PLACES
Part of the 3700 block of Vliet Street, between 37th and 38th Streets, exemplifies dynamic urban transformations. In 1910 this block was part of a subdivision called Woodlawn Park. Our study of Sanborn maps of this neighborhood and documented ownership records of this block shows that the ownership and use of the buildings on this block have changed over time. Only half of the current buildings on this city block existed in 1910. The 1910 Sanborn map shows a carriage house that no longer exists. Instead, within a span of 30 years, newer garage structures appeared along the back alley reflecting how the physical landscape of this block changed as a result of the introduction and popularity of the automobile. Similarly a drugstore that existed on the eastern corner lot in 1910 is now gone and an empty parking lot has taken its place. In 1910, except from a corner dwelling, the other buildings on this block were stores. Today, these erstwhile stores are vacant and boarded up except for a tattoo parlor.

The overall 30 ft. x 120 ft. lot plans are rectangular in shape with the narrow ends lined up along the major thoroughfare. The rectangular and deep lot sizes are not constant either. The pattern changes as we move further to the east along Vliet Street. Rigid rectangular shapes become quartered and halved lots with curved and diagonal fence lines indicating suburban growth.

Mixed use buildings located on this block have ground level commercial spaces with central recessed doorways and large display windows. The upper floor private residential spaces are marked by projecting bay windows on the second and third floors and sidewalk entries and staircases leading up to the upper levels. The exterior facades of the buildings express varied architectural styles and diverse ornamentation such as the Tudor style facades of one two storied building that we documented.
Change of Industries

Mirroring the dynamic changes along the single block described above, the larger neighborhood also witnessed transformations over time. The neighborhood evolved during the 20th C. as major industries developed along the 30th Street industrial corridor and streetcar and train lines connected Washington Park to Milwaukee and beyond. The Washington Park bandshell and the Cold Spring Street Car Shops became major destinations and served as catalysts for further growth during the first half of the 20th C. Later the flourishing economy and growth diminished with the loss of industries, major demographic shifts and suburban flight. The zoo left the park and the streetcar line disappeared in 1959. The decline can be still seen on the Vliet Street block described above, in the form of vacant lots and boarded up storefronts. This constant change, from a block scale to an overall regional scale, makes this neighborhood an important case study in urban history.

Postcard showing a full bandshell in Washington Park.

Mueller, Pat, Historical Images
Rogala, Cassie, Historical Image
This building was built for the Reisner family in 1909. It had been a residential building until a men's clothing store opened on the first floor (3710) in 1911. Since then, it was used as a mixed-used building until 2007, when it fell vacant. The current owners use the second floor as a dwelling.

The ground floor plan operates as an open, commercial space, currently being renovated into a restaurant, with a large public space greeting the entrance. The ground floor has gone through many changes and the imprint of the older layout can be deciphered on close inspection. For instance, the remains of a stairwell and what used to be a bathroom space can still be seen on the ground floor. The second floor of the dwelling has a front/back interior layout that remains mostly unchanged. This includes a front section with 3 bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, a pantry room, a dining room and a living room on this second floor. The front section has three bedrooms and an newly added temporary partition by the front-bay window for private office space. This section is accessed via a front entry staircase. Adjacent to the living room is the dining room space. The ornamentation in the front rooms mimics a classical style, with ionic wood columns, built-in cabinetry and door frames consistent with its initial construction. The dining room is the most decorative room in this house. It has very luxurious built-in furniture. A cabinet with a built-in mirror sits on the south side of the room. On the other side of the room, there is a column screen. The wood trims along the sidewalls are used to display family photos and plants.
It was very likely that John L. Reisner and Elizabeth Reisner occupied the master bedroom in 1909. The couple, John's sister-in-law and two of his nieces lived with them till 1930s. There used to be a door connecting the kitchen to the master bedroom, but that portal is now closed off. Without having a servant in the house, we can imagine how difficult it must have been for the Reisner couple to maintain the household and cook meals for the five residents living in this building (as indicated in the manuscript census from that period). When Geo Larsen bought the property in the 1950s, the attic was converted to a single-occupancy apartment, and the second floor was converted into two apartments. The back stairs lead to the kitchen and the attic. While the kitchen might have served as a less formal space in the past, as deduced by the lack of decorative moldings, today it serves as a central space.

What remains interesting about this house, specifically about the second floor, is that the bedrooms are used in a different way today. The dining room and kitchen remains the central space with family photographs and plants. The dining+kitchen space is always occupied and used. Food and cooking equipment are left out on the table in preparation for family meals. The space is decorated by temporary fixtures, framed photographs of immediate family members indicative of their successes (sons on football team, daughter as valedictorian). The living room is used in a very different manner compared to its formal use in the past. The living room is divided into two spaces: an office-space on one side and a space to view the television on the other.
Located on Vliet Street, this mixed-use building has a large commercial space on the first floor and a residential space on the second. The backyard and garage are sited off an alleyway. The ground level entry opens onto a large room that occupies most of the building’s footprint. Over the years this easily accessible room has served as a market, campaign headquarters, office, tavern and a grocery store. Located along the eastern wall is an enclosed stairwell that, in its current iteration, can only be accessed from the exterior of the building. Next to the stairwell is a small bathroom and a closet. Also located in the north end of the ground floor is a relatively large kitchen with access to a rear stairwell and rear entry.

The most recent use of the ground level is in the form of a congregational space for the Salvation Church of God. Although the building no longer holds worship services, it continues to be used as a meeting space and storage space. The upper floor is residential and is rented out. The BLC field school didn’t have access to the upper floor.
The building has seen multiple uses and occupancies in the past.

6/9/1910 - Built - Food Market
11/12/1925 - Garage built
1/23/1935 - Food Market
2/7/1936 - Campaign Headquarters for two months
10/14/1936 - Office
7/15/1937 - Shapiro Tavern
7/25/1950 - May's & Hy's Tavern
5/20/1976 - Tavern - Allan Richter
8/23/1979 - Tavern - Issac Harper
11/11/1981 - Grocery Store

The architecture of the storefront is typical of this building type from the first decade of the 20th C. The central recessed entrance with storefront displays, wooden transoms, lintels and bulkheads are still visible under the current boarded up facade. Similar storefronts were common along Vliet Street during the early half of the 20th C. as seen in archival images from that period.

City of Milwaukee, “Building Inspection and Safety Engineering, Premises Record,” file (#73-0101), Development Center.
After passing by the prairie style ornamentation on the front porch, we walked into the lower apartment of this two-storied duplex home with an imposing east-facing façade. The property contains both a front and back yard and a two-car garage. An entrance vestibule, living room, dining area and a home office constitute the front of the house. Directly across from the entrance vestibule, a door leads into a flex room that was once used as a bedroom but is currently being used as an office space. The back section consists of a kitchen, back stairs and the master bedroom. They are separated from the front by a swinging door between the dining room and kitchen. The kitchen is spacious and accommodates an additional, less formal dining area.

Ornamental woodwork can be found both on the outside and inside of this house. Alongside the elaborate woodwork are beautiful stained-glass doors of built-in cabinetry. Hardwood floors are interspersed with carefully selected carpets. We saw the thoughtful architectural touch of the designer/builder, but the constant upkeep of the woodwork is a true testament to the current renters' care for their home.
Column screen detail.

Stained glass window detail.

First floor plan.
This single story two-bedroom home faces east and sits on a small lot between an alley to its north and a small house lot to its south. It was built 8 years ago and has a connected garage and a green-house, the latter of which was constructed by its current owner. The basement is the only part of the home that was wholly constructed on-site. The house itself was shipped. It arrived in two pieces, and the seam where it was put together can be detected by the cracking paint on the ceiling. The building has a full basement although it does not extend below the ell holding the mudroom and garage. The front porch leads into an open-plan living-dining-kitchen space.
First floor plan.

Interior view of greenhouse.

Exterior space on side of house.
In Washington Park, residential buildings built during the 20th Century have seen changes in use and ownership. The resilience of buildings can be measured by its ability to accommodate diverse cultural practices, lifestyles and functions. We discovered one such resilient building that was built for 20th century families. The building adapts perfectly to the lifestyles of new Hmong American homeowners.

This residential duplex is set on a single lot facing east. The building has three stories with two separate living units on separate floors. The front porch spans the eastern facade of the entire building. The ground floor apartment has two entrances located in the front (east) and rear (west) ends of the building. The entry sequence and interior layout create a distinct front, middle and back section inside this apartment accentuating a front/middle/back trichotomy. The middle living space mediates the formality of the front room and the lived-in informality of the back service areas.
The contemporary use of this home inverts the front/back spatial domains during ceremonial events. The occupants of this structure use the rear door as the primary entry into their home. The kitchen becomes the most public space followed by the adjacent living room. In addition to changing the use of interior spaces the new residents transform this home via ephemeral sensorial modifications such as smells, curtains, plants, shrines, decorative objects and bric-a-brac. A large number of indoor plants bring the verdant ambience of the outdoor gardens into the home. Indoor shrines calling on the spirit of forefathers are carefully arranged. Little shrines hold incense and eggs in a bowl of rice. A red ribbon tied around doorknobs symbolize shamanistic rituals. The fragrant smell of incense permeates the entire home but is the strongest at the entryway near the main shrine. The aroma of Hmong food such as boiled chicken fills the kitchen. There is also a strong smell of soap in the bathroom.

As we move around the home we encounter carefully framed pictures of family and friends in private bedrooms. We also find pictures of Packers players hung above the TV in the living area. In this multi-generational home, contemporary technologies and electronics used by the younger generation coexist with the symbolic artifacts that are meaningful to the elders.
HAFA exterior sketch.

The building housing the Hmong American Friendship Association Inc. is a single-storied south facing structure, situated on a large lot. The building is currently divided into three sections. The entrance leads into the front office with a reception area, a museum and a seating nook. The middle section consists of a conference room, an open office with many cubicles and smaller office spaces. The back section consists of two closets (one enclosed, one not), two restrooms, a freight elevator and big kitchen and dining area. In addition, there is a back patio (or warehouse) with a loading dock at the rear of the building. There are three primary entrances to the building, one of which is a handicap-accessible entrance located on the western end.

There are many murals in this building. Each mural explains a story, whether it is the Hmong journey out of Laos and Thailand or about life back in the homeland. The back room containing the dining area has many quilts and embroidered artwork showing historical scenes. The smell of food, sight of elders socializing, and the tunes of traditional music make this space seem very cozy and homey. Pictures of Hmong groups are arranged along the walls of the hallway connecting the back room to the front entrance area. The front room feels more formal compared to the dining area. It acts as a museum with Hmong cultural artifacts, tools, cookware and ceremonial arms.

Like the murals, the building tells us a story. The interior of HAFA introduces us to three distinct representations of Hmong life, history and culture. The front, with its formal display of cultural artifacts, represents an official account of important people, places, and periods in Hmong history. The middle space, with offices, and posters of social services that is offered by HAFA to various stakeholders within the community give us a glimpse into the everyday life, social problems, political issues and needs of Hmong immigrants in the US. The back room, with the smell of food and a domestic ambience, gives us a glimpse into the everyday lived experience of Hmong immigrants in Washington Park.
Quilt detail showing a cultural scene.

First floor plan.

Wall mural on exterior of building.
A home, argues Clare Cooper Marcus, is a mirror of ourselves. Its architecture, detailing, and bric-a-brac reflect the desire of its resident to represent themselves and their identity. Built in 1929 by John D. Erb, this small duplex has served as a home to many tenants and has poignantly and symbolically served to represent their personalities. In keeping with the sense of the past, the house itself remains mostly unchanged, with preserved woodwork and an early sunroom add-on.

The plan of the house is divided into two sides, with two bedrooms and a bathroom on the right side and the kitchen, dining, and living rooms on the left. There is also a sunroom, that matches the style and finish of the house, in the rear that is accessed through the back bedroom. The only other transformations that have been made to the plan are adjusted door swings, indicating different room uses and security desires over time.

This house is thoroughly finished with wood trim in every room, a false fireplace, coved ceilings in the dining room and entryway, built-in cabinets in the dining room, and an arched entryway into the living room. Ornamental forced air grates are placed throughout the home, giving a sense of the past industrial era. This careful ornamentation and finish is important because it reflects the original homebuilder and owner’s intentions. The detailing, extravagant ornaments, and even the false fireplace, create an illusion of wealth, refinement and social status that masks the small size of this house.

The building continues be personalized by the current owner who has displayed awards, certificates, photos, paintings, and other meaningful items on the walls, giving a sense of identity throughout the house.
Sketch of living room.

Sketch of dining room and built-in cabinets.

Detail of arched entryway and coved ceiling.

First floor plan.
C&S Supermarket is a Hmong American owned store located at the corner of Vliet Street and 27th Street. This building was built in 1941 and has seen many owners and uses. It was occupied by Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (A&P) until 1973. At that time, the storefront windows and doors along Vliet Street were sealed off and boarded with plywood. In the same year, the building was bought by the office of the United States Social Security Administration. In 1986, it changed hands again and was bought by Delta Biological Plasma Center, run by Delta Biological Resources. The space was used as a facility for collecting, processing and manufacturing source plasma, specialty plasmas and other biological products used for therapeutic and diagnostic purposes. This facility closed by the end of 1991. The building changed ownership again in 1993 and a grocery store named Superior Oriental Store opened in the premises. The person who managed this grocery store rented the building from an absentee landlord. In 2006, the Yang family bought the store and renamed it as C&F Vliet Supermarket. In 2010, the store was renamed again as C&S Vliet Street Supermarket.

The success of the current C&S Vliet Street Supermarket is the result of hard labor of the Yang family. As Yee described, “the whole place was really a mess when we first got it. We had to clean off the floors and we had to go downstairs to clean off the basement.” However, as an ethnic grocery store, the business is successful because it fills a niche ethnic market and caters to an expanded Asian clientele including Hmong, Vietnamese, Laotians and Burmese living in this neighborhood and beyond. This store serves a variety of Asian foods from east and southeast Asia. Goods and ingredients from Thai, Laos and China appear on the shelves.
This grocery story has reshaped the life of the Yang family in many ways. The owner and his wife don’t farm anymore in this neighborhood. They spend almost all their time tending the store. Their kitchen at home is barely used now. Instead, they use the kitchen inside the store. Their two sons come to the store regularly during their college breaks in order to help their parents. Yee Yang—the younger son has majored in marketing and hopes to help his parents manage the store in the future. The store also serves a symbolic function as a Hmong community cultural space. The family decorated the store with Hmong cultural artifacts and ornamental details such as the “bandao” embroidery painted on to the ceiling tiles.

The merchandise in the store is organized in ways that seem slightly different from mainstream American grocery stores. According to Yee part of the rationale was idiosyncratic, “There isn’t a way of organizing things. It’s just a way my parents thought it should be.” But other choices were symbolic, pragmatic or cultural. For instance, a TV counter in one end of the store marks the separate media section of the store carrying Hmong video tapes and music media. Hmong shows loop all day long in the television display. Another section carries gardening equipment addressing the needs of the many Hmong gardeners who shop here. Spices are arranged in ways that make it easy for the ethnic shoppers to find them.

An ethnic grocery store is more than a marketplace. It is also a community space and a node where identities are reproduced and recreated. The act of entering and patronizing stores such as C&S Vliet Street Supermarket becomes part of the social construction or reproduction of Hmong American identity in Milwaukee.
This building was built in 1896 for the Bow family. Orrin Bow, the head of the household, was a lawyer. There were five residents living in the house including Helen Bow (Orrin Bow’s wife), Marion Bow (son) and two boarders. In 1938, owner Adela Wehe, who was a parish secretary, added asbestos siding onto the exterior of this home. This greatly shaped how the building looks like today. From the mid 1940s to mid 1950s, the Dieterle family occupied the house. In 1957, the Morrisette family bought the place and lived in it till late 1970s, when the Brown family moved in. The Brown family lived here for twenty-six years. The building was empty for a few years before a Hmong American family bought the house in 2012. Today the building is occupied by a three-generation Hmong family with ten to twelve family members.

This East facing building sits between a residential building to its South and a vacant lot to the North. It is the only two storied, single family building on this block. In addition to two main floors, there is a basement and a small attic. Like many other homes in this neighborhood, the interior layout of this building reproduces a clear front and back spatial hierarchy. This spatial organization fits the norms of behavior and use commonplace in the 20th C. when these homes were erected. We interpreted this by studying the original finishes of this building much of which remain intact from its original design.
The front zone with its elaborate classical ornamentation projected a face of refined gentility. An entrance vestibule leads to the main living space of the house. These rooms were designed for leisure, entertainment and dining. The rooms were divided by pocket doors, allowing inhabitants to open up or close sections of the interior to the public. Today the pocket doors are no longer used. The back zone was designed for family living and cooking. The kitchen located at the eastern corner is a back service-oriented space. There used to be a door that opened into the east side of the wall of the kitchen. The door, when shut, made the activities in the kitchen invisible from the front rooms. Today, this door has been blocked off and a half bath added to the other side of the wall while a different door located on the south side of the kitchen leads into the dining room.