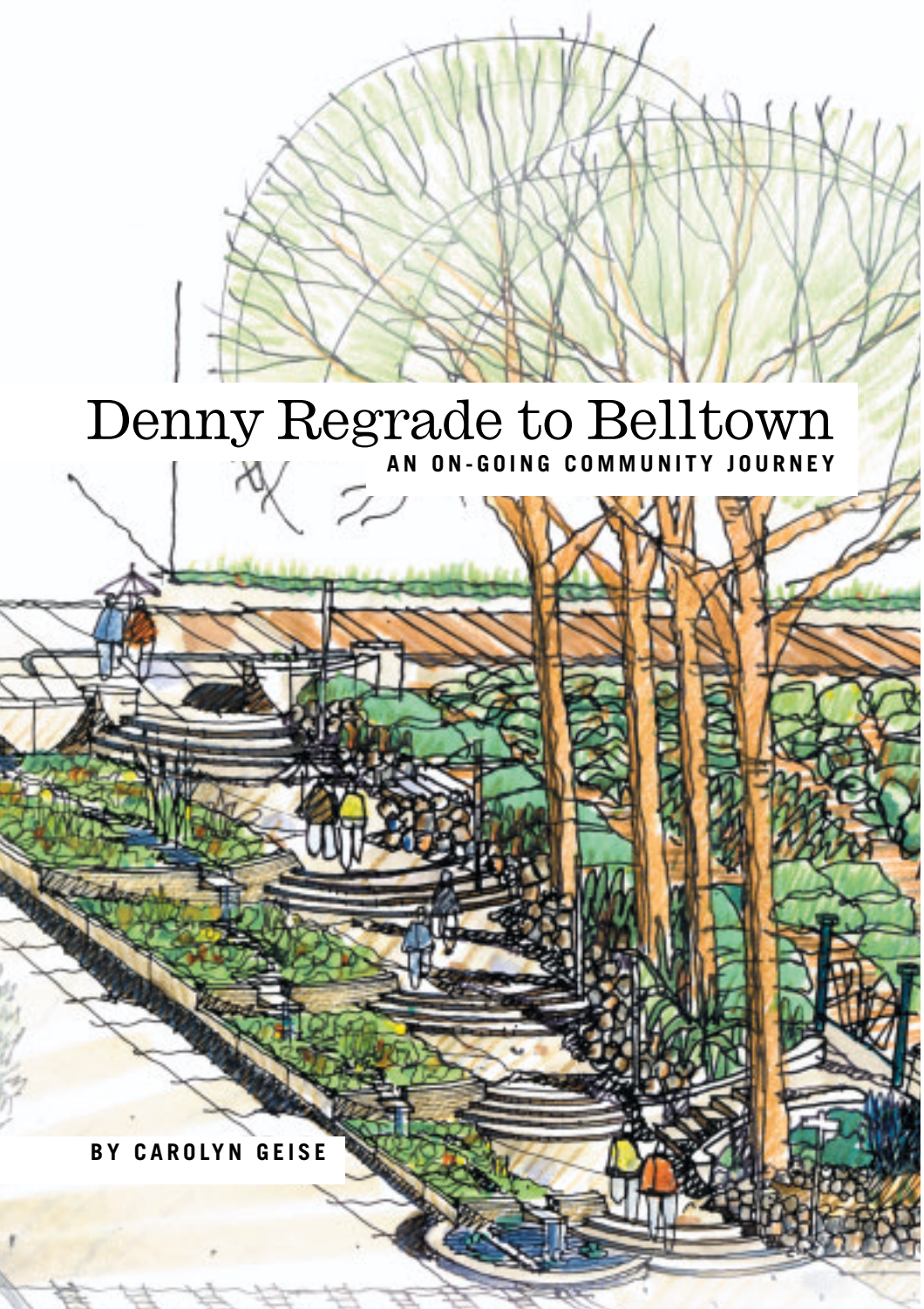

Denny Regrade to Belltown

AN ON-GOING COMMUNITY JOURNEY

BY CAROLYN GEISE

When development finally came to the Regrade area, it took off like a rocket with the economic success of the '90s and the dot-com bubble. There were one or more construction cranes on every block for several years. Many of us in the Regrade looked forward to a more densely populated urban neighborhood, but wondered what we could do to preserve some of the colorful cultural heritage the artists had developed.

Seattle's Comprehensive Plan projected 6,500 additional residents by the year 2014. Their arrival would increase density to 46.3 households per acre, making ours by far the most densely populated neighborhood in Seattle. Change was inevitable, but did it have to be total gentrification? Could the missions, low-income housing, and day-labor centers co-exist with multi-million-dollar condominiums and a fashionable restaurant district? What could the community do to shape this development, to provide breathing room for the new density, keep a touch of nature, and integrate newcomers into the existing fabric of the neighborhood rather than let it be destroyed?

When I joined this community in 1992, the organizers of the fledgling Belltown P-Patch were taking on this challenge. They set about planning a community garden, a public realm where interaction among people of all income levels could take place, tempered with nature, providing opportunities for community building and stewardship. They were creating a vision for a community garden not to just feed the stomach, but to feed the soul. Their garden consisted of art, flowers, and food. It provided a connection to the land desperately needed in this neighborhood of wall-to-wall paving. The Regrade was a location, but the name "Belltown" represented the heart and soul of the community that this valiant group set about saving and expanding. Their motto was a "garden where plants and people flourish." They were on to something and I wanted to help make it happen.

SEEDS OF GROWING VINE STREET

The Frayn Building at 81 Vine Street came on the market at just the time that my family development partnership sold a

far left:
Rendering of the Cistern Steps
Carlson Architects

building and needed to reinvest. It was a simple three story brick building built as a box factory in 1914 with beautiful large windows grouped into pairs under graceful brick arches. We purchased the building, and when the first stage of renovation was completed in 1994, I moved my office, Geise Architects, into the building. We used the open house as an opportunity to bring our new community together to discuss how we could support the P-Patch plan to expand into Vine Street. The P-Patch had discovered Vine Street was designated as a level 1 green street in the city's 1986 master plan. This classification allowed for pedestrian development into the street and, if desired, the street could even be closed off to motor traffic entirely.

Meanwhile, I was running into problems with the green street requirement for the sidewalk at the 81 Vine Street building. City officials did not agree about exactly what was required when developing along a green street. After spending thousands of dollars on civil engineering and hours going from the building department to engineering, which had control of the street right-of-way, to the city arborist, and around again, I proposed that we leave the sidewalk as is in the first phase of the renovation, since we were just remodelling the existing building. Then, during the second phase addition of seven penthouse units, we would upgrade the sidewalks. We hoped the green street requirements would be clearer by then.

In the meantime Glenn MacGilvra and I began to gather a community group around the issue of how Vine Street could be developed under the green street ordinance, especially beside the P-Patch. Soon Glenn and I were writing the first grant to Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods (DON) for $42,000 to hire a consultant to prepare a concept design for Vine Street based upon bioregional principles and celebrating water. At about 3 a.m., while putting the finishing touches on the application, Glenn came up with "Growing Vine Street," which has served well to title our vision.

EARLY STAGES

Word of the GVS project spread and our small group grew to 15 committed individuals. We attended meetings at least twice a month during 1996 and 1997 to develop preliminary design ideas in preparation for hiring a design team. A primary concern was incorporating ecosystem-based design to bring natural elements back to the city. Inspired by the idealism of the young people in our group, such as aspiring transportation planner Peter Voorhees and architect David Craven, we boldly claimed the full eight blocks of Vine Street as a watershed and defined some ecosystem design guidelines. We invited artist Buster Simpson to these meetings since he was interested in the area and in storm water solutions. He was an inspiring participant in developing the concept of treating and playing with the storm water.

We organized continuous events to raise money and awareness of the project. These events and the many meetings were successful as fundraisers, but more importantly served to unite and define this new community and bring new comers and old timers together around a common goal.

Buster Simpson and Peggy Gaynor planting *Vertical Landscape* at the 81 Vine Street building, 1999
Photo, Paul Joseph Brown, *Seattle Post Intelligencer*

NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING

Simultaneously, the neighborhood planning process began in Belltown and ran from April 1996 to December 1998. This was a community-driven process that received city funding. Communities hired their own planning consultants and the city provided staff to help keep the process moving. The core values developed by the Denny Regrade Organizing Committee, which included many GVS members, were as follows: The Denny Regrade Neighborhood is an urban community concerned with quality of life and built on social equity, economic

viability, environmental stewardship, security, and respect for its cultural and historical traditions.

For much of the process the GVS steering committee served as the Pedestrian Environment Committee for the planning group. The neighborhood planning process was a chance for us to discuss the problems we came up against while developing a street design that was actually a storm water treatment infrastructure. GVS served as a test case for developing well-designed green streets. The Downtown Urban Center Planning Group, a coalition of the five downtown neighborhoods including the Denny Regrade, chose to invest some of their planning money to study the obstacles and solutions to permitting, constructing, and maintaining green streets.

Vertical Landscape downspout on the 81 Vine Street building, 1999
Photo, Carolyn Geise

SELECTING A DESIGN TEAM

By July 1997, the steering committee had defined goals, developed design guidelines, and advertised for a design team. Eight excellent teams responded and we interviewed three. Seventeen members of the committee spent most of a Saturday conducting the interviews and making the decision. Our selection was a multidisciplinary firm organized by Carlson Architects consisting of Don Carlson, architect and urban designer; Greg Waddell, planner; Peggy Gaynor, landscape architect; and Buster Simpson, environmental artist. Aidan Stretch, Sustainable Development Group and Marni Heffron, Heffron Transportation, also provided input. We recognized the challenge of working with such a strong and diverse group, but they fit our vision of being bold, brave, and ecologically minded. We also felt the different talents, ranges of experience, and styles would resonate with the varied constituents in our community. Having Buster on the team was a plus as he was already recognized as the Regrade artist and his work typified the spirit we were trying to capture.

DESIGN CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

To accommodate the idea of this street as a laboratory for storm water solutions, and to facilitate incremental adoption of the concept by the community, the design team developed a "kit of parts," a guideline for development. This kit is a collection of flexible design elements that create a design framework and provide guidance for long-term development of the green street. There are four core concepts of structure and function: first, the street functions as a one-way driving lane with some back-in parking. Second, we recognize storm water runoff as a resource to be exposed and integrated into the green street philosophy. Third, the greening of the street corridor includes the greening of buildings. Fourth, the greening of Vine Street is an enduring social event providing a venue for creative contributions from the community.

This infrastructure project addressed the issue of regular sewer overflow into Puget Sound. Belltown has a combined sewer and storm water system. Statistics for 2001 show that Seattle had 556 overflow events which dumped 272 million gallons of sewage-tainted water into our natural water systems. Reducing the storm water run off will decrease or eliminate the incidence of overflow.

Our motto was, store the water, enjoy and play with the water, irrigate with the water; do not just send it down a black hole to get rid of it. The project was a winner and people flocked to hear about it and participate.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH & IMPRINTING THE CONCEPT

Development accelerated and new people moved into the community by the hundreds. GVS meetings became updates to the community about how the project was progressing and

about new construction in the neighborhood. It seemed that almost every week a new high-rise apartment or condo was being planned. We made a huge map of the neighborhood and pinned up articles about proposed new buildings. As the reality of the growth explosion began to sink in, the need to create a humane pedestrian environment stimulated wider interest in our project.

There were eight major construction projects in the planning stage on the eight-block length of Vine Street during the time we were developing our design concept. Members of the GVS steering committee or design team met with each of the developers to encourage them to take our concept into consideration in their new construction projects. Although none of them incorporated water features, several made supportive landscaping or detail gestures. Once the GVS design concept was approved by the Seattle Design Commission, the new city design department tried to require developers on Vine Street to embrace the GVS concept. Compliance is mostly voluntary, however, since financial incentives are not available.

We presented GVS to community groups, the Design Commission, committees of the City of Seattle Council, and at conferences. The idea began to take hold. GVS became part of the vocabulary of other Seattle communities and was used by city officials as an example of an innovative, community-driven approach to urban storm water solutions.

Detail of the *Beckoning Cistern*, by Buster Simpson
Photo, Carolyn Geise

81 VINE BUILDING
GROWING VINE STREET PROJECTS

With the economy rising in 1997, my development partners decided to proceed with the second phase of adding penthouses on the 81 Vine Building and converting the building to condominiums. This triggered the requirement for sidewalk improvements, but GVS was still working its way through meetings with the city to solve technical issues. My partners generously agreed to wait for GVS, which required putting off our sidewalk work for two years and posting a bond in order to secure a temporary occupancy permit so we could sell the units.

Bow truss downspout on 81 Vine Street Building
Photo, Carolyn Geise

The 81 Vine Building actually includes three GVS projects. The roof terraces serve as headwaters to GVS with water carried from the roof over the terrace in two graceful bow truss downspouts that feed into a linear galvanized culvert planter with a water distribution system. Water overflowing the planter or collected on the roof is directed through new scuppers in the parapet to channel rainwater to supply GVS. The downspout on the west is a vertical landscape by Buster Simpson, which has four stainless steel planter loops. The eastern downspout drained into

the gutter for two years before being hooked up to the *Beckoning Cistern*, also designed by Buster.

The Beckoning Cistern is magical. This huge blue metal cistern is set on a platform canted slightly toward the building with a green metal hand. The index finger reaches over the sidewalk to touch the downspout, which angles out from the building to deposit the roof runoff into the extended finger. When it rains, people come to see water flow from the thumb, into the planter, and then from pool to pool. Buster Simpson and Peggy Gaynor worked with architect Judy Tucker from Geise Architects on this project with special structural consultation by Swenson Say Faget.

OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD THE CISTERN STEPS

We had a developer nearby the P-Patch who was willing to channel their building's roof water across the street to feed the Cistern Steps. John Eskelin and Elisabeth Butler from the DON stepped up and negotiated an Opportunity Grant from the city in the amount of $200,000 so the Cistern Steps portion of GVS could proceed and integrate with the new development. This endorsement of our project gave us additional credibility at a time when we needed positive action to encourage our weary volunteers. We have now broken ground on the Cistern Steps, the second GVS demonstration project.

Breaking ground on the Cistern Steps

ENGINEERING DRAWINGS AND THE PERMITTING PROCESS

Our original design team, with the addition of SvR Design Company, was commissioned by the city to proceed with design refinement and permit documents. SvR were brought in as civil engineers because they grasped the significance of this project and have a strong landscape arrchitecture base. The design team project manager, Gregg Waddell, kept the team moving forward and negotiated through the technical hurdles.

I am used to complex and conflicting codes and regulations, but I had no idea how difficult it would be to build a non-standard design in the street right of way. Although most city officials were inspired by the idea and wanted to help, the official standards and procedures made it difficult. We often came to the point where I would tell the city reviewer to just say "no" if that is what their rules told them to do and I would take it up to the mayor or the council. I knew it was policy that had to change from the top and Mayor Paul Schell was wonderfully supportive. His motto was "neighborhoods that accept density will get amenities" and we were certainly getting density.

In February 1999, Mayor Schell and department heads authorized a technical team to work with our design team and steering committee to solve technical issues before the project could be permitted. We began with a half-day charette at the city, which over 30 staff members attended. By the end of the meeting we identified the issues and the responsible parties to solve them. The city authorized $60,000 to cover staff time and we began regular meetings. Almost a year passed with marginal progress, but thanks to Gregg Waddell a GVS Implementation Guide Book was published in March 2000, which has served as a guide as individual projects on Vine Street are submitted for permit.

KEEPING THE PROJECT ALIVE AND KEEPING OUR FOCUS

As GVS moved slowly along year by year, we stopped several times to focus energy on the core issues of the Belltown P-Patch. First, the campaign to buy the cottage property to the south and the missing piece in the main patch. Next, the effort to save all

three cottages and develop the Cottage Park, and last, the restoration of the cottages. There was some overlap of personnel on all of the projects, but GVS was the spine that connected this marvellous urban oasis to the community and to the waterfront. The P-Patch and Cottage Park were the core projects, so we made every effort to support and not distract from their work to insure proper funding and development. Myke Woodwell and Glenn MacGilvra carried most of the load on those two projects with varying degrees of support and encouragement from the rest of the community.

None of these projects would have happened at all without the DON matching grant program, which director Jim Diers nurtured under the administration of three Seattle Mayors. If we include purchase of the parcels of land and private contributions, over $3,000,000 has been invested into the P-Patch, Cottage Park, and GVS. The GVS portion alone represents an investment of over $800,000. Neither of these figures account for value of the thousands of hours of volunteer labor that have made these projects possible.

My front row seat as both observer and participant in this adventure over the past twelve years has been an extraordinary experience. I am amazed at the number of participants and accomplishments. The strength of the environmental movement and the delayed development in Belltown allowed us to catch a few opportunities before they were lost. The unique combination of artists, residents of all income levels, design professionals, developers, and community-oriented local businesses brought broad-based resources to the project.

GVS opened the way for flexibility in green street design. We discovered that there was no process for permitting a comprehensive green street, no way to pay for it other than on a parcel-by-parcel basis, and no system for handling maintenance. These hurdles have been met and the doors are now open for new projects. By introducing a radical design far outside the standard development guidelines for city streets, we cleared the way for other proposals from neighborhood and city departments.

Although the process of resolving technical and permitting issues seemed frustrating and arduous at the time, as I look back, I see extraordinary support for this project within the city. Many officials, especially from DON, took big risks in supporting us. The two major demonstration projects, Beckoning Cistern and Cistern Steps, would not have been possible without their support.

Potlach meeting in the P-Patch
Photo, Carolyn Geise

Projects like the Belltown P-Patch, Cottage Park, and GVS are a testament to the survival of the original Belltown spunk and sparkle. The stage is set for the full GVS vision to unfold. I hope this story gives a sense of the energy of these combined projects, an energy that could not be dampened, no matter what obstacles appeared.