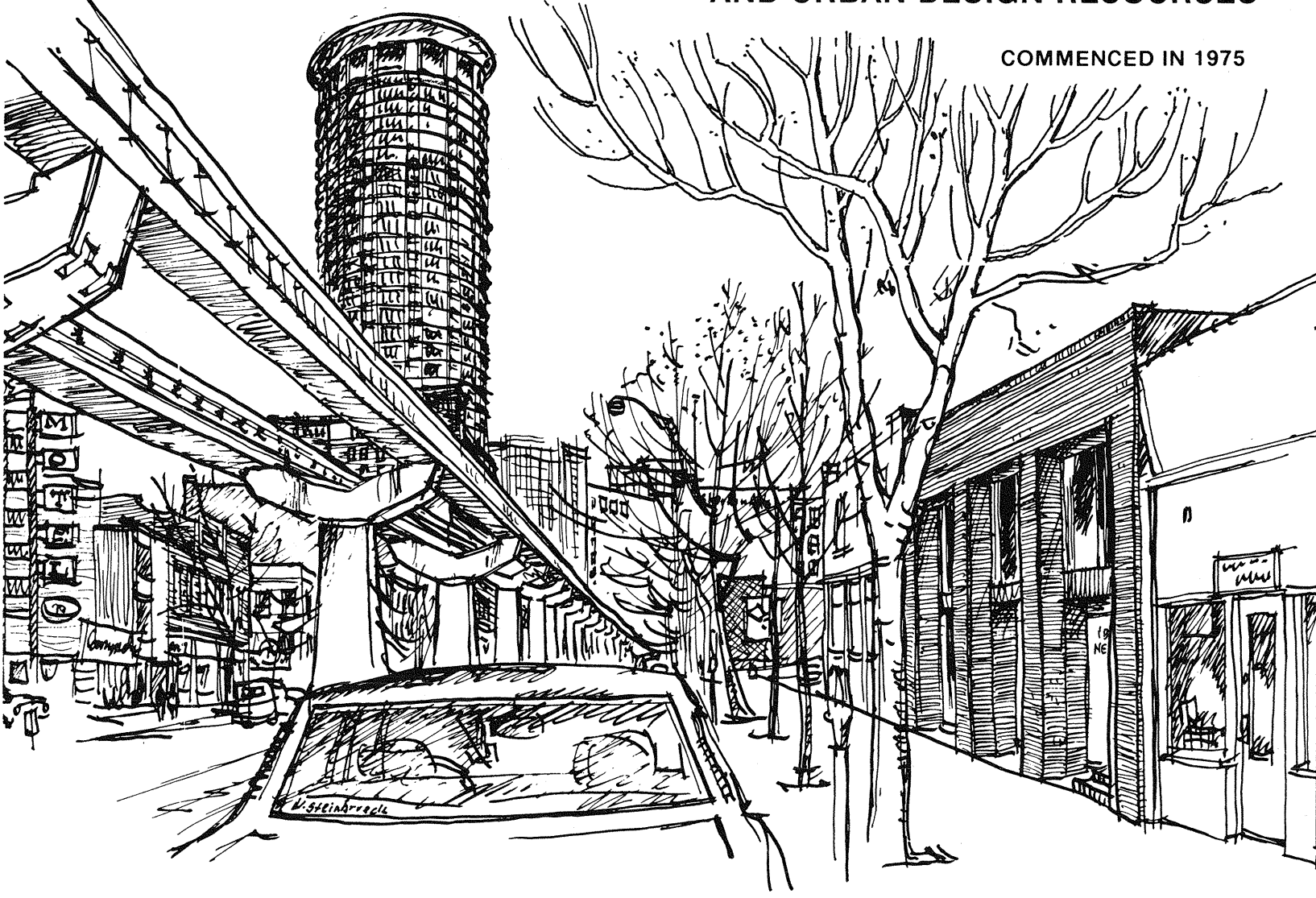


DENNY REGRADE

AN INVENTORY OF BUILDINGS AND URBAN DESIGN RESOURCES

COMMENCED IN 1975



HISTORIC SEATTLE PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

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URBAN DESIGN ELEMENTS

As noted in the General Description, the Denny Regrade is severed by traffic arterials and characterized by disorienting street layouts, and a broad mix of building types and activities. Because of the area's transitional unstructured nature, it has been subject to many urban design proposals attempting to establish visual continuity, spatial orientation, and ultimately a sense of place.

Landmarks such as the Space Needle and large commercial signs are important as visual reference points. In addition, street tree planting, besides providing spatial enclosure and visual relief from the parking lots and anonymous building forms, help to give the avenues individual identity. The Monorail acts as a unique "linear landmark" visually and symbolically linking the Seattle Center to Downtown. Although the vacant lots and parking lots often disrupt the streetscapes' continuity, they sometimes result in unusual views of Downtown and the waterfront. On the other hand, building groups which relate in form and massing add a continuity and stability that is also important.

The waterfront north of Virginia still maintains the character of Seattle's older industrial waterfront. The large wharf buildings, factories and warehouses typify the character of the port before the advent of the large scale and containerized shipping.

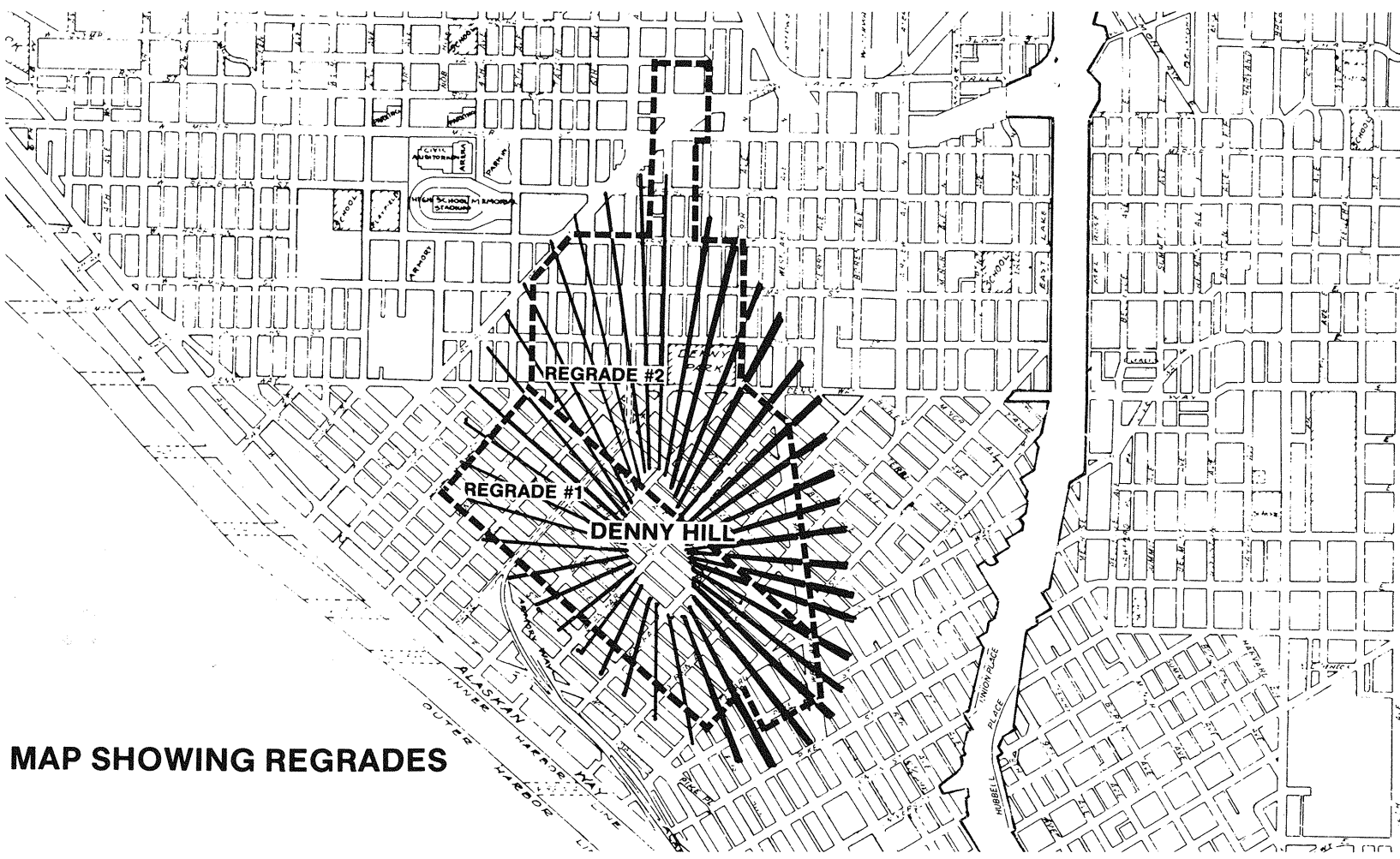
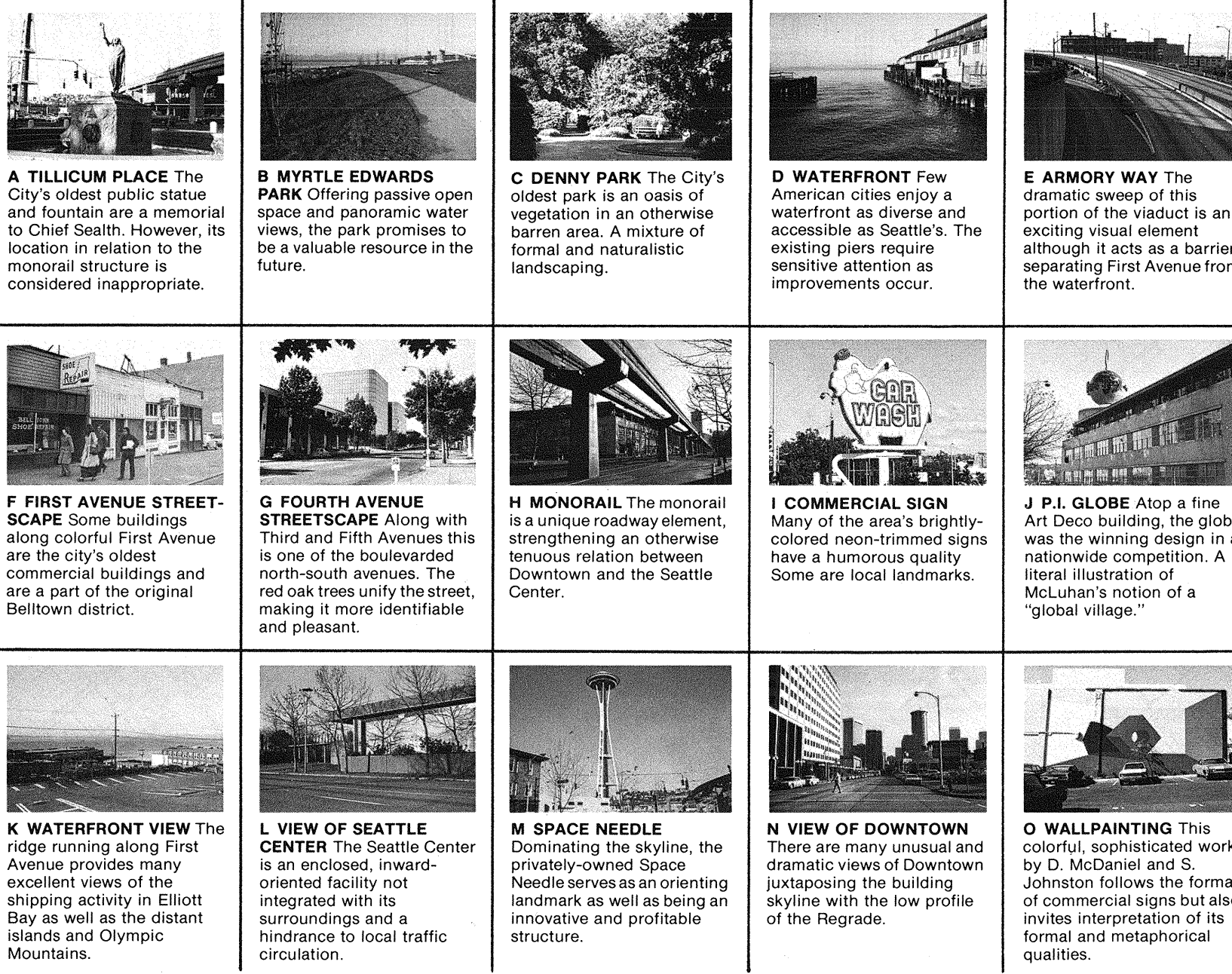
Denny Park provides a heavily-landscaped refuge from the noise and bustle of street traffic. It is Seattle's oldest public park, and named for the pioneer David Thomas Denny. Before the regrade of Denny Hill the Park was 60 feet above its present grade. The star pattern layout was designed by the Seattle Parks Department landscape architect, L. Glenn Hall.

Contrasting with the densely landscaped character of Denny

Park is the new Myrtle Edwards Park along the waterfront north of Pier 70. The park is intended to serve as an urban green belt emphasizing passive recreation and will feature a sculpture by Michael Heizer. The park's design is by Kelly, Pittelko, Fritz and Forsen, engineers, and Jongjan/Gerrard Associates, landscape architects.

Tillicum Place at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Denny Way is a monument to Chief Seattle, chief of the Suquamish tribe and invaluable ally of the early pioneers. The Chinook word "Tillicum" means "Greetings - Welcome". The monument was dedicated in 1912 and was Seattle's first public sculpture and fountain. The site chosen was thought appropriate as it was on the edge of a meadow which had been used by the Native Americans for potlaches and other gatherings. The statue of Chief Seattle was completed in 1908 by sculptor James A. Wehn. Wehn worked from the only known photo of the chief which was taken in 1864. Over the years, the monument has undergone several renovations since its erection. Its present setting is a triangular mini park designed by Jones & Jones, landscape architects.

The Denny Regrade's greatest urban design resource may be the view potential of not only Elliott Bay, but also of Lake Union and Downtown. This inducement for development must, however, be weighed against its present use as a service and support area for Downtown business activities, which has resulted in a relatively low building profile. The present contrast between the strong massing of Downtown and the Regrade may well be lost with the introduction of major new development. Similarly, the dramatic contrast between Queen Anne and the Regrade will be less noticeable as will be the views from Capitol Hill of Elliott Bay.



SUMMARY MAP SHOWING VISUAL STRUCTURE

HISTORY

The recorded history of the area was begun by William M. Bell, one of Seattle's original founders who arrived at Alki in 1851. It was Bell who helped Carson Boren, and Arthur and David Denny take the depth soundings of Elliott Bay which resulted in the choice of Seattle's present site.

Bell's claim which became known as Belltown, was a rectangular strip of land with boundaries running from the waterfront, easterly along the present route of Denny Way to Bellview Avenue, then southerly to Union Street, and then due west back to the waterfront. He built his first home near the present intersection of Western Avenue and Battery Street; however, in 1855 the Indians burned it and drove off his livestock. Soon after, Bell took his invalid wife to California, only to return in 1870 after her death.

Belltown grew as a small community with its own identity due to the steep grades and long distance separating it from the main settlement of Seattle. Before the regrades, Denny Hill limited growth eastward and the only street connecting Belltown to the central town was Front Street (now First Avenue). In the 1880's, a two horse wagon carrying passengers and freight ran to Belltown on a two hour schedule.

In 1870, Bell gave several acres of land to attract the Mattulath Barrel Company, an important enterprise at that time. Another major industry was shipbuilding. Bell also built the Bell Hotel at the corner of Bell Street and Front Street. Sofie Bass presented a nostalgic picture of Belltown life in her book, **When Seattle Was a Village**: "His (Bell's) white house with its square bay window, white picket fence, and garden, was a landmark. It stood at the east side of Front Street between Battery and Bell Streets. The board walk on Front Street, over hill and hollow, was the town's popular promenade and ended at the Bell residence.

Boys had rival gangs, then as now. A group known as the Belltown gang often rowed down to meet the Mill Street (Yesler Way) gang in Seattle. These fights were staged on the sawdust near Yesler's mill and were always broken up by Sheriff Lewis V. Wyckoff who sent the Belltown gang home."

Today, 36 years after the last Denny Hill Regrade was completed, it is difficult to visualize how great a barrier the hill was to Seattle's northward expansion. Denny Hill physically separated Belltown from Seattle and the grades along Second through Ninth Avenues north of Pike Street were so steep that they could not be negotiated by horse drawn vehicles. Even First Avenue was so steep that the children had to push their bicycles up to Belltown. Sofie Bass recounted that: "As a child, I thought that Denny Hill, which rose like a rock of Gibraltar to the north of town, was the highest hill in all the world."

But the boom generated by the Alaskan gold rush increased pressure to expand the business district to the north. Seattle's City Engineer at that time, R. H. Thompson, possessed an extraordinary combination of foresight, energy, political acumen and engineering skill. He was more than a match for the engineering challenges of Seattle's rugged topography as well as the obstacles presented by his political opponents.

Thompson began in 1898 by lowering First Avenue from Pine to Denny Way. This operation involved moving 110,700 cubic yards of earth and a 17 foot maximum cut. In 1902, Second Avenue was leveled, but it was not until 1908 that Thompson assaulted Denny Hill in earnest. This operation, which was completed in 1911, is commonly called the First Denny Regrade. Earth was washed into the sound by hydraulic sluices, an operation which is still considered an engineering feat. Approximately 27 blocks were regraded from Second to Fifth Avenues between Pine and Cedar Streets; the deepest cut being 107 feet at Fourth Avenue and Blanchard Street. Although the business district did not expand rapidly into the regraded area, the remainder of Denny Hill was considered an obstacle to arterial traffic to the north of the central business district and was therefore condemned to the earthmovers. On May 29th, 1929, the Second Denny Hill Regrade commenced. Belt conveyors carried 600 cubic yards of earth per hour along Battery Street to barges which then dumped it into Elliott Bay. Approximately 40 blocks were leveled with a maximum cut of 89 feet. When the final shovelful of earth was removed in 1930, the city awaited a dramatic redevelopment of the area. However, the depression hit that very year and business expansion ceased. When redevelopment finally resumed in the Central Business District, vertical expansion was favored over expansion of prestige retail and office development into the Denny Regrade. As a result, the Regrade contains a collection of auto showrooms, small businesses and manufacturing enterprises, and parking lots supplementary to, rather than integral with downtown. Of course the 1962 World's Fair was the area's single most important redevelopment enterprise; providing a major city-wide recreational facility, while measurably adding to traffic congestion and parking problems.

In 1974, the City's Department of Community Development produced a scheme for the redevelopment of the regrade to house a new in-town residential community along with a wide variety of business and commercial uses. The plan called for the establishment of new land-use zoning techniques, extensive construction of clustered housing units, open spaces and landscaped circulation linkages. Given the extensive city planning efforts, the complex problems, and especially the geographic potentials of the district, it appears that the Denny Regrade may have as dynamic a future as its colorful past.

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GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Although the Denny Regrade has often been characterized as an under-utilized area of parking lots and faceless, low-rise buildings, there is in the district a fine collection of architecturally and historically significant buildings. There is even one section, the old Belltown center on First Avenue, which merits consideration as a historic district. Moreover, the Denny Regrade's stock of architectural landmarks is very diversified including examples ranging from Victorian style houses and nineteenth-century storefronts to eclectic, Art Deco, International Style, and contemporary commercial structures.

Originally the term Denny Regrade referred to just the area which had been leveled by the earth movers. But the name has come to include the relatively flat area south of Queen Anne Hill west of the Freeway to the waterfront and north of the Central Business District.

One of the most noticeable and often annoying characteristics of this area is that the arterials disrupt the continuity of the district, making it difficult to travel from one part to another. Furthermore, the street patterns south of Denny Way are skewed 45 degrees, complicating traffic patterns. In addition, the Seattle Center acts as a barrier to circulation while increasing the traffic and parking load.

The major arterials and topographic features divide the Denny Regrade into several sections, each with its own identifiable characteristics. The area south of Denny Way is characterized by wide avenues and groups of low-rise buildings housing a wide variety of businesses. Third, Fourth, and Fifth Avenues are boulevarded and offer interesting views of Downtown. This section includes old Belltown centered at First Avenue and Bell St. Besides the several nineteenth-century wood frame store fronts and brick commercial buildings there are excellent views of the waterfront. The area from Third to Sixth Avenues was once a center of theater and film-making activities. There are now two prominent television studios in the area and a third is located a few blocks to the north. Other common businesses are printing shops, car dealers, movie theaters, repair shops and taverns. Parking lots also abound; giving an open, spacious feeling.

The area north of Denny Way is physically dominated by the Seattle Center. Not only are the Space Needle, Coliseum, and other World's Fair structures the most prominent skyline elements, but the Seattle Center grounds take up the core of this area, and the Center's activities, traffic, and parking significantly affect neighboring land uses. Aurora Avenue is a

major barrier running north-south, and Mercer Street and Roy Street carry heavy east-west traffic.

Just as in the area south of Denny Way, there is a wide spectrum of land uses. North-east of the Center there is a scattering of single-family residences and apartment blocks. There is a neighborhood shopping area along Queen Anne Avenue between Roy Street and John Street. The Hansens Baking Company, just north of the Center, is a commercial redevelopment of an old bakery and other structures into a complex of restaurants and shops around a central court. Besides being an imaginative adaptive use plan, the development has become an activity center in its own right and complements the functions of the Seattle Center.

The area west of Queen Anne Avenue is a heterogeneous mix of houses, apartments, small commercial structures and large new office buildings. This area has views of the Sound and is less disrupted by arterial traffic.

The Waterfront is the Regrade Area's most visually unified and consistent section. The industrial wharf building and piers of the Sound provide a unique sequential experience along Alaska Way, and the other industrial buildings and rail lines reinforce the area's utilitarian characteristics. There is also the new Myrtle Edwards Park along the waterfront north of Bay Street.

Throughout its short history, the Denny Regrade has been the object of planners' dreams. Extensive redevelopment schemes have come and gone without effectively organizing or restructuring the area. This may be because such plans have in the past tended to overlook the unique role which the Denny Regrade has always played in Seattle's urban pattern. Its low-rise, low-key character has attracted small businesses not wishing to locate in the Central Business District because of higher rents and congestion. It has become a place for new commercial enterprises to start as well as for those activities which serve downtown such as printing, repairing, storage, and parking. It appears that providing space for such small-scale business expansion and service is crucial to the vitality of downtown. Also, there is presently a relatively large number of residential units scattered throughout the area providing housing for a wide range of income groups. The heterogeneous mix of uses is itself a revitalizing characteristic, supporting a variety of lifestyles and commercial activities which can benefit from each other's proximity. Thus, the Regrade plays a unique part in the city's life which further redevelopment efforts must address if they are to be successful.