

Spontaneous Structures:
The Life of Vacant Spaces

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Abstract

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Spontaneous Structures: The Life of Vacant Spaces is about the vacant public land of Seattle. The City of Seattle defines “vacant land” as land that is not used for its intended purpose. This definition begs the question, what is the intended purpose of these sites? Is it possible they are not being used properly? What would be a better use? This thesis proposes that a better use for vacant public land is to sell the parcels to non-profit organizations. With a parcel in hand, various NPOs can develop their lots in order to fulfill their social goals. This thesis focuses on low-income housing, and proposes a design for high-density housing on a narrow lots.

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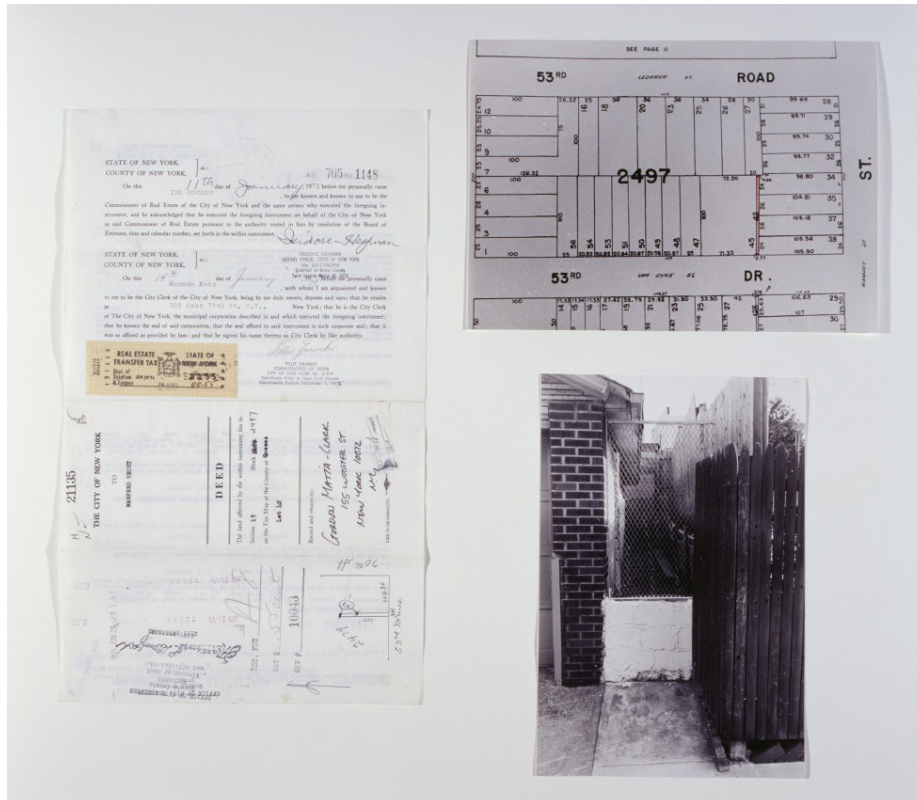


Figure 1 - "Fake Estates," Gordon Matta-Clark, <http://socks-studio.com/2014/10/22/gordon-matta-clarks-reality-properties-fake-estates-1973/>

Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout the urban environment spaces that escape architectural definition. These are the void spaces of the city, the vacant lots that are often forgotten and hidden from daily life. Many of these vacant lots are fenced off parcels and derelict landscapes, but others are so tiny and awkwardly shaped that are for all intents and purposes unbuildable. In the 1970s, these curious spaces drew the attention of the artist Gordon Matta-Clark. (Figure 1) He purchased 15 small, sliver-like properties in New York and then documented them by measuring and taking photographs of the sites and collecting deeds to the land.¹ His project, Fake Estates of 1974, called attention to the existence of these spaces with no obvious utility even in a dense urban environment.

According to the City of Seattle's code definition, a vacant lot is not being used for its intended purpose, but that does not mean that the lot is not being used at all.² Rahmann and Jonas observe in their essay "Void Potential" that vacant lots do get used by the neighboring locals as areas for socializing and playing games.³ Rahmann and Jonas argue that vacant lots are necessary for community development.⁴ While a public park is set up for more prescriptive functions, a vacant lot is open for interpretation by those who care to occupy it.⁵ Vacant lots do not have to be totally devoid of life, they can serve a purpose as a cultural space in the city.



Figure 2 - Vacant lot at the corner of Denny Way and Aurora Ave

Although there are many vacant properties throughout the City of Seattle, many of them are privately owned and fenced off to outsiders. However, publicly owned vacant lots do not always bar the public from access. The City of Seattle has an official sub-category for vacant land within the public land that it owns. This thesis makes use of the city's GIS data to map the extent of these vacant public lands scattered throughout the city. However, the maps show more than just location, they reveal how these sites are affected by conditions of topography and infrastructure. By closely documenting their place and character, these overlooked properties will be seen as having potential for reuse.

The City of Seattle, however, has deemed that these lands do not have value in that they are also a liability that outweighs their usefulness.⁶ These properties have existed as a category of public land under city jurisdiction for almost 150 years, their maintenance costs putting an added strain on funds.⁷ Currently, the City of Seattle is struggling to come up with a plan of what to do with their vacant lots. (Figure 2) Matthew Richter, Cultural Space Liaison at the Office of Arts & Culture, has indicated that one strategy is to allow cultural non-profit organizations to take ownership of the sites and use them for related public uses.⁸ The idea is that, an institution such as a museum, might make use of a vacant lot for art displays and other community activities.

This thesis proposes the design of several architectural installations located on vacant public lands with a focus on low-income housing. Using the vacant land maps, a series of sites were selected that were determined to be of potential use for the local community. Through an analysis of these sites, the qualities of the vacant lots were identified, which are highlighted and enhanced through the architectural design. The design proposal follows the City's plan for non-profit organizations to assume management of the land. Through the process of design and implementation, this thesis brings derelict lands out of the shadows and finds an appropriate use for vacant public land.

Chapter 2: The Curiosity of Vacant Lots

Walking through most areas of Seattle reveals a city under construction, marked by multiple tower cranes reaching to the sky. For the third consecutive year the US Census ranked Seattle among the top large cities for population growth in 2016.⁹ As a result, much attention has been given to the high rate of development fueled by the growth of commerce and the high-tech industry. However, the city still contains many sites that, due to their size and location, will not and cannot be developed. Considered to be “vacant”, these overlooked properties nevertheless serve a function in the fabric of the city.(Figure 3) The Seattle Municipal Code states that a “vacated building’ means a building that is unoccupied and is not used as a place of residence or business.”¹⁰ This definition excludes infrastructure for transportation or industrial uses because it is developed land that serves its purpose. A vacant lot therefore can be defined as a single parcel of land that does not serve an active function as a residence, business, or infrastructure. This definition of vacancy raises issues of ownership and property. Who owns this land? And why has it not been developed? What uses are permitted and by whom? Do unsanctioned uses indicate a condition of vacancy?

On Property

Understanding the concept of property is essential to understanding the nature of vacant lots. The idea of a piece of land being owned by a person or entity is a social and political construct that gives designated authorities the rights to impose boundaries. According to Jeremy Bentham, with property in hand a person can expect to reap the benefits of their possession.¹¹ The main advantage of owning



Figure 3 - Homeless encampment along S Spokane Street

property is that the owners have the right to write the rules that govern their property and to safely make use of it in a particular way.¹² The rules that a landowner may write for their property fall into four broad categories: construction and extraction of resources, and permitting and excluding guests.¹³ In his essay “The Institution of Property,” David Schmidtz argues that the first three of these categories encompasses the benefits that the landowner can expect. However, the right to exclusion of guests is the true test for the owner of a property, as it protects their resource from destruction or depletion.¹⁴

Not only does the rule of exclusion protect the property, but it also protects the landowner. The owner of a property who can successfully enforce the rules and exercise their right to exclusion will have staked their claim on the land.¹⁵ A landowner who cannot protect their property forfeits their rights to control their estate. Under the Washington State Law of Adverse Possession, a person may legally claim title to a piece of land belonging to another person if they successfully pay taxes on the land for seven years.¹⁶ If the legal owner does not actively attempt stop the “adverse possessor” during these seven years, they will have lost their rights to their piece of land.¹⁷ Negligence is forfeiture, while enforcement retains the rights to the benefits. The true owner of a piece of land is the one who participates in the active management of their property.

Property is typically considered to be privately or publicly owned. It is commonly understood that the social laws outlined above apply to private ownership, but what about public land? Just how “public” is public land, and what are the rights of any one person who occupies public land? While the concept of private land is clear, the definition of publicly owned land is less understandable. While everyone has access to public land that does not mean everyone has the freedom to do as they wish. Philosophy professor David Schmidtz observes that all “common ground” is a resource that is available to the public.¹⁸ Under normal circumstances, people are free to visit the “common ground” and utilize the resource as they see fit. However, he notes that there are always cases when someone takes too much, even though it was understood by the rest of the community to only use what is necessary.¹⁹ To protect the resource from depletion or destruction, one person from the community has to step up to claim ownership of the land. As the owner of this former public land, this new proprietor will have the responsibility of permitting the public to use the resource, and will have the right to expel those who deplete the resource.²⁰

By this logic, land that is thought to be public may be appropriated by those who have the means and wish to use the resource. This process can be seen in the following example where marginalized

groups appropriate the public space of the city. In the book titled *Sidewalk*, sociologist Mitchell Duneier conducts a study of how homeless men in New York make their living on the streets of Greenwich Village. Guided by the writings of Jane Jacobs, Duneier studies the informal economy of sidewalk life by conducting interviews with residents and business owners.²¹ He observes how the magazine and book vendors set up shop every morning after having reserved a spot the night before with a sidewalk placeholder. (Figure 4) Duneier sits down to interview Leo and B.A., two such “sidewalk placeholders” who find their home on the streets:

Duneier asks Leo and B.A. about reserving the sidewalk overnight for the magazine vendors “How do you establish your ownership right to a piece of sidewalk that belongs to the City of New York?”

“A lot of people fear me” Leo explains.

B.A. continues “They gonna move! I’m stepping up to my business! If they don’t move, I’m gonna move it.”

Duneier goes on to ask, “What is the minimum you will accept for (reserving a spot?)”

“I’d say fifty dollars.”

“And you can get this money for selling space that belongs to the public?”

“Yeah. You right. You right.”²²



Figure 4 - Customers at a magazine stand, Duneier, *Sidewalk*, pg 335.

This practice of reserving the sidewalk illustrates how any occupant of public land can claim a right to it, even if only for a short period of time. When a person goes out of their way to maintain a piece of land, they become the rightful owner. The base state of the sidewalk is that all citizens are free to occupy it, therefore Leo and B.A. are allowed to be there too. By being present on the sidewalk at all hours, these homeless men prevent passers-by from hanging around too long.²³ The magazine vendors are the ones who pay Leo and B.A. to reserve spots because when the morning comes, they profit from a clear space on the sidewalk to set up.²⁴

Duneier documents that Hakim Hasan, one of the book vendors, sees himself as a “public character,” the manager of the public realm on the corner of Greenwich and 6th.²⁵ Hakim sees that he does more than just watch over his book stand, he sees himself as a central point of contact. He does everything including recommending reading lists, giving directions to tourists, and watching for

suspicious activity.²⁶ In a neighborhood that has been marginalized, Hakim takes pride in managing the upkeep of his little corner of New York.

On Vacancy

Even though all land in major US cities seems to be owned by one entity or another, it is not being used to its greatest potential. For various reasons, there are cases in any urban environment where areas become or remain vacant. Frequently, private land is vacant only temporarily as one entity moves out and another moves in. In this transitional period, the vacant space is modified to accommodate the new tenant. In other cases, a vacant lot may have never been occupied, and is more obviously in a state of disuse, often overtaken by vegetation. This may be because economic forces have determined the plot of land to be unprofitable, or it has a topography that renders it unbuildable. This condition is often created when transportation infrastructure, for the sake of efficiency, cuts through the landscape, leaving awkward spaces that are too small or irregular in shape to develop.

Many of these seemingly abandoned spaces are of interest because they are not only vacant, they are also public land. In cities like Seattle, most public land falls into the category of “right-of-way,” (which are roads, highways, and railroads)²⁷ or parceled land which houses government facilities, schools, libraries, and parks. The last sector of public land consists of all the residual land, called vacant lots. Typically, these vacant publicly-owned parcels are small and irregularly-shaped parcels that have not been developed. In the City of Seattle, lots of this nature that are under 2000 square feet in area are called “snippets.”²⁸ With little demand for these curious bits of land, they remain under the ownership of the City, with the option of neighboring owners having the right-to-first-bid to merge the two parcels.²⁹

However the potential of these sites has not gone unnoticed. Architect Ignasi de Sola-Morales has introduced the concept of *terrain vague* to identify these types of properties. Translated from French, *terrain vague* means something along the lines of “land that is in flux.”³⁰ This term can be broadly used to describe the void and derelict, the in-between and forgotten spaces around the city.³¹ Sola-Morales explains why there is such a negative connotation connected to *terrain vague*:

Strangers in our own land, strangers in our city, we inhabitants of the metropolis feel the spaces not dominated by architecture as reflections of our own insecurity, of our vague wanderings through limitless spaces that, in our position external to the urban system, to power, to activity, constitute both a physical expression of our fear and insecurity and our expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopian, the future.³²

Sola-Morales thus argues that urban residents typically expect their cities to be utopias fueled by governmental power and realized through architecture. However the reality is that void and derelict spaces do exist in the city through oversights in planning and shifts in use. Empty of built objects, superfluous spaces that dot the cityscape are a reminder to the passerby that we do not live in a perfect world. Vacant lots are a reminder that no matter how much civic authorities try to maximize the use of the property, there will always be leftover spaces that escape control. When people come across a vacant lot, some may think there is a failure within the government or economy. One reason there is a common negative view of vacant lots is that people tend to ignore things they do not want to see. Vacant lots are representative of lost architectural opportunity, at least until they are redeveloped and the past is erased. Typically, there is a distrust for vacant space because they represent the oversight of society.

Even if the legal owners of these properties have not seen their potential, members of the public have had the vision to claim ownership through creative uses. As architect Karen Frank observes, urban residents often make use of vacant land they do not own.³³ From garden plots to homeless camps, and art installations to children's games, people are holding unsanctioned activities all over the city.³⁴ As seen in sites like Brooklyn's East River railyard, a vacant industrial site may become a site for social functions such as skateboarding, fishing, and holding concerts.³⁵ The unsanctioned use of the space sets up a situation where the new owners have to take responsibility for the management of the land.³⁶

Others in the creative fields have also recognized the potential of urban vacant lands. Brad Downey is an American artist who works with materials found in the public realm. He makes unauthorized installations that are always made in the moment on public land. Downey uses found



Figure 5 - "Brick Pry Stack (Wall)," Downey, *Spontaneous Sculptures*, pg 154-155.

materials on the site and reshapes into new sculptures that comment on the context around it. He claims that his spontaneous sculptures have always existed and will continue to exist.³⁷ His “Brick Pry Stack (Wall)” came into being when workers began laying bricks in a grid-like pattern to form the plane of the sidewalk.³⁸(Figure 5)When Downey came upon the worksite he transformed the planar materials into a spatial form, that juxtaposed solid and void forms. The artist notes that this sculpture lasted for two days, at which point the materials underwent a second transformation where a city-worker presumably put the bricks back in their intended position.³⁹

Brad Downey’s spontaneous sculptures toy with the laws that govern public space. Every citizen has access to the sidewalk, but Downey’s works draw out the irony that we do not all have the same freedom. The built environment has a proper order that must be maintained. When objects are out of line, the common perception is that something needs to be fixed and put back in order. Downey plays with this idea in place and time. His impromptu works have a time frame associated with them, anywhere from 2 seconds to 6 years.⁴⁰ During the time in which his works exist, Downey claims ownership. While seeking to make the public space his own, he recognizes the temporary nature of his work and that the city will reclaim possession.

Like Downey’s sculptures, the void spaces of the city are also temporal. As the city is being constantly reorganized, spaces are developed, and developed properties become vacant. Although the use and occupancy of a lot may change, what remains constant is the terrain and the borders of the parcel. At the geological scale, the land will remain the same for thousands of years, and at a historical scale it will continue to be defined by parcel surveys for hundreds of years. In contrast, the built structures on the land are short-lived. Architects like to think their designs are permanent, but even the largest of buildings will be replaced, as trends and technologies advance.

With all the changing figures and forces over the years, the ownership of urban lands is difficult to track. Civic governments seek to keep records of boundaries of parcels of land and of the taxpayers under control of the property. However, informal uses and unofficial managers are not tracked, as it would be impossible to monitor and document these unauthorized uses. Marichela Sepe makes a good attempt at documenting these fleeting curiosities in her book *Planning and Place in the City: Mapping Place Identity*. Expanding upon the work of Kevin Lynch, Sepe develops a way of mapping neighborhoods to aid the work of urban planners.⁴¹ In her PlaceMaker Method, Sepe lays out a series of steps, Phase 0 to

Phase 8, that can be used to create a series of maps that layers qualitative data on top of a quantitative base map.⁴² The nine phases of the PlaceMaker Method are as follows:

Phase 0: Construction of the Analysis Grid

Phase 1: Anticipatory Analysis

Phase 2: Denominative and Perceptual Description

Phase 3: Analysis of Traditional Mapping

Phase 4: Questionnaire for Analysis

Phase 5: Complex Map of Analysis

Phase 6: Identification of Identity Resources

Phase 7: Questionnaire for Planning

Phase 8: Complex Map of Project and Design Interventions⁴³

Using these steps, Sepe creates a series of maps that are human-centric and a-temporal. Her maps document the spaces, uses, and events that are often overlooked or quickly forgotten. Sepe applies her methodology to cities in Europe, Asia and North America, focusing on areas that consist of the blocks around a public square.⁴⁴ Since each place is unique, Sepe develops a unique legend for each map. These legends contain symbols for things that are ephemeral, such as “place of memory,” “hectic pace,” “live statue,” “graffiti,” and even “cats.”⁴⁵

Sepe goes on to explain how urban planners can use these types of maps to identify the image of the city as it exists in multiple scales and multiple timeframes.⁴⁶ Through this kind of mapping, certain elements can be identified that contribute to the cultural identity of the place.⁴⁷ The end goal of this method is understand how to intervene in these places in a way that would improve urban functions while preserving the cultural character of a city. This method of qualitatively mapping a place could be applied to focus on documenting the informal uses of a space and identifying the factors that contribute to it.

Chapter 3: Finding the Hidden Fragments

This thesis uses methods of place mapping to analyze the vacant lots of the city of Seattle. These maps will document the character of these overlooked public lands as physical and social spaces. The intent is to explore new ways to refine the role of these “empty” and forgotten lands. Marchichela Sepé’s Placemaker Method will be used as the basis to find a series of sites that embodies the character of vacant public lands. This mapping process that combines qualitative and quantitative data will seek to parse out vacant lots from developed properties, and identify properties and uses that benefit the community.

The first phase involves the creation of the base layer of the map of the city, a parcel map generated by data from King County GIS.⁴⁸(Figure 8) This map shows that all the land, and even the water of the city is divided into thousands of properties. These owners have staked a claim on the land of Seattle, and with title of ownership, they rework their land and shelter in unique ways to personalize their spaces.

This thesis however focuses on the vacant land within the city. The next phase of the mapping process involves forming a set of expectations for the site. Based on the writings of Ignasi de Sola-Morales, the *terrain vague* is a place that is void of development.⁴⁹ In the absence of development, the site is derelict and raw. Jill Desimini argues that there exists within the city a “third nature” which can be defined as a reclamation of the built environment by natural processes, where the “first” and “second natures” are wilderness and city respectively.⁵⁰ It is expected that a raw or vacant site will be a site of the “third nature.”



Figure 6 - Vacant lot at the corner of Fauntleroy Way and Edmunds St

The next phase of mapping employs direct observation, now through the eyes of the field surveyor. Photograph documentation of vacant sites through Seattle led to their categorization into closed and open lots. The image of a typical closed lot captures physical elements that are common and expected.(Figure 6) There are several elements that are common and expected. The first is the obvious lack of any architectural development. Second, the lack of a building calls further attention to the surrounding context. The neighboring buildings work to frame the void space of the vacant lot, making the space stand out from the context around it. The third element is the fence that acts as the most obvious as a physical manifestation of the concept of property. The fence, sitting on the property line, maintains that the unutilized property is still private, and that all others of the public are not welcome to occupy. With this base image of what a vacant lot looks like, various types of vacant lots can be identified.

Open vacant lots however are not so easy to spot because they lack the obvious identifying feature of the fence. The next phase of mapping is intended to locate these open vacant lots across the city. Using GIS data from King County a series of maps can be generated. The first shows all the publicly owned parcels in black, while all the white areas are either privately owned parcels or right-of-way.(Figure 9) This map shows that about 17.7% of all land in Seattle, excluding streets and highways, is owned by the city government. The largest sub-category of land by area is public parks, which make up 53.3% of publicly owned land in the city.(Figure 10) The next largest sub-category are properties and buildings related to governmental services, such as schools, fire stations, infrastructure, and other municipal buildings.(Figure 11) When these parks and governmental buildings are layered on top of the public



Figure 7 - Vacant lot at the corner of Market St and 55th St

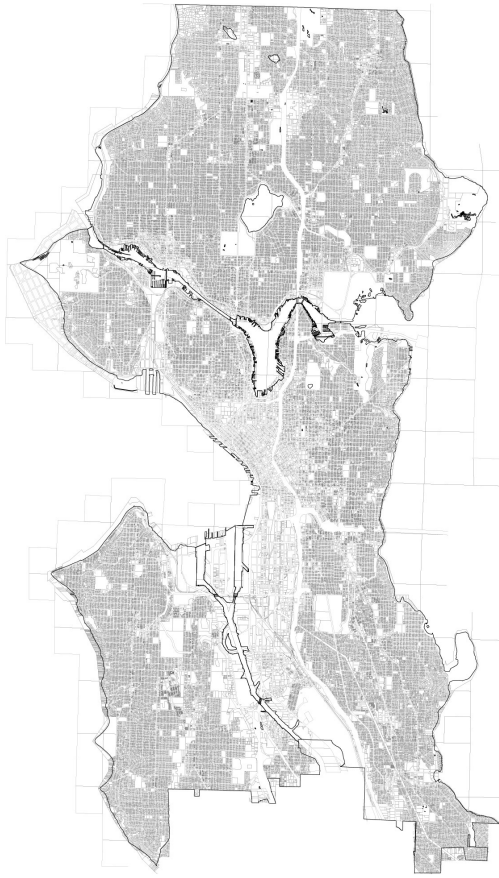


Figure 8 - Parcel map of Seattle



Figure 9 - Public land

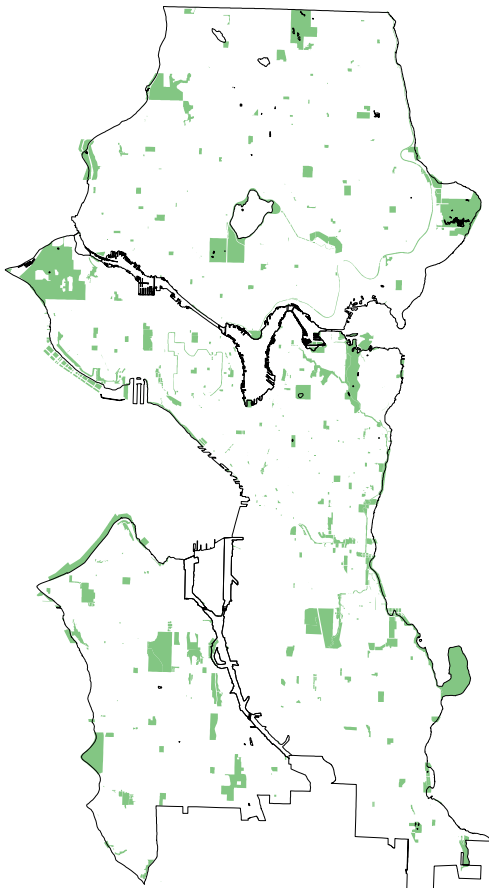


Figure 10 - Parks

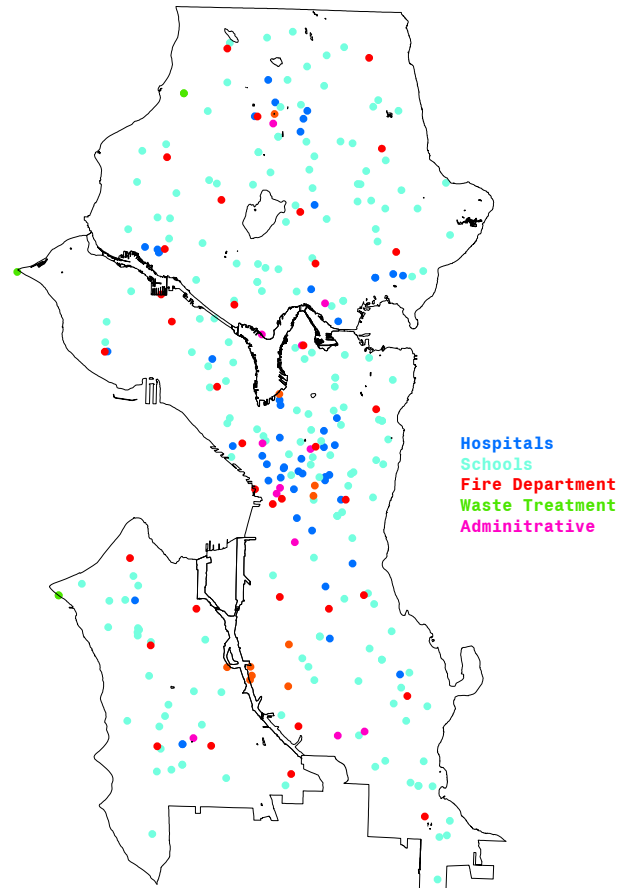


Figure 11 - Governmental services

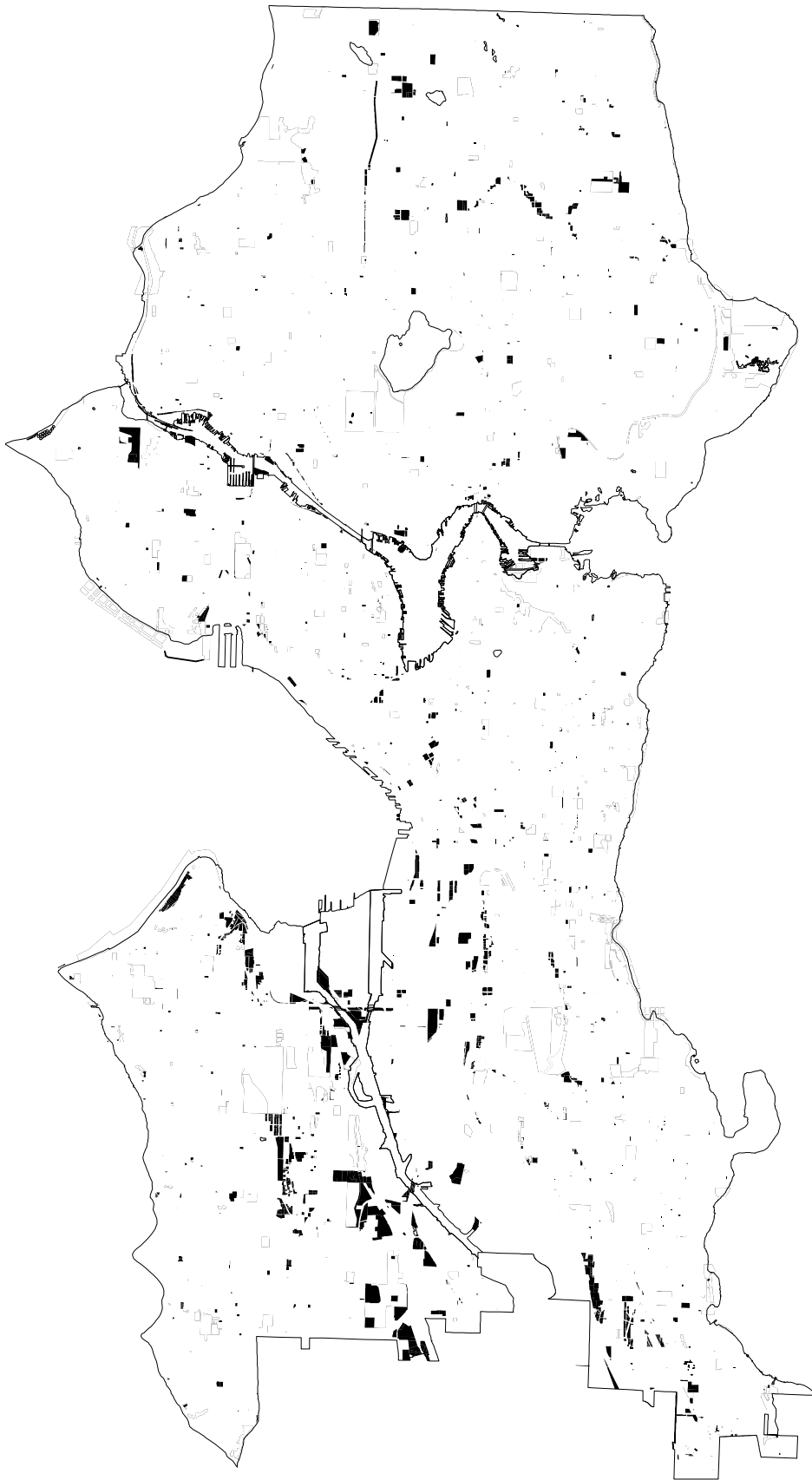


Figure 12 - Publicly owned vacant land

land map, and then filtered out, what remains visible are the publicly owned vacant lots of Seattle.(Figure 12) These lots cover 3.1% of Seattle, or 2827.2 acres. These are the scattered, vestigial lots of the city that escape a prescriptive use. In this map, the forgotten and ignored spaces become the foreground.

Next a closer look is taken at the organization and patterning of these vacant public lands. It is clear from the map that there are clusters of vacant lots in certain areas. These trends appear to be related to a couple different factors. The first is the nature of the topography of the land.(Figure 13) There are many hilly areas and steep slopes throughout Seattle that are believed to have been caused by the geological movements of the last ice age. These areas of steep terrain can render a small site unbuildable. Some of these sites are held by the City of Seattle for slope retention purposes because disturbing the land may cause mudslides.⁵¹ The second condition that influences where vacant land is found is the layout of the city grid in relation to the landscape.(Figure 14) Although the streets are based on a Cartesian grid, Seattle's unique topography forces the grid to shift, truncate, and bend in relation to the shorelines of the bay and the lakes. This juxtaposition of the grid and shoreline makes for irregularly shaped parcels, many of which are quite small and triangular shaped. These lots are not part of the right-of-way, but are individual lots with their own unique addresses and values.⁵² Since they are too small and irregularly-shaped to build a conventional building on, they are retained by the City as vacant lots.

Looking closer at the area of Interbay, there are several clusters of vacant parcels owned by governing bodies.(Figure 15) In the central area there are vacated industrial buildings left over from downsizing or closing of businesses. Along the canal, the diagonal waterway produces irregular-shaped lots that would be difficult to develop. At the base of Queen Anne Hill some lots are left vacant due to the steep slope. Another example of a cluster can be found along Market Street through Ballard, where the arterial cuts diagonally through the city grid as it climbs the slope of Phinney Ridge.(Figure 16) This creates a series of triangular parcels with steep slopes on both sides of Market Street. Many of these lots are left unmaintained, but a couple neighboring houses do appropriate the lots for extra garden space.

The next phase of the analysis shifts to identifying the characteristics of a particular set of sites. Along Martin Luther King Jr Way at the cross street of Yesler Way is a grouping of vacant lots that illustrate the two trends outlined above.(Figure 17) The first condition is the steep terrain of the hillside, and the second condition is the narrowness of the lots as the street cuts through larger parcels.(Figure 18) MLK Way is an older roadway that dates back to 1915 when it was a highway connecting Seattle to Renton.⁵³ As the highway ran North-South, it also shifted East-West as it followed the shoreline of Lake

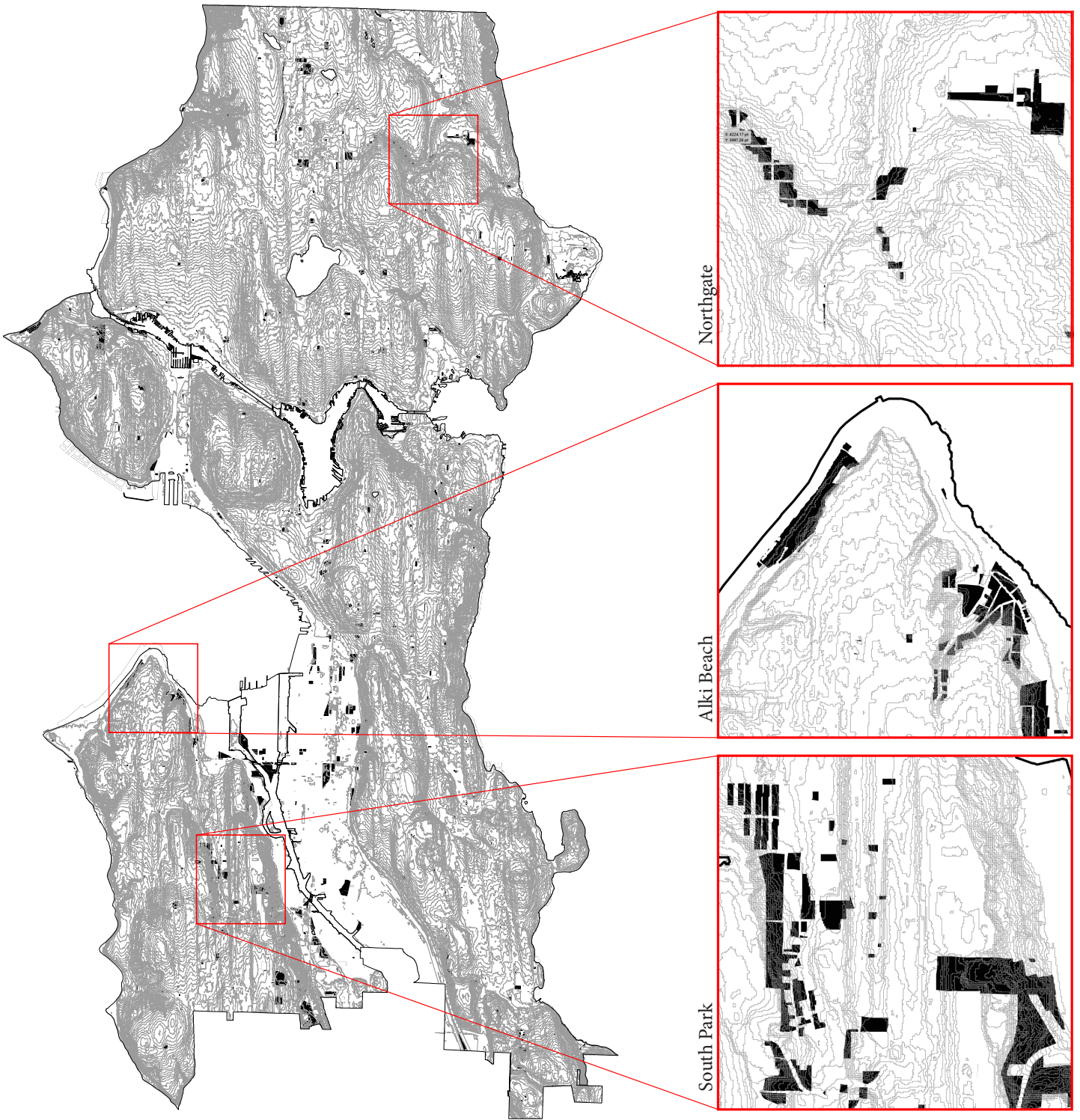


Figure 13 - Conditions of topography

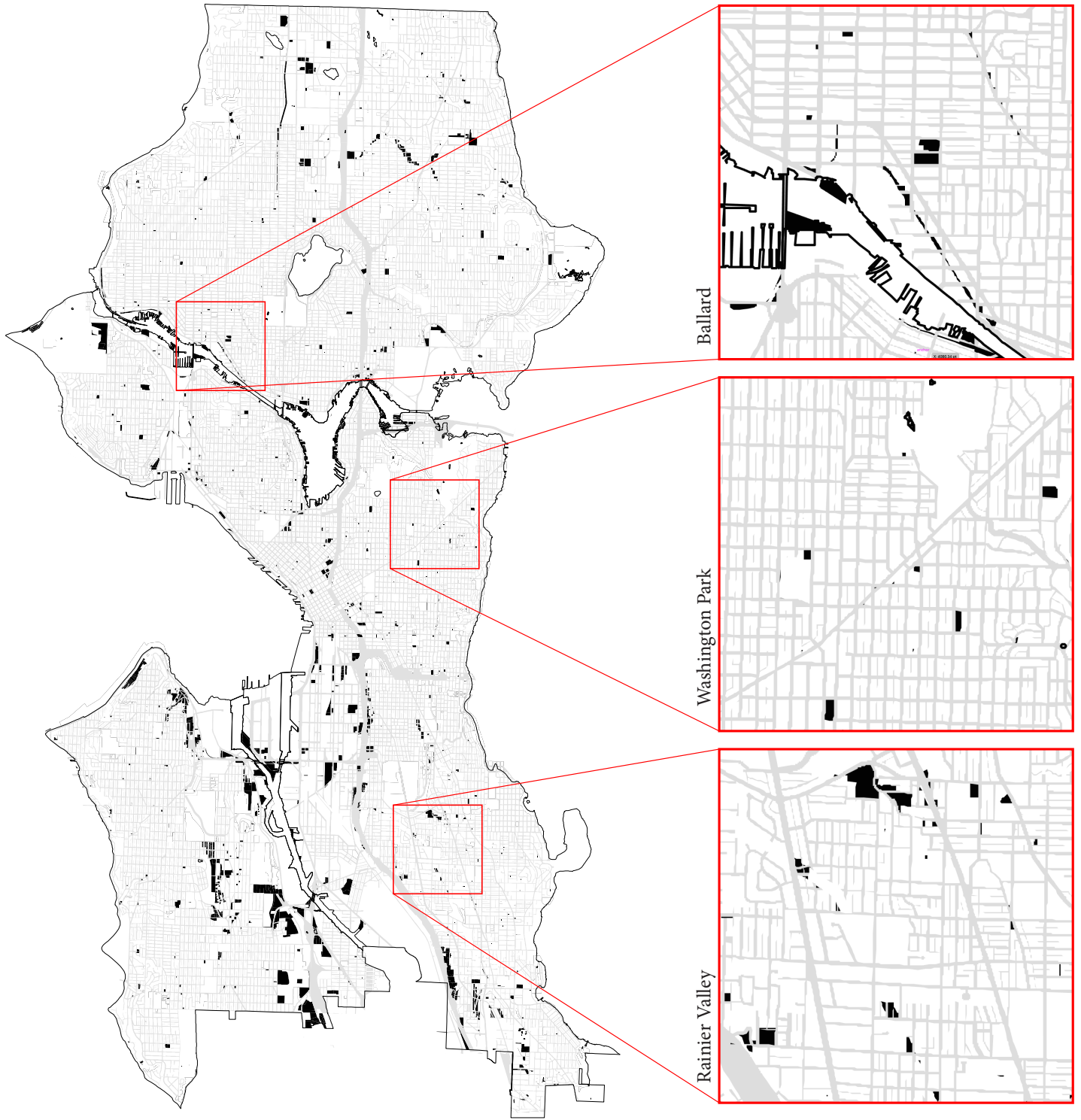


Figure 14 - Conditions of urban planning

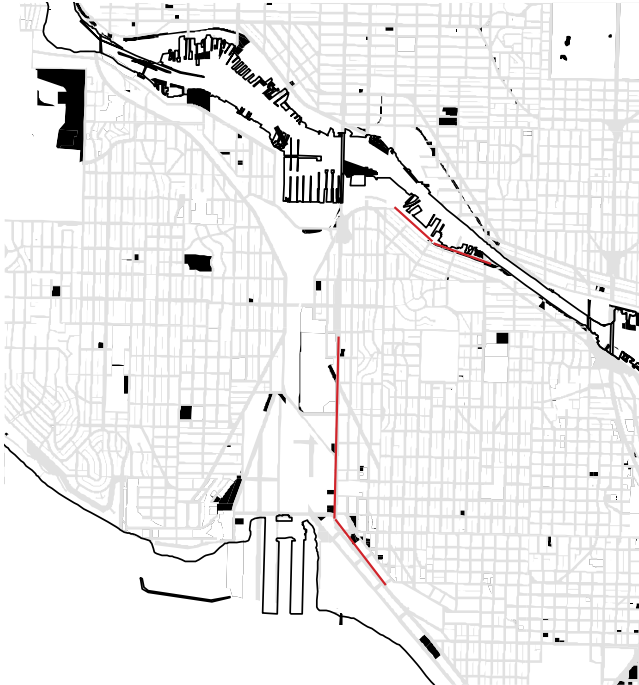


Figure 15 - Interbay has many industrial vacant lots, and irregular-shaped lots along the waterfront.

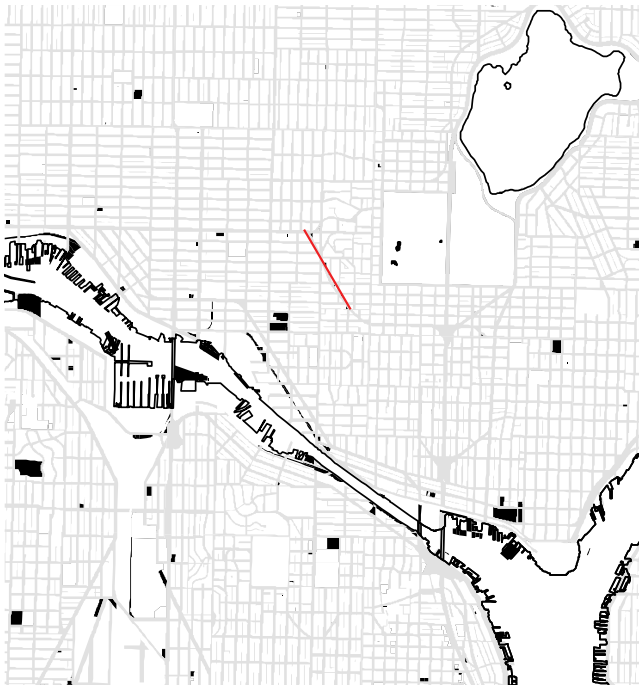


Figure 16 - Diagonal streets through Ballard create triangular parcels.



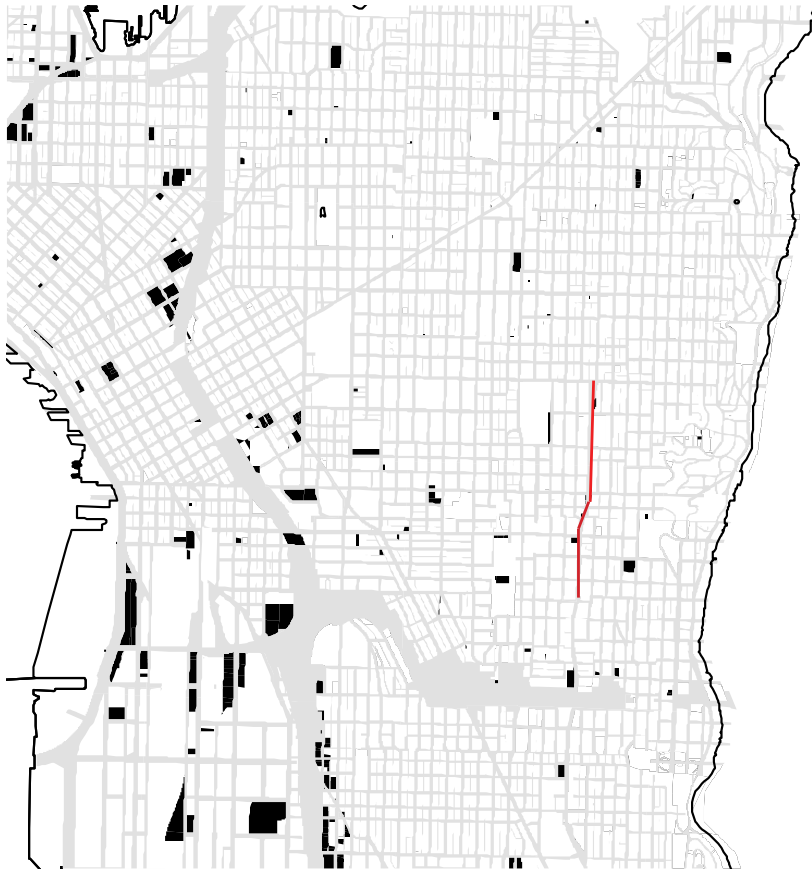


Figure 17 - As MLK Way shifts East-West, it creates long and narrow parcels.



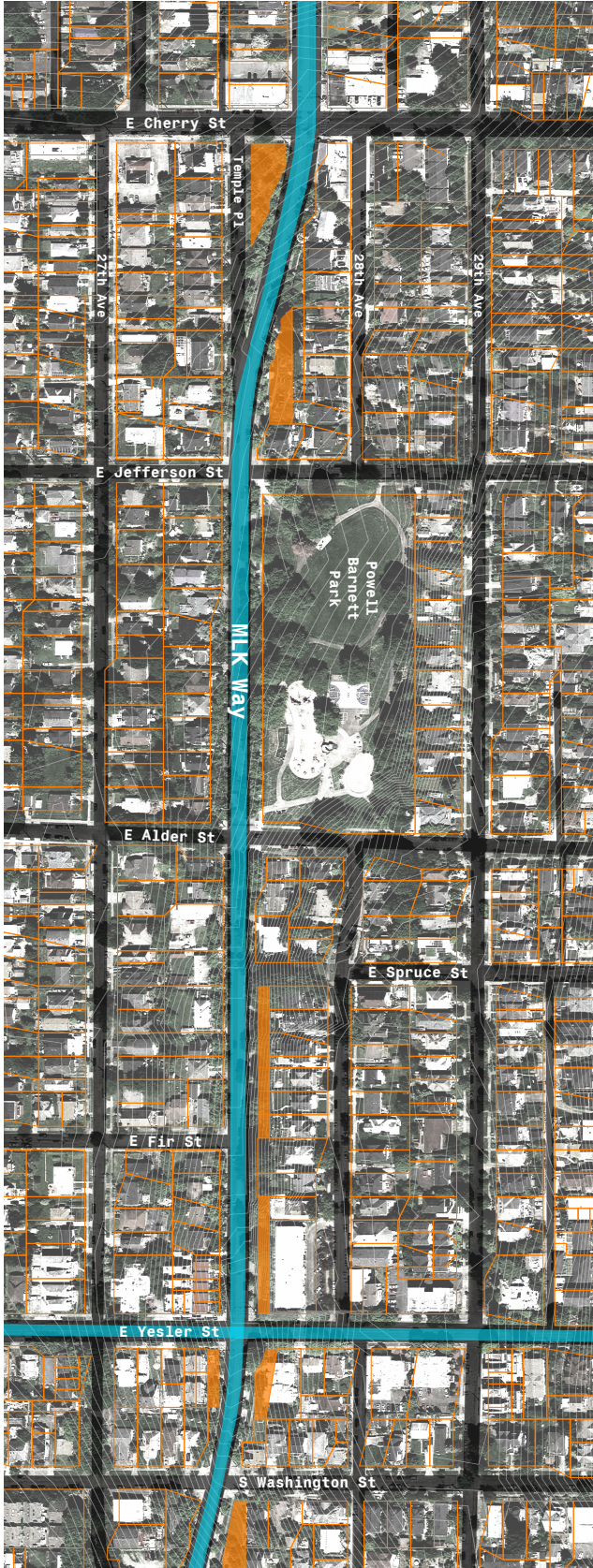


Figure 18 - MLK Way and Yesler

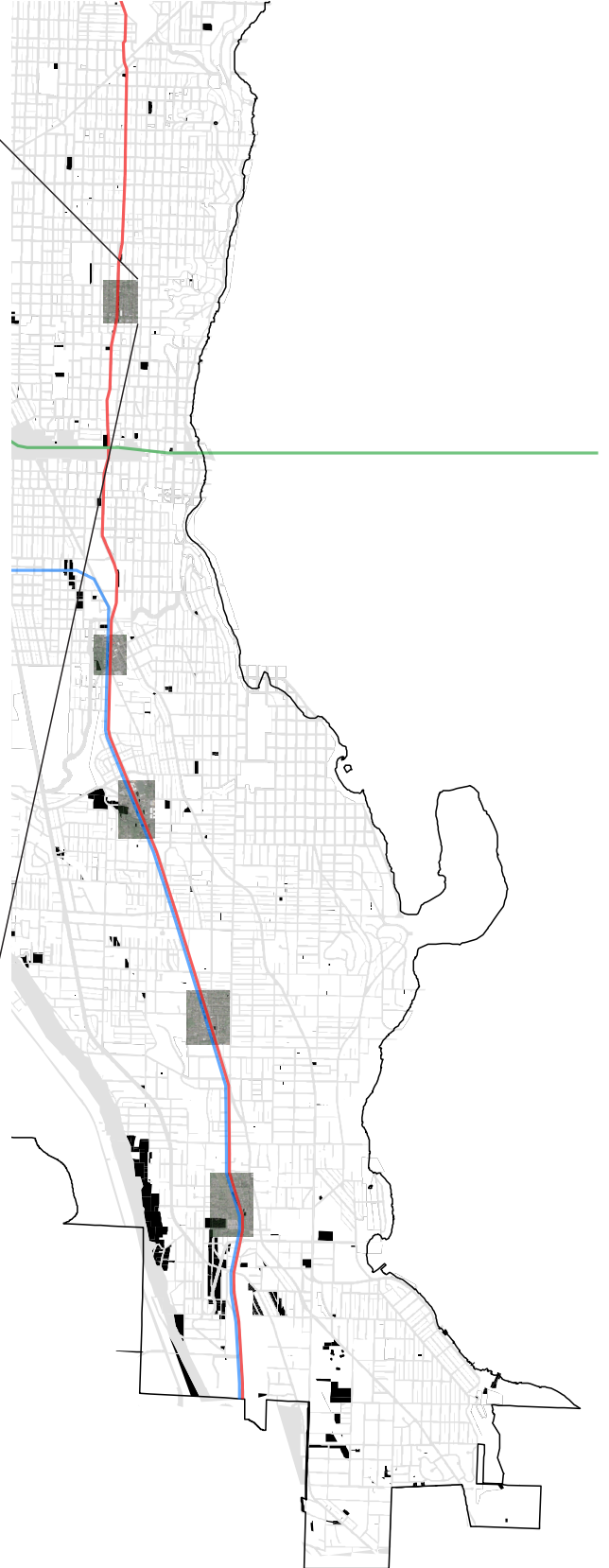


Figure 19 - Vacant lots along MLK Way



Figure 20 - A vacant lot at the corner of MLK and Yesler

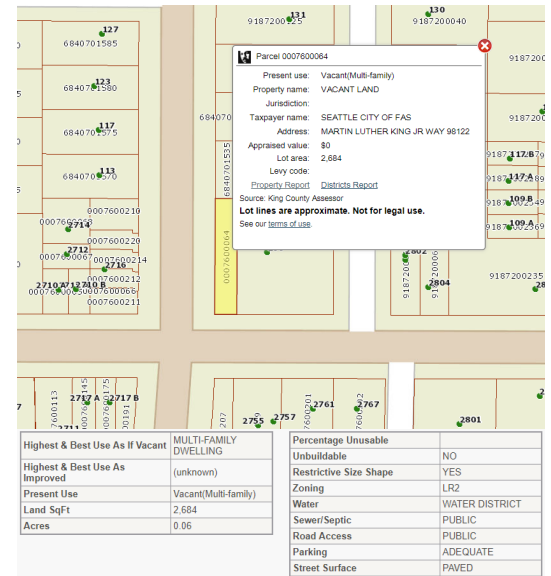


Figure 21 - Land data for the vacant lot

Washington. Later, the rest of the city grid filled in around MLK Way, which created long and narrow parcels in the areas where roads shift East-West.(Figure 19)

All along the length of MLK Way these thin and triangular lots can be found. In many cases these lots are left vacant because they would be too difficult to develop otherwise. These lots, along the arterial's 6-mile length, can be found in various conditions. They may be overgrown with underbrush, or sparingly maintained with minimal landscaping, and other times are covered in gravel and surrounded with a fence. The parcels at MLK and Yesler are representative of two types of conditions. In one instance, 150ft of the roadway is defined by a four foot retaining wall that holds back a landscaped area.(Figure 20) This patch of landscaping is 25 feet wide with a few small bushes. On the upper side of the hill there is a



Figure 22 - The hillside along MLK Way

fence separating the parcel from the neighboring apartment building. In the second instance, further down the block, the narrow parcel is overgrown with underbrush and a few medium-sized trees.(Figure 22) Here there is no retaining wall with the sidewalk sitting next to the raw hillside which rises steeply to the neighboring houses at the top of the hill. The sidewalk and the street are heavily trafficked by cars,

and residents walking to the park nearby, or waiting for the bus.

The analysis of these vacant lots moves beyond the physical quantitative data, to address issues of how these places are identified by the city and by their users. How, for example, has the city identified these properties in the past and what are their plans for the future? Matthew Richter at the City of Seattle states that the history of Seattle's vacant public land dates to the late 1800s when the city sold these properties for low costs.⁵⁴ As the city began to develop in its early years, the amount of desirable open land became scarcer. Today Seattle is left with small lots which are scattered throughout the city. In most cases, the City would like to sell off these parcels, or find a better use for them, as they are currently a strain on the general maintenance budget.⁵⁵ Seattle prefers to sell snippets, or lots under 2000 sqft, to the adjacent property owners at fair market value.⁵⁶ Property owners, for various reasons, many times do not take this opportunity.⁵⁷ In some cases the snippets are so small that they exist in people's backyards, and neighboring homeowners treat them as their own, regardless who the true owner is.

The City's latest strategy for selling off these vacant lots is to offer them to cultural organizations such as museums and artist collectives.⁵⁸ Matthew Richter states that the idea is to use cultural grants in order for institutions to acquire the lands. In return the organization must devise a 5-year program

PMA NUM	Type	PMA Name	PMA Location Address	Map	Disposition comment	Possible interest	PMA Classification	PMA Current Use	PMA Land
22	Parcel	Parcel at 3401 S Della St	3401 S Della St	Map 22	Needs survey, Geo tech work, Housing with potential for open space	Medium	Excess	Green Space/Natural Area	34760
24	Parcel	Parcel at 31st Ave S and S Lexington	3924 31st Ave S	Map 24	Need street improvement plan and work with neighbors	Medium	Excess	Roadway	9506
26	Parcel	Parcel at 9100 Cyrus Ave NW	9100 Cyrus Ave NW	Map 26	Internal Circulation, Possible TJO to SPU or Dedicate as ROW	low	Fully Utilized	Drainage (Natural)	30941
51	Snippet	Snippet at 1500 W Nickerson St	1500 W Nickerson St	Map 51	Possible sale to Port of Seattle, need survey to identify boundary	Medium	Excess	Storage (Uncovered)	3539
52	Parcel	Parcel at 1510 W Emerson St	1510 W Emerson St	Map 52	Sell to adjacent property owner with access. Need to survey to identify boundary	Low	Excess	Green Space/Natural Area	7686
60	Parcel	Parcel at 7018 Lincoln Park Wy SW	7018 LINCOLN PARK WY SW	Map 60	TJO to SPU drainage or sell open market with restrictions	low	Excess	Vacant (Undeveloped)	18320
62	Snippet	Snippet at 104 NW 47th	104 NW 47th St	Map 62		low	Excess	Excess Right-of-Way	1673
63	Parcel	Parcel at 180 NW Market St	180 NW Market St	Map 63	needs survey	Medium	Excess	Slope Protection	2171
64	Snippet	Snippet at 201 NW 50th St	201 NW 50th St	Map 64		low	Excess	Slope Protection	1533
66	Parcel	Parcel at 280 NW Market St	280 NW MARKET ST	Map 66	needs survey	Medium	Excess	Slope Protection	4395
67	Snippet	Snippet at 5300 NW 53rd St	5300 NW 53rd St	Map 67		low	Excess	Slope Protection	1364
68	Parcel	Parcel at 400 NW Market St	400 NW MARKET ST	Map 68	needs survey	Medium	Excess	Landscaping	3593
69	Snippet	Snippet 4599 Midvale Ave N	4599 MIDVALE AV N	Map 69	SDOT needs	Medium	Excess	Landscaping	1929
71	Snippet	Snippet at 1398 MLK Jr Way S	1398 MARTIN LUTHER KING	Map 71		Low	Excess	Landscaping	634
72	Parcel	Chief Sealth Trail - FAS Portion	8499 MARTIN LUTHER KING	Map 72	Need survey to define transportation use and excess use	low	Excess	Multi-Use Trail	9871
82	Parcel	Parcel at 2298 Sylvan Way SW	2298 SYLVAN WY SW	Map 82	Possible sale to adjacent property owner	low	Excess	Landscaping	3168
84	Parcel	Parcel at 4707 Woodland Park Ave	4708 WOODLAND PARK AV N				Excess	Landscaping	1055
85	Parcel	Parcel at 9399 8th Ave SW	9399 8TH AV SW	Map 85	Parcel may be needed for ROW, City circulation	low	Excess	Vacant (Undeveloped)	1699
1554	Snippet	Snippet at 14031 Ashworth Ave N	14031 Ashworth Ave N	Map 1554		Low	Excess	Landscaping	1006
1555	Snippet	Snippet at 398 NE 40th Street	398 NE 40TH ST	Map 1555		Low	Excess	Landscaping	658
1648	Parcel	Parcel at 7328 16th Ave SW	7328 16TH AV SW	Map 1648	Circulation, possible TJO to SPU	low	Excess	Drainage (Natural)	21977

Potential Art Sites
Finance and Administrative Services
Daniel Bretzke

Figure 23 - City list of vacant lots to sell

COMMUNITY GARDENS



LOW INCOME HOUSING



ARTS & CULTURE



Figure 24 - Organizations that may be interested in obtaining public land

Definitions
RCW 79.02.010

Public Land- land of the State

Improvement- changes to the land, affecting its value

Person- an individual, an organization, or an agency

Valuable Resource- the product of the land

Revised Code of Washington
Title 79 - Public Lands
Title 24 - Non-Profit Organizations

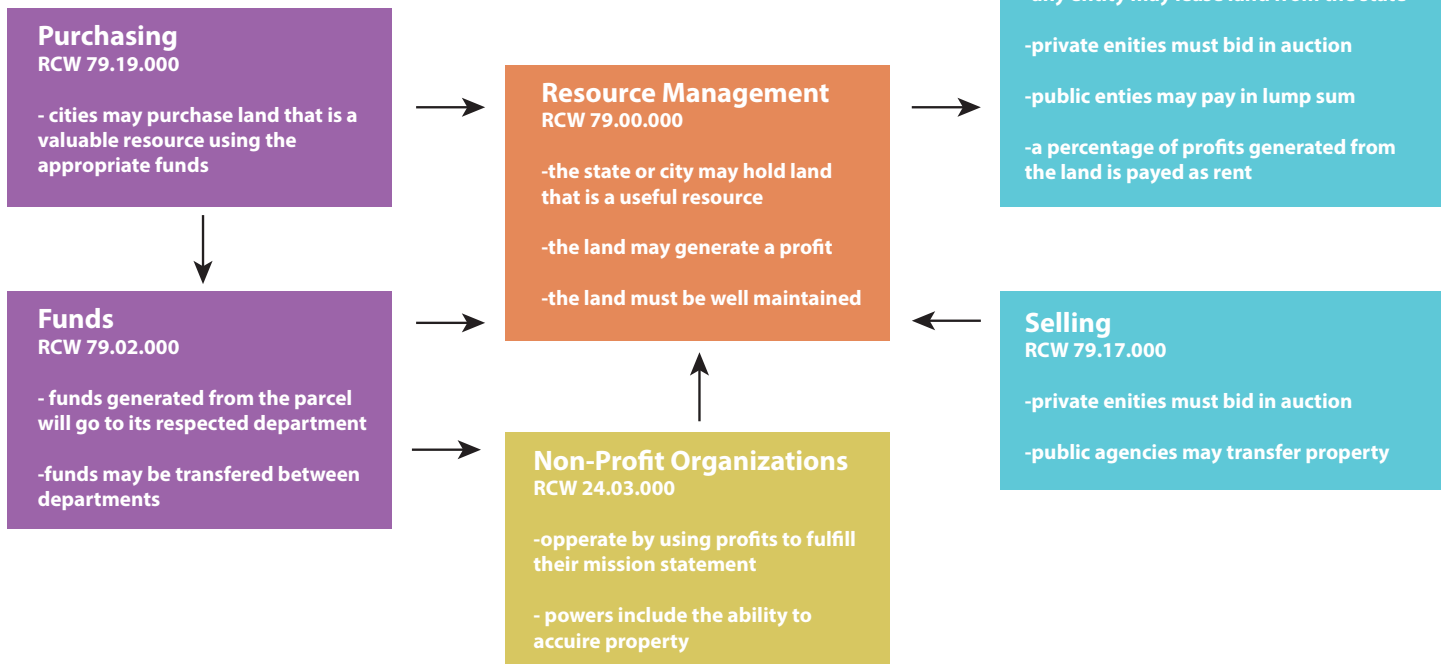


Figure 25 - Flow chart of laws that allow non-profit organizations to obtain public land. By sharing a common goal with the government, an NPO can effectively work for the government, allowing the transfer of lands without public auction.

for how they would use the site.⁵⁹ The City has compiled a list of small sites that that they would like to sell off through this program.(Figure 23) However, this list represents a small sample of the many vacant lots the City owns. Many other types of non-profit organizations (NPO) may benefit from this program.(Figure 24) The Revised Code of Washington states that, an NPO may act in the interest of the State only if their “vision statement” is in alignment with the State’s goals.⁶⁰(Figure 25) Using the 5-year program as a check, the State can confirm that the two entities are working together towards the same goal. This would make the transfer of land to the NPO easier because the organization is working in the government’s and people’s best interest.

Non-profits that have a local community focus may be more interested in owning these lots. A few categories of NPOs that may be interested are ones that focus on community gardening, low-income housing, and arts and culture. Community gardens have been quite popular recently and there is a demand for more. Making more gardens could transform a vacant lot into a pleasurable green space.(Figure 26) The P-Patch program already does this by taking difficult-to-develop sites and fills them with planter boxes maintained by the community. For low-income housing organizations, it could be possible to use vacant public land as a place to build quick and inexpensive housing.(Figure 27) Some organizations already do this by building shelters in underutilized parking lots. Museums may be interested in purchasing and maintaining vacant public land. They could use the space for displaying the work of visiting artists, or used as community event space as a satellite to their main operations.(Figure 28) This use could bring culture to an otherwise nondescript neighborhood.

The final phase of this analysis calls for a design proposal that addresses all the research uncovered in the earlier stages. This thesis makes use of a multi-layered mapping process of vacant lands in Seattle done on vacant public land to identify a suitable site for an architectural intervention. The maps on vacant public land are useful in identifying areas that have fallen outside the scope of planning and are open to new and creative uses. The site specific research aides in highlighting the resources and qualities that make a particular site unique. The architectural intervention will draw from those qualities to enhance the site’s usefulness for the local community. Using the City’s proposal as a guide, this thesis will take the first step in finding a design solution for vacant public land.



Figure 26 - Community garden

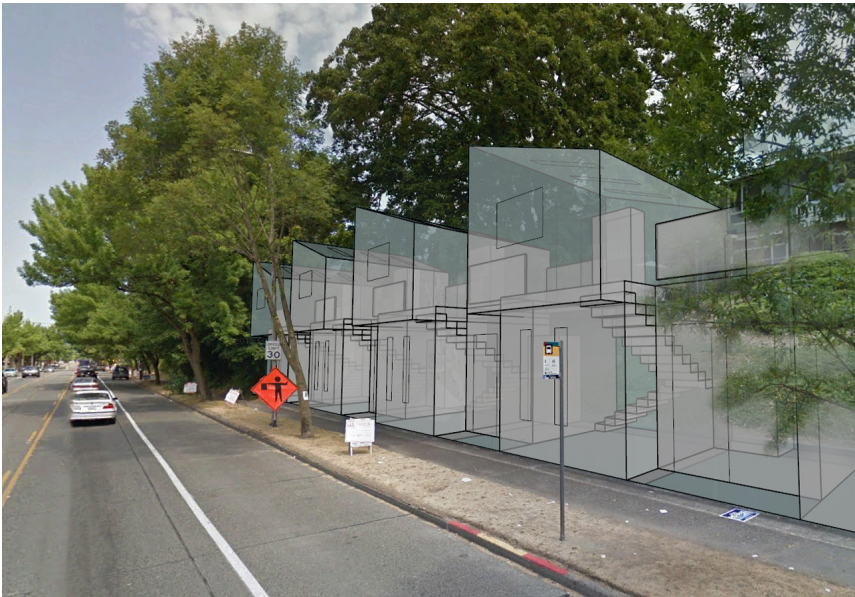


Figure 27 - Low-income housing

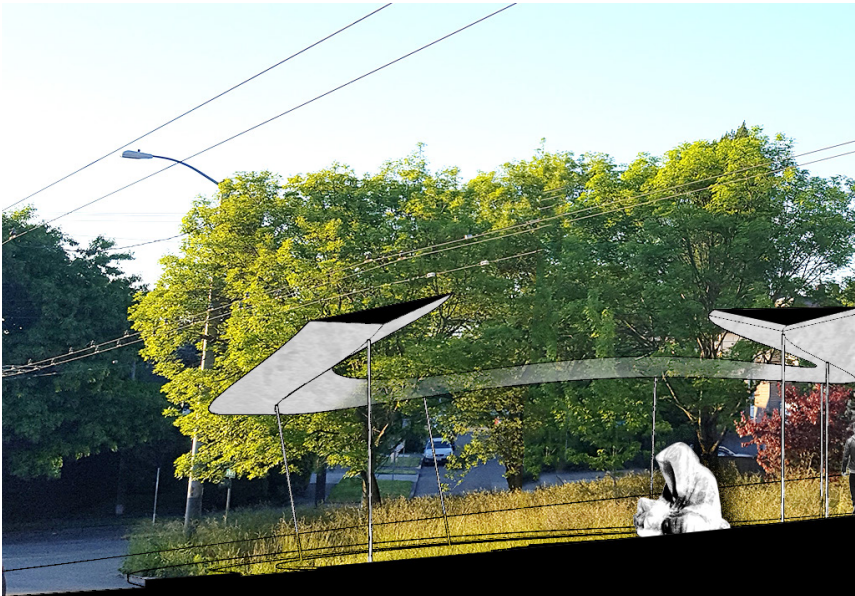


Figure 28 - Artist pavilion

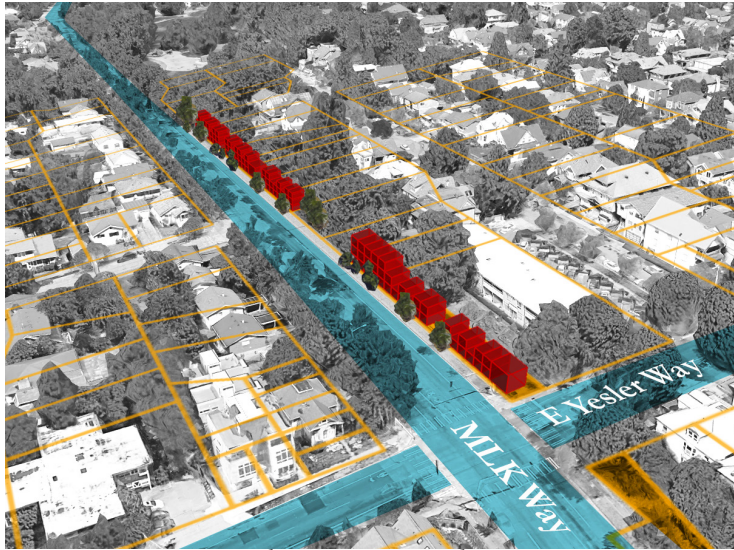


Figure 30 - Low-income housing massing diagram

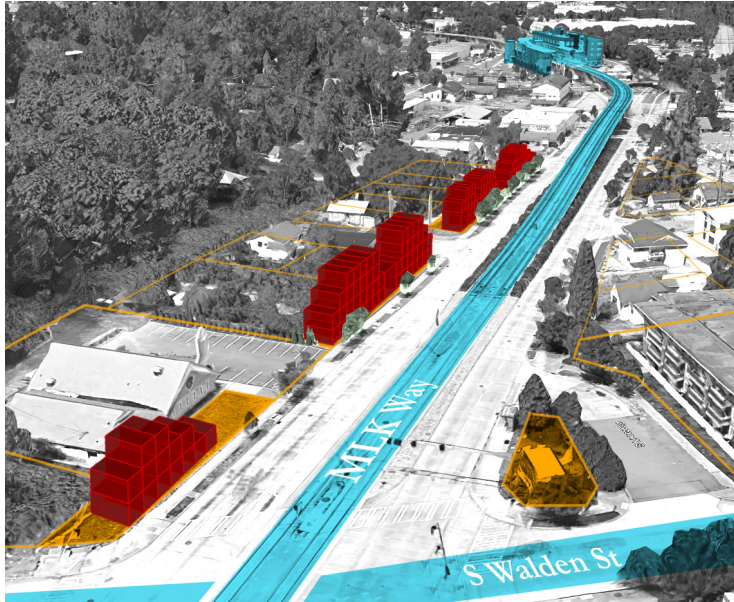


Figure 31 - Walden Street massing diagram

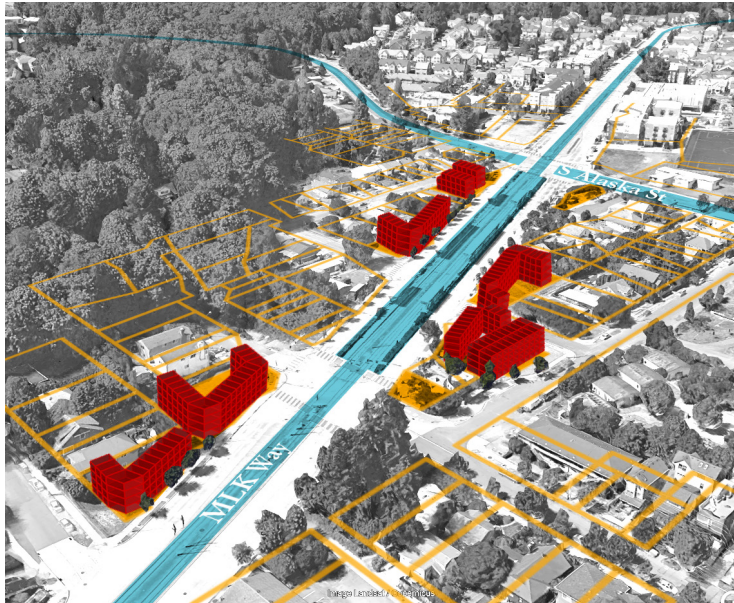


Figure 32 - Alaska Street massing diagram

Hill, and continuing South to Rainier Beach, is an area with a high density of low-income households. This area aligns with MLK Way and the project site at Yesler Way.

Along this corridor there is plenty of access to transit. On the North end of MLK there are several bus routes that connect to downtown and the greater Seattle area, including routes 2, 3, 8, and 27. At the southern end of MLK the light rail follows the street and provides easy access to the rest of Seattle. Since there is easy access to transit, a parking lot is not needed, although street parking is available. Immediately surrounding the site at MLK and Yesler, the neighborhood is mainly residential with two shopping centers nearby. The site also sits within the districts of three schools, Leschi Elementary, Washington Middle School, and Garfield High School. This provides schools for all levels of education for growing families in the area. For recreation in the area there is Powell Barnett Park and the Garfield Community Center. These factors together reinforce the choosing of this site for the development of low-income housing; the surrounding area will have the necessary services for growing families.

The Yesler Project

Other than providing affordable housing, the small site has the potential to fulfill multiple functions through its design. One condition is the steep topography, where the steepest slope has a rise of 20 feet over a run of 30 feet.(Figure 34) This is a major design challenge, but also provides design opportunities. The structure at this site will also have to have a retaining wall to hold the hillside behind it. The street-level units will be built up against the hillside to the East, and face the street to the West.(Figure 38) Then



Figure 33 - The project site, showing the retaining wall and neighboring building

at the upper levels, the units can be open on two sides for solar gains. To the side of the building, stairs following the natural topography of the hill provide access to the upper level units.(Figure 36) At these areas they can be used for more garden space for plantings. On the second level, between several of the units there are terraces which serve as outdoor space for the residents.(Figure 37) These are private outdoor spaces that are removed from the streetscape, yet still visually connected, creating a view corridor through the building connecting the gardens to the busy street.

Along the length of the block, the housing is divided in two narrow parcels. On these two lots the housing lines the street in the form of four buildings separated by green spaces. On the southern end of the block, where the hill is lower, the housing only rises two stories so as not to obstruct the neighbor's view. In the center of the block where the hill rises higher, the housing stacks up to three stories.(Figure 35)

Among the four buildings there are a total of 30 units, housing 50 people. By lot area this works out to be 240sqft per person. Comparatively, there are 13 residences on the opposite side of the block along the same length, with 1087sqft per person. At the corner of the block, and near the middle, there are two commons buildings. Here there are laundry facilities, a larger kitchen, a living room, and bike

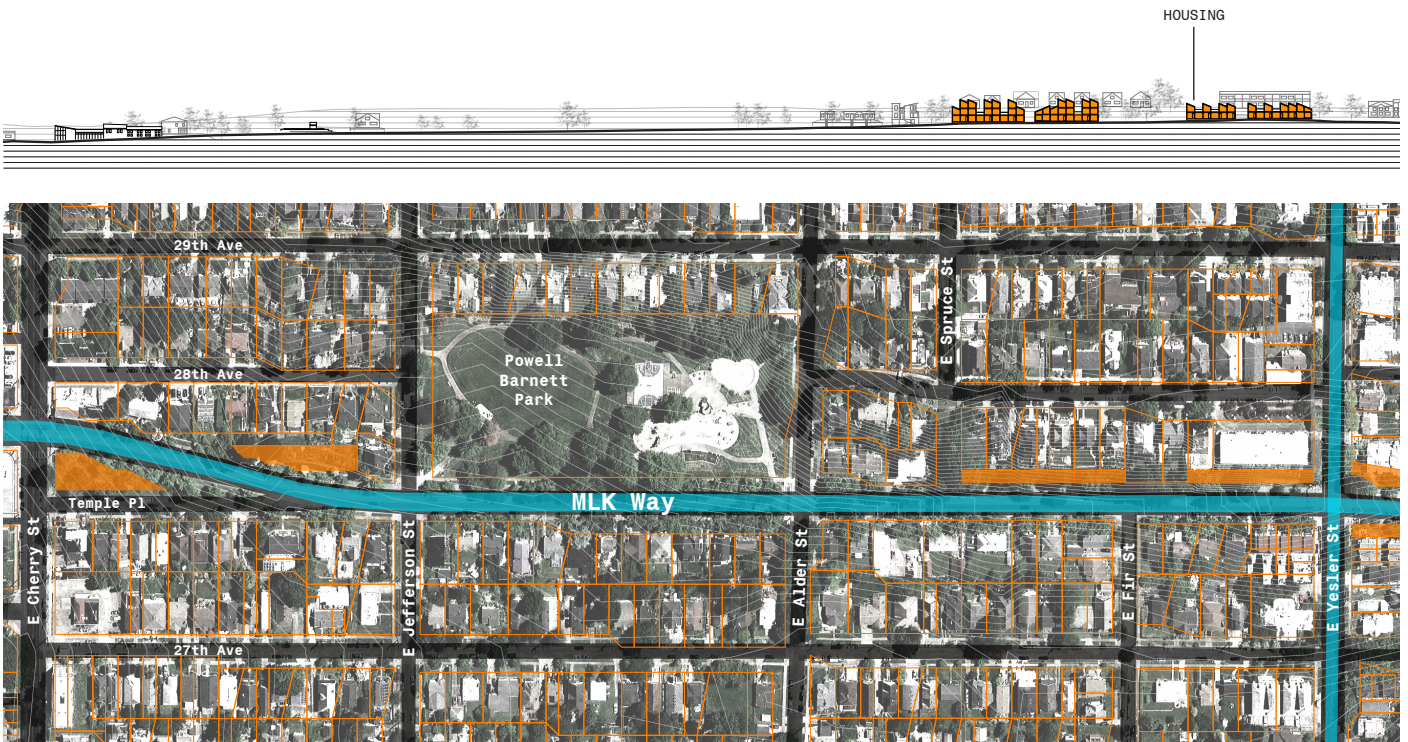


Figure 34 - Site plan and longitudinal street section



Figure 35 - Section

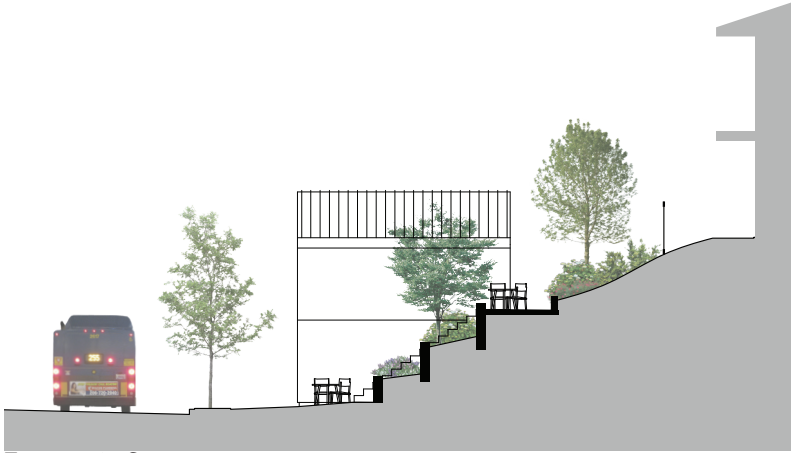


Figure 36 - Section



Figure 37 - Section

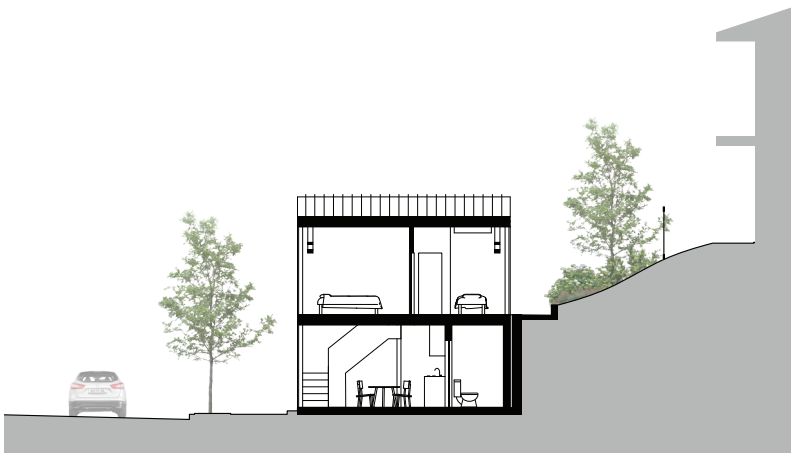


Figure 38 - Section

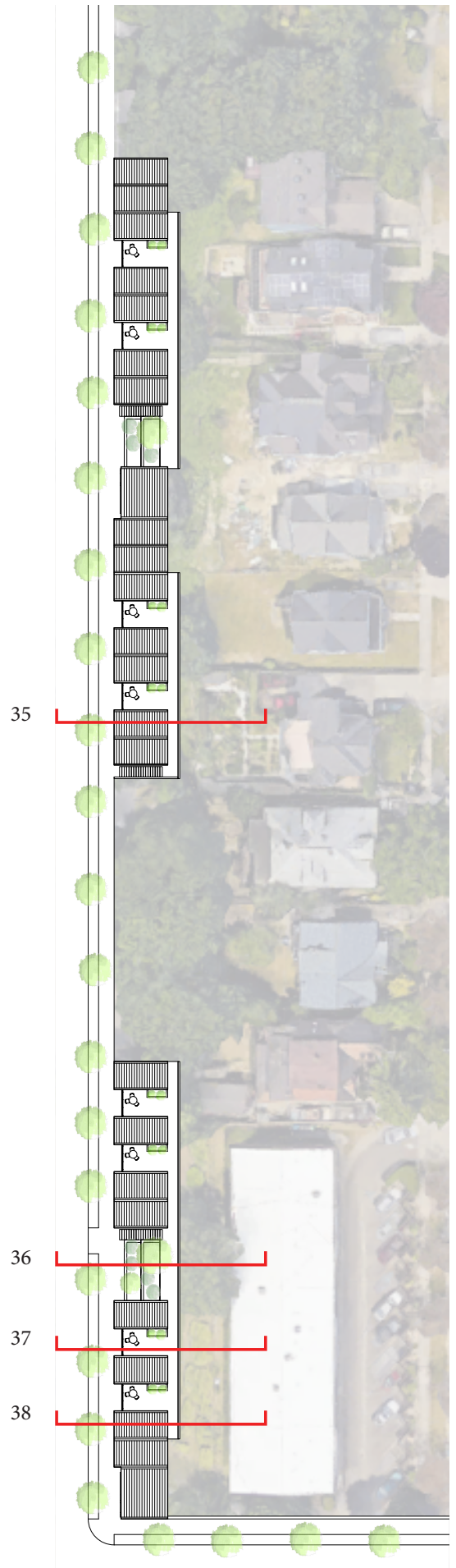


Figure 39 - Site plan

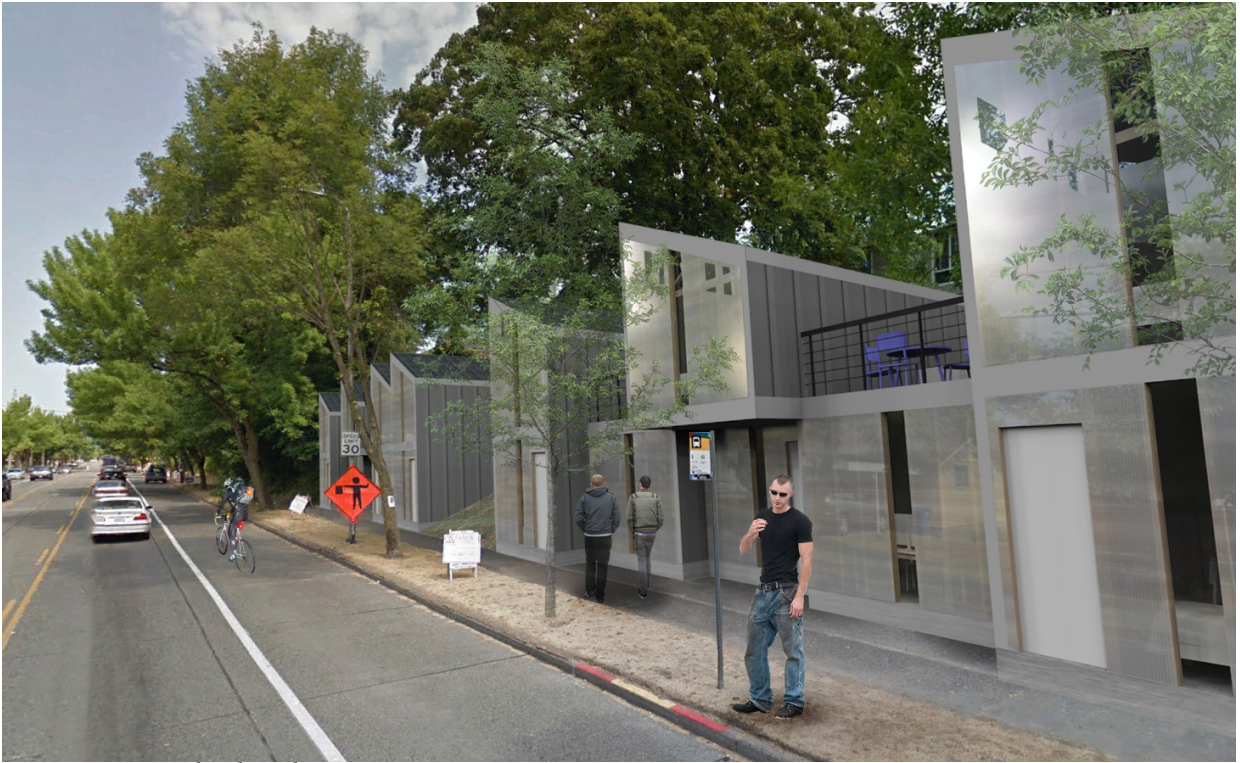


Figure 40 - Street-level rendering



Figure 41 - Street-level plan

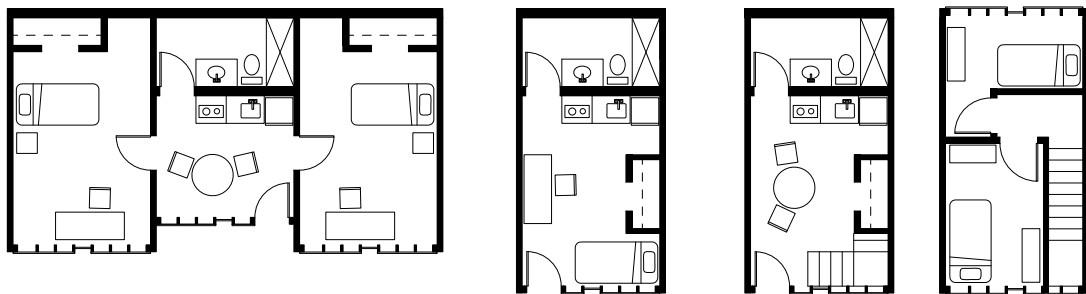


Figure 42 - 2-bedroom flat

Studio

2-bedroom townhome



Figure 43 - Daytime rendering



Figure 44 - Nighttime rendering of the street corner at MLK and Yesler

storage.(Figure 45) Together with the high-density living and the communal spaces, this building attempts to maintain a strong community atmosphere.

The individual units are divided into three types, a studio unit, a 2-bedroom flat, and a 2-bedroom townhome.(Figure 42) In each unit there is a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and closet. At the smaller end, the studios are 200sqft, while the 2-bedroom flats, at the larger end, are 450sqft. Although the units are quite small, large windows on the façade help bring in lots of sunlight.(Figure 46) The façade also makes use of a translucent material called polycarbonate panels, which let in light, but obstruct the view for privacy. Polycarbonate is also a good insulating material. The panels have vertical air pockets in the center to trap the transfer of heat in a small profile. These panels are attached to wood studs which are the main structure of the units. Wood stick-frame construction is an inexpensive and readily available building system that is common throughout the Northwest. This makes it a quick way to build many similar units at a low cost to the builder. Since each unit is similar, with only three variations, this design lends itself easily to mass-production across multiple sites.

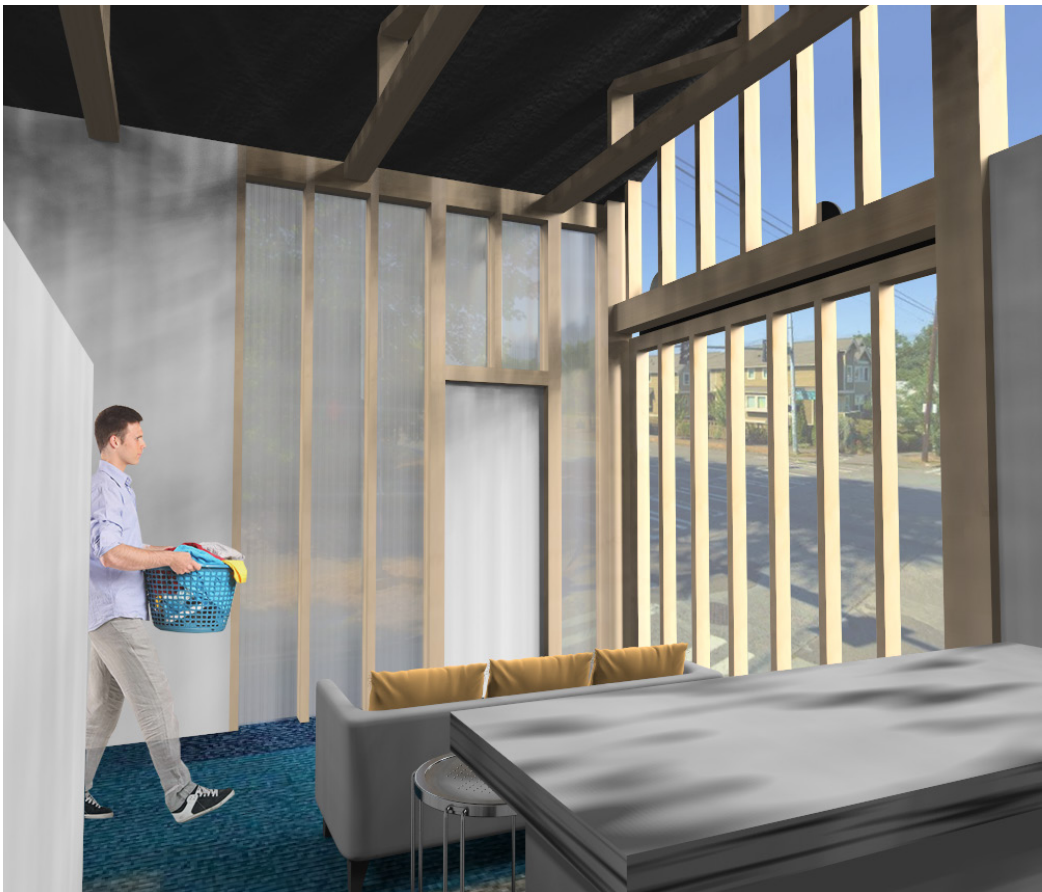


Figure 45 - Commons building



Figure 46 - Interior of a townhome unit

The section perspective shows how all the ideas of the thesis come together in one project. (Figure 47) In such a narrow site, it is still possible to build a structure that has value to the community. From the street, to the sidewalk, up to the garden, and the neighboring building, the design for low-income housing stitches the streetscape together. It fills the physical void as well as fulfilling a social need, all while adding a new architectural language to the neighborhood. Using the varying sizes of boxes and sawtooth roofs, the low-income housing units are broken down in their massing to match the scale of the surrounding residences. Yet, in their materiality, they bring a new look to the streetscape and bring pride to the residents. Rather than just being a mass to fill a void, the design acts as a beacon that signals a social change.

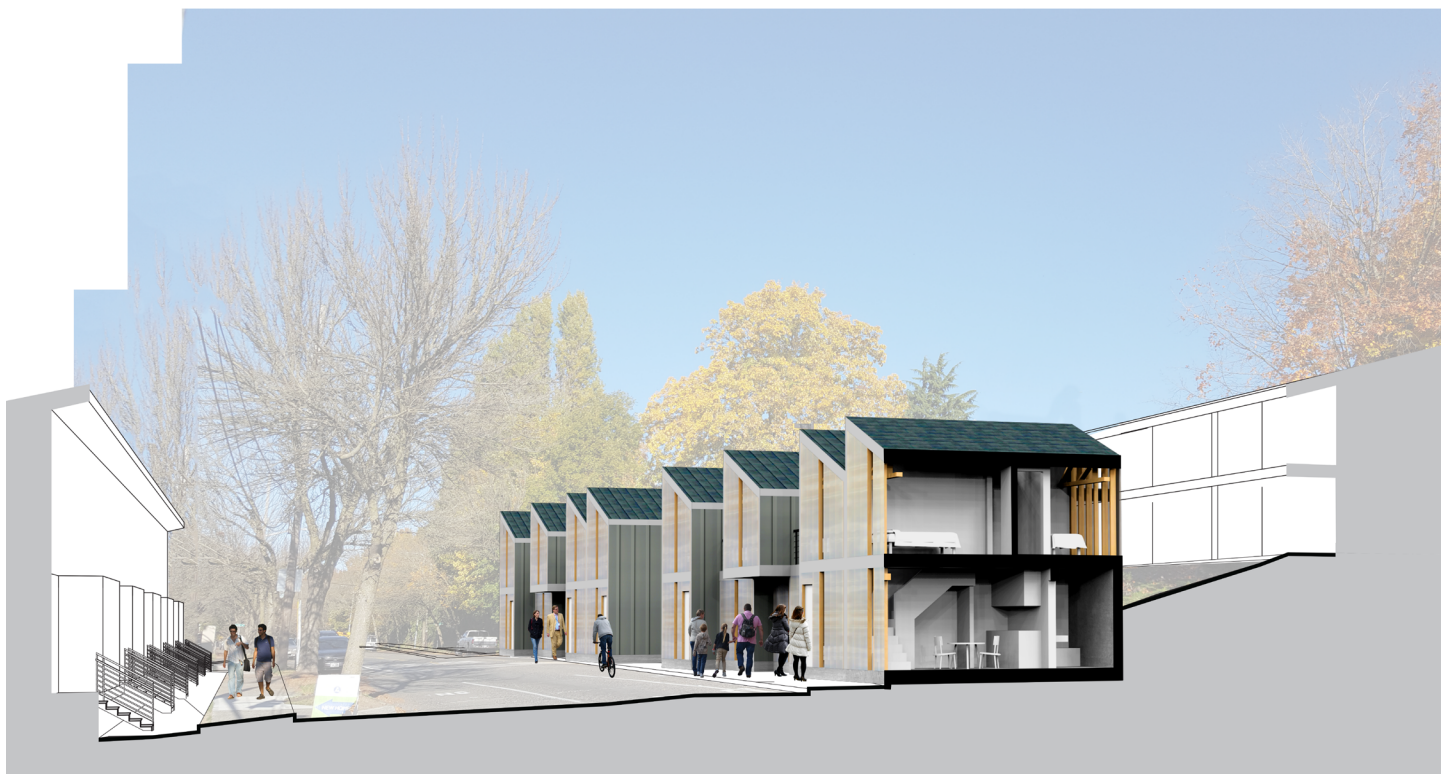


Figure 47 - Section perspective

Chapter 5: Conclusion

By identifying the void spaces of the city, a greater understanding of vacant lot's potential good can be achieved. This thesis proposes making use of this valuable land, and urges the City of Seattle to find funding to help purchasers that would relieve the City of residual land. The City can and should release this land to organizations that will make better use of irregular-shaped lots. The challenge moving forward though will be making sure the appropriate lands receive the appropriate programming. Some lots are better left as slope retention, and having green belts through the city is beneficial for preserving wildlife habitats.

Not all vacant land needs to be developed, yet if the governing entities have no plan for utilizing certain vacant lands for other goals, then the potential for development is being wasted. The City of Seattle has identified their need to sell off some of their vacant lands, which will alleviate the liability and financial burden of maintaining them. Not only would this program be beneficial to Seattle, but it would also benefit many other cities across the country that have similar public lands laws. Passing off the responsibility of ownership to non-profit organizations is an option that the City is capable of and should move forward with.



Figure 48 - Upper-level garden and terrace

Non-profit organizations will be able to find value in vacant lands and use it to spread social well-being according to the vision statement they follow. Transforming vacant lots into community gardens is a beneficial use that provides outdoor activities for the neighboring residents and brings beauty to an otherwise derelict space. Using these lands as exterior exhibit space for museums is another way to give a neighborhood a distinct identity. And lastly, building more housing would provide affordable housing options for low-income families. These new social uses if applied correctly will help stitch the city together by patching up the void spaces of the urban environment. Vacant land is not inherently useless, it just takes a bit of imagination to discover its value.

Endnotes

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