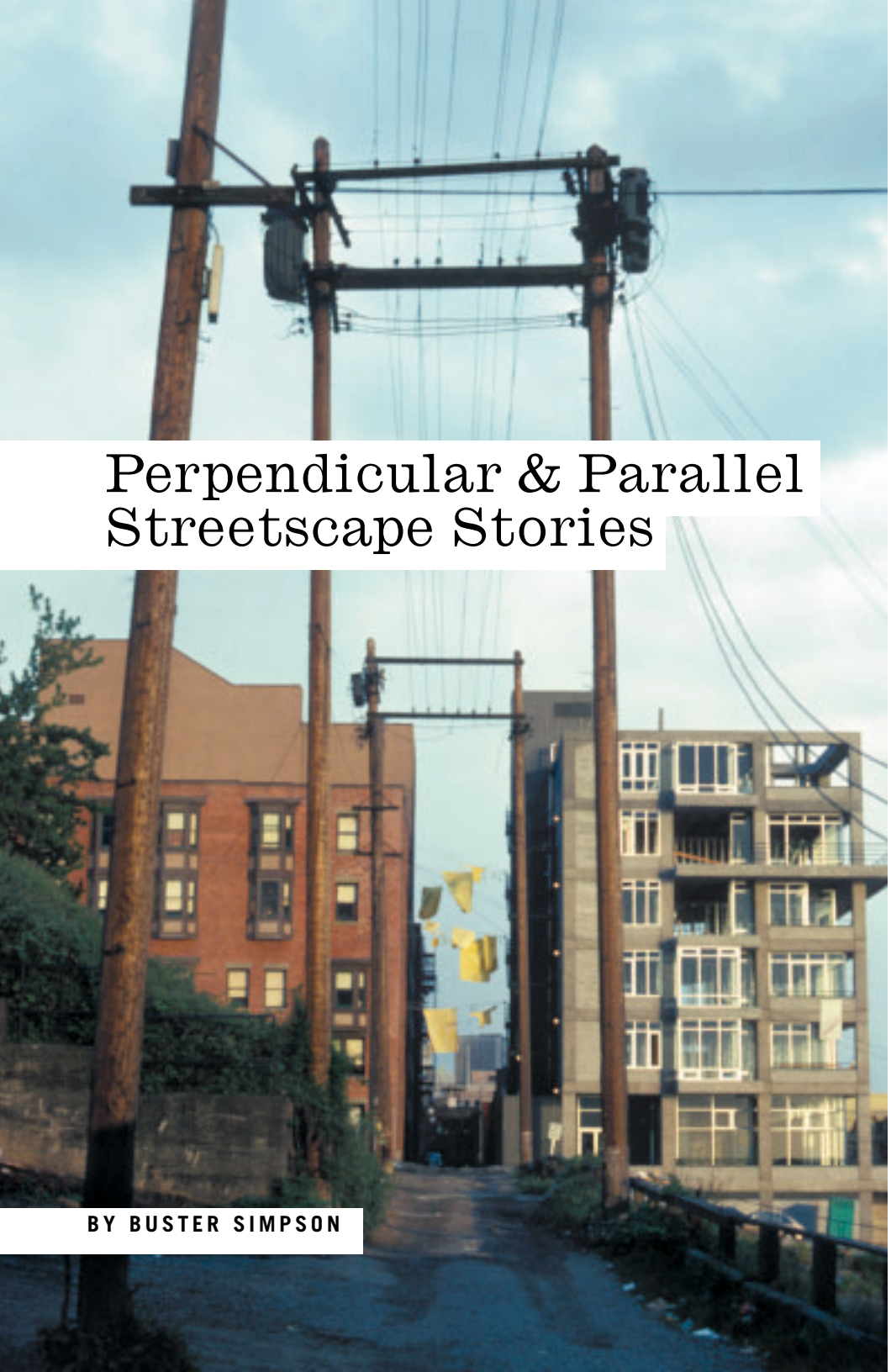

Perpendicular & Parallel Streetscape Stories

BY BUSTER SIMPSON

Downtown Seattle, Pike Place Market and the Belltown neighborhood served as locations for all of my studios from 1974 through 1987. Most were on a month-to-month basis, which had its economic advantages, but logistical shortcomings necessitating a move about every two years. Almost all the studio locations were on First Avenue or fronted Post Alley which runs parallel to the west of First Avenue. These two historic spines were my desire lines and became my public laboratories: the front door onto First Avenue, and its back door counterpart, Post Alley. The Avenue, with its veneer façade, window dressing, and commerce, was countered by the alleyway's transparency, ad hoc retrofits, and utility. Perpendicular to and intersecting these two parallel conveyances is Vine Street.

My last studio and residence in Belltown was located on Western Avenue. An adjacent vacant lot on Vine Street became a shared garden. This garden was the precursor to what eventually became the Belltown P-Patch. The P-Patch precipitated an ongoing project called Growing Vine Street, begun in 1996.

The neighborhood population has more than doubled since 1974 and with this increase came the growing pains characteristic of a community redefining itself.

LEARNING FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Post Alley served as my studio entrance at five different locations and became the basis of some early projects. In 1978, when I was living and working in a space on Post Alley below a fixed income residence, a new condominium had just been completed across the alley, creating a potential economic mix that makes cities interesting. I conceived and installed a working series of clotheslines between these two buildings connecting four floors and their inhabitants with their neighbors across the alley: the fixed income renters with the new condominium owners. I called this piece *Shared Clothesline: Banners of Human Reoccupation*. The installation proclaimed sustainability as well as social issues, as a dramatic agit prop of utility—what I later called "poetic

far left:
Shared Clothesline: Banners of Human Reoccupation, Solar Day 1978

utility." The clothesline was introduced on Solar Day in 1978 with an entire load of wash dyed yellow. This functional urban amenity served as an alternative to electric dryers as well as a response to the proliferation of the decorative "identity package" banners marketing a lifestyle rather than providing an authentic urban experience. Furthermore, many of the new condominiums had covenants against hanging clothes out to dry on individual balconies, which was considered "unsightly." The clotheslines could be used by neighbors on either side of the alley to dry clothing, or, I mused, a cup of sugar could traverse the gap. When the line was bare and wind gusted through the alley, the line functioned as an Aeolian harp providing acoustical resonance.

2001 First Avenue studio during demolition, 1978

Most residents and pedestrians walking through Post Alley appreciated the clothesline. One gentleman from the fixed income residence took offense to what he considered a reminder of his unpleasant past of being forced to hang his laundry out to dry. Eventually, he cut down all the lines. I learned from this the humility of working in shared space, and the patience such work requires. The piece remains a memory awaiting a paradigm shift.

FIRST AVENUE STREETSCAPE PROJECT

Artists residing in the Belltown neighborhood initiated the First Avenue streetscape project in 1978. What ultimately developed has become an ongoing innovative approach to streetscape design. Artists agreed to assist the Denny Regrade Community Council in conceptualizing and implementing projects on an eleven-block section of First Avenue centered north of the downtown Seattle core in the midst of Belltown. The project was treated as a work in process, a laboratory for untried approaches and solutions to urban design. Considering that there was little or no budget, this was realistic. The aesthetic was intentionally ad hoc and looked as though it had simply happened rather than been designed. This was a rejection to the commonly applied identity packages, branding, and way-finding clichés typical of a top-down design approach. We never invoiced for our "final billing" in 1984, so, technically, this project is still on the books.

The first concern of the community was to find something to sit on while waiting at the bus stops. There was interest in creating shade and greenery as well. The solution needed to be cost-effective and able to withstand the rigors of urban wear and erosion. The city engineering departments had their concerns about anything unique and not easily replicable. Their prime concern, as was ours, was that we did not create a harmful public liability.

Sandstone ready-mades at bus stop on First Avenue at Wall prior to re-siting the bus stop at Cedar Street, c. 1984

Working with the city was an ongoing waltz to push their envelope while respecting their issues. We called the street project a "laboratory" as a design strategy, and often used the term "temporary prototypes" as a non-threatening rationale to achieve an

innovative street amenity. These streetscape projects prompted a discussion among artists, community, and the city that ultimately led to a consensus. The relationship has provided an open-ended unofficial channel for aesthetic discourse as First Avenue in Belltown continues to be developed.

The changing demographic since 1978 has tested the laboratory approach as the streetscape has become more populated. The single-resident occupancy hotels built in the late 1800s and early 1900s were once the dominant housing stock in the neighborhood. In the 1980s they were demolished and replaced with condominiums and rental units. Developers, in an attempt to attract new residents, often based the aesthetics of a project on marketing trends, which were uninformed about neighborhood context and did not address social and sustainability issues. When new developers attempted to assert their design on our pre-existing streetscape they were instructed that both city and federal art funding protected the various amenities such as trees, artifacts, and benches. This provided leverage to negotiate for something better, if the developers were willing to invest in an idea bigger than their own frontage. By and large developers agreed to collaborate. To this day, the street design intends to integrate new developments and their needs with those of the greater community and its eleven-block episodic journey along First Avenue. The First Avenue approach strives to be dynamic, encouraging the ongoing layering of meanings. Discovering an anomaly from the past juxtaposed with the present is the essence of the urban; a sophisticated place allows us to read through the layers ultimately becoming our legacy.

above: Key stones sited on First Avenue and Broad Street (site of the first of three relocations)

right: Sandstone key stones removed from the state capital and in storage at Wilkeson Sandstone Quarry before siting

BUS SHELTERS

Providing a place to rest and wait along the First Avenue bus stops initiated a new street friendly social gathering place. The city budgeted enough money for the least expensive off-the-shelf bench solution. We chose to take that budget and select what we rationalized as "ready-mades"—sandstone remnants from the Wilkeson Sandstone Quarry in Wilkeson, Washington. This quarry operated since 1886 supplying dimensional stone to some of the region's significant architecture. The quarry had just declared bankruptcy and we were one of the first to salvage relics such as the original keystones from the state's capital building, which were replaced after the 1949 earthquake.

The stone benches were sited at each of the nine bus stops and augmented with a grove of purple plum trees that we planted to provide cover and a color code visible down the length of the street. Cluster planting lessened heat stress on the city street trees. The color-coded bus locations had their drawbacks when Metro moved or consolidated a few of its bus stop locations leaving the purple plums. Relocating the benches required a Sunday morning mobilization and consultation with the transit planners. A working relationship developed between the different governmental agencies involved in these streetscape decisions and a consensus was reached.

As the demographic changed in the 1990s and the new residents and merchants were not yet acclimated to the neighborhood, benches began to be perceived as magnets for "undesirables." There were city council hearings and community meetings, but the most effective approach to education was on-site dramatization of the issue. One such example was the "butt guard," a device that temporarily rendered the bench unusable while postings described the reason why the device had been installed. The benches are now an accepted part of the streetscape.

Community planting of Gary oak

THE URBAN ARBORETUM

The Urban Arboretum provided the First Avenue streetscape laboratory an opportunity to expand the city's acceptable palette of street tree choices. Aside from issues of invasive root structures, short-lived and brittle trees, the city's palette excluded many indigenous varieties for no apparent reason. America's urban street trees are more and more a monoculture of obedient vertical hybrids that keep out of our way and do not make a mess. This project was a refreshing opportunity to question that restrictive attitude. We were interested in creating a diverse urban arboretum to monitor the trees' ability to grow.

One of the first events was an Arbor Day interventionist planting of two hundred seedlings. The seedlings were given away with instructions on how and where they were to be planted. "No man's lands" and formal corporate landscapes, such as the large office towers being built on 4th Avenue with suburban landscaping, were among the suggested locations for planting.

One of the first trees to be introduced, or re-introduced, was the cedar tree. Because of our efforts, cedars are now included in other downtown streetscape designs. The laboratory was working. Other unique specimens included gingko, flowering dogwood, vine maple, and magnolia, interspersed with other trees, creating a unique rhythm of tree types and spacing. Another innovation was that the trees were not planted in a straight line. In addition to grove clustering at bus stops, we staggered trees between property line and curb to provide a weave to the pedestrian's walk. The city's only criterion in developing this design was to maintain a 4-foot wide, unobstructed pathway along the weave for wheelchair accessibility.

My studio at 2001 First Avenue accommodated a sixty-year-old Queen Anne fruiting cherry tree, and was surrounded by turn-of-the-century architecture. After an unsuccessful battle by housing and tree advocates, who equated displacement of people with the destruction of this tree, in 1979 this historic cherry tree became the first of the "witnesses" removed to make way for one of the first condominium developments along First Avenue. As a result of the attention this issue brought to the community, it was pointed out that preservation should include not only architecture, but also living things. Shortly after this battle, a fruiting cherry tree, which had been a survivor of pre-renovation of the Pike Place Public


THE BELLTOWN RAG
A View from the Denny Regrade
vol. 2 no. 6 dec. 1979

Front Page of the Belltown Rag featuring the removed Queen Anne cherry tree, December 1979

Market, was threatened by new development. After three hearings in the mid-1980s, where the developer paraded in experts to testify that the tree would not survive the new development, the historic commission issued a mandate to the developer to accommodate the tree with the new construction. The tree thrives to this day as a living relic.

above: Location of the fruiting cherry tree with text on fence and dancing figure tree guards

far right, top: Salvaging the Gary oak from the city landscape dump

far right, bottom: Gary oak one year later

On First Avenue, adjacent to the site of the Queen Ann's demise, a new fruiting cherry was planted as a replacement. The fence next to the new planting was painted with text, which provides passing pedestrians with a historical account of the cherry tree succession, and a pedestrian treatise explaining the urban design forces in play. Even though birds generally consume the cherries before they constitute a liability, allowing fruiting cherry trees as street trees is a subtle victory. These are the only fruiting street trees downtown. The historical precident overrode the developer's desire to plant a flowering, ornamental cherry tree. The tree guard we placed around the fruiting cherry was fashioned from branches gleaned from the fallen Queen Anne. The installation suggested three dancing figures with faces consisting of plates, which also served as bird feeders. There was a heated discussion with the developer about the aesthetic merits of this piece and its placement in front of his corporate building. His hired handyman removed and destroyed the tree-guard under the cover of darkness.

When possible, the community was involved with the street tree planting to foster stewardship. On one occasion, some city officials believed the selected type of tree, an oak, would not survive the urban environment. Not long after the community planting we noticed that the tree was removed professionally, which indicated to us that it was the work of the city rather than vandalism. We asked, "Why?" They replied, "It was dead." We knew it was alive because we had just checked the tree. We went to the city landscape dump and found, retrieved, and replanted the oak. Fortunately the root ball was intact although its trunk had been cut in half. The tree was replanted and it sprouted new shoots. A cage was installed around it. An ax head was buried in the "stump" of the trunk and the project documented. The oak thrived and the city realized the seriousness of our intent. Four years later, when a new development again threatened the tree, the construction workers worked around it and protected the tree until someone from the city ordered it removed. We lost this opportunity for yet another chapter in the saga of this particular tree. In 2002, two Gary oaks were planted as part of a condominium streetscape agreement supporting the urban arboretum concept. The struggle of the oak was now secure in the institutional memory. Its planting went unopposed.

The informal day-to-day monitoring of clandestine projects was giving way, due to the rapid development of the neighborhood, to the need for a formal process.

TREE GUARDS

In the late 1970s, First Avenue was in transition. Dotted along the Avenue were old sailor bars, such as the "Fore and Aft," which offered a 6 a.m. happy hour. As patrons left the bar and navigated the street, these young trees offered their tender limbs to the passing intoxicated pedestrians needing to stabilize their passage, subsequently deforming the branches. The city considered these trees damaged and expendable and was prepared to remove them. We argued that these deformed trees would grow to represent a living testimony to this time in Seattle's transitional history. We called this benign act "Urban Bonsai." We saw a parallel between these urban forces and those found at timberline where the trees physically express the environmental conditions of the location.

above left: Gary oak re-sited (in cage) on First Avenue

above right: *Tree Guard* stake and watering pipe

To brace the damaged or broken limbs, we bound them with cloth using a crutch as a splint. Occasionally we noticed a crutch had mysteriously disappeared. We found out that some people who needed a crutch for their own assistance would remove it from the tree unaware of its intended function. Eventually, with repeated reinstallations, the poetic utility of the crutch mending the limb was understood.

Additional approaches to tree guards were implemented along First Avenue, initially to protect the trees, but also to provide irrigation water. We installed vertical pipes that doubled as tree guards and a detention water system. A perforated section of pipe in the soil slowly irrigated the young trees. Objects such as crutches and bed frames, both from the abandoned single resident occupant hotels, served as a cost-effective, ad hoc solution, and illustrated a neighborhood in transition. The bed frames protecting the trees lasted a number of years until the thin metal head and foot frames rusted or were damaged while protecting the trees from automobiles. The bed frames were later transformed from relics into artifacts. We made a mold of the bed frames and cast them in iron. They are installed at locations where the transition continues.

COMPOSTING COMMODE

In 1978, a *Composting Commode* was installed on First Avenue in response to continued indiscriminant street level defecation and as a counterpart to a regional expansion of unsustainable flush technology. The commode sat over future tree pits and when full would be moved up the street to start anew. It had been our experience when planting trees that most of the soil was comprised of hard pan clay. Use of the commode

Bed Frame Tree Guard protecting an elm tree

enhanced the soil. The commode was designed as a stoop toilet with an aeration system for decomposing. There was an interior railing to assist patrons and a twenty-foot solar draw ventilation pipe, which was notched at the top to function as an adjustable wind pipe organ.

Obtaining a street use permit would have been a protracted affair, so in the spirit of a "temporary prototype" the commode was camouflaged within a shell of an off-the-shelf portable self-contained chemical toilet to avoid unnecessary attention by the authorities. The theory was that portable chemical toilets were part of the urban visual landscape, but a composting toilet that looked like an outhouse would be a red flag. Patrons, primarily the homeless, had no problem accepting the facility during its short existence at two locations.

Detail of dogwood planting after *Composting Commode* is moved

The authorities eventually discovered the ruse of the Composting Commode and requested its removal. We agreed to work together to address the issues this intervention dramatized, the basic human need for decent public facilities. The commode found a new home at a community garden adjacent to an alternative pubic school. The attention attracted the university architecture department to conduct a weeklong workshop in downtown Seattle to address the issues this project raised.

THE BELLTOWN PAN

Around the early 1980s, the Belltown Café at 2309 First Avenue became the social hearth for the community. The proprietors often did exchanges of food for art and one trade was for the concept and fabrication of the Belltown Pan. The pan was designed as a large cooking pan in the shape of a bell and sized to fit in a commercial oven. The pan was made from sheet copper, riveted together and tinned on the inside. Most of the year it hung from a bracket outside the café and functioned as a sign. On Groundhog Day, the pan was taken down, cleaned, and a large assortment of roots such as rutabaga, parsnips, beets, carrots, onions, potatoes, and garlic were prepared and baked. The connection to the root-consuming groundhog was a metaphor signaling the end of the winter when the roots in the root cellar were running out and we were anticipating the coming of spring. A piece of the pie sold for 99 cents and the event grew as an informal celebration over the few years of the pan's use. The café closed later in the 1980s and the building was torn down for new construction. There is a restaurant occupying the location and preparations are being made to return the pan to the facade and the yearly celebration to the community.

Details of Belltown pan and root pie

WATER TABLE/WATER GLASS

Some new construction along First Avenue has extended the episodic experience to include common areas and plazas. One such project was the *Water Table/Water Glass*. This project redirected the roof watershed down to the publicly accessible plaza and into two sculptures. One element is a large drinking glass with a straw connected to the downspout. The other plaza element is a water table with an adjoining roof watershed. A downspout is connected to a table through the fourth leg. The ten-story head

top: View of the public plaza with *Water Table / Water Glass*

bottom: *Water Table* expressing the rainfall head of water

of water is expressed up through the pierced text "water." The word "table" is sandblasted and has an ephemeral quality that changes when the black granite table surface is wet or dry. Rainwater from both sculptures supplies a landscape and then charges a cistern below before recirculation. This wetlands planting project will require an engaged residential community to eventually succeed.

As cities become denser and face increasing pressure to be more sustainable and engage their communities, catalysts for public interaction are going to be crucial. Public interaction is what makes a city urbane. The streets are the city's meeting place.

GROWING VINE STREET

We began the Growing Vine Street Project by defining the word "green" in relation to environmental sustainability rather than to traditional landscaping. This part of the city was "plumbed" to dispose of rain from roofs and hard surfaces through an antiquated combined sanitary and storm system. We proposed to redirect this urban watershed and keep it at the surface as an asset rather than a liability flushed out of sight. We have put the city on notice that we see gray water and brown water as the next opportunity.

The design team developed a working logic that equated the street to a crack. We needed to build a structural armature based on street infrastructure, site conditions, ownership, easements, as well as community and business needs. Rather than fighting the infrastructure, we let it reveal itself by working with the existing conditions and taking the path of least resistance. It was a pragmatic approach given the limited funding. Our design mitigated and nurtured the streetscape with the urban watershed through an interconnected system of green roofs, cisterns, detention planters, and street watercourses we called runnels, which are intended as an extension of the urban crack. The watershed journey is episodic and transparent as it makes its way down the eight sloping blocks of Vine Street towards Puget Sound. This project requires the patience of seven generations. We provided a start that will hopefully instill a desire to integrate similar systems in future development.

Maintaining community engagement during protracted consensus, permitting, and implementation processes is important. Private and public-sector processes are often too lengthy for the collective memory of a community. One approach to keeping the community engaged is to borrow lessons from First Avenue—the temporary prototype and other spontaneous interventions. The *Skyway Seed Bank* was one such project.

SKYWAY SEEDBANK

For over 50 years, a water tower platform, resting on the roof of the abandoned Skyway Luggage factory at Elliot Avenue and Vine Street, had nurtured a unique landscape of volunteer grasses and mosses in less than five inches of self-generated soil. We recognized that this repository could provide a seed stock for future

above: *Skyway Seedbank* on the roof of the Skyway Luggage building

right: *Portable Landscapes* at the Henry Art Gallery, 2000

neighborhood green roofs. This landscape was a survivor specific to the ecosystem of this particular urban environment. Segments of this seed bank were transplanted into recycled suitcases, referencing the Skyway Luggage Building that hosted the seed bank on its factory roof. The suitcases were also a symbol of a neighborhood in demographic transition. The suitcase planters were fixed to pallets to make them portable. These were placed along the eight blocks of Vine Street where they waited to be adopted by the community. The suitcases suggested displacement and

Barrel planters on Alaskan Way at Vine Street

hope as they lay themselves open exposing their contents to the whims of community and government.

In an attempt to soften the impact of suitcases with the Seed Bank of volunteer "ugly weeds" and their intended use as a seed dispersal system for future green roofs, the lower tier of the two-tier pallet of suitcases were planted with petunias and pansies and a covering of beauty bark, to exemplify the suburban coding for beauty. The planters were on the street for two years with the hope that residents would begin to adopt them. These suitcase planter locations were recipients of various levels of community engagement. One member of the business community, who failed to grasp the concept, forced the city to require a street use

permit, causing their removal. Temporary prototypes should not require street use permits. I complied with the removal of all but one. Out of sight of this individual's scrutiny, re-germination awaits another day. Civic engagement takes time to develop. The volunteer "adopt a street" approach to Vine Street is at odds with city regulations and needs to be reassessed.

At about the same time, two installations consisting of 55-gallon steel barrels strapped to fabricated steel pallets and galvanize-dipped as a single unit were sited and planted along the freight train tracks at the foot of Vine Street. The barrels referenced the warehouse activity of what was once a working waterfront adjacent to a salmon cannery on Vine Street. A community member has adopted one set. The other has become a recipient of vagabond plantings, perhaps seeds borne from the passing freight cars. Unlike the suitcase planters, the barrels on skids were out of the way and less interventionist in appearance, thus more acceptable. There was one complaint to the Port Authority of "illegal dumping" by someone who assumed the installation was an indiscriminant dumping of old barrels, perhaps full of toxins.

BECKONING CISTERN AND CISTERN STEPS

Interventions and temporary prototypes provide a visible and engaging presence for ideas. This helps keep the community engaged for a time when collective consensus is needed to support more ambitious projects. Collaborations with the city and the private development sector require a consistent and dedicated group of community advocates. Two recent projects along Vine Street exemplify this dedication of time, patience, and collaborative spirit, and reinforce the Growing Vine Street mission of roof watershed diversion to a cistern and landscape. One, *Beckoning Cistern*, has been completed. Construction began on the other, *Cistern Steps*, in the summer of 2004. This process has taken over four years because of the city's hesitation in approving innovation. These two projects relied heavily on private developers with courage and belief in the principles of Growing Vine Street. It is imperative that future private development along Vine Street follows the example set particularly at 81 Vine Street.

top: *Beckoning Cistern*

bottom: Lower pools of *Beckoning Cistern*

Beckoning Cistern at 81 Vine Street demystifies the journey of water in an urban watershed as rainwater travels from roof to bow truss downspouts to eighty-foot-long detention planters and finally, to two more downspouts. One downspout supports a series of vertical landscape detention planter devices and the other downspout offers rainwater to the Beckoning Cistern. The cistern is a large 10 foot by 6 foot diameter tank, as if a sleeve, with a hand and extended index finger reaching out to the down spout. It mimics the gesture of the painting in the Sistine Chapel of Adam and God with their fingers about to touch. In this case, God is the downspout implying Mother Nature as the alternate deity. The tank water overflow pours out the tip of the thumb and into a set of planters where a variety of native wetland plantings have established themselves. The tank water is available for additional watering as determined by the residence. In the next block down the hill, Cistern Steps is to receive additional waters from an adjacent condominium roof and direct it into a series of stepped wetland planters, rather than send the water into the sewer. The Cistern Steps is located adjacent to the Belltown P-Patch and is considered an extension of it. One more block and the water reaches Puget Sound.

The challenge is to bring in natural systems by retrofitting the city. The diverse talents and inventive approaches individuals bring to the collaboration benefit the entire community. The goal is to build a social network to realize the full potential of Vine Street.

Buster would like to thank the following people for their work and support on the First Avenue Streetscape Project: Denny Regrade Community Council; The initial design team—Jack Mackie, Joan Paulson, Deborah Reinheart, Paul Reinheart, and Ann Hershey; Department of Neihborhoods; Seattle Engineering; Marvin Black and Shane DeWald, City Arborist; Walter White, Belltown Pan coppersmith; Barbara Goldstein, Seattle Arts Commission 1978–2004; and many more over the years. www.bustersimpson.net