

Ballard Food Bank: Planting Seeds of Change

Ballard Food Bank, who has been addressing food insecurity within the community since the late 1970s, was expanding its services through partnerships with a variety of other organizations. As a result, the design team and the Food Bank set out to build a new permanent home for their growing operations that would address the increased needs of vulnerable members of the community. The new location would support the non-profit's mission of providing food and hope for its neighbors through a grocery-style shopping area, a warehouse, a no-cost café, and host a Community Resource Hub, where partner organizations offer a range of services such as medical care, and housing connections under one roof.

In support of the Food Bank's core values and beliefs, the design was focused around two principles: 1. To create a welcoming, inclusive, humane, and dignified place for all and 2. Maximize the Food Bank's ability to be able to serve as many of those in need as possible.

Creating a Green Oasis

Set in an industrial neighborhood undergoing rapid transformation, the food bank sits astride a corner of a dusty arterial. Working within a tight budget, the landscape approach was to create an oasis of green, starting its communal welcome at curbside with south-facing lush plantings, blending plant material that is durable to the rugged conditions, with native and pollinator-supporting plantings, a civic seed planted in this changing place.

The planting design is an interweaving of three themes: Habitat, Harvest and Memory. Habitat and Harvest support each other by providing food sources and shelter for pollinating insects near plant material intended to be harvested. These include native and adaptive plants that are drought tolerant.

As a place supported by and for the community, this is a neighborhood hub that runs on the spirit and energy of its volunteers. Memory offers an opportunity for the volunteers that help this place thrive to share in its civic presence. During the course of the design, the food bank leadership was looking to find a way to acknowledge long-time volunteers who had recently passed. The design team worked leadership's initial idea of adding a memorial rose garden to the site into a series of shrub roses into the right-of-way plant palette. The sturdy, long-blooming and low-maintenance flowering shrubs sharing the same vitality and spirit back to the neighborhood as the departed volunteers.

The east frontage places a public welcome on the quieter, not-too-public street, addressing the ongoing stigma of being a food bank client. In the right-of-way, where the mission is supported both by growing decorative (and harvestable) herbs as well as plantings that support pollinators that many of the edible plants need to thrive. The herbs were placed in raised planters to avoid growing into the subgrade, (which had contaminated soils), with the added benefit of helping the plants hold up against urban traffic.

Volunteer-Powered Agriculture

P-patches to be managed by volunteers to grow food that would be added to the food bank store were placed in raised planters, putting the planting at an ADA-accessible height and removing the root zone from contact with the contaminated subgrade. The p-patches arable area was extended further by its close proximity to the 8' perimeter fence that volunteers used to train twining vegetables.

A Purpose-full Landscape Approach

The north frontage is a Swiss-army-knife of space, needing to serve multiple functions: pedestrian access, vehicular circulation, stormwater mitigation of both parking and roof areas, maximizing p-patches for volunteer food production, garbage/recycling/compost waste storage, and provide areas for unpacking large volumes of food items arriving by palette. With this heavy use, a need for an approach to providing simple, durable and literally purpose-full landscape approach.

A Final Note

This is the kind of project that was memorable beyond its size or budget for asking the team to dream big and care! May our profession aspire to nourish the world in the way this project feeds its community - with warmth and kindness.