

THE CROSSROADS OF SEATTLE'S DISAPPEARING 'BLACKSCAPE': MADISON STREET AT 23rd AVENUE

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Figure 1. New paving of old streets on 24th Ave East, several blocks north of Madison St.

(Photo by author)

ABSTRACT:

As one of the two geographic origins of Seattle's Central District, the intersection of 23rd Ave and Madison St is a rich African-American cultural landscape. While recently much work has been done to document the contributions of important Black individuals and the historic narratives of the greater community, these efforts have not been popularly applied in spatial practice. The rapid transformation near Madison St and 23rd Ave has removed, modified, or muted many of the identifiably 'Black' physical elements in the landscape, exacerbating several problems associated with gentrification. This paper attempts to document the physical landscape in and around this important intersection with a focus on African-American identify, and provides specific recommendations for design intervention and preservation technique.

At the intersection of Madison St and 23rd Ave, the residue of time and the fragmentation of space are palpable. The awkward result of Madison's forty-five degree angle slicing through an orthogonal grid, it is an untamed collection of vernacular buildings and leftover pie-shaped parcels, of patched asphalt and cobblestone streets, uneven sidewalks and worn down pedestrian crossings. A block or two walk in any direction, however, and one gets the sense that this won't remain for long: freshly constructed townhomes, mint-new condominium complexes of steel and glass (complete with Starbucks), and the vibrant white glare of "For Sale" signs all sharply contrast from the older commercial buildings and more modest apartments and one-story homes. Even to the casual observer, this is obviously an area in transition. What is less obvious, however – especially to the new wave of homeowners, is that this is perhaps the most historically rich and rooted African-American landscape in Seattle, if not the state, and that it is quickly disappearing.

This is not to say that the area isn't accustomed to contrast and change; in many respects, these are its defining characteristics. Perched slightly below the southeastern crest of Capitol Hill, the urbanism of the Capitol Hill and Central District neighborhoods is undeniably close, yet the leafy naturalness of the hillside, the dark blue waters of Lake Washington below, and the expanse of sky and dirty cream-colored, Cascade-peaked horizon all exert an equal presence. The character of the residential neighborhoods – facilitated by sharp spikes in construction during the "streetcar period" of the 1900's-1920's and the employment boom of WWII – is a hodge-podge of larger Craftsmen and Victorian-era houses, one-story cottages, brick and masonry low-rises, bungalow courts and the occasional modernist home. As the unofficial (and at times official) boundary for redlining practices during most of the 20th century, Madison St has long been the shifting forefront of racial tensions as well. Indeed, the "fringe" quality of the setting has always existed and evolved, and this has had as much to do with the area's charm as with its troubles.

For a myriad of reasons, though, the present-day explosion of development and speculation is particularly troubling from a preservation standpoint. For one, the sheer magnitude of potential

investment is staggering: a 2004 estimate of projects underway or in the permitting process in the 'Central Area' was over half a billion dollars (with 55 projects worth over \$1 million), the bulk of these focused along the Madison St. and 23rd Ave corridors [Meyer]. New construction technologies have allowed developers to overcome many of the obstacles associated with the steep slopes that previously hindered build-out in many parts of the neighborhood. Furthermore, the current market trend for larger, 3,000-4,000 square foot single-family homes – particularly in an area with such dramatic views – has meant the razing of many humble one-story bungalows as land values have risen. Of the greatest concern is the simple fact that for the first time in its modern history, African-Americans are leaving the neighborhood en masse. "Our whole definition of 'community,' is having to undergo change," says Dr. Quintard Taylor, Professor of American History at the University of Washington and author of *Forging A Black Community: A History of Seattle's Central District, 1870 Through the Civil Rights Era*. "We know that the old order is swept away. We just don't know what's going to replace it at this point [Meyer]."

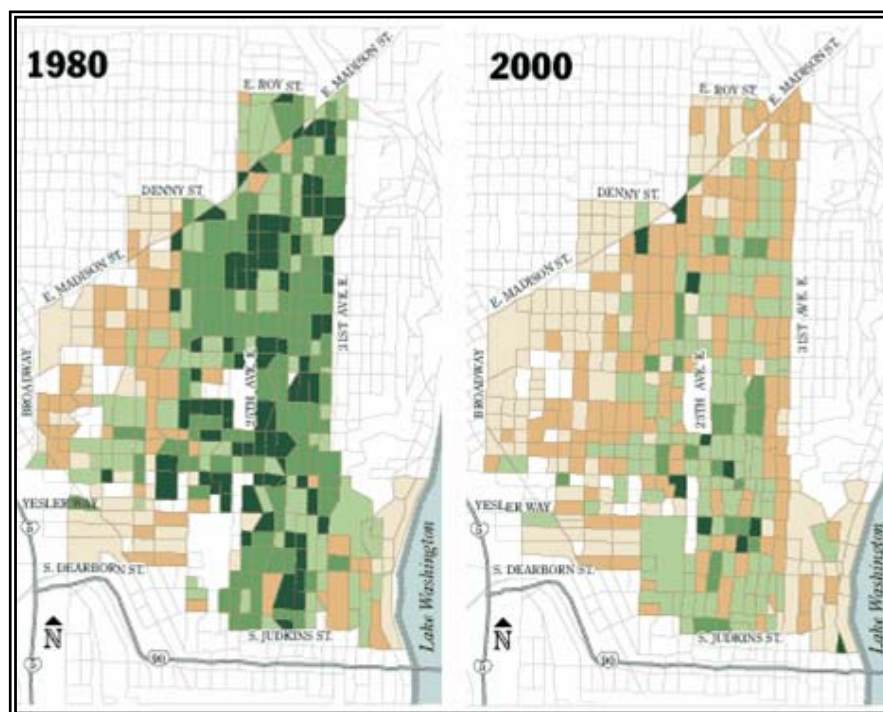


Figure 2.

This map shows the difference in concentration of Afro-Americans living in the Central District over a 20-year period. Higher concentrations are in dark green. Notice that one of strongest remaining black concentrations is at 23rd Ave and Madison St.

(Courtesy of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and Dr. Quintard Taylor)

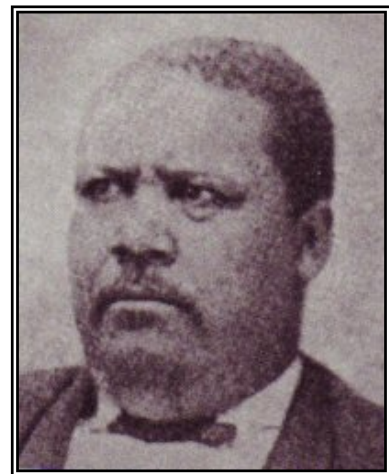
WILLIAM GROSE AND THE FORMATION OF A BLACK COMMUNITY

Settling in the area around 1860 (several years before fellow pioneer and east Seattle developer John J. McGilvra), William Grose was the second African-American in Seattle and the head of its first African-American family. In 1876 he opened up a restaurant on the waterfront called “Our House.” A well-traveled, large and affable man, Grose’s establishment quickly became successful, and by 1883 his holdings grew to include a small hotel downtown as well as a 12-acre ranch in Madison Valley (purchased from Henry Yesler). Located approximately between 21st and 23rd Avenues along Madison St,¹ William farmed and lived at the ranch from 1882 until his death in 1898. His house at 1733 24th Ave, a popular gathering spot for the African-American community at the time, still stands today.

Together with his son George (reputedly the first African-American to graduate from the University of Washington), William developed and sold parts of his ranch to incoming black families, “thus helping to establish the first, stable, non-transient Black community in Seattle [Greenblat].” By 1900, this community would be home to a majority of the 406 African-Americans living in Seattle. To the south, eventually a smaller Black enclave took root around 12th Ave and Jackson St, and with historic Jewish and Scandinavian populations beginning to move elsewhere, these two communities merged to form what is now known as the Central District.

Figure 3. William Grose (1835-1898)

(Courtesy of Special Collections Library,
University of Washington)



A natural leader, William Grose also helped fund one of the first African-American newspapers on the West Coast (the ‘Elevator’) and was an important link in the Underground Railroad – using his connections to open up emigration routes for blacks traveling to British Columbia. A few years

¹ There is slight confusion as to the exact boundaries of Grose’s ranch due to the renaming of early streets and the lack of numbered addresses at the time.

before his death, the worth of his holdings was estimated at one quarter of a million dollars – a vast sum for any man of his day, black or white. He was undeniably one of Seattle’s most successful pioneers, and as the founding father of the Central District, also one of the most influential.

BLACK IDENTITY AND SPATIAL PRACTICE

Thanks to a contemporary explosion of well-researched and wide-ranging efforts at documenting Seattle’s black history, Grose’s indelible influence on Seattle has begun to pervade the mainstream historical narrative.² Despite a small park that bears his name at 30th Ave and Denny Way, however, his “official” legacy is largely untold in the physical landscape. Unlike John McGilvra, whose original road layout of Madison St. still exists and whose vision for the Madison Park area remains intact (albeit with significant alteration), Grose’s imprint is less recognizable and permanent. Therefore, a major gap exists in the impact of this historical figure (and by extension, the larger African-American community) between what is on paper and what is legible on the ground.

An ever-growing body of literature has been concerned with the ‘spatiality’ of collective memories and public space [Soja, Hayden, Liggett and Perry]. These works acknowledge the importance of shared spaces and multiple publics to socially and culturally marginalized groups, and reject binary analyses (black/white, either/or, real/imagined) in favor of more inclusive concepts such as simultaneous, in-between, and ‘third’ spaces [Rios]. In essence, it is the theory that something is best understood if it is physically represented and experienced, although this representation must be interpretable fluidly to allow for different experiences by multiple users and to maintain relevance over time. In planning, preservation and design practices, the goal is often the ‘production of space’ that meets broader political, ideological, and environmental objectives (‘above the streets’) and also promotes a community’s social, cultural, and economic well-being (‘in the streets’) [Perry].

² A partial list of notable works includes Quintard Taylor’s *The Forging of A Black Community*, Esther Hall Mumford’s *Calabash and Seattle’s Black Victorians*, the University of Washington’s *Civil Rights and Labor History Project*, the partnership of the Black Heritage Society of Washington State with the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI), and Cecilia Goodnow’s ongoing body of work at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Physical representations of African-American experience and identity are particularly important during periods of gentrification and upheaval. Consider the following passage about a black man's return to a cabaret in 1920's Harlem:

I remembered one place especially where my own crowd used to hold forth; and, hoping to find some old-timers there still, I sought it out one midnight. The old, familiar plunkety-plunk welcomed me from below as I entered. I descended the same old narrow stairs, came into the same smoke-lain, mirror-smooth tables. I drew a deep breath and looked about, seeking familiar faces. "What a lot of 'fays!" I thought, as I noticed the number of white guests. Presently I grew puzzled and began to stare, then I gaped—and gasped. I found myself wondering if this was the right place—if, indeed, this was Harlem at all...I suddenly became aware that, except for the waiters and members of the orchestra, I was the only Negro in the place... Such a discovery renders a moment's recollection irresistible.

Rudolf Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," p. 61

Here the author subtly acknowledges that without the recognizable elements – the narrow stairs, the sounds, the same tables – his feeling of disorientation would be more abrupt and his attachment to this place more tenuous. Absent the familiarity of his physical and sensory experience, it would be difficult to fully incur a sense of loss and to gather enough sentiment for "a moment's recollection." No longer an insider at the cabaret, he nonetheless was able to lay claim to its authenticity and memory as a *place* – and ultimately (one hopes) extract some meaning.

The re-appropriation of space during gentrification is often contested, and it is valuable to examine if and how resistance to new ownership dynamics manifests in the public realm. Urban planners, social geographers, and fashion designers widely agree that to 'see and be seen' and to express one's individual self are the primary activities taking place in shared, public spaces. If the demand exists locally to (re)assert influence over place and to express frustration at unwelcome change, forms of protest or intervention are likely to become visible within the public landscape. At a time of "unyielding threats to the meaningful local and its associated values," it is common to see acts of "conscious community empowerment, re-established grassroots confidence, and conservation of vernacular authenticity [Kang 153]."

Figure 4. Graffiti on public stairs at Madison and Thomas Streets near 25th Ave. The phrase “BLUES CLUBS” is repeated at several other noticeable locations as well. (Photo by author)



While certainly not on par with the organized marches and more visceral demonstrations of the Civil Rights era, one artist's expression of protest indicates that a race-based contestation of local space exists. A repetitious 'tagging' of the words "BLUES" and "CLUBS" along the handrails of public stairs at 25th Ave and on several blank facades along Madison St., this example of graffiti, 'activism', or guerilla art represents a carefully chosen and value-loaded reference to a distinctly Black form. Writing about the early period of secular black song and blues music, African-American author and history professor Lawrence W. Levine asserts:

There has been an unfortunate if understandable tendency in our political age to conceive of protest in almost exclusively political and institutional terms...To state that black song constituted a form of black protest and resistance does not mean that it necessarily led to or even called for any tangible and specific actions, but rather that it served as a mechanism by which Negroes could be relatively candid in a society that rarely accorded them that privilege, could communicate this candor to others...[and] could assert their own individuality, aspirations, and sense of being...[Black songs] generally are not vehicles for the telling of explicit, chronological, developed stories. They more often embody personal comment and reaction and put their message across through innuendo, repetition, hints, and allusion.

p. 239-240

The evocation of the memory and image of blues clubs is a sort of code. If not an outright attempt to alienate non-Black observers and brand them as 'outsiders', it is at least an assertion of Black identity and manifestation of protest strategically placed within the physical environment.



Figure 5. Protest poster plastered to street furniture at 23rd Ave and Madison St. While the artist's rendering of police brutality is tangential to the issue of gentrification and race, her depiction of a diverse audience and direct challenge to a perceived 'White Establishment' reinforces the acceptance of marginalized cultures and the notion of multiple publics. (Photo by Author)

Unsanctioned acts of artistic expression, of course, are only one (limited) form of reaction to the threats of gentrification perceived by members of African-American communities. Many older, middle- and upper-class Black residents and business owners are ‘taking stands’ simply by remaining strong and continuing live and work in the neighborhood. Numerous members of the historically African-American churches in the area may have moved away, but their return trips every Sunday might now have additional meaning than just social bonding and a commitment to religious faith. Ultimately, all acts of protest and reactions in the face of upheaval are complex, personal matters. In the scope of this paper, however, it is the visible and physical result of these motivations that are being investigated for potential clues to design intervention and planning.

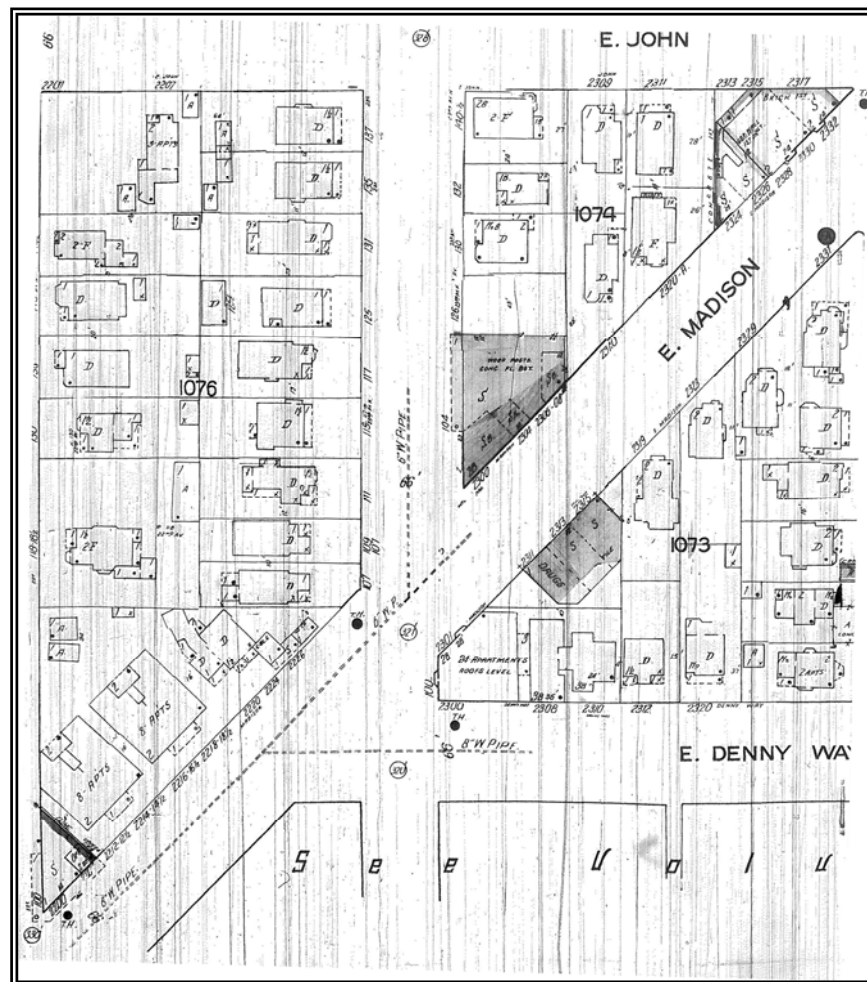


Figure 6. Sanborn map of the intersection of E. Madison, E. Denny Way, and 23rd Ave N (now 23rd Ave. E), Seattle, WA. 1905. The identification of this area as a cultural intersection and ‘in-between’ space is highlighted by its representation on the map, as both historic Sanborn and Kroll maps divide their volumes at this intersection. (Courtesy of Sanborn Map Co.)

SITE ANALYSIS: 23rd AVE AT MADISON ST

Starting at the northwest corner of the intersection and working its way uphill sits a partially fenced empty lot, its ground a chunky collection of clod grass, cement, garbage and rutted mud. The first few steps of a foundation still cling to several spots along the sidewalk's edge. From 1918 until 1985, the site was home to 'Johnson's Coal and Fuel Company,' and at the time of owner Ed Johnson's death it was believed to be the longest operating black-owned business in the state. Currently owned by the Madison Temple church across the street, there was an attempt at a mixed-use redevelopment in the beginning of the decade that has since stalled. Adjacent to the north of this lot is the Elizabeth James House, an elderly housing complex separated from 23rd Ave at Madison by a 5-10 ft. retaining wall. Built in 1968, the building razed a number of Victorian cottages from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that were owned by widows, several of whom may have been black.³ Behind both lots begins a residential neighborhood marked by several towering elm trees and a large Queen Anne house dating from at least 1900.

The northeast corner of the intersection at Madison and 23rd is an older 3-story masonry building whose early 1920's origin is only faintly detectable after a 1960's remodel and a bright sea foam paint job. A two-story extension along Madison houses a tattoo and a real estate business, while the main building holds 14 subsidized apartment units and ground-floor office space that is (in the mind of the author, anyway) currently filled with junk. Set back but adjacent to the tattoo shop stand a pair of old gabled and front-porched wooden houses, one of which is severely burned out and boarded up with prominent graffiti. A more substantial two-story brick building is further down the hill (a streetcar period commercial structure circa WW1), which houses a bohemian-style coffee shop and a sit-down 'Philadelphia Cheese Steak' joint.⁴

A vacant, pie-shaped expanse of sidewalk and trampled grass juts quietly out from the southeast corner of the intersection. The openness of the lot provides views to the row of vintage houses back

³ An analysis of King County's tax information and the Polk City Directory show that in the 1920's, these houses were owned by 3 women, at least two of whom were widows. While their names, former husbands' occupations, and presence of extended family nearby provide a suggestion, further research would need to confirm their race.

⁴ Of the legitimate variety, and I can say that because I lived off South Street for several years. They even know to offer Cheese Whiz.

along Denny Way whose variety of gables step rhythmically down the hill. The eastern portion of the vacant lot used to house the Ship Scaler's Local 541 building, a primarily African-American dry-dock and boatworker union that was highly active during WWII. A few years ago, however, the building was demolished to make way for a mixed-use development that has since stalled. Directly east of the lot sits 2319 Madison St, a turn-of-the-century cottage house (now an upscale restaurant) that was once home to James A. Roston, an African-American labor negotiator. Attracting hundreds of Blacks to work on the waterfront during the International Longshoremen Association (IWA) strike of 1916, Roston was a prominent figure in the sometimes rocky and always complex relationship between Labor and the African-American community in the mid-20th century.

Slightly above and set back quite a ways from the southwest corner of the intersection is the Madison Temple Church of God in Christ. A white and brown chapel only slightly modified from its original design in 1890,⁵ its only ornamental features are a circular stained-glass window, a small cross atop the tower, and a hand-lettered message sign on the corner. Looming in the background of the church stands the 6-story, 300-unit condominium complex 'Summit at Madison Park,' a 2004 mixed-use development with a Safeway and Starbuck's on the ground floor. Sandwiched in between the church and the condos is an automobile service station, the owner of which (Dorsey Chester) also owns an empty corner parcel across the street at 22nd Ave.

As noted throughout the document, this intersection is a rich African-American landscape, and despite the many recent changes that have taken place, a short distance in any one direction provides a number of Black-owned businesses and culturally significant sites. Northward several blocks at Harrison and 24th is a pocket park dedicated to Prentis I. Frazier, an African-American businessman who helped start the Black-oriented paper *Seattle Enterprise*, owned a movie theater at 21st and Madison, and who was a major contributor to the Republican Party (Teddy Roosevelt's party, remember) and the Jones St A.M.E. church [Henry]. At 22nd and Thomas, a small Pentecostal church

⁵ Greenblat, 1997. There is some discrepancy here, however, as King County assessor records date the structure to 1900.

with a stunning view of the Cascade Range is a reminder that the Black community spread northwards of Madison despite decades of segregation.

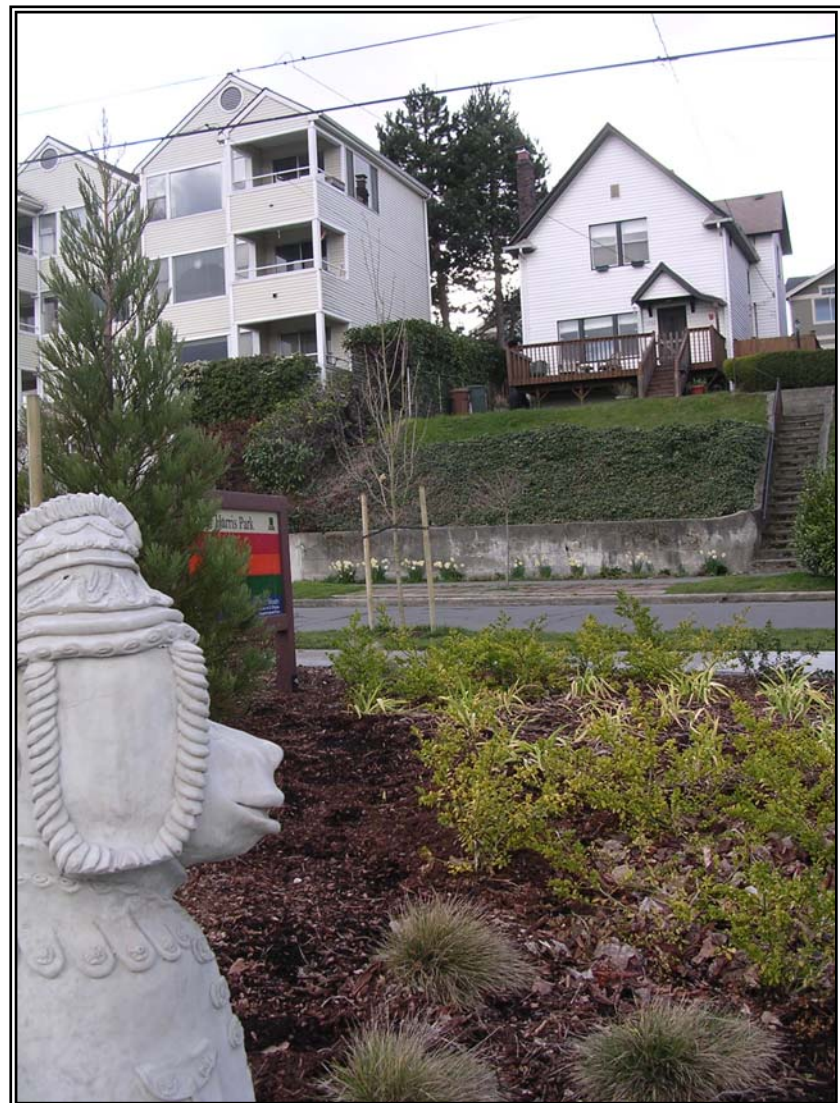
Eastward several blocks along Madison at 27th Ave is the former site of the home of Seaborn (also known as Seabron) Collins, one of the earliest African-American settlers in the area, a prominent figure in the development of the A.M.E. church, and the first elected public official in King County [Greenblat]. His house no longer stands amidst the upscale, trendy establishments of today, although several Black businesses do remain, including a woman-owned beauty salon and hat shop. To the west, up the hill from the intersection is the Mount Zion Baptist Church, a treasure trove of African-American significance located at 19th and Madison. At 2041 Madison Ave is a building designed by the first successful African-American architect in Washington, Benjamin McAdoo, who was also a local political figure and former president of the local NAACP. At 22nd Ave are several black woman run businesses, including a soul food restaurant and a beauty salon owned by De Charlene Williams, founder of the Central Area Chamber of Commerce and historian of Seattle's Black community.

South on 23rd Ave one-block from Madison St. is the Ebenezer A.M.E. Zion Church, a wooden frame chapel from the turn of the 19th century and historically African-American congregation, and adjacent is a 6,000 square foot local YMCA branch built in 1991. Behind the church towards 24th Ave is the historic home of William Grose, and opposite the street sits one of the City's newest open spaces, Homer Harris Park. Homer Harris, a retired and well-respected physician, is considered one of the finest student-athletes to come from Seattle, and his efforts on the Iowa University football (he was the first black captain in the history of the Big Ten conference) got him inducted into the University of Iowa Hall of Fame. The park is a large open space punctuated by small clay statues depicting a bulldog – the mascot of Harris' alma mater Garfield High School – and has wide views of Madison Valley and the North Cascades.



Figure 7. Opening dedication of Homer Harris Park in 2005. Homer Harris at podium with Mayor Nickels looking on (right). (Photo courtesy of the Seattle Parks and recreation Department)

Figure 8. The former home of William Grose (right, on hill) and its proximity to Homer Harris Park (foreground) make this a critical location for design intervention and interpretation. The Grose house should be purchased and developed into a multi-purpose interpretive center, perhaps in the form of a house museum and community space. Its location and connection to the YMCA and to Ebenezer A.M.E. Zion Church could also provide an activation and education opportunity such as a child care or after-school facility. (Photo by author)



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT & DESIGN OF AN INTERPRETIVE LANDSCAPE

“We prefer a world that can be modified progressively, against a background of valued remains, a world in which one can leave a personal mark alongside the marks of history... (and where) a portion of the past has been saved as being good, and this promises that the future will so save the present.”

Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?*

- pp 39-40

“Any part of a town –large or small –which is to be identified by its inhabitants as a precinct of some kind, will be reinforced, helped in its distinctions, marked, and made more vivid, if the paths which enter it are marked by gateways where they cross the boundary.”

Christopher Alexander, et. al, *A Pattern Language*

- p. 277

The Grose House and Homer Harris Park

Home to one of Seattle’s greatest pioneers and symbolic father of its Black community, the most fruitful action to preserve and physically represent African-American identity is to purchase and preserve/reuse the former Grose home at 1733 24th Ave. The survival of William Grose’s former residence and its proximity to the new Homer Harris Park is an act of great serendipity that must not be ignored. Integrating the design and functions of these two spaces would create a prominent and undeniable landmark of Black history – both living and interpreted. The adjacency of the YMCA and A.M.E. Zion church provide further opportunities to program child-care or after-school programs and develop a community meeting space, all of which would increase the visibility and educational value of preservation efforts.

Southeast corner of 23rd Ave and Madison St

The vacant lot at the southeastern corner is dripping with meaningful urban design and historic interpretation opportunities. As the intersection of two major arterial and transit routes (and active pedestrian routes as well), the area has great visibility and a large potential audience. As a central gateway with key visual connections in all four directions to an abundance of historical Black elements, here is the spot to collect and display interpretive elements and to provide reference material (in the form of a map, list, or perhaps a diagram) for those traveling on bus, foot, and other modes. The small pie-shaped lot – one of many quasi-public open spaces along Madison – provides

a near ideal stage for the physical expression of a rich African-American tradition. Specifically, the site contains an immediate connection to the history of African-American labor struggles, as well as valuable context to discuss the history of many important Black businesses.

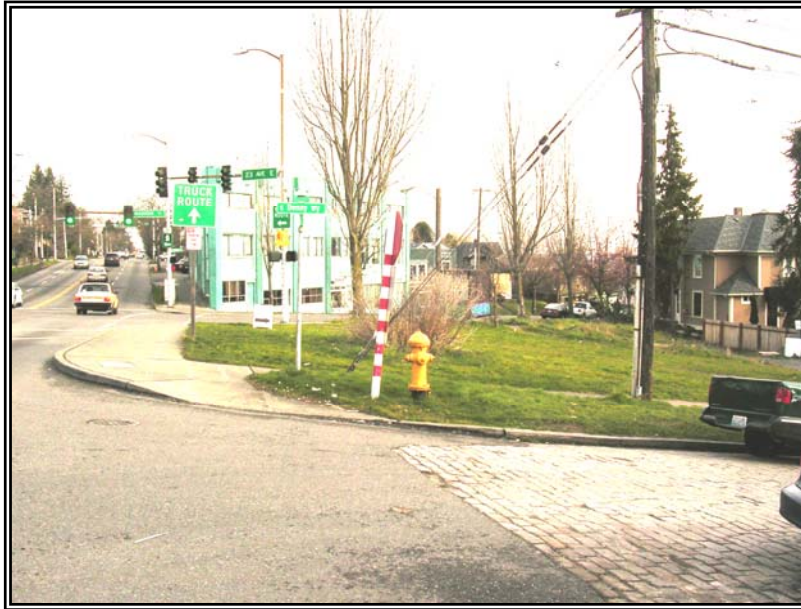


Figure 9. Open lot at southeast corner of intersection. The former site of an African-American union hall, and the former Roston House (now a restaurant called “Crush”) visible in the background at right, this site could be the symbolic and literal gateway to interpretation of the historic Black community. Cobblestone streets and reuse of local material would maintain and strengthen continuity and connection with the past. (Photo by author)

The open space at this corner is composed of two separate parcels, both of which are owned by a local developer who used to live in the neighborhood at Mercer St. and 24th Ave. Keeping in mind the potential importance of this intersection as a transit connection (future development of higher capacity transit service along both corridors is not out of the question and has been talked about in several planning circles), and with the goal of preserving key sightlines to and from the neighborhood, the City should work with the developer to reapportion the parcels to allow for development along Madison St. and the purchase/development of a transit shelter and interpretive center. The center should take the form of a literal and figurative gateway, while an interactive element – such as P-patch or workstation – should be included as part of a Labor-based historical element. Perhaps the shelter or building could be constructed by community members utilizing salvaged materials from several of the local houses and buildings that are going to be demolished.



Figure 10. Deano's Grocery and Café & Lounge, 22nd and Madison. By all accounts an area frequented by drug users and transient activity, "Deano's" is also an important social landmark for many impoverished and homeless residents – many of whom are black. The building, an historic brick structure from the streetcar period, along with several older houses adjacent to it, are slated for demolition in 2006 to make way for mixed-use development. Not an on-site adaptive reuse opportunity, the "Deano's" building is nonetheless a potential prime source of salvaged materials for an interpretive project in the area. (Photo by author)

As this paper intends to document, there is an unusually wealthy amount of African-American history and identity in the area approximate to and within the 23rd Ave and Madison St. intersection. Widely acknowledged to be an area undergoing gentrification, the physical representation and interpretation of a 'Black narrative' is vitally important to maintaining context and continuity in a time of rapid change, and for signaling that this is a valuable cultural landscape honored by the greater Seattle community. Private developers can and should be asked to contribute to these efforts, but that alone will not be nearly enough. With several opportunities for effective, creative design

intervention, and with the clock ticking, City officials and local leaders must act soon if a coherent Black identity and local history are to be meaningfully preserved here.



Figure 11. “On the Way Out” near 22nd Ave and John St. This is one of numerous properties in the neighborhood that signal the changes taking place and those yet to come. (Photo by author)