

A Garden to Honor Cass

By Jack Bautsch

The Inspired Moment

In-spi-ra-tion: *the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative* (Google). In a moment of inspiration at Cass's memorial service on March 25th, 2017, Ashley Bullitt approached Deborah Pedersen, one of Cass's dearest friends from college, with the idea of creating a garden in Cass's honor at the Bullitt family estate in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. Ashley and Deborah attended Stevens Elementary on Capitol Hill and their parents became close through an addictive activity known as politics. As time went by, the two friends went different places to do different things, but reunited in 2000 when they ran into each other in Port Townsend where each had moved independent of the other. Ashley first learned of Cass through Deborah and met her in-person in 2002 when Cass dedicated Seattle's first Heritage Tree—a massive English elm (*Ulmus procera*)—at the Bullitt family property. These various strands came together when Ashley conceived the idea of the Cass Turnbull Garden on her family's property. Because it has been deeded to the Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) in a life estate, the property will one day become a city park open to the public. Ashley went straight from the memorial service to the family home where she proposed the idea to Kay Bullitt, the family matriarch, and to her sister Margaret (Maggie). They both heartily approved, Maggie with extra gusto because for years she had wanted to do something special with the undeveloped southwest corner of the estate. Thus was born the idea of the Cass Turnbull Garden in a Seattle park.

The Location and Its History

The Bullitt estate, located south of St. Mark's Cathedral and west of 10th Avenue E on the western edge of Capitol Hill, has an interesting history. It was once owned by Seattle philanthropist Horace C. Henry, whose art collection founded the UW's Henry Art Gallery. According to archival material in the Museum of History and Industry, in the early 1900s Henry and his wife Susan J. Henry built "the first of many Victorian, Neo-classical, Colonial Revival, and Tudor Revival houses" in the Harvard-Belmont District, a home that was "noteworthy for [including] a five-car garage at a time when automobiles were a novelty in Seattle."¹ In 1934, Henry's heirs donated the home and property to the library to be the site of a branch named for their mother. The family had intended their gift to be utilized immediately, but for two decades the library board lacked sufficient funds to modify the home for library use. Funding was finally secured in 1953, but in the intervening decades the Henry mansion had been destroyed by fire. In the end, the library board deemed the land donated by the Henry family unsuitable for library use. The property was sold to its next-door neighbor, Prentice Bloedel, who later with his wife Virginia established the Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island. The library used the proceeds from the sale to purchase a site more central to the Capitol Hill business district on the corner of Harvard Avenue E and E Republican Street. There the Susan Henry Branch served the community from 1954 until 2001 when it was demolished to make way for a new facility, renamed the Capitol Hill Branch, which opened in May 2003.²

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Stimson “Stim” Bullitt purchased the property “at a very reasonable price”³ under Bloedel’s condition that only one house be built on the site platted for 13 homes. Stim proposed to Kay on the site and commissioned local architect Fred Bassetti to design a “gawd-damned ski lodge”⁴—an A-frame in the midst of turn-of-the century mansions surrounding it. He situated the house amid trees at the north end of the 1.6-acre parcel⁵ where it stands today and where Kay Bullitt still lives.⁶ Bullitt chose Bassetti as his architect because both shared a sense of civic responsibility. “Bassetti contributed significantly to development of modern architecture in the Pacific Northwest, via the buildings designed under his leadership (the Federal Building, Woodland Park Zoo, Pike Place Market and others) as well as the influence of his exemplary and contagious civic spirit on his colleagues in and beyond the design professions.”⁷ Similarly, Stim had “a keen sense of justice, espousing racial equality, social justice, the cause of peace, protections for this beloved environment and responsibility in business practice”.³ In reporting his death in April 2009, *Seattle Times* reporter Jack Broom noted that Stimson Bullitt “helped shape Seattle in many ways, from his time as president of KING Broadcasting in the 1960s, to his political activism and philanthropy, to his work as an advocate of reviving downtown as a livable neighborhood.”⁸

For her part, Katharine (Kay) Bullitt has been an activist for most of her 92 years. Activism began as a student at Radcliffe where she worked in a community center with African American children, an experience that grew into a lifelong commitment to civil rights and educational equity. She worked tirelessly to help desegregate Seattle Public Schools and, during the 1960s, ran a racially integrated summer day camp, using her entire yard and basement and the neighbor’s tennis court as well. She was involved in historic preservation in Pioneer Square and in founding Seattle’s Bumbershoot Festival. She helped organize *Target Seattle* antinuclear protests in the 1980s and traveled as a citizen diplomat on peace missions from Central America to the former Soviet Union to China and the Middle East.⁹ After the tragedy of 9/11, Kay initiated the Middle East Peace Camp to bring kids together for games and learning from a variety of backgrounds and traditions: Arab, Christians, Muslims, Jewish, and Israeli.³ Her activities reflect a firmly held belief that “when you bring people together around a purpose, good things happen.”³ A recipient of numerous awards for civic activism, Kay nonetheless remains very down-to-earth. On Wednesday evenings for the last 60 years she has hosted summertime picnics on her lawn and has also opened her yard as an off-leash area for neighborhood canines and their human companions. Most recently Kay has opened her heart and her property for the Cass Turnbull Garden.

Plant Amnesty Meets the Bullitt Family

Word of the Bullitt family offer reached PlantAmnesty (PA) through a series of phone calls and emails: Deborah to Laura Watson, PA’s former general manager; Laura to Jack Bautsch, PA’s acting board president; Jack to Ashley Bullitt and then to her sister Maggie. PA representatives first saw the proposed site on April 27, 2017 when board members Jack Bautsch and George Ortiz walked through it. Two impressions were immediate: how big it was and how overgrown it was!

Approximately 180’ (N-S) by 55’ (E-W), with a moderate slope from the lawn area on its eastern edge to a brick wall at its western edge, the site comprises nearly a quarter of an acre in the southwest corner of the 1.6-acre property. During the 1960s and 70s the area was a child’s playground dream. Giggling day camp children flung themselves into the huge cargo net strung from four large trees at the north end of the site or crawled through an ingenious tunnel that Stim Bullitt had dug—by hand—

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at its south end.

The area, which had not been tended to since the early 1980s, became over time the dumping ground for lawn clippings and all manner of yard waste—the proverbial back 40. Logs of varying sizes amid the undergrowth were evidence of trees that had been taken down and left where they fell. Granite stones barely visible through the tangle of blackberries and bindweed indicated that the farthest corner was the location the Henrys’ five-car garage, which Maggie called the carriage house. While Jack felt overwhelmed by the scale of the project and the work it represented, George was beside himself—awestruck by the grandeur and beauty of the brick wall along the site’s western edge and the natural amphitheater it formed as it curved to the east at its southern end; the peek-a-boo views of downtown and Lake Union; and the overall potential the site held for creating a fitting tribute to Cass. “This is amazing, and we can do it!” George declared.

In conversations with Kay Bullitt and daughters Ashley and Maggie, all agreed that the project would require some heavy lifting—first to clear the land enough to develop a design, and then, with design in hand, to raise money to implement the design. Resources were identified for both tasks: PA’s referral service and membership base for the former and the Bullitt family’s experience and connections within the community for the latter. Jack and George suggested that the entire PA board see the site. Kay Bullitt, experienced as she was in such matters, suggested that PA have a summer picnic on the property to give the entire membership an opportunity to see and weigh-in on what was being proposed. No sense in going forward if people did not like the idea. Good point, Kay.

Getting Down and Dirty

Arrangements were made for the PA board and a handful of referral service gardeners and arborists to visit the site five weeks later on June 4, 2017. What changes had occurred in those intervening weeks! Weeds that were ankle-high in April were waist-high in June. Hundreds upon hundreds of suckers had sprouted everywhere from the numerous English elms throughout the site. Land contours mostly discernible in April were totally obscured in June. Someone brought up the need for heavy equipment just to clear the land. While a few left the walk-through feeling skeptical, a stalwart group of seven intrepid souls retreated to a nearby pub/coffee shop and forged a plan: we would organize monthly work parties; we would bring Polaskis, shovels, spading forks, rakes, and hori-horis; we would use weed-eaters and roto-tillers or even goats; we would rent back-hoes if necessary. But we would clear the land and build the Cass Turnbull Garden! The first work party was set for June 18th—Fathers’ Day, the only open weekend day on the PA calendar for that month. Additional work days were set for July 22th and August 12th. We aimed to get a good portion of the site cleared in time for the August 15th Meeting of Like Minds (MOLM) that had already been scheduled as a picnic at the Bullitt estate. Onward!

Nineteen volunteers arrived on June 18 to behold an amazing site. The waist-high weeds had been wacked down to ground level! We learned that George Ortiz had brought his landscape crew in with weed-eaters several days before. The volunteers could now see the ground and the work to be done . . . but where to begin? PA arborist Dana Harper saw immediately where to start and proceeded to give us direction. He divided us into two teams. One team would start at the bottom of the slope at the wall and work its way up; another team would start at the top of the slope and work down. We would meet in the middle, having cleared a swath about 15’ wide and 55’ long. Throughout the day we made two

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piles of yard waste: one pile was fed into Dana's chipper; a second was loaded into the back of his truck, destined for the transfer station. Thinking we might eventually use them in the garden, we rolled logs to the base of the western wall. Along the top of the wall we started a collection of interesting rocks and bricks from the Henry's carriage house and the occasional old bottle or rusted hinge. Our final tasks were to spread arborists chips—those that Dana had brought with him and those he had created during the day—and to load his truck with the yard waste that could not be chipped. At the end of a long, sweaty, and dirty day, some went straight home to shower or soak in the tub while others debriefed over cold drinks with which we toasted a day well spent and a job well-begun.

Two similar work-days followed in July and August. Beginning with the second work day, a community-building ritual developed in which the group sat in a circle at lunch, introducing themselves and talking about what they do and how they came to be connected with PA. By the end of the third work day on August 12th, 32 individuals had volunteered just over 400 hours of labor to accomplish the initial cleaning of an area approximately 55' (N-S) by 60' (E-W), or about 30% of the total area of the garden site. Additional work parties are scheduled for October 14th and November 4th. Volunteers are needed and welcome! If you wish to help, please send an email to info@plantamnesty.org.

Seattle Parks and Recreation Department

In 1974, the Bullitt Property was deeded to the SPR as a life estate, which is a form of joint ownership that allows Kay Bullitt to convey the property to SPR while being able to enjoy the remaining years of her life in her home. Clearly, SPR needed to be on board with this project. In early June, contact had been made with Karimah Edwards in the Parks planning division, who expressed support for the creation of the garden, and asked to be kept informed of its progress. PA also made contact with the Parks Department Arboriculturist Nick Johnson, who, after touring the site with PA's Jack Bautsch, arranged for his crew to remove a diseased big leaf maple that posed a potential hazard for PA's volunteers.

With the land cleared and the design process imminent, Board Members Jack Bautsch and Ken Tuomi engaged in more active and ongoing conversation with SPR representatives, Michael Shiosaki, SPR's Director of Planning and Development, and Karimah. Both confirmed their support for the Cass Turnbull Garden and at the same time reminded us that the garden will be part of a larger public park serving many purposes and a broad range of interests within the community. SPR's active planning for the park will not start until it assumes control of the property and will involve an open public comment process. In that spirit, they encouraged us to include the immediate neighbors in the planning and design of the garden. Point well taken.

Designing the Garden

Kate Day is a local landscape architect, designer, and arborist who has served on PA's Heritage Tree Committee and Referral Service for many years. She learned about the proposed garden through emails sent to arborists and gardeners on PA's Referral Service. In late July she contacted Jack and offered to lead a design process for the garden—known as design charrette within the design professions. The initial invitation drew only a small but committed group of six participants, mostly due to Kate's time constraints, short notice, and the mid-week, day-time scheduling of the meeting. Nonetheless, the group generated several pages of garden design ideas.

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On August 15, the membership picnic that Kay Bullitt had proposed back in April took place on the property. Thirty-five members toured the garden site and, in the meeting that followed, suggested another several pages worth of ideas in response to questions such as “What is the purpose of the garden and how does it relate to PA’s mission?” “Whom does the garden serve?” “What are its primary activities?”

“How should existing features of the site—topography, vistas, walls and stone, its history, etc.—be incorporated into the garden?” “How can Cass’s spirit be manifested in the garden?”

The ideas generated at these two gatherings formed the basis for the second phase of the design process, which began on August 31st. Under Kate’s leadership, an expanded planning team convened to review the ideas, develop a vision statement for the garden, and begin preparation for developing several alternative concept designs at a later workshop in September. The 18 members of the team represent different backgrounds, expertise, and interests and consists of designers, gardeners, individuals with experience in other local public gardens (Streissguth and Dunn) as well as public gardens in other localities, SPR personnel, and members of the Bullitt household. Always the generous and gracious hostess, Kay Bullitt opened her home as a place for the group to hold its meetings.

The concept designs developed by the team will be presented to the PA membership at the October MOLM to see which designs resonate with the greatest number of people. Afterwards, the designs will be available through the PA office for a limited time to allow other members to review and comment. During this time, feedback will also be solicited from the Bullitt family, SPR, and neighbors living near the Bullitt estate. At the end of this review period, a final design will be created based on the feedback received.

Funding the Garden

Once a final design is determined, the project will enter its second phase identified in the April 27 meeting, namely raising funds to construct and install the garden. To date, clearing the land has been accomplished primarily with hand tools, but actual construction of the garden will require heavy equipment: grinders for the larger stumps, backhoes to remove smaller stumps and the considerable debris from the old carriage house, bobcats to contour the slope for ADA compliance, hoists to lift and place large logs and stones. Securing the resources for such equipment—and for other expenses not yet known—will require the joint efforts of the Bullitt family and PA, each reaching out to its respective networks. To the extent its resources allow, SPR has also indicated a willingness to help. Still, whether the garden will be ready to plant by next spring is an open question as of this writing. Timing of garden construction and installation is dependent on the success of fundraising efforts. When we get to the installation stage, PA already has offers from Cedar Grove Composting for soil amendments and from West Seattle Nursery for plants.

Other nurseries are also likely to contribute.

The Finished Product

In the end, how will the Cass Turnbull Garden look? Now—early September 2017— is too early to know for sure. If the visions for the garden generated at the August 31st meeting of the design team are any indication, the garden will invoke Cass’s “spirit, wit, and words [to demonstrate and educate

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about] thoughtful design and sound plant care,” inspire “appreciation for the natural integrity of plants,” and convince visitors to “end the senseless torture and mutilation of trees and shrubs.” Yes, Cass will surely live on in her garden!

References

¹ MOHAI photos of Henry mansion: [1967.4235.14a](#); [1979.6741.1](#)

² Susan Henry Library: <http://www.historylink.org/File/8174>

³ This detail, and several others about the Bullitts, their home, and its activities, are found in a book entitled *1125 Harvard East: Kay Bullitt's Gathering Place* written in 2014 by local author and journalist Sam Sperry. Alline Thurlow who works in the Bullitt household provided a copy of the book. Margaret “Maggie” Bullitt also supplied several details about life at the Bullitt home.

⁴ A quote from Kenan Block, son of the Bullitts’ close friends Bob and Dorothy Block, found in the Sperry book cited in the previous note.

⁵ King County Department of Assessments:
<http://blue.kingcounty.com/Assessor/eRealProperty/default.aspx>

⁶ The chapter entitled “1125 Harvard East” in Sam Sperry’s book (endnote #3) describes in detail the many features of this delightful home.

⁷ Fred Bassetti: <http://www.historylink.org/File/8959>

⁸ Stimson Bullitt: <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/civic-leader-charles-stimson-bullitt-ran-king-tv-and-helped-shape-seattle/>

⁹ Kay Bullitt:

- Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kay_Bullitt
- University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History: <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/bullitt.htm>