "Our metaphor was home," Murray says. "We wanted to create a kind of front porch for the city."

The design carved through the building's edge—adding new stairs, reworking circulation, and introducing a small glass pavilion that shelters visitors while catching sun. Previously, access to the space required traversing a sterile lobby and interior stairs. Now, people enter directly. What was once hidden became a threshold open to the city.

"The space now gets used in unexpected ways," says Murray. "Bus riders rest there. People cut through diagonally. It serves as a forecourt to Swedish Medical, but also as a passive gathering spot." Even amid post-COVID office vacancies, the space anticipates reactivation—not by retail but by design. "You can't rely on shops anymore," she adds. "The space must work on its own terms."

Who Stays, Who Passes: Public Experience in Practice

The contrast between Safeco Plaza and 800 Fifth extends beyond design decisions. It is felt in behavior—in what people do, or don't do, when they enter these spaces. At Safeco Plaza, most keep moving. Even on sunny days, it fails to retain visitors. The slope discourages sitting. The wind persists. The absence of street-level activity amplifies the sense of exposure. "It's not just the space itself," says Ochsner. "It's what's not around it. There's nothing to build on." Though modest improvements were made on the north end, the overall space remains shaped by an ethos of detachment. One interviewee describes it as "a place you cross to get somewhere else."

At 800 Fifth, people pause. Office workers drink coffee on low steps. The wide stairs read as an invitation, not a boundary. During early design observation, Murray noted how people from Swedish Medical paused to breathe, wait for a ride, or simply linger. "There's a softness to how people use the space—it adapts to what they need."

That adaptability is no accident. The team designed zones with different scales of use: from the wide stairs that double as amphitheater seating to smaller tucked-away perches for solitude. Light filters through the trees, and the interior lobby glows softly outward, creating an ambient sense of presence even when foot traffic is light. The plaza doesn't shout to be used. It simply allows it.

Measuring Success: Scale, Context, and Comfort

If public space success were measured by budget or square footage, Safeco would win. But the real measure lies in comfort, usability, and perceived welcome.

800 Fifth succeeds because it is modest. Its scale feels appropriate to its users. "The scale is forgiving," says Ochsner. "It doesn't take much for the space to feel alive." Safeco's monumentality works against it. The slope prevents usable furniture. Its edges remain inactive. "They designed the plaza to frame the building," Ochsner adds. "Not to invite the city." Environmental comfort matters too. Safeco is often shadowed and windy. In contrast, 800 Fifth benefits

as “a compromise” that cities use to provide public access while serving private interests. He points out the generated safety for social life that attracts anyone but that limits genuine public freedom. As much as Harris advocates for traditional public spaces, he also critiques urban choices such as blank walls along Broadway that ended up being “missed opportunities for activating the streets” and that would’ve benefitted from an addition of a POPS.

Although POPS provide convenient space for nearby users, Harris warns against relying on them at the expense of public parks as it limits access to all. He calls for an urban environment that fosters “spontaneous social interaction” and “a real sense of belonging”, not just overseen environments shaped by commercial priorities.

Meanwhile, developments such as the Elliott Bay Waterfront revitalization questions the ownership of spaces with its design of public areas owned by the city and those with individual owners. The public-private partnership of Elliott Bay Connections (EBC) will connect and revitalize public parks along the Elliott Bay Waterfront and provide connections from Pier 26 to The Beach at Expedia Group. This large-scale project hopes to open by Summer 2026. Projects like these could cause conflicts between public and private boundaries and how each owner will maintain their space. POPS will be found within this revitalization, and it’s important to understand POPS right now so we can better navigate these hybrid spaces in the future. It’s essential to understand how they function and who they will truly serve. This redesign will be a major addition to how people experience the Seattle waterfront as it continues to raise questions about what truly counts as public, how it serves the entire community, and its governing.

Privately owned public spaces are found across the country and range from small connectors like the Amazon campus to larger scales like the Elliot Bay project. As the city grows, the expansion of POPS continues to spark debate between designers, community members, and the role they play in shaping urban life. Some view them as valuable spaces that provide amenities and safe gathering, while others argue that they limit public access and prioritize commercial interest over inclusivity. Therefore, it’s important to evaluate whether POPS support inclusive development or if they subtly reinforce exclusionary boundaries? POPS hold rules and regulations, but so do traditional public parks which to an extend makes both a bit controlling. However, the appearance of openness while having underlying sense of control is what creates tensions. As Seattle and other cities continue to develop, it’s essential to understand and question who these spaces are for, how they are managed, and how they make people feel to ensure a balance between ownership and inclusion.



(Right) Signage at entrance of Amazon building in SLU informing users that the plaza is a privately owned public space (POPS).

Photography by Janeth Mendez Pacheco.

from sun exposure and subtle topographic shifts that create shelter and intimacy.

And then there is signage—what William H. Whyte called the “psychological thresholds” of public space. At Safeco, entry is unclear. Who is this for? Are you allowed to sit here? At 800 Fifth, transparency, light, and spatial flow communicate welcome without a single word.

The Stakes of Retrofit: Lessons from Two Attempts

Both sites were retrofitted. But only one fundamentally rethought its spatial logic. 800 Fifth dug deep—literally and metaphorically—to reconnect the building with the street. Safeco remained a surface adjustment, constrained by scale, cost, and risk tolerance. “We had to shift the frame,” says Murray. “Not what the building wants—but what people need.” The lesson here is not just architectural. It is philosophical. Retrofitting isn’t just about fixing surfaces. It is about recalibrating purpose—asking who a space serves now and who it could welcome in the future.

Toward a More Generous Downtown

Seattle’s downtown is unsettled. Office towers sit partially vacant. Sidewalk rhythms are inconsistent. In this flux, POPS matter more than ever—not as legal requirements but as civic infrastructure. The comparison between Safeco and 800 Fifth offers a cautionary tale. Monumentality, scale, and abstract generosity are not enough. Public life thrives in spaces of intimacy, adaptability, and care. As designers, developers, and policymakers reimagine what downtown Seattle might become, they must ask harder questions: Can this plaza host the spontaneous life of the city? Does it feel safe and permissive, or watched and corporate? Is it designed for occupancy or for optics?

From Gesture to Invitation

A plaza is not a promise. It is a question. Will people come? Will they stay? Will they feel that they belong? Public life doesn’t emerge from heroic architecture alone. It grows from small, sustained acts of care—chairs placed in sunlight, signs that say “Welcome,” trees that soften noise, furniture that invites rearrangement. The retrofit at 800 Fifth isn’t perfect. It works because it is generous, porous, unfinished in the best way. Safeco still bears the imprint of a time when form mattered more than feeling.

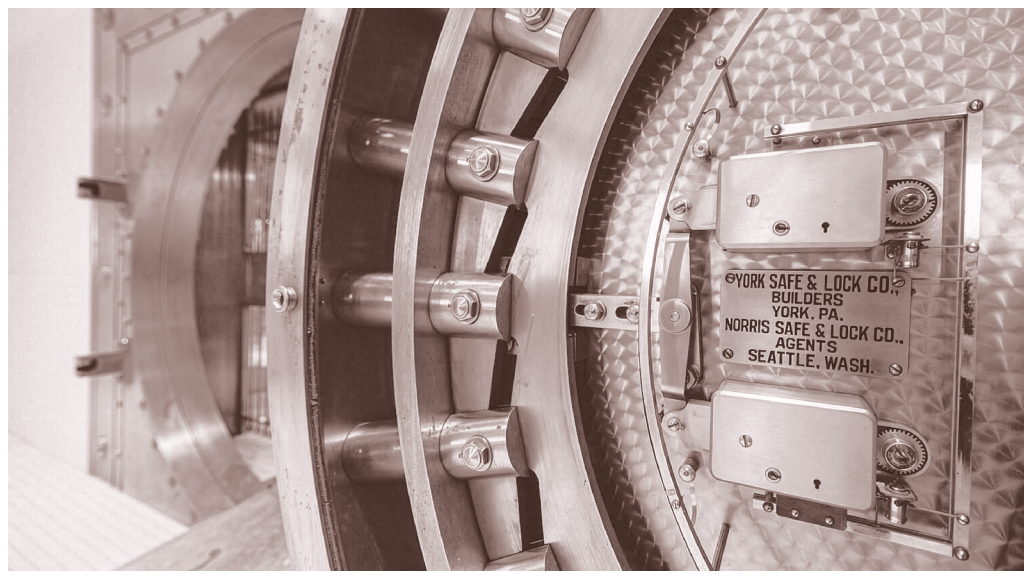
The future of public space lies not in grandiosity but in humility—in spaces that trade control for invitation, and scale for care. POPS must evolve from passive gestures to active welcomes. Not just places we pass through. Places where we belong.

From Vault to Vertical

Paige Cardwell

Interviewees:
Brendan Colford, Master of Architecture student UW and avid climber
Gail Sohm, PHD student and avid climber
Mo Herbert, Regional marketing manager for the West Coast, including Seattle, Salt Lake City, and Tempe
Kara Stone, General Manager of the U District Bouldering Project





(Left, Middle, Right) Images courtesy of Seattle Bouldering Project

Located in the University District of Seattle, at the corner of NE Forty-Fifth Street and University Way, the University Bank Building appears solid and unmistakably a former bank. The two-story white terracotta-clad building with its neoclassical facade and intricate detailing, once a quiet place of business transactions, now feels alive with movement and laughter. Through the heavy bronze doors, the space within has been refitted with large, blue, bulbous climbing walls and clouds of chalk dust fill the air while amateur and expert climbers scale the heights of the voluminous space.

Here, in a dramatic transformation of typology, the Bouldering Project has meshed old and new to form a distinctive user experience that blends historic design with modern innovation. By curating a place for indoor rock climbing inside a space once intended for quiet, quick business transactions, they have made the building into a place people joyfully frequent multiple times a week and a vessel for a vibrant, welcoming community.

The gym's location near the University of Washington campus allows it to attract student climbers while aiming to foster an inclusive place for all, as indicated through my conversation with Kara Stone, General Manager of the U District Bouldering Project and Mo Herbert, Regional Marketing Manager for the organization. Using adaptive reuse can positively transform user experience through thoughtful designed juxtaposition of old and new, which can be more beneficial than conventional purpose-built gyms both economically, visually, and when considering the eco-sustainability of such projects. The climbing gym is not just a gym but a place to truly immerse yourself into what it means to reclaim a building so rich in history and the positive interactions that come from that.

This historic landmark, built in 1912, is a mainstay of the U District and its history is well documented through its accreditation as a historic landmark which occurred in July of 2021 by Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board. In the early twentieth century, when the university was establishing itself, the neighborhood lacked one thing: a bank. The surrounding commercial development was just beginning and there was an increased need for access to staples of everyday life. Money was tight following the 1893 financial crisis, but the founders of the neighborhood and University raised $25,000 to establish a bank. Following all the planning and fundraising, the University Bank Building was finally constructed as a two-story concrete and steel building at the corner of NE Forty-Fifth Street and University Way. The historic landmark has been around throughout the growth of the U District, making this place a special place for long-time residents.[1]

The University Bank Building underwent its first renovation in 1926, expanding its interior to better serve the growing U District community. Today, the building has gone through another transformation, albeit for an entirely different purpose. The Bouldering Project, known for adaptive reuse projects in Seattle including their Fremont location and the Upper Walls, is breathing new life into the historic places they inhabit.

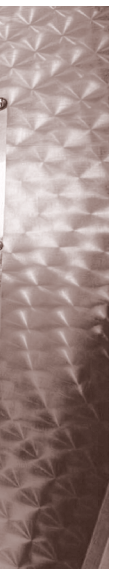
After entering the building through the glazed bronze doors, you can still see the original bronze sheet metal canopy suspended overhead. The open interior is filled with colorful blue climbing surfaces on white drywall. Original marble columns and floors guide you to the mats where the real fun begins. As you traverse through the space, ascending and descending through a network of staircases, you are met with new discoveries at every turn. Having multiple ways to navigate the building makes it feel like a maze or an adventure, as if the building itself is a climbing gym.

The main floor features the reception area, two large climbing walls, and a fitness gym. On the second level, the space opens into the mezzanine and leads into the former historic ballroom, now transformed into the main climbing area. Here, you are surrounded by large windows that overlook the neighborhood, vibrant climbing walls, soft mats, and a powerful sense of community and connection.

An unexpected but impressive reuse of the building is in the basement: the old bank vault, having lost its original purpose, is now a sauna. This space is something of a treasure in the way it combines old and new. According to Kara Stone, the General Manager of this location, the Bouldering Project wanted to maintain the original bank aesthetics by keeping the safety deposit boxes visible behind the walls of the sauna. There are numerous old artifacts to find if you keep an eye out and wander around this building.

Frequent users of this location, such as Gail Sohm, a PhD student at the University of Washington and avid climber, and Brendan Colford, a Master of Architecture student at the same university, mention the gym's unique atmosphere and thoughtful spatial design as things they appreciate about the new location. Sohm is drawn to this Bouldering Project location because it is in her neighborhood, while Colford appreciates its proximity to the light rail.

Both climbers describe being overcome at first by the abundance of natural light that pours through the large windows and the spaciousness of the interior. "I'm impressed by how the gym utilizes the entire space, including hidden stairwells, and the mezzanine area with work and lounge areas," says Sohm. Colford agrees: "The windows are brilliant here on the second





floor. You can get a great bird's eye view of what is going on outside. The basement is also one of my favorite aspects of the building."

The Bouldering Project has renewed the building. Being able to keep some elements of the old while breathing new life and use into it has been awe-inspiring to visitors. When Sohm moved to the University District two years ago, she remembered noticing the vacant building and hoping something was going to occupy the space before she graduates so she could truly see what the historic place was all about.

Creating a third place, a social environment which is separate from home and work, is especially vital in today's world. "The Bouldering Project fosters inclusive spaces as well as places to grow community, where everyone is welcome and able to come in and try climbing without any prior experience," says Mo Herbert, Regional Marketing Manager for the Bouldering Project on the West Coast, which includes locations in Seattle, Salt Lake City, and Tempe. General Manager Kara Stone adds, "Building community is so much in [Bouldering Project's] DNA." Such as how much BP leans into the student environment while also creating a holistic community for all.

The Bouldering Project serves as a compelling example for how urban spaces can be reimagined to support community engagement through adaptive reuse. It demonstrates how thoughtful design can transform unconventional spaces into vibrant hubs of connection and activity. During my conversation with Stone, she said that one of the coolest things about the U District is how tight-knit the business district is. "Everyone was so happy to have us join—not just for the building, but having a climbing gym on the corner that is open early and closes late really added another dimension of safety and community to the very busy street."

Adaptive reuse enhances user experience by allowing people to thrive in spaces that carry both historical depth and the promise of future memories. Connecting history and place can allow the users to feel more connected to these invisible layers of history. Reusing buildings helps preserve local character and architectural heritage while breathing new life into spaces, grounding users in the context of the community. Blending the past and present in functional, engaging ways can truly enrich community life as it creates open and inclusive spaces for all.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Zabalza-Winn, Rachel. "University National Bank: 2022 Community Investment Award." Historic Seattle, September 16, 2022.

"Historic Preservation - Neighborhoods | Seattle.Gov." Seattle.gov. Accessed November 2, 2025. https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/historic-preservation.

(Above) Image courtesy of Seattle Bouldering Project

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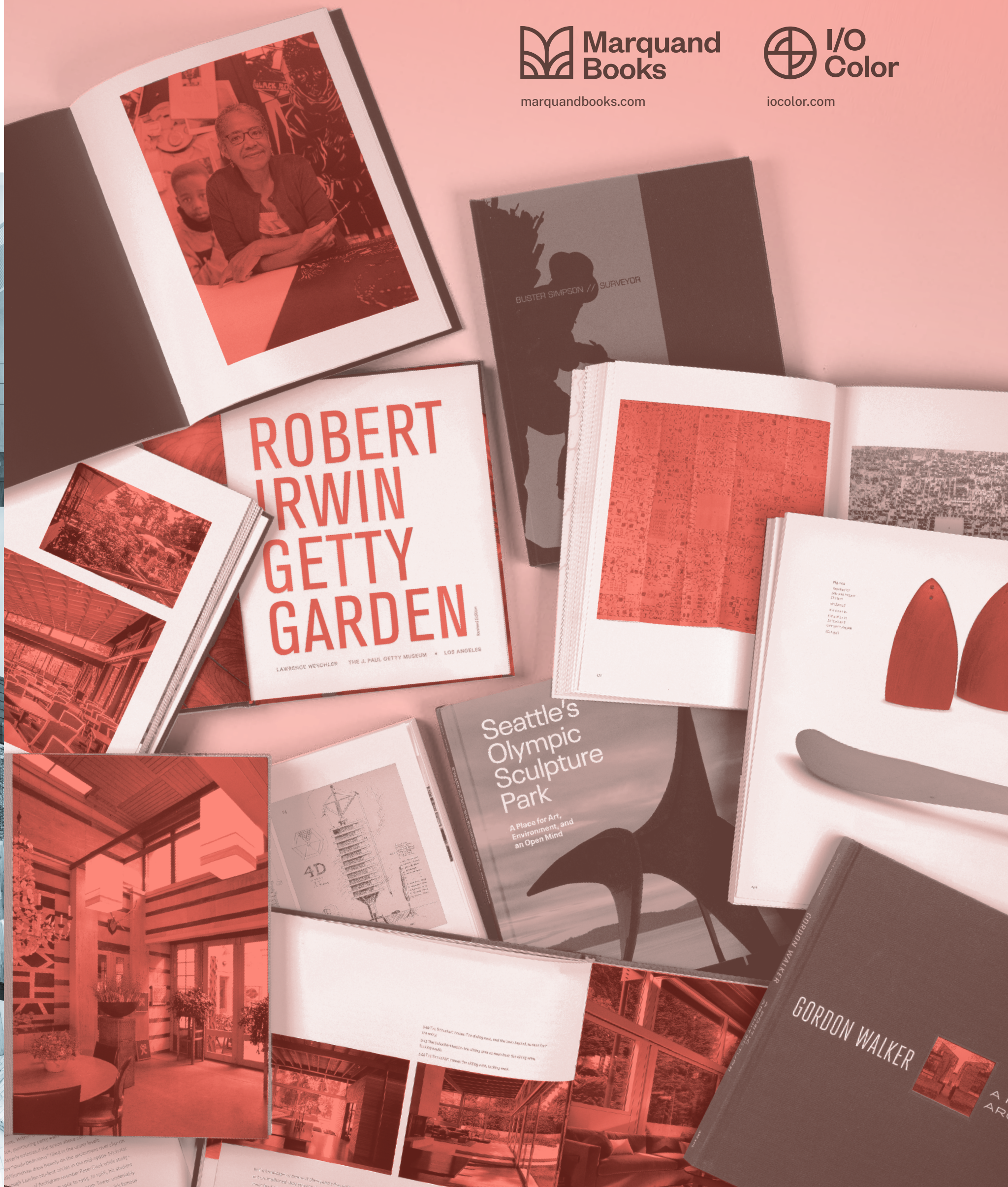
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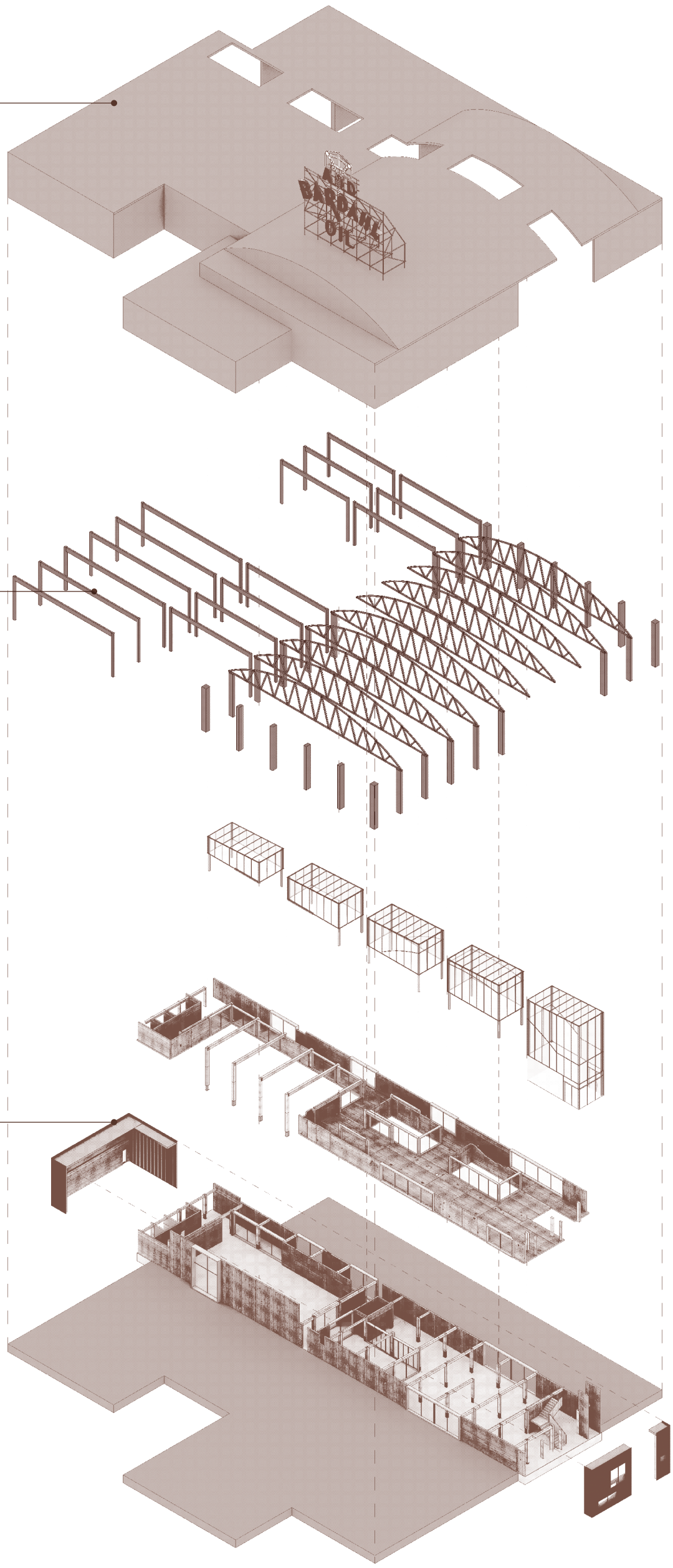
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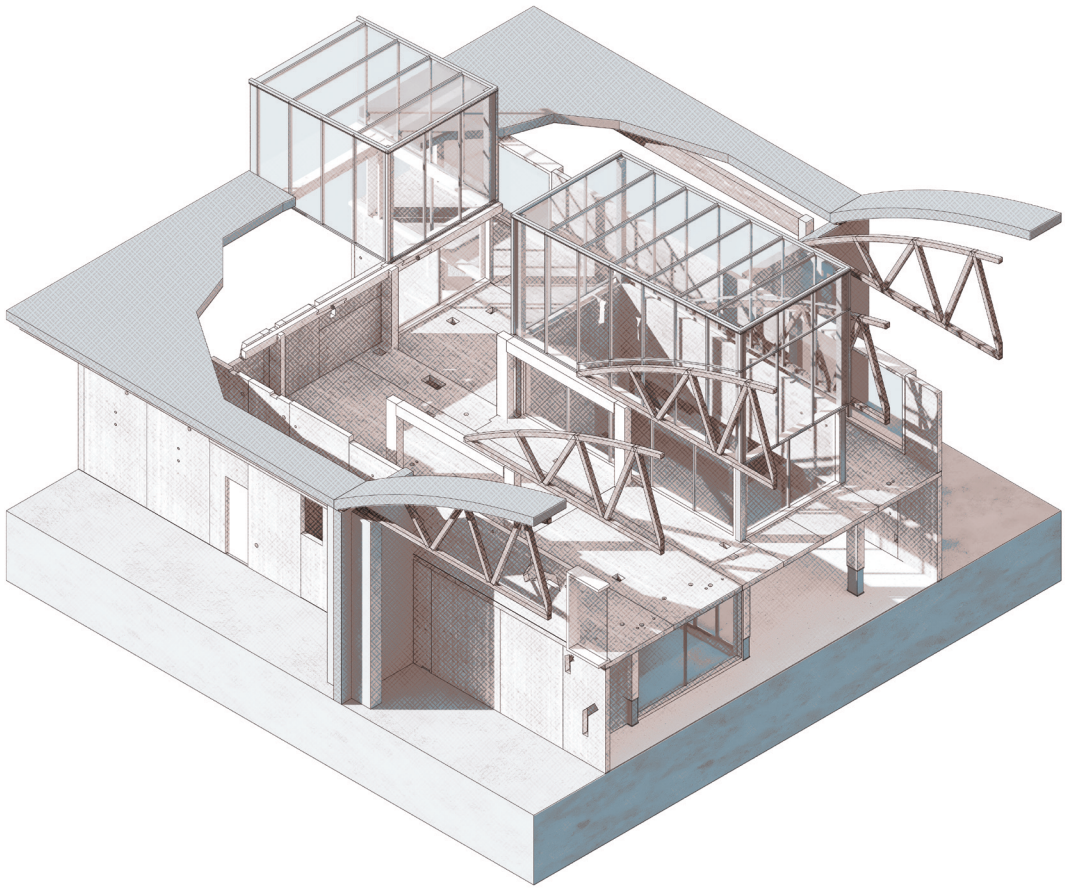
PIECES OF THE EXISTING BUILDING –
Bardahl Manufacturing Corporation ware-
house buildings and offices– located
at 1400 NW 52nd Street in the Ballard
neighborhood of Seattle

EVERYTHING ELSE:
Mass timber insertions

Glulam columns, beams and Cross-
Laminated Timber (CLT) slabs coming
from a disused warehouse complex



Essays from the CLT Cannibalism Studio



How architects and students are reimagining the life, death, and afterlife of buildings through material reuse

Genesis Mota Aguilera

Interviewee:
Jenn Chen

Daniella Nakamura

Interviewees:
Daniel Poppe, Matt Cattrow

Stephanie Williams

Interviewees:
Susan Jones, Craig Curtis, Kathryn Merlino

(Left) Exploded axonometric diagram illustrating the Salvage Studio project's structure

(Above) Axonometric diagram illustrating the relationship between the repurposed glulam beams and the existing bowstring trusses of the same project

Diagrams by Stephanie Williams



Circular Design Outshines Linear Architecture

Genesis Mota Aguilera

Interviewee:
Jenn Chen

Architecture has long prized the new: new ideas, new forms, new ground to break. But in an era of climate urgency, the most radical act might be to work with what we already have. Around the world, the construction industry is responsible for over a third of global carbon emissions, much of it locked into materials we discard far too early. What if buildings were not designed to last forever, but to come apart gracefully? What if the future of architecture is not about permanence at all, but about reuse, transformation, and reassembly?

This is the thinking behind circular lifecycle design, a growing movement that challenges architecture's linear trajectory. Typically, this follows the path of extract, build, use, demolish. Circular design asks us to blur those stages and to design not just for occupation, but for deconstruction and reuse. While still far from mainstream, the movement is gaining momentum as architects begin to reimagine the full lifespan of a building as part of its design ethic.

While circular design is often framed as an environmental necessity, it also holds unique cultural potential in a city like Seattle. Here, where development pressure and affordability are urgent concerns, designing for reuse could help reduce long-term costs and create more adaptable spaces for the public good. The idea that a building can evolve over time,

serving different uses or communities, speaks to a broader civic value. Circular design is not just good for the planet. It is also good for people, and increasingly, good for business.

As a fourth-year architecture student, I have spent the past year trying to understand what it might mean to practice this kind of thinking and how it is showing up in Seattle. I spoke with Jenn Chen, an interior designer formerly at LMN Architects whose professional focus includes sustainable design and lifecycle thinking. Chen has contributed to the firm's design research in areas such as material reuse and low-carbon interiors. Her insights offered a grounded perspective on how circular strategies like design for disassembly (DfD), material tracking, and early-stage carbon tools are gradually being integrated into civic and institutional projects.

The Problem with Linear Architecture and a New Path Forward

Most buildings are designed to last, until they are not. We rarely think beyond the moment of ribbon-cutting. But the materials embedded in our structures, including steel, concrete, adhesives, and plastics, often have lifespans that far exceed the building itself. Once the building is disassembled, these materials are difficult to salvage or recycle. According to the EPA, in 2018 more than 600 million tons of construction and demolition waste are generated annually in the U.S. alone. Much of this material is still usable in theory, but destined for landfill in practice.

Circular lifecycle design attempts to break this pattern. It encourages architects to ask: How will this building come apart? What happens to its pieces? Can they serve another life? And can we make reuse not just possible, but preferable?

In Seattle, LMN Architects is one firm asking these questions in both its research and practice, incorporating circular design into more and more of its projects. "Circular design is emerging," Jenn Chen says. "Its presence depends on the industry's capabilities, but also on the architect's initiative. These conversations don't happen on every project, but when they do, it's usually early on."

As interest in circularity grows, firms are also exploring how to position its benefits more strategically. Framing reuse not as sacrifice, but as smart planning, helps clients see circular design as an investment in long-term flexibility, cost savings, and future value.

In some LMN projects, teams conduct salvage walk-throughs at the outset to identify materials such as doors, carpets, and casework that can be retained or reused. "It's small," Chen says, "but it's something." LMN is also exploring design for disassembly by focusing on how materials are connected. That includes avoiding adhesives, choosing screw-based systems over nails, and selecting finishes that are easier to remove from walls. It's less about inventing new materials and more about making smarter use of existing ones.

One of the most promising materials in this context is mass timber, a strong, lightweight engineered wood product composed of laminated layers. "It's light, strong, and modular," Chen explains. "And unlike concrete, it doesn't have rebar, so you can actually take it apart." Mass timber's precision and prefabrication make it ideal for buildings designed to be disassembled or repurposed, though that intention is not always realized in practice.

That's why projects like Heartwood are so notable. Developed by Community Roots Housing and designed by local firm atelierjones, Heartwood is one of the country's tallest all-mass-timber workforce housing projects. Although not a reuse project, its modular design and reversible connections exemplify forward-thinking lifecycle planning. Heartwood's bolted, rather than bonded, elements are intended to be dismantled and reused. It serves as a prototype for what could be possible if we designed every building as part of a larger circular system, not just a one-time event.

Overcoming Barriers to Circular Thinking

Still, circular design faces resistance. "There are deep cultural barriers," Chen says. "There's this belief that new is always better." Reused components often require storage space, which most projects do not budget for. There's also a disconnect between supply and demand. No comprehensive network exists to connect those who have salvageable materials with those who want them. However, platforms like Harvest Map and Rheaply are beginning to fill that gap, connecting reuse suppliers with designers and contractors.

Technical limitations persist as well. Designers often don't know what is in the materials they are reusing. If a component has an unknown chemical history, reusing it can be legally or ethically risky. Meanwhile, carbon tracking remains inconsistent across platforms, leaving architects without clear incentives to prioritize reuse over recycling or new production. "A lot of it comes down to mindset," Chen says. "People drop reuse ideas the moment they seem slightly more expensive or difficult."

But change is coming, and not just from within the culture of design. It is also happening through the tools designers use. LMN is experimenting with C.scale, an open-source carbon calculator that lets architects estimate embodied emissions early in the design process. Unlike many carbon tools that require detailed specifications, C.scale works at a conceptual level. It helps designers ask big-picture questions from the start: Should we use mass timber? Can we reduce glazing? What if we retain the existing structure?

As a student, I find C.scale exciting because it gives designers more agency. It makes the environmental consequences of design visible, not just in the abstract, but through specific, early-stage decisions.

LMN is also collaborating with organizations like Urban Heartwood, which salvages wood from deconstructed buildings and felled urban trees for reuse in interiors. These small partnerships hint at a larger shift. Designers are beginning to steward old materials into new lives, not just imagining new buildings.

Rethinking Notions of Permanence

Circular design asks architects to reconsider the very notion of permanence. This is especially challenging in civic projects, where longevity is often equated with value. "It's easier to do DfD in something like a warehouse," Chen admits. "In civic work, it's harder. The systems are more complex, and the public expects lasting impact."

But permanence and transformation do not have to be opposites. What if civic architecture were designed to evolve, to be maintained, adapted, or even disassembled over time? Not as a failure of design, but as its fulfillment. In a moment when the climate crisis demands a rethinking of how we use natural resources, circular design offers a bold, pragmatic path forward. The new is not totally separate from the old, and the legacy of a building can be measured not just by how long it stands, but by how well its parts continue to serve.

We are at a moment where the boundaries that have shaped architectural thinking, between building and unbuilding, permanence and decay, use and reuse, are beginning to soften. As someone just entering this field, I find that both daunting and hopeful. Circular design is still rare, still messy, and still slowed by systemic obstacles. But it is a necessary reimagining of what architecture is for.

In school, we are taught to design buildings that make a statement. But perhaps the most powerful statement is not how buildings rise, but how they continue to contribute, even after their first life is over. Buildings are not static objects. They are systems in motion. When designed for disassembly, a building's end becomes part of its meaning , not its failure, but its future.



"Buildings are not static objects. They are systems in motion. When designed for disassembly, a building's end becomes part of its meaning , not its failure, but its future."

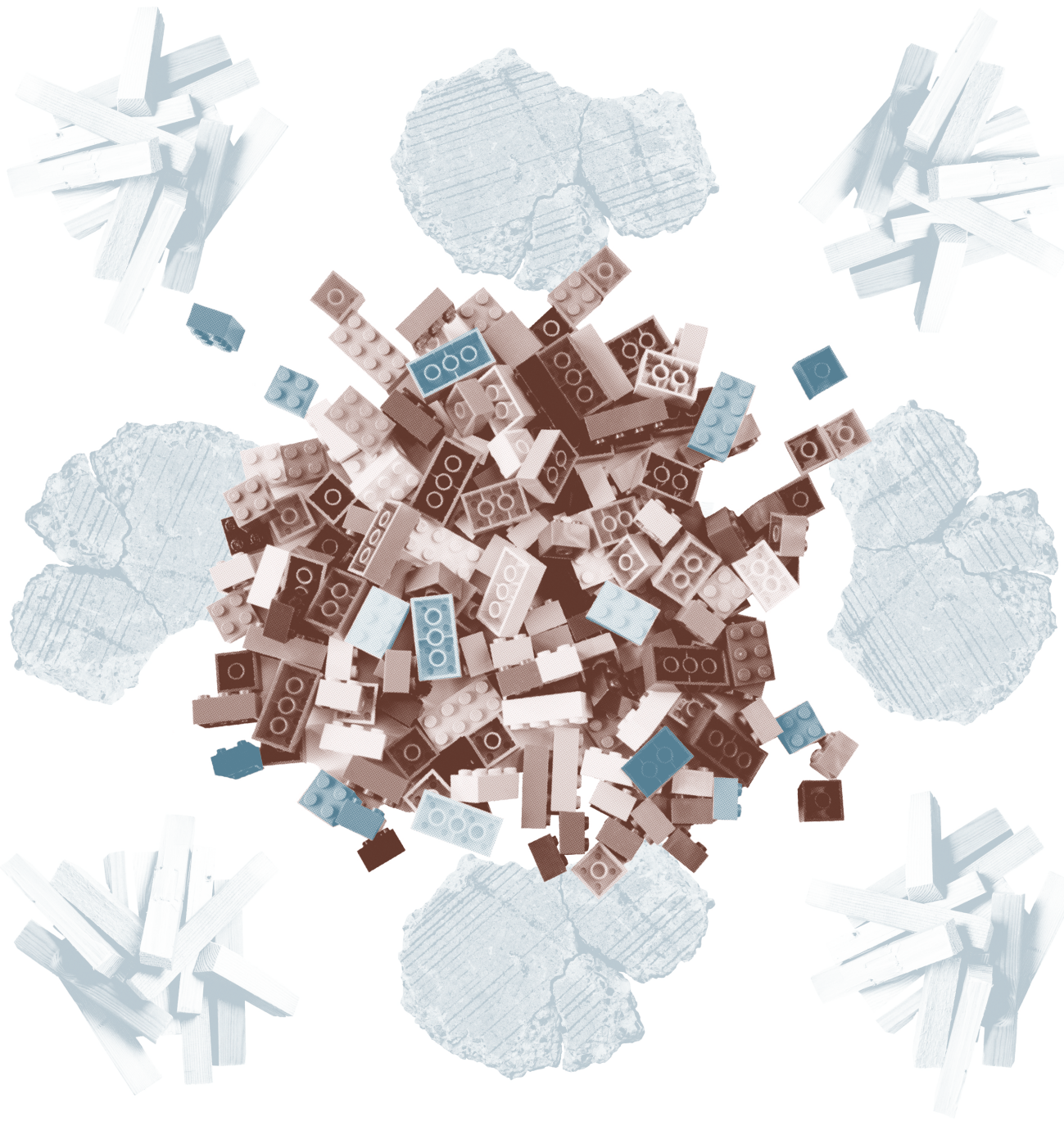


"Most buildings are designed to last, until they are not. We rarely think beyond the moment of ribbon-cutting."



"In 2018, more than 600 million tons of construction and demolition waste are generated annually in the U.S. alone. Much of this material is still usable in theory, but destined for landfill in practice."

Material Reuse as a Blueprint for Sustainability



From salvaged timber to bold forms, how material reuse redefines what construction means

Daniella Nakamura

Interviewees:
Daniel Poppe, Matt Cattrow

What if tearing down a building could be the start of building something even better—not just different, but more expressive, more conscious, and more alive? Sustainability and affordability aren't just modern day buzzwords—they're survival tactics for our built environment. As resources become more scarce and climate considerations non-negotiable, reusing existing materials is not only about cost savings, but also about reducing embodied carbon, the total greenhouse-gas emissions embedded in construction materials. When a designer opts to repurpose timber, steel, or concrete from an older structure, they're sidestepping the energy-intensive processes of harvesting, manufacturing, and transporting new materials. That saved carbon "budget" can translate directly into lower project costs, making sustainable design accessible to a broader audience—particularly community-driven or nonprofit developments with tight budgets.

This article dives into the unexpected creative potential of adaptive reuse—but without ignoring the nuts and bolts. From sourcing eccentric panels sizes to navigating tricky tolerances and reversible connections, the challenges are real. But so are the rewards: originality, affordability, and impact. This way, readers can prepare to integrate large-scale reuse strategies in their own work.

Imagine giving a designer a box of architectural Lego blocks—except the blocks are real pieces of an actual building. That was the introduction to CLT (Cross-Laminated Timber) Cannibalism, a recent studio taught at the University of Washington by local Seattle firm atelierjones. Instead of asking, "Where should I put these walls and columns?" the studio began by inviting students to ask, "Where did these walls and columns come from?" By taking apart a real building and carefully cataloging each CLT panel, beam, and connector, students confronted hyper-specific material constraints. Freed from the usual site-program paradigm, they were able to experiment with novel configurations that might never occur in a conventional design studio. Suddenly, constraints weren't barriers—they were provocations.

Lessons learned from the CLT Cannibalism studio extend far beyond an academic exercise. When archi-

“When architects and designers witness students/peers treating reclaimed panels like Lego blocks – allowing every notch, blemish, and drilled hole to inform rather than conceal – they begin to see material reuse as an open-ended toolkit instead of a rigid checklist.”

tects and designers witness students/peers treating reclaimed panels like Lego blocks – allowing every notch, blemish, and drilled hole to inform rather than conceal – they begin to see material reuse as an open-ended toolkit instead of a rigid checklist.

CLT—or Cross-Laminated Timber—is no ordinary wood. It’s a mass-timber product made by gluing perpendicular layers of lumber under high pressure. The result is a structural material with the strength of steel, the warmth of wood, and the poetic appeal of visible grain. It’s both robust and visually appealing, which makes it an ideal candidate for expressive reuse. The studio’s main focus was to explore how the environmental advantages of CLT could be amplified through adaptive reuse—and how a shift in process could spark a new way in design thinking. The goal wasn’t just to build something new, but to build differently.

For the CLT Cannibalism studio, students arrived not with site analyses or program briefs but with precise inventories of reclaimed CLT panels, sourced from a deconstructed residential building in Seattle. Each student team received an almost equal number of slabs, columns, and beams, varying in size, thickness, and finish—Some pieces bore the wear and tear of their past lives—cutouts for ducts, odd angles, even the ghostly outlines of long-gone nails. The objective was to create an entirely new building program using only those rescued elements, embracing their uniqueness as defining features. “This studio was a chance to explore how reuse could embrace imperfections and how materials can carry history with them,” says Matt Cattrow, an architect designer at atelierjones who helped lead the studio alongside Susan Jones. “Rather than seeing reuse as a compromise, it could be something that adds meaning and life to new designs.”

Limitations can be surprisingly invigorating. When students realized that a certain CLT panel had a water stain or a chunk missing at one end, they didn’t throw it aside; instead, they celebrated that flaw by highlighting it within a façade pattern or carving it into an interior art installation. Some discovered that weathered finishes could serve as a tactile storyboard, guiding users’ experiences through the building. The fixed quantity of panels forced teams to think strategically: would they reorient a panel horizontally to create a wide-span roof, or stand it vertically as a load-bearing wall? Such constraints demanded engineering clarity: every connection had to be reversible, every load path explicit, because you couldn’t simply “order more material” if something failed.

My own project for the studio, titled “The Canopy,” began with an abandoned concrete-frame industrial building on the outskirts of Seattle. This ghostly skeleton of a giant warehouse was begging for a new life: why rebuild from the ground up when a framework already stood in place? By adding reclaimed CLT panels to the old concrete columns, I molded a community center “parasite” that hung over the abandoned space like a treehouse. The historic nail-holes and duct cutouts from the reused CLT panels transformed into visual textures on the ceiling above and the floor beneath visitors. The existing concrete frame provided primary structural support, meaning I could allocate more of my limited CLT toward spatial partitions, and mezzanines. Weaving new timber forms into old concrete bones was both economical and poetic, honoring both the former industrial site and the reclaimed wood’s heritage. The effect was both efficient and poetic: concrete met timber, past met present.

Aesthetically, I approached the project by clearly distinguishing between what was old and what was new—separating the building’s essential “skeleton” from the added, almost parasitic layers of wood. The design was built on contrasts: cold, industrial concrete met warm, inviting CLT, and I fully embraced this tension. To highlight this tension, I designed the CLT additions as delicate layers floating within the concrete shell. Metal cables suspended the floor slabs, piercing the overhead beams to create the illusion that the wood was free and weightless while the concrete remained immovably grounded. Steel cables suspended floor slabs while diagonal bracing resisted lateral loads. Every detail was dry-assembled using custom metal brackets—sliding into pre-cut slots for easy disassembly. Nothing was permanent. Everything could be undone.

That’s the radical potential here: not just buildings that last, but buildings that can evolve.

Seattle, to its credit, is already leaning into this ethos. The city’s Salvaged Lumber Warehouse Pilot Program is an initiative led by Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) to promote lumber reuse and create a circular economy for salvaged wood. The program, still in the voting stage, aims to reduce waste from residential building removals by establishing a warehouse that collects, processes, and redistributes salvaged lumber. The city already encourages manual disassembly of buildings to maximize material reuse since 2022 with its Deconstruction Incentive Pilot Program that offers financial incentives such as $4,000 per house, $500 per garage, and $6,000 for commercial projects.

For practicing architects and designers, the CLT Cannibalism studio and Seattle’s pilot programs underscore three practical truths. First, “materials as constraints” can unlock precedents that transcend conventional site-program relationships; rather than asking “How might we fill this site?” designers can ask, “What latent potential lives within these salvaged panels?” Second, less is more: the fewer custom fasteners or embedded steel brackets, the more straightforward the future disassembly. As Cattrow notes, “The key is simplicity. The simpler the connections, the easier they will be to reverse later.” Third, harnessing the visual language of material history—knot patterns, water stains, even drill holes—can become a generative design driver rather than a cosmetic afterthought.

“The Canopy” became a living example of these principles—a hybrid of past and present, practicality and poetry. More than a design experiment, it hinted at a larger cultural shift: one where cities are no longer unchangeable spaces, but curated libraries of materials with reusable potential. Daniel Poppe, executive director of Seattle 2030 District, agrees. “ Preserving historic facades and retrofitting existing structures should be prioritized over demolition and new construction,” he says. “We don’t want a city made entirely of glass towers—we need diverse architectural styles that reflect the city’s history.”

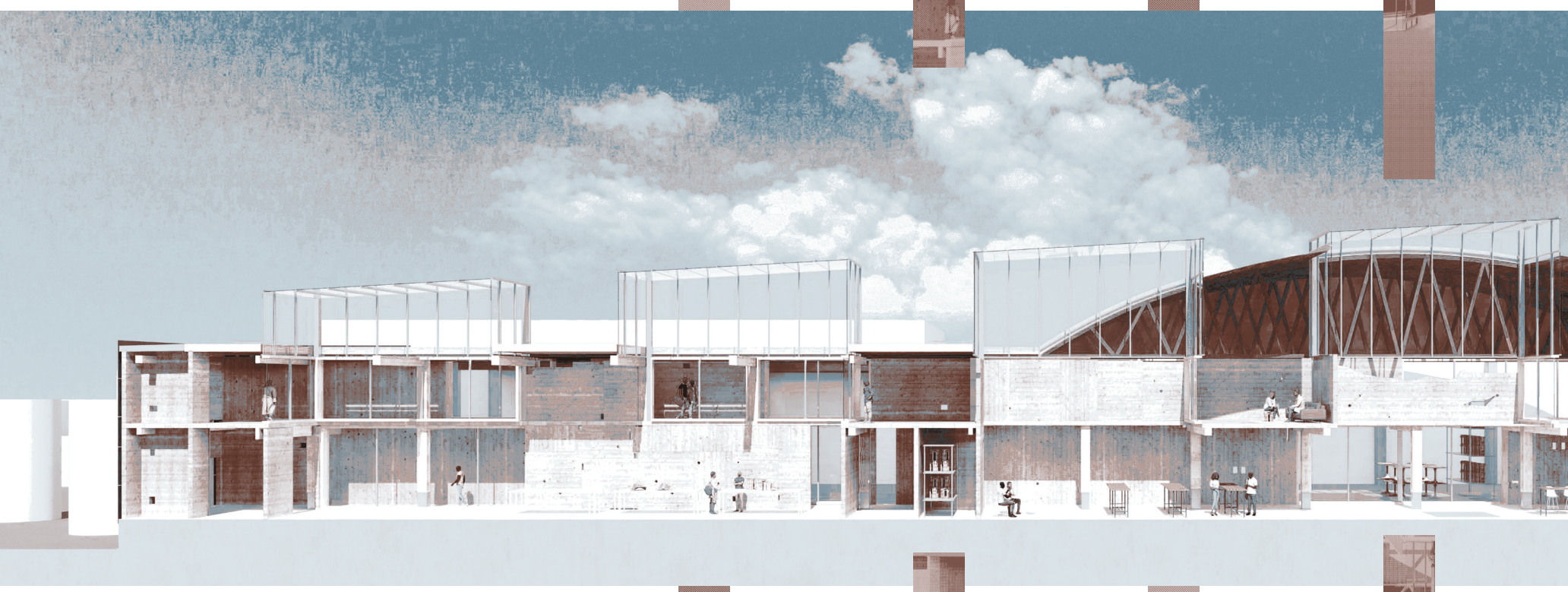
Reuse is not regression; it’s an evolution that keeps our buildings grounded in place, time, and memory that also happens to be good urbanism. Adaptive reuse cuts landfill waste, shrinks embodied carbon, and preserves the soul of a city’s built fabric. Seattle’s Climate Action Plan aims to cut built-environment carbon emissions by 50% by 2030. Achieving that goal means thinking differently about demolition and materials. CLT reuse isn’t just viable—it’s vital.

So what if we stopped thinking of reuse as a compromise, and started seeing it as a creative superpower? In reframing sustainability as a design opportunity—not a constraint—architects can craft buildings that are not only good for the planet, but nourishing to the imagination.

After all, a reused beam isn’t just a structural element—it’s a story, a memory, a provocation. When you build with history, you build with meaning. And when you design for disassembly, you’re not just making buildings—you’re making futures.



Salvage Studio
Integrating Adaptive Reuse and Mass Timber



Stephanie Williams

Interviewees:
Susan Jones, Craig Curtis, Kathryn Merlino

The typical take-make-dispose construction lifecycle is widely recognized by built environment practitioners as unsustainable. More and more designers are asking the question: how do we make this old model obsolete?

Eventually, our way of building will deplete our natural resources, and scarcity will compel us to reuse materials. Many designers aren't waiting for material reuse to become mandatory – they already treat existing buildings as valuable material sources for future projects.

Adaptive reuse – repurposing entire buildings – dates back centuries, seen in both Ancient Rome and parts of Asia. But since the late 20th century, a new movement of designers have embraced this old approach.

Designers have also responded to the threat of material scarcity by developing ways to reuse building materials. Reusing steel is costly and labor-intensive, and concrete is even harder to repurpose. By comparison, mass timber reuse is much more feasible – laminated wood beams, columns and slabs can be disassembled and reassembled with minimal modification.

Although today's mass timber buildings won't reach the end of their lifecycles for a hundred years or more, the industry can proactively act to imagine and develop prototypical frameworks so that designers and builders are ready to adopt these approaches once the materials become available.

In Winter 2025, students in the University of Washington CLT Cannibalism studio – led by Susan Jones and atelierjones – explored the future of mass timber, envisioning how salvaged materials from today's structures could find new life in the next generation of buildings.

Throughout the quarter, I conceived and developed Salvage Studio – a hypothetical design and production facility that transforms waste streams into raw material for furniture manufacturing. The facility integrates every stage of the process – materials recycling, production, design, fabrication and sales.

Salvage Studio showcases repurposed materials at multiple scales. At the object scale, resident designers repurpose timber offcuts and small granular waste – such as plastic e-waste and coffee shells – to craft furniture. At the architectural scale, the building adapts mass timber structural elements and repurposes a disused warehouse complex to accommodate a new program.

The mass timber components of Salvage Studio – glulam columns and beams and cross-laminated timber (CLT) slabs come from Heartwood, a 67,000-square-foot apartment building in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood.

The repurposed building, the Bardahl Manufacturing warehouse complex, sits in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. Spanning 36,000 square feet, it's a patchwork of mass timber warehouses built throughout the 50s and 60s. The complex stands out for its exuberant cladding: bumblebee-yellow paint and a striking green glass-clad office building that juts out from the south side, a celebration of mid-century modern vitality. A 50-foot-tall metal sign crowns a bowstring truss warehouse, prompting passersby to "Add Bardahl Oil."

Bardahl is a motor oil producer and distributor with a healthy business. However, as fossil fuel use declines, businesses like Bardahl will shrink, leaving their buildings vacant.

The defining architectural move is a mass timber insertion into the warehouse buildings. An 8,000-square-foot structural bar bisects the space. A series of lightwells punctuates the insertion, emerging from the roofline. Green steel panels cap the ends, providing protection and a distinct visual contrast.

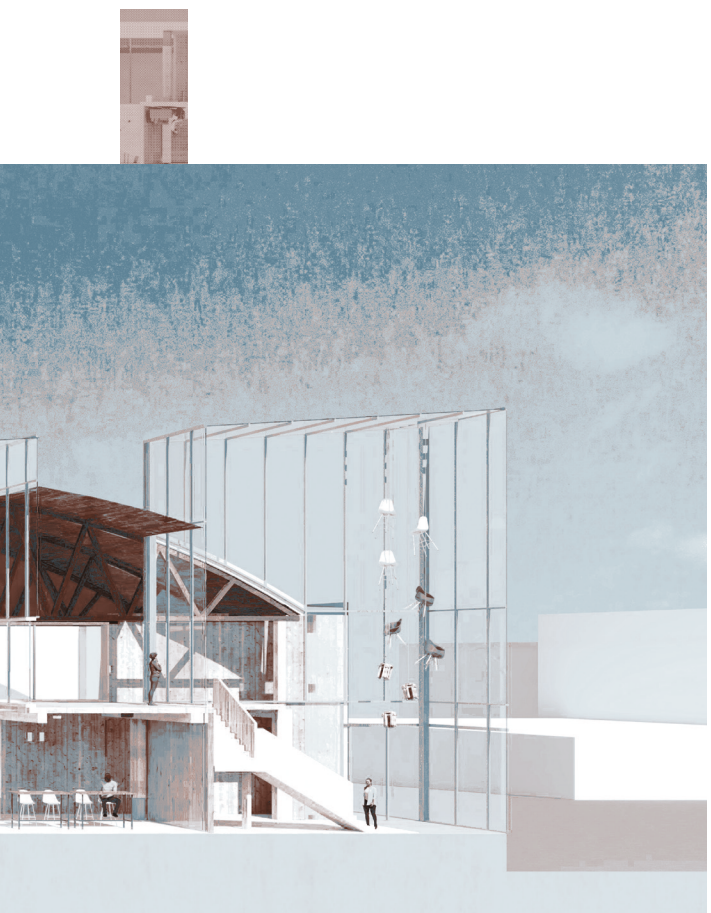
From the adjacent road, the first thing visible isn't mass timber – it's a 30 foot tall lightwell, standing like a lantern marking the main eastern entrance. Inside the lightwell, furniture dangles from the ceiling, and embedded shards of e-waste catch the sun and sparkle like chandelier lights. Looking further into the building, the mass timber begins to become visible.

In the lobby, a staircase of mass plywood leads visitors upstairs to the showroom. At the top, the space opens up – weathered timber bowstring trusses stretch across the warehouse. CLT slabs form the floor, and some are tilted upright as walls. Because the existing warehouse protects the water-sensitive wood, the CLT panels can lay bare the history embedded in scars from their previous use, such as intentional penetrations for mechanical equipment and chunks that have been removed because of cracking and water damage.

While the exterior appears opaque, the interior is unexpectedly open. The lightwells pierce through to the ground floor, giving showroom visitors a glimpse into the design studio below. On the west side of the building, the fabrication lab occupies a wide-open double-height space visible from a corridor situated on its north side.

This is a building within a building, complete with an internal façade, visible from the warehouse spaces. The tilted-up CLT panel walls alternate rhythmically with large plywood-framed glass panels that visually link the employees in the warehouse with the designers in the studio and the visitors in the showroom. Visitors observe the entire design and fabrication process, gaining insight into material reuse and the circular design cycle.

The insertion follows its own structural grid, necessitating the removal of several existing con-



RENDERING OF THE INTERNAL FAÇADE OF SALVAGE STUDIO, VIEWED FROM INSIDE THE BOWSTRING TRUSS WAREHOUSE BUILDING, BY STEPHANIE WILLIAMS.

Glossary

MASS TIMBER. A broad category of prefabricated wood products used for structural applications in buildings. It includes cross-laminated timber (CLT), glue-laminated timber (glulam) mass plywood panels (MPP) and a range of other products. They are strong, stable, and sustainable, making them a viable replacement for concrete and steel in a wide range of building scales and typologies. Mass timber has been used in construction for over 200 years, but in recent decades, it has experienced a renaissance because of its sustainability, efficiency, and aesthetic appeal.

CROSS-LAMINATED TIMBER (CLT). A prefabricated wood product made by gluing together layers of lumber in perpendicular orientations, enhancing strength, stability and fire resistance. They range from 2-10 feet wide, with lengths up to 60 feet long and thicknesses reaching 20 inches. Structurally, they're typically used in walls, floors, and roofs, replacing concrete and steel. Because they are cut to size at the mill, installation is fast and efficient. CLT was introduced in Europe in the early 1990s but didn't make its way to the US until the early 2000s.

GLUE-LAMINATED TIMBER (GLULAM). A prefabricated wood product made by gluing together multiple layers of dimensioned lumber with moisture-resistant adhesives. Its strength and stability make it suitable for use as beams and columns as a replacement for concrete and steel.Glulam beams trace their origins to England in the 1860s and were introduced to the US in the 1930s.

MASS PLYWOOD PANELS (MPP). Large, strong sheets of engineered wood made by layering thin wood veneers and gluing them together with adhesives. They are lighter and more efficient than CLT while still being structurally strong.

crete columns that once supported the bowstring trusses. A robust set of relatively young glulam beams provide new supports for the aged bowstring trusses.

Like all structures, this one holds value as a future material source, and it's designed with this in mind. Current mass timber construction relies on hefty steel fasteners that are difficult to remove with conventional tools. Salvage Studio takes an alternative approach, using all-wood joinery inspired by traditional Japanese craft, allowing for easy disassembly with minimal material disruption. Throughout the building, these joints are expressed in the spliced connections of reclaimed timber beams.

Speculative projects like Salvage Studio present future-focused solutions, but adaptive reuse and mass timber reuse still face barriers to widespread adoption. Beyond designing for disassembly, the industry must establish frameworks for assessing, cataloguing and storing materials between reclamation and reuse. Without these systems in place, salvage remains an ideal rather than a practical reality.

In many cases, adoption boils down to the bottom line. Until reuse becomes more efficient and less costly, the building industry will continue to extract, use, and dispose of building materials – an unsustainable cycle that feeds environmental degradation. Rather than waiting for cost reductions, built environment practitioners can take proactive steps to champion reuse as a priority, integrating circular principles into budgets and project timelines.

High costs and logistical challenges stem from gaps in industry expertise. Many architects lack experience in mass timber construction and adaptive reuse. Builders tend to be risk-averse, but contractors embracing mass timber expertise as a competitive advantage signals promise for the industry's future. The reluctance to innovate is not just a practical concern – it's a cultural one. Shifting perspectives on reuse from an occasional practice to an industry norm can pave the way for more sustainable building approaches.

Regulatory barriers – such as building codes and land use restrictions – also make adaptive reuse costly. Variability in local codes and design parameters further complicate mass timber projects. While regulatory complexity can't be ignored, it also offers opportunities for progress. By collaborating with architects and builders, policymakers can help create clearer pathways for reuse, streamlining approvals and incentivizing sustainable practices.

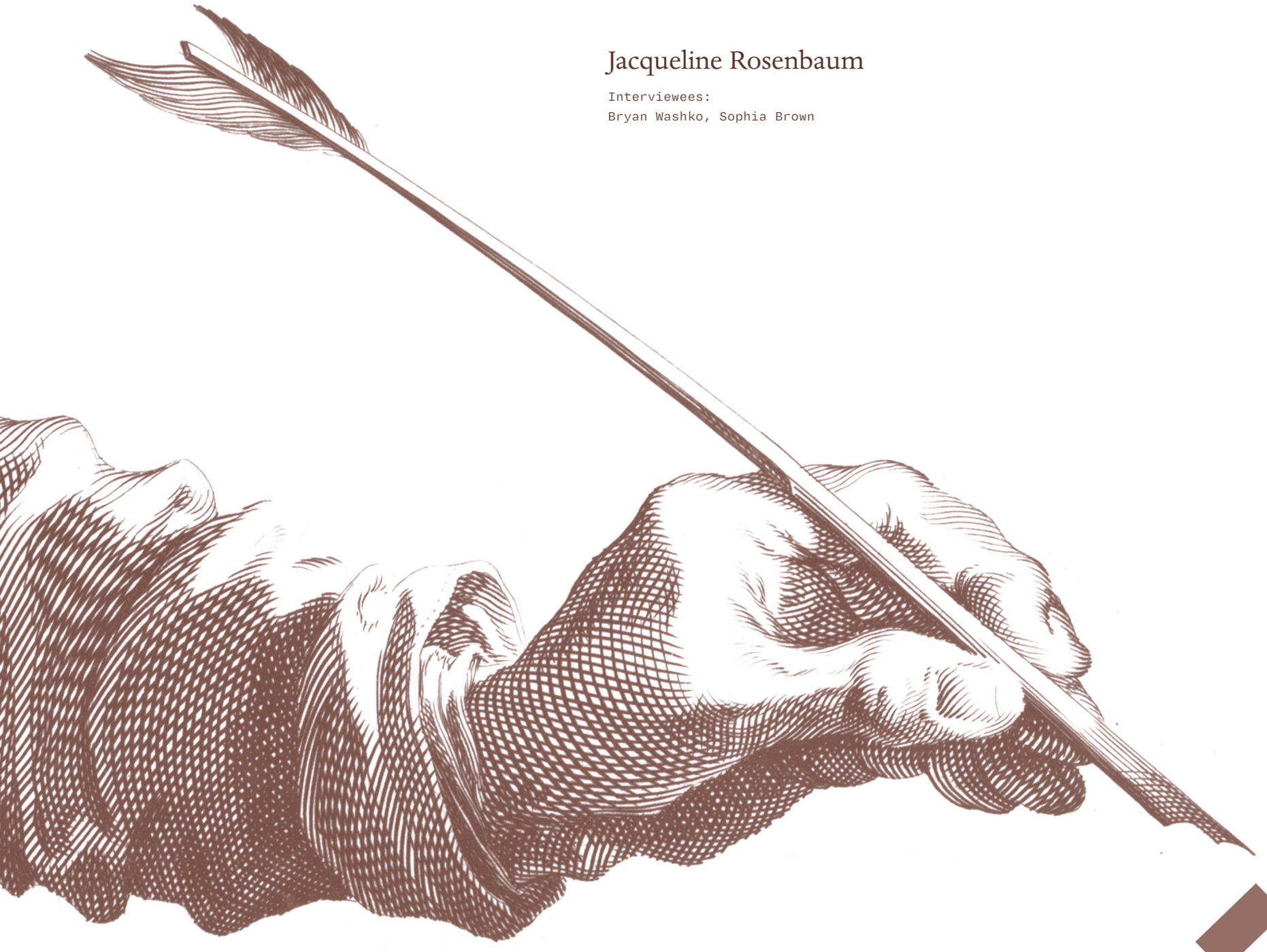
Despite these challenges, adaptive reuse and mass timber complement each other naturally – together, they create buildings that are greater than the sum of their parts. Salvage Studio takes this idea further, embedding reclaimed mass timber structures within disused buildings to breathe new life into old materials while adapting to the evolving needs of communities. The industry has an opportunity to embrace such approaches, rethinking materials not as disposable commodities but as long-term assets.

Beyond its practical benefits – extending the life of materials and reducing waste – reuse carries a poetic dimension. It blurs the line between past and present, weaving memory, history, and energy into the fabric of new spaces. But reuse is more than an aesthetic or conceptual choice – it's a fundamental step toward a more resilient built environment. No longer just an experimental approach, it has the potential to shape a future where buildings actively contribute to environmental renewal rather than depletion.

Speculative projects like Salvage Studio are just the tip of the iceberg. Other organizations are exploring ways to make circular construction a reality. If you're interested in more on this:

- The Circular Future Hackathon, hosted by Metropolis Magazine in July and August of 2024, invited practitioners from across the Architecture, Construction and Engineering disciplines to explore novel ways to eliminate obstacles to circularity. Proposals included a framework for assessing usability of reclaimed materials.
- The Circular Construction Lab at Cornell University is analyzing the current linear construction model and how to move forward with circular construction methods, including building and material reuse.

What Does the Hand Do?
Tracing Technology in Architectural Education



Jacqueline Rosenbaum

Interviewees:
Bryan Washko, Sophia Brown

From hyper-realistic renderings to immersive 3D models, the digital tools we use today would blow the minds of architects from just a few decades ago. The integration of computational technology has not only redefined the design process but also unlocked new dimensions of innovation. Complex and intricate ideas can be brought to life more easily than ever before. These tools are not just influencing the spaces we create; they're also reshaping the next generation of designers we're teaching. At the University of Washington (UW), the architecture program is deeply shaped by digital tools that have redefined the ways students approach and execute design.

As machines become our creative collaborators, it raises the question: Where do we draw the line between hand and technology? Do the benefits of speed and efficiency come at the cost of emerging architects losing traditional design skills and authentic creativity?

In the city of Seattle, a hub of both design and tech, this shift is especially relevant. As the home to some of the world's largest tech companies, Seattle continues to evolve through technological innovation. With the use of rapidly advancing technology, architects can meet the city's progressive goals such as sustainable design and social equity with greater ease. However, in a place with a deep rooted history of craft, this digital shift may further distance us from the traditional design practices that have shaped the field. As society evolves, a discipline once grounded in tradition is now propelled by technology.

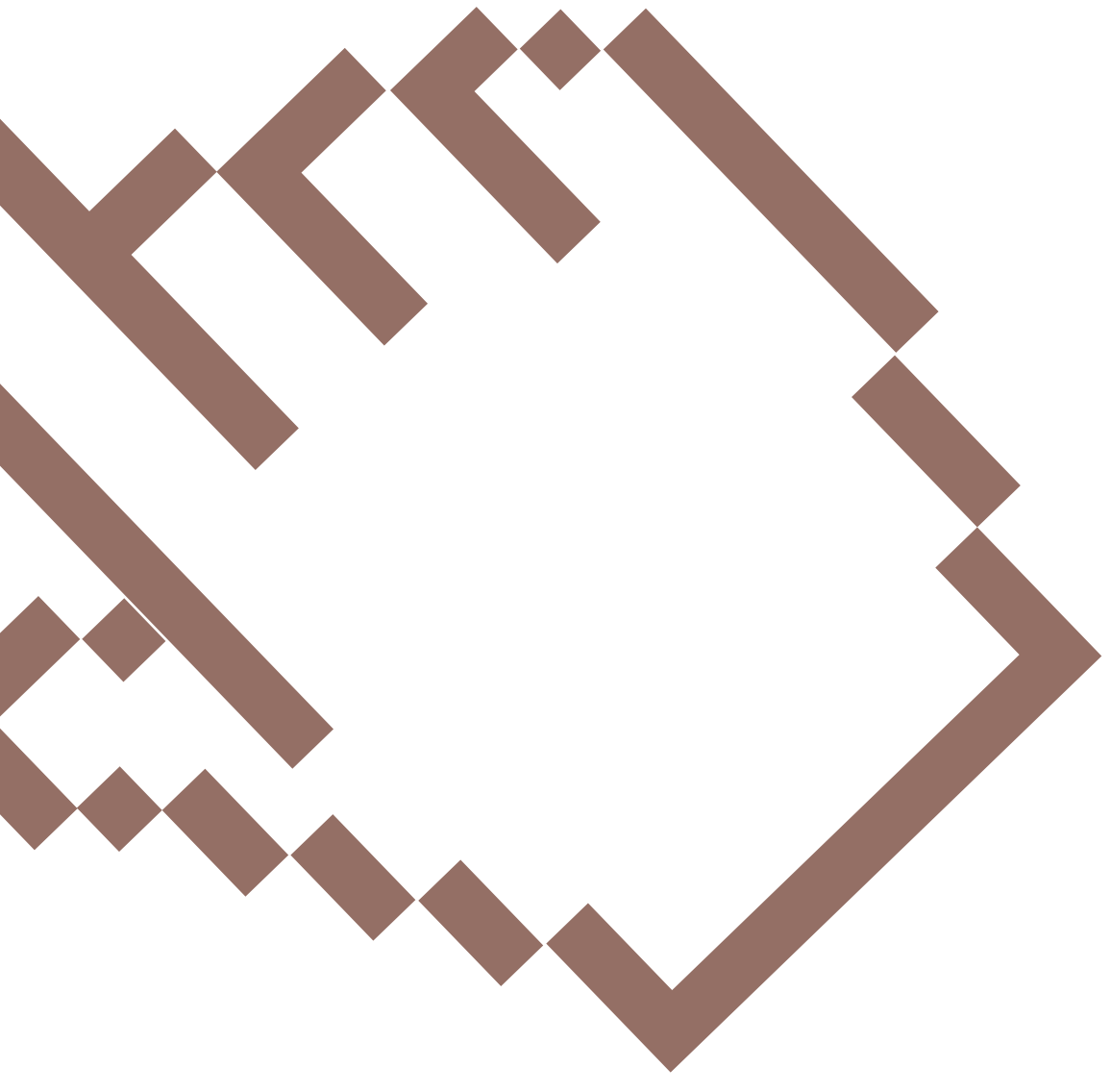
The practice of architecture has changed significantly over the last century. Prior to the 1960s, when computer aided design (CAD) software emerged, the time-consuming and labor-intensive process of hand drafting was extensive. A combination of precision, skill, and patience was required to navigate the profession. Every line was measured manually, every model was built by hand, and a single mistake could mean starting over completely. This process reflected a high level of artistry and technical skill that looks different in today's architectural field.

During that era, students learned foundational skills that prepared them for the demanding profession. The UW Department of Architecture began in 1914 with just twelve students. At the time, students had a strong foundation in artistic drawing, allowing them to create detailed floor plans, sections, and elevations by hand. Classes such as still life drawing taught students how to portray objects realistically and accurately to scale. They produced beautiful, detailed drawings and paintings that demonstrated their design ideas. Students also learned technical drafting in preparation for entering a career in architecture.

In the 1960s, computers began to emerge as a powerful new technology. However, it wasn't until the 1980s that they were commonly used in architecture. Architects started to use CAD software to create blueprints, which was a major shift from the time-consuming process of hand drafting. By the 1990s, digital design tools started making their way into the curriculum at UW. During these years, the Architecture studios supported a digital network for students. In 2005, the basement of Gould Hall was converted into the Digital Commons—a computer lab space for College of Built Environment (CBE) students that's still in use today.

Today, this technology has advanced even further. Drawings are now entirely digital, allowing architects to draw accurately with greater speed and precision. Additionally, 3D modeling programs can bring ideas to life visually. By plugging in real-world conditions, realistic renderings can show what a building will look like after it's built. These tools can even simulate environmental impacts, site complexities, and material efficiencies. And best of all, changes can

"Perhaps the future of design isn't about choosing between tradition and technology but learning to embrace the blend."



be made easily with the press of an undo button. At the UW, knowledge of these digital tools, methods, and skills is an integral part of architecture students' education.

Looking beyond computer modeling, digital fabrication machines can help designers transform their designs into physical objects. Using CAD software, designers can first create their models digitally and then export them to other programs that are compatible with fabrication machines. Everything from architectural models to furniture pieces and product prototypes can be produced directly from computer files.

Bryan Washko, a digital fabrication specialist and teacher at the CBE, teaches foundational skills in computational design software such as Rhinoceros, Grasshopper, Rhino CAM, and Autodesk Fusion 360. He also instructs students in digital fabrication machines such as Computer Numerical Control (CNC) plasma cutters, laser cutters, and 3D printers. According to Washko, proficiency in design software is not just beneficial—it's "crucial." For students entering the field, nearly every architecture job listing today includes software requirements.

UW Architecture student Sophia Brown agrees. She says that while her education required artistic drawing skills, they were emphasized far less than digital modeling and software proficiency. She says that software programs such as Rhino and Revit are "the most important thing in our age now."

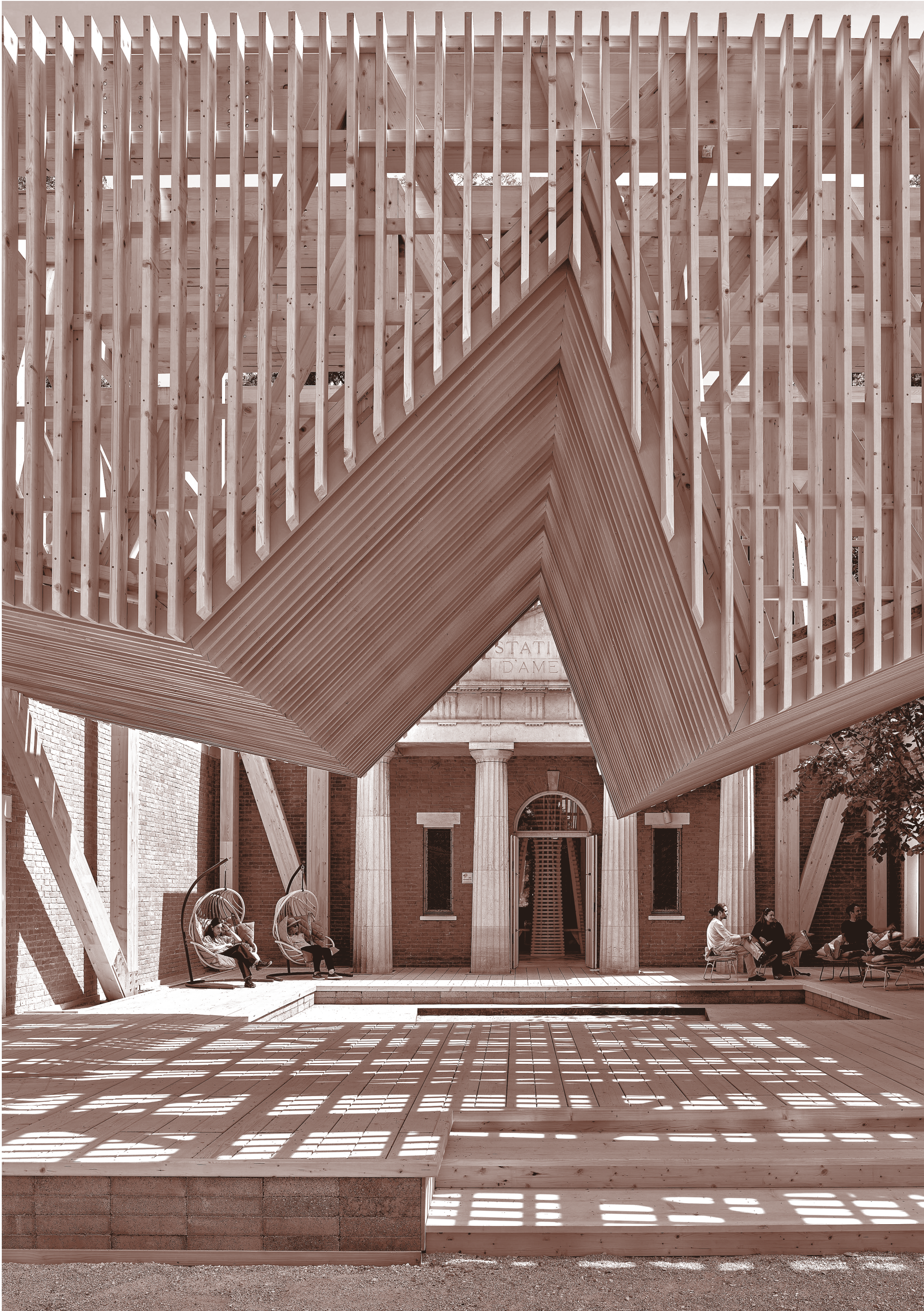
But despite this emphasis, the school still tries to balance the education. Particularly in their first two years of the undergraduate program, architecture students are taught to think, draw, and make by hand. Washko believes that UW Architecture offers a good variety of manual skill courses in addition to digital ones. He says that if an educational environment is not providing students with both areas of expertise, then "it's largely a failure of the institution."

While digital tools may seem to simplify the processes of drafting, modeling, and fabricating, they demand an entirely new skill set and level of patience. Becoming proficient in digital tools can require years of education, practice, and continued learning. Architectural design has become faster and more precise, but it has not necessarily become "easier." Even though the role of the architect has evolved with technology, creative thinking and problem solving remain just as essential.

But despite the benefits technology can offer, designers across various creative fields remain skeptical of the rapid change. There is a growing concern that computers are performing in place of human creativity. For example, artificial intelligence can quickly generate design concepts and produce realistic renderings, but this takes away the authenticity and intention behind human design. However, you could also argue that all the information AI depends on originates from humans. Many believe that computers will never be able to compete with the creativity of the human mind, yet there is still the fear of becoming overly reliant on them. There is a fine line between using technology as a tool and letting it take over the creative process entirely.

So, is technology improving the field of architecture, or hurting it? In the next decade, new advancements will continue to shift the methods of design. Maybe the question isn't about whether technology is good or bad, but how we can use it to preserve authentic creativity. The built environment of our future depends on the designers who are developing today. Architecture students should be taught to embrace technology while still applying traditional artistic and problem-solving skills. Washko believes that there should be room for both areas of expertise, and says, "In fact, they inform one another in a very effective way if done correctly."

Perhaps the future of design isn't about choosing between tradition and technology, but learning to embrace the blend.


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Ciao, Venice!
Seattle Architects Contextualize the Porch at Venice Biennale

Graycie Viscon

Interviewees: Brian Court, Cory Mattheis, Tobias Jimenez, Susan Jones, Alan Maskin

From the Indian veranda to the Italian loggia, the Japanese engawa to the Haitian galri, the porch is an age-old architectural strategy present across cultures and climates. It's a buffer space that shields from the elements in cold climates, and a means of ventilation and shading in hot, humid ones. A transitional space, the porch facilitates the passage between public and private; simultaneously, it can be a welcoming place for social interaction and relaxation.

At PORCH: An Architecture of Generosity, the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale explores how this space is quintessentially American and inherently generous. Nearly 400 design teams from around the country reflected on the meaning of the porch in their own work. Ultimately, fifty-four finalists, three of which are based in Seattle, were selected to represent the US. As America's perception abroad falters, the contributions of Seattle architects The Miller Hull Partnership, atelierjones, and Olson Kundig offer a story of generosity and optimism.

La Biennale di Venezia, or colloquially "the Olympics of the art world," is an international art exhibition that's been held in Venice, Italy, since 1895. The festival's focus alternates between art and architecture, with 2025 marking the 19th Biennale Architettura. In the southeast corner of the island, the park-like Giardini is the festival's original site and features the Central Pavilion and numerous national pavilions, including that of the US; adjacent, the pre industrial ship-building center known as the Arsenale hosts various special exhibitions and more country pavilions. Curated by architect and engineer Carlo Ratti, this year's theme, Intelligens. Natural. Artificial. Collective., urges designers to draw on different types of intelligence to redefine how the built environment addresses today's most pressing issues, especially climate change. To participate in the Biennale is to peek into the most creative and innovative minds around the world.

The decision of co-commissioners Peter MacKeith of the Fay Jones School of Architecture + Design at the University of Arkansas, Susan Chin of DesignConnect, and Rod Bigelow of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art to focus on the porch seems fitting given the opening of Ratti's curatorial statement for the Biennale at large: "Architecture has always been a response to a hostile climate. From the earliest 'primitive hut,' human design has not only been led by the need for shelter and survival, but also driven by optimism."

(Opposite) Exterior of U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. (Below) Interior of U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale showing exhibits. Photography by Tim Hursley. Photos courtesy of Novità Communications.



The 54 models–one for each design team–are exhibited in "window boxes" in the interior of the permanent US Pavilion building, a 1930s neoclassical structure. Outside, Marlon Blackwell Architects, TEN x TEN, Dirt Studio, and Stephen Burks Man Made transformed the front courtyard into a contemporary porch. The dynamic, zigzagging wooden structure hosts a myriad of artistic programming, enlivening the space. "It was the heartbeat of the Biennale," says Brian Court, principal at Miller Hull. "They had live music, they had dancing, they had all the people, and they had this great porch." The US Pavilion may be the exhibition's heartbeat but Miller Hull's submission draws equally on this cardiac metaphor.

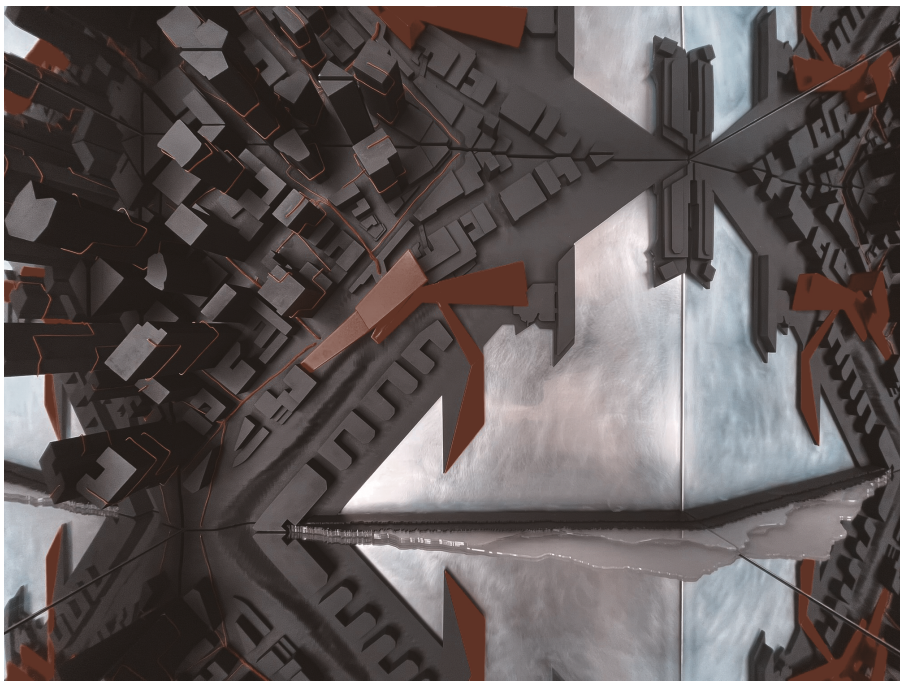
The MarketFront project–essentially a "porch for a city," notes Court–is the threshold between Seattle's historic Pike Place Market and the recently redeveloped waterfront. The bright red abstracted form of the model connects to the rest of the city by thin red veins, alluding to people's circulation from the office, home, or street to the community-centered market. The box's mirrored walls create "interesting perspectives of the MarketFront building itself [as it is] reflected through the context of the city," observes senior associate Cory Mattheis. Why red? Well, it's "Market red," of course–a callout to the iconic Public Market sign. Though completed in 2017, MarketFront is particularly relevant for Seattleites today. For the first time, the city's downtown is connected to the waterfront via the Overlook Walk. Opened in 2024, it bridges the 100-vertical-foot gap and brings pedestrians down to the 20-acre Waterfront Park, completed in collaboration with James Corner Field Operations and LMN. Mattheis notes that while the MarketFront was once about "arriving, pausing, and looking out over Elliott Bay," now it's an energetic node of movement and transition. Like a porch, it's both a place of prospect and refuge, and a threshold. "It was one of the honors of my lifetime," says Susan Jones of atelierjones, who first visited the Biennale in 1990 as a young architect and has since regarded it in her own mind as a "North Star."

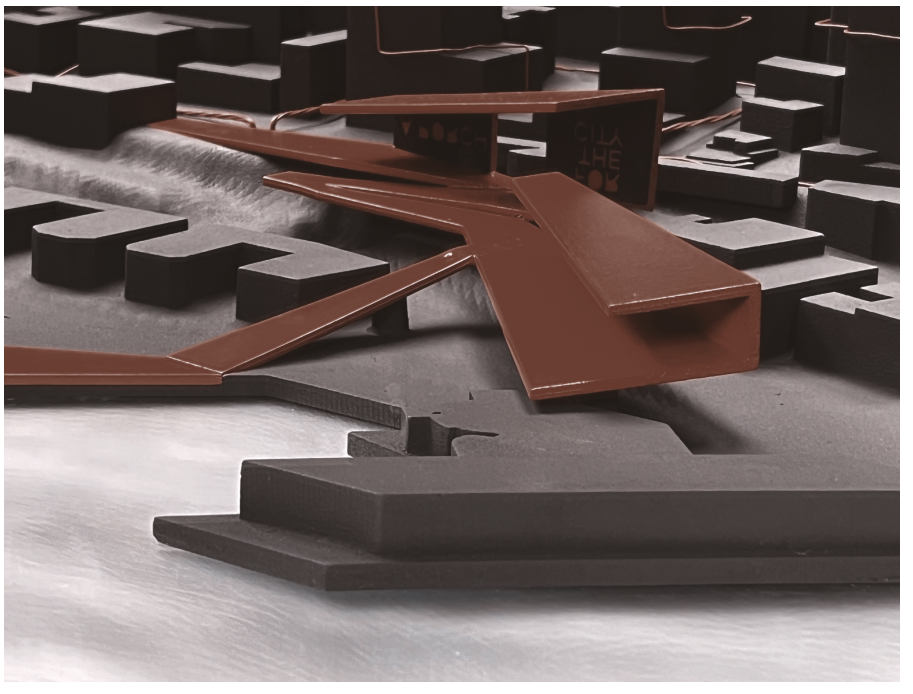
For the Maidu Roundhouse Youth Education Center, an afterschool center in Greenville, California, the team worked closely with the Roundhouse Council and Sierra Institute for Community and Environment to replace an afterschool center destroyed by the 2021 Dixie Fire. Its form is modeled off traditional Maidu roundhouses, but Jones, known for her innovations in mass timber, uses 10 ′ x 4 ′ cross-laminated timber (CLT) panels for the walls in the central rotunda. This human-scale acknowledges tribal members' practice of joining hands in a circle to size the gathering spaces for their roundhouses. The model for the Biennale captures this sentiment well–every other panel is replaced by a human figure. A steel shell surrounds the mass timber structure for maximum fire resilience, while timbers salvaged from the fire make up the porch's colonnade. atelierjones's human-centric porch shares the story of one community's resilience and provides inspiration for communities nationwide.

Olson Kundig took a unique approach, featuring three porches of varying scales in their model. "Every week–for as long as any of us can remember–we've engaged in 'Crit,' a firmwide design dialogue," recalls principal and owner Alan Maskin. Following the Biennale crits, the team knew this notion of scale was key, and selected three projects from their public portfolio that reflect how the domestic porch is translated. The Fourth Ward Office Building along the Beltline in Atlanta, Georgia, is a 1.1-million square-foot commercial building with offices and ground-floor retail. Six different porch



Miller Hull window box in interior of U.S. Pavilion.
Photo Courtesy of The Miller Hull Partnership.





(Top) Miller Hull MarketFront model and its reflections.
(Bottom) Miller Hull MarketFront model perspective.
Photos courtesy of The Miller Hull Partnership.

types are present throughout the project, including a large dog trot–an open passageway cutting through the center of a building, typical in southern US residences to provide ventilation, but here creating a plaza that connects the Old Fourth Ward Park and the Beltline Corridor.

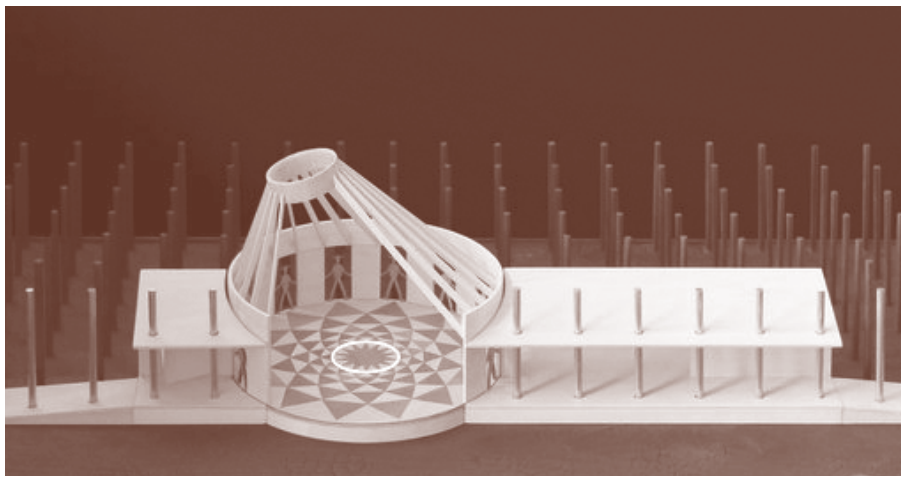
The arbor and elevated tree walk at Leach Botanical Garden in Portland, Oregon, draw on a more Pacific Northwest idea of the porch as a protector against rain and cold. The arbor's wooden screens soften the wind and create a fun play of light and shadow, while the tree walk extends the idea of the porch into the forest as it weaves through trees on the site masterplanned by Land Morphology.

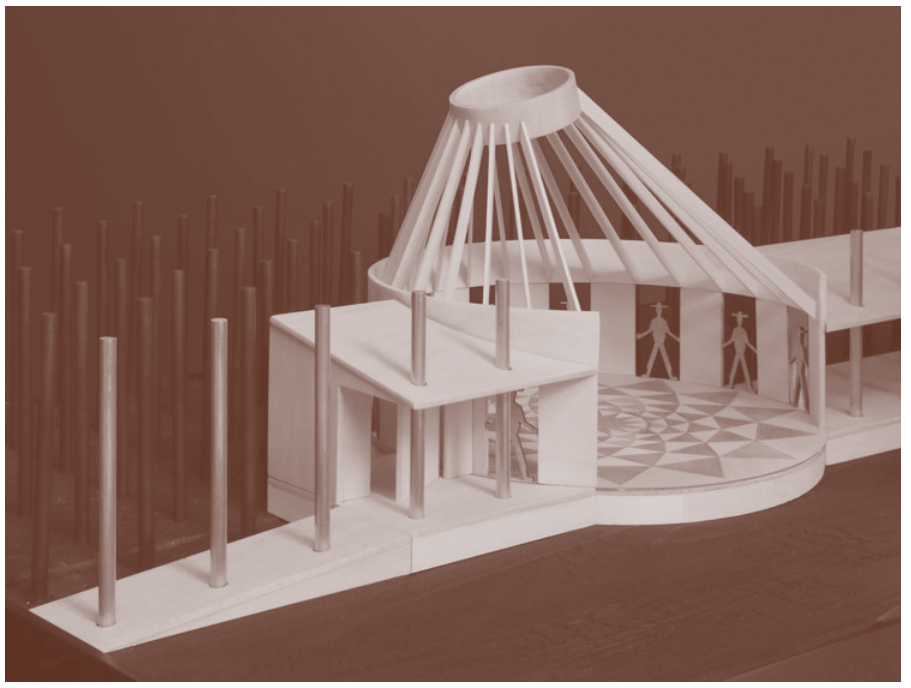
Olson Kundig's smallest-scale porch, 242 State Street, a 2,500-square-foot storefront in Los Altos, California, employs one of Olson Kundig's hallmark "gizmos." The entire front facade can be raised or lowered by a hand crank, enabling the space to shift from enclosed to inviting. "I've already noticed in the weeks following the Biennale's opening that the idea of 'porch' has infiltrated our internal design conversations on multiple occasions," says Maskin. Just as Olson Kundig did, designers across the country can find inspiration for their public projects in the richness of residential architectural typologies, like the porch, which are all about warmth, community, and belonging.

As the administration cracks down on immigration and instates exorbitant tariffs, an architecture of generosity might seem like wishful thinking. Indeed, Maskin reflects, "The one sobering moment for me was realizing that, simultaneous to the US Pavilion's opening event, many cultural organizations back home were receiving cancellation notices for grants they had been awarded from the National Endowment for the Arts." However, the contributions of the Seattle firms illustrate how the American people still have faith in the goodness of one another and how architecture is there to elevate this sentiment. "When you left the US Pavilion, there was a sense of uplift, of warmth. A feeling that we can do this together—and that our resources are ourselves and the communities we create," says Jones.

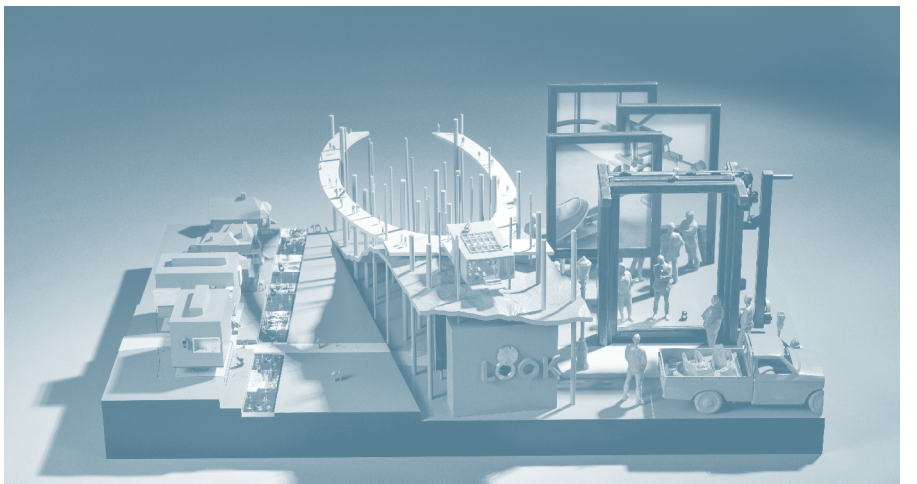
In the age of rapidly advancing artificial intelligence, the rather humble porch is a return to the analog strategies that have defined building for millennia. One such strategy, present on the pavilion's contemporary porch structure, is the haint blue paint, a popular tactic in the southern US for keeping away mosquitoes (and evil spirits, which are practically the same thing). Miller Hull architectural designer Tobias Jimenez says, "It's a means of intelligence that we often forget, that we don't pass down anymore. It's a heritage knowledge." In contrast to the overwhelming digital focus of the rest of the exhibitions, the US design teams' simple, low-tech approach is refreshing and hopeful.

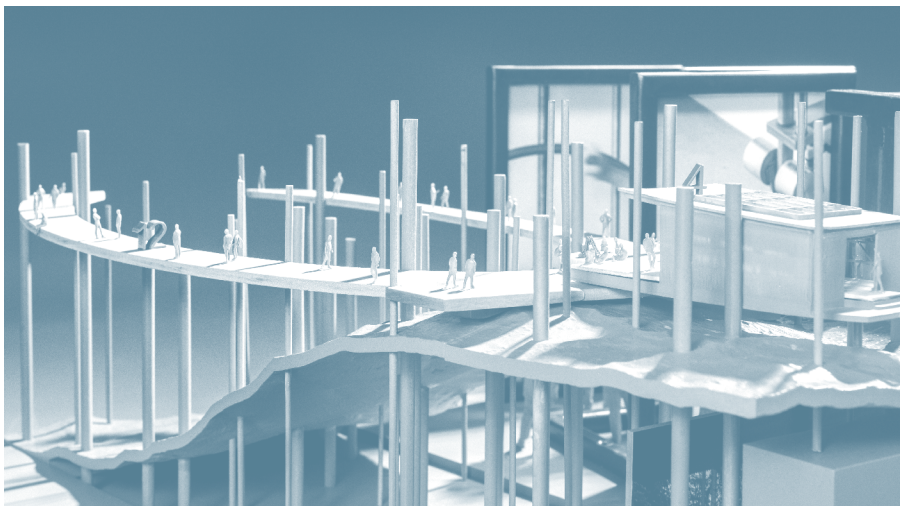
"The bells were all-of-a-sudden ringing one night. We were standing in the middle of Peggy Guggenheim [Collection] for a reception," Jones recalls, shivering, as news broke that the first American pope was elected. In that moment at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Pope Leo XIV stepped onto the central balcony–a porch, really–and radiated warmth and generosity. Jones closes: "I have to believe in the hope and the optimism in the choice of the cardinals."

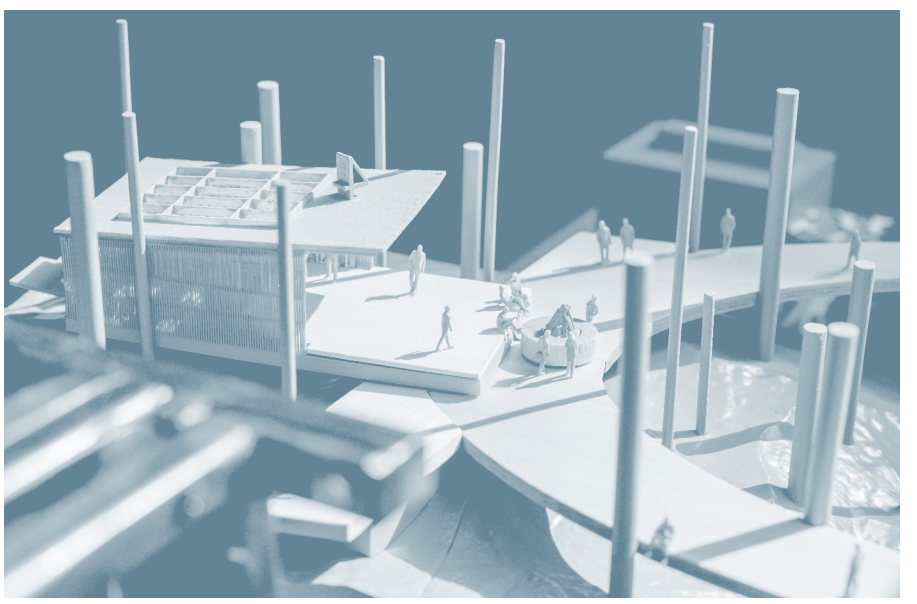




(Top) atelierjones Roundhouse model elevation.
(Bottom) atelierjones Roundhouse model rotunda.
Photos courtesy of atelierjones.







(Top) Olson Kundig model featuring the arbor.
(Middle) Olson Kundig model in its entirety.
(Bottom) Olson Kundig model featuring the tree walk.
Photos courtesy of Olson Kundig.



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Authors

Paige Cardwell is a recent graduate of the University of Washington, where she earned a Masters in Architecture and a certificate in Historic Preservation. She completed her undergraduate studies at Miami University in Ohio, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture with a minor in Entrepreneurship. Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, Paige draws inspiration from the layered histories of cities and the potential for revitalization through community-driven design. Her working goal is to focus on adaptive reuse and the preservation and reimagining of historic structures, with an emphasis on creating meaningful spaces rooted in local identity.

Khawthar Eltom

Nicolas W. Farley is a Master of Architecture student at the University of Washington, Seattle. He holds a B.S. in Biology with a minor in Art from Western New Mexico University. Nicolas has a rich background in construction and ecology, having worked as a seasonal ecologist with the Forest Service and with NASA's Airborne Research Program, where he explored the interactions between the built environment and the biosphere. Through architecture, he aims to weave together the natural and construction sciences to contribute to sustainability, technological exploration, and multi-species design in our built environments.

Shannon Hayamoto is an undergraduate at the University of Washington, majoring in Architectural Studies with an area of concentration in History and Theory, and planning to minor in Urban Ecological Design. Since childhood, she has been fascinated by the built environment and is currently interested in studying the phenomenology of spaces. An avid horror videogame enjoyer, she wants to someday explore creepy liminal spaces around the world.

Alex Huynh is a graduating architecture student at the University of Washington, where he recently completed his Bachelor of Arts in Architectural Studies. With a strong interest in how design intersects with public life, Alex focuses on community-centered planning, urban storytelling, and the overlooked sensory dimensions of space. Alex has contributed to civic and development research through collaborations with OneRedmond for a Comunity, Environment, and Planning Studio, helping translate policy-heavy proposals into community-minded visions. He has also worked on architectural design projects ranging from observatories to fire stations, emphasizing both technical fluency and human-scale experience. Outside of school, he enjoys hands-on fabrication, photography, and game design.

Amy Kale is a graduate student in the Master of Architecture program at the University of Washington. She holds a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Mumbai, India. Her interests lie at the intersection of design, storytelling, and urban justice, with a focus on how public policies shape access to space and economic opportunity.
She wrote this article as part of her final project for the course Writing and Storytelling in the Built Environment, where she explored the role of street vendors in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighbourhood. Her work focuses on the lived experiences of immigrant vendors navigating the city's permitting system, and how these informal actors contribute to the character, culture, and accessibility of urban life.
She is currently pursuing opportunities in architecture and urban planning that center inclusivity, sustainability, and design justice.

Ayami Kawasaki Matsushima is a Master of Architecture student at Yale School of Architecture, previously at the University of Washington, where she received the Top Scholar Award. With an undergraduate degree in business and professional experience in both urban design and the healthcare industry, Ayami brings a multidisciplinary lens to architectural practice. She began her career as a strategic planner at UDS Ltd., leading urban design and hospitality projects in Tokyo and Shanghai, before transitioning to M3, Inc., where she directed patient-centered design and business development for healthcare services. Her architectural interests focus on using spatial design to address pressing urban health challenges, particularly the growing need for mental health and long-term care infrastructure. She is passionate about creating new models of community-based care environments that move beyond traditional medical or care facilities, informed by her experience at the intersection of design, business, and healthcare systems.

Daniella Kondo Nakamura is a Brazilian architect and designer based in Seattle. Daniella is interested in the exploration of the intersection of adaptive reuse, material storytelling, and sustainable design.

Skylar Lin is an aspiring architect and avid videographer/photographer. A graduate of the University of Washington's Bachelor in Architectural Design, he is currently pursuing a Master in Architecture at the University of Kansas with the goal of merging his passions in both the built environments and the sports industry. Skylar believes that architecture is much more than the design of space, but rather the design of an experience. His interest in storytelling in architecture stems from his belief that experiences can be best conveyed both visually and in a written format. Skylar is a first time contributor to the ARCADE magazine.

Tushita Mehta is an architectural designer and storyteller currently pursuing her Master of Architecture at the University of Washington. Trained in Mumbai and working across two continents, she brings a critical lens to the evolving relationship between people, public space, and design systems. Her work spans commercial practice at Ware Malcomb and experimental research on adaptive reuse, drawing from both dense urban environments and moments of quiet spatial resistance. Whether sketching construction details or mapping community needs, she is driven by the belief that architecture must listen first—and then act with intention.

Jessica Martinez Vaca is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Architectural Studies at the University of Washington. Over the course of her studies, she has developed a deep passion for advocating for communities that are often underrepresented or overlooked in design and planning decisions. Her academic interests include social justice issues such as displacement and gentrification, with a focus on understanding how the built environment shapes people's daily experiences, health, and opportunities. Jessica's education has emphasized the importance of sustainability, equity, and creating spaces that foster belonging and community empowerment. She believes architecture and urban design have the power to promote positive social change by prioritizing inclusivity and addressing systemic inequalities. As she prepares to transition into the professional field, Jessica is eager to apply her knowledge and passion to projects that center the voices and needs of diverse communities, aiming to build environments that are welcoming, accessible, and just for all.

Janeth Mendez Pacheco is a second-year Architectural Studies student at the University of Washington. From Snohomish, WA, she has found the city of Seattle to be a great place to spend her young adult life as it allows for eye-opening experiences, many different views, and high community spirits. Her work explores the intersections of space and accessibility which are drawn from academic research and personal perspectives. She is highly passionate about how architecture can foster equity and inclusivity within its designs. As a new writer, she found the process of storytelling to be values it as it allows for a connection between people in and beyond the field of architecture.

Genesis Mota Aguilera is a recent graduate of the University of Washington's architecture program, where she developed a strong interest in sustainability, circular design, and the future of building materials. Over the past year, she has become especially drawn to mass timber, not just for its environmental potential but for the questions it raises about reuse, longevity, and how buildings can evolve over time. This is her first published piece, and it reflects a broader curiosity about what it means to design with care, for people, materials, and the planet. She is excited to keep exploring these questions through writing, research, and design practice.

Brian Njoroge is a graduate architecture student at the University of Washington with a background in urban design and experience in affordable housing development. As an emerging designer, his work looks to explore the intersections of design, land, and community. He is especially drawn to grassroots-led projects that center historically marginalized communities, those often rendered invisible by systems of erasure, contested authorship, and displacement.

Jacqueline Rosenbaum is a recent graduate from the University of Washington with a Bachelor of Arts in Architectural Studies and a minor in Real Estate. Her architectural concentration, "Materials and Making", focused on exploring design and fabrication processes with a strong emphasis on materiality. With a passion for creative problem-solving and innovative design strategies, Jacqueline hopes to build a career in architecture where she can contribute to meaningful social and environmental change in her future.

Graycie Viscon is an undergraduate Architecture student at the University of Washington, where she is also pursuing a minor in Spanish. Beyond her studies, she enjoys writing about her travels and is a passionate screen actor.

Stephanie Williams is an architectural designer at Mithun, based in Seattle, WA. In June of 2025, she earned her Master of Architecture from the University of Washington. Before transitioning into architecture, she worked as a software engineer in consumer electronics and robotics, as well as a retail visual designer at Anthropologie, where she executed display and merchandising concepts for apparel and home goods. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Computer Science from Northwestern University, where she also minored in French and studied language and art history in Paris. Her professional interests include mass timber, adaptive reuse, interior architecture, and furniture design.

Editorial

Lauren Gallow is a Seattle-based design writer, editor, and educator. She holds an MA in Art & Architectural History from UCSB. She is a regular contributor to Dwell, Luxe, and Interior Design and writes for The New York Times, Architectural Digest, and Architect's Newspaper, among other titles

Leah St. Lawrence is the Editorial Director of ARCADE, having worked in multiple capacities with the publishing house since 2018. She is a graduate of Seattle University's Art History department and holds an MFA in Arts Leadership also from SU. She is a writer, curator, and new media enthusiast who also covets her book collection.

Design

Cameron Reeder is a recent graduate from University of Washington, where he studied Visual Communication Design. He has a passion for publication design, lettering, and enjoys finding unique visual solutions to design problems.

Natalie O'Rourke is a Visual Designer & Photographer currently living in Seattle. She holds a Bachelor of Design from the University of Washington's Visual Communication Design program and is passionate about making visual design accessible and approachable to anyone interested. Working as ARCADE's Lead Designer, she creates engaging visual systems and collaborates with talented local designers to uplift Art & Design in the PNW.

Sharon Chen is a Chinese American graphic and print designer from Queens, NY. She is interested in creating meaningful work facilitated by print and physical media. Ultimately, Sharon wants to contribute to something greater than herself.

Burke Smithers is a visual and typeface designer based in Seattle. Through a typography-centric practice, he enjoys exploring intersections between design and the environment. His interests encompass branding, publications, installations, typeface design, and font production.



An empty facade in Portland, Oregon
Photography by Cameron Reeder



Old Black locust (Robinia pseudoacacia)
in the dead of winter.
Photography by Natalie O’Rourke