ANALYSIS
Accessibility and Resilience

Easy access to transportation and availability of daily goods and provisions are vital factors that produce a strong and healthy community. When access to these components is available to everyone in the neighborhood, each member of the community has the opportunity to prosper. The ability to get around and be mobile within the neighborhood depends largely on physical ability, economic opportunity and available modes of transportation.

The history of Washington Park and Martin Drive neighborhoods alerts us to different periods when changing modes of transportation and shifting availability of local resources produced distinct living conditions and neighborhood life. We explored these cycles by exploring historic and current events, examining documents and archives, analyzing oral histories, and interpreting visual information.

Current view of a boarded up storefront. This building housed a clothing store, bakery, jewelry shop, repair shop, and blind cleaner before 1960. After 1960 it housed various restaurants until it came to its current state.
There are multiple forms of transportation connecting the Washington Park and Martin Drive neighborhood to the city of Milwaukee. Public transit, provided by the city, is available to a variety of citizens at a nominal cost. Private automobiles, while convenient, depend on the owner and may be expensive to maintain. Walking and cycling are good options but are time consuming and do not allow for carrying large objects or traveling long distances.

Accessibility also depends on the availability and existence of nearby businesses and institutions as well as the nature of goods and services they offer. Access to groceries, health care, religious services, banking, security services, recreational spaces, and many other resources are necessary to keep up healthy lifestyles and social relationships.

Street car map from 1938.

There are multiple forms of transportation connecting the Washington Park and Martin Drive neighborhoods to the city of Milwaukee.
**Accessibility on Vliet Street**

Vliet Street is a commercial corridor cutting through the Martin Drive and Washington Park neighborhoods. Different modes of transportation and changing types of businesses have made life along Vliet Street change over time. These changes also coincide with periods of economic and social growth, decay and resurgence in surrounding neighborhoods.

The early history of Vliet Street depicts a vibrant commercial corridor. Around the turn of the 20th C., West Park, now known as Washington Park, was established. The park housed the Washington Park Zoo, a huge attraction and destination that brought in tourists and business to this area. During this period, many of the buildings along Vliet Street housed greengrocers, butchers, tailors, doctors, and other essential businesses and services. The streetcar line from downtown Milwaukee that ended just blocks away at Cold Spring Barns connected this neighborhood to the city. With increasing popularity of the automobile and introduction of the Milwaukee County Transit System’s bus line, the streetcar was decommissioned in 1959. Also around this time, in 1958, the zoo moved out of the park to its current location. These two events, as well as increasing suburbanization, drew residents and business away from Vliet Street and its surrounding neighborhoods. Limited transportation options for local residents, many of who were not able to own an automobile, made life difficult and access to services limited.

*Militzer’s Grocery Store on Vliet Street provided groceries to residents for many years. Mid-20th C.*
Subsequent years showed signs of economic decline in the area surrounding Vliet Street. Businesses that had once been part of the vibrant commercial street were losing customers and profit. Many older stores were converted into taverns, convenience stores, liquor stores, cell phone stores, and tobacco stores. Others closed permanently. As a result, access to groceries, health care, and other essential services was limited within the neighborhood. The only mode of transportation for those without automobiles remained the city bus which was inconvenient at best. With little access to transportation and resources along Vliet Street, the neighboring community struggled to maintain its previous standard of living and vibrancy.

Recently, new businesses started returning to Vliet Street. These businesses give the community access to resources without need to travel as far. There remains a need for stores selling fresh groceries and better health care institutions within the community.

Our historical analysis of buildings, businesses and neighborhoods along Vliet Street paints a picture of dynamic transformation. Vliet Street has survived and flourished despite these transformations. Its history points towards a certain social and spatial resilience that made the street survive over the years and this quality needs to be nurtured and maintained. Our research points towards the importance of accessibility as a central issue that frames successful urbandity and culture.
Hmong Cultural Kitchen

A kitchen is often seen as a functional service space. However they also serve a larger symbolic and cultural function. Kitchens are sites of domestic labor, central spaces where families gather, locations where cultural memories are reproduced during the act of cooking, and places where our senses are enhanced due to the sights, sounds and smells of food. We examined domestic kitchens of three Hmong American families as well as a public kitchen at the Hmong American Friendship Association in Washington Park. Although the layout, location and size of these kitchens were very similar to kitchens in neighboring homes, the Hmong American kitchens were unique in the way they were used, their sensorial ambience, and as a gathering space for the extended family and kin.

Food in HAFA

The Hmong American Friendship Association (HAFA) has an open kitchen at the far end of their building. A couple of volunteers, the Chens, use it to cook meals for elderly community members living in the neighborhood. They come in early and work from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM to prepare meals, eat and socialize. On a typical day we found around ten people lounging in the dining area. The HAFA kitchen has a big storage cabinet for sauces and seasonings that the Chens use for their meals. After cooking, the Chens clean up and store the sauces and seasonings back in the storage cabinet before leaving for the day.

The day we visited HAFA, the Chens had cooked a curry dish *khaub poob*, a rice noodle served on soup with chicken, bamboo and ginger in it. A separate bowl of mint and cilantro was served to be poured over the soup before eating. Sticky rice was set out in a rice basket *tawb rau mov*. Pizza and watermelon were also on the menu.
Vang Family Kitchen

The Vang household is made up of nine family members. Their small kitchen has a few built-in cabinets. A small counter set on one side holds microwaves, and daily cooking seasonings are placed on a shelf. The pantry room is organized in a similar way to that of the Lor family, with big pots, a few stacks of bowls, and some sauces and seasonings stored in this space.

The Vang family holds weekly spiritual/religious ceremonies in their house. In order to accommodate these practices the front entrance is usually kept closed and visitors and family members enter the house from the rear entrance. Therefore the entry sequence that we encounter in a typical American home - front porch, living room, dining area, kitchen and back yard - is reversed. The kitchen is the first room that a visitor encounters upon entering this house.

The sensory atmosphere of this kitchen: the smell of cooked foods, sounds of cooking and friendly chatter inside the kitchen, gives identity to this Hmong American home.
Lor Family Kitchen

Six family members live in the Lor residence. Their medium-sized kitchen has a built-in cabinet over the sink. They store their food, seasonings and spices in two open shelves and on a big white table. There is a pantry room next to the kitchen and this space is also used to store foods and cookware that are used less frequently. By studying the way domestic kitchens are organized we can observe the diet and cooking practices.

Homemade churro (fritter) is a common snack for this family. It's served all day long. A big pot of oil lay alongside the churro on the kitchen table. Besides churro, chicken is also a common part of the daily diet in this family. On days we visited, we observed a pot with stewed chicken on the stove.

This kitchen serves six family members. They may not have many of their extended kin living in this neighborhood, but occasionally they invite friends from work and church to enjoy their meals.
Yang Family Kitchen

The Yang household has ten to twelve family members. Despite spatial constraints the Yang household is a gathering spot for their extended family from this neighborhood. They often have family gatherings in the form of meals.

The kitchen in this house is the biggest among the three domestic kitchens that we visited. Goeliang Yang mentioned that she is the person who often cooks for the family. There are a few built-in cabinets where sauces and seasonings are stored. There is no pantry room in this house. The Yangs store their food in a refrigerator and on an arc-shaped storage corner. They have two refrigerators in the kitchen, but only one is plugged in. The other refrigerator is used as a pantry, in order to store extra food and containers.
Revitalization of the Martin Drive and Washington Park Neighborhoods

The Washington Park and Martin Drive neighborhoods are set for dramatic changes and an infusion of investments in the near future. As artist Muneer Bahauddeen puts it, Washington Park is going through its renaissance. But as we plan the future of these neighborhoods we need to think carefully about the nature of change we plan to implement, our goals for revitalization, and consider those who will (or will not) benefit from our actions. These neighborhoods are not blank slates, or a *tabula rasa*, where urban planners and other professionals render their development dreams. Instead, the BLC field school asks how past histories, current lifestyles, everyday practices and resident aspirations may be factored into future plans.

Neighborhood safety

In the past, the Martin Drive neighborhood was considered a very safe place, but today residents feel that safety is a concern. In order to make sure that their neighborhood remains safe some residents coordinate with the local businesses, government and the police. Others make their own contribution to the neighborhood's safety by setting up block watch groups and joining neighborhood associations. Take for instance, Phyllis Reitter who has lived here most of her life. She cares for residents' safety, gathers her neighbors together and offers to coordinate regular block watch meetings. People who attended these meetings told us that as a group they looked out for each other, they found out who is living next door and noted what happens nearby. Martina Patterson of Washington Park succinctly explained that her neighbors, who look out for others, through their acts of caring make her neighborhood a safer place.

Economy

When the residents talk about the economy, they refer to the local cafes that they like, the grocery store they go to, the new businesses that have opened, and the now-vacant theaters that they once frequented. According to Reitter, the area surrounding 37th Street and Vliet Street used to be a very safe and active community. There used to be a bowling alley, a grocery store, and two theaters within a few block, but they are all gone now. Many of these buildings are currently vacant. The Martin drive neighborhood is really eager to attract progressive local businesses.

Residents worry about the growing number of tobacco and liquor stores, hoping instead for a healthy mix of diverse businesses. When new stores open in their neighborhood, the neighbors anxiously wonder how many customers patronize these stores and where these patrons come from. They want a community with a mix of businesses that may be conveniently accessed by all.
Three new businesses on 43rd and Vliet; Heritage West Properties, Eat Cake!, and Artists Working in Education Inc. are creating a cashflow in the local economy and have decreased crime rates in the area by removing a corner payphone that was linked to multiple crimes.

The Martin Drive Neighborhood recently built a rain harvesting and activity pavilion at their community garden, which will be the site of many community events. The pavilion and garden give residents access to new resources that they did not have previously.

**Relationships**

Another change that residents desire as they mull over revitalization plans is a need to improve relationships within the community. The internal relationships of Martin Drive are complex because it is home to a diverse population. People from different cultures may not have close connections due to cultural misunderstandings and language barriers. For example, the Hmong are relatively new in this area, but their population is significant. They have different traditions and the older generations have language barriers which cause other neighbors to have little interaction with them. Although communication across social and ethnic groups has improved considerably in recent years due to the first generation of Hmong Americans being multilingual and proficient in cross-cultural engagement, more needs to be done.

**Access**

Pat Mueller, a member of the Martin Drive Neighborhood Association explained how access to internal as well as external resources is central to successful revitalization of this neighborhood. She has lived in this neighborhood since 1986 and has focussed on growth and development. She said that there are many misconceptions about this area and once, even she thought that the area was not a good place to live. But when she visited the neighborhood and discovered the beautiful buildings and environment she was convinced that these were inherent resources that would help revitalize this neighborhood. She is bringing positive thinking to this neighborhood by working on improving the usage of space. Pat believes that positive thinking can change the false perceptions of neighborhood and bring more people and investment back to the neighborhood.
Cultural traditions are shared, explored, and transmitted within multiple contexts. They are learned by observing others, transmitted through language and other communicative skills or imbued via the teachings of elders. Communicating traditions, values, and practices may not happen naturally; it is learned or adapted from the surrounding environment or from others. Spoken language may be the primary communicative medium that allows one to share their thoughts and feelings and transmit traditions. Nevertheless, there are other forms of nonverbal interaction, many transmitted through one’s senses. They include smells, sounds, and sights that may awaken memories and induce a behavioral or habitual response.

The Hmong families in the Washington Park neighborhood have retained their cultural traditions in multiple ways. They continue to speak Hmong, a language that has two different dialects (Hmong Green and Hmong White). Mychoua Yang, a Hmong worker at HAFA (Hmong-American Friendship Association) points out that “language is one of the few common things that the entire Hmong population has in common. I think being able to meet someone who speaks the same language as you is a relief if you’re in a strange place or if you come here (U.S.A.) for the first time it’s like great, I can talk to you, I don’t feel like a stranger or that I don’t belong here.” Nurturing their common Hmong identity allows individuals to feel part of a larger community and collaborate with other in-group members. Dr. Chia Youyee Yang, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, speaks of this sense of communal fellowship “The fact that I am Hmong and that I am speaking Hmong to these elders I am not treated as an outsider; I am just like a daughter to them even though I have no relation to them. But because I can engage with them, I can understand some of their life experiences through my own background I’m not an outsider. I’m always treated as a family member because of the shared Hmong identity.”

What about those from the first generation who may not know how to speak Hmong language? We experienced non-verbal communication through music, art, singing, dancing, food, and body language among youth at HAFA. Painted murals depicting memories of home and life of the Hmong people in Laos/Thailand during the Vietnam War adorn the walls of HAFA. Mychoua Yang explains that the “integration of people coming together and painting and leaving something artful behind of their time together” is what the murals are about. Getting people together to interact with one another is exactly what those murals did. In addition to painted mural on the walls, there are huge decorative quilts that tell myriad stories. Mychoua states that “some of them [Hmong refugees] when they first came to the U.S. didn’t really have any income and so people were interested in the Hmong history. So they started doing storytelling cloths, Paj ntaub [Quilts].” These quilts share the Hmong culture and history through beautifully hand-crafted works of art. Making quilts is a Hmong cultural tradition that shows the journey of Hmong people through the hardships of war. There are “a lot of them [Hmong refugees] that have different depictions about life back in Laos and some of them have an actual storyline. One part of the cloth will be about what life was like before the war, next part will be what happened during the war and then after the war.” Pictures speak a thousand words and these quilts speak for themselves.

Music, dance, and singing are popular cultural forms in the Hmong culture. They teach Hmong youth how to dance, sing, and make music like their ancestors. Hmong people dance in the order to narrate a story that has a lesson, moral, or a meaning behind it. Every dance move and every flick of the wrist need to be precise. The posture and the body language of the dancers need to fit the story and the emotions that pertain to the story. Music and singing flow hand in hand in the Hmong culture. The qeej is an old traditional Hmong instrument which is played by “singing a song through it” — that is, words are sung through an instrument, thus producing beautiful sounds.
Another mode of communication that remains popular is food. Eating or preparing meals together communicates traditions in powerful ways. In some families food is the only cultural tradition that remains. As newer generations become more westernized their palate changes as well. In addition traditional comestibles are not as accessible to Hmong people as it is in Laos or Thailand. Many improvise, although, the basic types of Hmong food remain the same. Chia Youyee Yang explains, “that is one thing we share as Hmong ... You won’t know ours is a Hmong house, but when you eat with us you will know we are Hmong. My kids are pretty Hmong in terms of Hmong food.” Sitting together in a setting with food can help people bond together and can also keep the traditions alive.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt once said that “to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.” Our time with the Hmong American community in Washington Park gave us a glimpse into ways such a shared common world is reconstructed, maintained, and nurtured by people. However, Arendt also reminds us that this world we share between us is never interpreted as the same by each of us. Rather we all approach it from different perspectives, bring our unique worldviews and “differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives.” As we studied how everyday activities, architecture, gardens, and the networks of relationships that connect them help reproduce and transmit Hmong traditions in the New World we become cognizant of the multiple perspectives, point of views and positions from which different Hmong individuals approach this common project.
Our study of Hmong households and careful analysis of their behavior and activities in domestic spaces complicate our understanding of how Hmong refugees maintain, reproduce, and transform their culture and traditions in the New World. Displaced from their homeland, many of the old traditions and practices of Hmong refugees are re-established in their new abodes in Washington Park. They reproduce their home in alien buildings built by 20th Century German Americans. Duplexes, four-squares, and Victorian cottages become stage sets where daily life and practices of Hmong families unfold, where memories and practices from the past are enacted and remembered. In the remaking of their homes, Hmong residents don’t make dramatic changes to the homes in order to reproduce their cultural practices. Rather, they deploy, re-appropriate and adapt via subtle, ephemeral, nuanced, ingenious and stealthy acts.

One such method of re-appropriating the American home is by circumventing conventional boundaries between indoors and outdoors, nature and home, or front and back. The plan and images of a Hmong home show how interior spaces are filled with indoor plants. The profusion of indoor plants seem to continue the verdant outdoor garden into the living room making the boundary between inside and outside very permeable.

Another method of re-appropriation is to reuse and reclaim spaces in ways not originally intended. Living rooms becomes shrines, dining rooms becomes TV rooms, kitchens becomes storage pantries for herbs, and backyards and front yards become farms. By changing the use of interior spaces Hmong residents reorder ways in which privacy in experienced and practiced in the traditional 20th century American homes.

But lest we begin to suggest that all Hmong homes are distinctly different we encounter one where the functions and interior spaces remain unchanged from the past. An entrance vestibule leads to the main living space of the house just like every other home in the neighborhood. The formal front rooms, located in the first floor, are designed for leisure, entertainment, and dining. The back rooms are used for family living and cooking, with a mini dining table and two refrigerators used for storage.
Plants filling the interior space.

Repurposed TV room.

Storage room.

Kitchen in a Hmong-American home.

Various items placed in a home for protection.

Plants in a transition space.
What can we learn from vernacular architecture? This summer we studied a mixed use building that survived for over a century because it is adaptable and has the capacity to accommodate changes in ownership, use and lifestyles. In a quest to find how the built form was able to sustain such transformations we mapped the changes in the floor plan over time. Is there a blueprint for a flexible building?

We found three important factors that helped this building accommodate change over time. The first factor had to do with the organization of the functions in the building. As a two-storied structure, the commercial space was located on the ground level and the residential space on upper floors. Having a residence above a business provided the owners an opportunity to have their workplace above their residence. The commercial space provided the perfect size for a small retail business or an office as circumstances demanded.

The second factor had to do with access and choreography of movement inside the building. The front and back stairs created multiple entrances and allowed the upper floors to operate independent of the lower floors if necessary. This allowed the owners to rent out the lower floor in order to help cover costs as well as to make additional profit and savings. In addition to producing a front/back, public/private spatial hierarchy this layout and dual entrances also allowed the owners to rent out the front section or the back portions of the second floor home to multiple renters.

Finally, on careful examination of the wall additions and changes at the ground floor level, we see a clear pattern develop. The back room and stairs remained untouched over the years. However the front room of the commercial space has been repeatedly modified by the insertion of a dividing partition wall in order to create a front and an intermediate zone (as shown by the red dotted line above). By moving this partition portal a storeowner could expand or contract the public front space and the intermediate space as required. A narrow bay defined by the front stairs was enclosed in different ways in order to produce a variety of storage and service spaces (as shown in grey above). Therefore the open floor plan on the first floor was not a blank canvas. Rather it accommodated a series of formulaic subdivisions that could be adapted to produce a variety of interior spaces and cater to different uses.

Scholars of vernacular architecture (Habraken 1998, Hubka 1979) argue, vernacular designs offer infinite number of creative variations and options within the constraints of an overarching thematic grammar. Understanding that grammar is key to understanding the flexibility and power of vernacular architecture.

**Former Occupancies**

1. 1911 - Haberdashery (Men’s Clothing) Store
2. 1935 - "Schmidt’s Bakery"
3. 1948 - Jewelry Shop - Repair and Gifts
4. 1949 - "B&D Fixit Shop" - Appliance Repair
5. 1952 - "Supreme Venetian Blind Cleaners"
6. 1953 - "Esther’s Gift Shop"
7. 1957 - "Dinner Bell Grill"
8. 1964 - "The Skillet Ivy Restaurant"
9. 1966 - "Mary’s Lunch"
10. 1974 - "Bob’s Cafe"
11. 1990 - "Bob’s Custard"
12. Present - Vacant

Section of building.
Through physical examination of the building and researching construction permit records we were able to determine that the facade of the building’s first floor was originally glazed from floor to ceiling. As shown in this picture, some of the glazing for these shop windows still exists today, but it was covered by aluminum siding in 1974.

Interior changes over time.

City of Milwaukee, “Building Inspection and Safety Engineering, Premises Record,” file (#73-0101), Development Center.