The Future in Ruins: Leveraging Principles of Preservation to Reclaim Vacant Buildings as Public Space in Downtown Seattle

Katherine Magee

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Dylan Stevenson

Daniel Winterbottom

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Abstract

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Katherine Magee

Co-Chairs of the Supervisory Committee:

Dylan Stevenson
Department of Urban Design and Planning

Daniel Winterbottom
Department of Landscape Architecture

Vacant buildings, deteriorating infrastructure, and shrinking public realms are symptoms of ongoing pandemic-era challenges and underfunded downtowns, contributing to broader crises of human disconnection and declining ecological networks. In Seattle, unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings embody this intersection of challenges, presenting seismic vulnerability and urban vacancy while offering unique opportunities for adaptive preservation and public space revitalization. This thesis reimagines preservation as a proactive, adaptive practice that moves beyond architectural integrity to embrace social, cultural, and ecological values. By integrating strategic deconstruction and on-site material reuse, preservation becomes a tool for regenerating urban "ruins" into community-rooted public spaces. Framed as a dynamic dialogue between past and future, this thesis proposes an approach that expands preservation practice beyond static artifact-guarding to an integrated, community-driven strategy that strengthens urban infrastructure across built, environmental, and social dimensions. Through this lens, former vacant sites are transformed into accessible public spaces that foster community cohesion, ecological health, and climate resilience. Applying this framework to a vacant URM building in Belltown, the thesis employs physical modeling and material analysis to develop design proposals that reimagine the site as a hybrid cultural-ecological 'commons.' This work offers a replicable model of adaptive preservation that leverages material continuity and spatial transformation to address urban challenges and promote more sustainable, equitable urban neighborhoods.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

This thesis explores how preservation can be reimagined as a proactive, regenerative tool for transforming sites with vacant, deteriorating buildings. In particular, it examines how unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings, historic and seismically vulnerable structures found throughout downtown Seattle, might be strategically deconstructed, adaptively reused, and reprogrammed into hybrid cultural-ecological commons.

This investigation is guided by three intersecting goals:

1. Broaden the social, cultural, and regulatory definitions of preservation to be more adaptable and inclusive;
2. Look at preservation through the lens of public space as an approach to building and strengthening urban infrastructure (built, social, ecological) in the face of climate and other contemporary threats to urban spaces;
3. Leverage deconstruction and material reuse to reduce waste, preserve embodied carbon, and retain local material heritage.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Preservation carries varied meanings across institutions, disciplines, and local contexts, reflecting the distinct values and priorities of organizations and governments. Among the most influential definitions in the United States are those provided by the National Park Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior, whose standards guide federal preservation policy and underpin local practices nationwide. They define preservation as "a conversation with our past about our future" ("Historic Preservation" 2021; "The National Park Service & Historic Preservation" n.d.) At the state level, organizations like Washington's Municipal Research and Services Center (WA MSRC) provide context-specific guidance shaping preservation efforts within local communities. The WA MSRC writes that historic preservation "maintains, restores, and rehabilitates historic and cultural resources for future generations...[and] identifies what's unique about a community and creates a sense of place" ("Historic Preservation" 2025).

Consistent in these 'official' definitions is the perspective of preservation as a dynamic process and its role as an important link between history and future generations, which informs the core approach of this thesis. Rather than understanding historic preservation as a way of freezing static artifacts, this project adopts a dynamic understanding of preservation as the active shaping of memory, identity, and material continuity over time. In this view, preservation reflects shared values, supports evolving character, and nurtures a living community fabric that connects generations.

Public space also plays a critical role in shaping resilient and inclusive cities. While definitions vary, public space is generally understood as the physical and symbolic spaces that are open and accessible to all, serving multiple functions and accommodating diverse users and activities. Drawing from Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe's Public Spaces, Public Life: Copenhagen, public spaces serve "a diversity of functions, multitude of people, fine views and fresh air" and act as "information and communication platforms," enabling cultural exchange and expression, diverse social interaction, democratic participation, and community self-definition (Gehl and Gemzøe 2004, 67, 79).

For this thesis, public space is defined by its value-add to downtown areas, focusing on qualities essential to active, connected neighborhoods. Some of these qualities include:

- Open, safe, accessible to all people
- Accommodating a range of programs and activities
- Connecting other key nodes and neighborhoods around the city
- Offering ecological connections and habitat for local species
- Encouraging social interaction and community gathering
- Providing therapeutic sanctuaries of nature that improve wellbeing
- Inviting democratic expression, protest, and cultural discourse
- Enabling communities to define and express their own needs and aspirations

Deconstruction and material reuse further expand the framework for this thesis by addressing the environmental and material dimensions of preservation. An alternative to demolition, deconstruction is the process of systematically disassembling buildings to recover materials for reuse or recycling, reducing landfill waste and embodied carbon by offsetting the need for new construction materials (Hauf 2023; Chini and Bruening 2003). In the context of this thesis, deconstruction and reuse function together as a strategy for on-site material circularity, to reduce environmental impact and foster continuity within an evolving urban fabric.

BACKGROUND

The urban built environment is failing to meet the needs of current and future residents. Aging infrastructure, fragmented ecological systems, and rising real estate pressure have strained downtowns like Seattle's, where access to housing, green space, and essential public resources is increasingly limited. Historically reliant on non-resident workers' social and economic activity, downtowns now face accelerated decommercialization and widespread vacancy, signs of "too much" underused space existing alongside "too little" access to essential amenities. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle of decline, an "urban doom loop" that has revealed downtowns' overreliance on commercial uses and deep inefficiencies in land use (Loh and Love 2023; Edsall 2022).

Paradoxically, despite perceptions of both too little and too much space, the real issue is a failure to manage urban space in ways that serve the public good. The decline of active, inclusive public realms contributes to crises in public health, social disconnection, and ecological degradation. As opportunities for social interaction diminish and environmental systems erode, the urban landscape grows increasingly inhospitable; less capable of sustaining human and non-human life, and less resilient to the threats of climate change, displacement, and disaster.

While much research explores downtown vacancy tied to remote work and digital marketplaces (Kotkin 2023; Olasov n.d.; Chapple et al. 2022), and separately addresses shrinking quality public urban space (Dunlop et al. 2023; Leclercq and Pojani 2023; Gidwani and Baviskar 2011), little attention has been paid to the intersection: growing commercial vacancy alongside failures to integrate these spaces into the public realm to promote ecological sustainability and social well-being.

In this context, preservation holds potential. As defined, preservation is a dynamic process linking past and future, offering a means to foster continuity, sustainability, and cultural resilience. Yet culturally, it is often framed in binary terms: buildings are either saved or lost, deemed worthy or discarded. Regulatory and market pressures reinforce this dichotomy, narrowing the scope of what preservation can be and undermining its broader relevance.

In reality, preservation exists on a spectrum – from full conservation to restoration to adaptive reuse – offering the potential for nuanced responses that balance heritage value with evolving urban needs (Figure 1.2). Yet, current policy frameworks tend to focus primarily on notions of "integrity," often assessed through the endurance of physical form. This emphasis on form over lived experience is embodied in the prevalence of "facadism," where surface architectural elements are preserved while intangible, community-valued heritage is erased (Vansynghel 2018; Whiters 2021).

This pervasive narrow view of what makes a place worth preserving obscures the full spectrum of strategies available and fuels the perception that preservation obstructs progress. Landmark status often imposes costly retrofits and rigid regulations that deter reinvestment. As a result, some developers intentionally neglect landmarked buildings to avoid these obligations, leading to "demolition by neglect." These outcomes reveal not a failure of preservation itself, but the limitations of the frameworks that define and enforce it.

When treated as a visual or economic burden rather than a strategy for adaptation, preservation loses its ability to support equitable, resilient, and future-oriented urban environments – outcomes that should be in the public's shared interest. This disconnect fundamentally undermines preservation's very purpose, resulting in the loss of what it aims to protect. To prevent further failure, and more effectively address contemporary challenges, preservation must be reimagined as a flexible, place-based practice responsive to community needs and urban change (Avrami, Leo, and Sanchez 2018; Scheld, Taplin, and Low 2014; Lowenthal 1989). Approaches such as selective deconstruction and on-site material reuse expand preservation beyond the building-as-object, enabling new forms of heritage expression while reducing environmental impact. Critically, these strategies broaden the preservation spectrum, allowing for adaptive interventions that balance material, cultural, and ecological values, with the potential to shift outcomes away from patterns of demolition (Figure 1.3). This expanded view also opens space for preservation to intersect meaningfully with public space.

Figure 1.1 Spectrum of Preservation, depicting City of Seattle landmarks (left to right):

Galbraith House, Capitol Hill (built 1904, landmarked 2005, demolished 2018) | Google Maps
Galbraith House, Capitol Hill (built 1904, landmarked 2005, demolished 2018) | Tom Heuser, Capitol Hill Historical Society
Firestone Tire Building/400 Westlake, South Lake Union (built 1929, landmarked 2016, alterations completed 2024) | Perkins + Will
Johnson Plumbing Building/Gridiron Condos, Pioneer Square (built 1903, alterations completed 2018) | Lara Swimmer via Hewitt
Chophouse Row, Capitol Hill (built 1924, completed 2015) | Graham Baba Architects
Queen Anne Exchange, Queen Anne (built 1921, landmarked 2015) | Lara Swimmer via BuildingWork
Cotterill House, Queen Anne (built 1910, landmarked 1978) | Queen Anne Historical Society
Stimson-Green Mansion, First Hill (built 1901, landmarked 1977, property given to Washington Trust for Historic Preservation 2001 | Michael D. Martin via Historic Seattle

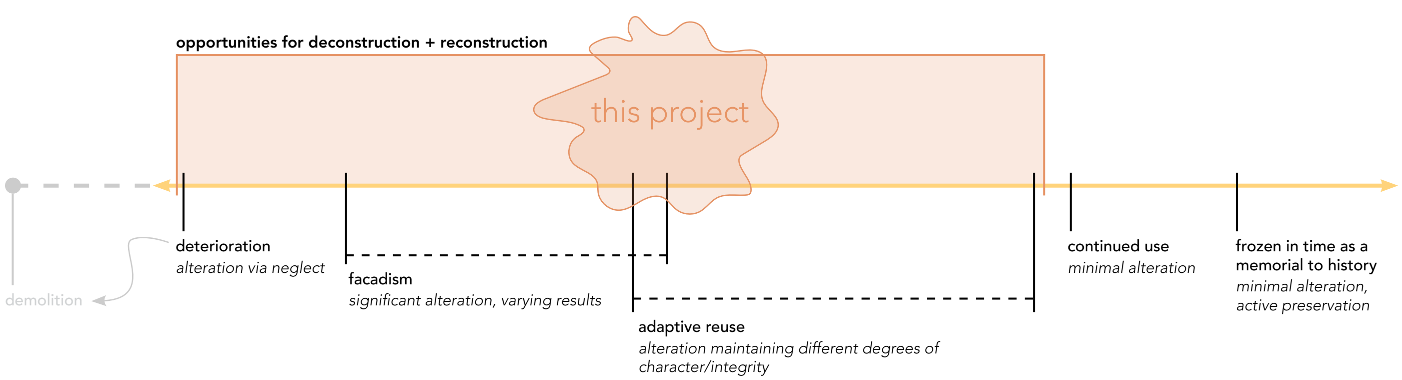


Figure 1.2 Intervention: Spectrum of Preservation

Within this context, the unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings of downtown Seattle offer a unique typology for exploration. Many of them are vacant, underused, and at risk of demolition; these seismically vulnerable but materially rich structures remain largely excluded from contemporary urban strategies. By examining how URM sites might be selectively deconstructed, reprogrammed, and reconstructed as hybrid cultural-ecological commons, this thesis proposes a broader framework for preservation: one that addresses the intertwined crises of vacancy, climate change, and public space scarcity through strategies of reuse, repair, and reinvention.

THE ARGUMENT

This thesis proposes an expanded model of preservation that responds to contemporary urban needs by integrating strategies of selective deconstruction, on-site material reuse, and public space transformation. Moving beyond static notions of "integrity," it reframes preservation as a dynamic, place-based process capable of supporting both continuity and change.

Urban vacancy, typically treated as a loss leading to demolition, can instead be an opportunity to create public space. Underused structures can be carefully dismantled, with

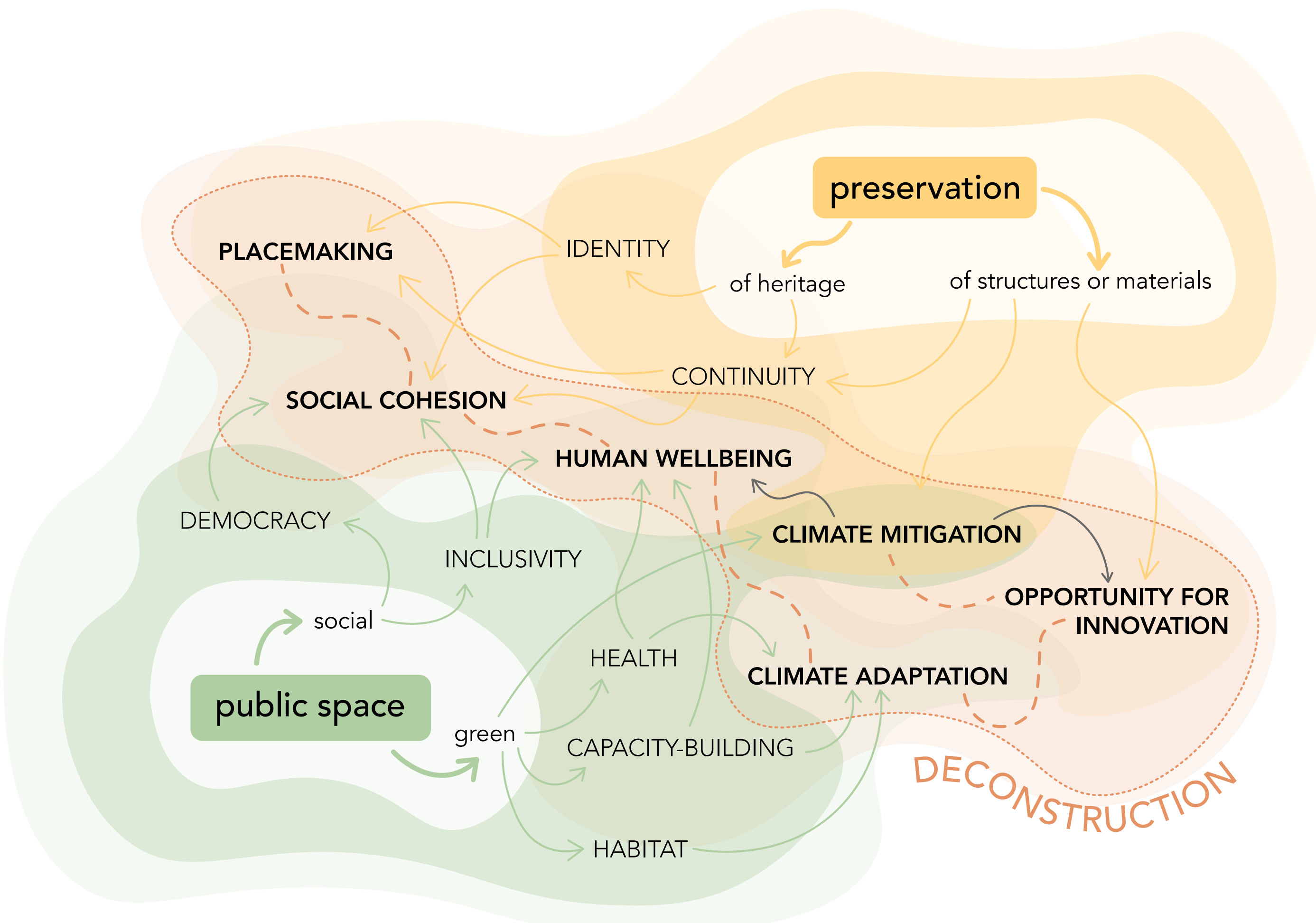


Figure 1.3 Conceptual Framework diagram

their materials reintegrated into new civic uses that carry forward embedded histories. In this context, deconstruction and material reuse become strategic tools that bridge the goals of preservation (material, historical, and cultural continuity) with those of public space (promoting social, ecological, and spatial activation).

Grounded in the idea of preservation as "a conversation with our past about our future," this thesis positions deconstruction and material reuse as a unified cultural and spatial practice that simultaneously advances public space production, climate resilience, and community cohesion (Figure 1.3). This preservation-informed framework strengthens infrastructure across three interconnected dimensions:

- » Built: through structural reinvention and material reuse;
- » Environmental: through ecological regeneration and climate-responsive design;
- » Social: through honoring community significance and creating inclusive public spaces.

These principles are applied to Seattle's vacant, deteriorating unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings – 'ruins' symbolic of urban life that once thrived but has since faded. Through deliberate deconstruction and context-specific reuse, these structures can be transformed into a new typology of urban public space that hybridizes built and natural environments, historic and contemporary culture, and formal and community-driven infrastructure (Figure 1.4).

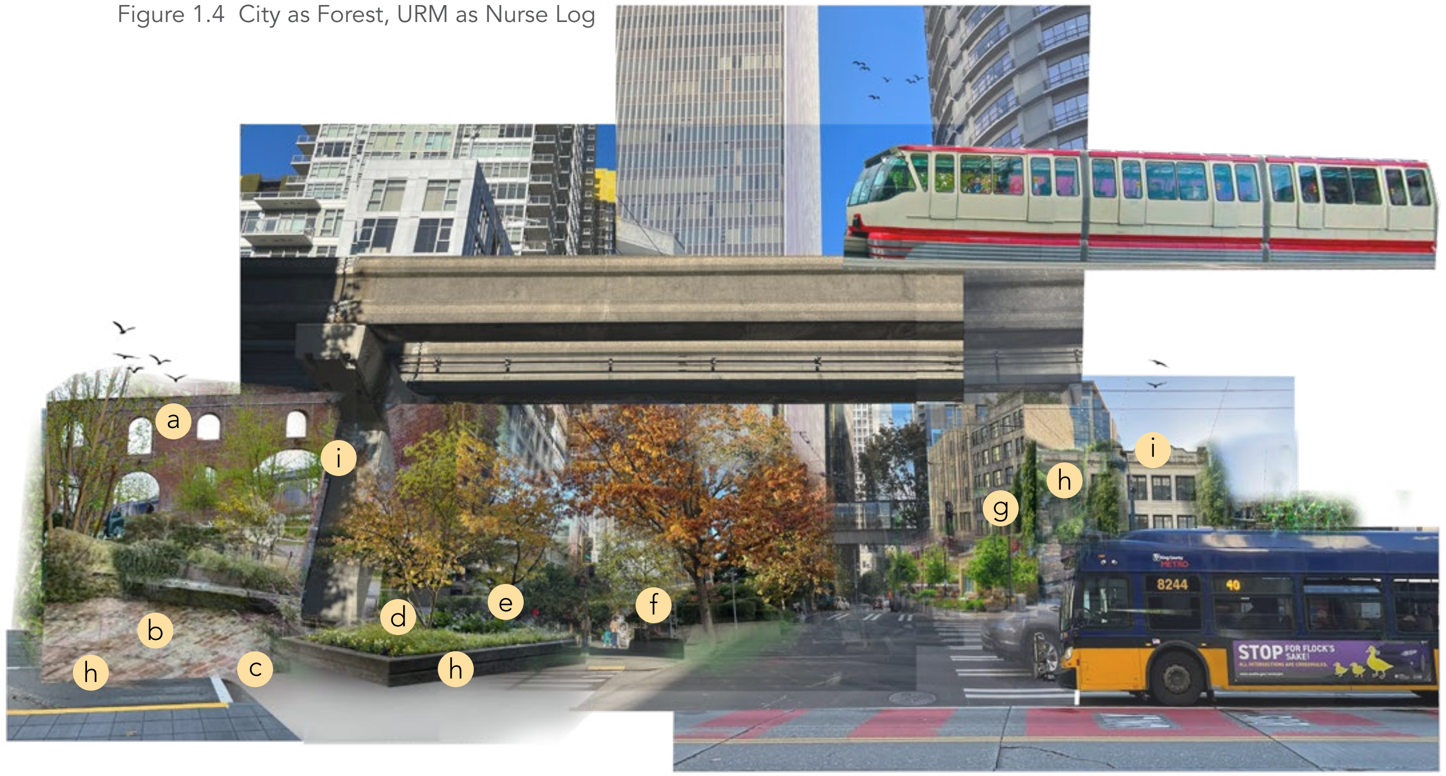
Realized through innovative preservation strategies, these spaces emerge as dynamic agents of memory and regeneration. Like nurse logs in a forest – fallen trees that nourish new life – these structures, though no longer functional in their original form, support new public, ecological, and cultural life.

This thesis offers a model that challenges existing preservation practice to better address today's urban realities. By integrating heritage preservation with climate mitigation, it envisions spaces that honor Seattle's history while confronting urgent issues such as safety, embodied emissions, and waste – paving (or rather, de-paving) the way to a healthier, more sustainable city. To guide this effort, I ask the following research questions:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How can principles of preservation, deconstruction, and design with material reuse transform the typology of historic unreinforced masonry buildings into a new hybrid typology of safe, ecologically and culturally rich public spaces for downtown Seattle?
2. How can these new public spaces build and connect essential urban infrastructure (built, environmental, social) to improve human and ecological health, foster community development, and strengthen urban systems in the face of climate threats?
3. How might this hybrid typology of green-built-historic-public space be conceptualized as a replicable model for creating healthier, more sustainable urban environments?

Figure 1.4 City as Forest, URM as Nurse Log



- a historic materiality
- b open space
- c public
- d native + bioremedial plants
- e shade + solace
- f space for people
- g building ecological function
- h repurposed materials
- i reinhabited vacancy

The following chapters address these research questions. Chapter 2 reviews literature on downtown revitalization, public space, commoning, and preservation theory, highlighting their interconnected challenges in post-COVID urban contexts. It argues that combining a more adaptive approach to historic preservation with public space strategies can support downtown reinvention, drawing on precedents where public spaces have emerged from ‘ruins’ through intentional design. Focusing in on Seattle, Chapter 3 examines how public space, preservation, and neighborhood identity interact amid vacancy, infrastructure challenges, and affordability pressures. It explores tensions between top-down planning and grassroots efforts, and narrows the site to Belltown, where a high concentration of URMs, limited public space, and strong community engagement converge. Building on this foundation, Chapter 4 introduces the design research process, outlining methods such as urban form analysis, archival research, digital and physical modeling, and material studies that inform a site-specific intervention. Chapter 5 presents two alternate design proposals and key findings, demonstrating how selective deconstruction and material reuse can transform a vacant URM building into a community-rooted public space. The designs are evaluated for their capacity to strengthen built, environmental, and social infrastructure. Chapter 6 reflects on the design process, outcomes, and limitations, while the final chapter concludes with key insights and recommendations looking forward.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Cities across the world are facing new and intensified challenges following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. With downtowns in particular experiencing urban decline, shifting economic patterns, and increasing environmental pressures, there is an urgent need to rethink how space is used in cities. The pandemic accelerated changes that were already in motion, including the decentralization of economic activities, increased remote work, and growing vacancy in traditional office and commercial spaces.

These trends, compounded by a housing crisis, are revealing stark inefficiencies in downtowns. Once bustling with the social and economic activity of non-resident commuters, downtown centers are now struggling to maintain themselves, victim to the "urban doom loop" of disinvestment and increasingly troubled by issues of homelessness, vacancy, and deteriorating physical and social infrastructure.

Central to these discussions is the question of how downtowns can be reimagined to prioritize human wellbeing, sustainability, and social cohesion. As downtowns shift from purely commercial and office use, urban designers have an opportunity to imagine innovative, adaptive solutions to foster connection and regrowth. This chapter will explore the evolving challenges faced by post-COVID, post-commercial urban centers, with a focus on the role of public space and historic preservation in addressing these issues. Through this literature review, I will argue that the integration of historic preservation and new public space offers a solution, aiding in building urban environments that are resilient, responsive to contemporary needs, and capable of fostering community identity, well-being, and innovation in the face of climate change.

A BROKEN CITY

The contemporary American city is suffering from a series of interconnected challenges including issues related to space (housing crisis, growing vacancies, inequitable distribution of public greenspace), deteriorating physical and social infrastructure, and declining ecological and human health. These challenges not only harm residents' quality of life today but threaten future urban resilience, undermining the ability of cities' built environments to adapt to climate impacts.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, downtowns were already facing challenges due to patterns of decentralization, with many businesses and residents moving to suburban areas in search of more affordable housing and better living conditions (Chapple et al. 2022). The pandemic catalyzed a more rapid transformation of downtown spaces, as the rise in remote work diminished the demand for office space, leaving downtown areas with high vacancy rates and underutilized public spaces (Olasov n.d.).

As businesses, workers, and residents moved away from urban cores, many downtowns experienced a hollowing out of their tax bases, resulting in a phenomenon coined the "urban doom loop." The "urban doom loop" describes how decreased activity in downtown areas leads to disinvestment and deterioration of the built environment, creating a self-perpetuating cycle: less activity and more vacancy results in less economic activity and reduced public transit usage, which in turn reduces the local government's revenue, further hindering the ability to maintain infrastructure and provide public services. This cycle encourages more affluent residents to move out and redistributes poverty and homelessness to urban centers, which – compounded by the growing housing crisis – further contributes to the visible decline of downtowns, alters perceptions of safety and urban vitality, and exacerbates economic and racial inequalities (Edsall 2022; Loh and Love 2023; Gidwani and Baviskar 2011).

As patterns of decentralization have created new mini city centers (or urban villages) within residential neighborhoods, downtowns have remained dominated by office buildings, which still account for a majority square footage in many American cities. Office buildings consume 49% of Seattle's downtown square footage, as well as 83% of Boston's and 74% of San Francisco's (Badger and Bui 2021). This overabundance of office space, coupled with a more limited tax base and declining revenues, has made recovery difficult for post-pandemic downtowns. Additionally, experiences during pandemic-era lockdowns have shifted expectations among urban residents, who prioritize quality-of-life amenities including walkability, community infrastructure, and access to nature. Facing complex challenges rooted in outdated urban structures and evolving demands for more people-centered environments, downtowns have been slow to recover from pandemic-era activity deficits, while other urban neighborhoods thrive (Kotkin 2023; Short 2023).

Because downtown business districts have fundamentally changed, they require more than recovery to prevent further social, economic, and ecological decline; they need reinvention, a dramatic shift in urban values and strategies, including rethinking who uses space and how (Edsall 2022). Scholars have proposed solutions that look to diversify economic activity and land uses in order to create more walkable, people-centered places; such as, reinhabiting vacant spaces as community centers, converting vacant office buildings into housing, and investing in more adaptive infrastructure that responds to climate, accessibility, and evolving public needs (Kotkin 2023; Short 2023; Smigielski 2014)

Calls for more adaptive, people-centered downtowns have underscored the need for spaces that foster community, support environmental health, and accommodate diverse uses. Transformation demands adaptive reuse and economic diversification alongside intentional design and stewardship of public space as a shared, inclusive resource.

WHY PUBLIC SPACE?

Public space has long been considered a fundamental aspect of urban life, playing a critical role in fostering social interaction, democracy, economic vitality, and human health and wellness. Public space – especially in the form of public green space – enhances the aesthetic quality and desirability of urban areas, but also critically contributes to the environmental and economic health of cities (Wolf et al. 2015). Urban greenspace supports immediate urban health by improving air quality, managing stormwater, and mitigating urban heat islands; they also support biodiversity, create habitats for wildlife, and promote carbon sequestration, playing a crucial role in sustainable urban design (CABE Space n.d.; Orsetti et al. 2022).

The value of public space extends far beyond its physical infrastructure. Abundant evidence demonstrates that well-designed public spaces are essential for fostering social cohesion, encouraging spontaneous interactions, and providing venues for relaxation, recreation, and cultural expression. They create opportunities for diverse groups to come together, promoting inclusivity, community, and civic engagement (Gehl 2011; Jacobs 1961; Mitchell 2003; Whyte 1980). Access to urban greenspace and the multiplicity of amenities it offers has been linked to significant human health and well-being benefits. These benefits translate into substantial long-term economic gains – between $2.7 and $6.8 billion annually – tied to those improved psychosocial, cognitive, and physical health outcomes (Orsetti et al. 2022; Wolf et al. 2015; Yang et al. 2021) As cities become increasingly dense and complex, the importance of public spaces has only grown, playing a crucial role in addressing urban challenges from climate change to crises of human connection, and strengthening resilience for the future.

The growing privatization and commercialization of public space in recent decades, however, has eroded its social value. Malls, private plazas, and corporate-sponsored parks have increasingly replaced traditional public spaces, often with implementation of surveillance and restrictive rules governing who can access them and how they can be used (Mitchell 1995; Németh 2012). Privately owned public spaces (POPS) represent a hybrid model of public space, offering amenities like greenspace and areas for rest and social gathering, but owned and managed by private entities, which impose restrictions and may control accessibility and usage (Dunlop et al. 2023). POPS are designed to attract consumers, enhance the value of surrounding private developments, and create a curated environment that aligns with the interests of private owners. While POPS remain physically open to the public, the degree of control exerted by private owners – whether through restrictions on activities, surveillance, or imposition of commercial activity – undermines the core democratic principles that public space has historically embodied (Leclercq and Pojani 2023; Mitchell 1995; Németh 2012).

The trend toward privatization has led to a shift from spaces that foster public life and community engagement to those that prioritize consumerism and profit over social value. This has broad, though often unrecognized, implications for inclusivity, accessibility, and freedom of use and expression, eroding true "publicness" (Dunlop et al. 2023; Leclercq and Pojani 2023).

COMMONS

The concept of urban commons offers an alternative to increasingly commodified public space. Urban commons refer to spaces and resources collectively managed by communities, rather than being privately owned and controlled. The practice of "commoning" counters privatization by fostering collective stewardship and shared responsibility, strengthening community ties around shared resources. (Gidwani and Baviskar 2011; Harvey 2008).

Through collective use and stewardship, urban

Figure 2.1 Paley Park, a POP in New York City | Charles Birnbaum via TCLF

commons foster a more democratic, resilient urban form – one that is equitable and socially cohesive – focusing on shared responsibility and shared value and reprioritizing community well-being and environmental health over commercial or private interests (Foster and Iaione 2016; Standing 2018; Stavrides 2016). When urban spaces are viewed as shared resources to be collectively envisioned and managed, they become more flexible and adaptable, supporting a wide range of uses – including environmental functions, recreation, social gathering, and democratic expression. This approach better equips cities to face major challenges like scarcity, environmental degradation, and social inequality (Verheij, Gerber, and Nahrath 2024; Feinberg and Herder 2023; Bodnar 2015; Nissen 2008).

Reinhabiting underutilized or vacant space through commoning can be a particularly powerful strategy for increasing urban resilience, giving rise to community-driven spaces such as gardens, co-working hubs, parks, and cultural centers. Free from private and profit-driven interests, these spaces support projects that directly address social and environmental needs – promoting engagement, inclusion, and ecological regeneration, and strengthening social and built infrastructure against present and future threats. (Carlone et al. 2022).

While urban commons typically refer to open spaces (vacant lots, surface parking lots, former airfields, etc), my project builds on existing literature to explore how vacant buildings, like other underutilized urban spaces, can be reshaped into dynamic, shared resources. A hybrid approach to building adaptation blends cultural memory and identity with a focus on flexible use that responds to changing community needs (Günçe and Albraifkanni 2020). When applied alongside concepts of commoning, this approach might allow vacant buildings (now privatized and closed off) to be integrated into open space networks, staying relevant and resilient across generations while preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainability. In recognition of heritage and urban open space as "complementary layers of urban life," this approach proposes a new typology of public space where community, memory, culture, and space identity come together to foster rich environments that are not only functional but deeply connected to the people they serve (Taylor 2025).

RETHINKING PRESERVATION

In supporting memory, identity, and community cohesion, historic preservation has the potential to play an important role in strengthening urban life; yet in practice, preservation in the United States is too often treated as oppositional to progress and innovation, rather than as a complementary force (Sandefur 2024; Zhang and Gianoli 2025). Legal preservation has become a tool in broader conflicts over development, a weapon in a war between 'status quo' and 'modernization.' Preservationists seek landmark status or leverage preservation reviews to intentionally delay or derail development projects, and conversely, developers actively prevent the designation and protection of new landmarks in order to secure properties viable for redevelopment (Vansynghel 2018). As a result, historic places are often either fully protected as landmarks, with restrictions and procedural design review requirements, or left vulnerable to demolition, with little room for nuanced approaches that allow for growth and adaptation.

This tension is not inherent to preservation itself but rather a consequence of how preservation has been narrowly defined and applied – privileging "correct form," aesthetics, and architectural "integrity" over the overall material fabric, the social, cultural, and experiential qualities that make these spaces meaningful to the people who use them (Avrami, Leo, and Sanchez 2018; Murtagh 2005; Scheld, Taplin, and Low 2014). This narrow, object-based understanding of heritage is rooted in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), which evaluates properties based on "integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association," with significance tied to architectural style, association with notable events or persons, or archaeological value (National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 as Amended 1981). This approach favors high-style Euro-American architecture and dominant historical narratives, often excluding vernacular or community-valued places, particularly in communities of color (Avrami, Leo, and Sanchez 2018; King 2003; Morgan, Morgan, and Barrett 2006).

While later amendments to the NHPA and tools like National Register Bulletin 38 attempt to expand the eligibility of "properties of traditional religious and cultural importance" and Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs), these have been unevenly applied due to bureaucratic complexity, lack of funding, and reliance on professional consultants over community stakeholders (Parker and King 1990; Morgan, Morgan, and Barrett 2006). As a result, places made significant through memory, use, and cultural practice remain largely unrecognized. The continued emphasis on architectural integrity, even when a place's value is not architectural, restricts the field's ability to reflect diverse heritage and respond to contemporary social and ecological needs (Michael 2014). Vernacular, everyday, and culturally meaningful places are overlooked and often lost to redevelopment.

A rethinking of preservation – culturally, legally, and in practice – is necessary in order to support both the protection of historic and cultural places and the evolving needs of cities. Moving beyond rigid architectural replication requires a flexible framework that values both the tangible and intangible qualities embedded in historic places: architectural, material, experiential, and environmental. This shift involves replacing the rigid notion of "integrity" with a broader understanding of "authenticity," understood as the relationship between people and place, grounded not solely in the material fabric but in how a place is used, remembered, and valued (Stovel 2008). It also requires centering the voices of those who inhabit and care for these places, recognizing that communities are dynamic and that everyday sites can carry deep cultural weight (Avrami, Leo, and Sanchez 2018; Morgan, Morgan, and Barrett 2006).

Prioritizing authenticity and 'hybridity' – allowing the overlap of cultures and concepts that maintain productive, flexible interaction, to encourage interaction and designate creativity – would enable a preservation practice that honors the essence of a place while making it functional and adaptable to modern urban needs (Günçe and Albraifkanni 2020; Tyler, Ligibel, and Tyler 2018). In vernacular contexts especially, change is not a threat to preservation but a condition of it; vernacular places are shaped by, and build meaning through, ongoing use and adaptation(Stovel 1987). Preservation should support continuity through reinvestment and reuse, not immobilization.

This approach aligns with critiques of material preservation that caution against fetishizing the past, obscuring its meaning, and opens the door to more varied levels of intervention (Lowenthal 1989). Alternative modes – such as preserving fragments of the whole, replicating processes of manufacturing, images or other physical or abstract representations of past meaning – prioritize preserving the meaning and function of places over fixed appearance, treating preservation as an evolving conversation between past and future, an approach emphasized in the definitions publicized by the U.S. Department of the Interior and other agencies.

Expanding on these options to incorporate strategies like selective deconstruction and material reuse supports preservation and sustainable development by reframing the false binary between preservation and progress. These strategies reduce carbon impacts of demolition and new construction while enabling integration of past heritage and contemporary programming. Beyond environmental and cultural benefits, recent research emphasizes how these strategies also promote economic resilience and community engagement by creating local material loops and preserving social memory, positioning deconstruction as a promising framework for sustainable urban transformation (Pomponi and Moncaster 2017; Gorgolewski 2008).

A people-centered approach to preservation supports more equitable, healthy, and resilient communities by recognizing that historic places shape physical and psychological health, social cohesion, entrepreneurial spirit, and conservation of land and habitat (McClimon 2018). Grounding historic preservation in community engagement and cultural relevance – and acknowledging place as an accumulation of time rather than a static snapshot – invites broader and more creative approaches to preservation practice that better fulfill the NHPA's goal of preserving heritage as a living, evolving part of community life. In this way, preservation can become a tool to reimagine urban form in ways that strengthen communities, promote equity, and support climate adaptation (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation 2017).

RUINS AS OPPORTUNITIES

To better understand how this approach can be realized in practice, the following projects trace a continuum of approaches to reusing and engaging with ruins, navigating the relationship between past and present through varying balances of preservation, transformation, and use. Together, they demonstrate ways in which cities, designers, and communities have reclaimed remnants of former infrastructure as frameworks for renewed public life – each offering distinct strategies for engaging with memory, material, and new uses.

LANDSCHAFTSPARK DUISBURG-NORD (LATZ+PARTNER)

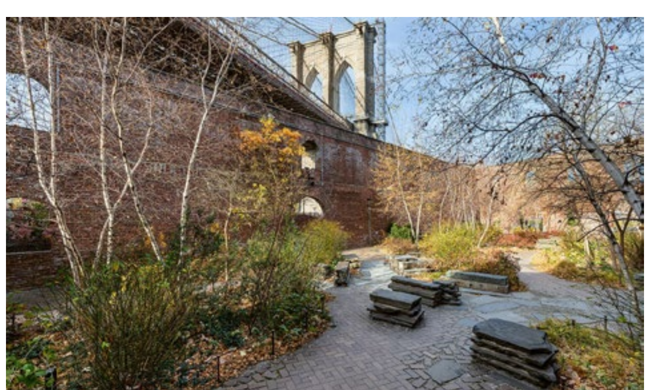
In Germany, the previously mentioned Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, designed by Latz + Partner beginning in 1990 and fully realized by 2002, takes a monumental approach, preserving the site's industrial form as a foundation for layering diverse public and ecological uses. The vast former steel plant is largely maintained intact, but reinterpreted; its massive structures now support climbing walls, promenades, gardens, land art, and civic events. The site's industrial past, spatial and architectural features find "a new interpretation with a new syntax," according to the designer, the history neither reconstructed nor abstracted but felt through presence and scale ("Duisburg Nord Landscape Park, DE" n.d.). Memory and understanding of the site's past were central to the design, embodied in the continuity of form that now frames new activities and experiences.

Figure 2.2 Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord | Christ Panick, Michael Latz, Jane Sebire via Landezine

MAX FAMILY GARDEN (MVVA)

The Max Family Garden at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn – constructed in 2016 and designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA) – also employs historic materiality as a design strategy, but emphasizes the material itself more than the memories embedded within. Occupying the shell of a nineteenth-century tobacco factory, the project is less concerned with the specific narrative of the site's past and more with its material traces: brick, texture, and edge ("Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc" n.d.). The ruin is stabilized and opened up, with its tactile and structural qualities anchoring present-day use. The past is understood through physical texture and literal framing – with the brick walls surrounding the interior park, and local material elements integrated throughout. While Landschaftspark relies on historic interpretation, elements of memory and transience as key strategies from which to build new public spaces and uses, this project activates the space through reinhabitation and reuse of the material ruins (Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.3 Max Family Garden | MVVA



TURTLE CREEK WATER WORKS (D.I.R.T. STUDIO)

A similar attention to material presence shapes D.I.R.T Studio's Turtle Creek Waterworks in Dallas, completed in 2002. Its large concrete reservoirs no longer flowing with water, the abandoned historic pumphouse is reimagined as a quiet cultural landscape and sculpture garden,"with a new flow of arts events and everyday play" Selective deconstruction reveals and frames the historic infrastructure, allowing traces of the past to support new uses. Water is reintroduced not functionally but poetically, alongside broken stone paths, wild native plantings, and minimal sculptural interventions. Committed to cataloging, preserving, and restoring critical features, the design is described as "one of restraint," relying on simple means: opened surfaces, creatively reused materials – including 70 year-old broken concrete slabs as garden floor, defunct electrical panels integrated into steel benches, and a re-fashioned steel well-head as a cocktail table – with the addition of water and native plants that recolonize themselves ("ASLA Professional Awards" 2007; "Turtle Creek Water Works" n.d.). The project exemplifies ruin as both artifact, resonant in itself, and as armature for new art, landscape, and reflection (Figure 2.10).

Figure 2.4 Turtle Creek Water Works | Tom Jenkins via ASLA (right) Charles Birnbaum via TCLF (below)

Other projects shift focus from preservation of form to the inhabitation and adaptation of place – embracing social occupation, transformation, and honoring the past through reuse that resonates today. This approach reimagines "ruins" as living spaces, socially or ecologically renewed, with less emphasis on preserving a fixed historical narrative.

SZIMPLA KERT, BUDAPEST

In Budapest, Szimpla Kert and other "ruin bars" illustrate this layered reuse. Rather than restoring or deconstructing, these deteriorated buildings are simply reopened and reoccupied, animated with salvaged furniture, vibrant colors, and dynamic uses. Memory here is informal and ambient, created through ongoing presence and accumulation rather than exact preservation (Figure 2.11; Ruin Bars Budapest n.d.).

Figure 2.5 Szimpla Kert | Sunshine Seeker (above), Alamy (below)

JARDIN DES JOYEUX (WAGON LANDSCAPING)

In Paris, Jardin des Joyeux, designed by Wagon Landscaping, similarly reoccupies an underutilized space, but a very different kind of site: a former parking lot with no architectural heritage to preserve. The project breaks up the asphalt surface and rearranges the broken concrete and asphalt into playful, ecological topographies. While the physical history as a parking lot is erased, its material fragments are preserved and repurposed to nurture new ecological and social life; stewardship and growth become the new language of memory (Figure 2.12; "Jardin Des Joyeux by Wagon-Landscaping" 2018).

Figure 2.6 Jardin des Joyeux, process | Landezine

Figure 2.7 Jardin des Joyeux | Landezine

PEARL DISTRICT, PORTLAND OR

In Portland, the Ecotrust Building site and surrounding Pearl District demonstrate a hybrid approach that treats preservation as a framework for ongoing transformation, rather than as an endpoint. Along the edge of a parking lot, a partial brick wall is supported from behind by a metal structure that extends beyond the brickwork, gradually opening up into a metal shade structure with integrated plantings. Salvaged and new structures are layered to blur distinctions between past and present, framing views toward the adaptively reused Ecotrust Building and activating the interface with the public realm, while still functioning as a parking lot.

Elements of the area's material and ecological heritage are integrated throughout the district: salvaged stone and wood are used as paving, industrial remnants are repurposed as artwork and street furnishings, and historic wetland habitats have been restored to reestablish native ecology. These gestures operate at multiple scales – architectural, infrastructural, and environmental – reinforcing a layered identity where the historic fabric supports new uses (Leahy 2019; Mills 2020).

Figure 2.8 Pearl District Ecotrust Building details

Through integration of evolved preservation and public space strategies, Seattle can rebuild its downtown to meet the demands of the public good, fostering community identity, innovation, and well-being in the face of ongoing urban challenges and climate change. These examples reflect varied possibilities for how various forms of 'ruins' can support public space, by both preserving and honoring what once was and enabling what could be. They serve as precedents for thinking about how traces of the past might anchor future use – materially, ecologically, and socially – as I return to the context of Seattle in the next chapter.

Figure 2.9 Pearl District details at Tanner Springs Park and The Fields Park

CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

This chapter builds on the broader discussion of preservation and public space by looking at how these elements exist within the context of Seattle. I explore how public space, commoning, preservation, and neighborhood identity have manifested locally, and how tensions between top-down planning and community-driven efforts have shaped Seattle's urban fabric. As the city faces mounting challenges – vacancy in its urban core, aging infrastructure, rising unaffordability, and the pressures of climate change – it presents a compelling case for rethinking these frameworks together.

THE LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC SPACE IN SEATTLE

Seattle's public space network reflects a layered history of settler-colonial reordering of land, elite planning, and neighborhood activism. Much of the city's early urban form was shaped by the desire to tame, "improve upon," and commodify nature in service of growth and industry (Klingle 2007). Large-scale efforts like the Olmsted Brothers' 1903 park plan aimed to civilize the city through orderly, health-promoting landscapes, drawing on City Beautiful ideals to promote public morality through exposure to 'natural beauty' while simultaneously increasing adjacent land values in anticipation of speculative development (Klingle 2007, 5, 127). But from the beginning, these visions encountered resistance, with Seattleites debating what public space should be and whom it should serve.

Working-class and immigrant communities, among others, sought more flexible, active, and socially useful spaces than the Olmstedian grand parks and boulevards. Organizations like the Seattle Playground Association challenged the notion that public space design should be the exclusive domain of elite professionals, arguing instead for accessible, flexible, socially responsive spaces. The rejection of the 1911 Bogue Plan, Seattle's first comprehensive plan proposal, illustrates how voters pushed back against centralized planning that concentrated money and ignored immediate local needs (Klingle 2007). As large-scale visions stalled, hyper-local efforts grew, with community clubs and civic organizations advocating for green space and playground development at the neighborhood level, a pattern that continues to define Seattle's public space politics.

By the 1930s, Seattle had amassed an impressive public space inventory – including over 40 parks, dozens of playgrounds, bathing beaches, scenic drives, and neighborhood pocket parks – with varying outcomes and continually growing tensions between top-down and bottom-up public space planning efforts (Klingle 2007, 150). The creation of formalized public spaces often came at the expense of unhoused individuals, Indigenous communities, and informal land users, and efforts to preserve parks as "ordered" and "pastoral" prompted ongoing exclusionary policies, privatization, and spatial control.

Yet, no matter how meticulously they were planned, parks reflected the unpredictable interplay between human and nonhuman forces, continually reshaped by the ecological and social dynamics they sought to contain and control. This mounting unpredictability was reflected in the development of Seward Park (then Bailey Peninsula), where efforts to protect bird habitats clashed with adjacent landowners' complaints, and at Green Lake, where pollution led to persistent algal blooms despite engineering interventions (Klingle 2007, 150–52). In some cases, these challenges pushed city officials toward privatization as a means of tightening control – notably in the case of the Washington Park Arboretum, established through a public-private partnership between the City of Seattle and the University of Washington and funded by a nonprofit foundation.

In contrast, community-driven green spaces emerged throughout the 20th century as residents responded to gaps in access and representation. Initiated in 1973, Seattle's P-Patch Program grew from a single community garden into a citywide network of over 90 sites within two decades (Figure 3.1). P-Patch gardeners provide stewardship and grow food

Figure 3.1 One of Seattle's 90+ P-Patches | Seattle Department of Neighborhoods

and community on 33.7 acres of public urban land, typically in residential neighborhoods on previously underutilized parcels ("About the P-Patch Program" n.d.). The program continues to thrive because of the individuals and community organizations – garden collectives, nonprofits, and urban food advocacy groups – who put in the time and effort to steward and grow these spaces. Demand for access to these spaces is high, with waiting time for garden plots often 3-5 years. Other neighborhood-led playground projects and block-level green infrastructure initiatives reflect the success of bottom-up public space, rooted in local priorities. In Maple Leaf, for example, neighbors drove efforts to fund and build a playground, envisioned and advocated for the Upper Maple Leaf Reservoir Park, and continue to steward native plantings there (Hou 2010; "Maple Leaf Reservoir Park" n.d.; "Neighborhood Matching Fund Project Records" n.d.; "Neighborhood Matching Fund" n.d.).

Despite growing support for grassroots planning, recent projects and past proposals suggest an ongoing disconnect between centralized planning and community priorities. The failed Seattle Commons proposal of the 1990s remains a pivotal case study. Framed as a civic investment akin to New York's Central Park, the proposal sought to transform 60 acres of South Lake Union – then composed primarily of one-store light industrial, retail, and auto dealership buildings and over 40% vacant lots or surface parking – into a massive downtown park ("Citation: Committee for the Seattle Commons" 1995). But voters rejected it, citing concerns over displacement, unaffordability, and the privatization of public land. The project's downfall reflected widespread skepticism about who benefits from high-profile planning efforts and highlighted the enduring tension between neighborhood-scale needs and centralized visions (Klingle 2007).

The City of Seattle continues to invest in major, centrally coordinated public space initiatives – such as the Seattle Waterfront Program, including the newly opened multi-level Overlook Walk park and the Waterfront Park on Pier 58 – with attempts to address past shortcomings by incorporating public feedback through community engagement ("New Overlook Walk Opens in Seattle, Connecting Pike Place Market to the Waterfront" n.d.; "Seattle's New Waterfront Is Taking Shape" n.d.). But the Seattle Waterfront is still a massive top-down planning effort, an $806 million multi-year investment led by city agencies and design consultants ("Seattle Waterfront Program" 2024; "Seattle's New Waterfront Is Taking Shape" n.d.). While met with much excitement and anticipation, the Waterfront has drawn criticism for prioritizing tourism-oriented placemaking over more localized, community-identified needs, echoing concerns from earlier eras.

Initiatives like the P-Patch program, the Neighborhood Matching Fund, and the recently launched Park CommUNITY Fund offer a counterpoint to top-down investment by channeling public resources directly into neighborhood-scale visions. These programs invest in local organizations' efforts to build and maintain spaces people want and need: community gardens, improved trail signage, neighborhood greening efforts, playgrounds, or plazas near local businesses ("City Of Seattle's Neighborhood Matching Fund Invests Over $1.1 Million Into 27 Community-Led Projects" 2024; "Park CommUNITY Fund" n.d.). What sets these efforts apart is scale and authorship: they are initiated, shaped, and maintained by the people who use them, exemplifying a democratic model of planning where city support reinforces grassroots initiative. Today, the challenge is not simply to build new parks, but to invest in public space as social infrastructure. As Seattle confronts complex and intersecting challenges, these city-supported, locally rooted projects offer a more resilient and equitable path forward.

PRESERVATION TENSIONS IN SEATTLE

The ongoing tension between elite, top-down visions and local community priorities extends into the realm of historic preservation. Just as the legacy of Olmstedian design prioritizes aesthetic form over social function in parks and civic spaces, Seattle's preservation framework centers architectural integrity, "high-style" design, and dominant historical narratives – often excluding places of collective memory, cultural identity, and daily use, especially those significant to marginalized communities (Seattle Municipal Code 2025, §25.12.020; Avrami, Leo, and Sanchez 2018; King 2003).

Although Seattle's preservation criteria are shaped by national guidelines, their interpretation and enforcement are local and deeply entangled with capitalist interests. Preservation exists on a broad spectrum, from strict conservation to flexible adaptive reuse; yet rather than using this range to expand preservation's relevance or respond to community needs, it is routinely exploited by developers and regulatory bodies to serve market-driven priorities, minimizing obligations while maximizing profit. This selective interpretation gives rise to practices like "facadism," in which new development of landmarked sites retain only the bare minimum of protected features – often just the front-facing architectural shell – while gutting the rest of the building (Berger 2015). This practice reduces historic buildings to marketable facades, preserving the appearance of heritage without its social or cultural substance.

Facadism is just one example of how preservation in Seattle often serves development-friendly interests under the guise of aesthetic continuity. This pattern is reinforced by Seattle's Landmarks Ordinance, which requires that a property possess "integrity or the ability to convey its significance," which, in practice, is interpreted through the lens of material or formal authenticity, criteria that privilege fixed, physical qualities and exclude sites that have evolved through community use and adaptation (SMC §25.12.090).

Figure 3.2 Facadism in Seattle: Firestone Tire Building/400 Westlake and Johnson Plumbing Building/Gridiron Condos | Perkins + Will; Lara Swimmer via Hewitt

Further compounding this issue is the ordinance's emphasis on architecture and elite narratives. Of the six designation criteria, two of the six criteria are concerned with "significant" historical events or "important" people, and the other four emphasize style, period, "outstanding" design, or associations with "significant heritage" or "prominence" – all of which are subject to top-down interpretation (SMC§25.12.350).[1] Although the criteria include reference to cultural and neighborhood identity, these are rarely applied in practice to protect vernacular or community-rooted sites, whose significance lies in use, memory, and social value rather than architectural form. As noted by local advocates such as Cynthia Brothers of Vanishing Seattle and the late Flo Lentz, nationally renowned preservationist and former Preservation Director at 4Culture, this system fails to recognize less tangible forms of significance, leaving many of the city's most meaningful places invisible to official systems of protection (Vansynghel 2018; Whiters 2021).

Even when a site is designated, the city's regulatory framework is limited in its ability to protect what actually matters about these spaces. Protective controls apply only to those "specific features or characteristics" deemed historically significant – reinforcing a snapshot-in-time approach that preserves how a building looked at the point of significance rather than recognizing its role as adaptable social infrastructure (SMC§25.12.090).

Narrow definitions of significance are reinforced by the structure of the preservation system itself, where decision-making power is concentrated among professionals whose training often reflects dominant cultural and economic priorities; eight of the twelve seats on the city's Landmark Preservation Board are reserved for professionals in architecture, engineering, real estate, or finance – fields shaped by dominant, often white, cultural frameworks (SMC§25.12.270; Vansynghel 2018). This professional gatekeeping excludes the communities most affected by displacement and redevelopment and undermines the potential for preservation to function as a tool for cultural equity and community empowerment.

This imbalance plays out further in the procedural logic of designation and demolition. In Seattle, the burden of proof falls on those advocating for preservation, who must demonstrate why a site deserves protection rather than requiring developers to justify demolition. This backwards logic prioritizes capital flow and quick construction over long-term sustainability, heritage, and community continuity. In contrast, cities like Denver, Colorado and many in Europe default to preservation and reuse, shifting the burden of proof and permitting requirements to those seeking demolition (Denver Revised Municipal Code 2019, §30-6; Veldpaus, Fava, and Brodowicz 2019).

1 Standards for designation according to the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance as laid out in the Seattle Municipal Code §25.12.350 are: *"An object, site or improvement which is more than twenty-five (25) years old may be designated for preservation as a landmark site or landmark if it has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, state, or nation, if it has integrity or the ability to convey its significance, and if it falls into one (1) of the following categories:*

A. It is the location of, or is associated in a significant way with, an historic event with a significant effect upon the community, City, state, or nation; or

B. It is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the history of the City, state, or nation; or

C. It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, City, state or nation; or

D. It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or of a method of construction; or

E. It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder; or

F. Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the City and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City."

Developers have learned to strategically exploit this process, submitting landmark "anti-nominations" that deliberately downplay historic significance in an effort to preemptively block designation and clear the way for future demolition and redevelopment (Danner 2020). When these tactics fail, preservationists fight back, or protections are delayed, property owners will instead resort to "demolition by neglect," a growing practice of purposefully allowing structures to deteriorate until removal becomes inevitable (Figures 3.3 and 3.4; Hall 2016; Vansynghel 2018).

Ultimately, preservation in Seattle functions less as a vehicle for community memory and more as a regulatory tool to serve development-friendly

Figure 3.3 Demolition by neglect: Belltown's Wayne Apartments, designated in 2015 and demolished in 2022 | Friends of Historic Belltown

Figure 3.4 Demolition by neglect: Capitol Hill's Galbraith House, landmarked in 2005 and demolished in 2018 | Architecture of Thompson and Thompson via Capitol Hill Historical Society; Tom Heuser via Capitol Hill Historical Society; Google Street View

interests. This has not only resulted in the loss of historic buildings, but also in missed opportunities to utilize preservation to bring culture and memory into public space.

The redevelopment of Seattle's central Waterfront, driven by the removal of the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the Battery Street Tunnel, offers one example. The viaduct had been a barrier between the city and its waterfront for over 50 years, obstructing views and access while posing safety risks due to seismic vulnerability and noise pollution (Poyner 2019a). While there was broad consensus that the structure was problematic, many advocates proposed reusing or repurposing some of the structural elements to inspire an imaginative redevelopment of the waterfront. In particular, communities banded together in an effort to preserve the Battery Street Tunnel, which linked the viaduct to Aurora Avenue beneath Belltown.

Artists, architects, and community members proposed a wide range of ideas to adapt the Battery Street Tunnel, from public parks to vertical farming and mushroom growing, to a swimming pool or a beach and surfing site, to water treatment, to a tourist attraction (Newsdesk 2018). Local residents formed Recharge the Battery in 2017 to advocate for "alternative uses and more responsible decommissioning solutions" that could serve both Belltown and the broader city ("Recharge the Battery" n.d.). The group argued that the tunnel's land value, which was estimated at $200 million, offered strong justification for reuse rather than burial. After reviewing over 40 proposals (Figure 3.5), Recharge the Battery focused their advocacy on a hybrid plan that combined ecological infrastructure, a subterranean urban farm, with a public park (Poyner 2019b).

Despite years of organized grassroots engagement, all of these ideas were ultimately dismissed. The viaduct itself – once a gritty but iconic structure that offered elevated views of Elliott Bay – was entirely erased, and the tunnel was filled with rubble from the demolished viaduct, repurposed as a utility corridor, and sealed off with more concrete (Poyner 2019b). The parcel, where residents had envisioned vibrant parks and urban agriculture, remains fenced off and vacant (Figure 3.6). Instead, civic and political focus turned to the new, polished waterfront park, which, as discussed in the previous section, has faced criticism for prioritizing tourism while offering insufficient impact analysis and limited consideration of local community needs (Packer 2023).

Figure 3.5 Proposals for the Battery Street Tunnel | Recharge the Battery

Figure 3.6 Vacant parcel, October 2024

Gas Works Park represents an alternative example for public space in Seattle, created through practices of cultural preservation, though with much (and ongoing) controversy. Designer Richard Haag's 1962 proposal for the park relied on adaptive reuse of the industrial remnants, preserving and repurposing key structures while transforming the toxic site into a civic landscape (Figure 3.7). His design incorporated constructed mounds using contaminated soil as fill, combining remediation with sculptural landform. Haag's approach was innovative in both concept and process: he hosted community meetings onsite, collaborated with engineers and scientists on early bioremediation strategies, and challenged dominant aesthetics of cleanliness and order in public space. Rather than erasing the site's industrial past, he framed it as a defining feature: rusting towers and buried toxins became sculptural centerpieces, making the park a visual expression of its layered history.

More than a design experiment, the park became a critical addition of public green space for North Seattle at a moment when land acquisition was still feasible, before rising land costs would have made such a project basically impossible (CityDays 2024). Its large, open design has supported a wide range of uses from daily recreation and neighborhood gatherings to large-scale performances and regional festivals ("Gas Works Park" n.d.). Haag's proposal ultimately was approved in 1971 due to its economic feasibility, as retaining the structures proved less costly than demolition and conventional redevelopment (Sawyer 2020). In this context, preservation became a tool for public engagement and ecological awareness as well as a practical means of making bold civic space possible.

Yet the project also reveals challenges. Remediation has been inconsistent over the long term and continues to pose public health risks. Some of Haag's 'solutions' – especially at the shoreline – were crude fixes and contribute to ongoing pollution. Initial efforts in 2001 involved capping the most contaminated areas of the park with two feet of soil over a protective barrier, and the installation of a groundwater "pump and treat" system, which operated from 2001 to 2006. While the state declared a "no further action" status, evidence of contamination such as tar seeps and toxic soil continue to appear, and remediation efforts will continue at least through 2029 (Wong 2023).

Further, the "gasworks" structures, originally accessible to the public, were fenced off in 1976 after a youth fell and was seriously injured (Golden 2019). Safety concerns were never adequately addressed, perhaps due to cost, and as a result, direct engagement with these structures was cut off. This kind of interaction was essential to the success of Latz + Partner's Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, described in the previous chapter, where industrial remnants were not just preserved but adapted for cultural, educational, and recreational use. In contrast, Gas Works Park offers only a visual connection to its industrial past, limiting its ability to foster the interactive, memory-driven communal experiences that make Duisburg-Nord so impactful.

The park's unresolved and compromised condition reflects yet another instance in which aesthetic considerations were prioritized over substantive action, including environmental remediation and practical use, and preservation was reduced to performance. There is growing recognition that open spaces can serve as"living expressions of evolving human values toward nature and community," and while Haag's design hinted at this potential, the absence of lasting engagement, long-term maintenance, accountability, and community stewardship ultimately undermined its full realization (Taylor 2025).

Together, these cases reveal the complex tensions within Seattle's preservation system.

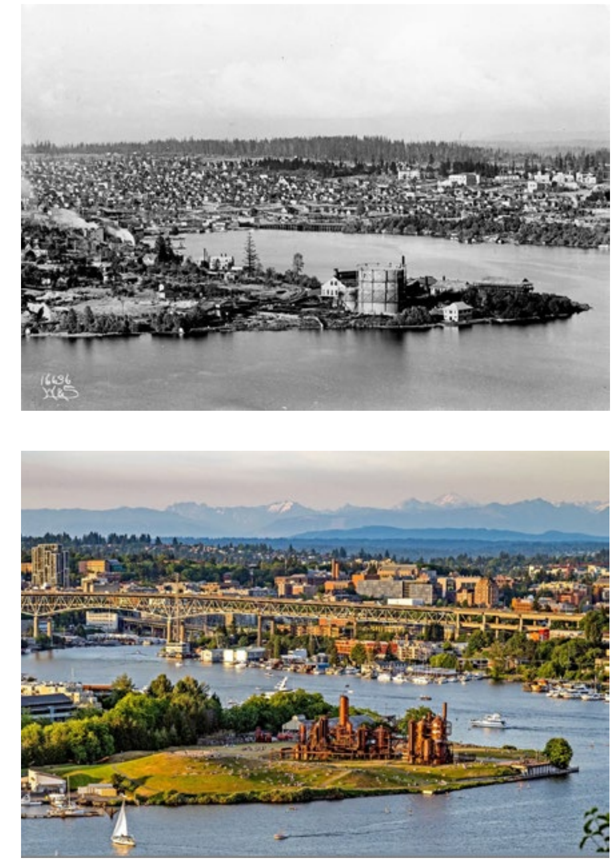


Figure 3.7 Gas Works, before and after | Webster & Stevens via MOHAI (top), Jean Sherrard (bottom)

Despite growing recognition of preservation's potential to support community resilience, ecological repair, and cultural continuity, current frameworks remain constrained by narrow definitions of significance and procedural imbalance. Seattle's challenge now is to expand how we practice preservation, moving beyond appearances to instead cultivate places as evolving cultural infrastructure, systems of meaning and memory that strengthen urban life. This vision calls for a cultural shift and broader adoption of practical tools like deconstruction and material reuse, but Seattle still faces significant barriers to implementation.

BARRIERS

Seattle's preservation policy continues to favor static, formal outcomes over adaptive approaches, limiting the ability to respond to evolving environmental needs or reflect contemporary community values. Legislation passed in March 2025 (HB 1576, SB 5554) imposes new barriers to landmarking, most notably an owner consent requirement, intended to reduce obstacles to housing production. While proponents argue this may curb misuse of landmark designation by NIMBY groups opposing affordable housing, it further weakens preservation tools without offering viable alternatives (Mohamed 2025; Trumm 2025).

Rather than fixing structural flaws in the preservation system, these measures intensify an already inequitable process, making it even harder to protect culturally significant sites, especially for communities historically displaced or lacking property ownership. Although landmarking processes often exclude marginalized voices, they still serve as a vital defense against cultural erasure. Critics argue the legislation prioritizes individual property rights and short-term market value over collective memory, identity, and long-term continuity. Grassroots advocates in Seattle's Chinatown-International District emphasize that tying preservation to ownership undermines civic responsibility and dismisses the enduring value of place, reducing cultural sites to disposable assets vulnerable to each new development cycle rather than shared legacies that root communities in time (Mohamed 2025).

Preservation and housing are not mutually exclusive: older buildings can be adapted for affordable housing, and local incentives could support both goals. Instead, this policy reinforces the false binary between preservation and development, prioritizing deregulation over inclusive, place-based development. By focusing narrowly on cutting red tape to speed housing development, it overlooks how preservation and quality public spaces are equally essential to sustaining community identity, resilience, and well-being. This short-sightedness sacrifices the physical and cultural foundations of historically marginalized neighborhoods. Effective policy should align housing with cultural heritage and the social infrastructure that sustains strong, inclusive communities. Ignoring this balance weakens our collective responsibility to protect places that carry meaning across generations.

Seattle faces ongoing tensions between preservation and development, and while deconstruction and material reuse could support both goals, practical and institutional barriers limit widespread adoption. Though deconstruction and material reuse are increasingly recognized for their environmental and economic benefits, they remain limited in Seattle due to high costs, complex permitting, and a lack of infrastructure for storage, redistribution, and knowledge sharing. Unlike Portland, Boulder, and San Antonio, which have adopted deconstruction mandates, Seattle has no such requirements, making deconstruction less viable as a business model than demolition, which is faster, cheaper, and more familiar (Balwit 2017; Portland City Code 2020, §17.106). Deconstruction demands more labor, coordination, and upfront cost, further challenged by monopolized waste sorting that inflates recycling prices, the logistical burden of storing and processing salvaged materials, and the lack of a streamlined buyer market (Chini and Bruening 2003). A pilot program launched in 2022 offers modest grants for residential and commercial deconstruction and supports contractor capacity-building, but these efforts remain small in scale ("Deconstruction" n.d.). Portland, by contrast, pairs its mandates with workforce training programs, framing reuse as both a climate and an economic justice strategy. Without similar mandates, toolkits, and sustained investment, Seattle's efforts risk remaining marginal. Building a reuse economy requires more than incentives; it demands long-term policy commitment and leadership to reshape norms, markets, and institutional practices.

SEATTLE TODAY

Reframing preservation as a tool to support community identity opens new possibilities for downtown's future. Seattle's neighborhoods offer a compelling precedent, having long sustained civic life through place-based planning and community investment (O'Donnell 2004). Since the 1994 introduction of the Neighborhood Planning Program and its "urban village" strategy, urban life in Seattle has been concentrated in the neighborhoods surrounding downtown (Broner and Housing Now Seattle 2021; Gehl Architects 2009; Steinbrueck et al. 2015). Even through the disruptions of COVID-19, neighborhoods including Capitol Hill, Beacon Hill, and Ballard have sustained and deepened their civic life, with active public spaces, distinctive cultural identities, and continued investment in community-driven planning efforts including Stay Healthy Streets and local business alliances (Bet 2024; Burns 2020; Schwichtenberg 2023; Seattle Times staff 2021). In contrast, downtown Seattle – encompassing the "commercial core" and the central business district – is slow to recover from pandemic-era losses. Office vacancy remains at a record high of 21.5%, with job counts in the urban core down roughly 15% since 2020 and still on the downward trend (Downtown Seattle Association 2024). Seattle also has had one of the lowest downtown worker return rates in the country, with just over 50% of non-resident workers returning to work in 2023 since 2019 (Center City District 2023). As a result, retail activity, foot traffic, and perceptions of public safety all remain below pre-pandemic norms (Castán Broto & Bulkeley 2013; Chapple et al. 2022).

This gap reveals more than an economic challenge: it exposes downtown's lack of the essential civic infrastructure, lack of "commons," that make neighborhoods livable. Historically, downtown Seattle was shaped by commercial and industrial uses – offices, warehouses, piers, and railways – serving as a place where people commute in to work and commute out to live, but that identity no longer reflects reality. Downtown is now densely residential, with over 108,000 residents within twelve districts from Uptown and South Lake Union to the north, First Hill to the east, and SODO to the south (Downtown Seattle Association 2024). Since 2010, this residential population has increased by 78%, with over 30% of that growth occurring after 2019. In 2024, downtown accounted for nearly half of Seattle's new residents, growing by over 2,300 (Downtown Seattle Association 2024).

Despite this shift, the physical and civic infrastructure of downtown has not adapted to meet the needs of its new residential base. Downtown lacks neighborhood character, not for a lack of people so much as a lack of amenities, comfort, and cohesion that enable neighborhood life. Much of the public space in downtown is fragmented, lacking connections, clear identity, or inviting, varied use (Gehl Architects, 2009). Many of these spaces are also heavily regulated, and others are under-maintained or underutilized, contributing to perceptions of over-surveillance, discomfort, and lack of safety and limiting meaningful opportunities for people to linger, rest, and gather (Gehl Architects 2009; Seattle Metro Chamber 2024).

Westlake Park, Occidental Square, Denny Park, Freeway Park, and the in-progress Waterfront Park are a few of the civic open spaces within downtown zoning. While improvements from the Downtown Seattle Association and Metropolitan Improvement District have enhanced programming and maintenance (especially Westlake and Occidental; Figures 3.8 and 3.9), others, like Freeway Park and Denny Park, continue to face issues related to safety and public perception (Hirsch 2017; Journal Staff 2024; Kostanich 2020; O'Connor 2021; Schmidt 2025; Walker Macy n.d.). Notably, many of the recent public space improvements in downtown have been driven by tourism-focused priorities – as described previously in discussions on the Waterfront Park, and preparation for the 2026 FIFA World Cup – representative of the fact that these downtown spaces are not embedded within residential and community life in the same way that neighborhood parks are. Consequently, they lack the democratic flexibility, familiarity, and sense of collective ownership that cultivate sustained community use (Daniels 2023; Schmidt 2025).

Figure 3.8 Covered pavilion added to Occidental Square in 2021 | SDOT Parkways

Figure 3.9 Recent programming introduced in Westlake Park by the Metropolitan Improvement District | Seattle City Council Blog

In contrast, neighborhoods like Capitol Hill, Ballard, and Beacon Hill demonstrate the kinds of civic infrastructure and spatial relationships that support vibrant, connected urban life. While very different in demographics, density, and character, each fosters civic culture through well-integrated, human-scaled public space and strong local stewardship.

Capitol Hill's Cal Anderson Park serves as the civic "living room" for political demonstration and expression, from the summer 2020 Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) encampment to ongoing May Day rallies that draw thousands of residents (Beekman 2023; Burns 2020; Dowell 2025). Community groups – from the official Cal Anderson Park Alliance to the neighborhood business alliance to the grassroots 'Cutie Fest' – activate the park with events, pop-up markets, and installations, as well as occupy adjacent plazas and rights-of-way with seating and lighting, expanding public space functioning beyond the bounds of the park (Schwichtenberg 2023; Fritz 2024). The spontaneously planted Black Lives Memorial Garden, stewarded by Black Star Farmers until 2023, embodied participatory stewardship rarely seen in dense urban neighborhoods (Beekman 2023). Public art, both officially sanctioned projects and anonymous street art (Figure 3.10), is celebrated, adding to the neighborhood's distinct character (jseattle 2022). Crucially, Cal Anderson Park is integrated into a surrounding fabric of small businesses, coffee shops, and cultural venues, supported by mixed-use zoning and well-connected pedestrian and transit networks that reinforce a walkable, human-scale urban environment.

Other neighborhoods offer similar civic infrastructure. In Ballard, historic overlays and cultural institutions reinforce local identity, while the year-round weekly farmers market transforms streets into active social space ("Ballard Alliance" n.d.; Seattle Farmers Market Association Markets n.d.). In Beacon Hill, community-led projects like the Beacon Food Forest and the revitalization of Jefferson Park center equity, grassroots advocacy, and adaptive land use (Sorell 2024).

Figure 3.10 Public Art in Capitol Hill: Street Art by Bob Bummer (below); The People Make this Park by Jean Bradbury (right) | Capitol Hill Seattle Blog; Seattle Office of Arts and Culture

Sustained civic vitality, as demonstrated across these and other Seattle neighborhoods, is rooted in walkable streetscapes, cultural anchors, strong connections between public spaces and other local assets, and robust community planning frameworks that foster collective care, community expression, and adaptability. In these neighborhoods, public spaces are woven into daily life, shaped by community input, and responsive to local needs. Downtown Seattle, despite its growing residential base, still lacks many of these qualities. This gap presents an opportunity: to reclaim vacant and underutilized space as raw material for neighborhood development – rebuilding a downtown where people not only move through, but also live, connect, and grow.

This moment presents more than a chance to revitalize underused space: it invites a redefinition of what downtown can be. Rather than seeking a return to its pre-pandemic identity as a commercial center, downtown can be reimagined as a dynamic, people-centered neighborhood that reflects its growing residential population and embraces layered, civic uses. Past planning decisions – such as the failure to mobilize vacant public lots for civic use in the 1980s and 1990s, privatization of public land, and the rise of large-scale corporate campuses in South Lake Union – demonstrate how easily downtown space can be shaped by private interests at the expense of public life. Street vacations, rezoning deals, and missed opportunities for civic investment have, so far, constrained the city's ability to cultivate a downtown rooted in neighborhood life; and with ongoing growth and continued private development, opportunities to secure critical public land uses in the downtown core are rapidly diminishing (Bonjukian 2018; Trumm 2015).

Today, by treating vacancy as an asset – infrastructure with the potential to become cultural venues, gathering places, markets, and more – Seattle has a chance to build a more adaptable, equitable urban core. Prioritizing community ownership, building on existing social and cultural infrastructure, and planning with long-term flexibility in mind can help establish downtown's identity as a neighborhood. The question is no longer whether downtown can "come back," but how we can remake it as a civic commons that reflects and strengthens the values of the residents it serves.

MOVING INTO THE FUTURE: SITE AREA SELECTION

Building on the opportunity to reimagine downtown as a dynamic, people-centered neighborhood, the next step is to engage directly with the physical and spatial realities of the city. This section analyzes the urban form of downtown Seattle to identify zones where 'ruins' – in the form of vacant unreinforced masonry buildings – hold potential for transformation. These spaces serve as entry points for testing how preservation and public space frameworks can be used to reclaim and reactivate the urban core in ways that foster collective life and neighborhood identity.

WHY UNREINFORCED MASONRY?

Unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings form the core typology for this project's exploration of deconstruction and urban reclamation in downtown Seattle. Built primarily before 1945 and restricted under Seattle's Building Code since the 1970s, these buildings rely on masonry and mortar, without internal reinforcement from concrete or steel, to bear structural loads. Inherently historic and seismically vulnerable, URMs are often caught in a liminal state between preservation and neglect, valued for their cultural significance and craftsmanship but burdened by safety risks that make retrofitting legally and financially prohibitive. These barriers are exacerbated by the 2021 'substantial alteration' trigger in Seattle's Building code, which requires a certain level of structural reinforcement alongside significant changes to occupancy or use of URM buildings (Ohlgren and Hertzfeld 2024).

Despite their risk and regulatory barriers, URMs are deeply embedded in the city's urban and cultural fabric; many are formally landmarked or informally tied to collective memory through long-term neighborhood presence and layered use. Some over a century old, they are composed of high-quality, carbon-rich materials such as old-growth timber, locally sourced and fired brick, and lime-based mortar. These qualities make these buildings ideal candidates for creative transformation: rich in embodied energy and craft, durable materials that can to be reused again and again, bricks assembled with lime-based mortar, which uniquely enables non-destructive, waste- and input-free deconstruction and reconstruction processes (Cowland 2023; Manoharan and Umarani 2022).[2]

SITE AREA SELECTION

Mapping the existing built environment with a focus on unreinforced masonry buildings and public space reveals patterns of vacancy, underuse, and opportunity. This analysis highlights zones where concentrations of URM buildings overlap with gaps in accessible public space and community infrastructure. Adding layers of population and demographic data sourced from Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections and the Office of Planning & Community Development narrows in on a site area for further study with strong potential for transformation – where preservation and public space frameworks could transform a vacant building into an anchor to support its growth into a distinct, socially and ecologically connected neighborhood.

Significant clusters of URMs were identified in Belltown, just northwest of Pike Place Market, and in Pioneer Square (Figure 3.11). Public open space is limited throughout most of downtown, especially further inland from the waterfront and neighborhood edges. More public and cultural resources are available near Pike Place Market and south, including the central branch of the public library and the Pioneer Square historic district.

Figure 3.11 Unreinforced Masonry Buildings and Public/Cultural Resources in Downtown Seattle

2 Non-hydraulic lime, which was used in mortars through around 1930, sets through carbonation, which makes it a basically carbon-free material (Maier, 2022).

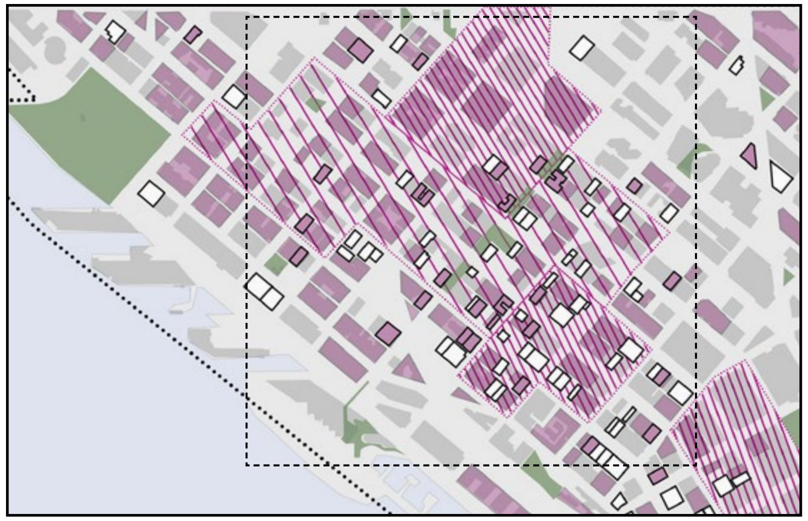


Figure 3.12 Residential Uses and Population Density in downtown

Figure 3.13 Income Distribution

Zooming further into Belltown and layering residential population and parcel uses reveals that the concentration of URMs between Western Ave and 3rd Ave is surrounded by a high-density residential population (Figure 3.12).

To understand this zone's demographics further, I overlaid income, revealing a zone of unusual mixing between very high income blocks (>$120k) and very impoverished blocks (>30% households in poverty). The outlined area in the map (Figure 3.13) stands out for its diverse household incomes, represented by orange, bridging more segregated neighboring blocks. This mixed-income area, squarely in the downtown district of Belltown, combines medium-high residential density with limited access to public space and cultural resources, alongside a high concentration of URM buildings, making it an ideal 'neighborhood' for reimagining.

WHY BELLTOWN?

North of downtown's commercial core and adjacent to the waterfront, Belltown sits diagonally between South Lake Union and the Waterfront, two of Seattle's most high-profile master-planned districts that have caused rapid change to downtown's urban fabric. The removal of the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the city's shift toward a polished waterfront have redrawn Belltown's edges, opening the door to large-scale redevelopment. Once known for its working-class roots, artistic communities, and affordable rentals, Belltown today is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Seattle. Increasingly defined by glass towers and high-end condos, Belltown's older, vernacular layers – former industrial buildings turned artist studios, independent music venues, and eclectic community spaces that give Belltown its social texture and offbeat charm – are disappearing (Figure 3.14).

Belltown retains a unique, though increasingly threatened, character rooted in its community's artistry, quirkiness, and ongoing advocacy for themselves. Despite its rapidly changing surroundings and real estate pressures, there is a long-standing pattern of grassroots efforts by community groups to preserve and build on what makes Belltown distinct. Through initiatives including the Belltown Art Walk and Growing Vine Street and in the work of artists including Buster Simpson and Basecamp Studios, the Belltown community has a track record of engaging creatively with its built environment, advocating for open space and green infrastructure, responding to vacancy with art and improvisation, and transforming infrastructure into a canvas for collective meaning (Figure 3.15).

On Vine Street, art becomes ecological armature, a visible and performative infrastructure for urban water cycles, demonstrating how artistic practice in Belltown often bridges community expression and functional needs, including stormwater management, green space, and preservation (Figure 3.16). Other layered interventions like the Belltown P-Patch cottages – saved through grassroots preservation and transformed into a community garden under artist-led stewardship – demonstrate how art, ecology, and preservation intertwine. Alongside urban agriculture and community

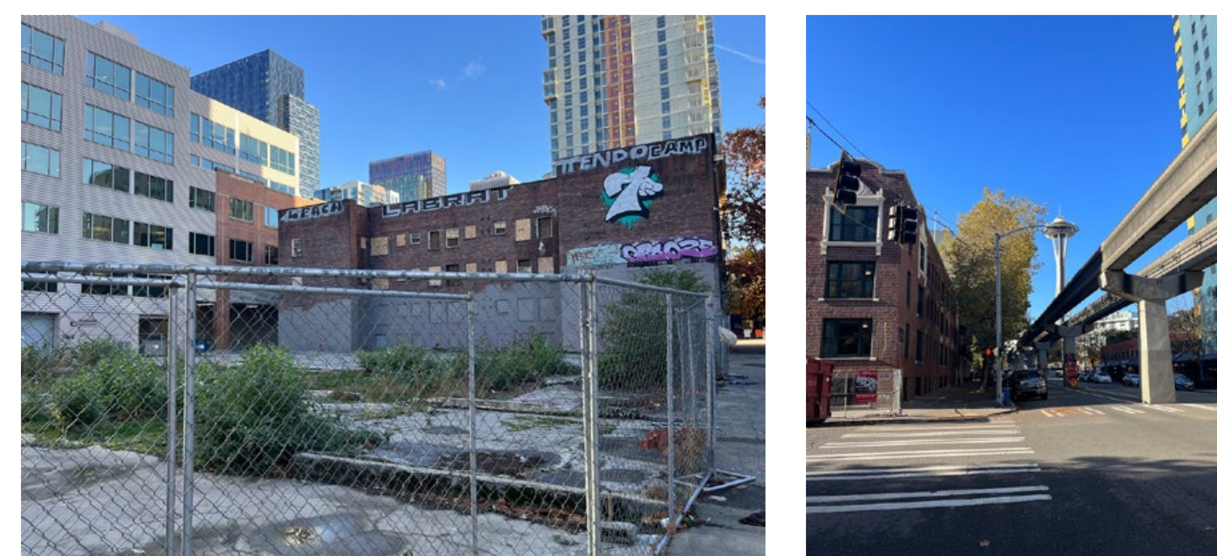


Figure 3.14 Belltown, October 2024

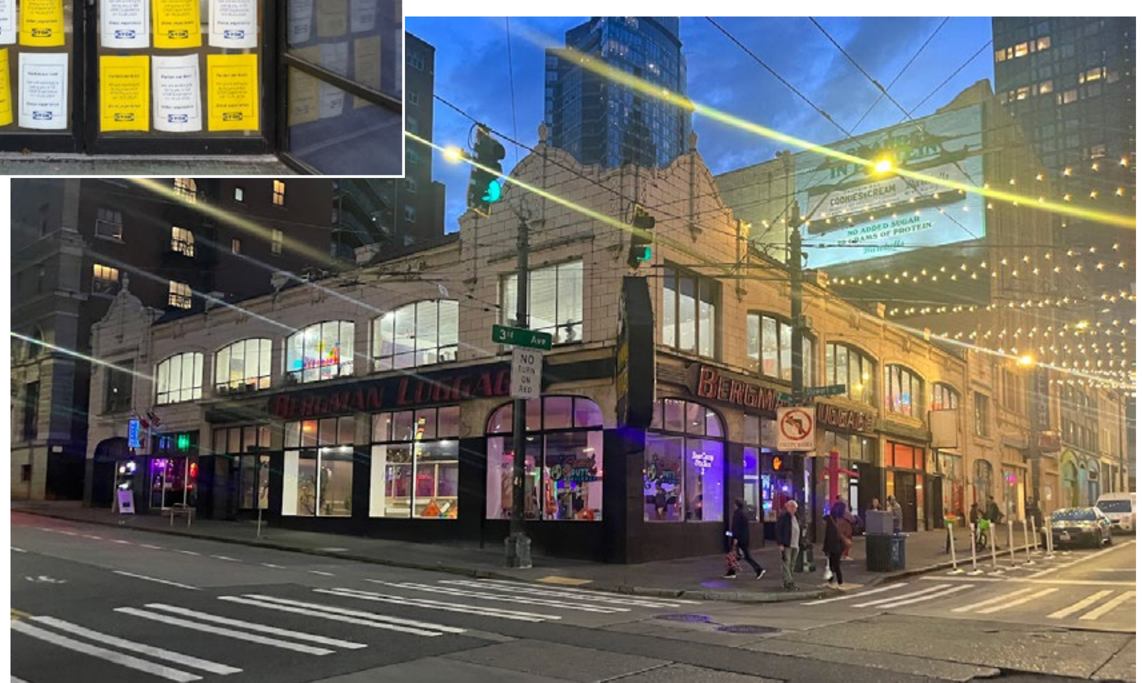


Figure 3.15 Examples of how Belltown residents engage with vacancy: public art, exhibitions, activism, social activities

gardening at the P-Patch, the cottages continue to serve Belltown's creative community, once housing a writers-in-residence program and still hosting art classes and other events managed by the Belltown Community Council (Campanario 2019). Building on this tradition, the recent community-requested Portal Porch is a small public plaza at the upper end of the vacant Battery Street parcel (formerly the south entrance to the Battery Street Tunnel). While perhaps seen as somewhat of a consolation prize to the neighborhood who hoped for a park encompassing the whole site, the Portal Porch still reflects of the community's ongoing interest in memory and art, incorporating saw-cut patterns and metal inlays that trace the site's layered history (Figure 3.17; Dewhirst 2023; "Portal Porch" n.d.). Intertwining memory, ecology, and place, these works show how art in Belltown functions as connective infrastructure, grounding preservation in everyday life and shared identity.

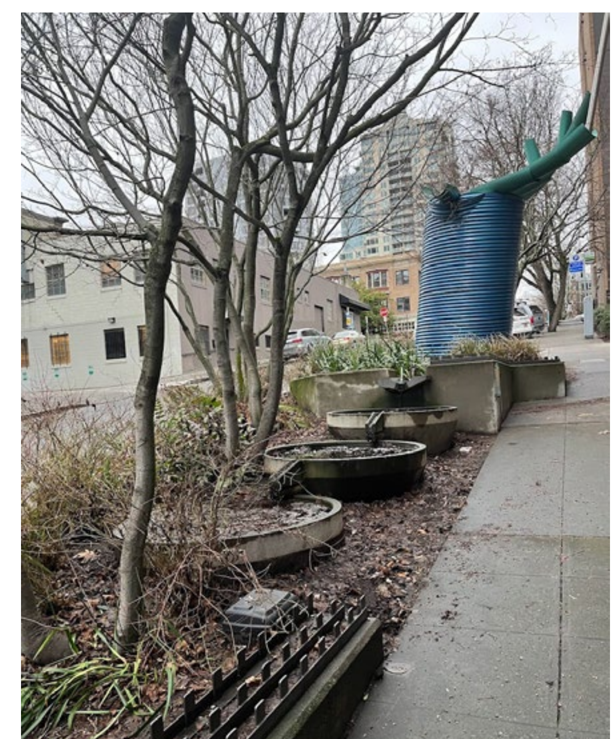


Figure 3.16 Growing Vine Street: art and infrastructure

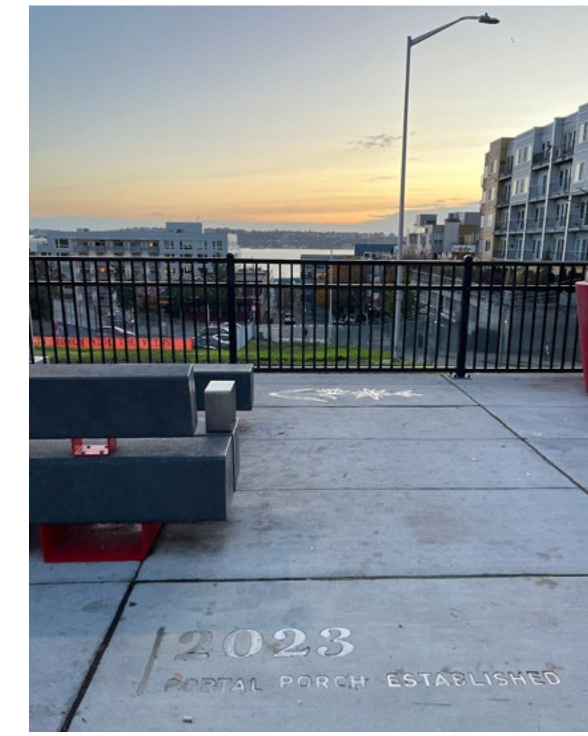


Figure 3.17 Portal Porch | Belltown United (bottom)

Community groups like the Belltown Community Council, Belltown United, Friends of Historic Belltown, and Recharge the Battery actively work to preserve neighborhood authenticity and improve civic life through landmark nominations, public art, workforce development, and advocacy (Figure 3.18; Asis n.d.; "Is Belltown History?" n.d.). Advocacy efforts focus on ways of protecting and improving environmental conditions and quality of life for Belltown residents – addressing housing affordability, green infrastructure, pedestrian and bike improvements, and neighborhood greening ("Recharge the Battery" n.d.). As the population grows and becomes more socioeconomically diverse, residents have increasingly emphasized that the area's civic infrastructure has not kept pace. Ongoing efforts to reclaim the Battery Street Tunnel parcel as a neighborhood park reflects a growing urgency to secure this rare opportunity for public space in an increasingly built-out neighborhood.

In this current moment, as low-rise commercial buildings are being vacated and replaced by high density development, reinvestment in public and cultural uses is critical. Public space is not only a necessary complement to new housing, but a foundational element of urban resilience, social connection, and community identity. Especially in neighborhoods experiencing rapid change, investment in shared, inclusive public spaces is essential to sustaining civic life and ensuring that dense urban growth remains livable, equitable, and rooted in place.

Recent public realm improvements in Belltown have fallen short of providing the growing neighborhood with helpful neighborhood amenities, exemplified in the Portal Porch as well as in Bell Street Park. While the woonerf concept offered a creative way to reimagine dense urban space, the park has struggled with unclear boundaries, inconsistent programming, and ongoing safety concerns, limiting its use as an active public space (Barnett 2015). Belltown needs more, and more effective, public spaces that respond directly to community needs and aspirations, making it a compelling site area for design intervention. This potential is further strengthened by Bell Street Park itself, which offers an opportunity to connect and reactivate a larger network of public space (NACTO 2016; Holmes 2018).

For this thesis, Belltown embodies the conditions this thesis seeks to explore: with its ongoing community advocacy, creative energy, and existing investments in public space and green infrastructure. Its layered context makes it an ideal testing ground for an experimental intervention that weaves together art, preservation, ecology, and reuse – advancing a model for community-driven, resilient public space in the face of urban change. The lessons from Belltown offer valuable insights for other Seattle neighborhoods facing similar pressures from rapid growth and development; by prioritizing meaningful, community-led public spaces, cities can better sustain neighborhood identity, boost resilience, and enhance quality of life during times of change.

Figure 3.18 One among many in the neighborhood-wide mural project 'By Belltown,' which tells stories of the neighborhood's history; A vision for the Battery Tunnel parcel, 'Belltown Portal Park' | Aaron Asis

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

This chapter outlines the research methods used to explore how deconstruction and material reuse can support a preservation-informed approach to creating public space in Belltown. Addressing a gap in preservation and urban design literature, the study investigates how integrated strategies can address climate resilience, cultural continuity, and public space through the reuse of vacant building fabric. The framing of deconstruction and material reuse as cultural and spatial strategies guides all stages of the research. Methods include urban form analysis, physical modeling, and material analysis, each contributing to and culminating in applied design research. The final phase presents and evaluates speculative designs that apply these principles to transform a vacant unreinforced masonry (URM) site into a new type of public space.

URBAN FORM AND SITE SUITABILITY ANALYSIS

As detailed in the previous chapter, I began by analyzing the distribution of unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings and public space across downtown Seattle using GIS. Drawing on publicly available data from Seattle's OpenGIS portal – including layers from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections, and the Office of Planning & Community Development – I mapped URM buildings within downtown zoning and examined their proximity to amenities such as parks, libraries, cultural centers, and designated historic districts. These spatial layers were overlaid with population and demographic data to identify areas where concentrations of URM overlap with limited access to essential neighborhood infrastructure.

This analysis helped narrow the site focus area to Belltown, a neighborhood in downtown Seattle that, despite its high population density and central location, has comparatively limited access to essential neighborhood amenities such as parks, libraries, and cultural centers, and whose character-defining features are increasingly threatened by high commercial turnover and rising real estate pressure.

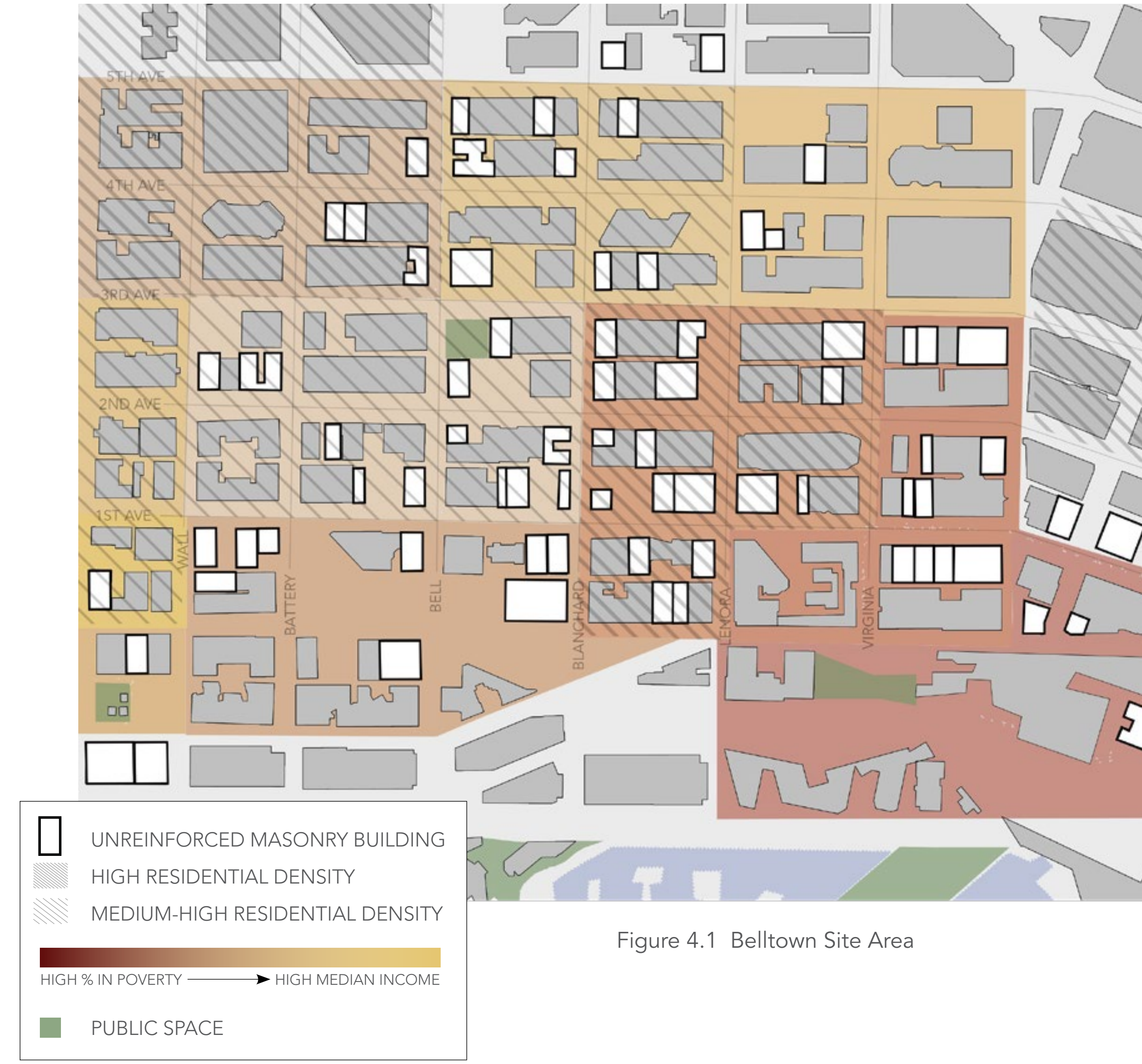


Figure 4.1 Belltown Site Area

I zoned in on central Belltown, between Wall and Virginia streets, which is characterized by medium-to-high density, mixed-income housing alongside few public and cultural facilities, as well as a notably high concentration of URM structures (Figure 4.1). On-the-ground documentation of existing uses and infrastructure within the identified site area supported and expanded on information gathered from GIS data (Figure 4.2). I conducted street-level observations and documented building uses, vacancy conditions, street infrastructure, and public space access. I recorded extensive vacancies, ranging from entire buildings and ground floor retail units, to fenced-off lots and surface parking, and private, inactive ground floors, some of which were due to the vacancy and/or ongoing construction. In many areas, the lack of active storefronts, the prevalence of vacant spaces, and the near absence of public spaces – outdoor or indoor – compound one another to undermine street life, contributing to a surprisingly quiet and low-energy pedestrian environment (Figure 4.3).

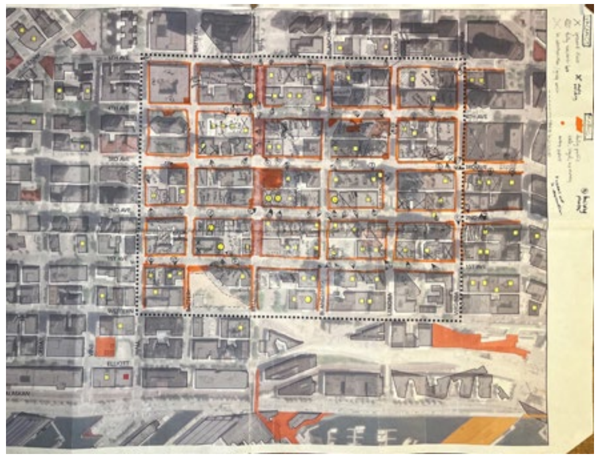


Figure 4.2 On-Site notetaking: including publicly accessible space, vacant buildings and lots, and current construction sites

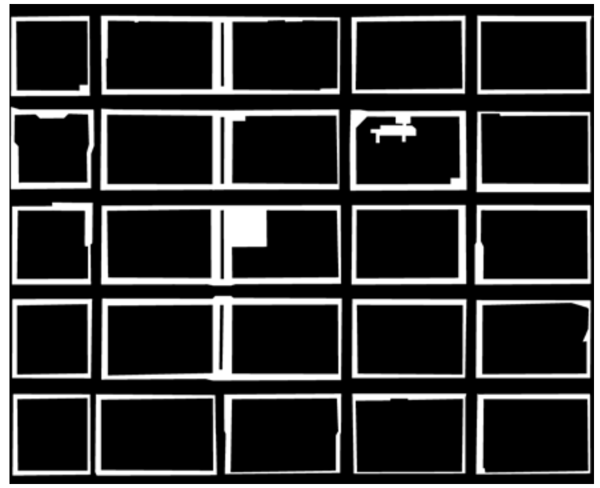


Figure 4.3 Public-private map inspired by the 'Nolli Map,' demonstrating the relationship between publicly accessible human-scale space and private, commercial, and car-centric uses

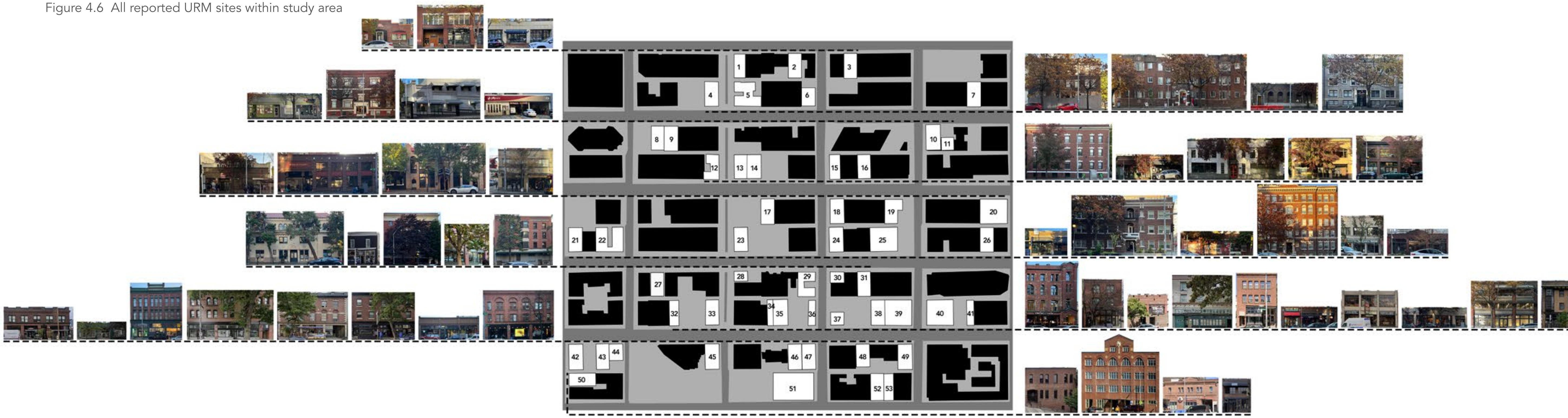
Figure 4.4 Belltown Site Area: In Flux

This field survey confirmed many URM buildings in the area to be partially or fully vacant, including at least two which are designated and protected City of Seattle landmarks. On-site verification also revealed that at least eight URM buildings have been demolished since 2021, including the landmarked Wayne Apartments (razed in 2022). Permitting records from Seattle in Progress and visible construction sites confirmed that this neighborhood is undergoing rapid transformation (Figure 4.4).

I identified a five-block study area – between 1st and 5th Ave, Wall St and Virginia St – which exemplifies both the cultural significance and neglect of URM architecture: frequently recognized in landmark nominations but still prone to vacancy and demolition (Figure 4.5). This convergence of heritage value, underutilization, and redevelopment pressure makes the area an ideal test case for exploring how retrofitting vacant URM buildings might maximize both community and ecological benefits.

Figure 4.5 Belltown Site Area: Demolition vs. History

Figure 4.6 All reported URM sites within study area



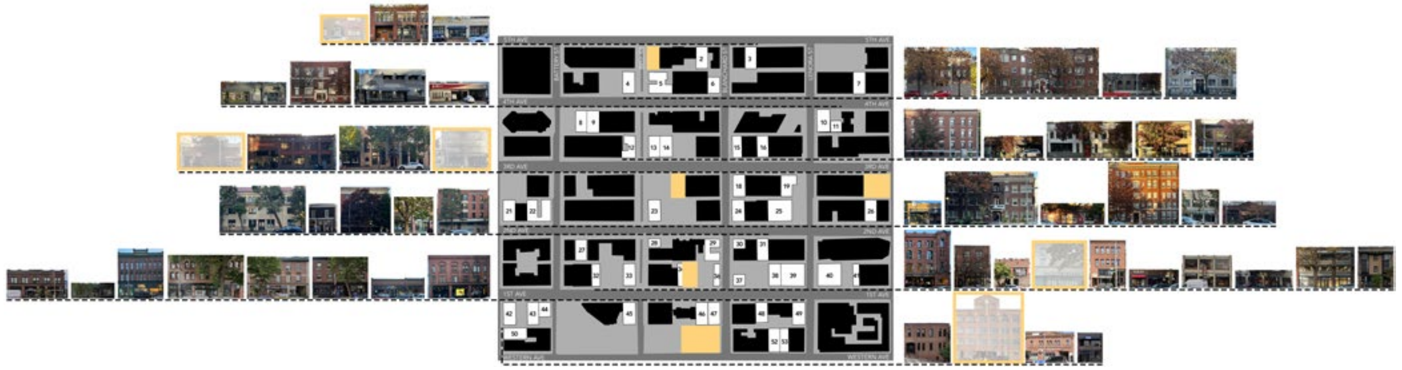
SITE SELECTION

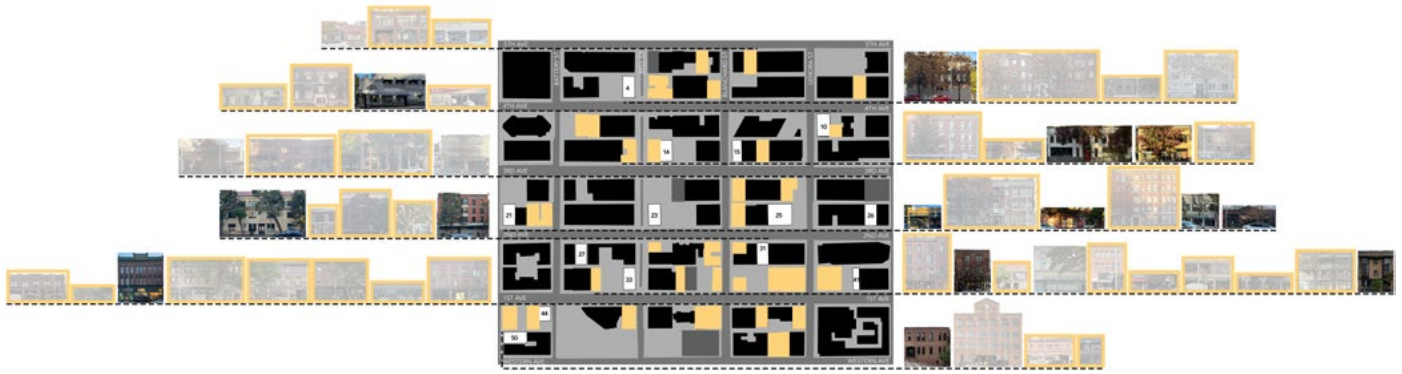
In an updated September 2024 report, the Seattle Department of Constructions and Inspections reported 52 unreinforced masonry buildings within the selected site area (Figure 4.6). In order to select a specific site for further study and experimentation, buildings within this site area were assessed based on the following criteria:

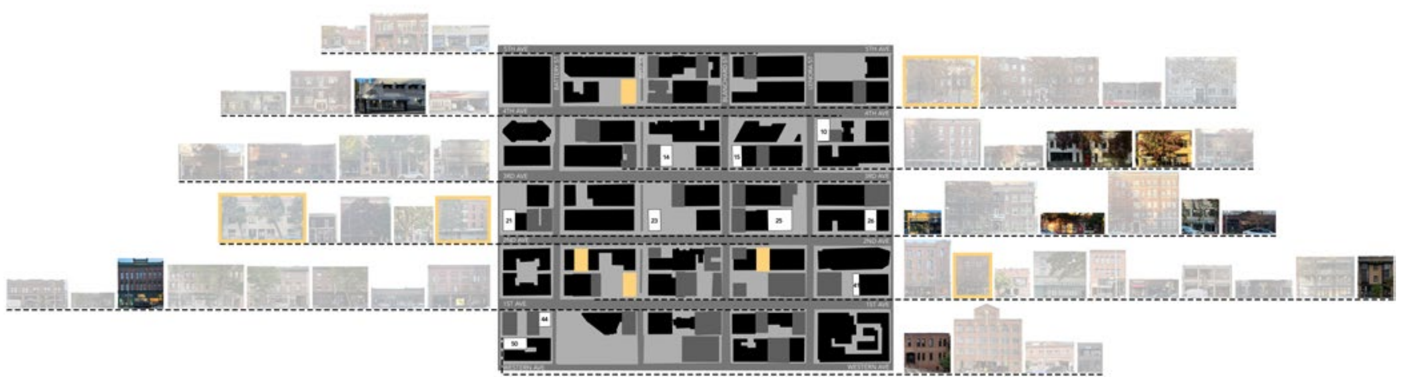
A. Structure: confirmed unreinforced masonry, indicating high structural risk
B. Building condition: vacant (include length of vacancy) and/or exhibiting frequent turnover
C. Building use: non-residential with preference for commercial, and/or less than 3 stories to simplify conversion and reflect local vernacular
D. Cultural/historical value: a formally designated landmark or meeting criteria for historic status
E. Potential for neighborhood growth: >10 minute walk from existing public space and/or complementary adjacencies

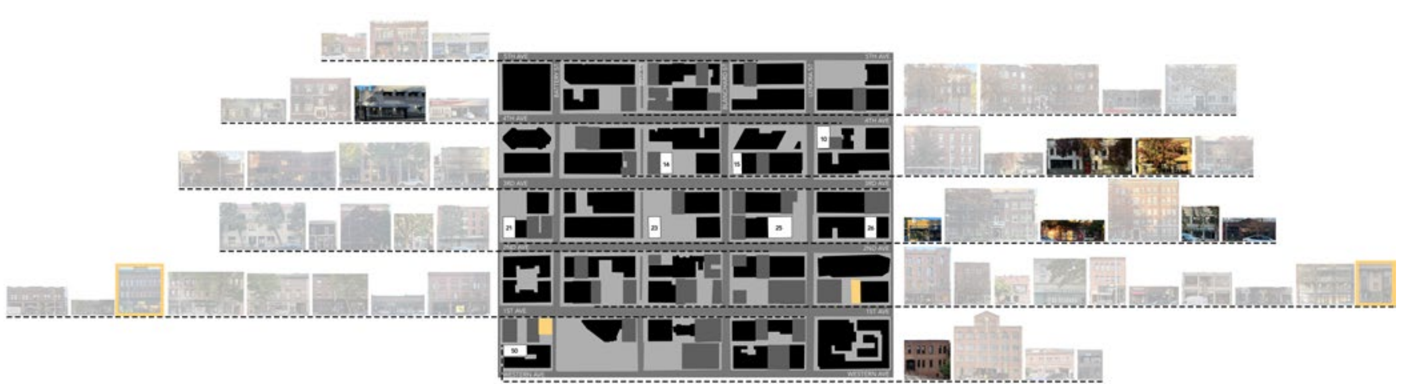
This framework deliberately foregrounded URM buildings because they simultaneously demand seismic-safety interventions and encapsulate distinct heritage value tied to their specific era of construction, masonry craftsmanship, and use of high-quality brick, stone, and hardwood. Commercial building types were prioritized for their vernacular ties to Belltown's automotive and film-industry past; their low-rise, one- or two-story forms make them more suited for conversion into public spaces.

While landmark status signals recognized cultural importance, it was applied as one of several measures and secondary to URM structure, so non-designated but otherwise eligible buildings remained in consideration. Vacancy became a key factor both as a proxy for underutilization (and thus readiness for intervention) and as an indicator of market disregard, which can open a window for community-oriented retrofit.









After assessing sites with criteria A (structure) and B (building condition), fourteen buildings remained which were confirmed unreinforced masonry buildings, without permitted or visible retrofit, and partially or fully vacant (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). In assessing Criterion C (building use), eight of those fourteen sites were one- or two-story commercial buildings (#10, 14, 15, 21, 23, 25, 26, 50), while six of the fourteen sites had residential uses and/or were three or more stories high (#4, 27, 31, 33, 41, 44) (Figures 4.9 and 4.10).

Figure 4.7 Criterion A: Confirmed URM, eliminating buildings that have undergone extensive changes and/or visible retrofits including structural elements (Source: Seattle Historical Sites and SDCI)

Figure 4.8 Criterion B: Vacant or partially vacant URMs

Figure 4.9 Criterion C1: Non-residential uses

Figure 4.10 Criterion C2: Less than 3 stories

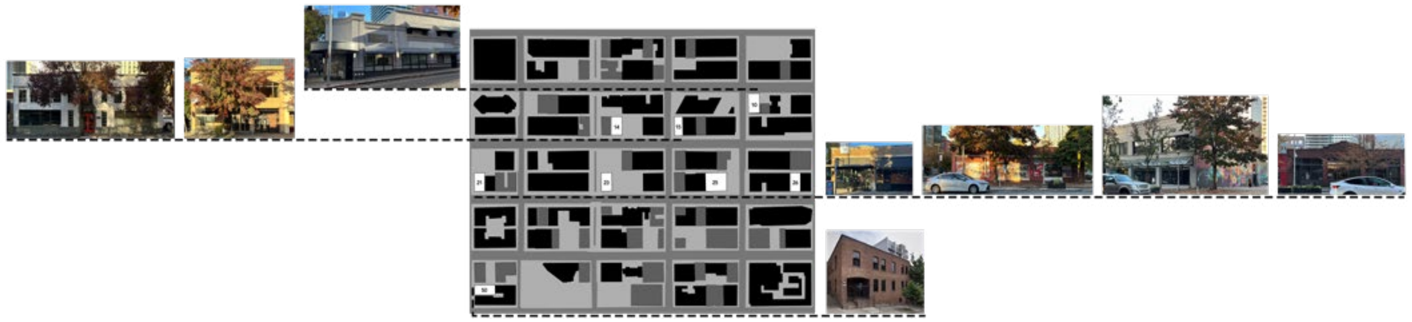


Figure 4.11 Remaining sites after assessing criteria A-C

Looking to criterion D, cultural or historical 'significance,' I looked further into each of the remaining eight sites (Figure 4.11) in order to understand their role in Belltown's historical fabric and how well their physical materiality reflects those histories. Table 4.1 outlines key historical information about these sites, sourced from the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods' Historical Sites database (Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections 2025). Highlighted in yellow, four of the sites (#14, 21, 23, 50) had enough information to determine relative intactness as well as some degree of historical significance of storytelling potential related to the buildings' histories within their context of Belltown. Sites #14 and #23 exhibited the most integrity in terms of their original construction and use. In contrast, sites #21 and #50 were notable not as much for their physical intactness but for their roles in Belltown's industrial past, as a centerpiece of the PNW film industry and a prominent auto garage, respectively. While site #23 was not noted upon initial review to play any major role in Belltown's economic or industrial history, it was designated a City of Seattle landmark in 2017, suggesting significance, historically or within the community or both.

Site #	Address	Common Name	Year Built	# Stories	Notable Former Uses	Vacancy status	Integrity?	Significance?
10	2035 4th Ave	General Tire Company	1926	2	tire company, market/deli	partial - with limited other uses, including bitcoin ATM	significant alterations made, few historic features remain	unknown
14	2226 3rd Ave	Seville Building	1929	2	advertising agency, warehouse, restaurant, office uses	partial - with office uses	altered for office use (primarily interior)	designed by George Wellington Stoddard
15	2132 3rd Ave	Brewer & Cone	1919	2	former sheet metal contractor, mexican consulate	partial - with co-working space	altered for office use, additional changes to windows	unknown
21	2420 2nd Ave	Principal Picture Exchange	1928	1	former film industry picture exchange	fully vacant (since ~2022)	extensive changes to windows, cladding	central to Belltown's history in film industry
23	2234 2nd Ave	Mama's Mexican Kitchen	1924	1	auto repair, restaurant	fully vacant (since ~2019)	historically intact	designated City of Seattle landmark (2017)
25	2106 2nd Ave	Golden West Garage	1919	2	vehicle storage and parking, Red Cross	partial - with public services	extensive changes to interior and exterior, altered for office use ~1951	probably one of the primary auto-oriented buildings in the vicinity when it was first built
26	2006 2nd Ave	Bushells Auction House	1917	1	art gallery	fully vacant (since fall 2024)	modest original historic building fabric and features, significant alteration to storefront	unknown
50	87 Wall St	Butterfield Trunk Company / Illium Building	1912	2	travel trunk manufacturing	partial (likely) - unknown	altered for office use ~2002	one of the most intact small manufacturing buildings in Belltown until alteration in 2002

Table 4.1 Criterion D: assessing significance. Yellow rows indicate the sites that convey the highest degree of integrity and significance

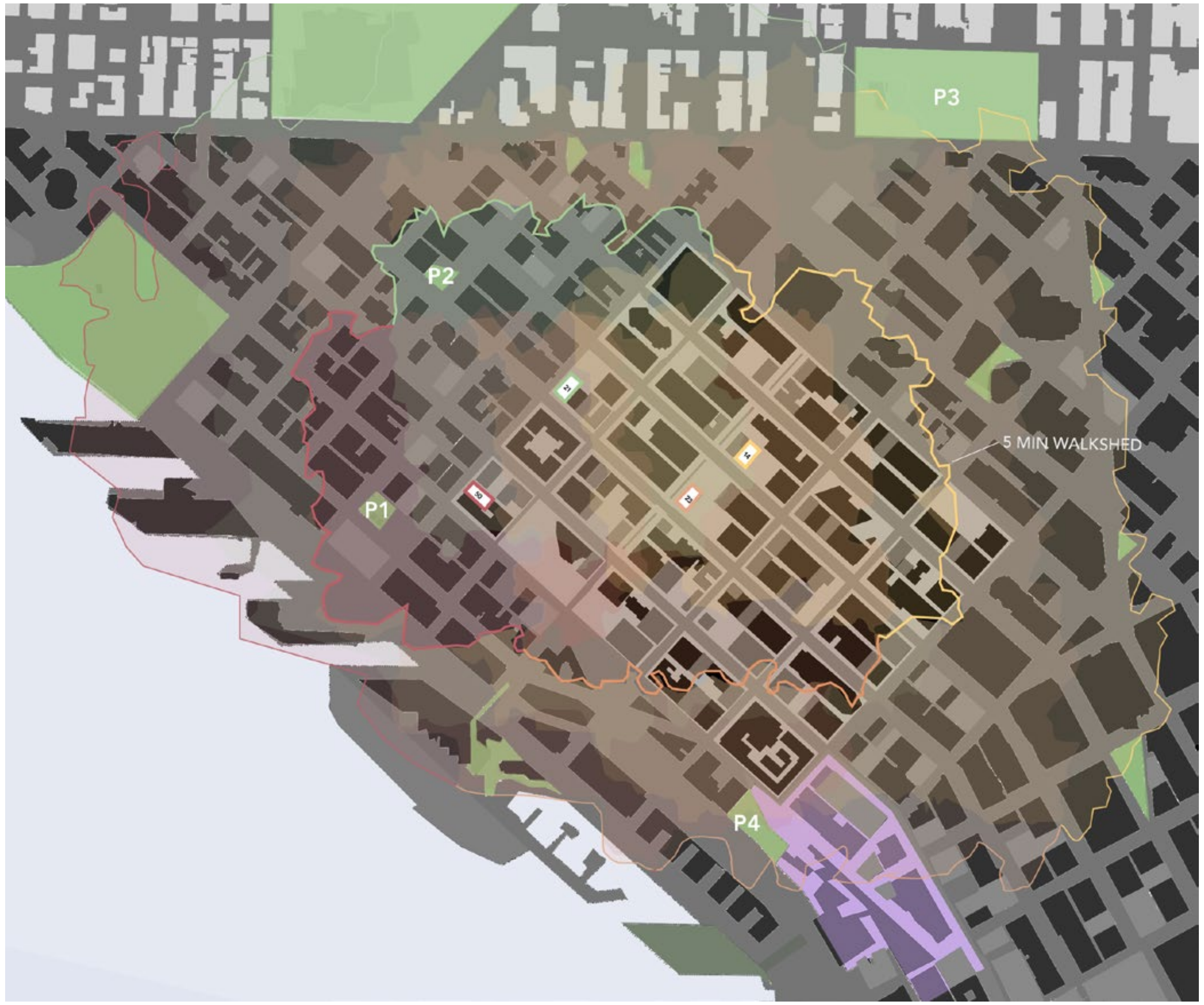


Figure 4.12 Criterion E1: Assessing proximity to nearby existing public space

In evaluating Criterion E, "Potential for Neighborhood Growth," I analyzed each of the remaining four sites within their broader neighborhood and block contexts to understand how new public space at these locations could support larger-scale growth and connectivity. At the neighborhood scale, I conducted a walkshed analysis to assess the quality and quantity of existing public spaces within a 5-10 minute walk from each site (Figure 4.12). I evaluated 5- and 10-minute walksheds as these distances align with well-established standards in urban planning and public health, and with behavioral and urban design research indicating that people are more likely to regularly use public spaces within short walking distances. A 10-minute threshold remains broadly accepted as an upper limit for equitable access, but some studies indicate that people are most likely to engage with public space when it is within a short, spontaneous walking distance, five minutes or less (Browning and Lee 2017).

Figure 4.13 'Parks' out of scope, Bell Street Park (left) and Regrade Park (right) | Seattle Department of Transportation; Seattle Parks and Recreation

In this analysis, Bell Street Park and Regrade Park were deliberately excluded as they do not meet the definition of public space as used in this project (Figure 4.13). Although Bell Street Park falls within the 5-minute walkshed of all four sites, its primary function is as a woonerf rather than a dedicated park, and, as discussed in Chapter 3, has been widely criticized for its ambiguous role, limited activation, and unclear pedestrian prioritization; these factors make it inconsistent with this study's definition of inclusive and accessible public space. Similarly, Regrade Park – while within a 5-minute walkshed of #14, #21, and #23, and a 10-minute walkshed of #50 – is an off-leash dog park, serving a specific non-human user group and thus not meeting the criteria of inclusive, accessible public space as defined in this study. However, I would argue that Regrade Park remains a potentially synergistic site, as its use has shifted in the past and could again, offering opportunities for future reprogramming.

There are just two public spaces within the 5-minute walkshed of any of the four sites. The Belltown P-Patch and Belltown Cottage Park (P1 on the map) is in the 5-minute walkshed of #50 and the 10-minute walkshed of #21 and #23 (Figure 4.14). A public plaza associated with Grange Insurance Associates (P2 on the map) is in the 5-minute walkshed of #21 and in the 10-minute walkshed of #14, #23, and #50 (Figure 4.15). Belltown Cottage Park (P1), is well-used and well-loved, exemplifying quality public space through its integration of greenery, art, and layered community use, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Figure 4.14 Belltown Cottage Park and P-Patch | David Koch via HistoryLink; TIA International Photography via Seattle Parks and Recreation

Figure 4.15 Public plaza outside Grange Insurance Group at Cedar St and 2nd Ave | Jesse Chappell via Google Maps; Google Street View

Figure 4.16 Denny Park (left), Victor Steinbrueck Park (right) | TIA International Photography via Seattle Parks and Recreation

Denny Park (P3) and Victor Steinbrueck Park (P4) each fall within the 10-minute walkshed of one of the four sites, providing additional but more distant options for public space access (Figure 4.16). Denny Park, located just outside of Belltown across the heavily trafficked Denny Way, offers over four acres of traditional green space with mature trees and seating. Victor Steinbrueck Park (P4), adjacent to Pike Place Market, offers scenic waterfront views and cultural significance but is more closely tied to the Market district and its tourist infrastructure than to the daily rhythms of Belltown. While both parks contribute to the broader public space network, their relative distance and distinct neighborhood contexts limit their relevance for regular, spontaneous use by nearby residents. This underscores the need for new, proximate public spaces within Belltown itself ("Denny Park" n.d.; "Victor Steinbrueck Park Design Threatened by Renovations" n.d.)

The others of the nearest public spaces within 10-minute walksheds, colored green in the map, are not necessarily parks – either part of a company or residential campus (i.e. Amazon spheres), or extremely small and open to busy car-trafficked roads.

Determining that sites #14, #21, and #23 were all within 10-minute zones of limited community-oriented public space, I moved forward with the second part of assessment for Criterion E, looking at potential areas of synergy around each site. Potential adjacencies with synergy include current open space (i.e. underutilized or privatized public space that could be reclaimed and adapted for alternative use), vacant/parking lots with potential for redevelopment, and other URMs, with potential for redevelopment into residential or mixed-use.

Site #23 (Figure 4.17) presents the strongest potential for synergy due to its proximity to several complementary spaces. It borders Regrade Park, which, despite currently functioning as a dog park, provides rare open space and large mature trees that enhance the public realm. Should Regrade Park's use evolve, the addition of new public space at site #23 could further activate the area and expand opportunities for community programming. Bell Street Park also runs alongside both site #23 and Regrade Park, offering additional designated open space that is currently underutilized but well-suited for thoughtful activation (Figure 4.18).

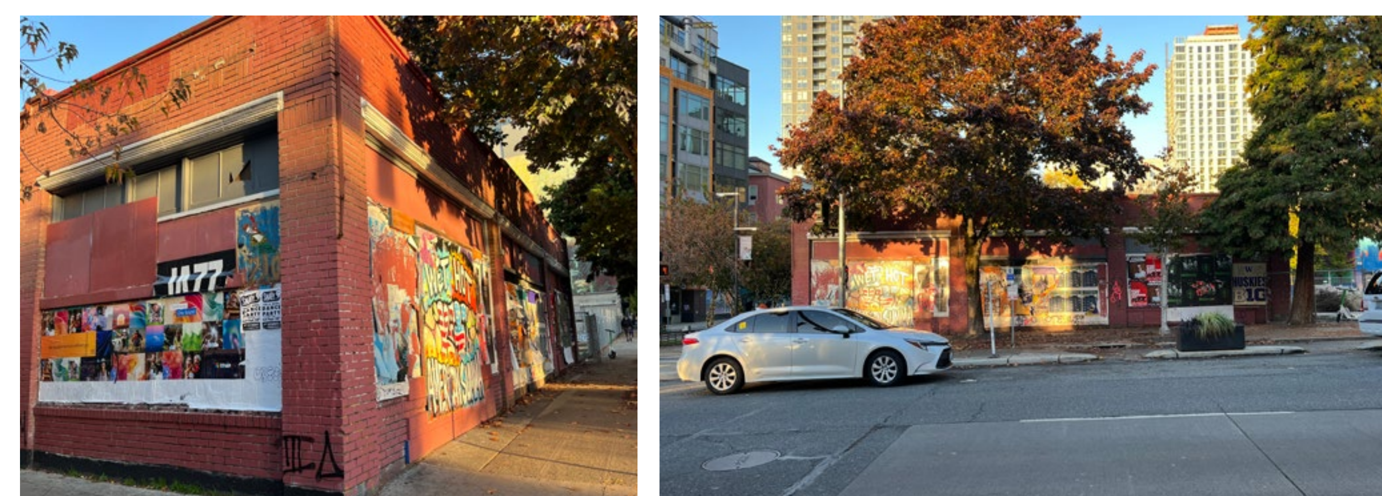


Figure 4.17 Site #23: 2234 2nd Avenue, October 2024

Figure 4.18 Site in context

On the opposite side of the site, a vacant lot spanning three parcels is zoned DMR/R 95/65, or 'Downtown Mixed Residential/ Residential,' allowing up to eight stories or 95 feet of mixed residential development (Seattle Municipal Code 2025 §23.32). Permits issued in 2021 approved an eight-story project with 175 apartments above ground-floor retail, though construction has yet to begin (Figure 4.19; Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections 2020). If built, it would significantly increase residential density and demand for accessible, high-quality public space. Together, these adjacencies position site #23 as a key node for addressing neighborhood amenity gaps and promoting active community use.

While I am choosing this one site for further exploration, it is representative of a broader pattern found in Seattle's core: the co-location of seismic vulnerability, public space scarcity, vacancy, and cultural significance. This convergence presents a critical opportunity to address multiple urban challenges through preservation-informed, community-centered design. The chosen site embodies the intersection of these urgent needs and serves as a model for applying this framework elsewhere in Seattle.

Figure 4.19 Proposal for adjacent parcels | Liv 2nd & Bell, LLC and Ankrom Moisan Architects

THE SITE

Site #23, located at 2234 2nd Avenue in Belltown, stands out not only for meeting the project's suitability criteria but also for its unique cultural history, landmark status, physical condition, and environmental context – all of which position it as a strong candidate for my proposed design intervention.

The site holds formal recognition through its 2017 designation as a City of Seattle landmark, affirming its architectural and historical significance. The building was designated Criterion D of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Ordinance (SMC §25.12.590) for embodying the distinctive visible characteristics of early 20th-century commercial masonry construction, and under Criterion F for its prominence of spatial location and scale, which make it an easily identifiable visual feature that contributes to the distinctive character of Belltown. According to the designation document, the building exemplifies typical masonry storefront construction from the 1920s, featuring distinctive brick detailing and original wood sash windows. Belltown's development, tied to early Seattle settler William Bell and shaped by streetcar expansion and mixed-use growth, gives the building added contextual significance as part of one of the city's oldest and most architecturally diverse districts. Nearby landmarks and public spaces reinforce its role within the evolving urban fabric of this dense, vibrant neighborhood (City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board 2017).

Beyond its formal designation, the building housed Mama's Mexican Kitchen and holds deep emotional and cultural meaning for the Belltown community. Operating from 1974 to 2016, Mama's was a beloved local institution known for its kitschy decor (including the iconic Elvis Room), affordable food, longtime staff, and welcoming "hole-in-the-wall" atmosphere. With its many rooms, nooks, and alcoves filled with colorful paintings, posters, and family mementos, it embodied the eclectic and unpretentious spirit of Belltown (Figure 4.20; Hall 2017; Vanishing Seattle 2025)

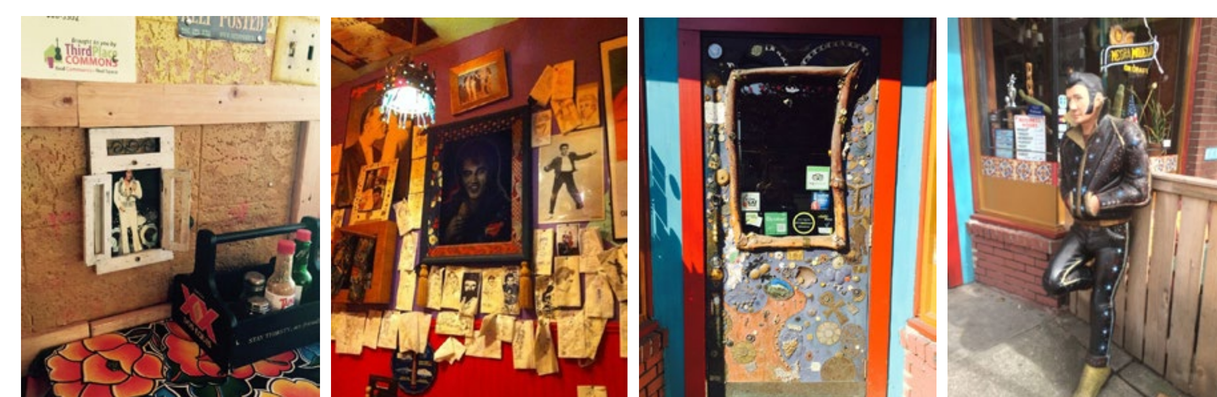
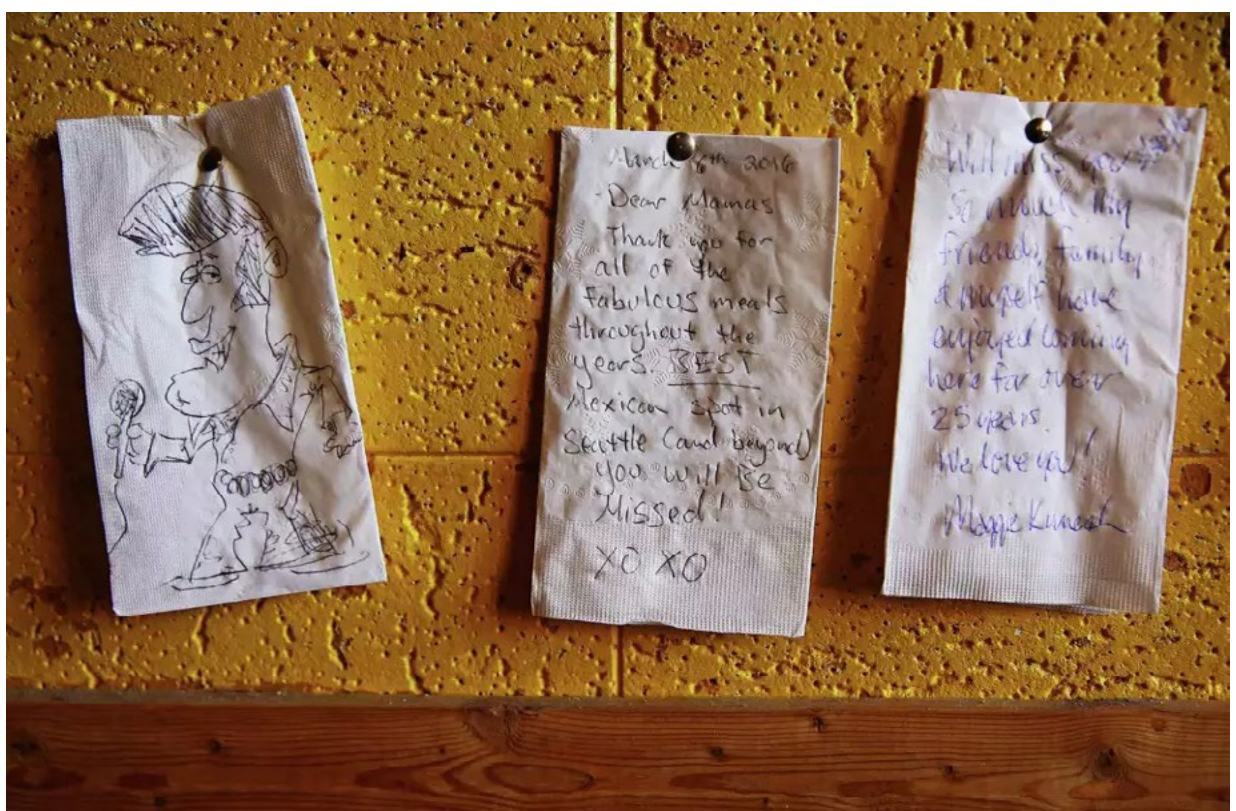


Figure 4.20   Art, Elvis, hidden nooks, bright colors, and quirky decor | Yelp



Mama's offered a casual, community-rooted space that became a lasting community presence, sustained by its character, affordability, and deep, multigenerational social ties. Frequented by local regulars, musicians, artists, and service workers, Mama's anchored a stretch of 2nd Avenue that many considered the cultural heart of Belltown (Banel 2024; Vanishing Seattle 2025)

When the building was sold in 2015 to developer Minglian Realty, Mama's closed to widespread community mourning, with long-time diners gathering for their last meals at Mama's (Figure 4.21). Though the space briefly reopened under new ownership until 2019, the one-story brick building has remained vacant since (Burton 2016)

As the new owner planned redevelopment, they proactively submitted the landmark nomination with arguments aimed at denying landmark status for the Mama's building, challenging its architectural and historical significance to avoid preservation requirements and enable demolition. This strategic move heightened tensions between community preservation advocates and developer interests. Fears of losing this piece of Belltown's cultural fabric amid rapid gentrification galvanized residents, workers, small business owners, and advocacy groups launched a grassroots campaign to protect the building. In landmark designation hearings, they argued that its significance went beyond architecture: it stood as one of the last intact commercial spaces reflecting the neighborhood's working-class and artistic identity. Advocates emphasized its three public-facing facades, original auto garage layout, and symbolic continuity amid accelerating change. Despite initial resistance from City staff, the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board voted unanimously for designation in 2017 (Banel 2024; Hall 2017)

Yet in the years that followed, the building sat vacant and unsecured, drawing break-ins and eventually a "public nuisance" designation from the Seattle Fire Department. Community advocates saw this not as neglect, but as a deliberate strategy of "demolition by neglect" by Minglian Realty to bypass preservation requirements as well as public opinion. As Steve Hall, Belltown resident and member of Friends of Historic Belltown Steve Hall, said "they've harmed our neighborhood for the last nine years… turning our landmark into a blight," eroding both trust and support for preservation efforts (Banel 2024).

Beginning on December 30, 2024, the building, despite its landmark status, was demolished under an emergency demolition permit (Figure 4.22). This bypassed standard preservation protocols and public oversight, erasing a site of cultural and architectural significance essentially overnight at the discretion of the owner (a developer with plans to build an 8-story apartment complex), despite opposition from Belltown community groups (Banel 2024; Studio19 Architects 2024).

Figure 4.21 People gathering at Mama's on its last day (top), napkins hung on the wall, a final expression of love from loyal restaurant-goers (bottom) | Genna Martin via Seattle PI

Figure 4.22 Demolition of building at 2234 2nd Ave, ‘Mama’s Mexican Kitchen.’ Photos taken January 2, 2025.

Even months after its demolition, public responses underscore how deeply Mama’s remains embedded in local memory. Posts on Yelp, Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube reflect a vast and vivid emotional archive: recounting first dates and celebrations, funny moments, time spent with loved ones, and years sustained by Mama’s chips, salsa, and burritos (@fecundity88 2024; Games Played Terribly 2015; “Mama’s Mexican Kitchen - Seattle, WA” n.d.; Rachael Haverlock 2012; Vanishing Seattle 2025). In a testament to this lingering attachment, Vanishing Seattle sold limited-edition “Mama’s” pins, and elements of the restaurant – including its neon sign and recreated seating – were preserved at the nearby Jupiter Bar (Figure 4.23; Vanishing Seattle 2025). As part of a neighborhood-wide effort to show love for cherished places on Valentine’s Day 2025, Belltown residents left posters and art at the vacant lot where Mama’s once stood (Figure 4.24; Friends of Historic Belltown 2025). These gestures suggest that, even in absence, the building’s cultural presence endures and reflect a collective need for a tangible space to hold, honor, and carry forward its memories.

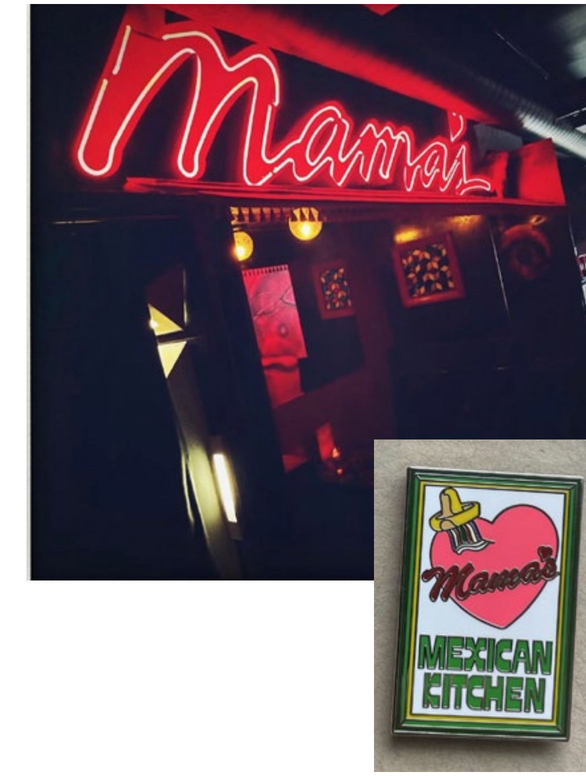


Figure 4.23 Mama’s neon sign and booth, now located at the Jupiter Bar; Mama’s commemorative pin | Jupiter Bar on Facebook; Vanishing Seattle

Figure 4.24 Neighbors leave art at the vacant lot where Mama’s stood | Friends of Historic Belltown on Facebook

MODELING

Despite its unexpected erasure, I decided to continue a design exploration on this site. In doing so, the project became an act of memory and preservation in itself, made even more poignant by the knowledge that all of the memories and richness that once stood at that site is now lost.

In order to investigate the spatial, structural, and ecological possibilities of transforming the building into public space, digital and physical modeling were employed. Digital modeling assisted in building a comprehensive understanding of the building's material composition and quantities, structure, and change over time. The physical model provided a means of tangibly experiencing the construction process and material articulation within the space, simulating deconstruction methods, and testing reconstruction possibilities.

DIGITAL MODELING

Construction documents from the building's original 1924 construction through multiple renovations up to 2004 were obtained via email from the City of Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections Public Resource Center's Microfilm Library (See Appendix A). More recent permits (post-2004) were numerous and reviewed online as relevant. These documents, supplemented by photographs from online posts and articles, helped inform my best approximation of the building's existing conditions, a necessary foundation for design proposals. Translating decades of archival drawings into Rhino offered a clearer understanding of the building's spatial qualities than 2D documentation alone. Modeling changes over time revealed how renovations altered its form and material composition across generations, while also highlighting elements that remained consistent.

The building is a one-story commercial structure constructed in 1924, composed of unreinforced brick masonry bearing walls on a poured concrete foundation, with a heavy timber post-and-beam interior system supporting a flat built-up roof. Measuring 60 feet along 2nd Avenue and 108 feet along Bell Street, it is organized into three structural bays along the east-west axis and six along the north-south, fully occupying its parcel. A two-foot-thick masonry fire wall divides the building between the third and fourth bays on the north elevation, historically separating the three front commercial storefronts from the rear workshop accessed via Bell Street. As one of the most substantial interior structural elements, the firewall played a central role in the building's use and adaptation over time and served as a key reference in digital modeling.

The Rhino model reconstructed the building's original layout and documented key alterations over time (Figure 4.25). Notable changes include window and door modifications in 1944 and 1976 that reconfigured much of the brickwork on the Bell Street facade; the1980 insertion of a modern aluminum storefront in the Second Avenue center bay; and recent covering of transoms with plywood or similar materials for vandalism protection. An original two-part wood garage door from the Bell Street facade was removed in 1944 and relocated to the alley facade sometime after 1980. Interior finishes reflect multiple renovation phases, with flooring ranging from concrete and hardwood to asbestos tile and vinyl, and walls varying from exposed brick to lath-and-plaster and gypsum board. A drop ceiling and skylight covering were added to the middle bay on 2nd Avenue in 1958, while the brick chimney in the front section was likely removed in the 1970s. These details were cross-referenced using archival drawings, permit records, and photographic sources.

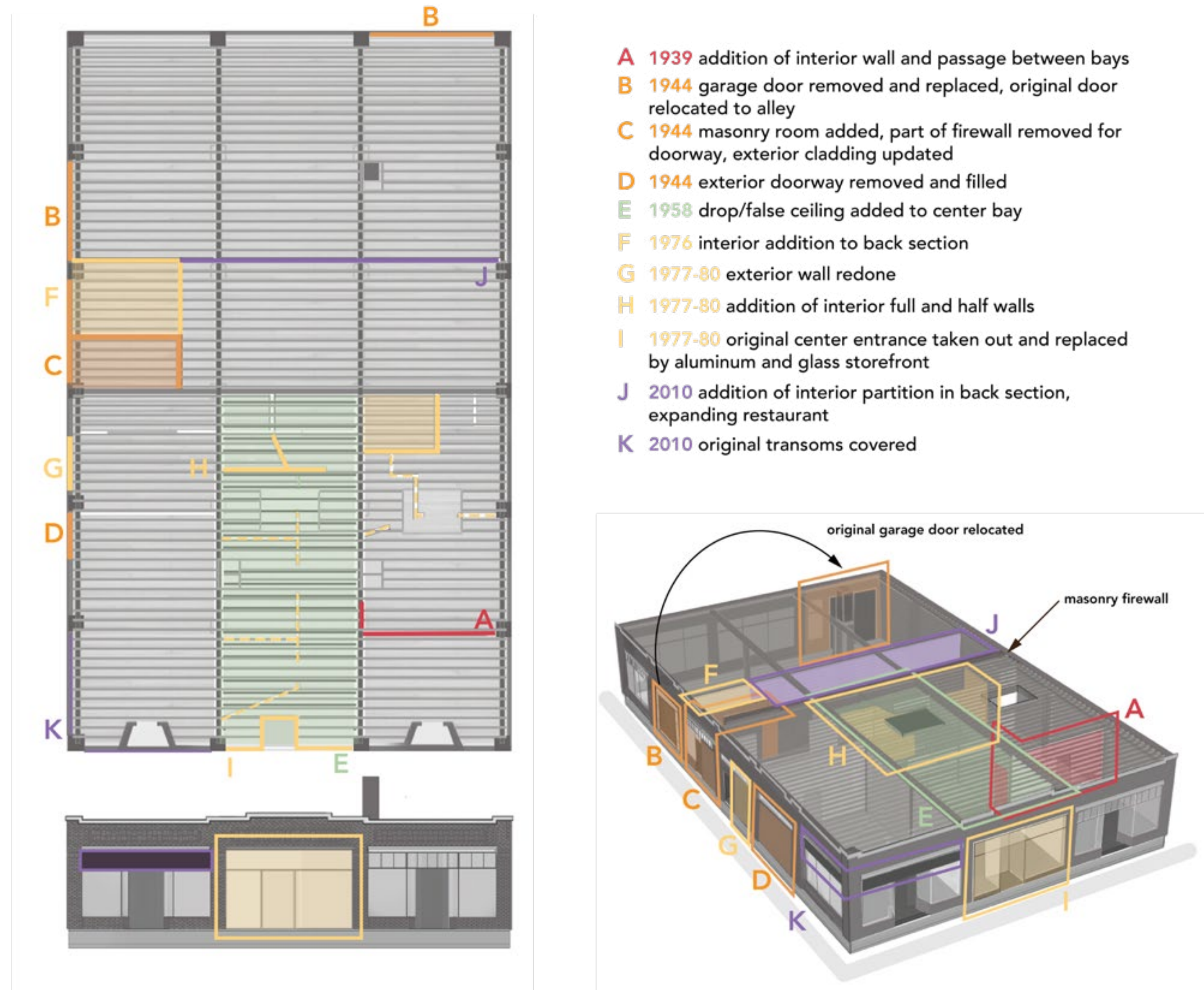


Figure 4.25 Documenting changes across the building's history

The final digital model captured both original conditions and later interventions, integrating major structural and ornamental elements into a cohesive representation of the building's existing state (Figure 4.26). Key components include: the masonry envelope, structural bay rhythm, parapet profile, roof framing and rafters, and the fire wall.

Discrepancies between archival drawings were resolved as accurately as possible through comparative analysis with photographic sources, resulting in a layered, materially grounded model that informed subsequent design explorations responsive to the building's spatial and historical complexity. Certain uncertainties – such as the restaurant's possible expansion beyond the firewall, undocumented openings in the firewall, unclear connections between rear and front interior additions, and potential damage or vandalism to windows and interior finishes – were excluded from the final digital model, which served as the basis for the physical model, to maintain clarity and consistency.

Figure 4.26 2234 2nd Ave: Existing Conditions

Figure 4.27 Physical model, 2nd Ave facade

PHYSICAL MODELING

Building on insights from the digital model, I constructed a physical scale model of the building (Figure 4.27) to more closely engage with the materiality and construction techniques characteristic of unreinforced masonry (URM) structures, as well as the particular spatial characteristics of this site. Using information gathered from historical construction documents and organized in my digital model, I replicated aspects of the original materials and methods at a 1:32 scale. This hands-on process provided a deeper spatial and tactile understanding that complemented the digital model and archival research.

Two phases of physical modeling informed my design process: construction and deconstruction. The construction phase involved assembling the model using materials that closely approximated those used in actual construction, a form of simulation research that enabled both a high-level understanding of the material assembly and construction process as well as a more tacit engagement with the embodied knowledge, labor, and craft embedded in this type of pre-mechanized building construction (Figures 4.28 and 4.29).

Because I was unable to physically enter the actual building, this model became a proxy for spatial and material engagement. It helped reveal how individual components articulate in space, how surfaces meet, how load-bearing elements might have been assembled, and how construction choices expressed both structural logic and craftsmanship. In this way, the model became a tool for inferring significance: not just what materials were used, but how and why they were arranged in specific configurations. Spending extended time within the space of the model also offered an experiential connection to the building itself, allowing me to access, to some degree, the perspectives of those who once built, inhabited, or otherwise shaped it. This process created a tactile and temporal proximity to a structure that no longer exists in accessible form – surviving now largely through memory and documentation – underscoring the role of embodied knowledge in architectural interpretation and the value of making as a form of inquiry into both material history and spatial meaning.

This phase informed my design approach through an evolving understanding of how reorganizing the materials on site could function to preserve and build upon the building's original craft and spatial character. See Appendix B for more photo documentation of model construction.

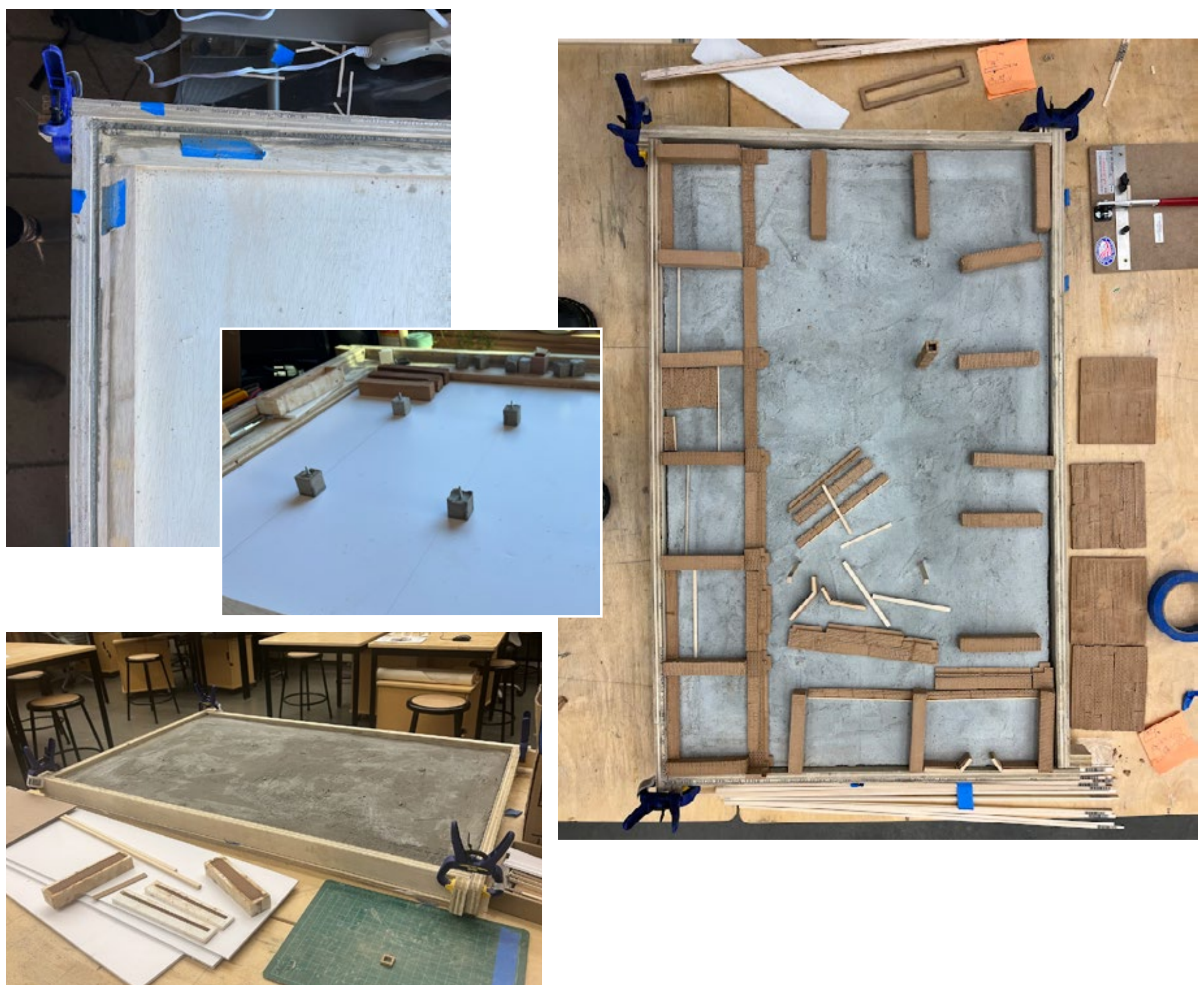


Figure 4.28 Modeling process: concrete foundation elements, facade construction

Figure 4.29 Modeling process: wood and brick assembly, plaster and paint, rafter and roof construction

Following construction, I carefully deconstructed the model, again as a form of simulation research, applying deconstruction strategies drawn from literature and professional case studies (Chini and Bruening 2003; Krause 2015; Sledge Seattle, LLC 2020), youtube videos of deconstruction demonstrations and seminars (Rethos Places Reimagined 2022; San Mateo County Sustainability Department 2019), and professional guides and toolkits (Build Reuse 2025; Hauf 2023; RE-USE Consulting 2025). This process became a test of both method and material durability. I began with a planned sequence intended to simulate best practices prioritizing safety, machine and human access, and damage minimization. I also mapped a selective deconstruction strategy, identifying which elements to remove and which to retain based on structural logic and interpretive goals. As in full-scale projects, the actual progression shifted based on material response – what broke, what held, and what could be salvaged – and to access constraints, especially my inability to physically enter the model (Figure 4.30).

I started by scraping off the roof material, followed by progressive removal of the shiplap panels. Although I had planned to delay rafter removal until after dismantling the party wall, mimicking typical sequencing, I had not fully accounted for the model's limitations. The side openings were too small to allow realistic interior access, and it quickly became clear how difficult it would be to remove interior elements while leaving the rafters in place. Since many rafters had already collapsed during roof deconstruction, I continued removing them to gain access from above. This shift in sequence, while a departure from standard practice and likely unfeasible at full scale, highlighted the spatial challenges and constraints that can shape deconstruction strategies in real-world conditions.

With access improved, I allowed the ceiling plaster to collapse as rafters were removed, then scraped plaster and pried lath strips from the interior walls. I then dismantled the party wall to simulate access for theoretical machinery that would assist with efficient stripping of interior finishes and framing. I removed wall studs by detaching the bottom plate and pulling the studs from the header. I proceeded to remove the remaining rafters, the interior masonry partition, and segments of the central fire wall, in alignment with my design proposal.

Throughout the process, I sorted salvaged materials based on type and size as well as what remained intact versus what broke during deconstruction. Notably, the model's brickwork – constructed largely from etched clay segments – did not replicate the behavior of bonded individual bricks in full-scale conditions, limiting the accuracy of salvage simulation. However, it is well documented that bricks in URM construction are often fully salvageable when deconstructed carefully, as lime mortar can typically be removed with minimal damage (Nordby et al. 2009). I therefore operated under the assumption that most bricks would remain intact, with the exception of an estimated 5% to account for damage either prior to or during deconstruction. While my intent was to leave most of the heavy timber beams and certain segments of rafters in place, the need to deconstruct from above required their temporary removal. These elements were reinstalled afterward to simulate continuous structural presence.

Model deconstruction underscored the complex interdependencies between method, material, and spatial constraints. Despite careful planning, efforts to implement deconstruction actions often impacted surrounding assemblies, resulting in a range of material conditions from intact to partially damaged to significantly damaged. This variability emphasized the importance of flexibility in deconstruction approaches (as well as in repurposing strategies). Even so, a greater proportion of components remained reusable than initially expected, including elements that sustained some damage but could still serve functional or interpretive roles in future use.

These observations informed how I approached the material inventory and design research, detailed in subsequent sections. While some materials broke during deconstruction, many proved more durable than expected, and even damaged pieces retain potential for creative reuse. Salvage does not depend solely on a material remaining fully intact, but on its material and chemical properties, character, and how it can be adapted. My design exploration reflects this broader understanding of what can be preserved and how materials might carry meaning or function in new ways.

While the physical model provided a tactile way to understand the processes of construction and deconstruction – offering insight into craft, effort, and material behavior at a small scale – it was less about quantifying outcomes than about engaging with the building's history, exploring how that significance might inform methods of deconstruction, and developing a feel for how buildings come apart (Figure 4.31). This led directly into the material inventory, detailed in the next section, where knowledge gained in modeling was expanded through a systematic material assessment, informing strategies for deconstruction and reintegration that honor both the site's history and its future possibilities. See Appendix B for more model process photos.

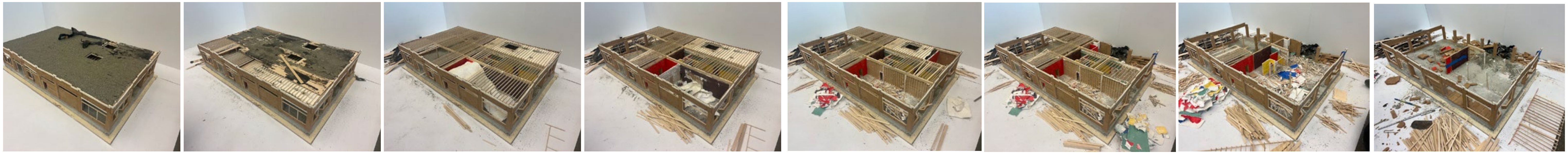


Figure 4.30 Model deconstruction

Figure 4.31 Model deconstruction: before and after

MATERIAL ANALYSIS

Informed in part by the modeling process, the material analysis sought to: 1) document the existing material composition of the site, including quantities and likely dates and sources of origin; 2) understand the history and significance embedded in the building's form and materiality; 3) refine deconstruction methods by considering material conditions in relation to their origin and physical properties; and 4) evaluate the material palette – as well as waste diversion and reuse potential – of a reconstructed landscape.

MATERIAL HISTORY & SIGNIFICANCE

My investigation into the historical and cultural meaning of the building's materiality began with archival research. As described in the modeling section, I examined original plans and subsequent alterations to trace how the structure evolved over time, which guided my understanding the site's "existing conditions" as well as revealed what building owners prioritized, how spaces shifted, and how architectural decisions reflected changing values across the building's lifespan. Physical modeling further deepened my understanding of material significance, as described in the previous section. This research was supported by documentation reflecting the site's "official" significance, according to the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board in the building's nomination and designation report, where historic materials were a primary focus (Nicholson Kovalchick Architects 2016; City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board 2017).

Over the 100-year lifetime of this building, the architectural and material integrity was largely preserved. Across generations of owners and renovations, there was a consistent sensitivity to maintaining the fundamental characteristics of the structure: the 3x6 bay structure framed by large masonry columns, carefully designed brickwork on the facades, large windows, and openness out to its two adjacent streets (2nd Avenue and Bell Street). This continuity forms a core thread in the building's history and is an important consideration in its next transformation: what physical elements are truly core to the building's identity, which should be preserved to maintain its integrity? At the same time, what of its materiality are less essential to the building's character?

While the Landmarks Board identifies the three exterior facades as primary features to preserve, a more nuanced approach to preservation might also consider how less immediately visible elements – material and spatial rhythms, shifts in the internal elements, accumulated patina – contribute to the building's cultural meaning. The addition and removal of interior partitions in the front half of the building over time (periodically between 1939-1980) illustrate how the layout adapted to evolving programs and user needs, introducing circulation between the three front bays. This articulation and gradual expansion of Mama's Mexican Kitchen reflects its growing role and enduring presence within the building, contributing to the site's character over time. Meanwhile, the continued maintenance of large storefront windows and ongoing experimentation with entries along Bell Street and the central 2nd Ave bay indicate a longstanding priority for openness and street-level engagement. These changes suggest that flexibility, permeability, and incremental adaptation are themselves qualities worth preserving and expressing in future design. Figure 4.32 illustrates how consistency and transience take shape spatially.

These analyses helped me form goals for my design approach. A broadened framework for preservation should aim to engage with this complexity, recognizing the significance of less tangible, less easily measured qualities, rather than reducing the building to a set of static components. Accordingly, I prioritize preserving those elements that most strongly reflect and contribute to the building's layered significance, while selectively removing parts that have changed more over time, are not directly tied to significant aspects of the site, or do not require their full form to convey meaning.

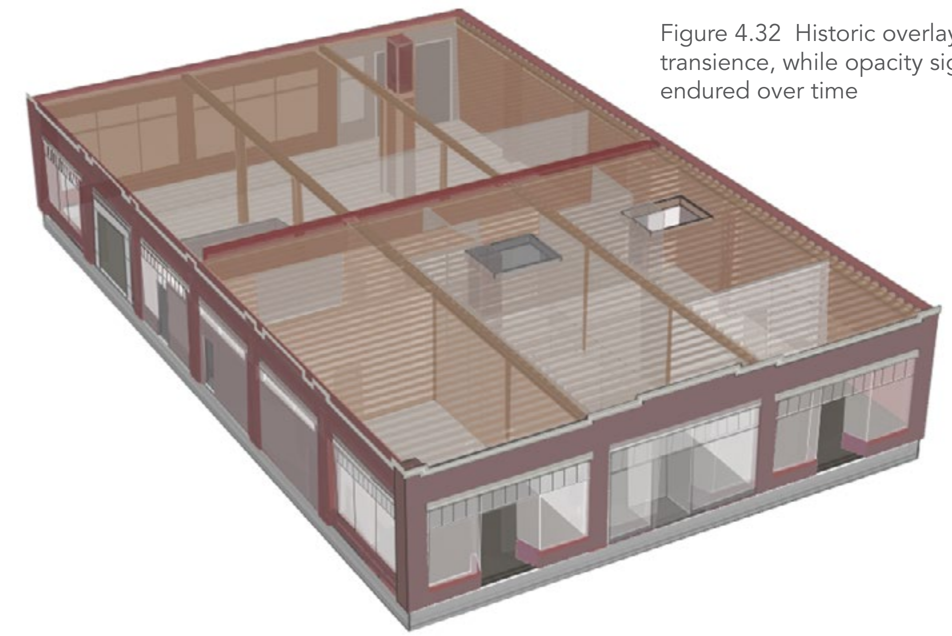


Figure 4.32 Historic overlay: transparency represents transience, while opacity signifies elements that have endured over time

The core elements I identified include the masonry columns, which organize the building into a 3x6 bay structure; the separation between the front and back halves of the building, marked by the firewall; the recessed entries on 2nd Ave that served as primary access points for the restaurant; and the various secondary entries along Bell Street. The meandering, flexible rhythm of the front section contrasts with the open spatial character of the back, each contributing differently to the building's identity. Additional defining features include the detailed brick articulation above the windows and the colorful, eclectic imagery associated with Mama's, which speak to its evolving personality and cultural imprint over time (Figure 4.33).

Materials that do not reflect these essentials can be selectively removed and reintegrated into the landscape in new ways, allowing the site's history to persist through adaptation rather than strict replication.

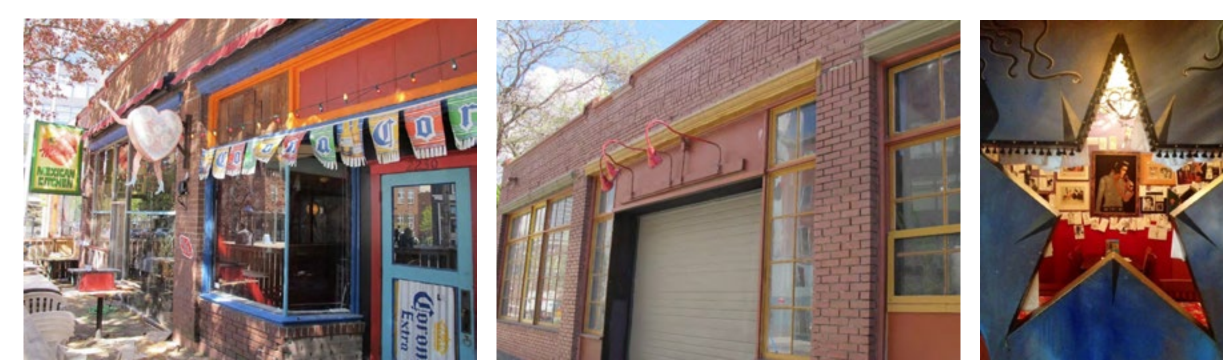


Figure 4.33 Material details | NK Architects via Seattle Landmark Nomination; Yelp (right)

INVENTORY

Building on this qualitative understanding of the site's material and spatial significance, I turned to a more detailed material inventory, captured in spreadsheets and diagrams, cataloging the types, quantities, and characteristics of materials on site. I also accounted for embedded environmental value, including estimated carbon content calculated using the Embodied Carbon in Construction Calculator (EC3) and, for older or less common materials, supplemented by some material-specific Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) and academic literature. Identifying the materials with the highest embodied carbon helped establish priorities for on-site reuse and enabled direct comparison with the carbon impact of proposed new materials. Further understanding of the quantity, condition, and deconstruction/reuse potential of the materials on site helped me refine my understanding of the material palette and informed decisions about how different materials would be deconstructed and reconstructed in my design proposal.

To build this inventory, I undertook a systematic deconstruction of the digital building model in Rhino, breaking it down into discrete material layers with quantifiable data. Each component of the building's "existing conditions" was cataloged by material type, dimensions, and date of construction, as noted in construction documents; likely source and composition, inferred through historical research; total volume, calculated in Rhino; and embodied carbon content, determined primarily through the EC3 too. This process is illustrated in the accompanying exploded axonometric diagram (Figure 4.34) which visualize the spatial relationships and material stratification of the building, and in the corresponding material inventory table (Table 4.2), which lists all identified components and quantities. Fasteners, adhesives, paints, and minor decorative elements were excluded from the material assessment due to limited data availability and their relatively negligible contribution to overall quantities. The original stone corbels, a distinctive decorative and historical feature, were also excluded from analysis, noted for retention rather than deconstruction.

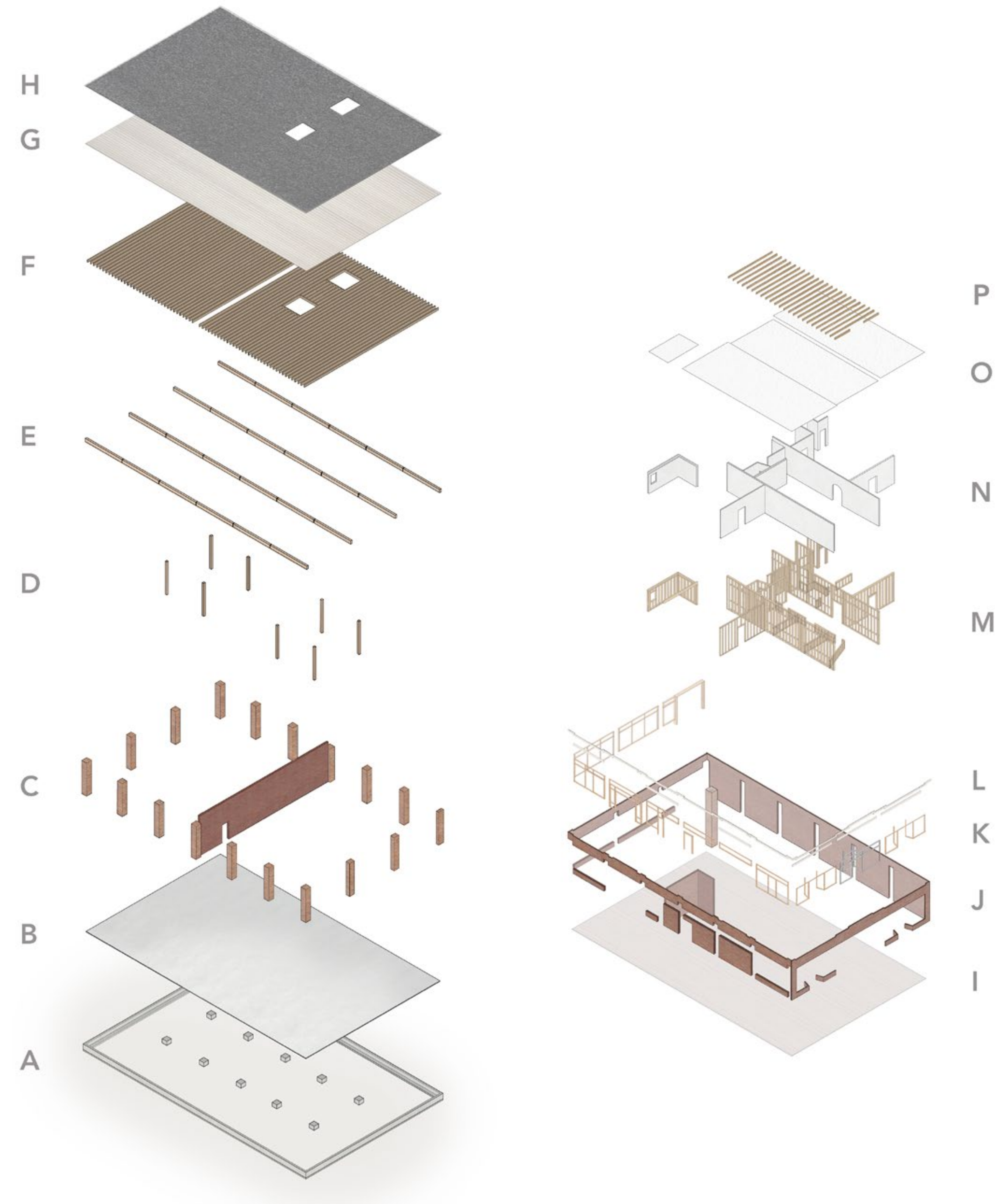


Figure 4.34 Exploded axonometric diagrams illustrating material layers, letter labels keyed to Table 4.2

year of construction	feature	element		dimensions	total volume (cubic ft)	total area or volume	units	est. carbon content (kgCO2e) per unit (cradle to gate)	total carbon content	key
1924	foundation	footer	concrete, portland cement and local aggregate	26" x 6"	179	6.63	cubic yd	236.8	1569.9	A
		foundation wall	concrete, portland cement and local aggregate	8" x 3'	412	15.26	cubic yd	236.8	3613.4	A
		concrete piers	concrete, portland cement and local aggregate	2'x2'x18" (10 total)	60	2.22	cubic yd	236.8	526.2	A
		concrete slab floor	concrete, portland cement and local aggregate	2 1/2" thickness	1148	42.52	cubic yd	236.8	10068.4	B
1924	masonry columns	brick and mortar	high fire clay brick, glacial or alluvial clay (rich in iron oxides), lime-based mortar	25x25" / 14' height (18 total)	1094	131280	lb	0.2233	29314.8	C
1924	masonry firewall	brick and mortar	high fire clay brick, glacial or alluvial clay (rich in iron oxides), lime-based mortar	1' thick, 785.7' area	524	62880	lb	0.2233	14041.1	C
1924	exterior walls	brick and mortar	high fire clay brick, glacial or alluvial clay (rich in iron oxides), lime-based mortar	8" thick	1159	139080	lb	0.2233	31056.6	J
1924	interior structure	posts	heavy timber, likely douglas fir-larch	8x8"	43.8	1.6	cubic yd	56.59	91.7	D
		beams	heavy timber, likely douglas fir-larch	8x14"	298.7	11.1	cubic yd	56.59	625.9	E
		rafters	heavy timber, likely douglas fir-larch	2x10" (16" OC)	557	20.6	cubic yd	56.59	1165.8	F
1924	roof	shiplap base	likely douglas fir-larch	5443 sq ft, 1" thick	453.5	16.8	cubic yd	56.59	950.5	G
		#14 felt, 4 ply	organic textile (cotton, wool rag paper, or wood pulp)	1.2 mm thick	85.7	2419	sq yd	0.5017	1213.7	H
		asphalt/tar	coal tar pitch (coal byproduct, sourced from coal refining plant or coke oven)	4 ply with textile	535.7	5443	lb	0.04237	230.6	H
		gravel	aggregate (river gravel and/or crushed rock from local quarries)		907.2	5443	sqft	0.1673	910.6	H
1924	chimney	brick and mortar	high fire clay brick, glacial or alluvial clay (rich in iron oxides), lime-based mortar		61.5	7380	lb	0.2233	1648	J
1924	interior walls	stud framing	douglas fir-larch	2x6"	57.9	2.1	cubic yd	56.59	121.1	M
		stud framing	douglas fir-larch	2x4"	61.4	2.3	cubic yd	56.59	128.5	M
		lath and plaster	western hemlock or douglas fir	1/4" thick× 1-1/4" wide × 48" typ	37.53	1.4	cubic yd	56.59	78.7	N
			lime plaster		3.7	197.9	lb	3.4833	689.3	N
		ceiling (lath and plaster	western hemlock or douglas fir	1/4" thick × 1-1/4" wide × 48" typ	1.42	1.4	cubic yd	56.59	80.4	O
			lime plaster		3.8	202.6	lb	3.4833	705.9	O
1939	interior partitions	stud framing	douglas fir-larch	2x6"	18.6	0.7	cubic yd	56.59	38.9	M
		lath and plaster	western hemlock or douglas fir	1/4" thick × 1-1/4" wide × 48" typ	7.18	0.3	cubic yd	56.59	15.1	N
			lime plaster or gypsum-lime mix		0.72	37.9	lb	3.4833	132.3	N
1944	interior partition	brick and mortar	high fire clay brick, glacial or alluvial clay (rich in iron oxides), lime-based mortar	8" thick, 15' ceiling	188.42	22610.4	lb	0.2233	5048.9	J
1944	exterior update	brick and mortar	high fire clay brick, glacial or alluvial clay (rich in iron oxides), lime-based mortar		115.49	13858.8	lb	0.2233	3094.7	J
1958	drop ceiling	ceiling	plasterboard	5/8"	45.6	875.1	sqft	0.3679	321.9	O
		rafters	standard 1200 f. timber, douglas fir-larch	2x8" (24" OC)	50	1.9	cubic yd	56.59	104.8	P
		headers	douglas fir-larch	2x4"	14.66	0.5	cubic yd	56.59	30.7	M
		furring	douglas fir-larch	1x4" (10" OC)						
		cladding	cherry plywood	1/4" board	6.29	0.2	cubic yd	216.4	50.4	–
1976	interior addition	floor and header plates	second-growth douglas fir, hemlock, or spruce-pine-fir	2x4"	20.23	0.7	cubic yd	56.59	42.4	M
		stud framing	second-growth douglas fir, hemlock, or spruce-pine-fir	2x4" (16" OC)						
		wall opening	second-growth douglas fir, hemlock, or spruce-pine-fir	2x4"						
			second-growth douglas fir, hemlock, or spruce-pine-fir	2x12 (2' OC)						
		ceiling	gypsum board	5/8" board	5.83	112	sq ft	0.3679	41.2	O
		wall cover	gypsum board	5/8" board	7.48	143.7	sq ft	0.3679	52.9	N
		ledger (attached to existing masonry)	douglas fir-larch	3x12" (14'-6" length)	3.66	0.1	cubic yd	56.59	7.7	M
1976	exterior change	brick and mortar	likely update/reuse of existing (1924) brick		54.43	6531.6	lb	0.2233	1458.5	J
1980	interior partitions	stud framing (full-height)	second-growth douglas fir, hemlock, or spruce-pine-fir	2x4"	40.81	1.5	cubic yd	56.59	85.5	M
		stud framing (half-height)	second-growth douglas fir, hemlock, or spruce-pine-fir	2x4"	24.61	0.9	cubic yd	56.59	51.6	M
		interior wall cladding (full-height)	gypsum board	5/8"	31.72	609	sq ft	0.3679	224.1	N
		interior wall cladding (half-height)	gypsum board	5/8"	20.94	402	sq ft	0.3679	147.9	–
	exterior changes	window framing update (likely)	likely second-growth douglas fir, hemlock, or spruce-pine-fir	2x4”	57.91	2.1	cubic yd	56.59	121.4	K
		storefront (2nd St center bay entrance)	aluminum and glass (glass out of scope)	~2-4.5" extruded aluminum likely	2.37	400	lb	5.64	2256	K

Table 4.2 Material Inventory

This analysis revealed several important patterns. The highest carbon intensity is found in elements dating to the original 1924 construction, particularly the solid brick masonry walls and poured concrete foundation. These materials are heavy, high in volume, and carbon-intensive to produce, making their reuse especially impactful. Later modifications, such as plaster and lath partition walls and the drop ceiling, are lighter with lower embodied carbon but tend to be less durable and more temporary, offering greater opportunities for selective removal and reuse. Among these newer elements, the masonry partition wall, updates to exterior masonry, and the replacement aluminum storefront have the highest embodied carbon.

As summarized in Table 4.3, the majority of the building's recoverable volume and embodied carbon is concentrated in brick and wood, which together account for approximately 59% of total material volume and an estimated 80% of the building's embodied carbon. Both materials are highly reusable when carefully deconstructed, either in their original form or through reprocessing. Although wood framing has comparatively low embodied carbon, it accounts for a larger share of total building volume than materials like aluminum or plaster. This distinction is important for emissions reduction and landfill diversion, as high-volume materials with moderate carbon footprints still provide significant environmental benefits when reused.

Table 4.3 Material Inventory Summary

material category	total volume (cubic ft)	percentage of total material volume	total est. embodied carbon (kgCO2e)	percentage of total building carbon footprint
brick	3,197	38%	85,662	76%
wood	1,755	21%	3,791	3%
roof	1,529	18%	2,355	2.5%
concrete	1799	21%	15,778	14%
plaster / gypsum	120	1%	2,315	2.5%
aluminum (1980 storefront)	2	<1%	2,256	2%
total	8,402	100%	112,157	100%

Still, embodied carbon and volume represent only partial considerations; durability, reversibility, adaptability, and carbon sequestration potential are also important factors to guide design decisions about which materials to prioritize in deconstruction and reuse. Wood offers ecological advantages beyond its low embodied carbon, including long-term carbon storage and ease of reuse with minimal processing. Similarly, high-carbon materials like brick can have strong reuse potential if their physical properties and assembly methods support disassembly. The building's original brickwork exemplifies this: structural, high-fired, and durable bricks assembled with lime-based mortar that is reversible, rehydratable to restore structural performance (Maier 2022). These qualities make brick recovery both feasible and ecologically justified.

I furthered this analysis by organizing building elements according to their dimensions, material characteristics, and specific uses; for example, distinguishing between 2x4s cut from old-growth Douglas fir-larch before 1924 and those milled from second-growth trees in the 1970s, or between interior and exterior brick, and ceiling versus wall-mounted lath. This differentiation allowed for a more accurate estimation of each material's susceptibility to damage during deconstruction, and thus its salvage and reuse potential. By understanding how factors such as age, exposure, and installation method influence material integrity, I was better able to assess which elements were most 'worth' deconstructing and where materials should be prioritized for preservation or reuse in order to make best use of their cultural resonance and physical and chemical properties, while supporting a design strategy that maximizes on-site reuse while minimizing material loss (Table 4.4).

Salvage rates were estimated based on material type, year of installation, and known exposure to damage, along with relevant literature on deconstruction strategies and reuse practices (Ecotone Partners and Better Futures Minnesota 2014; Hauf 2023; Krause 2015; Manuel 2003; Ross 2020; Sledge Seattle, LLC 2020). For example:

- Brick laid in lime-based mortar (1924-44) is highly recoverable, up to 95–98% if removed carefully. Brick from this time is durable, and lime-based mortar is reversible. Even chimney brick, which may be smoke-stained or require removal of terra cotta flue liners, remains 90% salvageable.
- Dimensional lumber from the original construction (1924-39) fares similarly well, with posts, beams, and rafters reaching 85-95% reuse potential, depending on removal method and exposure
- Later additions of wood, such as 2x4s from the 1970s, have lower reuse value due to their faster-grown, softer wood which causes more frequent warping or splitting. 80% is estimated salvageable with some trimming or milling.
- Surface-mounted components like furring strips and ceiling lath suffer from higher breakage, with salvage estimates around 50-75%, but they remain usable in low-load or decorative applications.
- Any and all damaged wood (about 15% of total) can be milled or shredded for reuse as compost or mulch, ensuring minimal waste. Damaged brick and plaster can be used as fill, or added to soil mixes to add structure and improve drainage (though grain of brick and alkalinity of plaster should be accounted for in planting design).

element	year of construction	volume (cubic ft)	deconstruction	est. salvageability	reuse options
concrete slab floor (2-½" thick)	1924	1148	able to be broken and/or sawcut	100%	broken concrete usable as aggregate (fill, riprap, drainage trenches), sawcut pieces reusable in full (table tops, bench, etc)
brick and mortar	1924	2947	fully deconstructable, lime-based mortar is easily removed and reusable	95% in-tact + 5% damaged	structural or aesthetic - furniture, planters, paving, umbrella stand, etc
brick and mortar - chimney`	1924	61.5	requires removal of terra cotta flue liners (also reusable as garden edging/fill/art), possible smoke damage, otherwise deconstructable and reusable	90% in-tact + 10% damaged	
brick and mortar	1944	303.9	fully deconstructable, lime-based mortar is easily removed and reusable; mostly interior, damage less likely than exterior masonry	97% in-tact + 3% damaged	
brick and mortar	1976	54.4	fully deconstructable, lime-based mortar is easily removed and reusable	95% in-tact + 5% damaged	
posts (8x8")	1924	43.8	fully deconstructable with lifting straps. high reusability, likely limited damage (potential for rot or insect activity)	90% in-tact + 10% damaged	structural or aesthetic
beams (8x14")	1924	298.7	deconstructable with hoists/slings and braces; very high reusability, likely low or no damage	95% in-tact + 5% damaged	
rafters (2x10")	1924	557	deconstructable with pry bars, some damage from fasteners/exposure likely	85% in-tact + 15% damaged	structural (walls, boxes, pergolas, fences, furniture) or aesthetic (flooring, paneling, art)
rafters (2x8")	1958	50	deconstructable with pry bars, some damage from fasteners likely	95% in-tact + 5% damaged	
2x12" and 3x12" framing	1976	5.6	moderate risk of splitting or surface degradation, less so than smaller dimension wood	90% in-tact + 10% damaged	structural or aesthetic - bench or furniture feature
wall framing (2x6")	1924-39	76.5	deconstructable and reusable, requires denailing and inspection for splits/rot, likely need to trim ends	85% in-tact + 15% damaged	structural or aesthetic - stair treads, small structures, furniture
wall framing (2x4")	1924-58	76.1			
wall framing (2x4")	1976-80	85.7	deconstructable and semi-reusable, requires denailing, likely need to trim ends / likely to have some warping and splitting	80% in-tact + 20% damaged	wider grain/faster-growing wood, not as ideal for structural/heavy use purposes - temporary
window wood framing updates (2x4")	1977-80	57.9	*out of scope* likely damage from moisture and vandalism	N/A	

element	year of construction	volume (cubic ft)	deconstruction	est. salvageability	reuse options
shiplap roof base (~1x6")	1924	453.5	deconstructable with pry bar, scrape off residual asphalt; moderate reusability with some damage/staining from tar	75% in-tact + 25% damaged	new flooring, wall panels, furniture uses, decor
furring (1x4")	1958	10.3	splitting and other damage likely	75% in-tact + 25% damaged	usable as compost when shredded; non-structural purposes (cladding, art)
walls: lath (~1x1/4")	1924-39	46.1	high durability, deconstructable with pry bar but likely breakage	70% in-tact + 30% damaged	usable as compost when shredded; can be used as cladding (siding, table tops), art
ceiling: lath (~1x1/4")	1924	1.42	high durability, deconstructable with pry bar but wood likely to be sagging or brittle, likely breakage	50% in-tact + 50% damaged	
#14 felt, 4 ply roof	1924	85.7	deconstructable through scraping / hazardous (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons), requires proper disposal / encapsulation	0% (100% requires disposal or encapsulation)	very hazardous - reuse possibilities are limited to encapsulation
asphalt/tar roofing	1924	535.7			
gravel (roof)	1924	907.2	often contaminated with asphalt/bitumen	90% (10% disposal or loss in screening and cleaning)	base layer under slabs/pavers, backfill or gabion fill, rock mulch; requires screening at minimum for cleaning (maybe power washing)
plaster (walls and ceiling)	1924-39	8.2	deconstructable - scrape off. reusable as fill or soil additive	100% (in pieces, use limited to fill or soil addition)	soil addition
wall and ceiling plaster/gypsum board	1958-1980	111.6	likely asbestos contamination in adhesives or coatings, requires disposal	0% (100% requires disposal or encapsulation)	very hazardous - reuse possibilities are limited to encapsulation
aluminum storefront (2nd St center bay entrance)	1977-80	2.4	*out of scope* unknown type/size and condition, highly reusable and recyclable	N/A	

Table 4.4 Deconstruction Analysis

Overall, as seen in Table 4.4, about 78% of the material volume on site can be deconstructed in-tact while an additional 7% is expected to be damaged though still viable for reuse in a different form. The remaining 15%, about 824 cubic feet, poses a significant public health hazard and must be either encapsulated or disposed of in accordance with environmental safety protocols. Gypsum board and plaster installed between 1958-1980 are highly likely to contain asbestos, while roofing tar contains polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), a known carcinogen. PAHs primarily affect the roofing felt, which is saturated with hot tar, and approximately 10% of the roof gravel.

While these materials are often considered unrecoverable, on-site capping proposes on-site capping as a viable mitigation strategy that not only avoids the risks associated with transport and off-site disposal, but also supports this project's intent to retain materials on site and repurposes their volume for grade variation. Capping these materials in situ using layered, site-sourced components – such as gravel, tightly-laid bricks, and crushed concrete, in addition to clean soil and potentially activated carbon or amended clays to absorb leachable byproducts– aligns with EPA-recommended practices for isolating contaminants, preventing their spread, and protecting both human and ecological health (EPA Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response 2012; EPA Superfund Redevelopment Initiative 2014; Interstate Technology Regulatory Council 2010; Patmont et al. 2015; OSRTI US EPA 2025). Although recent innovations have made it possible to treat or neutralize some hazardous substances in both asbestos- and tar-contaminated materials, these technologies remain beyond the scope of this study (Quarmby 2024; Torrent Laboratory, Inc. 2024).

My estimations align with findings in literature, which generally suggest that 80-90% of building material waste can be diverted from landfills through deconstruction; this project furthers that potential by introducing on-site capping as an additional strategy for waste diversion (Chini and Bruening 2003; "Deconstruction & Building Material Reuse: A Tool for Local Governments & Economic Development Practitioners" 2018; "How to Salvage Building Materials During House Deconstruction" n.d.; PlaceEconomics 2021; Thies 2025).

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This material analysis formed the foundation for the applied design phase, where deconstruction and material reuse were used as practical strategies to adapt the site into a culturally relevant public open space. Grounded in a detailed understanding of what could and should be preserved, reassembled, or removed, the inventory and assessment provided a framework for identifying which materials to reuse in place, where to reintroduce salvaged components as new landscape elements, and which features to reconstruct or reinterpret based on cultural significance. In these ways, this analysis moved beyond documentation to actively guide design decisions around material reorganization, spatial layout, and programmatic intent, further detailed in the next section.

DESIGN / APPLIED RESEARCH

In an applied research exercise, I employed deconstruction and reuse as both a preservation and a design strategy aimed at honoring the most essential elements of place identity – as revealed through material analysis alongside community accounts – while reopening the vacant structure as a public resource for Belltown. This effort reframes the building as an active, adaptive component of creating a cohesive, healthy neighborhood.

I developed a framework that combines what is essential to both preservation and public space, as defined in the introduction. Deconstruction becomes a design tool, an active process of exchange: for everything dismantled, what new value is created? What can be gained – in openness, meaning, ecological function, or carbon benefit – through careful, intentional loss?

Continuing from previous methods which evaluated material significance, deconstructability, and reuse potential, I charted out a phased deconstruction procedure that aimed to minimize damage: to physical material, to elements of significance, and to capacity to reuse or reintegrate within the site. I also established a clear set of design goals and parameters, distilled from my broader research questions, to ensure that the results and evaluations remained grounded and focused.

GOALS OF THE DESIGN:

1. Preserve (and highlight) historic integrity
2. Create meaningful public open space that fosters community attachment and engagement
3. Limit material waste and inputs

PARAMETERS:

Preservation mindset: Deconstruction decisions should be guided by a preservationist lens, starting with a focused approach that adheres to the legal framework, requiring the retention of all three exterior facades as significant elements. As the process progresses, the scope should be broadened to selectively remove additional components, with careful evaluation of when the trade-offs between loss and gain no longer align with preservation goals. Both perspectives should be evaluated under the same criteria in order to understand how each framework preserves physical and experiential elements and provides opportunity for new programming and creative reuse.

Structural reinforcement: For unreinforced masonry buildings of this type (one-story, with large storefront windows), the City of Seattle recommends (and is expected to eventually require) reinforcement according to the Bolts++Frame retrofit standard ("Existing Building Code" n.d.; National Development Council 2019).[3] The National Park Service/U.S.

3 The National Development Council's 2019 Report to the City of Seattle on "Funding URM Retrofits" detailed Seattle's Bolts+ retrofit standards:

"A Bolts+ retrofit requires that 1) the walls are tied to the floors and roof, 2) parapets are braced, 3) weak floor and roof diaphragms are strengthened, and 4) tall brick walls are strong backed to prevent out-of-plane bending failure. Bolts+ retrofits significantly improve the structural performance of a URM, reducing the likelihood of full or partial collapse in an earthquake. Note that this retrofit level is not designed to fully protect the building from damage that would allow for immediate occupancy after an earthquake. It is, however, a cost-effective method for protecting lives"

The Bolts++Frame standard builds upon the Bolts+ retrofit by incorporating a steel frame or shear walls to further strengthen the existing structure. In Seattle, low-rise URM buildings with open storefronts at street level often require the Bolts++Frame retrofit. (National Development Council 2019)

Department of the Interiors also provides authoritative guidance in their Preservation Brief 41 on seismic upgrades to URM buildings that maintain historic integrity; recommendations include internal bracing, tie rods, compatible materials, and minimally invasive reinforcement. Preservation scholars generally agree that such reinforcements should be "reversible to the largest extent possible to allow future removal for the use of future improved systems" (Sayin et al. 2017).

While there are many ways of achieving seismic safety within Seattle's recommended Bolts++-Frame standard and following best practice for preservation, I chose what I believed to be a simple, widely accepted, minimally invasive strategy for reinforcement: a steel bracing frame, with strongbacks (vertical supports) anchored to the foundation and beams bolted to each masonry wall with steel tie rods and exterior anchor plates. Bolting is historically common and reversible, and anchor plates are often decorative. Tubular steel braces can be affixed to the overall frame to provide additional support for the parapets (Aguilar 2016; Korany, Drysdale, and Chidiac n.d.).

This method stabilizes the historic exterior facades, allowing the building to be safely repurposed, while employing interventions that are removable and do not damage or obscure the original fabric, aligning with safety standards and preservation ethics.

Materials out of scope: Various compository parts of the building were intentionally excluded from the material inventory and reuse assessments in order to ensure that focus remained on the materials most critical to preservation.

Windows and Doors (including frames, glass, and plywood coverings): These elements have been repeatedly altered and/or damaged in recent years, making it difficult to determine their origin or condition. Their overall material contribution is minimal compared to the structural mass of the building.

Floor Finishes and Veneers (e.g., tile, linoleum, hardwood): Similarly, surface treatments have evolved over the years and are not reliably included in site documentation or permitting records. With their composition and condition unknown, floor coverings were not included in reuse strategies.

Temporary or Non-Original Fixes (e.g., privacy screens, patched siding, impermanent added partitions): In the building's later years, vandalism and unauthorized occupation led to substantial undocumented damage. Many temporary repairs or already-compromised elements were difficult to identify or assess with certainty and were therefore excluded from the inventory.

Mechanical, Electrical, and Plumbing (MEP) Systems (e.g., piping, wiring, fixtures): These systems are part of broader utility networks and have more standardized repair, replacement, and salvage protocols beyond the scope of this project.

Furniture, Hardware, and Electronics: Non-fixed elements, often introduced during later uses of the building, are not intrinsic to the building fabric and are also difficult to pin down and thus were not evaluated for reuse.

Building integrity: The building was, in fact, demolished in early 2025, meaning that the "existing conditions" referenced in this project are no longer physically present. My evaluation and design exercise was based on an approximation of the building's form prior to its demolition, as understood through analyses presented in previous sections.

Site Boundaries: The design exercise was to remain within the existing property boundaries and subject to current zoning regulations outlined in the Seattle Municipal Code. Limited encroachment into the public right-of-way was included where permitted under the code, consistent with prior uses by Mama's Mexican Kitchen including outdoor seating and signage. Block context and adjacencies to 2nd Street, Bell Street Park, an alley, and Regrade Park were considered in terms of opportunities for synergy.

SITE DIAGRAMMING

To bridge research and design, I developed a series of layered diagrams that translated findings from archival research, modeling, and material analysis into deconstruction and programmatic strategies. Rather than dictating fixed outcomes, these diagrams served to guide an adaptive, value-driven transformation of the site. Informed by the goals of preserving historic integrity, creating meaningful public space, and minimizing material waste and inputs, this diagramming process was a method of organizing complex material, cultural, and spatial data into a useful design framework.

First, I summarized findings from previous material analysis in a diagrammatic plan to inform deconstruction of my Rhino model (Figure 4.35).

Reflecting the previous section, the key elements to preserve include the 3x6 masonry bay structure, some form of partition distinguishing the front and back sections, and a gradient of porosity with primary entry on 2nd Avenue, secondary access points on Bell Street, and more secluded entry via the alley by Regrade Park. Wood framing, rafters, and bricks from interior and party walls offer strong reuse potential with minimal material loss, while hazardous materials including gypsum board and roofing material require encapsulation or disposal.

An on-site capping strategy aims to safely contain hazardous materials while integrating them into the landscape as part of a meaningful design intervention. A two-cap approach would be necessary to address

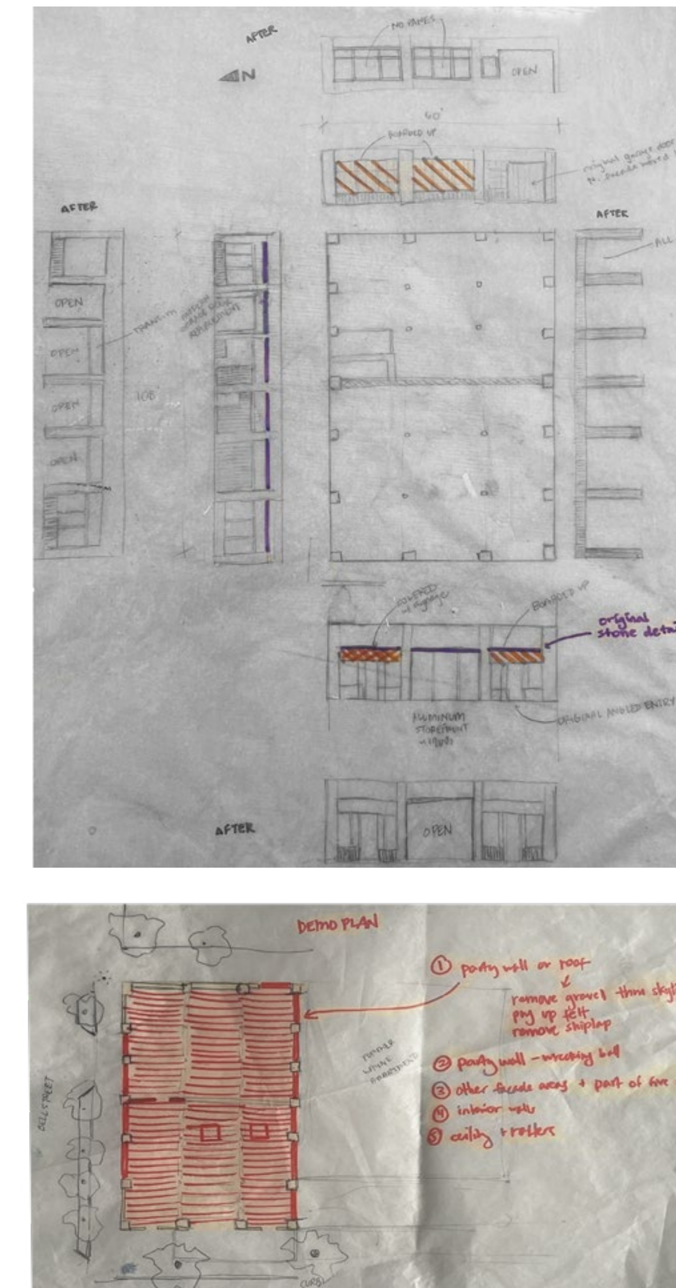


Figure 4.35 Initial deconstruction diagramming

material-specific risks. Pieces of tar-saturated roofing felt can be layered underground within a constructed berm, atop tightly laid gravel and brick, and capped with site-sourced crushed concrete, more brick, and clean soil. Roofing felt, often installed in multiple plies and exhibiting flexible, semi-solid properties, can be placed in horizontal lifts no greater than 12 inches thick, an approach adapted from EPA and ITRC guidelines for the containment of contaminated sediment and semi-solid waste that promotes structural stability and limits moisture entrapment. (Interstate Technology & Regulatory Council 2023; Interstate Technology Regulatory Council 2010; New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Site Remediation Program 2014; Fitzgerald 2002; Tetra Tech FW, Inc 2004). Separately, asbestos-contaminated plaster and gypsum board should be encapsulated in a single, undisturbed layer beneath a separate cap to prevent airborne fiber release, in alignment with recommended best practices for managing friable asbestos (OCSPP US EPA 2013).

This two-part strategy parallels precedents at Superfund sites repurposed as public lands, such as the Dietzman Tract at the Millington, New Jersey Asbestos Dump Superfund Site, now part of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, and Seattle's Gas Works Park, where coal tar-contaminated debris was sealed under engineered layers of clay and clean soil to create the publicly accessible Great Mound (EPA Superfund Redevelopment Initiative 2014)

This site-specific strategy similarly applies contemporary environmental guidance to isolate distinct hazardous materials while enabling safe reuse of the site as both ecological landscape and public amenity (Figure 4.36). Approximately 712 square feet of site area is required to encapsulate the tar-contaminated roofing felt and the 10% of the roof gravel considered contaminated, based on their combined volume. The asbestos-contaminated gypsum and plasterboard panels require an additional 2,142 square feet to be laid flat in a single, undisturbed layer, as recommended for safe encapsulation.

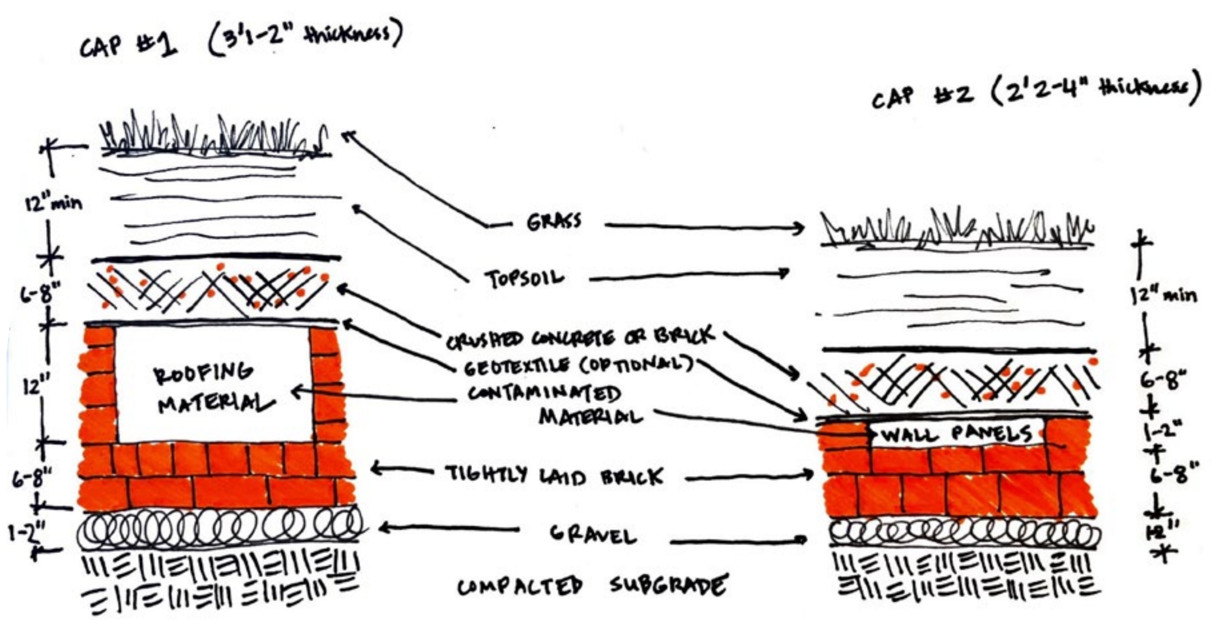


Figure 4.36 Hazardous material encapsulation strategy including materials required for safe

The existing foundation wall, which supported the building for over a century, offers a natural containment basin with compacted subgrade and intact perimeter walls, making it a secure location for on-site encapsulation of hazardous materials. Given that the building foundation spans approximately 6,480 square feet, the proposed caps would occupy about 44% of this area. Whether the full 2,142 square feet required to encapsulate the asbestos-contaminated wall panels is justified remains an open question that I will reconsider in relation to broader priorities around facade retention, public programming, and the preservation of spatial character.

Next, I translated my understanding of place-based significance into a series of spatial diagrams. Drawing on community sources – including articles, video blogs, and forum postings described and cited previously – I mapped areas of past activity and attachment to identify which spaces and programs should be emphasized, where original materials should be preserved in place or relocated to support those uses, and where new interventions could emerge from the building's historical logic (Figure 4.37).

Key takeaways include:

- Mama's Restaurant expanded organically, growing from one bay into the full 2nd Avenue frontage and alley bay, signaling deep community engagement.
- The Elvis Room, decorated with community-contributed art and music memorabilia, embodied informal authorship and social flexibility.
- Indoor-outdoor permeability, bright decor, and irregular architectural interventions (like punched-out walls and hidden nooks) created a unique sense of discovery and belonging.
- Visitors most valued the social energy of the space: live music, a sense of activity, and a well-used outdoor patio
- While the food had mixed reviews, it was a way of bringing people together to this unique place
- This was one of the few buildings along Bell Street with direct openings to the side street (with most parcels oriented toward the numbered Avenues). Although previous uses didn't fully take advantage of this, it offers an opportunity to better activate Bell Street Park as originally intended.

The 2nd Avenue side held higher activity density, while the alley side remained more open and loosely programmed, with a less defined historical/cultural significance.

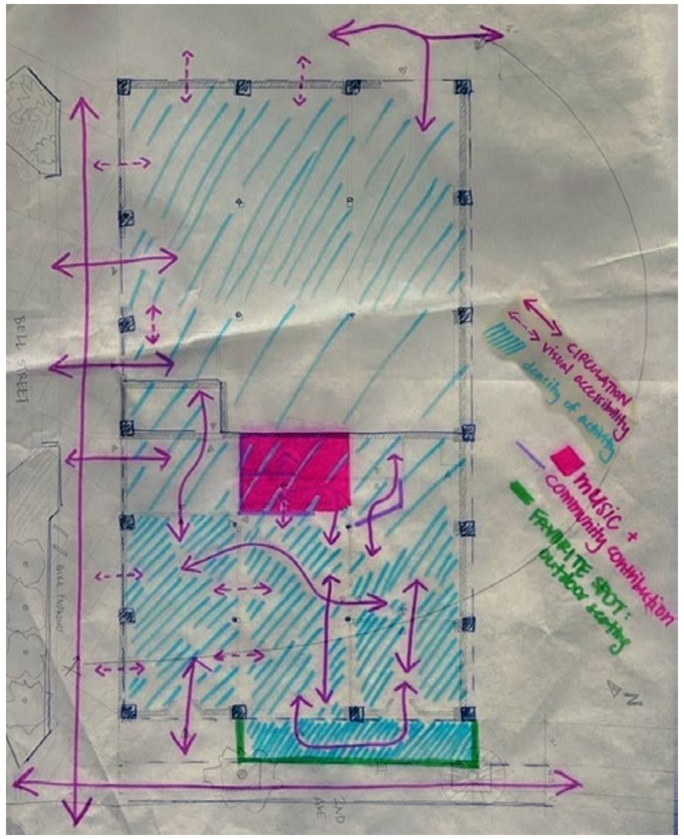


Figure 4.37 Circulation and attachment diagram

These insights informed a program diagram organized around recurring themes that historically activated the site: community contribution, art, music, food, social gathering, and being outside (Figure 4.38).

From there, I integrated environmental and climatic data to assess the site's potential for climate-responsive programming, critical to my goal of strengthening urban infrastructure (Figure 4.39). The building's corner location provides favorable solar exposure, with southwest and west-facing facades receiving ample afternoon light. To the northeast, a 12-foot-wide alley and Regrade Park create a consistent light buffer, preserving daylight access from the north and northeast. Although a future development on the vacant lot to the east will likely introduce some shading, overall solar access remains strong, especially in winter. The northwest corner near Regrade Park receives the most sunlight, while the southeast corner remains more shaded. These conditions informed the placement of moveable planters and seating areas to balance shade and sun. Environmental risks and opportunities were also evaluated. According to data from the One Seattle Climate Portal and other city sources, Belltown experiences elevated urban heat island effects and poor air quality due to its dense, vehicle-heavy built environment ("Clean Air Havens: Top Seattle Neighborhoods With Low Air Pollution" 2025; Office of Sustainability & Environment 2023; Office of Emergency Management 2023; Climate Matters 2024; Clarridge, Gallvan, and Falconer 2024). While the site has low flood and landslide risk, it remains seismically vulnerable due to the building's unreinforced masonry construction. Accordingly, design considerations for the landscape include:

» Seismic reinforcement of remaining unreinforced masonry walls

» Rest areas and moveable shade structures that take advantage of both shaded and full-sun zones

» Vegetation strategies using vertical-growing, phytoremediating, and climate-resilient species matched to site-specific microclimates

Integrating all of these layers, I developed a conceptual plan that outlines reconstruction logic and spatial organization, demonstrating how historic identity and contemporary needs can intersect to support a richer, more adaptive public landscape (Figure 4.40).

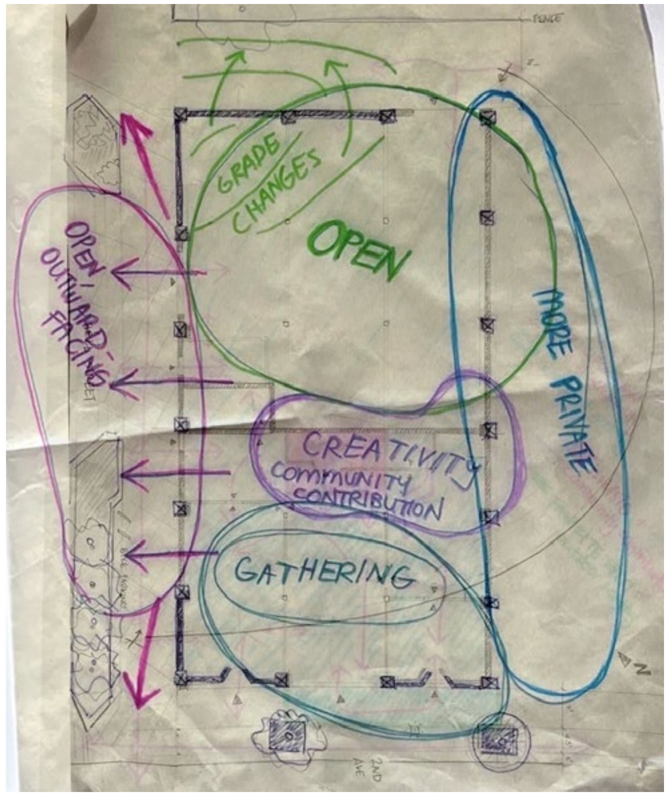


Figure 4.38 Program diagram

Figure 4.39 Environmental considerations diagram

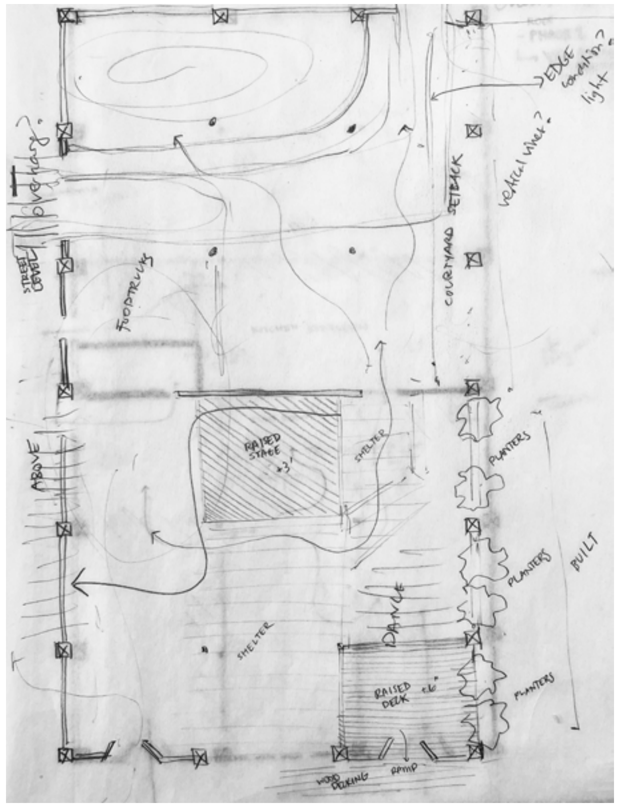


Figure 4.40 Conceptual plan iteration

DESIGN SCHEMATIC

The proposed design schematic organizes the site into two interrelated spatial zones: a lively social space along 2nd Ave side and a quiet reflection zone on the alley side, drawing from the building's original structural and programmatic division while establishing new ecological and cultural relationships with the surrounding urban context, including Bell Street Park and Regrade Park (Figure 4.41).

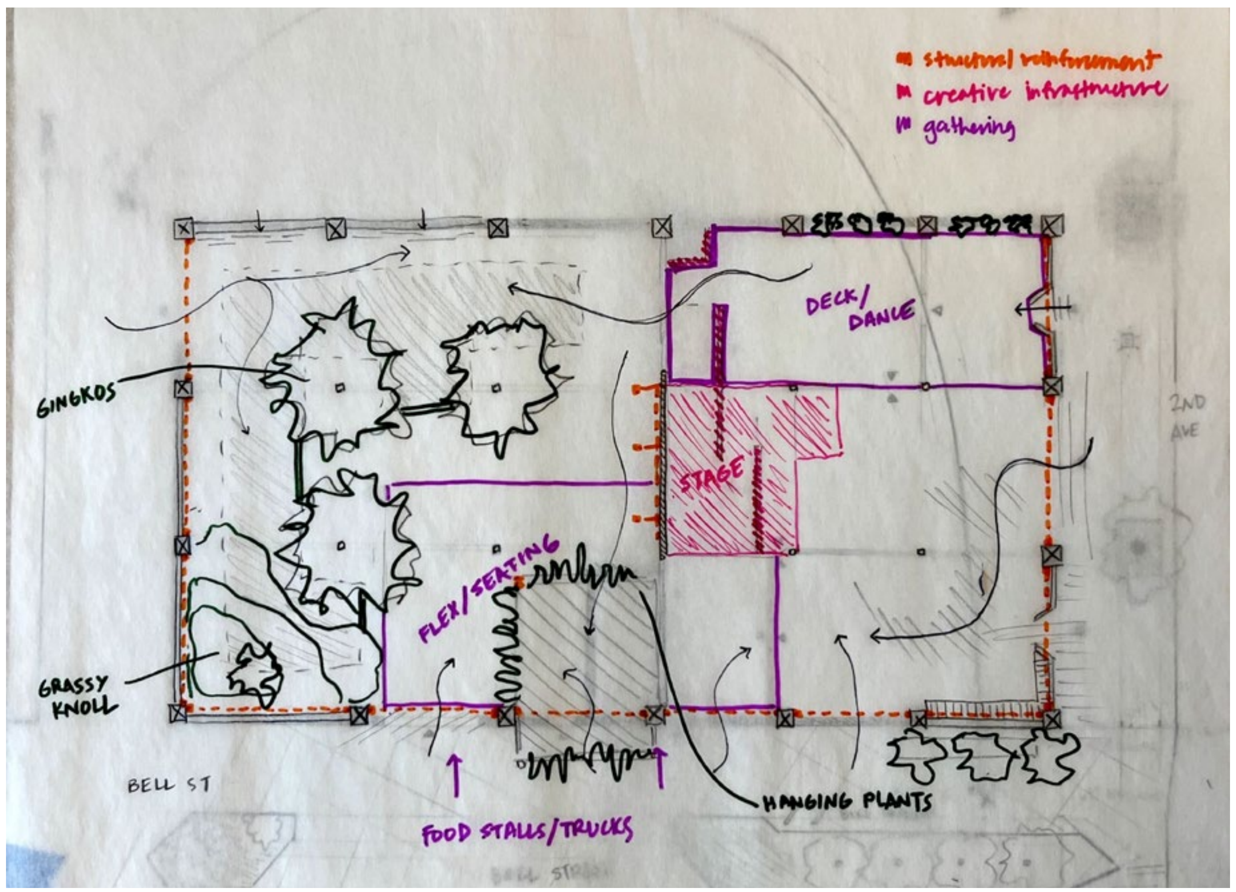


Figure 4.41 Programmatic plan diagram

Social space (2nd Ave side): Anchored by the historically active 2nd Ave frontage (once the main entrance to Mama's), this space is designed to support gathering, performance, and spontaneous interaction. This area reflects the building's former role as a vibrant cultural venue known for its music, eclectic decor, and community-authored character. Programmatic elements include:

» Multi-level platforms that invite a range of uses: a slightly elevated stage, a deck/dance floor, and a sloped ramp from 2nd Avenue that facilitates flow and allows for spontaneous street-level engagement

» A pergola structure, adapted from the building's original roof rafters and referencing the 1958 drop ceiling, frames a dramatic entry while serving as an armature for lights, art, or flexible signage

» Other remaining vertical scaffolding structures retained from interior walls provide opportunities to display artwork, host temporary installations, or define flexible sub-zones within the open space

» Three informal zones for performance viewing surround the stage: on the deck, beneath the pergola, and within the corner bay, which opens toward Bell Street – encouraging informal gathering and more programmed uses

» Geometric hardscape and stepped surfaces evoke the building's urban character and introduce a plaza-like condition, while porous boundaries enable interaction with adjacent public spaces

Quiet reflection (alley side): the building's less-defined historic use on this side offers opportunity for more ecological intervention. This side transitions into a more immersive, ecological landscape, introducing a softer spatial experience that connects more seamlessly to the tree canopy and informal character of Regrade Park. Key elements include:

» Subtle landforms (knolls, dry gardens, and woodland edge plantings) establish spatial variety and visual intimacy, encouraging rest, observation, and wandering

» A softer, curvilinear design language contrasts with the structured social plaza, echoing the logic of material disassembly and the adaptive reuse of elements as new terrain and shading structures

» Vertical planting layers and reassembled materials are used to define edge conditions, introduce shade, and support ecological performance while maintaining openness and visibility

» A central transitional zone along the Bell Street functions as a connective hinge: providing flexible seating, shaded dining, and small gathering opportunities while linking the two zones and extending the site's activation out toward Bell Street.

DESIGN APPROACH

This layered schematic provided the framework for two distinct design approaches to material deconstruction and reuse, each responding to a different interpretation of preservation.

Approach 1: This approach adheres closely to the existing landmark designation (2017), which mandates the retention of the building's three exterior-facing unreinforced masonry facades. Aligned with standard regulatory processes, it prioritizes minimal, reversible interventions to the building envelope, respecting the physical and formal integrity of the original structure. Deconstruction is limited to non-landmarked elements. Interior features may be selectively removed and reused through cutting or re-construction, while components with structural or significance are retained intact to preserve reversibility and material continuity.

Approach 2: This alternative approach practices preservation as a tool for ecological, social, and cultural regeneration, as defined in previous sections. Rather than treating the exterior facades as fixed criteria for preservation, this strategy evaluates which elements, including non-original or heavily altered facades, may be deconstructed in order to increase spatial openness, accessibility, and ecological performance. All salvaged materials are treated as a living archive: reused either whole or adaptively reassembled to serve new spatial and communal purposes.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Prior to implementation of the above approaches, I developed evaluation criteria under which to assess my deconstruction/preservation frameworks in terms of their ability to strengthen and improve essential urban infrastructure, per my research questions. The criteria:

Built Infrastructure evaluation will focus on both strict material preservation as well as reuse. *Materials retained on site* will assess the total quantity of original material that remains, whether preserved in its original location or repurposed elsewhere on the site, providing a broad measure of material continuity and adaptive reuse. *Materials preserved in place* will consider both formal significance (landmark-designated features) and informal significance, measured via *original features*: elements that have remained consistent throughout the building's lifespan including the unmodified brick facades, firewall, posts and beams, and rafters.

Environmental Infrastructure evaluation will assess both embodied carbon and amount of added greenspace, recognizing broad ecological benefits associated with urban greenspace. The *Embodied carbon* metric accounts for the carbon value of materials already on site alongside the carbon impact of new inputs and material losses. For the post-intervention condition, this will include: (1) the embodied carbon of all materials ('before' condition), (2) the embodied carbon of new material inputs (steel reinforcement), and (3) the embodied carbon lost to waste: the portion of original materials removed from the site without reuse, representing lost carbon value. Additionally, a negative value will be applied to account for carbon sequestration introduced by new vegetation on site.[4] This embodied carbon analysis will not include emissions from deconstruction equipment, transportation of materials, or hazardous material disposal. It also excludes the carbon storage potential of greenspace, which amplifies over time as vegetation matures, root systems expand, and soil health improves.

Social Infrastructure evaluation will focus on the quality and potential of public spaces created in each design scenario. This includes assessing the amount and character of gathering areas that encourage community use and social interaction. *Gathering space* will assess areas that support informal engagement, flexible seating, and adaptable programming. *Community canvas* will measure opportunities for visible community expression, such as space for murals, installations, or community-maintained areas. *Openness* will evaluate both physical and visual accessibility of the site as part of the public realm, measured by percentage of open frontage and physical permeability (surface area of physical openings that allow public entry).

Built Infrastructure			
Criterion	Before	After 1	After 2
Materials retained, site level	100% (before condition) 0% (demolition condition)		
Materials preserved in place	100% landmarked features 100% original features		
Environmental Infrastructure			
Criterion	Before	After 1	After 2
Embodied carbon	Amount in materials		
Greenspace	Existing ROW plant areas		
Social Infrastructure			
Criterion	Before	After 1	After 2
Gathering space	none		
Community 'canvas'	none		
Openness	% facade porosity Access point (area)		

Table 4.5 Evaluation Criteria

4 To estimate carbon sequestration from greenspace, I referenced an urban greenspace lifecycle assessment that reports a sequestration potential between 0.2546 and 0.3011 kgCO2e per square foot per ten years, depending on planting density (Strohbach, Arnold, and Haase 2012). This estimate was modified from the study's unit system of MgCO2 per hectare per 50 year period. The study also estimates that below-ground sequestration from root biomass contributes an additional 25% to the above-ground total, which will be incorporated into the overall sequestration value in my evaluations.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The evaluation of the two design approaches demonstrates how different interpretations of preservation yield different strengths (Table 5.1). Both contribute meaningfully to the site's design without sacrificing embedded significance, but each follows a distinct strategy aligned with its underlying values. I titled each version to reflect these strategies: Preserve + Program and Preserve + Transform. In Version 1, Preserve + Program, minimal disruption to the existing structure supports a preservation model focused on retaining material and spatial continuity, enabling public programming within a largely intact shell. In Version 2, Preserve + Transform, greater intervention allows for a more transformative approach, where materials are reconfigured and spaces reimagined to support ecological regeneration and social activation. This chapter explores how these contrasting approaches play out on the site and evaluates their resulting landscapes.

Built Infrastructure			
Criterion	Before	Version 1: Preserve + Program	Version 2: Preserve + Transform
Materials retained, site level	100% (before condition) 0% (demolition condition)	71%	92%
Materials preserved in place	100% landmarked features 100% original features	100% landmarked features 53.9% original features	82.9% landmarked features 52.1% original features
Environmental Infrastructure			
Criterion	Before	After 1	After 2
Embodied carbon (net)	112,152 kgCO2e	132,741 kgCO2e +18.4%	121,552 kgCO2e +8.4%
Greenspace	2 trees in ROW	380 sqft	3000 sqft
Social Infrastructure			
Criterion	Before	After 1	After 2
Gathering space	none	3860 sqft	3370 sqft
Community 'canvas'	none	1230 sqft	1702 sqft
Openness % facade porosity access points (doors, pass-through openings), total width	37.9% porosity 25 ft access	48.5% porosity 72 ft access (+188%)	56.5% porosity 120 ft access (+380%)

Table 5.1 Completed Evaluation Table

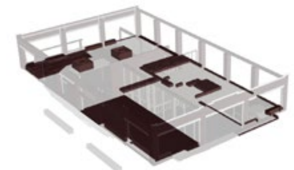
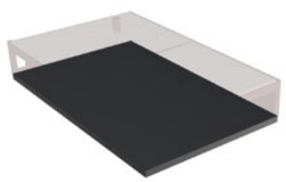
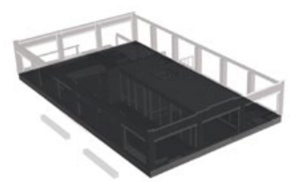
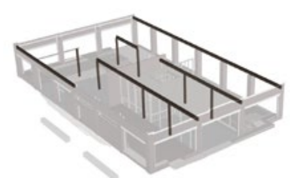
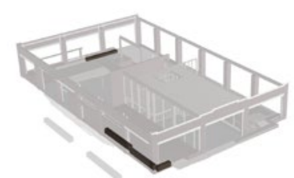
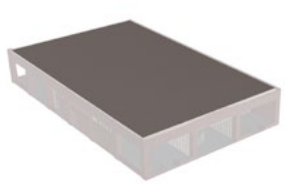
VERSION 1: *PRESERVE + PROGRAM*

Version 1, "Preserve + Program," demonstrates the outcomes of a preservation strategy that adheres closely to regulatory standards and prioritizes the retention of officially designated material elements. Design parameters prohibited modification of structural components, such as cutting rafters into smaller members or drilling into the concrete foundation, which put stricter limits on transformation. Space below the foundation remained inaccessible, preventing the safe capping of hazardous materials and limiting opportunities for large-scale planting, resulting in reduced green space.

Reuse of large structural elements was constrained by dimensional limitations. Most posts and beams were left in place and repurposed for passive uses, such as hanging art, hammocks, lighting, or plants, with minimal reuse beyond occasional applications like benches. Rafters, though long, had a narrower width (2") and were more adaptable; they were repurposed as the deck/dance floor feature, other floor surfaces, and shade structures. Greater flexibility with non-structural interior wood allowed for new construction, including a raised stage and built-in furniture. Interior partitions and the drop ceiling were removed at a high rate to increase openness and spatial continuity, helping to counterbalance the enclosure imposed by retained exterior walls. The most significant material challenges involved brick and roofing components, which proved difficult to reuse primarily due to space constraints. Preservation and reuse of material elements is illustrated in Table 5.2 and summarized in Table 5.3.

Figure 5.1 Preserve + Program: perspective view

Figure 5.2 Preserve + Program: plan

material	before	stayed the same	after	loss/leftover
BRICK				334 cubic ft mostly intact, 67 cubic ft (5% of deconstructed amt) broken or crushed
	3197 cubic ft	1862 cubic ft	934 cubic ft	
CONCRETE			n/a	n/a
	1799 cubic ft	1799 cubic ft	n/a	
WOOD STRUCTURE				18 cubic ft (15%) - 5 cubic ft available, 13 cubic ft shreddable
	343 cubic ft	218 cubic ft	107 cubic ft	
ROOF		n/a	In planters	712 cubic ft (requiring disposal), 790 cubic ft usable gravel
	621 cubic ft (tar-saturated felt) 907 cubic ft (gravel)		26 cubic ft (gravel)	

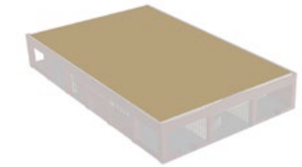
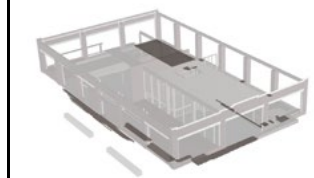
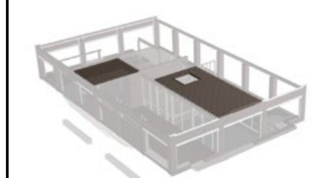
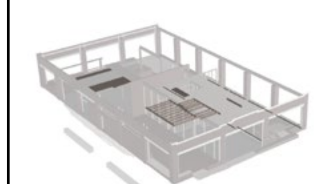
material	before	stayed the same	after	loss/leftover
SHIPLAP (roof)		n/a		113 cubic ft for shredding (25%), 274.5 cubic ft available in tact (60.5%)
	453.5 cubic ft (shiplap)		66 cubic ft	
RAFTERS				30 cubic ft (6.8%) - shreddable)
	557 cubic ft	106 cubic ft	420 cubic ft	
WALLS				11 cubic ft (5%) - shreddable
	244 cubic ft	105 cubic ft	128 cubic ft	
DROP CEILING		n/a		10 cubic ft (15%) - shreddable
	65 cubic ft		55 cubic ft	

Table 5.2 Preserve + Program: tracking material changes

material	total leftover (volume)	%	REUSABLE AS IS	RECYCLABLE	REQUIRING DISPOSAL
BRICK	401 cubic ft	30%	334 cubic ft	67 cubic ft	0
CONCRETE	0	0%	–	–	–
ROOF	1502 cubic ft	98%	790 cubic ft	–	712 cubic ft
WOOD STRUCTURE	18 cubic ft	15%	5 cubic ft	13 cubic ft	–
SHIPLAP (roof)	387.5 cubic ft	85%	274.5 cubic ft	113 cubic ft	–
RAFTERS	30 cubic ft	6.8%	–	30 cubic ft	–
WALLS	11 cubic ft	5%	–	11 cubic ft	–
DROP CEILING	10 cubic ft	15%	–	10 cubic ft	–
LATH - ceiling and wall	47.4 cubic ft	100%	24 cubic ft	23.4 cubic ft	–
PLASTER	120 cubic ft	100%	–	8 cubic ft	112 cubic ft

Table 5.3 Preserve + Program: Material reuse summary

Inputs to the site include structural reinforcement and soil/plants to generate greenspace (Table 5.4). Leftover materials from the site – brick, uncontaminated lime plaster, and shredded wood– can be incorporated into soil amendments that also support different planting schemes and microclimates. Using native Seattle urban soil as a base, these materials improve soil structure, drainage, and pH balance to suit varied plant communities. For the estimated 230 cubic feet of soil required for this design scheme, up to approximately 69 cubic feet of crushed brick, 11.5 cubic feet of lime plaster, and 32 cubic feet of shredded or chipped wood could be used. Final material quantities after these uses are summarized in Table 5.5.

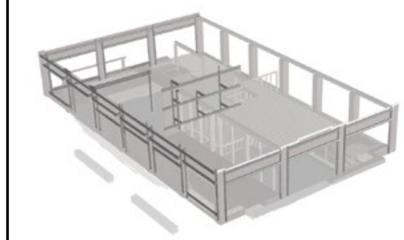
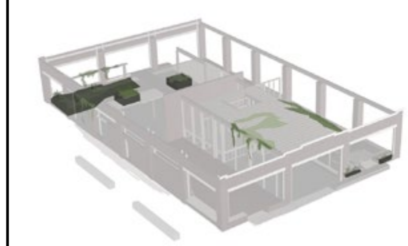
		volume	est. carbon
STRUCTURAL REINFORCEMENT		28.67 cubic ft	7,749 kgCO2e
GREENSPACE		380 sqft	-160.6 kgCO2e

Table 5.4 Preserve + Program: Inputs

material	total - before	total - used	%	total - remaining	%	est. carbon content remaining (kgCO2e)
BRICK	3,197 cubic ft	2865 cubic ft	90%	332 cubic ft	10%	8,896
CONCRETE	1,799 cubic ft	1799 cubic ft	100%	0	0%	0
ROOF	1,529 cubic ft	26 cubic ft	2%	1502 cubic ft	98%	2,328
WOOD	1,710 cubic ft	1237 cubic ft	72%	472 cubic ft	28%	989
PLASTER	120 cubic ft	8 cubic ft	7%	112 cubic ft	93%	788
ALL	8,355 cubic ft	5,935 cubic ft	71%	2418 cubic ft	29%	13,001
			REQUIRING DISPOSAL	824 cubic ft	10%	2,323

Table 5.5 Preserve + Program: Material loss

Figure 5.3 Preserve + Program: looking in from 2nd Ave

Figure 5.4 Preserve + Program: 'Quiet Reflection' facing out to Bell St

VERSION 2: *PRESERVE + TRANSFORM*

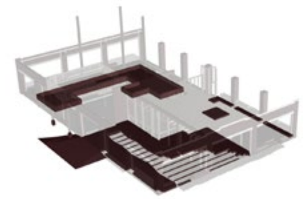
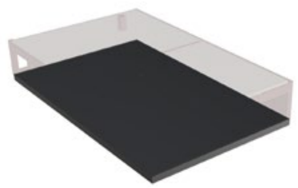
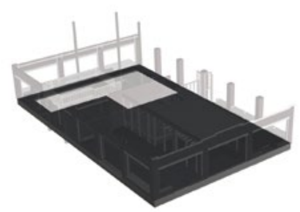
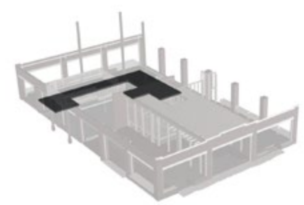
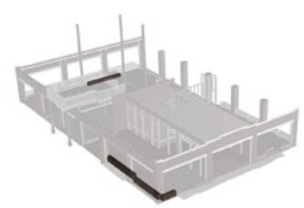
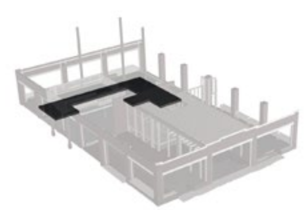
Version 2, "Preserve + Transform," reflects a more expansive interpretation of preservation that emphasizes ecological regeneration, material adaptability, and public accessibility over strict formal retention. This approach allowed for significantly greater material circularity, increased greenspace, and improved embodied carbon performance. Design flexibility supported a more open and participatory public realm, with enhanced opportunities for gathering, informal use, and expression.

As in Version 1, dimensional lumber from interior walls and the drop ceiling was reused for the construction of a raised stage, while a portion of the rafters were repurposed for a deck/dance floor. Pushing transformation further, this version was able to incorporate more structural elements across a broader range of applications. Rafters and larger wood members, once resized, supported new structural interventions, including an upper deck that introduces vertical variation, improved visual connection to the neighborhood, and extended engagement with the tree canopy. Additional rafters were recut to form a boardwalk feature that highlights the former entrance and dining areas of Mama's. Although slightly more wood from shiplap and rafters remained after the initial intervention compared to Version 1, this was likely due to increased cutting and on-site adaptation; all resulting offcuts were able to be reincorporated as compost or mulch.

More of the interior wall structure was retained in Version 2 compared to Version 1, repurposed as scaffolding for new art installations, signage, climbing plants, and/or lighting. Due to this version's increased openness to the street, the interior could accommodate additional partitioning using open stud walls without creating a sense of enclosure.

Figure 5.5 Preserve + Transform: perspective view

Figure 5.6 Preserve + Transform: plan

	before	stayed the same	after	loss/leftover
BRICK				23 cubic ft (1.6 of total deconstructed))
	3197 cubic ft	1698 cubic ft	1476 cubic ft	
CONCRETE				0
	1799 cubic ft	1539 cubic ft	260 cubic ft (360 cubic ft volume for crushed concrete)	
WOOD STRUCTURE				19 cubic ft for shredding (10% of total deconstructed), 9 cubic ft in tact
	343 cubic ft	152 cubic ft	163 cubic ft	
ROOF		n/a		270 cubic ft (gravel) - all usable
	621 cubic ft (tar-saturated felt) 907 cubic ft (gravel)	n/a	721 cubic ft encapsulation (contaminated felt and gravel) 538 cubic ft (gravel base in in planters)	

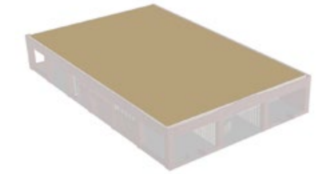
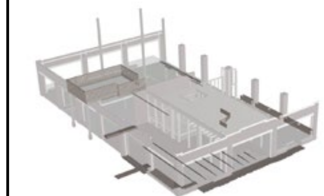
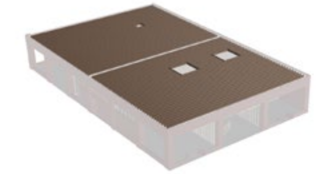
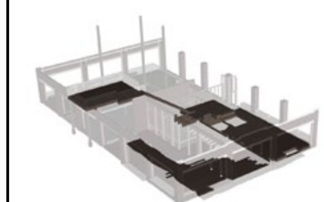
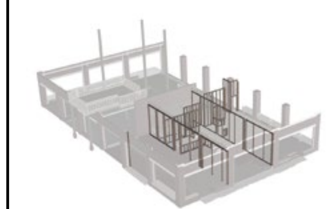
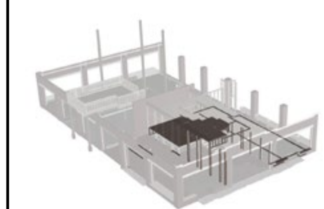
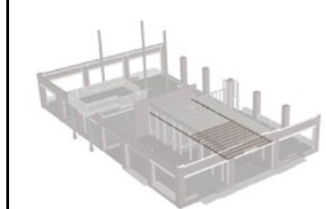
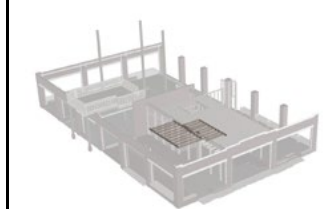
	before	stayed the same	after	loss/leftover
SHIPLAP (roof)		n/a		113 cubic ft for shredding (25% of total deconstructed) 234 cubic ft available intact
	453.5 cubic ft (shiplap)	n/a	106 cubic ft	
RAFTERS				45 cubic ft (9.7% of total deconstructed) - shreddable
	557 cubic ft	106 cubic ft	406 cubic ft	
WALLS				11 cubic ft (5% of total deconstructed) - shreddable
	244 cubic ft	118 cubic ft	115 cubic ft	
DROP CEILING				6 cubic ft (16% of total deconstructed) - shreddable, 4 cubic ft intact
	65 cubic ft	28 cubic ft	27 cubic ft	

Table 5.6 Preserve + Transform: tracking material changes

material	total leftover (volume)	%	REUSABLE AS IS	RECYCLABLE	REQUIRING DISPOSAL
BRICK	23 cubic ft	1%	–	23 cubic ft	–
CONCRETE	0	0%	–	–	–
ROOF	270 cubic ft	21%	270 cubic ft	–	–
WOOD STRUCTURE	28 cubic ft	8%	9 cubic ft	19 cubic ft	–
SHIPLAP (roof)	347 cubic ft	76%	234 cubic ft	113 cubic ft	–
RAFTERS	45 cubic ft	8%	–	45 cubic ft	–
WALLS	11 cubic ft	5%	–	11 cubic ft	–
DROP CEILING	10 cubic ft	15%	4 cubic ft	6 cubic ft	–
LATH - ceiling and wall	47.4 cubic ft	100%	–	–	–
PLASTER	120 cubic ft	100%	–	8 cubic ft	112 cubic ft

Table 5.7 Preserve + Transform: Material reuse summary

The most significant difference in material performance was the safe reintegration of contaminated roof components through the creation of an underground cap. Brick played a structural and containment role in this system, leading to a substantial increase in brick reuse compared to Version 1. Preservation and reuse of material elements is illustrated in Table 5.6 and summarized in Table 5.7.

Site inputs again include structural reinforcement and soil/plant materials for greenspace (Table 5.8). The balcony in this version required slightly more steel reinforcement than Version 1, but this was offset by the significantly increased greenspace and corresponding carbon sequestration. As discussed previously, leftover or broken brick, lime plaster, and wood can be incorporated into soil amendments to support material circularity as well as different plant communities. For the estimated 1,666 cubic feet of soil required to fill designated planting areas, amendments could include: up to 83 cubic ft of lime, 500 cubic ft of crushed brick, and 233 cubic ft of shredded or chipped wood. Final material quantities after these uses are summarized in Table 5.9.

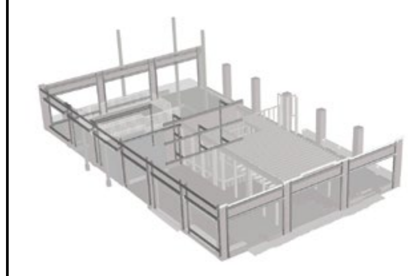
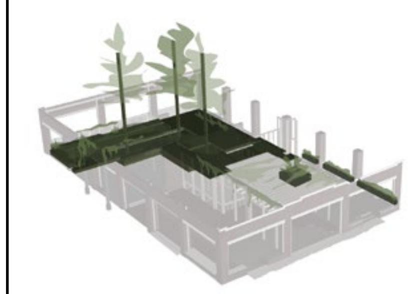
		volume	est. carbon
STRUCTURAL REINFORCEMENT		33.19 cubic ft	8,971 kgCO2e
GREENSPACE		3000 sqft	-937.8 kgCO2e (including root biomass)

Table 5.8 Preserve + Transform: Inputs

material	total - before	total - used	%	total - remaining	%	est. carbon content remaining (kgCO2e)
BRICK	3,197 cubic ft	3197 cubic ft	100%	0	0%	0
CONCRETE	1,799 cubic ft	1,799 cubic ft	100%	0	0%	0
ROOF	1,529 cubic ft	1,259 cubic ft	82%	270 cubic ft	18%	45
WOOD	1,710 cubic ft	1,455 cubic ft	85%	255 cubic ft	15%	534.5
PLASTER	120 cubic ft	8 cubic ft	7%	112 cubic ft	93%	788
ALL	8,355 cubic ft	7,718 cubic ft	92%	637 cubic ft	8%	1367
			REQUIRING DISPOSAL	112 cubic ft	1%	788

Table 5.9 Preserve + Transform: Material loss

Figure 5.7 Preserve + Transform: looking in from 2nd Ave

Figure 5.8 Preserve + Transform: 'Quiet Reflection' looking out toward Bell St

Figure 5.9 Preserve + Transform: looking in from the corner of 2nd and Bell

FINDINGS

The findings confirm that both preservation approaches are viable but yield distinct outcomes. Version 1 adheres closely to conventional standards, retaining all landmarked features and over half of the original materials in place. However, it achieves only modest ecological gains and limited material circularity, with just 71% of total materials retained on site. In contrast, Version 2 adopts a more flexible preservation framework, slightly reducing in-place retention but dramatically increasing on-site material reuse (92%), introducing nearly 8x more greenspace, and cutting embodied carbon impact by more than half.

Importantly, the gain in reused material between the two versions exceeds the difference in material retained in place. This indicates that Version 2 increases circularity without significantly compromising heritage value. These results suggest that preservation strategies focused on broad material retention (rather than strict retention in place) can more effectively align with ecological regeneration and climate-responsive goals.

Spatially, both approaches expand public use, but with different emphases. While Version 1 provides marginally more gathering space, Version 2 supports greater community expression and site permeability, with enhanced access points, facade porosity, and informal use potential (Figure 5.10).

Together, these findings demonstrate that loosening rigid preservation rules can produce meaningful social and environmental benefits with minimal compromise to historic integrity – and potentially greater authenticity, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Version 2 ultimately exemplifies a more holistic model, integrating material circularity, ecological performance, and public accessibility. By treating materials as a living archive and prioritizing adaptive transformation over static retention, this preservation framework offers a compelling approach to reactivating underused urban sites and advancing preservation as a tool for climate and community resilience.

Figure 5.10 Elevations: Version 1 "Preserve + Program" (top) and Version 2 "Preserve + Transform" (bottom)

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS

This project's methods culminated in a design investigation exploring how principles of preservation and deconstruction could transform a vacant, unreinforced masonry building into a materially, culturally, ecologically, and socially rich public space. Through iterative modeling and comparative design testing, the work challenged conventional preservation and redevelopment frameworks by demonstrating that memory doesn't require stasis, and that reprogramming a site doesn't necessitate demolition, waste, or environmental compromise. Site significance can be retained, and even strengthened, through transformation that responds to both past values and future needs.

Both design approaches applied deconstruction and material reuse strategies, but diverged in how they interpreted the intent and scope of preservation; these differences produced distinct material strategies and outcomes. Version 2, which embraced a broader, more inclusive definition of significance, delivered greater ecological, social, and material benefits without compromising the landmark's expression of its identity. By expanding the idea of 'significance' beyond architectural integrity to encompass authenticity – as the evolving, lived relationship between people and place – preservation was reframed as an active, iterative process rooted in adaptation and reinterpretation rather than rigid facade retention. Across both schemes, material reuse proved not only feasible but generative: preservation constraints became design tools, prompting deeper creativity, intentionality, and environmental responsiveness.

REFLECTING ON FINDINGS

The project was organized to evaluate the design process and result under the main themes of built form, ecological infrastructure, and social function. In adding ecological and social infrastructure and transforming the site into accessible public space, both design versions demonstrated that large-scale transformation is possible without erasing historic fabric.

BUILT/MATERIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

This project demonstrated how much can be preserved, transformed, and reactivated without relying on new construction. Where removal was necessary, especially to open the structure up, make space for ecological and social uses, deconstruction offered a more deliberate alternative to demolition, yielding a reservoir of culturally and structurally valuable resources. Diagramming each material's journey (whether retained in place, reused elsewhere, or removed entirely) showed how deconstruction and reuse became a generative design process; in both versions, site materials informed sequencing, enabled new programming, and deepened continuity between past and future use. Constraints such as limited material availability, structural conditions, and sizing were productive creative prompts that clarified priorities, guided decisions, and led to more intentional and coherent results in both versions.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Deconstruction opened opportunities to reintroduce ecological systems into a previously hardscaped, enclosed site. Both designs incorporated planter boxes, compost derived from wood scraps, and ruderal landscapes planted into broken or offset hardscape materials like brick, gravel, and concrete. With greater flexibility to break into the concrete foundation, Version 2 additionally introduced significant permeable surfaces and trees. While traditional preservation often equates 'sustainability' with building retention, this process revealed other ways to embed ecological value into preservation practice. In both versions, selective removal was justified by its ecological tradeoffs, enabling different levels of biodiversity, stormwater infiltration, and climate responsiveness.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The ways the built and ecological systems were handled directly shaped the social potential of each design. By reusing original materials to create seating and gathering areas, revealing traces of past use in new program spaces, or inviting community interaction through open, flexible layouts, both versions utilized preservation as a tool for fostering connection, creativity, and belonging. With greater use of deconstruction, Version 2 introduced more varied spatial strategies and improved both visibility and physical connection to Bell Street Park, effectively expanding the connected network of public space available for community programming.

In both versions, the design process revealed how preservation and deconstruction could be leveraged to recover the social qualities that once made the site special. Selective deconstruction enabled the rebuilding of community memory through unexpected spatial relationships, the reintroduction of bright colors, and the addition of spaces for art, informal authorship, and social and sensory experiences such as eating, music and performance, sitting in the sun/shade, and social connection. By valuing these intangible dimensions of the site alongside the physical materials, the project reimagined reuse as a tool to create inclusive and resonant public space.

REFLECTING ON THE DESIGN PROCESS

Deconstruction and reuse shaped every step of this project. Beginning with a material inventory rather than a blank slate, the process reversed typical workflows, letting existing conditions guide iterative testing and drive decision-making. Rather than imposing new forms,, I asked what of the existing building could or should be preserved, transformed, or relocated to support public, ecological, and cultural goals. Comparing two schemes, one more traditional and one more transformative, helped illustrate how preservation parameters can be expanded or relaxed to produce different outcomes.

Unexpected outcomes and opportunities emerged throughout the process, further shaping design decisions and expanding the project's potential:

» Deconstruction yielded more usable materials than anticipated, revealing strong potential for on-site reuse that enhanced design authenticity while reducing waste and environmental impact.

» Constraints fostered creativity by requiring careful justification of design decisions, resulting in more intentional and focused spatial/material choices rather than open-ended exploration.

» Physical modeling revealed material fragility and assembly complexities that challenged digital assumptions, refining design decisions on form and preservation and highlighting the essential role of hands-on, tactile engagement in heritage transformation.

This experience reinforced the potential of deconstruction as an alternative or hybrid preservation method. Benefits include:

» Reduction of waste and emissions associated with demolition and new construction

» Retention of embodied energy and cultural value

» Support for nuanced, site-specific design grounded in existing conditions

» Promotion of public awareness around material life cycles and spatial memory

There are tradeoffs, but I found these to be productive constraints that pushed me to design in a way that did more with less and resulted in more grounded, context-aware outcomes. Challenges include:

» Increased labor and time compared to demolition

» Need for detailed inventorying and assessment of material conditions

» Added design complexity due to material limitations

» Regulatory barriers that prioritize form over adaptive function

ON MODELING

Physical and digital modeling were central to the design process, shaping how I understood both the building and possibilities for its transformation. Each modality offered distinct advantages: digital tools enabled rapid iteration, precise measurement, and formal testing, while physical modeling fostered material intuition, spatial awareness, and an embodied connection to the building. The iterative movement between these modes required heightened attention to spatial relationships and material behavior, providing a productive balance between abstraction and experience.

Physical modeling demonstrated the value of slowness and manual labor in shaping design decisions. The process of crafting the model included experimenting with materials, testing assembly methods, developing brick molds, shaping hundreds of clay components, and assembling the model by hand. (Figure 6.1). Time-consuming and sometimes unpredictable tasks, such as molding bricks or waiting for cast elements to cure, introduced delays and uncertainties; outcomes were not always visible until hours or days later (Figure 6.2). These factors encouraged a mindset oriented toward long-range thinking and systems awareness. Repetitive work revealed how small details accumulate into structure, while the slower pace demanded deliberate decisions. Physical limitations including finite material supply, fragility of certain components, and irreversibility of certain actions prompted care and deliberate decision-making, especially during deconstruction. This process clarified spatial relationships and design priorities, revealing opportunities that may have gone unnoticed in a purely digital workflow, which favors speed and flexibility.

Figure 6.1 Modeling photos: process of casting concrete footers and molding/assembling clay

Figure 6.2 Model photos: difficulties such as a concrete-mixing failure, having to relocate the model, material connections

The deconstruction of the physical model carried emotional resonance, given the significant time and labor invested in its construction. In contrast to the controlled, intentional, and foresighted process of model deconstruction, the building's actual demolition was messy, partial, and abrupt, unfolding unpredictably over several days (Figure 6.3). Materials were piled and removed without salvage (Figure 6.4), with traces of Mama's still visible in faded paint and accumulated debris.

While the model deconstruction functioned as a speculative and interpretive process allowing consideration of significance, sequence, and reuse, the building's demolition was final and irreversible, leaving these questions unresolved. The labor and attention invested in modeling fostered a sense of care and accumulated understanding. As the layers of memory, craft, and lived experience embedded in the real building became visible in its demolition, questions arose about the extent of care afforded to real places and what is lost when such care is absent.

This comparison of deconstruction and demolition highlights that methods of removal are never neutral, as they carry consequences that can sever a place from its memory and erase meaning. In the case of this building, both preservation and removal took place, but neither was carried out with sufficient care, leading to neglect and loss of both materials and place.

This again underscores a broader need in Seattle's preservation practice to adopt care-based approaches, particularly for unofficial or overlooked landmarks that often fall through regulatory gaps or are lost to demolition. These sites hold value beyond their physical form, encompassing cultural memory and community significance. By balancing respect for material and meaning, thoughtful deconstruction offers a sustainable, community-centered approach to preservation.

Figure 6.3 Photos of Mama's demolition, January 2025

Figure 6.4 Materials piled on site prior to landfilling

REFRAMING PRESERVATION

Reflections on process and findings reaffirm the need to move beyond rigid, material-centered understandings of preservation toward a more adaptive, values-based approach that centers not just what is preserved, but why and for whom. A values-based approach understands heritage as relational and evolving, shaped through occupation, storytelling, care, and ongoing use. Significance is not inherent in physical form but emerges through memory, meaning, and shared relationships with place (Scheld, Taplin, and Low 2014). This aligns with literature advocating for 'hybridity' and 'authenticity' in preservation: integrating both tangible and intangible heritage, and emphasizing authenticity, adaptation, and process over fixed appearance, especially in vernacular sites (Avrami, Leo, and Sanchez 2018; Morgan, Morgan, and Barrett 2006; Stovel 1987; 2008; Lowenthal 1989).

Both design versions challenge conventional preservation logic by treating deconstruction not as loss but as a generative tool to uncover, reinterpret, and amplify the site's layered cultural and ecological value. Rather than focusing on materials or form as ends in themselves, the designs pursue continuity through transformation, redistributing materials to support memory and identity alongside new ecological and social functions. This approach centers lived experience as integral to the site's identity, guiding spatial decisions and enabling inclusive possibilities for reuse and gathering.

In this way, preservation becomes a framework for culturally responsive, ecologically integrated, and socially engaged design, emphasizing stewardship, shared ownership, and participatory processes. This shift implies that preservation may depend less on rigid material standards and more on shared principles, inclusive governance, and community-defined guidelines that prevent displacement and speculative redevelopment.

When ecological systems such as soil and planting strategies are treated as integral rather than secondary to preservation, they expand the definition of what it means to care for and sustain a place. This integration fosters long-term attachment, enhances environmental performance, and reinforces preservation's role in climate resilience and social transformation. In this way, preservation becomes a strategy for urban commoning: a framework for collectively stewarded spaces that adapt over time. This approach fosters more resilient urban forms by strengthening neighborhood identity, rebuilding social and ecological infrastructure, and supporting downtown recovery from disinvestment and disruption, offering a forward-looking model for cities facing increasing climate pressures and social fragmentation.

LIMITATIONS AND REMAINING QUESTIONS

This project proposes a flexible, community-centered approach to preservation, but its development was constrained by time, access, and scope. The following limitations highlight where further work is needed to evaluate feasibility, long-term impact, and broader applicability.

COMMUNITY SIGNIFICANCE AND STEWARDSHIP

Capturing intangible heritage and everyday lived experience proved more challenging than documenting quantifiable conditions such as material inventories and deconstruction processes. Because the building was vacant throughout my time in Seattle and demolished early this year, my insight into the site's social and cultural layers remained limited. Although anecdotal accounts supported my understanding of character and significance, future work could benefit from ethnographic research, community engagement, and direct physical presence to more fully explore these dimensions.

Community input and long-term stewardship shape how any design functions over time. While Belltown is well suited for this type of intervention given its location, history, and strong record of grassroots care, questions remain around site maintenance, ecological management, and programming. My understanding of significance was necessarily shaped by my own research and perspective, but any real project would require meaningful community involvement and leadership to ensure relevance and longevity.

ADAPTATION OVER TIME

Building on questions of stewardship, this project does not simulate long-term change, material weathering, seasonal use, or shifting public needs, nor does it address changes in ownership or policy that could affect the project's durability. These limitations point again to the need for ongoing community leadership and adaptive governance structures that can evolve alongside community priorities and site conditions.

POLICY AND REGULATORY CONSTRAINTS

Implementing the proposed preservation framework faces potential barriers in existing regulations. The proposed framework assumes a shift away from rigid material standards toward shared principles, inclusive processes, and community-defined guidelines; however, the project does not fully engage with the regulatory and policy constraints that might limit implementation. Actual adoption would require changes to preservation codes, land use policy, and construction standards to allow for deconstructed material reuse and alternative approaches to significance.

DECONSTRUCTION AND REUSE FEASIBILITY

In addition to policy challenges, this proposal also does not fully address labor, cost, or construction code compliance. It suggests that deconstruction can be carried out with direction and care, but does not account for time, safety, or technical oversight. Structural reuse, hazardous materials, and grading standards all pose real challenges that would require further study and technical coordination.

URBAN PRESSURES

Cost more broadly remains outside the scope of this thesis. Proposing a park in a high-value urban site runs counter to real estate pressures, but when framed as essential social and ecological infrastructure (with layered public programming, cultural continuity, and community attachment), the proposal offers a different kind of value. Future work could explore funding models, incentives, or policy tools that support this shift.

EQUITY

Adaptive reuse and public space creation can contribute to displacement or aesthetic gentrification if not grounded in equitable frameworks. This project does not fully resolve questions of access, ownership, or governance. These issues must be addressed through participatory design, clear stewardship models, and long-term community control to ensure relevance and prevent exclusion.

BROADER APPLICABILITY

Finally, this project is site-specific but proposes a framework that could apply to other vacant URM buildings or at-risk or vacant sites. Testing this approach across different building types and neighborhoods would help assess its scalability and limitations.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This thesis reimagines historic preservation as a flexible and regenerative tool for transforming defunct buildings into ecologically and culturally rich public spaces. Focusing on vacant unreinforced masonry (URM) buildings in downtown Seattle, the research explored how preservation, deconstruction, and public space design can be integrated into a broader framework for responsible urban regeneration.

As conventional preservation frameworks are increasingly undermined by developer interests leading to cycles of neglect and eventual loss, this work contributes to the evolution of preservation practice by proposing selective deconstruction and material reuse as a forward-looking strategy. This approach offers a powerful alternative for historically significant but at-risk buildings by transforming them into public spaces that strengthen built, environmental, and social infrastructure.

This thesis positions deconstruction as a generative act: a technical intervention that can reclaim closed and underused buildings by carefully opening them, brick by brick, to public life. When paired with material reuse, it becomes a design strategy for reintegrating historic fabric to support new, community-centered uses. More than a way to reduce demolition waste or salvage materials, deconstruction and material reuse function together as a design methodology that links the physical and cultural layers of heritage with contemporary social and ecological needs. This approach can model a more adaptive, resilient urban form, uniting ecological, social, and cultural dimensions through preservation-informed and uniquely sustainable public space design.

From this perspective, the thesis asked:

1. How can principles of preservation, deconstruction, and design with material reuse transform the typology of historic unreinforced masonry buildings into a new hybrid typology of safe, ecologically and culturally rich public spaces for downtown Seattle?
2. How can these new public spaces build and connect essential urban infrastructure (built, environmental, social) to improve human and ecological health, foster community development, and strengthen urban systems in the face of climate threats?
3. How might this hybrid typology of green-built-historic-public space be conceptualized as a replicable model for creating healthier, more sustainable urban environments?

SUMMARY

Literature demonstrates that post-commercial, post-pandemic downtowns require not just recovery but fundamental reinvention. In response to issues of vacancy, shrinking public realms, aging infrastructure, and insufficient attention to growing impacts of climate change, scholars call for rethinking and diversifying land use in downtown cores, including by integrating adaptive, people-centered infrastructure and reactivating underused spaces through strategies like adaptive reuse and community reinhabitation. Separately, models of 'commoning' that expand true public space and authenticity-based approaches to preservation are emphasized as approaches to improve urban health, equity, and community cohesion. However, limited research explores the intersection of downtown regeneration, preservation, and public space as a combined strategy to address overlapping urban challenges and the climate crisis. Addressing this gap, this thesis argued that selective deconstruction and material reuse offer a strategic intervention that bridges preservation and public space creation, transforming downtown vacancy into opportunity and enabling new, inclusive public uses.

Seattle exemplifies these challenges and opportunities. While neighborhoods around downtown maintain active civic life through community-based public spaces and strong local stewardship, downtown remains fragmented, its commercial-industrial built form increasingly misaligned with a growing residential population. Preservation systems, narrowly focused on material integrity, often contribute to cycles of teardown and redevelopment that serve market forces over community needs. This accelerates emissions through new construction and erodes the civic and cultural fabric essential to livable neighborhoods.

This thesis proposed reusing vacant URM buildings through a strategy of selective deconstruction and reconstruction through material reuse that emphasizes cultural and community memory while integrating programs for present and future use. This approach aims to rebuild civic infrastructure, expand the public realm, and support downtown Seattle's transformation into a livable, community-centered neighborhood. To test and demonstrate this potential, the research combined urban form analysis, physical modeling, material experimentation, and applied design research.

I narrowed my focus to Belltown, a neighborhood that concentrates key downtown issues: a high number of URM buildings, rising vacancy, and a growing residential population with limited access to essential amenities, especially open and green public space. Of the 52 URM buildings identified within the study area, I selected one for further investigation based on criteria including structure, building condition and use, cultural and historical value, and potential contribution to neighborhood regeneration. The chosen site, 2234 2nd Avenue, now demolished, was a designated City of Seattle landmark and the former home to Mama's Mexican Kitchen, a long-standing and beloved community restaurant known for its eclectic decor and social significance as a neighborhood gathering spot.

Through modeling and material analysis, the project explored how meaning resides in spatial and material form. This process culminated in two speculative designs that apply deconstruction and reuse strategies to reimagine the site as public space. One approach adhered closely to traditional landmarking priorities; the other leveraged deconstruction more fully to embrace more transformative reuse. These contrasting schemes revealed how expanded, adaptive preservation frameworks can maintain cultural relevance while increasing material circularity, expanding greenspace, and reducing embodied carbon.

By integrating physical form, ecological systems, and social uses, this project demonstrated a reimagining of preservation as a dynamic, evolving process that treats materials and memory as living assets rather than fixed relics. This expanded framework offers a promising pathway for revitalizing underused urban buildings, aligning preservation with climate responsiveness, community inclusion, and the reinvigoration of public space in rapidly changing cities.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The speculative designs, through their demonstration of selective deconstruction and reconstruction through material reuse, offer a broader framework for addressing the overlapping pressures of vacancy, cultural loss, and environmental degradation in Belltown and throughout Seattle. They illustrate how preservation, when approached openly and adaptively, can strengthen urban infrastructure, foster attachment, and respond to shifting conditions. While centered on a single site, the implications extend beyond: this model reframes preservation as a challenge to conventional definitions of "highest and best use," which should not be guided solely by development potential or market value, but equally by long-term cultural, ecological, and social return. In this view, public space and historic fabric are not obstacles to progress but foundational assets in building more equitable and resilient cities.

As discussed in Chapter 3, significant institutional and practical barriers remain. These include a lack of infrastructure to support deconstruction and reuse at scale, preservation practices narrowly focused on material integrity, and rigid regulations around landmark form and affordable housing integration.

To overcome these barriers, preservation policy and practice must be re-grounded in authenticity defined by community relevance rather than material stasis. Rather than requiring strict retention of form, preservation frameworks could instead provide adaptable guidelines rooted in public benefit: cultural continuity, public access, participatory governance, and long-term stewardship. Ownership and oversight structures could be expanded to include community land trusts, neighborhood development groups, public-nonprofit partnerships designed to resist speculative redevelopment and instead reinforce the role of preserved sites as urban commons in its broadest sense: spaces held in trust for collective use, memory, and meaning. Seen this way, preservation practice can live up to its intended purpose, honoring the past while enabling ongoing relevance through deliberate, accountable transformation.

This raises important questions about longevity and loss. The act of deconstructing and reassembling a site over time risks, if guided solely by changing needs or dominant interests, the erosion of meanings preservation aims to protect, especially for marginalized communities who may lack decision-making power. This is particularly true for materials originally designed to form a closed system, whose durability may not support open-ended reconfiguration. However, when grounded in community-centered goals and an ethos of care, iterative adaptation can preserve meaning through ongoing physical evolution. Uncritical material retention too often hollows out cultural value by preserving only facades, or leads to total erasure through neglect and demolition. Instead, preservation should require deliberate cultivation of memory, use, and shared identity, allowing change to serve as a form of continuity.

The community response to the demolition of Mama's Mexican Kitchen underscores this point. Public art, social media posts, and grassroots mourning rituals signaled a strong attachment to the site as a symbol of neighborhood identity. By engaging this kind of attachment directly, the speculative designs in this thesis demonstrate how preservation might evolve to support more inclusive, lived forms of memory. These designs do not simply restore what was lost; they offer a framework for future decisions that could extend across Seattle. As neighborhood-scale public spaces receive more investment, patterns of attachment deepen. Preservation, in this sense, can act as a catalyst not just for remembering the past, but for building shared futures.

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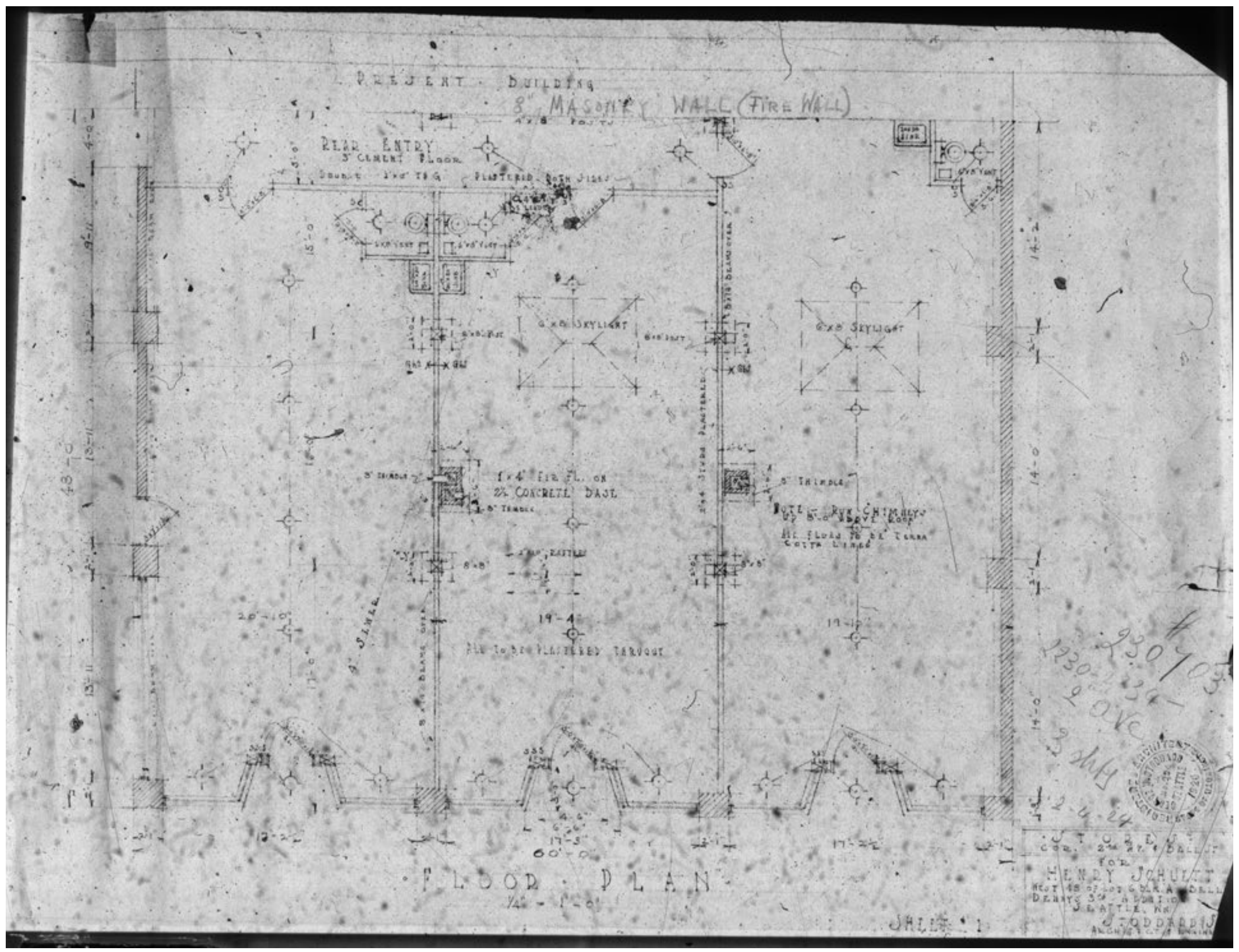
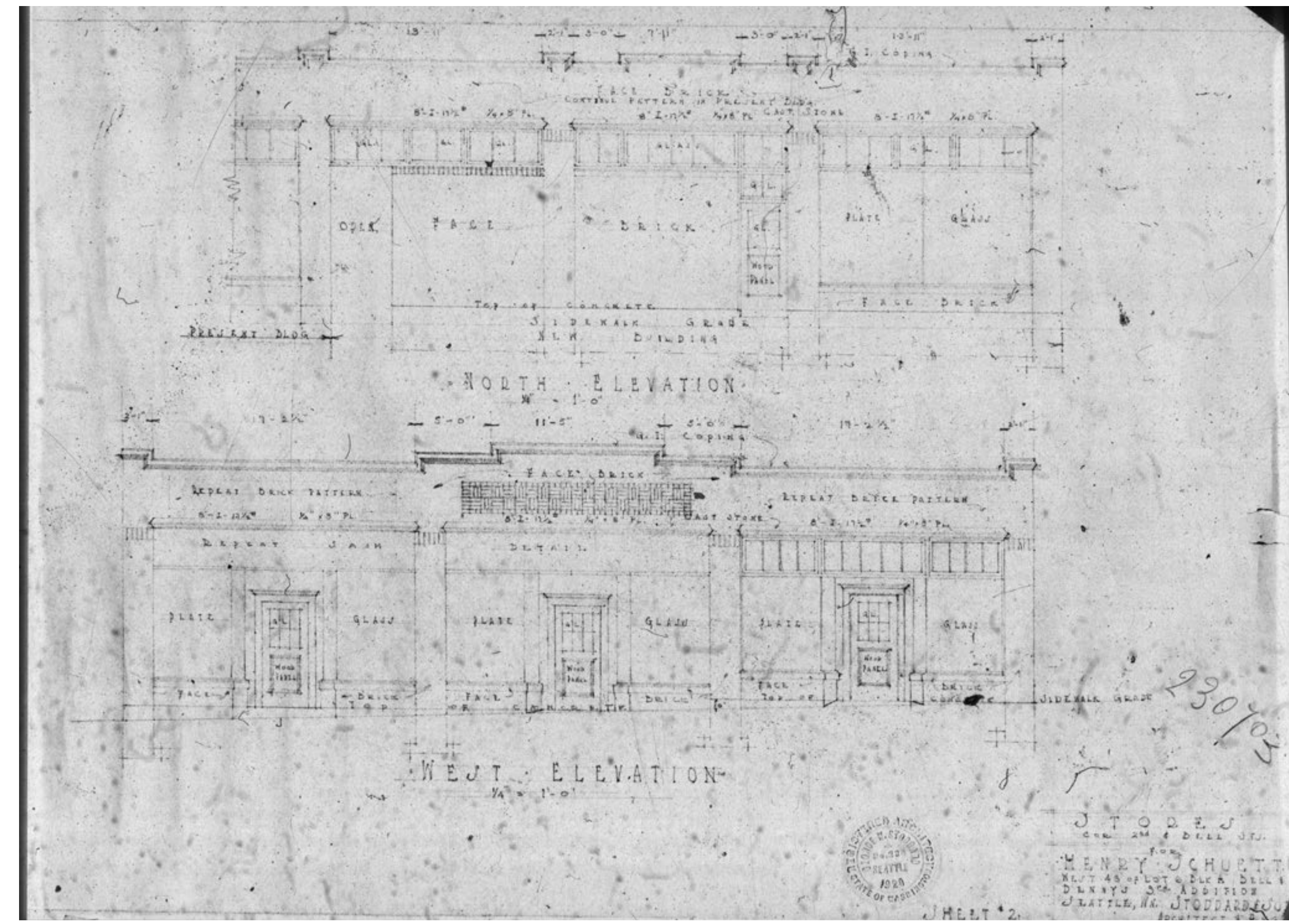
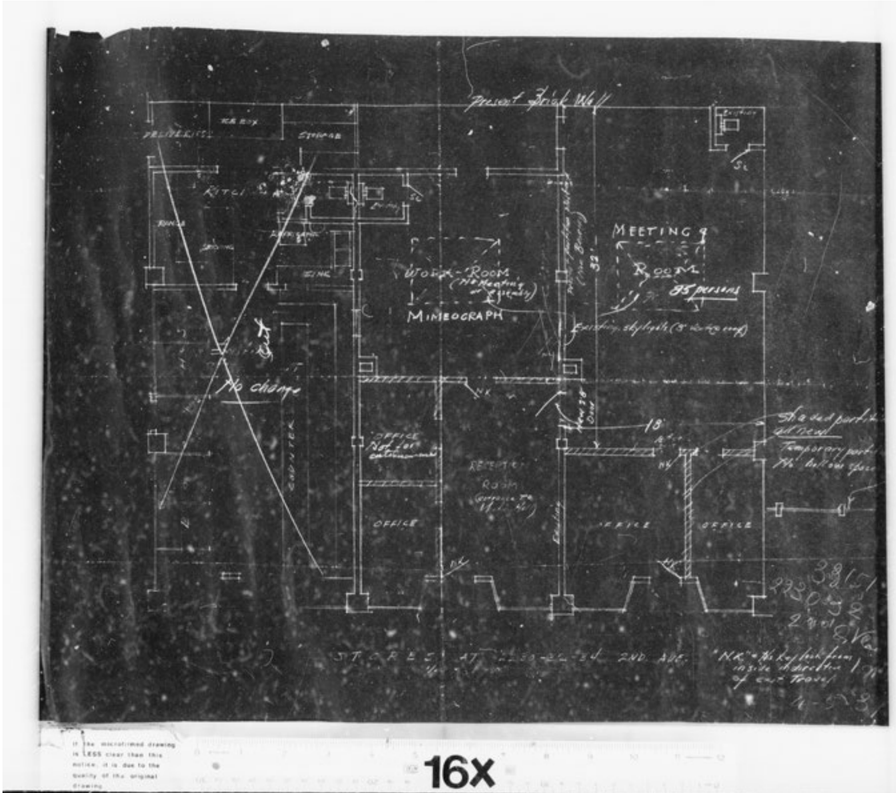
APPENDIX A

Documents pertaining to 2234 2nd Avenue in Belltown, obtained through the City of Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections Public Resource Center's Microfilm Library.

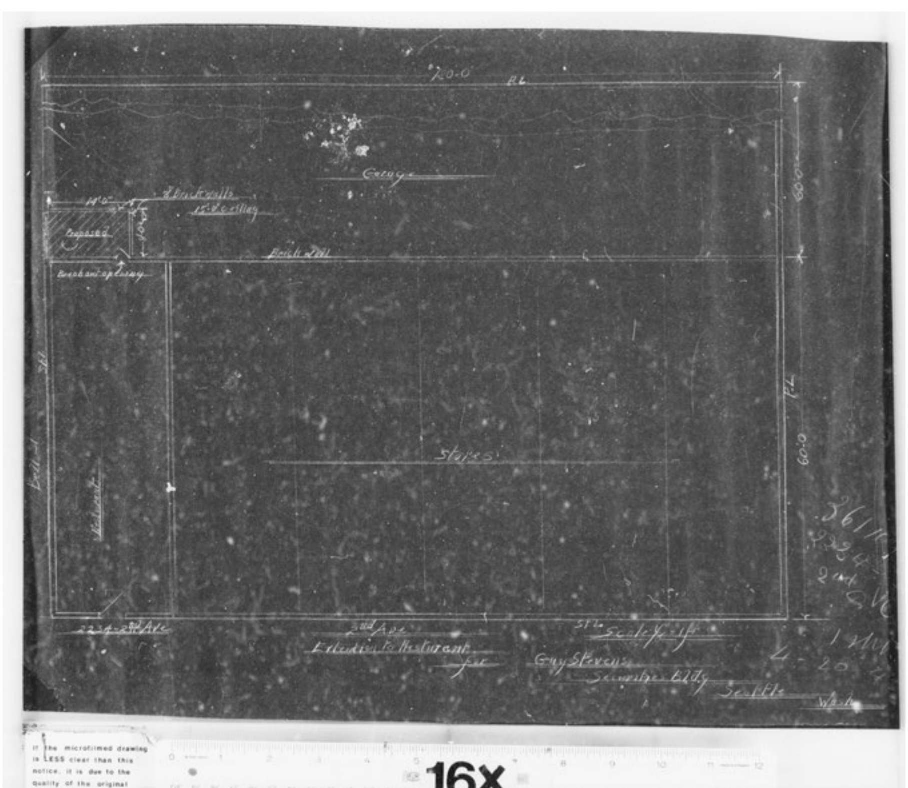




Original plan and elevation (1924)

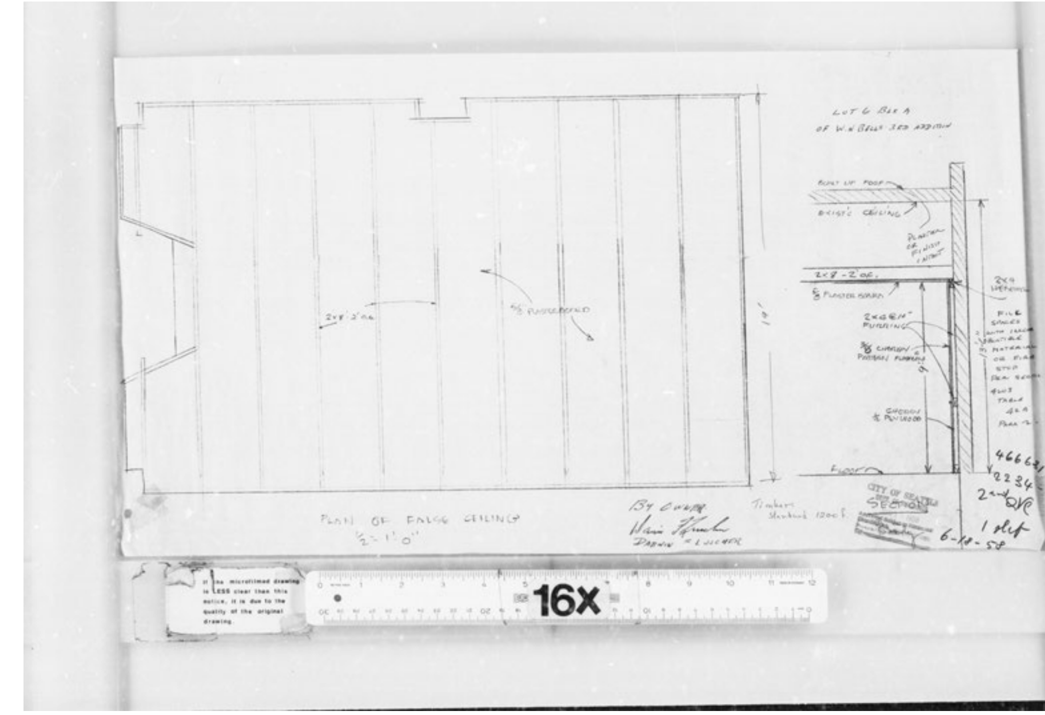


Updates to the interior (1939)

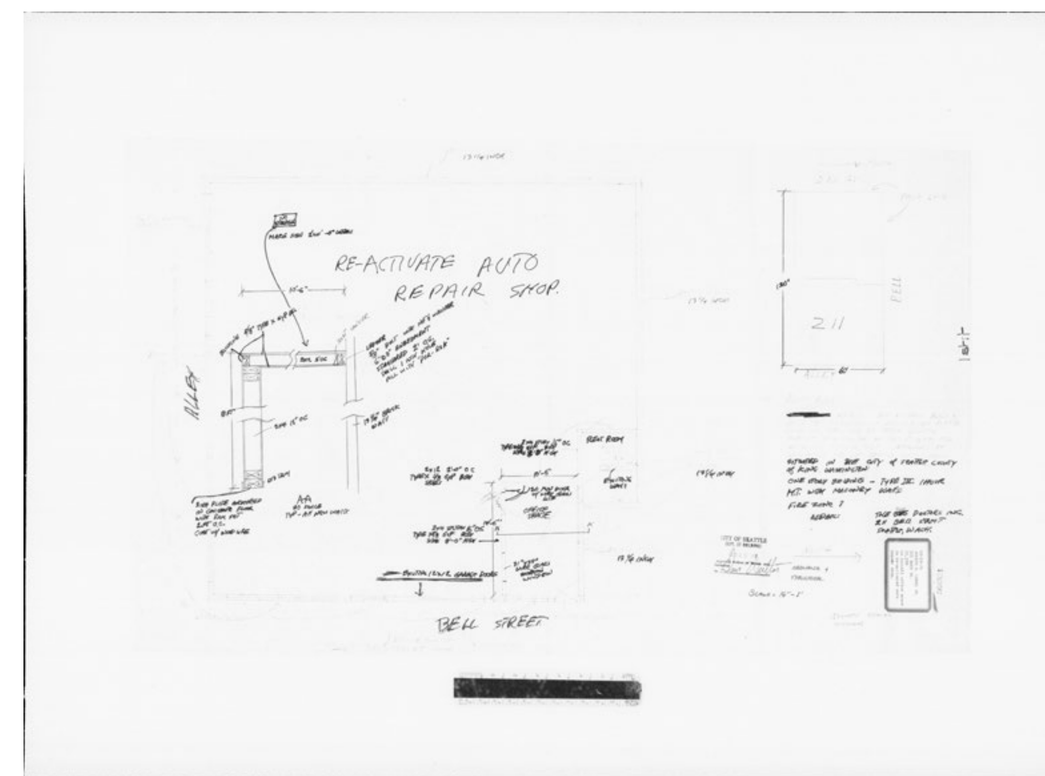


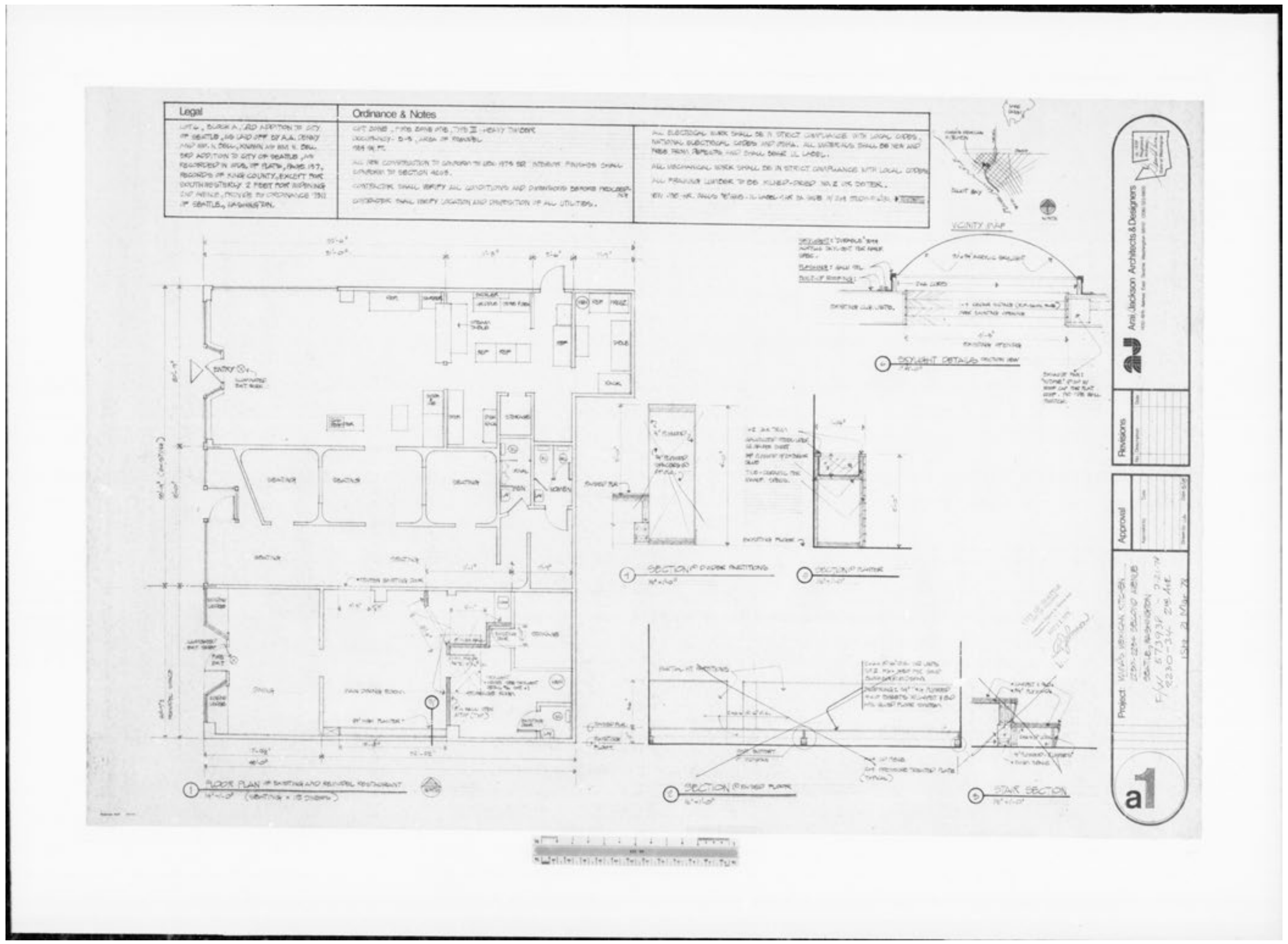
Interior masonry partition added (1944)

Drop ceiling (1958)

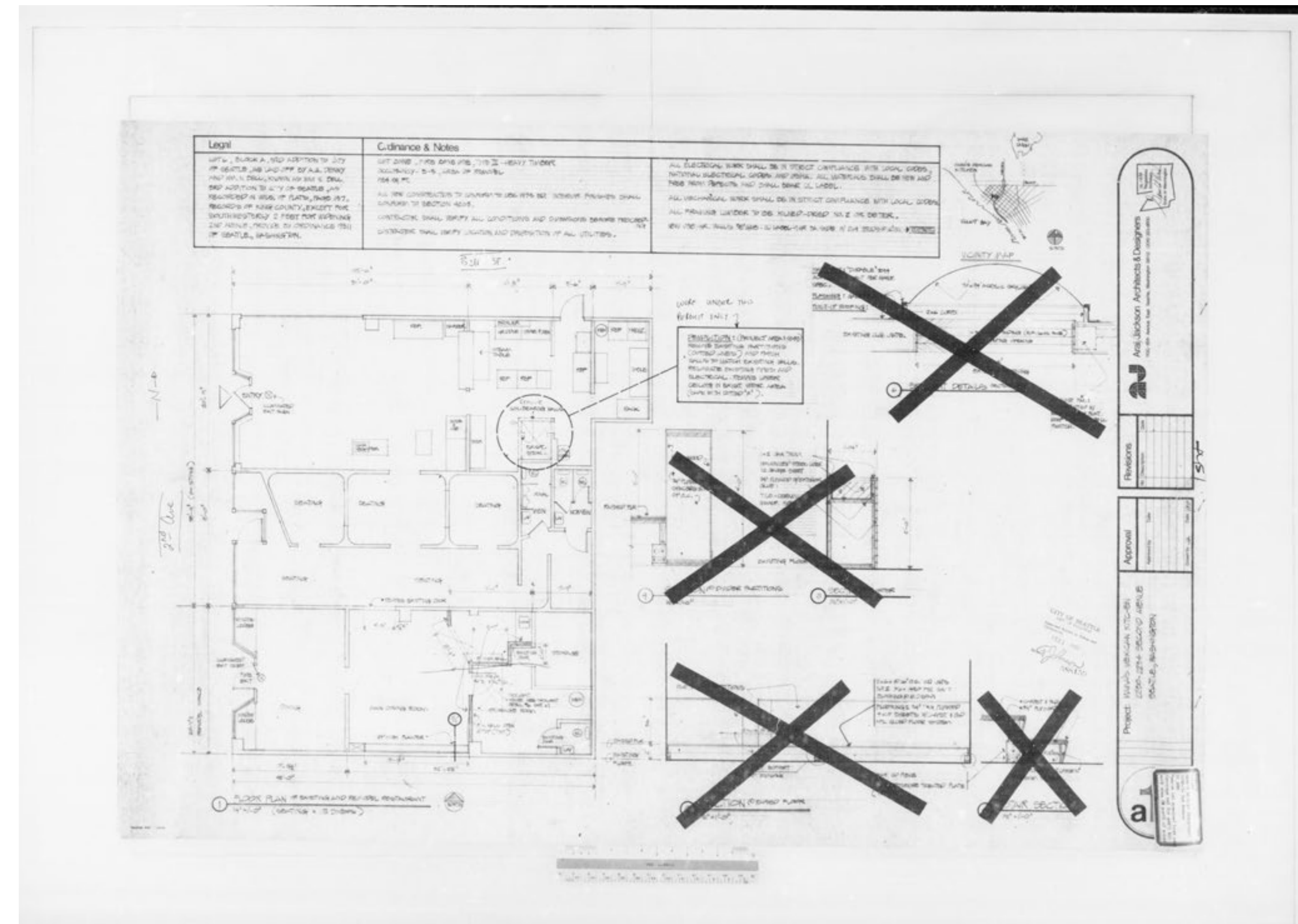


Auto shop office added (1976)





Proposed alteration (1977)

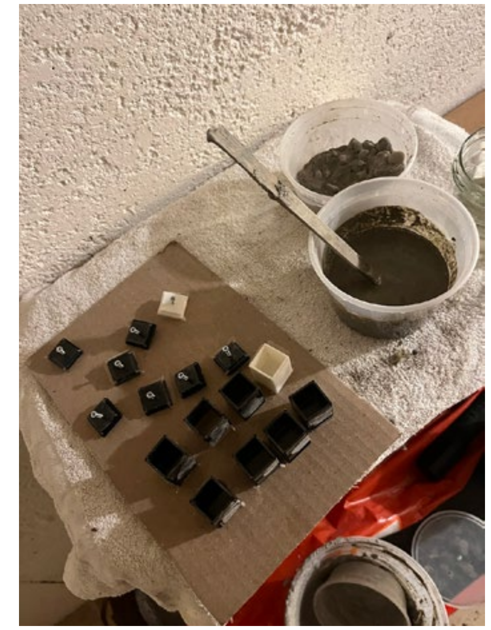


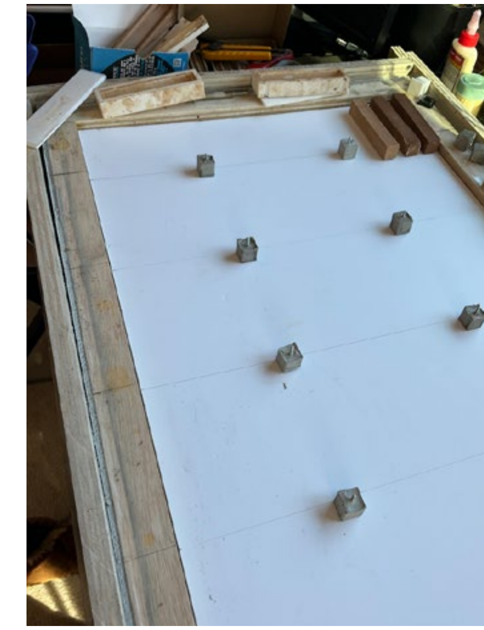
Proposed alteration for Mama's (1980)

APPENDIX B

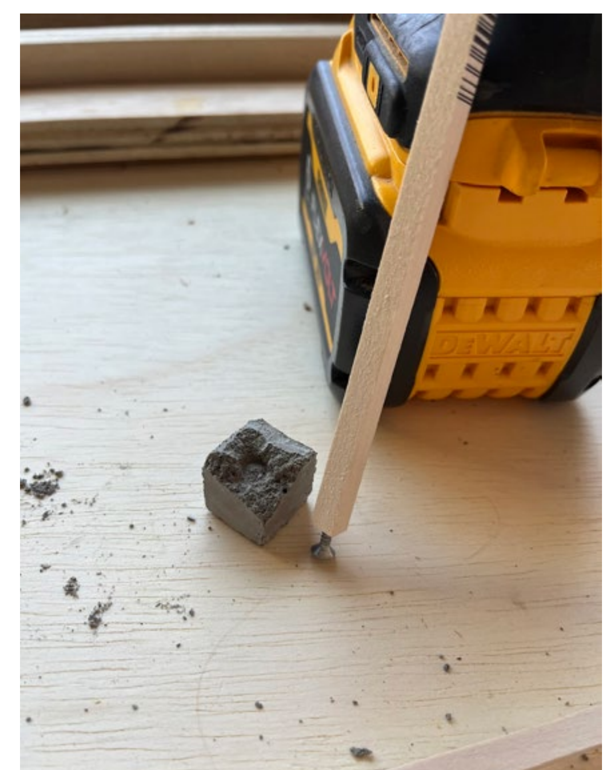
More photos documenting the physical modeling process.

Pouring concrete to form foundation wall.





Concrete footers set with screw in 3D-printed molds; wood columns screw into footers.

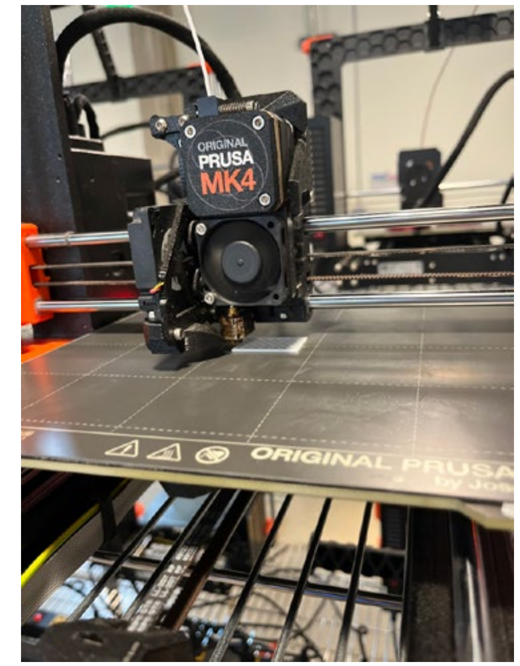


Some iteration required.

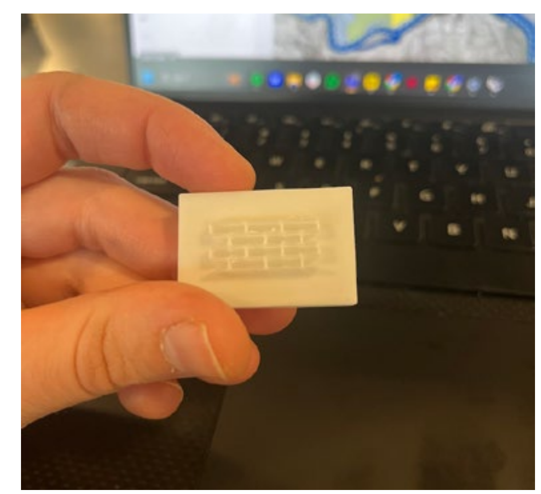
Sand acts as aggregate, keeping footers in place prior to pouring of concrete slab.

Concrete mix failure.

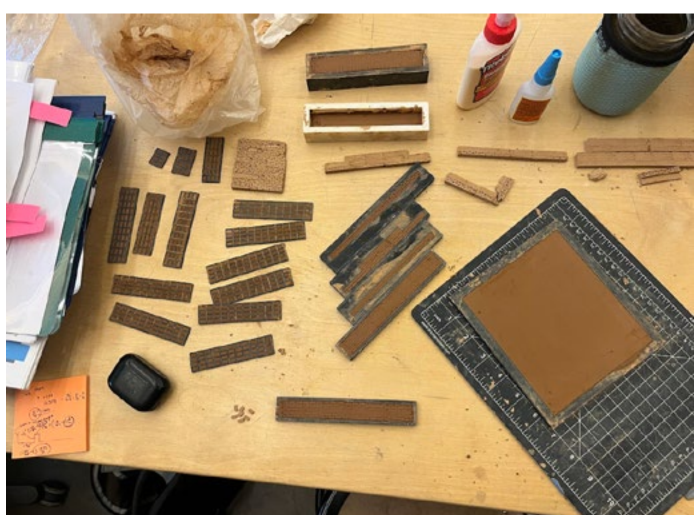
Brick molds sized in Rhino and 3D printed. Iteration required to understand 3D printing mechanics and to account for clay's shrink rate as well as breakage.

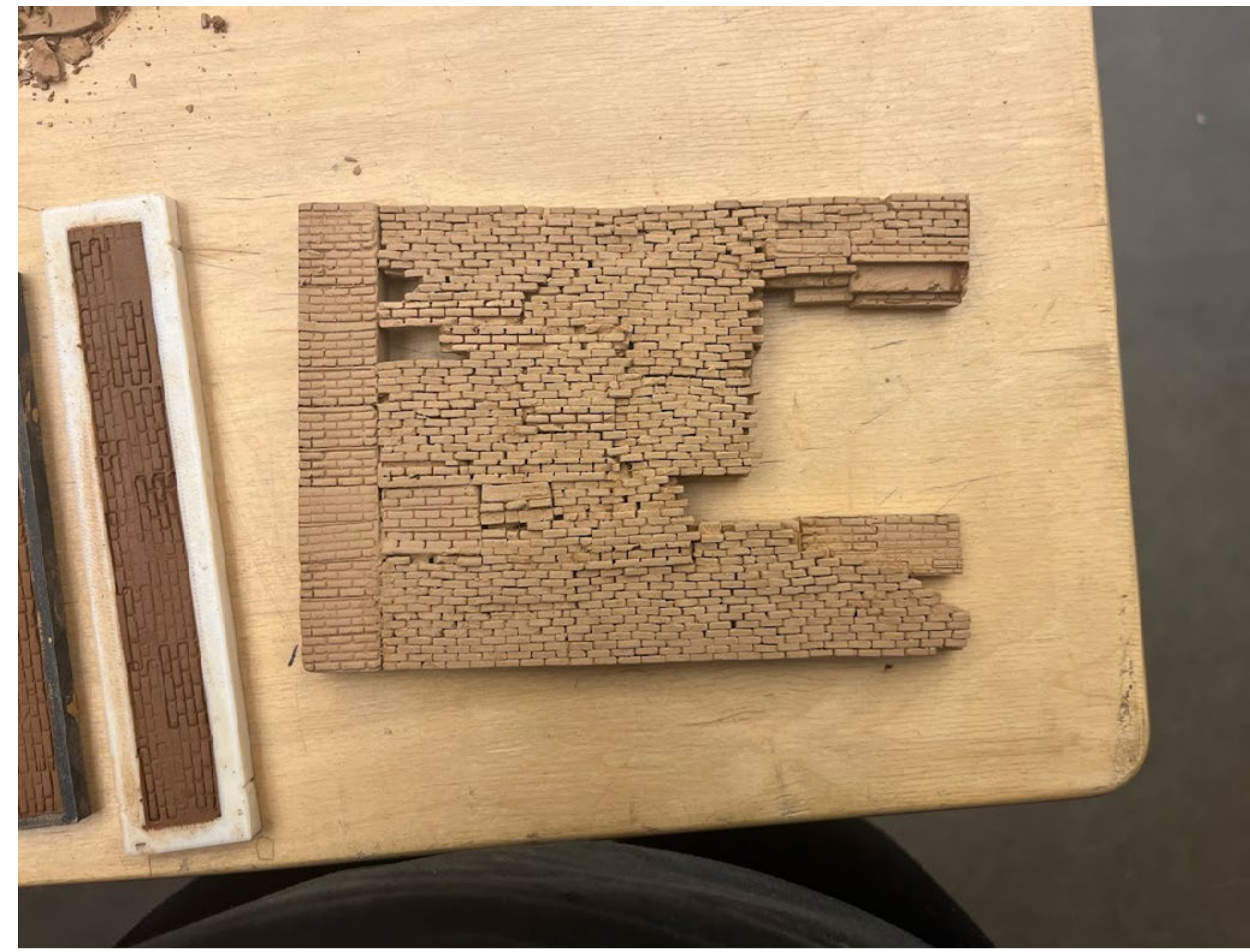


3D printing brick molds.



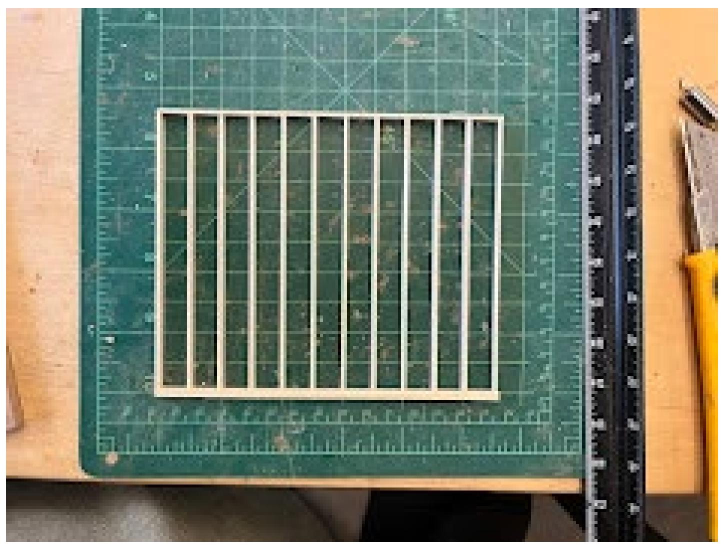
Molds and pattern stamps.

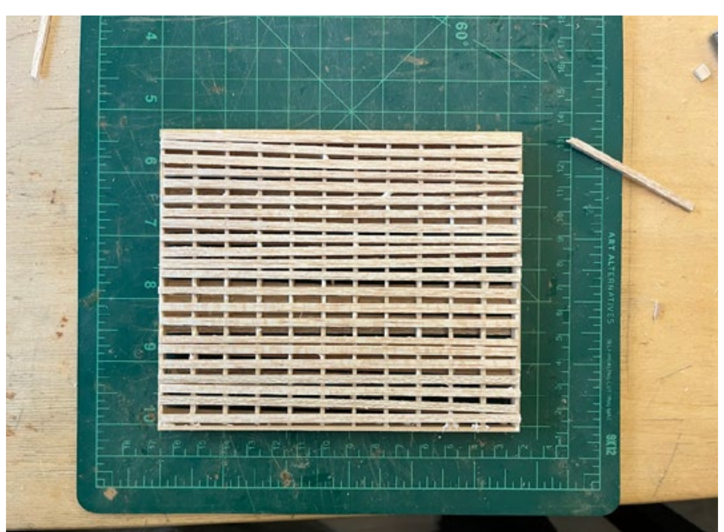




Testing methods for efficient molding and assembly.

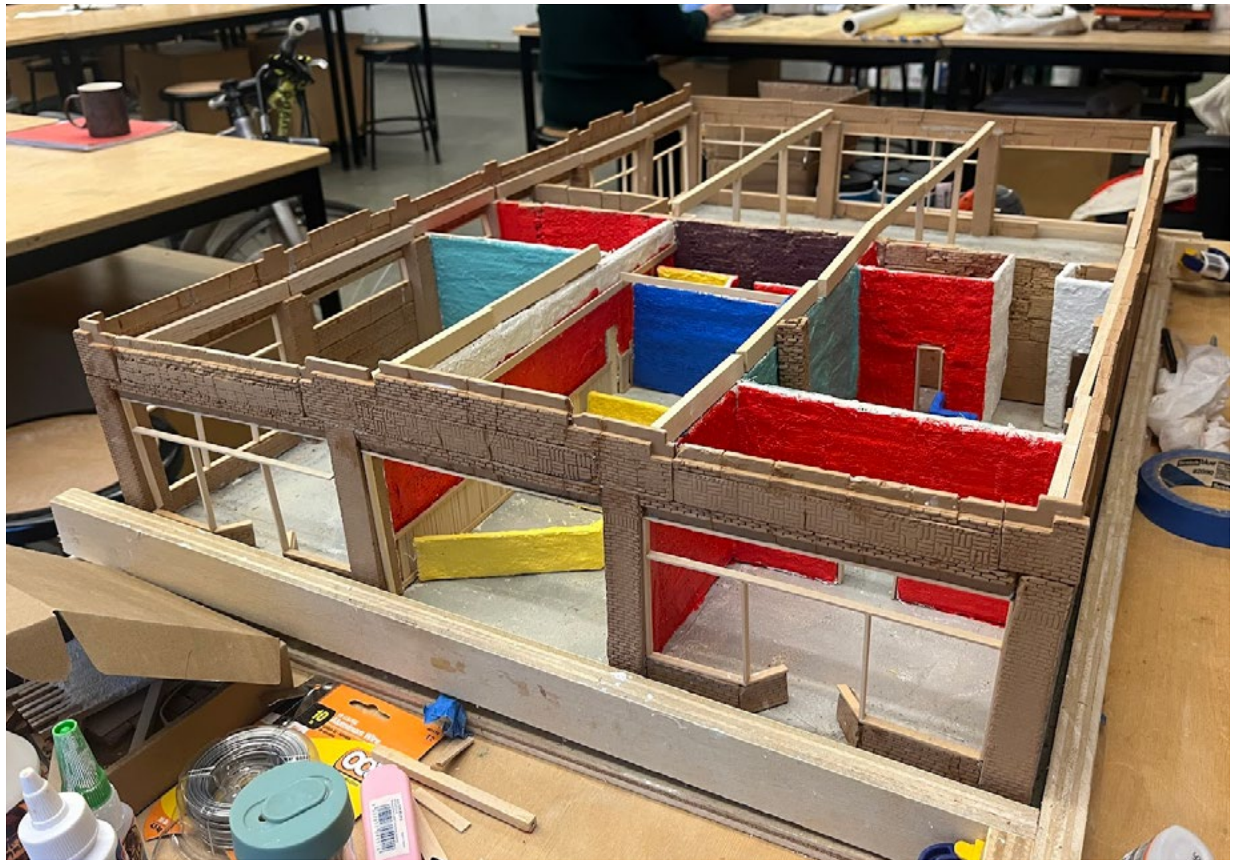
Wall construction made easier with
3D-printed template sized to wall types.

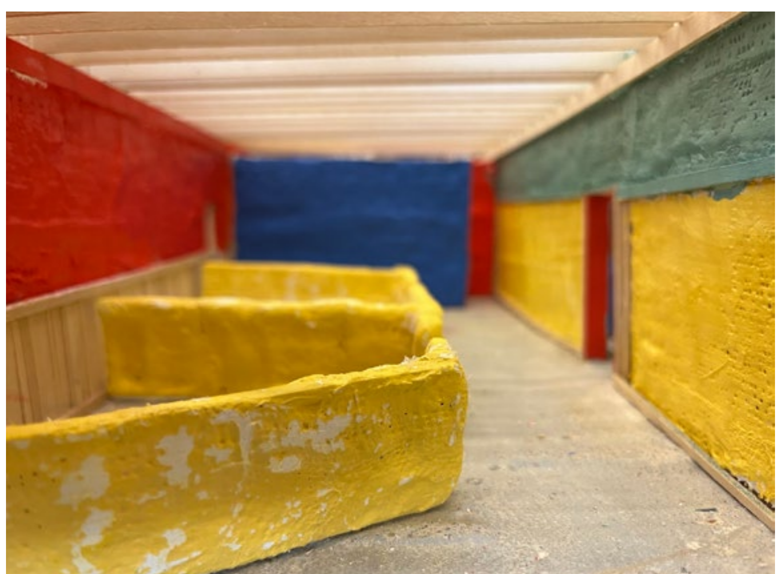


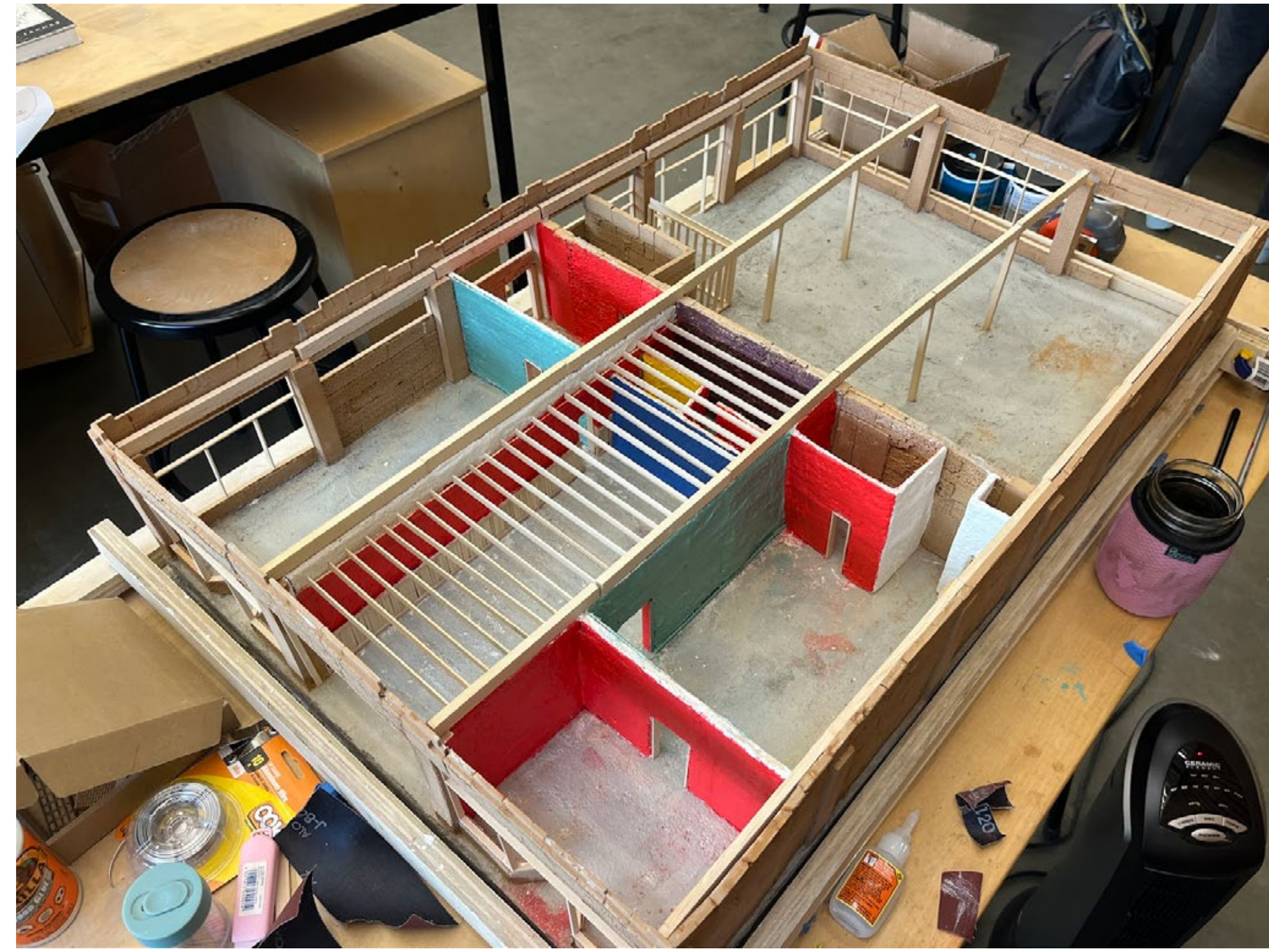


Application of lath.

Plaster layered to interior walls.







Interior walls painted, colors according to Mama's Mexican Kitchen.



Rafters and plaster ceilings.






Roof: wood base, fabric paper and asphalt-based roof coating, gravel

Details: front and back sections.

Deconstruction.