

Belltown P-Patch and Cottage Park

BY GLENN MACGILVRA

Every community garden is the story of a piece of land and a group of people determined to garden it. In the case of the Belltown P-Patch, the land in question is a lot at the corner of Elliott Avenue and Vine Street near downtown Seattle, off to the edge of a neighborhood now known as Belltown. Like many streets and neighborhoods in Seattle it was named after an early pioneer and real estate speculator, in this case William Bell. It is an area of restaurants, condominiums, and small and medium-sized office buildings. The P-Patch is on a small 7200 square foot lot. It sits on a slope between a one-way avenue, Elliott, and an alley.

There is a lot of prehistory, geological upheaval, and Native American history to hurry over. At one time, for example, Elliott Avenue was the shoreline where Native Americans beached their canoes off Elliott Bay. Now the water is a couple of blocks away beyond where the bay was filled in.

I did not get involved with the Belltown P-Patch until June 21, 1995 when I wandered down for the first time to see this cool new community garden I had heard about. I got sucked into blowing up balloons for the opening day celebration. I have been hanging around the place ever since. By then, however, the garden had many years of history behind it.

The story begins more or less in 1910. Seattle was just a few years past the Alaskan Gold Rush and about to enter another economic boom during World War I. Trade at the Seattle docks and nearby was increasing steadily. Five shotgun shacks were built on the corner lot, each 30 by 15 feet with privies in their tiny backyards. A few years later, on the neighboring lot to the south, another six cottages were built, each 20 by 24 feet. These were “modern” cottages with indoor plumbing and “electricity,” which consisted of a light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

A real estate speculator and developer named William Hainsworth owned all eleven houses. He marketed them to blue-collar workers making good wages, employed in the shipyards, docks, stores, and nearby fishing boats. A 1920 census showed a range of people and professions living in the area

far left: Myke's Cottage
Photo, Myke Woodwell

including women, children, Croatians, Germans, and Scotts. The cottages remained the same for the next 40 years, as a cluster of small houses for the working class. At some point in the 1930s, the lots were divided into separate little tax lots and sold off to those living in the houses. The houses were passed down to friends and family members.



The cottages when they were new, circa 1916
Photo courtesy of the Hainsworth family

Meanwhile, Belltown changed around them. All the other little wooden houses, as well as most of the tenement houses, were torn down and replaced by apartment buildings, gas stations, commercial buildings, and parking lots. Sometime in the 1960s, all five of the shotgun shacks were torn down. Joe Diamond, owner of Diamond Parking Co., one of the nation's oldest parking lot companies, acquired four of the five lots. Skip Kotkins, owner and manager of Skyway Luggage Company, which had offices nearby, purchased the six-cottage lot next door and tore down three.

That situation, three little houses on one lot next to an empty lot on the corner, stayed the same for the next 25-30 years. During this time Joe Diamond refused to sell to Skip. The houses were rented out by Skyway to various people and the empty lot next door was left to grass, brush, trash, and casual camping.

The story of the people behind the P-Patch can be traced to 1981. At that time, Katherine Shedd moved into one of the cottages. She helped run a vegetable stand at the Pike Place Market about five blocks away. Though not an artist herself, she had friends who were; Buster Simpson and Carl Smool lived across

Vine Street in an old yellow wooden tenement building, one of the few left downtown. Carl, Katherine, and Buster began gardening the backyard of the three cottages, putting in vegetables, paths, and decoration.

Around 1985 or 1986, Katherine moved to Vashon Island and traded her lease to Myke Woodwell for his used mountain bike. The rent at the time was \$95 a month.

Myke is a journeyman carpenter, currently an engineer for a truck company. He is a hippie, an inventor (a stair climbing wheelchair), an historian, a photographer, a romantic, mildly pig-headed, but always cheerful. He set about improving his cottage, adding a covered porch, a shed, removing interior walls, and continuing to garden in his backyard. He also acquired a VW Beetle that had rolled over a few times when part of Elliott Avenue caved in during a utilities accident. He cut off the top, put on roll bars, and raced his "Baja Bug" around and around the empty lot next door. As he noted later, it kept the transients out. After every Christmas, he and his friends would take their Christmas



trees out to the lot and set them on fire. It was a corner of downtown Seattle strangely neglected by the authorities.

In 1988, Wilbur "Wilds" Hathaway, another interesting guy who lived in the neighborhood, had the idea of starting a community garden in Belltown. His notion was to put it on an empty

Glenn MacGilvra standing in front of the boarded up cottages
Photo, Myke Woodwell

lot that slopes down from Elliott Avenue to the waterfront, where remnants of an old apple orchard could still be found. It is now the site of a Port of Seattle office building. Wilbur put an ad in the local newspaper, *The Denny Dispatch*. Wilbur, Myke, Wendy Oberlin, Shirley Schire, and Nancy Allen, the latter a coordinator of the City's P-Patch Program, gathered in a nearby costume shop run by Wendy. After kicking around Wilbur's idea for a while, Myke suggested they cross the street and take a look at the vacant lot next to his house. The five gathered there and found empty mattresses, forty-ouncers, cardboard, and blackberries. They looked upon the land and thought it good.

The five started a round of community gatherings, meetings, and wrote letters to local officials. The preeminent civic institution in the Regrade (its name at the time, Belltown being a later, retro notion) was the Crime Prevention Council run by Jan Drago (now a city council member). The Crime Prevention Council approved of the plan for a P-Patch. Politicians like Norm Rice (former mayor), Ron Sims (now county executive), and Larry Phillips (county council member) also wrote letters of support. An informal group, the Friends of the Belltown P-Patch, was formed.

The problem was not getting support. The problem was money. The empty corner lot was divided between Joe Diamond and Skyway Luggage Co., and neither was known to give away land. The Seattle Parks Department had no money to buy land. Neither did the city's P-Patch program, which relied on donations of land and unused city-owned properties for its community gardens.

Luckily, in 1989, King County passed an Open Space Bond, gathering funds for the purchase of open space in a fast growing region. The competition was stiff. In addition to properties planned for purchase in the bond, there was enough money to acquire another twelve parks countywide, based on citizen nominations. Over 133 properties were nominated.

The Friends of the Belltown P-Patch, a merry band of citizen activists, lobbied the Citizen's Parks Oversight Committee by baking them cookies, handing out fresh vegetables, and chalking flowers on the sidewalk in front of the meeting room. Wendy Oberlin, the costume designer, made trees, squash, gnomes, and

hags who haunted the nomination meetings. The Friends of the Belltown P-Patch started making all the newspapers and soon became notorious.

Volunteers crowded the meetings to speak and argue. It was acknowledged that the amount of money needed to purchase the land was awfully big considering the small size of the lot. One member of the committee noted that for the same price, the county could get ten acres of suburban woods. On the other hand, there was not a lot of open space in Belltown; downtown Seattle was slated for higher density. Green space would make the area attractive, and the neighborhood really wanted it.

The property, or at least Joe Diamond's four-fifths, was purchased in 1993 at a cost of around \$450,000. A nearby developer gave the Friends \$30,000 in exchange for being allowed to limit access to an alley. The city provided \$45,000 in matching funds from the Department of Neighborhoods. The land was cleared, a concrete bulkhead built against Elliott Avenue, and hundreds of cubic feet of new topsoil brought in. There was wrangling over design and fierce arguments regarding paths, the gist of which I could never quite follow when hearing of them later. After two years and a lot of very hard work, much of it managed by Myke—work harder than lobbying, harder than chalking sidewalks, harder than writing letters or histories—the garden was built.

This takes us to 1995. Lovely opening day, balloons and costumes galore, music by the Black Cat Orchestra, food from somewhere, speeches by dignitaries, tours provided by local transvestites, happiness all around. Presiding was another key



Mosaic mural on concrete bulkhead
Photo, Myke Woodwell

figure, Eulah Sheffield. She had, at some point, married Myke and moved into his cottage. She was a painter and web designer who could calm dissension, invite participation, facilitate consensus, and still maintain a sense of humor. She had led the Friends for a number of years. For opening day, she wore a blue fairy costume provided by Wendy and led a costumed band around Belltown, from restaurant to restaurant, inviting people to come see the garden.

So then what? What do you do with success? For the next years, the P-Patch peacefully flourished. Wilbur had a plot with teepees and crystals. Others had garden statuary. On the concrete bulkhead a talented artist put in several large mosaic murals of fish, bugs, bees, and sunflowers covering most of the surface. Myke continued to make improvements here and there, and hosted parties in the backyard of his cottage. I came by on occasion and, in collaboration with local architect Carolyn Geise, incited interest in persuading the city to make Vine Street into a “green street,” ripping out the pavement and installing an orchard. That idea continues, in various designs, as Growing Vine Street.

Fence, gate, and
solar-powered fountain
Photo, Myke Woodwell

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An observer, however, would note a peculiarity, and a perceptive observer, a growing peril. The peculiar thing was, as noted, the P-Patch covered four-fifths of the lot. It was not a contiguous four-fifths. There was a strip owned near the alley, and also three strips from Elliott Avenue heading uphill. In between was 20 feet by 60 feet covered by grass and owned by Skip Kotkins. How that one lot got into Skip’s hands and the rest into Joe Diamond’s is lost to history. One popular account holds the seller had a sense of humor. Skip did not sell in 1993. The consequence was a divided garden, leaving the 20-foot strip of P-Patch next to the alley as an orphan. Transients and drinkers enjoyed hanging out in the grassy strip between, and technically, the gardeners had no right to oust them.

One might assume that eventually Skip would sell. What could he do with a single 20-foot strip? Unfortunately, there was the less obvious peril: Seattle’s economic boom.

Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, lived a few blocks away. Bill, the Dark Lord of Redmond, made money for himself and for many, many others at Microsoft. All around Belltown, tall condominiums sprang up to house rich people and the moderately prosperous people who worked for them. To the south of the Belltown P-Patch were the lots owned by Skyway Luggage Co., which held a small old storage building, a gravel parking lot, and the three remaining cottages. Skyway Luggage Company was not a real estate developer and purchased the property years before for expansion of its own business. They moved the factories south and overseas instead, and it made sense to sell the property while the good times were rolling. The zoning on the lots allowed a residential building 120 feet high, quite high enough to shade the Belltown P-Patch at nearly all times of the day.

The first move came from Skyway. They offered to sell, or even give away the missing strip if, in return, the Friends of the Belltown P-Patch agreed not to object to building plans on the remaining part of the block. The proposal became known as the “shadow easement.” Although the offer gained support from some city council members, the Friends quickly rejected it.

A year or two later, it became clear that Skyway Luggage decided to sell anyway. They hired a property sale negotiator, put

their old factory site up for sale, and gave Myke and Jerry the Drummer (a quiet sort who lived without a stir in another one of the cottages) their notice. The last party Myke held in his cottage was in December 1997.

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Sleeping in the P-Patch
Photo, Myke Woodwell

The cottages were boarded up. Gardeners kept gardening the backyard for a while, but it soon mostly went to seed. Transients slept on the porch, broke into the cottages and quickly trashed them. The sleepers and the drunks started to be seriously oppressive to the gardeners next door.

The Friends rallied to stop the potential threat of a tall building. Various proposals were kicked around and the city lobbied heavily to change regulations to lower the height limits, or put in development restrictions so that any new building would not shade the garden. After a large meeting of activists and city officials, the city went away and came back with a simpler idea: buy the cottage lot and make it a park. The price would be more than \$900,000.

That the city would be willing to do something like this is a testament to the imagination and audacity of Seattle city officials (particular appreciation to Council Member Jan Drago, the office of Mayor Paul Schell and Parks Official Don Harris), the pressure

of the community, and the fact that the good times were rolling for the city too.

The purchase was completed by 2000. The gardeners quickly incorporated the “missing strip” into the garden. The fate of the cottage property was less clear. The city and parks officials who engineered the purchase had in mind a piece of open space, emphasis on the word “open.” Leaving the three cottages on the property was a maintenance problem and inconsistent with park principles. Although the city agreed to let a community process come up with a design for the space, the city officials who stuck their necks out to get the money for us and negotiated the purchase had all assumed that the cottages would be torn down. Among other things, part of the purchase price had come from general revenue (amazing in itself). They hoped to repay the general fund with money from an annually available open space fund. That fund would not be available if there were still structures on the property.

What followed was one of those long Seattle processes. Over the course of the next 18 months, the community would consistently deadlock over the question of whether to keep the cottages, how many, and how it could be done. A strong minority agreed with the city that those semi-historic old little houses should be bulldozed and a sweet little park built in its place. A majority, including Myke and myself, thought that a park without people living in it would simply attract transients and trash. This new park, we thought, would become like the empty lot that the P-Patch had been once. Expanding the P-Patch to include the cottage lot was off the table based on the feeling in the parks department and city council that P-Patches were not really public use. Myke, others, and I are fond of old buildings, and thought it a good idea, if possible, to keep the last little wooden houses left in downtown Seattle.

For a year or so, neither side was able to make their views stick. Some of the city officials felt betrayed; they had bought this property for a bunch of ingrates who would not accept that it was not possible to keep the houses. On the other hand, and I am lucky to live in a city like this, those officials were not of a mind to metaphorically steamroll the opposition, terminate the plan-

ning, and literally bulldoze the houses. They had a certain respect for community feeling. And, it was never quite clear, legally, that the city had to repay the general fund or was required to tear the cottages down.

There was one fairly tense meeting in the basement of city hall where an official from the mayor's office openly accused me of lying to the community that the cottages could be saved, and then walked out. But then things calmed down. There was one more community meeting to see what people really thought. Myke and I were careful to pack the meeting with supporters.



The cottages
before renovation
Photo, Myke Woodwell

There was a nice speech from the head of Historic Seattle, a local preservationist nonprofit. The city finally agreed to keep the three cottages in place, allow some to be used as residences, and continue to work towards figuring out what to do with the others. Shortly afterwards, for purposes of insurance, Myke and I persuaded the city Landmarks Committee to give the cottages landmark status making it much more difficult to tear them down.

After this, there was still more struggle to raise the money needed to renovate the cottages, sadly trashed and abused in the three years they were unoccupied, to make them habitable, manage the construction, and work out the landscape design for the remaining part of the property. One of the more important tasks was to figure out exactly who was going to be in the cottages. We were lucky again, as a Seattle institution, the Richard Hugo House—a literary center named after a local poet—was

willing to help. They agreed to make two of the cottages into writer-in-residence spaces.

The fundraising, renovations, and landscaping were stressful and frustrating, as those things tend to be. Myke managed the rehabilitation quite well, working with the parks department and keeping pressure on contractors hired with approximately \$350,000 raised from public and private sources, mostly Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods. We are still, actually, in the process, as we have not quite finished off the interior of one cottage, where Myke used to live. A gardener, Rebecca, is



above: The cottages
after renovation
Photo, Myke Woodwell

left: Cottage Park crew

Belltown Inside-out
Community Festival,
August 1997
Photo, Carolyn Geise



working with a friend to make the space serve as café and meeting place for the community. In the meantime, the planting and planning continue. On spring days, like today, the place looks very sweet. We hope for the best. The effort to actually implement the plan has been slow but reasonably steady.

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The people and the neighborhood continue to change. Perhaps it is best summed up by an artist who painted a trashcan with this message: “Move to Belltown. See the Artists. Buy a condo. Kick the artists out.” But before I can get too sentimental, I have to remember that if there had not been the change, neither the Belltown P-Patch nor the Cottage Park would have been purchased or built, at least looking as good, or as polished as they do now.

In 1989, the Citizens Oversight Committee, advising regarding the Parks Bond, might not have spent their limited funds in Belltown, except on the assumption the neighborhood would become more densely populated. In 1999, the city made the even tougher decision to buy the cottage lot for the same reason. If a condo had not been blocking an alleyway nearby, the P-Patch would not have received \$30,000 to help build the gardens in 1993. Money from another developer, Intracorp, as well as contributions from our longtime neighbor, the Skyway

Luggage Co., helped rehabilitate the cottages. Even though condo owners can be a crabby, selfish, shortsighted lot (I am one, as it happens), for the most part, they wanted this community garden and park. There were more and more of them to make this point.

If the Belltown P-Patch and Cottage Park are a consequence of gentrification, at the very least the gentry do not have to be stuffy. In years past, talented people scraping by in low rent buildings made interesting stuff for public display, ran around in costumes, had solstice celebrations, drove cut-down VWs on empty lots and torched trees on New Year’s Day. I only hope that interesting stuff continues to happen here.

Watering the garden
Photo, Myke Woodwell

