



Introduction

This book has taken four years to compile. It is the culmination of many visits, discussions, proposed and rejected projects, and a residency, which all happened in and around a site at the corner of Vine Street and Elliot Avenue in Seattle's Belltown neighborhood.

This site at the corner of Vine and Elliot has a complicated history. It took me a long time to understand what is happening there and its relevance to the greater Belltown area.

The site seems simple enough when you visit; you find beautiful gardens with vegetables and flowers, a city park with three wooden worker's cottages that have been restored and now host residencies for writers, and the beginning of Vine Street's transformation into an environmentally and people-centered green street. What is missing when you visit is direct access to the multiple stories, struggles, volunteer work, meetings, and other long processes that make the place a mini-paradise in one of Seattle's most densely populated neighborhoods.

The gardens are a P-Patch, which means they are city-owned but community run. The P-Patch program is a wonderful city initiative that maintains open urban space for community gardens all over Seattle.

Adjacent to the P-Patch is Cottage Park, which literally grew out of the P-Patch. Three former worker's houses, the last remaining single-family wooden structures in all of downtown Seattle, were neglected and rotting on the privately-owned property next door. Several people instrumental in establishing the P-Patch took on the enormous task of rehabilitating the cottages. The property is now a city park and the cottages house writers-in-residence and a community center.

Growing Vine Street (GVS) is another initiative that came from the energy behind the P-Patch and the determination of nearby residents. The long-term goal behind GVS is to turn Vine Street into a green street—a park that cleans the environment while providing open space for residents. GVS has the potential to eventually close the street to anything but foot traffic.

far left: Mended limb with crutch as splint on street in Belltown, a project by Buster Simpson

Lewis “Buster” Simpson has had an enormous aesthetic impact on these initiatives and on the neighborhood. I repeatedly came across Buster’s artwork during my visits to the site and on walks around Belltown. You can find his work on the tops of buildings, integrated into downspouts, temporarily placed on street corners, protecting trees from cars, and in other locations.



Looking at the surrounding buildings and P-Patch from the cottages
Photo, Brett Bloom

A lot of the work Buster has been involved with was ephemeral and only exists in documentation, much of which is included in this book. The amount of work Buster has done in Belltown and the thinking that has accompanied it is stunning. I was surprised that a history of Buster’s work in Belltown had never been made. It is important well beyond Belltown and Seattle.

The story of this site is also one of rapid urban change, human displacement, shifting populations, city planning versus local needs, migrant workers, drug addicts, viable artist communities, grunge rock, speculators, dot-com millionaires, homeless men and women, and more.

Through many conversations with The Friends of Belltown P-Patch, gardeners and visitors, it became clear what issues this book should address. There was a desire to make the complicated history of this site visible to the immediate area, greater

Seattle, and beyond. This last concern inspired the second book, attached to this one, which puts the story of this site in dialogue with similar initiatives in other cities.

I would like to thank Glenn MacGilvra, Edie Adams, and Myke Woodwell for putting up with me for the four years it took to finish this project. I would also like to thank Buster Simpson for contributing to this book and for inspiring me, and an entire neighborhood, to think differently about art, ecology, and how they interface with urban realities.

Special thanks go to Ava Bromberg for her tireless hours of editing on both books. The second book would not have been possible without the generous sharing of her independent research.

—Brett Bloom