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## Places

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# Residual Space Re-evaluated

As urban dwellers in Seattle struggle to increase the amount of open space within their neighborhoods, many are recognizing the existence and value of residual space and the tremendous potential it has for transforming local communities.

From median strips planted with corn to a bridge embankment from which a troll sculpture emerges, residual spaces are being reincorporated creatively into the fabric of Seattle neighborhoods. They are providing space for recreational activities, spiritual regeneration and growing food; many declare or reinforce community identity; some even provide niches for urban wildlife. Most of the residual space projects in Seattle have been driven and managed by local communities, and the process of creating these projects can evolve meaning as much as the outcomes.

Several factors are contributing to Seattle's rediscovery of residual space. The city's voters recently rejected a tax increase to fund a large-scale public open space project, Seattle Com-

mons, with sentiment leaning toward smaller-scale, more manageable neighborhood-based projects. There is a much-celebrated precedent of public art projects that address community concerns and character using commonly neglected urban spaces, such as traffic islands, road right of ways and parking lots. And the voices of neighborhood councils are growing stronger as Seattle wraps up a citywide neighborhood planning process in compliance with its comprehensive plan.

In Seattle, the rediscovery of residual spaces is helping to address a number of problems. One is the fragmentation of neighborhoods through insensitive siting of arterials, bridges, freeway ramps and strip development. Another concern is that as infill housing projects are built, the amount of informal open space available to communities is decreasing. Meanwhile, budgets for public land acquisition are shrinking, and voters have proven less willing to fund parkland projects.<sup>1</sup>

What kinds of space do communities need? How can the planning and design process foster

exchange and a sense of community identity? I will offer some thoughts about those questions and describe five residual space projects.

Communities can use more of what David Engwicht calls “exchange space.” In *Reclaiming Our Cities and Towns*, he argues that spontaneous exchange space, such as local grocery stores and walkable streets, is an essential component of healthy urban communities because it can help establish and reinforce community structure.<sup>2</sup>

Also, neighborhoods need a better network of pedestrian connections, especially to increase safe movement and the social relations that pedestrian activity promotes.

Finally, communities (and individuals) benefit from projects they can initiate and implement themselves. This typically enables communities to address what they perceive their real needs to be, reduces the timeframe for implementation, cultivates local civic life, leadership and institutions, and provides tangible results — outcomes that may not be achievable as easily through political advocacy.

Solutions for these problems are often found in residual spaces, which can provide reasonable and immediate opportunities for linkages and re-adaptive open space uses. Residual spaces are often publicly owned and of low value, as they have little prospect for commercial or residential development. Typically considered eyesores or waste zones, they invite creative solutions.

Indeed, many communities are looking for opportunities that supplement traditional large-scale public works improvements, such as public parks, greenbelts, recreation facilities and the like. As Terry Keller notes on his experience in New York City, “The lifestyle of the average New Yorker is not suited to having parks as works of art. Neighborhoods do not need parks as ornaments, something to look at but not really use. Our city is one of different cultures with different perceptions and needs, so the open space appro-

priate for the people living in each community and neighborhood must be taken into account.”<sup>3</sup>

What is residual space? The dictionary provides one answer: “residual” means “a remainder” or “remaining after a part is taken.” In *Finding Lost Space*, Roger Trancik writes:

*Generally speaking, lost spaces are the undesirable urban areas that are in need of redesign—anti spaces, making no positive contribution to the surrounding or users. They are ill-defined, without measurable boundaries, and fail to connect elements in a coherent way.*<sup>4</sup>

Looking specifically at the neighborhood context, I find it useful to think about three types of residual space, what I call “non-spaces,” “leftover spaces” and “dual-use spaces.”

Non-spaces are often near movement corridors and include median strips and rights-of-way along highways and roads. Because people frequently view these spaces from moving vehicles, the landscape becomes a backdrop, seen from a moving perspective.

Leftover spaces are not programmed and not connected to surrounding spaces. Created by intrusions into a previous open space, they include odd geometric spaces adjacent to intersections, setback frontages, underpasses, easements and traffic islands.

Dual-use spaces are areas that have a single use at certain times but are otherwise underused, thus becoming residual spaces for certain periods—for example, parking lots that are largely vacant after business hours.

In the neighborhoods we have studied, approximately five percent of the public and private unbuilt land can be considered residual space. The various spaces differ in scale, function and form, but they share a detached quality, providing little opportunity for meaningful engagement by the community.

# Re-adapted

## **Fremont Troll: Eyesore to Icon**

Fremont, an old industrial neighborhood north of Lake Union, has been revived by an active arts community. Characterized by single-family houses, small apartment buildings and commercial streets, it is bisected and bridged by Aurora Avenue, a major arterial that leads across the lake towards downtown.

The steep embankment beneath the Aurora Bridge was a typical “leftover” space. It was used for shelter by transient people, many of whom were drug abusers, and the area had become a safety concern. In 1990, a group of University of Washington students won a public competition and built a large figurative sculpture called “The Fremont Troll” on the embankment. (Many community members pitched in during the construction.) The troll, funded by the Fremont Arts Association, was conceived as an iconic figure, reflective of Scandinavian mythology, a tribute to those who settled the area. The figure is enormous—it grasps a real Volkswagen in its hand—and it animates the space under the bridge.<sup>5</sup>

Literally and symbolically, the troll reclaims for the neighborhood the underside of the bridge and highway that bisect it. The sculpture does so with a sense of humor and creativity, qualities that are now identified with the Fremont community.

The figure was not designed for a particular use group, and people of all ages respond to it. The troll has become a celebrated landmark, its image replicated in a local grocery store and on T-shirts sold in the neighborhood. It is also a significant play structure, in a community that has few playgrounds. At any time of day, one can find residents and visitors congregating there and having their pictures taken.

## **Median Gardens: A Survey**

Residential medians (planting strips between sidewalks and streets) are residual space at the smallest scale. As “non-spaces,” they may not be

read in the landscape at all, or might be seen as sites for illegal parking. But residents are using them as places for social exchange and for expressing both individual and community identity.

Median strips, commonly planted with turf grass and street trees, are now being used for gardens with both ornamental and edible plants. The gardens are often places for expressiveness through ornamentation and art, and sometimes have raised beds so that people in wheelchairs can tend or enjoy them.

In Seattle, property owners are legally responsible for improving and maintaining the medians in front of their properties. In theory, all improvements must be permitted by the city, but in actuality, most temporary uses are overlooked unless a complaint is registered or the improvement obstructs a vehicular sight line.

The use of medians, particularly for gardening varies by neighborhood and, within any one neighborhood, by streets. On some blocks, eighty percent of the median strips are intensely planted; in others it can be as low as ten percent. Apparently, once a few median conversions occur, strip gardens soon spread along the rest of the block.

In 1996, my students and I conducted a survey of median gardeners in the Wallingford and Capitol Hill neighborhoods. Both are inner-city districts that are undergoing gentrification and have a mix of single- and multifamily dwellings. The survey was designed to explore the motivations for and rewards of gardening in the median. It consisted of four biographical, three multiple choice and six open-ended questions. We placed the survey in the mailboxes of 120 houses with median gardens in cultivation and received ninety percent back.

When asked: “Why have you chosen to plant the median?” sixty percent of the respondents said the lack of planting space elsewhere on the property and fifty percent replied that it provided a space for the garden to be seen by the public.





Median garden,  
Wallingford neighborhood

When asked, “What do you most enjoy about your median space?” eighty percent responded that others can see and enjoy the garden, and sixty percent said it increased interaction with neighbors and passersby.

All respondents indicated that they had met more neighbors since they started their median gardens, and all had received positive reactions from neighbors and passersby. The increased sociability may result from frequent, spontaneous interactions or from the exchange of work and resources. On many blocks, neighbors team up to weed, remove sod and water, or arrange for the bulk delivery of materials.

#### **Fremont Open Market:**

##### **Parking Lot as Town Commons**

On Sunday afternoons, a centrally located parking lot in Fremont becomes a twentieth-century commons. This is a “dual-use” space: During the week, it provides parking for businesses; on weekends it is used for a public, open-air market with crafts-people and food-sellers.

The market was conceived by a self-proclaimed business association headed by John Hagelman, a local community advocate and writer (and formerly an advertising executive)

who wanted to find space where his wife could sell her crafts. Remembering open-air street markets he had seen in England, he eyed a parking lot behind the buildings along Fremont Avenue, a main neighborhood commercial street, and opened the market in September, 1990.

The Fremont market is an example of a creative partnership between community interests and the private sector. The inclusiveness of the process was essential. Hagelman first approached the owner, who supported the idea. Then his group met with area business owners, heard their concerns and included them in the process.

The market is now a weekly social event, attracting people from Fremont and beyond. It continues to provide an outlet for people who operate cottage industries, often home-based, that can afford neither gallery rents nor the staff necessary to run a retail space. It also functions as a testing ground for young entrepreneurs.

The space supports large gatherings, serving as the main location for the annual Fremont Fair and the endpoint of the Fremont Parade, the community’s major civic celebration. On Saturday evenings in the summer, a blank wall serves as a screen for the Fremont Open Air Movies (also started by Hagelman). Like a drive-in-theater,

# Re-inhabited

without the anti-social nature of cars, the parking lot serves as a mass seating area.

As the market grew successful, Seattle's Engineering Department and Board of Health took notice and raised issues of compliance. Hagelmann's group worked with the agencies to revise outdated codes and regulations that prohibited public markets, and the city subsequently placed signs directing the public to the market.

## **Phinney Ridge: Vacated Street to Community Gardens**

Unused "non-space" street rights of way offer many opportunities for active and passive uses. Some can be unprogrammed play areas. Others lack stewardship and revert to a succession of opportunistic species, becoming urban wildlands and providing cover for animals. Still others become encampments for the homeless or places for antisocial activities. Some are co-opted by abutting property owners, who turn them into illegal extensions of their private property, blocking public access and views.<sup>6</sup>

Many community groups are spearheading processes to vacate unused street rights of way and convert them into community parks and gardens. The city considers such conversions in three situations. The first involves unpaved rights of way, strips of land set aside for future use. Having

never served as streets, they are easiest to convert. The second involves former streets that have already been vacated. The third involves a "Green Street" designation, in which existing streets are redesigned to give pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users preference over passenger vehicles.

It is not always easy to convert unused rights-of-way to community use, as public agencies are reluctant to relinquish control of streets, built or not. But when Phinney Ridge residents tired of people using a local unused right-of-way for driving off-road vehicles, they took action. The engineering department rejected their request to block vehicular access to the street with permanent barriers, so residents joined the city's "Pea Patch" program to develop a community garden, considered a temporary use within the street.

The upper portion of the site was planted with fruit trees and serves as a passive pocket park. Raised planting beds were built into the existing grades, providing garden plots for residents without private yards. Many residents come to watch and chat, while others come to tend their plots.

The garden has become a civic center for the neighborhood; community cookouts, celebrations (such as birthday parties) and gardening demonstrations are held there. Fall cleanup and spring start-up events also serve as annual social events for the community.

## **Georgetown: A University Design Studio**

My landscape architecture studio at the University of Washington, "Small Community Design," worked a few years ago with Georgetown, a low-income neighborhood in south Seattle. The community is fragmented by intense rail and truck traffic, and the open space is either privately owned or extremely contaminated.

Students met with representatives of three main interest groups: heavy industry and trucking, design businesses and residents. The residents' major concerns were negative pedestrian



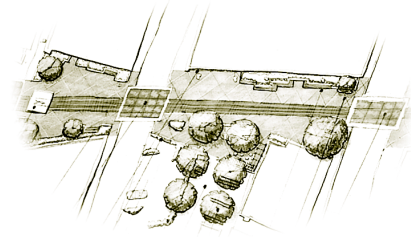
Street right-of-way converted to community gardens, Phinney Ridge neighborhood





A parking lot in the Fremont neighborhood also serves as a town commons, providing space for an outdoor cinema (top) and open-air market (bottom).

# Re-imagined



experience, lack of recreational opportunities and loss of neighborhood identity. They believed they had suffered from the siting of a disproportionate amount of anti-residential uses, including three freeway access ramps and increased industrial activity, and from the closure of civic institutions like a school, library and town hall.

The residents felt the city was unresponsive and were searching for vehicles for self-empowerment and strategies to improve and reconnect the physical fabric. They needed a master plan with ideas and processes for making low-cost improvements, re-establishing connections, increasing accessible open space and improving pedestrian routes. Of key value to them was a resource list citing suppliers, potential lenders, city departments and labor pools to implement the ideas.

Trucking and industry representatives were concerned that freeway access might be rerouted to accommodate pedestrian friendly streets, resulting in longer trip times. The design trade constituents were worried about maintaining direct trucking and customer access to the center. Moreover, the conversion of industrial space into housing threatened to displace the shippers, packagers and exhibit fabricators they depended on.

The studio served many purposes; the most important, and undoubtedly the most difficult, was to create an atmosphere for discussion among these groups. We held several workshops in which ideas were presented in a discussion format and

participants from these groups could enter into a dialogue. We conducted one-on-one interviews to ascertain the important issues for each group. Finally, during the design presentations, the groups again had an opportunity to join the dialogue. Through the process, a sense of respect and understanding emerged; former strangers came to know each other as neighbors. Unfortunately, this dialogue was not formalized.

Residual space provided many design opportunities. The studio helped prepare a mural master plan that inventoried large blank walls at important entry points into the community and along major roadways. The mural content was planned to correspond to the evolution of the specific sites.

The studio also studied opportunities for making safe, pedestrian-oriented linkages within the area, particularly between the residential community and the neighborhood core and the design center. One significant connection employed a rail spur that was used once a day; the right of way was redesigned to accommodate pedestrians, pocket parks and commercial activity. Residual space was also used to improve access to the river and to create gateways into the community.

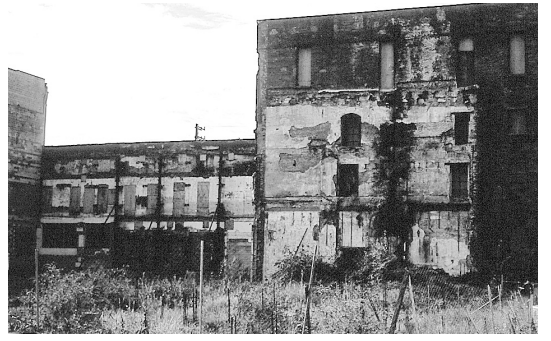
The studio also suggested how residual space could be used for public recreational activities. Freeway ramps and underpasses were redesigned to accommodate basketball, rollerblading and street hockey. Artworks and lighting were added to increase people's sense of safety in and enjoyment of the spaces.

In university-based design studios, residual space projects require different approaches and produce different results than typical projects do. Communities need help with processes, implementation plans and guidelines, as well as information on funding, resources, regulations and permits. Students are challenged to work as intently on these issues as on producing designs.

This can result in a reconsideration of the product that is provided to the community.







This studio provided the Georgetown not only with a master plan and site designs but also with lists of funding sources and politicians who would be sympathetic to its efforts. The studio provided examples of similar projects so the community had examples of how others had brought their ideas to fruition.

### Epilogue

While this article was being completed, the parking lot owner has decided to develop the property. Options for relocating the market and movies are being evaluated. Fremont's success (partly due to the market, movies and art) has brought many people to the area, increasing the development opportunities and resulting in the loss of the attributes that initially been the focus of the community.

### Notes

1. *Seattle Times*, 20 September 1995
2. David Engwicht, *Reclaiming Our Cities and Towns* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993)
3. Terry Keller, *Green Cities, Ecologically Sound Approaches to Urban Space (The Green of the Big Apple)* (New York: Black Rose Books, 1990)
4. On the definition of residual, see *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1967). On "finding lost space," see Roger Trancik, *Finding Lost Space* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986).
5. Students: Will Martin, Donna Walter and Ross Whitehead. Instructor: Steve Badanes. The selection committee included several community representatives.
6. *Seattle Times*, 27 December 1994

Current conditions and design proposals for open spaces in the Georgetown neighborhood

