

The Columbia City Revitalization Story

By Dave Bockmann

Columbia City is a southeast Seattle neighborhood of about 13,000 people. It's a working class neighborhood with household incomes well below the city's average. It's also one of Seattle's most diverse: About one-third of the people are White, one-third Black and one-third Asian.

Named for the song, Columbia, Gem of the Ocean, Columbia City was a thriving mill town before its annexation into Seattle in 1907.



Columbia City Main Street

From that era many two and three story brick buildings still stand, giving the neighborhood a distinctive turn-of-the-century architecture that has been likened to a movie set. Today, the flourishing neighborhood business district, situated in the heart of the Rainier Valley, is considered Seattle's most diverse. It is, Seattle's "Neighborhood of Nations."

However, the business district has not always prospered. In 1995, following two decades of steady economic decline, the permanent death of the neighborhood seemed certain when two popular restaurants, one owned by a national chain, the other by local residents, closed their doors almost simultaneously. With a majority of store fronts boarded up, the business district looked like a ghost town.

During the years of decline, a number of efforts, some by the City and some by non-profit agencies funded by the City, attempted to restore the neighborhood. Those

efforts failed. Then, in 1995, with the assistance of the Department of Neighborhoods, 20 or so area residents and merchants, realizing they couldn't depend on anyone else, began meeting monthly to talk about Columbia City's strengths and weaknesses and what they could do to save the neighborhood.

They invited guest speakers from other neighborhood business districts, including Fremont and Ballard, to share their stories of decline and renewal. They met with economists and other experts and spent countless hours talking about how to attract new businesses to Columbia City as well as how to strengthen existing ones. Through trial, error, and common sense, a renewal strategy for Columbia City emerged.

The Columbia City Renewal Strategy

- **Do it yourself!** Employ a grassroots approach--you can't rely on someone else to do it for you.
- **Focus on assets, not problems!** Use what you've got. People live in the neighborhood because they like it there. On reflection, it's clear that good things about the neighborhood far outweigh the problems.
- **Recognize the talents of people!** The most important assets are neighborhood people. They have all the skills, knowledge and expertise needed. Involve the whole community--merchants, young people, old-timers, new immigrants--everyone.

- **Think big, start small!** Start with small, doable projects and build on a momentum of success before tackling more difficult issues. By all means establish long-range goals, but achieve them with short-range projects, including marketing, physical improvements, public safety issues, parking and traffic, clean-ups, etc.
- **Take the lead!** But, work collaboratively with other ongoing efforts in order to leverage additional benefits from limited public funds; and,
- **Get Started!** Most important, do something visible. Just organizing a day to clean, paint and pick up litter builds a sense that things are changing.

Since 1995, the neighborhood has followed this strategy and the business district is once again thriving. Buildings that stood vacant and neglected have been restored to their turn-of-the-century beauty and are filled with businesses. The sidewalks, once barren, are busy with people and shoppers. Columbia City, once viewed as "unsafe," is now considered one of Seattle's most dynamic and desirable neighborhoods.

The Revitalization Committee and Self-Management

The turnaround of Columbia City is largely attributed to the **Columbia City Revitalization Committee**, the permanent organization that grew out of the monthly meetings held in 1995. There are new faces and new leaders, but the group still meets monthly and still follows the strategy formulated by the

early organizers.

The success of CCRC stems from its policy of "self-management." Every member of the CCRC community has the "right" to suggest a neighborhood improvement project and the "responsibility" to manage it.

The annual "International Pancake Breakfast and Town Meeting" exemplifies the policy of self-management. An all day meeting, the Town Meeting draws between 100 and 200 people. It's at this annual meeting that the organization sets an action agenda for the coming year. The meeting is organized around an "open space" process in which anyone attending may suggest an idea for a neighborhood project they'd like to carry out in the next year. There are only two qualifications: the presenter of the idea must feel passionate about it, and she must take responsibility for leading a discussion about the idea.

Following a hearty breakfast, each person is invited to write their idea down on a large sheet of paper, and then enter the "open space" at the center of the room. After describing their idea to the assembled group, the "idea" is taped to a wall which becomes a "community bulletin board." Within an hour or less, the bulletin board holds dozens of ideas. Once everyone has had a chance to make a presentation, the "market place of ideas" is opened.

Everyone present is invited to enter into the exchange by joining one of the idea discussions taking place around the room. Participants are free to "vote with their feet" at any time by leaving one discussion and joining another. From what seems like pan-

demonium, dozens of good ideas are generally sifted down to five or six doable ones. At no time does the larger group vote on an idea or establish priorities. All ideas are considered equally valid, and it's the responsibility of the person presenting the idea, and those who have joined the group, to carry out the idea within the next year. Here are just a few of the "ideas" that came from a Town Meeting and have come to fruition:

- **A Farmers Market:** Every Wednesday afternoon, June through October over 1,800 people gather in Columbia City to buy fresh farm produce from three-dozen Washington State farmers. After shopping at the Farmers Market, a majority will stay on to shop elsewhere in the business district.
- **Beat Walk:** On the first Friday evening of each month, Columbia City's restaurants, coffee shops, and the new art gallery, host an evening of live music. The hundreds of people who attend pay a single \$5 cover charge to enter all venues. It's a family oriented evening of music, song and dance.
- **Kiosks:** Two handsome kiosks, one on each side of Rainier Avenue provide a convenient place to post notices of lost dogs, neighborhood meetings and events garage sales and whatever. Designed by a neighborhood architect, installed by neighborhood volunteers, the kiosks have become a model for other Seattle neighborhoods.
- **Public Art:** Concerned about empty and unsightly storefronts, murals depicting small businesses were placed on

murals were so lifelike that people stopped their cars to "shop." Intrigued by what they witnessed, neighborhood entrepreneurs purchased the empty storefronts, restored the buildings and leased them to highly successful new businesses.

- **Public Gardens:** An unkempt parking strip, adjacent to the parking lot where the farmers market is held, was turned into a beautiful public garden by neighborhood gardeners.
- **Garden Tour:** The same gardeners organize an annual tour of Columbia City's spectacular private gardens.
- **A Neighborhood Plan:** At the first Town Meeting, a committee formed to develop a plan for the neighborhood. Now adopted by the City of Seattle, the plan will guide the development and revitalization of Columbia City for the next 20 years.
- **Greening of Orca School:** Volunteers turned the asphalt that surrounded the Columbia-Orca school into a pleasant play area for all the neighborhood's children.

The pictures below, show how Columbia City has been transformed through civic action.



In 1995, this building was "boarded-up."



Colorful murals showed the potential



Today, it's a popular restaurant