

EMERGENCE, RESILIENCE, AND FUTURE(S) OF URBAN INFORMALITY IN SEATTLE

WHITE PAPER | MAY 2026



image credit: Hannah Hynes

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1. INTRODUCTION

This research project interrogated recent and emerging urban informal initiatives and patterns among West Coast cities, particularly Seattle, that may inform urban design and planning. Given the widening inequalities since the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating climate-driven disruptions, such urban informality holds potential to support community resilience. Initial cases were identified to provide context and framing for a community workshop around such potentials of urban informality in Seattle's future. In November 2024, a ½ day workshop at the University of Washington engaged Seattle community activists and leaders, municipal and state agency partners, and CBE members to explore forms, practices, and potentials of informality broadly and within the City, and in relation to Seattle's design and planning systems. Project research and workshop outcomes discussed here are intended to expand awareness, appreciation, and experimentation in the roles Seattle's urban informality may play to support more inclusive, equitable, and resilient urban life.

Two collaborative initiatives—research and teaching—addressing urban informality by Professors Chalana and Johnson served as a foundation for this inquiry. Both faculty were part of the 2018 Runstad Fellowship, which informed their 2020 CBE interdisciplinary studio on Urban Informality in Seattle.

The 2018 Runstad Fellowship was comprised of a six-person group of industry leaders (Brianna Holan and PJ Santos), CBE faculty (Manish Chalana and Julie Johnson) and then-Master of Science in Real Estate students (Christina Kim and Evan Schneider) to identify lessons on particular urban issues for the Seattle region by visiting, studying, and learning from other cities. The group framed their research as “Paradigm Shift”—new approaches to urban resilience, particularly the intersecting lenses of housing, food, and community life—and selected Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban, South Africa to learn from these cities' post-apartheid successes in these areas.

Through individual and collective research, the group discovered how formal planning priorities and initiatives provided a framework through which varying informal practices infilled and animated more diverse urban communities. Resourceful and creative informal practices in housing, livelihoods, food production, and community life grew from and supported the needs of local people. As an example, the visit to Cape Town coincided with a severe and worsening water shortage, such that the City had identified a “Day Zero” when water would no longer be distributed to individual taps, but rather to a limited number of city locations for access. The group learned about daily quotas and the urgency of the situation through news as well as educational artworks across the city, with makeshift water conservation practices in public spaces and where they stayed. This challenge affected all aspects of daily life. And like the challenges of affordable and adequate housing, access to livelihoods and food security, the group experienced how space for temporal and more enduring informal practices addressed needs and advanced community resilience. A common thread that wove through the group's findings was the concept of Ubuntu, of recognizing our shared humanity and that our lives and well-being are connected. Such an understanding was revealed as fundamental to greater equity, inclusion and resilience within communities. The group's first presentation of findings, “Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are”, was part of the 2018 Seattle Design Festival (Chalana, et al 2018), followed by additional public presentations and an exhibit in the UW CBE Gould Hall Gallery March 4-13, 2019.

Findings from this 2018 Runstad Fellowship also framed a College of Built Environments (BE) studio focusing on Seattle, which Professors Chalana and Johnson co-taught in early 2020. The studio examined urban informality in relation to spatial and social inequities, as well as its potentials for building more resilient, adaptable, and inclusive urban futures. Students first engaged with scholarly readings to articulate critical perspectives on urban

informality more generally in the Global North, then investigated case studies of informal practices related to housing, livelihoods, urban agriculture, and arts & culture in the context of Central Seattle. Fieldwork and mapping exercises helped students analyze historical and contemporary patterns of informality that ranged from untolerated/unauthorized to tolerated/supported. These explorations culminated in site-based final projects where students developed planning and design strategies using informality towards more resilient urban communities.

The BE studio's research on the spectrum of informal practices and the levels of tolerance and legitimacy from regulating bodies provided a robust foundation for students to imagine new possibilities that often connected or expanded existing informal practices, and sparked synergies across the studio themes of housing, livelihoods, urban agriculture, and arts & culture. As the studio concluded, the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic put an indefinite pause on presenting their work. A studio report summarizing the students' research, design and planning proposals was developed and posted online (Chalana, Johnson, Murray 2021).

This white paper, "Emergence, Resilience, and Future(s) of Urban Informality in Seattle", thus grew from the Runstad Fellowship's international research and BE studio's local studies of urban informality. In both local and broader contexts, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-caused disruptions have further revealed limits of formal systems, as well as potentials of informal individual, group and/or community initiatives, in supporting daily needs. The 2024 UW CBE Inspire Fund Grant afforded a meaningful next step, to examine emerging informality in West Coast cities and Seattle as well as to initiate conversations among Seattle community leaders and activists, municipal and state partners, and CBE students about Seattle's urban informality and how it might contribute to more inclusive and resilient urban futures.

Our project scope is relevant to built environments disciplines within and beyond the University of Washington, to community stakeholders seeking to expand social justice and equity through spatial practices, and to the City of Seattle, particularly the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI), Climate Justice, and Food Policy & Programs within the Office of Sustainability and Environment, and to the Office of Planning and Community Development.

This paper is intended to:

1. **expand awareness and appreciation** of the roles that urban informality—in other cities, and what exists and is emerging in Seattle—plays towards community resilience and equity;
2. **spark continued engagement, dialogue, and networking** among community leaders and activists for potential synergies;
3. **foster new conversations** among City and State partners with community leaders and activists in exploring room and roles for informality within the City's design and planning systems; and
4. **inspire students in built environment fields** to further examine and imagine the potentials of urban informality in advancing equity and social justice in their careers.

2. FRAMING URBAN INFORMALITY

2.1 Urban Informality in Context

Urban informality is typically associated with the Global South, in the context of rapidly transforming cities and urban poverty. Even there, it is largely understood through informal settlements (slums) that are either fetishized using aesthetic lenses; pathologized as sites of crime and social ills; or dismissed as inconsequential (Roy 2005). Modern planning tends to associate urban informality with under- development, poverty, and shantytowns. However, in the Global North, urban informality exists as myriad spatial forms and complex networks, such as corner stores masquerading as year-round yard sales, unauthorized dwelling units in single-family neighborhoods, and informal systems of food growing or procuring and sharing (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014). These practices reflect alternative systems of exchange, care and livelihood that continue to thrive at the margins of formal regulation, despite ongoing pressures to eliminate or contain them.

The roots of urban informality in the United States stretch back to time immemorial, to pre-modern societies in which Native peoples inhabited and shaped land long before the arrival of European colonizers. These communities practiced diverse systems of communal living, mutual aid, resource-sharing and land stewardship—systems fundamentally at odds with Western notions of urbanity tied to individual property ownership within a capitalist framework (Walker et al. 2013). The early colonizers arrived with diverse conceptions of urban life, many of which were rooted in informal living arrangements, street-based economies such as food carts, hawking, and decentralized forms of district level governance (Chudacoff 2000). As modern planning emerged in the late 19th Century, it actively dismantled spatial manifestations of urban informality through the zoning, land use regulations and building code (Scott 1998).

Despite these efforts, urban informality has never been fully eradicated from U.S. cities and continues to persist in various forms. Municipal responses to urban informality have been inconsistent. At times, informal practices are tolerated as practical necessities—when they are not seen as disrupting the order or aesthetics of the city. In other instances, urban informality has been co-opted and selectively contained and celebrated to showcase cultural diversity in food, art, or craft. However, when informal practices challenge the visual or spatial order of urban life, or impact public health, they are framed as public nuisances and penalized or erased. This uneven treatment reveals the ambivalence of urban planning toward informality—typically viewing it as a liability or a problem to be fixed, rather than as an alternative mode of inhabiting the city that might offer valuable lessons in building more resilient, inclusive, and adaptable urban futures.

2.2 Themes and Findings from 2020 UW BE Studio on Urban Informality in Seattle

Our co-taught 2020 UW BE studio's exploration of urban informality in Seattle engaged student teams with four intersecting themes: housing, livelihoods, urban agriculture, and art. These teams concluded that urban informality is a legitimate, historically rooted urban condition and an integral part of metropolitan Seattle's urban fabric that should not be seen as an aberration. Brief summaries of the studio's thematic findings and broader reflections follow.

Housing

In Seattle, a range of informal housing types already exist, including backyard cottages, mother-in-law units, trailers, car camping, tent encampments, urban camping, and tiny home villages—including the sanctioned variety (Figure 2.1). These forms of shelter are used by people who have been priced out of formal housing or choose to remain outside of formalized systems. Rather than penalizing these forms of living, and clearing them through organized sweeps and raids or parking infractions; policies should acknowledge their usefulness in filling the gap of affordable housing, and support them through flexible infrastructure for basic services. It is also important to recognize that many forms of informal housing are transitory and transforming – and hard to pinpoint. Embracing this fluidity is essential for ensuring that housing solutions respond to real, lived needs rather than a fixed understanding of home.



Figure 2.1 Encampments in Miller Playfield at Seattle's Capitol Hill, 2022. image: Manish Chalana.

Livelihoods

In-home businesses encompass a wide range of paid activities conducted from residential dwellings in Seattle, either full- or part-time. Common examples include tailoring, barbers, babysitting, home cooks, tutors, online sellers, and recurring garage sales. These ventures are often shaped by the need for affordable and flexible livelihood options—particularly in response to high living costs, limited access to formal employment, and burdensome regulations such as permits and taxes. Enabled by digital platforms and informal networks, in-home businesses are common in the city. In addition to home-based enterprises, some residents engage in seasonal street vending, selling home cooked food or homegrown produce (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Makeshift Mexican food stall along Alki Ave SW, West Seattle. image: Manish Chalana.



Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture refers to the cultivation, production, harvesting and distribution of food within or near urban environments. In Seattle, a diverse range of practices exemplify this phenomenon, including guerrilla gardening, small-scale animal husbandry (such as backyard chickens), urban beekeeping, parking strip and P-Patches (including the sanctioned variety). The city also supports a strong culture of urban foraging, with residents engaging in seasonal harvesting of clams, mushrooms, and fruits and berries. Additionally, alternative food sourcing practices, such as collecting discarded or donated food, are common (Figure 2.3). Organizations like Food Not Bombs facilitate the redistribution of surplus food (“Food Not Bombs,” n.d.), while some individuals engage in dumpster diving as a means of subsistence and/or minimizing food waste. Digital platforms are frequently used to share information, coordinate group foraging efforts, and connect participants in these informal food networks.

Figure 2.3 Distributing food in Cascade Park, Harrison St and Pontius Ave N in the Cascade/ South Lake Union neighborhood – looking north. image: Manish Chalana.



Art

Informal art in Seattle takes many forms, from spontaneous performances to more organized expressions using the city as canvas. These practices enliven public space and reflect the city's cultural diversity, expressing joy, struggle, resistance, and belonging. Forms of informal art include murals, graffiti, and posters as visual commentaries on social or political issues. Pop-up art installations/DIY art shows appear in vacant lots, alleyways, or temporarily unused storefronts. Collectively, they expand the boundaries of what is traditionally considered art and foster more inclusive forms of cultural participation throughout the city (Figure 2.4)



Figure 2.4 BLM Mural at 2nd and Yesler in Pioneer Square. image: Manish Chalana.

Reflections

The studio process revealed intersectionality among various forms of urban informality, highlighting synergies that warrant deeper exploration. Informal housing and livelihoods, for example, are often closely linked. Mobile homes or tiny house villages could be co-located with temporary markets, such as weekly farmers' markets or pop-up vending stalls, creating spaces where residents live or work. Similarly, informal housing situated near urban agriculture sites might encourage residents to grow, prepare, and sell food, integrating subsistence and income generation within shared spaces. Additionally, informal art plays a critical role in animating these spaces and increasing their visibility. Urban planning should engage urban informality holistically, recognizing and building upon the strengths, opportunities, and interconnections among the diverse forms.

Tools and land use strategies that could support urban informality in more sustained and equitable ways, notably Community Land Trusts and activating vacant spaces, were explored in the studio. Community Land Trusts (CLTs), while formal in structure, offer an effective mechanism to support informal uses by securing land for collective stewardship. CLTs can help communities resist displacement and create space for affordable housing, food production, art, and economic activity. Another opportunity lies in the strategic use of underutilized spaces, such as highway underpass; parking lots and garages. These areas often go unused during evenings and weekends and could be adapted as sites for temporary or more permanent informal uses. Repurposing these landscapes for housing, vending, agriculture, or performance offers a flexible and equitable alternative to conventional land use.

The studio concluded abruptly at the onset of COVID-19 pandemic (followed by BLM protests), which amplified pervasive societal disparities and inequities. During and after the pandemic, metropolitan Seattle experienced rising

hopelessness and homelessness, particularly among low-income and minority communities. This was evidenced by the closure of small businesses; significant increases in food bank recipients; and overstressed community facilities and services. Individuals and groups met the gaps that the city could not fully address through informal practices that revealed the benefits of informal practices that are not excessively regulated and controlled (Seattle and King County Public Health, 2022) (Figure 2.5). For us, the pandemic put the spotlight back on urban informality and potentials it might offer for resilient and inclusive urban futures experiencing climate and other disruptions.



Figure 2.5 A food stall in the Central District (26th & Howell) offering fresh foods during COVID. image: Manish Chalana.

2.3 Reconnaissance of Urban Informality in Select West Coast Cities and Municipal Responses

The CBE Inspire Fund supported this project's research activities of expanding the geographic lens of urban informality beyond Seattle to the Pacific West cities of, including Vancouver, BC; Portland, OR; San Francisco and Los Angeles, CA. This phase of the project aimed to begin identifying the range of urban informalities that appear in those cities under the same themes identified in our BE studio: housing, livelihoods, urban agriculture and civic life (revised from arts and culture), with particular attention to how municipal governments have responded through various policies, regulations, and support mechanisms highlighting both the potential benefits and gaps of formalization. The following highlights findings within each theme.

Housing

Housing insecurity is a defining challenge across all five West Coast cities, though its scale, visibility, and policy responses vary significantly. Squatting, camping and encampments have become common (and expanding) options for unhoused individuals and families. Vehicle residency is widespread, with thousands living in cars, vans, and RVs. Other forms of informal housing include unregulated rentals (including couch surfing), unauthorized accessory dwelling units (ADUs and DADUs), single-room occupancy hotels (regulated), and informal co-housing arrangements. Social housing initiatives are minimal but are emerging as formal responses to inadequate formal housing provision.

Seattle's typical home price of \$860,000 has spurred a range of informal housing arrangements (Zillow, n.d.). The City is invested in publicly owned social housing developers to create permanently affordable, mixed-income rental housing (House Our Neighbors, n.d.). The passage of Initiative 137 reflects a growing public support for alternative housing models, however its rollout is still in early stages (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2025). Meanwhile, the City spends tens of millions annually on encampment removal and enforcement—a contradiction that underscores the tension between progressive housing policies and punitive on-the-ground responses to homelessness (Kim, 2025). Even as Portland continues to be the more affordable city among West Coast cities, the Portland and Gresham/Multnomah County rate of homelessness is higher than Seattle/King County (Love and Loh, 2023). Portland has demonstrated some alternative housing models such as co-housing and self-managed villages (discussed later), which offer supportive shelter options with resident governance. In contrast, San Francisco, despite huge housing insecurity, offers fewer pathways toward social or cooperative housing models and instead relies on market mechanisms for affordable housing. (Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development, n.d.)

Los Angeles, with over 75,000 unhoused residents in LA County; over 45,000 in the City as of 2024 has the largest homeless population of any U.S. city (CVillacorte 2024). Its response to housing insecurity has been somewhat limited and sporadic, but Safe Parking LA is notable (Safe Parking LA, n.d.). The program employs underutilized parking lots, as safe zones for those experiencing housing insecurity. But, just as Seattle, LA criminalizes encampments and so further pushes unhoused residents into precarious conditions. Vancouver, despite benefiting from Canada's robust social welfare infrastructure, is struggling with housing insecurity similar to its US West Coast counterparts. The City has been streamlining its zoning regulations to facilitate the development of social and mixed-income infrastructure housing (City of Vancouver, n.d.a). These reforms simplify rezoning, making it easier to construct affordable housing across a broader range of neighborhoods. An encouraging example of this effort is the Little Mountain project that involves redevelopment of a former public housing site into a mixed-income community. It will include new rent-geared-to-income (RGI) homes – set typically at 30% of the tenants' income (rather than based on market rate); market-rate housing, and dedicated homes for members of the Musqueam Indian Band, integrating affordability with reconciliation efforts (City of Vancouver, n.d.c).

Tiny House Villages (THVs) have emerged as a growing response to the homelessness crisis across West Coast cities, gaining popularity especially after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the shortcomings of market-based housing models. While each city has adopted THVs in different ways, the approach generally centers on offering small, individual structures as temporary shelter with varying degrees of services, privacy, and permanence. Even as it remains far from a permanent housing solution, it is a modest stopgap effort with transformative outcomes for some individuals and families. While some cities have begun experimenting with more spacious or well-designed models, most efforts remain quite minimal. Still, the widespread uptake of THVs, especially in Seattle, reflects growing recognition of the need for flexible, rapid, and low-cost interventions amid rising housing insecurity.

Seattle has a robust tiny house village system, with the Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI) managing or partnering with others on multiple sites (Figure 2.6). These villages, some dating back to the early 2000s through Nickelsville encampments, expanded significantly after the pandemic. While they are framed as emergency shelters rather than long-term housing, the City continues to invest in them. However, like elsewhere, they face staffing and service provision challenges (Low Income Housing Institute, n.d.).

Figure 2.6 True Hope Village, a tiny house village at 1714 E Yesler Way in Seattle's Central District, developed by Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI). image: Manish Chalana.



Portland began implementing THVs more recently, with seven Safe Rest Villages (SRVs) funded by the American Rescue Plan but managed by a range of nonprofit organizations (City of Portland, Oregon, n.d.c). Notably, Portland is the only city to incorporate affinity-based villages, including spaces specifically for women, BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals. These SRVs represent a more inclusive model of shelter but remain limited in number relative to the city's needs. Kenton Women's Village is a transitional housing community in Portland, Oregon, designed specifically for houseless women. It consists of small sleeping pods arranged around shared facilities for cooking, hygiene, and community space. The village emphasizes safety, community support, and pathways to permanent housing, and is co-managed by local nonprofits with resident input. It was created through a multifaceted collaboration including the City of Portland, Catholic Charities of Oregon, and educational, civic and business organizations (Catholic Charities of Oregon, n.d.).

Dignity Village deserves a mention as a pioneering example of a transitional housing in Portland that is a self-governed, city-sanctioned shelter community created by and for unhoused people. Residents elect their own governing council and make collective decisions about operations, conflict resolution, and membership. The village embraces a low-barrier entry philosophy while upholding shared commitments to sustainability, autonomy, and mutual aid as core principles of daily life. Residents live in tiny houses, many built from recycled materials, and contribute to upkeep of the village through shared responsibilities and modest monthly dues (Dignity Village, n.d.).

In Los Angeles, the first THV was created in 2021 by Hope the Mission, and has developed multiple sites with small units, hygiene facilities, pet areas, meals, and individual support (Hope the Mission, n.d.). Vancouver, by contrast, has only one small sanctioned THV, consisting of ten, 100-square-foot rooms without in-unit kitchens or bathrooms; those amenities are located in an adjacent shelter (Little & Prasad, 2023). A grassroots effort to build insulated tiny homes in CRAB Park (in the Gastown neighborhood) in early 2024 was halted by authorities due to lack of permits and concerns about unauthorized use of public land (Kulkarni, 2024). The city previously raised concerns about the park's use for semi-permanent shelter and emphasized the need for sanctioned alternatives. Thus, the CRAB Park episode illustrates how municipal mandates for park management and regulation override informal housing efforts.

Livelihoods

Livelihoods are similarly shaped by informality, spanning a spectrum of activities in West Coast cities. These include street vending, busking, food carts, and pop-up services, as well as domestic work, app-based gig labor, and day labor. Many of these forms of work rely on flexible, low-barrier entry points, offering income where formal employment is inaccessible or insufficient. Unsanctioned markets and home-based businesses including cooking, tailoring, tutoring, and childcare allow participants opportunities for income generation without having to navigate regulatory or financial hurdles.

Street vending culture regulations and costs vary across West Coast cities. Portland permits allow carts in commercially zoned areas where sidewalks are at least 10' wide, with relatively moderate permit and fee costs (\$150 annual permit and \$194 fees) (City of Portland, Oregon, n.d.a). San Francisco's permitting costs are moderate (up to \$495 for permit and surcharge), with more specific criteria for single location vending (City and County of San Francisco, n.d.). Vancouver's permit system for new food vendors applying for a single location downtown is competitive, at a much higher cost (\$69.85 application fee and \$1,545.04 permit fee) (City of Vancouver, 2026a), while a "roaming food vending permit" outside downtown is not competitive, with lower fees, but has extensive criteria about allowed locations and times (City of Vancouver, 2026b). In Seattle, vendors face a relatively high financial barrier: a sidewalk or plaza vending permit requires a review deposit, issuance fee, and a square-foot-based charge—typically totaling around \$1,100 to \$1,500 annually, including permit issuance and occupation fees (Seattle Department of Transportation, n.d.b). These high costs can drive vendors to operate informally, often risking fines and enforcement actions. These dynamics underscore how regulatory burdens can push workers into the margins even in cities with progressive reputations.

The modern food cart movement in Portland gained traction in the early 2000s and surged during the 2007–2008 recession, when it was seen as a more affordable alternative to brick-and-mortar restaurants. This growth gave rise to "pods"—clusters of food carts on typically private lots that have become a defining feature of Portland's urban fabric. Portland and Multnomah County play key regulatory roles. The City issues business licenses, site permits, and oversees infrastructure connections and the Multnomah County Health Department handles food safety permits and sanitation inspections; other city agencies are involved for fire safety, wastewater management, and periodic inspections, etc. Food carts are generally seen as performing well and supporting local entrepreneurship, activating underutilized spaces, and enriching the city's food culture (Newman and Burnett 2013) (Figure 2. 7). More recently, in 2023, the city launched the Central City Food Truck Pilot Program, allowing rotating food trucks to operate,

outside of the pods, at designated curbside locations in the downtown area. The program's effectiveness was under evaluation ahead of a potential permanent adoption in 2025 (City of Portland, Oregon, 2024).



Figure 2.7 Food trucks in Alberta Arts District, Portland. image: Manish Chalana.

Los Angeles, despite some enforcement inconsistencies, also supports vendors through permissive policies and very low permit costs (\$27.51), acknowledging their cultural and economic value. There are some 50,000 vendors (10,000 of which sell food) majority are first generation immigrants. The low entry barriers to street vending has generated a vibrant street life (Rojas, 2024b). Although California's 2018 SB 946 decriminalized vending statewide, L.A. initially retained several "no-vending" zones that disproportionately impacted immigrant and low-income vendors (Petrow-Cohen, 2024). In 2024, the City Council unanimously rescinded these restrictions, signaling a shift toward alignment with state law and street vending. Additionally, L.A. County has approved reforms to simplify health permitting under new food codes—an important step forward after years of grassroots advocacy (Rojas, 2024a).

Urban Agriculture

Informal and more formal urban agriculture practices reflect creativity and resourcefulness, emerging in environments that are not naturally conducive to food cultivation. Residents in West Coast cities establish guerrilla gardens in underutilized spaces such as parking strips, highway edges, vacant lots and sometimes even portions of city parks. Foraging for mushrooms, berries, or clams are common practices for both subsistence and a recreational activity. Food gleaning involves collection of excess fresh food from farms, gardens, or markets for redistribution to reduce waste while addressing food insecurity. These efforts are often tied to collective infrastructures like community fridges, pantries, and seed libraries, which connect these resources with those in need. Such mutual-aid and sharing networks present in varying degrees across all cities and play a key role in expanding food access outside of the formal food systems.

Vancouver has emerged as a leader in this space, with organized initiatives like the Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks that map gardens, fridges, and fruit trees across neighborhoods (Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks, n.d.). Another initiative of note is the Chénchenstway Healing Garden and Indigenous Food Forest, an Indigenous-led project by members of local First Nations. Planted in 2022, this serves as a place of healing, food cultivation, cultural teaching, and land-based practice. "Chénchenstway" is Squamish, translated as "to lift each other up, to stand and work together." (Vancouver Urban Food Forest Foundation, n.d.).

Seattle’s support for urban food systems has emerged through varied City and community initiatives. Seattle’s P-Patch Community Gardening Program grew from a resident starting a community garden feeding those in need on neighboring farmland owned by the Picardo family. The garden’s success led to the family selling the farmland to the City, as the first P-Patch and start of this Program, in 1973. Fifty years later, 91 P-Patch community gardens across the City were cultivated by community members. Seattle P-Patch Program is administered by the Department of Neighborhoods, with a continued focus on equity in food access. (SEAnighborhoods 2023). Seattle expanded opportunities for urban agriculture, with The Urban Food Systems (UFS) Program launched in 2008 as a pilot to advance urban agriculture and its related social and environmental justice dimensions. Managed through Seattle’s Department of Parks and Recreation, UFS grew to manage multiple sites 23 acres of cultivation space (Seattle Parks and Recreation, n.d.). Additionally, the city has revised its zoning code to permit “urban farms” and “community gardens” in nearly all zones—residential, commercial, and industrial—with some restrictions in industrial areas (Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development, n.d.). Other agencies also have supported urban agriculture, such as the Seattle Housing Authority entering an agreement with Washington State Department of Transportation for improvements to the I-5 right-of-way (ROW) adjacent to the redeveloped Yesler Terrace neighborhood, and designating Black Farmers Collective as the group to manage this ROW area. Black Farmers Collective created and continues to develop and steward Yes Farm (SEAnighborhoods, 2022) (Figure 2.8).



Figure 2.8. Black Farmers Collective’s evolving Yes Farm in the I-5 ROW next to Yesler Terrace, with community member garden plots and communal care of annual crops, berries and fruit trees. image: Julie Johnson.

Other West Coast cities provide similar supports for urban agriculture. The City of Portland hosts a well-established network of 60 community gardens (City of Portland, Oregon, n.d.b). San Francisco’s Urban Agriculture Program focuses on food cultivation through its Urban Agriculture Resource Centers and a network of 42 community gardens across the city. While five gardens are tended and harvested communally, gardens with individual plots have waitlists, suggesting an unmet interest in community-based food growing (San Francisco Recreation & Parks, n.d.a & b). Los Angeles supports urban agriculture through various efforts including the Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone (UAIZ) program to promote food cultivation on vacant urban land. It allows landowners to voluntarily contract with the city to use eligible vacant properties exclusively for agricultural purposes in exchange for potential property tax reductions. To qualify, parcels must be between 0.10 and 3 acres, fully dedicated to agriculture for five years, free of hazardous conditions or protected designations, and compliant with local zoning (Los Angeles City Planning, n.d.).

Civic Life

A wide range of civic life is shaped by informal practices that reclaim public space for expression, gathering, and play. These activities bring communities together through the creation and experience of art, culture, and everyday interaction. Guerrilla art, murals, graffiti, and other forms of community-based public art are sometimes tolerated (and even officially sanctioned) in some West Coast cities. Public performances, parkour, pop-up play spaces, and informal street uses; such as streateries, night markets, festival streets, and initiatives like Healthy Streets – challenge conventional notions of what public space is and how it ought to be used. While some of these practices have been formalized in the cities, especially since the pandemic, they push the boundaries of official cultural programming.

Artistic expression, particularly in the form of murals, street art, and guerrilla interventions—is central to civic life across all five cities. Vancouver has one of the most permissive policies, allowing murals on public property without permits. This has enabled a flourishing scene of grassroots expression. The City has a Mural Support Program that supports projects led by artists, community groups, businesses, and property owners. The program provides resources and opportunities for community expression in public spaces, supports local and emerging artists, and offers additional consideration and support to historically marginalized groups (City of Vancouver, n.d.d). Also in Vancouver, guerrilla art has become a vibrant form of community expression, exemplified by projects like the whimsical “Dude Chilling Park” prank sign that was first removed but later reinstated by a petition with the sign officially approved as public art (City of Vancouver, n.d.b).

Seattle embraces murals as tools for civic engagement, with city-funded efforts like the Signal Box Mural Program. This initiative transforms metal traffic signal control boxes at street intersections into engaging public art pieces. Supported by Seattle’s Office of Arts & Culture and the Department of Neighborhoods, the program collaborates with local artists, community groups, and youth or students to design and install colorful vinyl wraps or hand-painted murals on signal boxes (Seattle Department of Transportation, n.d.a). While beautifying streetscapes, the Signal Box Mural Program deters graffiti and showcases neighborhood identity. For instance, in Seattle’s Central District, signal boxes feature imagery honoring Black artists, activists, and landmarks within the neighborhood (Figure 2.9). Similarly, Capitol Hill’s boxes often showcase queer culture, contributing to the neighborhood’s role as a hub of queer life and activism. Projects are often developed through partnerships with neighborhood associations, local nonprofits, and Business Improvement Areas, ensuring that the artwork reflects residents’ stories and priorities.



Figure 2.9 Corner of 23rd and Union in the heart of the Central District. Mural is of Earl Lancaster, who has owned Earl’s Cuts and Styles at the intersection since 1992. Originally located across the street, then relocated to the new Liberty Bank Building when that was developed. image: Steve Goodreau

Yet Seattle contends with tensions between sanctioned murals and unsanctioned protest art especially following the 2020 George Floyd uprisings, which sparked a wave of public murals commemorating victims of state violence (Figure 2.10). The One Seattle Graffiti Plan strategy consolidates city resources for graffiti removal teams, enhances targeted enforcement, and supports impacted businesses. The plan also fosters public art initiatives and volunteer cleanups to address the issue creatively and collaboratively (City of Seattle, n.d.).



Figure 2.10 The "Black Lives Matter" mural painted on Pine Street between 10th and 11th Aves, adjacent to Cal Anderson Park, which was the epicenter of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) created during the days following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. image: Manish Chalana.

Portland's vibrant mural culture is closely tied to activism, often addressing themes of social justice. While the city requires permits for murals, even on private property, it also has a history of guerrilla art that challenges official narratives. A powerful example is the York Monument, an unsanctioned bust installed anonymously in February 2021 on Mount Tabor Park's vacant plinth, once occupied by a toppled statue of Harvey W. Scott following BLM uprising. The bust honored York, the only Black member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and symbolized a reclamation of public space for overlooked histories. Created by sculptor Todd McGrain, the statue was a deliberate intervention in civic memory, prompting reflection on who gets memorialized (City of Portland, Oregon, n.d.d). It was damaged beyond repair by vandals in July 2021 and is currently in storage. Its brief presence underscored the role of guerrilla art in amplifying marginalized voices and contesting official narratives of history and memory.

3. COMMUNITY PARTNERS WORKSHOP

To investigate how urban informality across these four themes may—and already does—hold opportunities and practices toward more inclusive and resilient futures in Seattle, we reached out to community and agency leaders with expertise and interest for shared conversations. A ½ day workshop at UW on November 21, 2024, engaged Seattle community activists and leaders, agency partners and CBE members to explore forms, practices, and potentials of informality broadly, within the City, and in relation to Seattle’s design and planning systems (See Appendix A).

This section summarizes workshop activities and the ideas generated, as a resource for further conversations in advancing the potentials of urban informality practices and forms by local communities as well as city planning and design policies and programming.

3.1 Overview

This workshop brought together invited community leaders and agency staff whose work relates to one of the four themes: housing, livelihoods, food security (including urban agriculture), and civic life. Interested students from CBE responded to a call for participation, and identified which theme(s) they gravitated towards. The workshop participants and facilitators included nine community leaders, seven agency staff, seven CBE students, one CBE faculty member/artist/researcher, and the two CBE faculty grant leaders—26 total. Participants and a small group facilitator gathered around one of four meeting tables, each focused on a particular theme. The workshop opened with a welcome, round of introductions, overview presentation of urban informality globally and among West Coast cities through the lens of the four themes, and discussion of the workshop goals and agenda. Two group activities engaged individuals and groups in generating ideas using sticky notes through a modified 3CM approach (Kearney and Kaplan, 1997; Micic, 2001). A break/gallery walk to review and add ideas/note to other theme groups’ ideas followed these first two activities (Figure 3.1), followed a third group activity delving into particular examples, and a collective wrap-up/social/open discussion.



Figure 3.1. Workshop break and gallery walk to review and add to thematic groups’ sticky note ideas generated in first two activities. image: Cameron Musard.

Each of the three small-group activities focused on a particular context and set of prompts. In the first two activities, individual ideation led into group discussion, with the third activity designed to synthesize ideas from the prior two:

Activity 1. Urban Informality Examples in Other Cities

Each person:

Reflect on urban informality locally, nationally or beyond through your lived experiences or what you've learned. Name and describe each example that comes to mind (e.g., where this was, what you appreciated about it, how it contributed to inclusivity/resilience or not) –write one idea per sticky note and place that note anywhere on the table-long sheet.

Group:

What do we discover among all the ideas shared? In conversations, organize notes + jot down emerging themes and relationships.

Activity 2. Urban Informality Examples in Seattle and Regulatory Responses

Each person:

Reflect on urban informality in Seattle through your lived experiences, as well as from readings, work, or research. Name and describe that form/example (e.g., where this was, what you appreciated about it, how it contributed to your group's theme as resilience/equity). Write one idea per sticky note and place each note where it fits best on the sheet's titled regulatory responses (Not Tolerated – Tolerated – Appropriated/Celebrated).

Group:

Discuss all ideas shared on the sheet, then organize notes + write themes and relationships that emerge.

Activity 3. Potentials for Selected Examples of Urban Informality

Group:

Identify examples from Activity 1 or 2 that you want to do a deeper dive on. For each example, use one of the 11 x 17 charts with space for notes to collectively capture the ideas you discuss. You don't need to agree on perspectives; the diversity of perspectives is valuable to better understand the complexity of this particular form/example and where/how different approaches may have more potential.

Following the workshop, all group activity sheets with sticky notes and 11" x 17" sheets were collected. Sticky notes relating to prompts and workshop sheets were transcribed and organized into tables (see Appendix B).

3.2 Thematic Descriptions, Groups, and Activities Summaries

Each of the following thematic sections provide: the description provided in the workshop invitation to participants characterizing that theme; group participants and facilitator; and summaries of the three activities undertaken. Within the summaries of Activities 1 and 2, transcribed notes with unique qualities are included as quotes, while more common or repeated terms are not in quotes. Summaries of Activity 3 contain tables that are direct transcriptions of the group sheets, with minor edits included for clarity within brackets [].

Housing

The workshop invitation described urban informality in housing as:

Informal housing can take various forms, including makeshift tents/sleeping bags in various public/private settings occupied individually or in groups; and campers and vehicles used by individuals and families. It may also include state-sanctioned tiny homes, unauthorized Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) and Detached Accessory Dwelling Units (DADU) that circumvent city rules and regulations, or authorized versions of these. Also, informal housing can include co-housing arrangements or social housing that is often community-driven, and resource-sharing in response to affordability and accessibility challenges to housing in Urban America.

The workshop housing-focused group was comprised of:

Jenn La Freniere, The BLOCK Project, BLOCK Architects

Tiffani McCoy, House Our Neighbors

Evan Schneider, Heartland

Tim Lehman, City of Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development, Indigenous Planning

Cameron Musard, Master of Urban Planning student

facilitator: Hannah Hynes, Master of Landscape Architecture student

Summary of Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

Ideas generated in this activity centered on three characteristics: housing types, design/features, and policies/programs. Additionally, two particular examples were noted: Hutong, Beijing compound living and NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center Portland).

Housing types examples span spatial scales, planning and investment, intended populations and uses, and temporality. Larger, intentional, and more permanent examples include: “Garden cities urban planning”, “vertical housing towers”, social housing, cohousing, retirement homes, and work/live. Other planned but less permanent examples were noted, such as Tiny House Villages, “caravan villages,” and “mobile trailer park-ish”. And smaller housing types identified include DADU & ADU, Micro housing, and Tree houses. More informal types included “unowned housing (shared)”, “unauthorized roommates”, and “squat”.

Examples of housing design/features also express a range of investment and permanence, as well as infrastructure. These include adaptive reuse, pre-fab, shipping containers, Amazon Home Kits, and “mobile housing trailers, cars, vans”. Considerations for sustainability, “dwellings w/o kitchens; common kitchens”, and changes undertaken as “...tenant improvements” illustrate alternatives in housing infrastructure.

Policies and programs noted identify opportunities for flexibility in housing construction and accessibility, including: form-based codes, master builder, “affordable mortgages”, and “incentives \$\$\$ tax breaks”.

Summary of Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

Seattle examples were identified across the regulatory spectrum of Not Tolerated – Tolerated – Appropriated/Celebrated. Not Tolerated notes encampments, vehicles, and apartments that are not code compliant. Entries in Appropriated/Celebrated include more formal housing, such as dormitories and cohousing, as well as particular programs—The BLOCK Project, Habitat for Humanity, and Mary’s Place.

Examples in the Tolerated section address particular types, housing organizations and sites, and broader programs. Types include Pallet Housing, shelters, hostels, and Single Room Occupancy. Several Seattle-based housing organizations that provide immediate and transitional housing sites are identified: Porchlight Mens

Shelter CFH, ROOTS Youth Shelter, Nickelsville SHARE/WHEEL, Chief Seattle Club as well as LIHI Tiny House Villages (see Figure 2.6). Three broader programs are noted: Homestead Program, Catholic Housing Services, and Evergreen Community Land Trust Housing.

Summary of Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

The Housing group engaged with two of their earlier examples through this activity: Prefab Housing and Shared Housing. Both examples highlight efficiencies to building these types of housing, while the stresses differ. Potentials discussed address more diverse populations and design, and management by residents. The group's handwritten charts were transcribed as:

Prefab Housing

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Cheaper, efficient, ability to repair	• Building codes + environmental regulations • Monotonous design • ADA requirements • Suitable location	• Multigenerational housing

Shared Housing [dorms, SROs Retirement]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Higher density • Cheaper to build + rent • Efficiencies with shared utilities	• Privacy limited • Less storage space • Conflict with work/live? • Family stresses-kids & pets	• Self-management • Scales for sharing different features • Flexible units

Livelihoods

The workshop invitation described urban informality in livelihoods as:

Urban informal livelihoods encompass a variety of economic activities outside formal employment structures in cities. Examples include street or front yard vending, waste picking, busking, panhandling, home-based work, and small-scale enterprises like food carts, pop-up kiosks, tailoring, handicrafts, beauty and repair services. Many also operate home-based food services, from pies to catering to home-restaurants. Some may operate virtually, through social media or apps. These informal livelihoods provide essential goods and services, often filling gaps not met by formal markets.

The workshop livelihoods-focused group was comprised of:

Rachel Miller, Makers
 Doc Wilson, Peace Peloton, Columbia City Night Market
 Sarah Cubillos, City of Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment, Climate Justice
 Joel Miller, City of Seattle, Department of Transportation, Public Space Management
 Kat Harvey, Master of Landscape Architecture student
 Emily Waldoch, Master of Urban Planning student
 facilitator: Manish Chalana, Urban Design and Planning faculty

Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

This group identified diverse livelihoods that characterize four contexts: home-based, gig work, pop-up retail, and sharing.

Examples of home-based livelihoods primarily address products sold locally or online. These include online marketplaces to sell clothes, crafts or other items. One example noted someone making breakfast sandwiches through timed orders on Instagram for pickup at a designated street corner. Another example noted childcare as a common home-based business.

Gig work livelihoods are expressed as services that range from very informal and individually undertaken, contrasting with the formal example of Airbnb's events/tours identified. Examples include: carpools and various ride-for-hire models, handyman, day laborers, repairs, landscaping, mechanics, childcare, "youth micro enterprises (window washing, etc.)", as well as "Squeegee boys (Baltimore)".

Pop-up retail examples convey both locational contexts and activities. Sidewalks, transit, and parking were noted locations. Informal advertising was recognized, with notes on kiosks, "A-Frame signs", and posters. Most of the identified activities center around food, including ghost kitchens, food stands, sidewalk cafes and bake sales. Other activities noted were buskers and artists.

Three types of sharing were noted: "mutual aid societies during emergency/climate event"; "barter economy 'buy nothing' 'time back'", and that of "bike/scooter share" and "bike swap".

Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

The Livelihoods group's examples from Seattle demonstrate the overlapping nature of the four workshop themes, with activities that also address food security, housing and civic life.

Similar to the regulatory distribution of examples by the Housing group, more examples were identified as Tolerated than Not Tolerated or Appropriated/Celebrated. Not Tolerated listings include some overlapping uses with Civic Life—graffiti and raves. Other uses included drug dealing, street walking, "after hours bars" also known as speakeasies, "unpermitted vending". Appropriated/Celebrated examples include or expand on some identified in other cities, with informal to more organized contexts: products sold online, yard sale, maker space, "Markets-Farmers, Night, Christmas", sidewalk cafe, "food trucks & other 'authorized' vending". Services of nanny and street performance are also included.

Examples of Tolerated activities address online and more informal approaches to livelihoods. Activities noted include: retail, food catering and vendors, transportation (including Uber, Touro, pedicab), rental of parking space as well as home EV-chargers, services (childcare, tutoring, art, bands performing house shows, day labor) and panhandling. A number of companies were noted that provide online markets for individuals, ranging from Craigslist and Only Fans to those serving pets—Sniffspot (yard rental), Rover and Wag (pet sitting). Additionally, housing-related activities were identified: roommating and renting out amenities such as pools.

Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

Three examples were selected by the group for further discussion: App Based Services, Street Vending, and the organization Carpenters Company of Philadelphia. While App Based Services were noted for flexibility, "lower barrier entry", and independence, the current stresses identified in both App Based and Street Vending

livelihoods include lack of benefits, healthcare, and protections. Both Street Vending and the Carpenters Company of Philadelphia are noted as small scale, with Street Vending identified for the urban vitality it contributes. Future potentials identified in all three examples address aspects of stability and growth. The group's handwritten chart were transcribed as:

App Based Services vs. Community & Relational

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Micro-economies, growth potential, flexible, independence in how you make a living • Lower barrier entry • Worked well during pandemic, • more options for people with disabilities/seniors	• Raise funds • No benefits/healthcare • Liability—no employment protections • More cars—delivery • Less face-to-face [depends on service]	• ACA for healthcare • Build connections that can continue w/o app

Street Vending

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Breakfast sandwiches/chillie during covid • Small scale • Adds vitality to the street	• Food handler permit • Risk making people sick • No benefits/healthcare • Hazard • Gig economy—limited employment protections, no skill development	• Have pop-up locations—affordable for customers • Get spot zoning to allow this • Support sense of “place”— chance encounters and vibrancy • Potential to grow into a brick & mortar store

Carpenters Company of Philadelphia

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Small scale, incremental • Inclusive-women run	• Formal training requirements	• Apply here with Master Builders • Less division of labor • Greater discretion over daily life • Build starter homes, infill • (isn't this Sawhorse Revolution??)

Food Security

The workshop invitation described urban informality in food security as:

Informal practices for food security include harvesting food by fishing or foraging in public (and less-public) lands; gleaning what may be wasted food, such as from farms/gardens/stores/etc., dumpster-diving; and growing one's own food in community, shared, or co-opted gardens as well as unsanctioned/guerilla gardens. Informal food provisioning relates to sharing among friends and neighbors and through digital networks; sharing places like seed libraries, The Little Free Pantries, Community Fridge, or free community meals; and sharing by community gardens, farms, mutual aid groups, nonprofits, or food banks.

The workshop food security-focused group was comprised of:

Ray Williams, Black Farmers Collective
Navera Ahmed, City of Seattle P-Patch Community Garden Program
Bridget Igoe, City of Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment, Food Systems
Lizzy Baskerville, Washington State Department of Ecology
Dana Grant, Master of Landscape Architecture student
Evelyn Newman, Master of Urban Planning & Master of Public Health student
facilitator: Julie Johnson, Landscape Architecture faculty

Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

The Food Security group's examples from other cities fold into four broad areas: selling food, mutual aid and gleaning, growing food, and tending practices.

Selling food, while contributing to local food security, also overlaps with informal livelihood practices. Examples were noted as individual efforts, such as homemade food products and catering, to more collective and organized approaches, such as street vending, food carts and night markets. Two more formal approaches listed are an open kitchen with a check out system in Boston, and food production, sales, and recipe development in prisons.

Examples of mutual aid and gleaning address food access through: driving others to a grocery, cooking for others, donating practices including "Community Fridges", gleaning practices such as "Food Rescue" from businesses, foraging, as well as fishing and hunting. More formal approaches included organizations that support particular practices of gleaning (including Seattle's City Fruit and Chicago University), donating food, and growing new community gardens by Philadelphia Horticultural Society.

Examples related to growing one's own food also spanned a spectrum of individual/informal contexts to more collective/formal approaches. One sticky note identified "seed saving", which as an individual practice can also grow into more community-based sharing contexts such as seed swap events or local seed libraries. More activist approaches and examples include "seed bombing" areas, Ron Finley gardening in Los Angeles street Right-Of-Way, and gardening in vacant lots. A more formalized approach from Vancouver, BC, notes gardening in vacant lots with portable containers that is validated by reduced taxes.

Food tending practices of nutrient and water inputs were notes highlighted by informal approaches. Examples include human waste with a reference to research undertaken in Ghana, mulching with wool, and benefits of using recycled water in Seattle's P-Patches. Bangladeshi Floating Gardens are described in the context of multifaceted life-sustaining benefits of reduced flood impacts and as food sources.

Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

Like the examples this group identified in other cities, Seattle examples also centered around the four broad approaches of: selling food, mutual aid and gleaning, growing one's own food, and tending practices. These examples and practices were located across the regulatory spectrum of Not Tolerated, Tolerated, and Appropriated/Celebrated.

Among examples of selling food, "mobile food vendors" is identified as Not Tolerated, while particular individuals and locations such as Cal Anderson Park are identified as Tolerated. Examples within Appropriated/Celebrated express organized venues and a business: "Farmers' markets & Farm Stands" and "Rising Sun Produce (discount produce, "ugly" produce)".

Mutual aid and gleaning examples are primarily noted within Tolerated and Appropriated/Celebrated sections, and with one entry in Not Tolerated: "During COVID, some mutual aid w/prepared foods was shut down (South Park)". Notes in the Tolerated section include approaches such as Little Free Pantries, as well as specific programs for food rescue through "Food for All mutual aid foodforall.org Yesler Terrace Park Saturdays" and free food through "Capitol Hill Freegan ("vegan") Wednesdays". More formal examples such as Meals on Wheels, City Fruit, as well as local Seed Libraries are listed as Appropriated/Celebrated. Practices of squidding and foraging (for invasive plants and at Seattle Parks) are identified as Tolerated, while Appropriated/Celebrated contains fishing and the welcome foraging at the Beacon Food Forest.

Growing food is noted across the regulatory spectrum, with the Not Tolerated containing "Planting fruit & nut trees in the street ROW" and two entries identifying the activist-initiated garden that was removed by the City—the Black Lives Memorial Garden at Cal Anderson Park. Within Tolerated, two examples of guerilla gardening are noted: in street roundabouts of Capitol Hill and a garden adjacent to the Climbing Water P-Patch. The City's P-Patch Community Gardening program and the Black Farmers Collective's Yes Farm are listed in Appropriated/Celebrated.

As a tending practice, fertilizer from compost sources are noted across the spectrum. The Not Tolerated section lists human waste, while a nitrogen-rich byproduct of a tofu factory is identified as Tolerated. Appropriated/Celebrated features two local compost programs: Restaurant 2 Garden and Zoo Doo.

Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

The Food Security group selected three urban agriculture examples to discuss in more depth: the City's P-Patch program with many community gardens, the Black Farmers Collective's Yes Farm, and the Danny Woo Community Garden (managed by Interim CDA). Current conditions were addressed in more detail than more speculative potentials. The group also discussed aspects of the City's Comprehensive Plan Update and the 2024 Food Action Plan that could support local food systems, as well as other topics, including suggestions of less red tape and increased flexibility and trust to improve grant processes and relationships in support of community-based initiatives.

P-Patch [City of Seattle, Department of Neighborhoods]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Each P-Patch is so unique—practices, culture • Resources to replace raised beds • Refuge for people needing this in city	• Waitlist is 5 years • Food insecure people harvesting gardeners foods • SPD complaints	• Build relationships with those in need

Black Farmers Collective [Yes Farm]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Grassroots origins w/formal agreements by WSDOT+SHA • Rainier Beach Food Action Coalition—space where people can wash vegetables. Yes Farm has some produce at RBFAC Farm Stand • Community can come learn about food system + build community • Events • Locals use • “This is sacred space”—how help people appreciate and value	• Risks of wildfire • Vandalism due to people needing spaces to be—try to balance needs with impacted • ADA access	• Partnerships with other organizations • Big trees on site are heat oases

Danny Woo [Interim CDA]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Financial support • People in crisis needing food, sleep, be safe, solitude come here • Elders carry things, manage well—they do what they want • Aesthetics—perceived as beauty, cultural values	• Access to resources • ADA accessibility issues • Wayfinding & lighting challenges with fence heights • Perceived by city as a mess, too smelly. Human compost practice not understood	

Civic Life

The workshop invitation described urban informality in civic life as:

In the context of civic life, urban informality is expressed through spaces, features and gatherings including visual and performing arts, play, protesting, planting, eating, and celebrating. This includes unsanctioned graffiti as well as commissioned murals, chalk art and guerilla crosswalks; parkour and pop-up playgrounds; protest marches and camping in trees (to save them); seed bombing vacant lots and planting flowers in a parkway; outdoor community kitchens and streateries; flash mob dances, bicycle flash mobs, pop-up concerts, and block parties, as well as related temporary or more permanent street closures by jurisdictions.

The workshop civic life-focused group was comprised of:

Brianna Holan, Gemdale USA

Cheryl Klotz, Triangle Associates

Tori Shao, artist and landscape architect

Ian Macek, City of Seattle, Department of Transportation, Urban Design

Thomas Nguyen, Bachelor of Arts in Community, Environment & Planning student

facilitator: rich desanto, UW CBE Lecturer, artist and researcher

Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

This group identified six categories of urban informality addressing civic life, with examples listed within each category: Performance; Food; Events; “Mark-Making” & Art; Destinations “This Is The Place”; and Facilitating Creation. Several examples illustrate overlapping functions and benefits of urban informality, by contributing to civic life while simultaneously supporting individuals’ livelihoods and access to food.

Within the category of Performance, most examples highlight music and dance forms—busking, punk show, breakdancing and dance church. Others listed here include skateboarding and tailgating.

The category of Food contained both models of food serving— “ghost restaurants”, food carts and trucks, lemonade stand—and social and locational dimensions with notations of “...transforming sidewalks into communal eating spaces” and “eating/gathering in greenspace”.

In Events, the group’s examples illustrate temporal, spatial and activity considerations. Temporal examples include: “Annual/Seasonal Celebrations/Festival/Ritual/TRADITION”, “Trolloween”, and “Off the grid’ Food Truck Night”. Spatial and activity-oriented examples range from organized to spontaneous: Critical Mass, “walking/biking school bus”, “Play in the ROW/Facilitating play”, “Block Party!” and, “snowday streets as sledding hills”.

The group’s entries in the two categories of “Mark-Making” & Art and Destinations “This Is The Place” provide a range of creative civic installations. Some are particular features, such as: “Fairy Houses”, “Ghost Bikes/Roadside Memorials”, “Wish Tree/Poem Bench”, and a riff on the formal Little Free Library program --“Little Free Puzzle Library”. Others relate particular media, such as “Artful ‘repair’” described for streets as Lego or mosaic infill of potholes, and “mural projection mapping” at night. Specific places are noted: Atlanta Beltline with murals and space for artists, and the “Bed-Stuy Aquarium in NYC [where a] leaky fire hydrant becomes curated goldfish habitat becomes neighborhood destination/tourist attraction”.

The three examples in the Facilitating Creation category highlight how such informality emerges: “Informal cocreation of spaces Notice what people already do here”, “Crowdsourcing (restroom codes, hillclimbs, street end parks)”, and Social Media.

Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

This group's examples of Seattle's informal civic life span the regulatory spectrum and include some identified earlier in other cities as well as specific locations or features in Seattle.

Examples in the Not Tolerated section present a range of activities undertaken in the public realm, including: prostitution, street racing, "sticker/stencil bombing", "guerilla street improvements", as well as protests, vending at the stadium, and skateboarding.

Within the Tolerated section, several examples relate to food and livelihoods, such as "parking strip gardens", "fruit stands" and "busking". Other examples include street installations of "utility pole community postings" and Little Free Libraries, as well as events such as "snow day sledding on hilly streets", "Westlake Park activating", "block parties playstreets", and "naked bike ride – [Fremont S]olstice [Parade]".

Artworks, destinations, and events dominate the Appropriated/Celebrated entries. Specific artworks are noted—“COVID storefront murals”, “Black Lives Matter mural Capitol Hill”, and the “Gum wall” (in Pike Place Market)—as well as Coliseum Actualize Air and “Bergman Luggage basecamp art studios”. Other identified destinations and events include: “Night market (Columbia City, CID, etc.)”, “Ballard Ave streateries, parklets, weekly street closure” and “42nd Green Street”.

Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

The Civic Life group focused on two street art installations—Unsolicited Street Art and Ghost Bikes—and two activities—Rave and Walking/Biking School Bus. Myriad facets regarding the significance, challenges, and potentials of the two street art installations are addressed. And insights on the two activities highlight multiple benefits currently experienced and those hold greater potentials, as well as challenges that need to be addressed. The group's handwritten charts were transcribed as:

Unsolicited Street Art [e.g. Black Lives Matter Mural]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Art in public spaces • Advocacy • Pointing to a problem, identifying a social/structural issue • Beauty in the mundane, new way to experience a place • Expression of culture • Tool for communities: cultural expression • Local or [I]ndigenous artists • Relationship building • More things to look at • Brightens the gray	• Formal infrastructure (property owner status quo) • Maintenance • Life-cycle considerations • Access to mural space • Controversy with imagery and unequal consequences • Representation • Community agency in design/implementation • Changes traffic flows/context • “ROW cluttering” –how it integrates with existing infrastructure	• Permanence • Celebrating diversity/neighborhood distinctiveness • Contributing to place attachment • Mental map landmarking • Relationship-building • Local or indigenous artists • Representation • Thought-provoking • Education • Community agency in design/implementation • Creating landmarks, marking time

Ghost Bikes

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
- Form of education/heightens awareness - Memorial - Advocacy for non-carcentric - Making visual/legible history of place - Histories inscribed that would otherwise be lost - Changes the experience of the pedestrians/cyclists/driver (debated)	- Acknowledges the problem - Unregulated right of way impediment–hazardous to others visually, mobility impa[ir]ed folx - Puts responsibility on cyclist/pedestrian - How does removal impact loved ones? - mobility/vision impaired folx bear brunt of hazards	- Indicator of the location for necessary change - Once change is made, how to memorialize the person? - What [do] formalized memorials look like? - Bike lanes - Formal memorials - place /infrastructure name changes

Notes: Pedestrian loss of life not treated with the same advocacy/memorialization

Rave

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
- Tethers community - Catharsis - Musical performance/ expression - Activates underutilized spaces - Night life economy - Low barrier of entry - Place attachment cultivator - Community ownership to place - Builds community-creates connections	- Competes with formalized nightlife - Stresses venue - parking /noise - First aide/hydration - Illicit drug use - Crowd issue/control - Accessibility - Limits to knowledge of the event/exclusivity - Potential lack of safety in location	- Re-invigorate spaces - Broaden access - Fundraising - Position Seattle as a destination for music, fun - Community aide/point people - Place attachment cultivator - Reinvigorate spaces/places - Flexible space usage

Notes: Spree River Arts District (Berlin) was born from Rave Culture

Walking/Biking School Bus

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
- Mobility to School - Reduces commute stress - Community connection - Public health/active kids - Build kid skills + confidence in a safe environment - Move away from car-centric infrastructure–reshape traffic flows	- Infrastructure inadequacy - equity/access to bikes + to chaperones - School closures affects neighborhood access	- Scalable - Formalizing routes through improved infrastructure - Tie into play streets/kid space stuff

4. OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

This research project afforded further understandings of the themes of urban informality and spectrum of regulatory responses that we initially investigated as members of the 2018 Runstad Fellowship team, and experimented with students in our co-taught BE studio. The project workshop brought together multiple stakeholders for creative and critical exploration into the types, roles, and potentials of these urban informality themes in Seattle to support a more inclusive and resilient future. We are grateful to and inspired by all the participants, whose insights, humor, creativity, and meaningful engagement with each other's ideas throughout the workshop provided an ideal milieu for meaningful discourse. The outcomes of this half-day workshop revealed the diversity, nuanced complexity, and interconnectedness of urban informality, both as a conceptual framework and its contemporary manifestations in Seattle, highlighting and its potential to inform the city's urban futures.

In documenting and processing notations from each of the four thematic groups, we observed how many forms and practices of urban informality are already tolerated to varying degrees, while others have been appropriated, celebrated, and in some cases formalized as programs and events by the City. This raises questions for further study around how informal initiatives evolve into more codified means of advancing equity and community resilience.

The workshop groups' interrogation of roles played by urban informality, including forms and practices not tolerated within existing regulatory systems, highlight the vital ways informality serves daily needs for many residents in an increasingly unaffordable city. And such informality also provides opportunities for delight, reflection, and connection within the community and with shared urban surroundings. These roles, ranging from essential needs to community connection, demonstrate the inherent potentials of urban informality as a nimble, creative, and self-adjusting means of countering impactful disruptions within and across the City, including increased inequities as well as climate change.

The manifestations of urban informality in Seattle and other West Coast cities warrant further study and dialogue among diverse stakeholders. Opportunities are needed to more clearly understand where, how, and what is needed for these practices to coexist alongside the formal systems across different scales and community contexts—as well as how certain practices may inform changes in city policy and programming—to support more equitable, inclusive and resilient futures.

4.1 Lessons for Practice

Our research and teaching on urban informality across India, South Africa, and the United States reinforces the conviction that formal design and planning systems must accommodate and engage informality in more deliberate and meaningful ways. From our reconnaissance of West Coast cities, we see that municipalities are increasingly opening up to various forms of informal practice, whether through tolerance, regulation, or integration. We note key observations and distill some lessons relevant for practice as formal systems open up spaces for urban informality through dialogue and experimentation.

Urban Informality as Resistance and Resilience

Generally, informality emerges as a response by individuals and communities that are navigating exclusionary planning regimes. It often functions as forms of both resistance and resilience serving diverse and distressed

populations, reflecting adaptive responses to systemic inequities. As such, urban informality practices that develop in isolated contexts may evolve and expand to other places where people are experiencing similar conditions. Some practices become widely tolerated, and even adopted into city programs and policies, in supporting broader community resilience.

Informal/Formal False Dichotomy

Urban informality unfolds across different multiple spatial and temporal dimensions, appearing along a continuum from isolated/ephemeral to more collective/enduring systems. It may exhibit fluidity and impermanence alongside or even within stability and permanence. While the spatial manifestations of urban informality may appear disordered - they often conceal a complex underlying order. Moreover, the perceived divide between formal and informal is artificial; research shows that these two facets of urbanness are indeed inextricably networked both socially and economically and even spatially to varying degrees, even if the intersectionality is less immediately visible. Scholars have argued that urban informality is just another form of urbanization that should be recognized and treated in planning and policy as such, rather than being marginalized and othered (Roy, 2005 2009). There is a need to recognize urban informality as a legitimate urban process to be included in urban theory and planning practice.

Less for More

Treating urban informality as a problem needing fixing or failing to provide flexible, supportive systems for it to realize its full potential, is an unproductive approach, yet it remains widespread across municipalities. Urban design and planning practice needs engage with informality thoughtfully and responsibly using humility and care, while avoiding both romanticization and demonization. Integrating urban informality into rigid, formalized planning structures can minimize their resilience and adaptability. Expert interventions should be guided by a “less for more” philosophy aimed at minimal interference in the spontaneity, creativity, and generative potential that define informal practices.

Valuing Community Needs and Labor

Urban informality often depends greatly on unpaid labor of distressed communities who invest significant sweat equity through collective labor to secure basic necessities of shelter, sustenance and livelihoods. In that regard, its existence reflects a failure of planning and policy to generate an equitable urban environment. Municipalities should recognize - not rely on - the unpaid labor of these groups as they work to address systematic gaps. They should acknowledge that urban informality is filling critical services and supports gaps that formal planning has been ineffective in bridging. As forms of urban informality become appropriated and/or celebrated in cities, those communities involved in creating and sustaining such forms need to retain agency and reap benefits from their labors. The potential community resilience emerging from urban informality can be strengthened and amplified through such support.

These observations and insights underscore the importance of recognizing, valuing, supporting, and making space for the emergence of urban informality as an intrinsic means of generating a more inclusive, resilient and equitable urban future.

4.2 Next Steps

We look ahead by considering recent global disruptions and their impacts on equity and resilience. In our collaborative studio teaching, we mentored an interdisciplinary cohort of students who then experienced the unprecedented modern upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic. As these students moved out of academia and into

practice, we are curious about how the studio may have equipped them with urban theory and creative practice models that view urban informality from a fundamentally different perspective - as a legitimate form of planning practiced by “non-experts.” We are hopeful that they carry such insights into their professional careers, fostering more inclusive, just design and planning for equity and resilience in uncertain futures.

Through this research project, we initiated a meaningful dialogue with diverse stakeholders engaged in work related to urban informality. We hope to continue expanding potentials identified in the workshop through further exchanges and dialogue among City leadership and the public. This process would envision mainstreamed approaches and practices that enable a meaningful integration of the formal and the informal as complementary and evolving urban processes. The development of this paper also inspires us to continue advancing and sharing findings through our teaching, research, and community engagement.

While this White Paper serves as a means of exploring and reflecting on themes and potentials of urban informality in West Coast cities, and particularly in Seattle through the project workshop, it also serves as a springboard for workshop participants and other readers to imagine and pursue greater roles and potentials for urban informality.

As our stated intentions in the Introduction, we hope that this White Paper will:

1. **expand awareness and appreciation of the roles that urban informality**—in other cities, and what exists and is emerging in Seattle—plays towards community resilience and equity;
2. **spark continued engagement, dialogue, and networking** among community leaders and activists for potential synergies;
3. **foster new conversations** among City and State partners with community leaders and activists in exploring room and roles for informality within the City’s design and planning systems; and
4. **inspire students in built environment fields** to further examine and imagine the potentials of urban informality in advancing equity and social justice in their careers.



Figure 4.1 The Cascade P-Patch Community Garden endures at Thomas St and Minor Ave N amidst the ongoing transformation of the Cascade/South Lake Union neighborhood. image: Manish Chalana

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6. APPENDICES

Appendix A. Workshop Handout and Agenda

URBAN INFORMALITY WORKSHOP

University of Washington | College of Built Environments

Thursday, November 21, 2024

1:00 pm – 5:15 pm (followed by a reception) - 6:15 pm

Alder Hall Commons room 107, enter building from 40th Street near Brooklyn

Julie Johnson + Manish Chalana, UW CBE faculty, project leads

Hannah Hynes, UW MLA student, project research assistant

rich desanto, MLA, Lecturer, Artist & Researcher with Haddad/Drugan

1:00 **thank you for coming!** please fill out a name tag + enjoy some refreshments + meet folks

1:10-1:45 welcome from Interim Dean of CBE Ken Yocom
welcome + introductions by project team/workshop facilitators
introductions by workshop participants

1:45-2:10 overview on workshop framings of urban informality + examples + goals

2:10-2:15 questions? ready to get to work? move into your thematic group!

|

PART 1: URBAN INFORMALITY IN OTHER COMMUNITIES THAT YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED OR OBSERVED

Reflect on urban informality locally, nationally or beyond through your lived experiences or what you've learned. Name and describe each example that comes to mind (eg where this was, what you appreciated about it, how it contributed to inclusivity/resilience or not)--one/sticky note and place anywhere on the sheet. What do we discover among all the ideas shared? In conversations, organize notes + jot down emerging themes and relationships.

2:15-2:25 **table introductions:** how your work + lived experience broadly relates to urban informality or not

2:25-2:55 **OTHER COMMUNITIES:** each person describes a form/example they know of--1 per sticky note. put anywhere on big sheet. what themes do we discover? in conversations, organize notes + jot down emerging themes and relationships Write themes/relationships on the big sheet.

PART 2: URBAN INFORMALITY IN SEATTLE THAT YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED OR OBSERVED

Reflect on urban informality in Seattle through your lived experiences, as well as from readings, work, or research. Name and describe that form/example (eg where this was, what you appreciated about it, how it contributed to FS/H/L/CL as resilience/equity)--one/sticky note and place on the sheet across the spectrum of NT--T--A/C where you see them fitting. Discuss all ideas shared among group--organize notes + write out on themes and relationships that emerge.

2:55-3:30 **SEATTLE:** each person describes a form/example they know of--1 per sticky note. Place your sticky note examples across the spectrum of Not Tolerated--Tolerated--Appropriated/Celebrated where you see them fitting. what themes do we discover? in conversations, organize notes + jot down emerging themes and relationships Write themes/relationships on the big sheet.

3:30-3:45 **COFFEE BREAK + GALLERY WALK!**
Check out other group trace murals
+ add yellow square sticky note ideas to other groups' sheets where you have more ideas!

PART 3: POTENTIALS FOR URBAN INFORMALITY

As pairs/3s, identify an example from the Other Communities sheet or the Seattle sheet that you want to do a deeper dive on. Write your names next to the one you want to discuss on each of these big sheets. Use the 11 x 17 matrix with space for notes to collectively capture the ideas you discover. You don't need to agree on perspectives; the diversity of perspectives is valuable to better understand the complexity of this particular form/example and where/how different approaches may have more potential.

3:45-4:20 pairs/3s discuss/fill out matrix together an example;
2 pairs/3s share out w/each other, build on ideas

4:20-4:40 pairs/3s discuss/fill out matrix together an example;
2 pairs/3s share out w/each other, build on ideas

4:40-5:05 whole group discussion of opportunities + potentials

5:05-5:15 **CALL ALL TO WRAP-UP + THANKS + NEXT STEPS**

5:15-6:15 **SOCIAL/INFORMAL GALLERY WALK W/FOOD + DRINK**

THANK YOU FOR SHARING YOUR INSIGHTS AND BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH US!

We hope the ideas and conversations here today spark continued dialogue among you all and with others, to expand awareness, appreciation, and realized potentials of urban informality supporting more inclusive, equitable and resilient urban life in Seattle.

This workshop is undertaken through a UW College of Built Environments (CBE) Inspire Fund project led by Julie Johnson (Associate Professor, Landscape Architecture) and Manish Chalana (Professor, Urban Design and Planning) with support from Research Assistant Hannah Hynes (Master of Landscape Architecture student) and rich desanto. (Lecturer, Artist & Researcher with Haddad, Prugan). Additional workshop funding is provided by the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design & Planning, and by the CBE Dean's Office.

Appendix B. Workshop Activities Documentation

The following tables list ideas generated during the 3 workshop activities by each workshop thematic group. Handwritten workshop notes and sheets have been transcribed here, with any minor edits made for clarity within brackets [].

For ideas recorded in Activities 1 and 2 on sticky notes, if more than one sticky note had the same or similar idea, these repeated/related ideas are listed in the same cell, separated by a space and a |. The ideas generated in Activity 1, Urban Informality Examples in Other Cities, have been organized under headings of particular characteristics. For Activity 2, Urban Informality Examples in Seattle, sticky note ideas generated and their placement relating to how they fit within the regulatory spectrum of Not Tolerated – Tolerated – Appropriated/Celebrated are listed accordingly, with more general ideas followed by more specific features or sites in each section.

In Activity 3, Potentials for Selected Examples of Urban Informality, group ideas were handwritten on an 11” x 17” sheet with a chart. Each group’s chart notes were transcribed as bullet points within each section.

HOUSING

Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

TYPES
Garden cities urban planning
Social housing around the world
Cohousing
Multigenerational housing
Retirement homes support/shared
DADU & ADU
work/live spaces Retail/housing
Emergency Housing (Quick build, etc.)
Transitional Housing
Tiny House Village (run by the city) Tiny House Village (self-organized community)
Tiny Structure that is part of an encampment
Micro housing
Dwellings w/o kitchens; common kitchens

Mobile trailer park-ish
Caravan villages
urban farming Roof/balcony backyard
Tree houses
Unowned housing (shared)
Unauthorized roommates
squat
DESIGN/FEATURES
Vertical housing towers
Adaptive Reuse Adaptive Reuse - build-out of buildings
Pre Fab spectrum
mobile/modular housing
Shipping container homes
Amazon Home Kits
Mobile housing trailers, cars, vans
Additions tenant improvements
Sustainable vs. fast/easy can we have both?
High performance envelope / passive house / no systems reduce barriers to entry Energy consumption
POLICIES/ PROGRAMS
Building & housing (umbrella drawn over food work life)
Form-based codes
Master builder
Affordable mortgages
Incentives \$\$\$ tax breaks
counter-economics
examples
Hutong, Beijing Compound Living
NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center Portland)

Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

NOT TOLERATED
Unregulated apts (not up to code)
Unhoused encampments Vacant lots parks chaz/chop
Vehicle residency
TOLERATED
Scale driving success?
Under the interstate
Pallet Housing
Campgrounds vs. homeless camping
shelters
“Foot in the door” spaces
Rehab housing
hostels
Single Room Occupancy
Tiny house villages Chief Seattle Club
LIHI LIHI Tiny Houses supported by the City but not by some neighbors
Nickelsville SHARE/WHEEL
WELD housing
ROOTS Youth Shelter
Homestead Program
Catholic Housing Services
Evergreen Community Land Trust Housing
Porchlight Mens Shelter CFH
APPROPRIATED/CELEBRATED
Student housing/dorms
Formal shelters
Habitat for Humanity
Winslow Cohousing Group

Sherwood Cooperative for Students
The BLOCK project
Mary's Place

Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

Example: Prefab Housing

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
Cheaper, efficient, ability to repair	- Building codes + environmental regulations - Monotonous design - ADA requirements - Suitable location	Multigenerational housing

Example: Shared Housing [dorms, SROs Retirement]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
- Higher density - Cheaper to build + rent - Efficiencies with shared utilities	- Privacy limited - Less storage space - Conflict with work/live? - Family stresses-kids & pets	- Self-management - Scales for sharing different features - Flexible units

LIVELIHOODS

Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

HOME BASED
Home-based businesses Home-work -types/range -less exhaustive +co-op (pickle making)
At home child care
House shows
Selling clothes online (Facebook, dePop, Craigslist) other goods/crafts (Etsy)
Pop up breakfast sandwich run by one woman in West Seattle through Instagram. People would select times to meet on a corner in the Delridge neighborhood
GIG WORK

Airbnb events/tours
Carpool Groups Carpooling Informal taxi/tuktuk, jeepney, etc.
Handyman
Day Laborers
Home Repairs
Landscaping
Shade Tree Mechanics
Informal Childcare
Informal youth micro enterprises (window washing, etc.) Squeegee boys (Baltimore)
POP-UP RETAIL
Kiosks A-Frame signs + Advertising (posters)
Shared retail
Selling stuff in the street Pop-up markets (e.g. under bridge in NYC)
Temporal use of sidewalks / street parking Sidewalk, transit stop, etc. vending
Parking stalls for events (e.g. Puyallup Fair)
Ghost Kitchens
Food vending Popup food stands
Sidewalk cafes
Bake sale
Girl Scout cookie sales
Buskers Street artists/busker sales
SHARING
Mutual aid societies during emergency/climate event
Barter economy “buy nothing” “time back”
Free-floating bike/scooter share Bike swap

Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

NOT TOLERATED
graffiti graffiti
Drug dealers
Street walking (sex work)
Unpermitted vending CD hustlers
After hours bars
raves
Outdoor storage for sales large items (e.g. construction equipment)
TOLERATED
Micro retail
Pop-up kiosks Sidewalk sales
Homebased retail & food catering
Late night street vendors hot dogs/taco stands
Outdoor gear swapping/rental
offer up/Craigs List
Uber, Lyft, other Touro (cheaper car rental) pedicab
Using private home EV charging -income for homeowners
parking/storage rentals Driver parking
Sniff Spot rent yards for dogs
Rover/Wag pet sitting
childcare
Art installations
Tutor Music teacher
House shows (bands) So Far Sounds, etc.
Only-Fans
Day laborer (Lowes & Home Depot)
panhandling
roommating
Apt amenity space rentals, pool rentals

APPROPRIATED/CELEBRATED
Maker Space
Online selling goods (Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist, Etsy)
Markets - Farmers, Night, Christmas
Commercial kitchens
Food trucks & other “authorized” vending Sidewalk cafe
nanny
Girl Scout cookies (bake sale)
Yard Sale
buskers/street performers
art

Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

Example: App Based services vs. community & relational

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Micro-economies, growth potential, flexible, independence in how you make a living • Lower barrier entry • Worked well during pandemic, • more options for people with disabilities/seniors	• Raise funds • No benefits/healthcare • Liability–no employment protections • More cars–delivery • Less face-to-face [depends on service]	• ACA for healthcare • Build connections that can continue w/o app

Example: Street Vending

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Breakfast sandwiches/chili during covid • Small scale • Adds vitality to the street	• Food handler permit • Risk making people sick • No benefits/healthcare • Hazard • Gig economy–limited employment protections, no skill development	• Have pop-up locations– affordable for customers • Get spot zoning to allow this • Support sense of “place”–chance encounters and vibrancy • Potential to grow into a brick & mortar store

Example: Carpenters Company of Philadelphia

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Small scale, incremental • Inclusive-women run	• Formal training requirements	• Apply here with Master Builders • Less division of labor • Greater discretion over daily life • Build starter homes, infill • [isn't this Sawhorse Revolution??]

FOOD SECURITY

Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

SELLING FOOD	
Home-based stores selling everything from beans to bike parts - livelihood linkage	
Home based bakeries (linked w/ livelihoods)	
Catering for events	
Street vending . food sales @ flea markets	
Mobile food carts	
-prepared food	
-produce	
Night markets (Taiwan)	
Boston - open kitchen as “library check out” to use to cook	
Prison food systems	
Growing, selling, creating new recipes that use available prison equipment (no ovens, just microwaves)	
MUTUAL AID + GLEANING	
Transportation mutual aid-rides to stores, delivery Drive your neighbor to the store Lived in a food desert. People would drive one another to the grocery store	
Mutual aid in the form of neighbors cooking for vulnerable families or individuals	
WA State Espresso Stand [is this the coffee stand at interstate rest stops?]	
End of the day “Food Rescue”	End of the day “Food Rescue”
Food waste/leftovers from bakeries	From bakeries or discounted food-more formal system
Community Garden @ UA Arboretum donates food/harvests to Food Bank	

Gleaning -Seattle City Fruit -Fishing + hunting + trapping -Restaurant 2 Garden -Food 2 Good 2 Go -Community fridges -Chicago University->end of the day food rescue -homebased stores/bakeries (Guatemala)
Foraging on native fruit trees (Kenya) Foraging native fruit trees everywhere - reliable breakfast, snacks for kids!
Tiny forests (Japan)
Homesteading, Hunting, foraging, gardening
Fishing & hunting Foraging for native plant foods in rural areas fishing/hunting/shellfish
Fishers who sell their catch (livelihood link) or take home to eat
Philadelphia Horticultural Society (non-profit) -supports community gardens when they are just <u>emerging</u> instead of <u>established</u> -connects the 400+ gardens across the state all to each other -no shortage of volunteers
GROWING OWN FOOD
seed saving
Growing food + chickens in front yard and along street in Johannesburg, SA
“Seed bombing” urban spaces (often w/ wild flowers (native) but can sometimes include veggies) -happening in some Seattle spaces as well
Vacant lot gardening w/o any formal approval (Detroit, circa 2010)
Gardens popping up in Vacant Lots Vancouver BC vacant lots: formal community garden Vancouver BC: tax benefit for community garden Planters are on pallets, can be moved around
Growing/cultivating food @ train stations @ Tokyo
Climate Victory Gardens + Ron Finley in LA growing food in street ROW. + in front yards.
TENDING PRACTICES
Circularity with animal/human waste -research in Ghana on value of human waste as fertilizer (can't be studied in US because of restrictive health code) -wool can be used as mulch instead of outsourcing woodchips, etc. -recycled water (non-drinkable grade) has increased nitrogen & phosphorus in Seattle P-Patches which plants love

Pig composting with human waste (Korea, 1960s)
Bangladeshi Floating Gardens -climate change= increased flooding flooding=increased housing/food/livelihood insecurity Solution= layered floating garden with water hyacinth @ bottom (floating native weed), then bamboo layer, then compost/fertilizer layer, then plant starts in seed bales.

Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

NOT TOLERATED
Mobile food vendors
During COVID, some mutual aid w/prepared foods was shut down (South Park)
Planting fruit & nut trees in the street ROW
Black Lives Memorial Garden Cal Anderson Community Garden
Human waste as compost/fertilizer
TOLERATED
At-home kitchens
Informal food selling at Cal Anderson Park
Lady who sells matsutake mushrooms behind the Othello Safeway
Capitol Hill guy in Cal Anderson park who sits on a bench and sells his homemade baguettes
Mutual aid, be careful of prepared foods
Community fridges Little Free Pantries
Community produce stands (mutual aid)
Food rescue-free food. Food for All mutual aid foodforall.org Yesler Terrace Park Saturdays Rescue food waste, get carbon credits, people getting foods are partners
Capitol Hill Freegan (“vegan”) Wednesdays Hot vegan food free! Informal but is tolerated.
Foraging from non-native invasives (Himalayan blackberry) Foraging in Seattle Parks
Squidding (catching squid)
Capitol Hill guerilla gardening in roundabouts of residential streets
Climbing Water P-Patch right next to the formal p-patch is a guerilla garden, which has been there for awhile!

-Between two condo/apartment/townhouses in an alleyway -tolerated, but not “celebrated”. City of Seattle refused to cover costs of H2O
Tofu bi-product for compost (Okara?) high in nitrogen, get informally from tofu factory
APPROPRIATED/CELEBRATED
Farmers’ markets & Farm Stands
Rising Sun Produce (discount produce, “ugly” produce)
Mutual Aid
Meals on Wheels
City Fruit
Seed Libraries KCD free seeds @ p-patch
Fishing at Duwamish Head
Food Forest- Beacon Food Forest for open foraging
Yes Farm
P-Patch Community Gardening -90 gardens across Seattle -400+ gardeners -Municipal supported (City of Seattle)
Restaurant 2 Garden (local composting)
Zoo Doo Compost

Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

Example: P-Patch [City of Seattle, Department of Neighborhoods]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
- Each P-Patch is so unique-practices, culture - Resources to replace raised beds - Refuge for people needing this in city	- Waitlist is 5 years - Food insecure people harvesting gardeners’ foods - SPD complaints	Build relationships with those in need

Example: Black Farmers Collective [Yes Farm]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
Grassroots origins w/formal agreements by WSDOT+SHA	Risks of wildfire	Partnerships with other organizations

• Rainier Beach Food Action Coalition-space where people can wash vegetables. Yes Farm has some produce at RBFAC Farm Stand • Community can come learn about food system + build community • Events • Locals use • “This is sacred space”--how help people appreciate and value.	• Vandalism due to people needing spaces to be--try to balance needs with impacted • ADA access	• Big trees on site are heat oases
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Example: Danny Woo [Interim CDA]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Financial support • People in crisis needing food, sleep, be safe, solitude come here • Elders carry things, manage well--they do what they want • Aesthetics-perceived as beauty, cultural values	• Access to resources • ADA accessibility issues • Wayfinding & lighting challenges with fence heights • Perceived by city as a mess, too smelly. Human compost practice not understood	

Other Discussion notes:

Grants

- Balancing support with capacity
- Help people apply and with scoping project
- Flexibility
- Trust-based grant-making
- Supports that work together
- For grants to groups, what may formal/informal sets of relationships look like if blurred?
- Dissolve red tape. Lower barriers on things such as reporting requirements, reimbursement-based grants gone, have open-ended RFPs instead of prescriptive
- Community leaders brought into city process, city recognizes they have wisdom to share
- At State--review what does state really require

Food Action Plan

Activate land and food forest

Community based organizations access land--community land trusts

Equitable economic development

Call for community driven solutions supported by grants

Collaborative funding models, longer term support than competition across grants. Groups spend so much time on fundraising

Change the paradigm about land management—urban agriculture organizations are managing public space.

Environmental Justice space at State

How support with resources without being too regulatory/overseeing?

How support more partnerships to build greater resilience in the food system

MOU Contract manager

- Need to be invested in the community & their goals
- Longer term land use
- Challenge of land tenure for investment of productive land

Public land less likely to lose access—private land less secure

Restaurant2Garden program—WSDOT wants market rate lease & SEPA review—this isn't affordable for this use/scale

Comp Plan Update

Has new designations + densities for Neighborhood Centers

Also opens opportunities for small businesses in these centers

What lower permitting barriers, e.g., permitting costs, while protecting public health

Confluence of permitting through community organizations—African Community Housing, Housing Delridge Market

Equitable Economic Development—Rainier Beach Initiative

Mutual Aid gathering/listening session. Interested in funding infrastructure support from the City.

CIVIC LIFE

Activity 1. Urban informality examples in other cities

PERFORMANCE
Skateboarding Building skate parks
busking/public performance
Informal: pre-funk in the parking lot Formal: tailgating
breakdancing
Dance church
Punk show in the Taco Bell Parking Lot
FOOD
Ghost Restaurants
Portable food carts
Food trucks in Portland
Sidewalk eating/transforming sidewalks into communal eating spaces
eating /gathering in greenspace
Lemonade stand/carwash/fundraisers

EVENTS
Annual/Seasonal Celebrations/Festival/Ritual/TRADITION
Trolloween Trunk or Treat
Temporary/cyclical activation “Off the grid” Food Truck Night
Walking/biking school bus
Critical Mass
Play in the ROW/Facilitating Play
Rave
Block Party!
T-Horse - T-Pony Mobile Hospitality + Gathering Space Portland, Oregon
Snowday streets as sledding hills Midnight snow walks
“MARK-MAKING” & ART
Artful “repair” Lego pothole patches Mosaic pothole patches Incorporating existing street infrastructure features/flaws into art/mural/sculpture
Mural projection mapping (night activation of visual public art)
Atlanta Beltline Murals (informal) Artist Space (formal)
Ghost Bikes/Roadside Memorials
Fairy Houses
DESTINATIONS “THIS IS THE PLACE”
Wish Tree / Poem Bench
Little Free Puzzle Library
Shared yard as dog play area Belame Public Square of my neighborhood
Bed-Stuy Aquarium in NYC Leaky fire hydrant becomes curated goldfish habitat becomes neighborhood destination / tourist attraction
FACILITATING CREATION
Informal cocreation of spaces Notice what people already do here
Crowdsourcing (restroom codes, hillclimbs, street end parks)
Social Media

Activity 2. Urban informality examples in Seattle

NOT TOLERATED
Drug + prostitution
Cruising
Street racing
Tagging
sticker/stencil bombing
Guerilla street improvements
Skateboarding
Unsanctioned stadium vending
“Open air market” 12&Jackson, 3rd Ave
Rave - dance party
demonstrations/protests chaz/chop protest
TOLERATED
Snow day sledding on hilly streets
Utility pole community postings
Little free libraries
Parking strip gardens
Gardening (food/seeds)
Fruit stands
Busking
House concerts Backyard music venues
Block parties playstreets
Influencer recommendations
Naked bike ride - solstice
I5 colonnade
SEA dragons
Cat rides northwest
Westlake park activating

APPROPRIATED/CELEBRATED
Pop-up concerts (internet)
Murals, comm'd street art
COVID storefront murals
Black Lives Matter mural Capitol Hill
Gum wall
Night market (Columbia City, CID, etc.)
Bergman Luggage basecamp art studios
Coliseum Actualize Air
Ballard Ave streateries, parklets, weekly street closure
42nd Green Street

Activity 3. Potentials for selected examples of urban informality

Example: Unsanctioned Street Art [e.g. Black Lives Matter Mural]

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Art in public spaces • Advocacy • Pointing to a problem, identifying a social/structural issue • Beauty in the mundane, new way to experience a place • Expression of culture • Tool for communities: cultural expression • Local or indigenous artists • Relationship building • More things to look at • Brightens the gray	• Formal infrastructure [property owner status quo] • Maintenance • Life-cycle considerations • Access to mural space • Controversy with imagery and unequal consequences • Representation • Community agency in design/implementation • Changes traffic flows/context • “ROW cluttering” –how it integrates with existing infrastructure	• Permanence • Celebrating diversity/neighborhood distinctiveness • Contributing to place attachment • Mental map landmarking • Relationship-building • Local or indigenous artists • Representation • Thought-provoking • Education • Community agency in design/implementation • Creating landmarks, marking time

Example: Ghost Bikes

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Form of education/heightens awareness • Memorial • Advocacy for non-carcentric • Making visual/legible history of place • Histories inscribed that would otherwise be lost • Changes the experience of the pedestrians/cyclists/driver (debated)	• Acknowledges the problem • Unregulated right of way impediment–hazardous to others visually, mobility imparked folx • Puts responsibility on cyclist/pedestrian • How does removal impact loved ones? • mobility/vision impaired folx bear brunt of hazards	• Indicator of the location for necessary change • Once change is made, how to memorialize the person? • What formalized memorials look like? • Bike lanes • Formal memorials • place /infrastructure name changes

Notes: Pedestrian loss of life not treated with the same advocacy/memorialization

Example: Rave

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Tethers community • Catharsis • Musical performance/expression • Activates underutilized spaces • Night life economy • Low barrier of entry • Place attachment cultivator • Community ownership to place • Builds community-creates connections	• Competes with formalized nightlife • Stresses venue • parking /noise • First aide/hydration • Illicit drug use • Crowd issue/control • Accessibility • Limits to knowledge of the event/exclusivity • Potential lack of safety in location	• Re-invigorate spaces • Broaden access • Fundraising • Position Seattle as a destination for music, fun • Community aide/point people • Place attachment cultivator • Reinvigorate spaces/places • Flexible space usage

Notes: Spree River Arts District (Berlin) was born from Rave Culture

Example: Walking/Biking School Bus

SUPPORTS TODAY	STRESSES TODAY	FUTURE POTENTIALS
• Mobility to school • Reduces commute stress • Community connection • Public health/active kids • Build kid skills + confidence in a safe environment • Move away from car-centric infrastructure–reshape traffic flows	• Infrastructure inadequacy • equity/access to bikes + to chaperones • School closures affects neighborhood access	• Scalable • Formalizing routes through improved infrastructure • Tie into play streets/kid space stuff

